

Paul C. P. Siu. *The Chinese Laundryman: A Study of Social Isolation*. Edited by John Kuo Wei Tchen. (New York: New York University Press, 1987) 252 pp., \$47.50.

There are two tales behind Paul Siu's *The Chinese Laundryman: A Study of Social Isolation*. It is his detailed insider's description and analysis of the Chinese Americans who were commonly tracked into this occupation prior to World War II. The immigrant laundrymen of Chinatown worked long hours for low wages and predominantly remained isolated from mainstream Anglo society. This recent publication of Siu's 1953 dissertation is also the story of a son of a Chinese laundryman who immigrated to the United States in 1927 and became a student of Ernest Burgess at the University of Chicago School of Sociology dominated by Robert Parks. University of Chicago Press at the time felt that Siu's finished research was not "marketable" enough to be considered for publication, and it remained buried in obscure archives until John Tchen of the New York Chinatown History Project accidentally came across it in 1980. Tchen, thankfully, recognized the importance of this dissertation to ethnic studies and tracked down Paul Siu. Siu passed away just prior to the final publication of this book, another "Chinaman" buried before his contributions to his adopted homeland could be properly recognized.

Paul Siu's *The Chinese Laundryman* is a careful, anthropologically-oriented description and study of Chinese laundrymen in the Chicago area in the 1930s. As an insider, Siu recorded the daily routine, the aspirations, the problems of these pioneers, capturing the desperation and frustration of their "social isolation" from mainstream society. He includes many candid quotes from interviews. He describes the physical appearance of the work space down to the use of the abacus and the format of the laundry ticket. An interesting aspect of the study is Siu's comments on Chinese relations with their "Negro" employees. Siu builds evidence that the Chinese had little contact with mainstream society except for limited contact with customers. The Chinese had their own leisure activities, language, customs, and social relationships. These immigrants retained economic and social ties with their villagers from and in China. The separation from mainstream society was exacerbated by the attitudes of non-Chinese, which Siu also collected:

I don't use their laundries, no more, after they tore up a couple of shirts on me. You can't argue with the bastards, they don't talk English. They know what money is; they can count better than Americans. They save every cent. They eat nothing but rice. If I done that, I'd be a millionaire. . .

Siu's dissertation, however, seems to stretch in two opposing directions. On the one hand, he painstakingly describes the racism that the Chinese Americans faced; Siu describes the stereotypes, the violence, and legal actions against the early pioneers. Siu suggests that the

Chinese were tracked into the laundry business because it was a service industry that the bachelor Anglo-American communities did not want as it was deemed lowly “women’s work.” On the other hand, Siu concludes that the Chinese isolation in the U.S. was due to the “sojourner” mentality, which was “deviant.” As sojourners, the Chinese did not try to “seek status in the society of dominant group” and instead, the process of socialization was “contact, conflict, accommodation, and isolation.” Siu goes further to suggest that the Chinese were “non-assimilable” and thus formed their own “racial colony” in Chinatown. Are the Chinese immigrants non-assimilable or victims of racial prejudice, or both?

The dissertation describes the reality that Siu witnessed as a participant observer but concludes in a framework that accommodated to Robert Parks’s theories of cultural assimilation: contact, conflict, accommodation, and assimilation. Still in 1953, this academic compromise did not make this research acceptable enough for scholarly recognition. A study of Chinese laundrymen by a Chinese American scholar was deemed superfluous to the serious work in “American” sociology.

But Siu’s research survives the odds. His consistent attention to descriptive details in this study is invaluable in helping 1980s scholars understand the daily drudgery of Chinese American laundrymen. Siu systematically recorded a way of life that few others bothered to appreciate in that era. Siu’s *The Chinese Laundryman* is yet another testimony that the ethnic experience could not be completely suppressed despite the racist attempts by both general society and academia.

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Michelle Maria Cruz Skinner. *Balibbayan/A Filipino Homecoming*. (Honolulu: Bess Press, 1988) 76 pp., \$6.95 paper.

Homecoming is that eternal and unrealizable dream for expatriated Filipinos, from the migrant workers of the 1930s to the skilled and professional immigrants of the last two decades. Sheer economic hardship or cultural estrangement after relocation consign them to limbo and leave-taking. Homecoming becomes an act to be imagined; a dream pursued by Carlos Bulosan in his village stories and 1950s novella, *The Power of the People*; a hope nursed by the “hurt men” of Bienvenido Santos’s *Scent of Apples* (1981); an experience textualized by Ninotchka Rosca’s account of the 1986 Four-Day Revolt in *Endgame: The Fall of Marcos*.

Michelle Skinner imbues her stories with a sense of this elemental trope