

# Navigating Prejudice and Solidarity

## Labor Disputes in New York City's Chinatown in the 1980s and 1990s

What larger situation brought about the labor disputes in New York City's Chinatown and why are they not talked about?

Source Project Stream:  
Mapping American Prejudice  
Presenter: Yao Shen He

### Background

- The **Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882** was legislation that restricted the immigration of Chinese and other Asian groups to the United States.
- **Family name associations** were pivotal in building the community and served as a source of authority in the community. This institution took on the roles of mediating conflicts, placing workers, and hosting events.
- The repeal of the Chinese Exclusion Act and the **1965 Immigration and Nationality Act** worked to open the United States to more immigration, resulting in a new wave of Chinese immigrants.
- The working conditions in Chinatown have historically been categorized as **sweatshops** with low wages and long hours. This stems from the lack of government regulation in the community.
- The **Chinese Staff and Workers Association (CSWA)** worked to fight for workers' legal rights and improve their working conditions.
- In 1980 the workers of the **Silver Palace Restaurant** worked to create Chinatown's first restaurant workers **Union 318** for which there was a lot of pushback by restaurant owners.
- In 1994 the union benefits won for Silver Palace in the 80s were at risk because of restaurant management resulting in a picket. This brought the restaurant management to the bargaining table to renegotiate the union contract.
- In 1995 there was another labor conflict with **Jing Fong** regarding stolen wages. This conflict brought press to the labor conditions in Chinatown and working conditions.

### Importance

- The tensions within the Chinese community are often not talked about by scholars.
- The labor conflicts that that will be examined emphasize the impact of these tensions within Chinatown.
- The lack of government involvement in Chinatown during this time was particularly noteworthy – **why was there a lack of regulation and what factors ultimately caused the government to get involved?**

### Limitations

- Many of the people involved in the labor struggles in Chinatown during the 80s and 90s speak only Chinese with limited knowledge of English.
  - Some of the translations from people and from the Chinese newspapers may be mistranslated.

### Results

- The tensions in the community surrounding this issue are evident from the newspaper accounts along with personal accounts.
- From within, both Chinese restaurant workers and restaurant owners worked to unite against the other side, meeting and forming associations to make organized and strategic decisions.
- There was a hunger strike from students during one of the labor disputes against Jing Fong which was a driving force in bringing attention towards the issues in the community.
- Even after the government started regulating labor, issues remained and tensions remained high well into the 2000s during which there were more strikes and lawsuits.
- The Chinese community as a whole was still very wary of the government and regulations that were proposed.

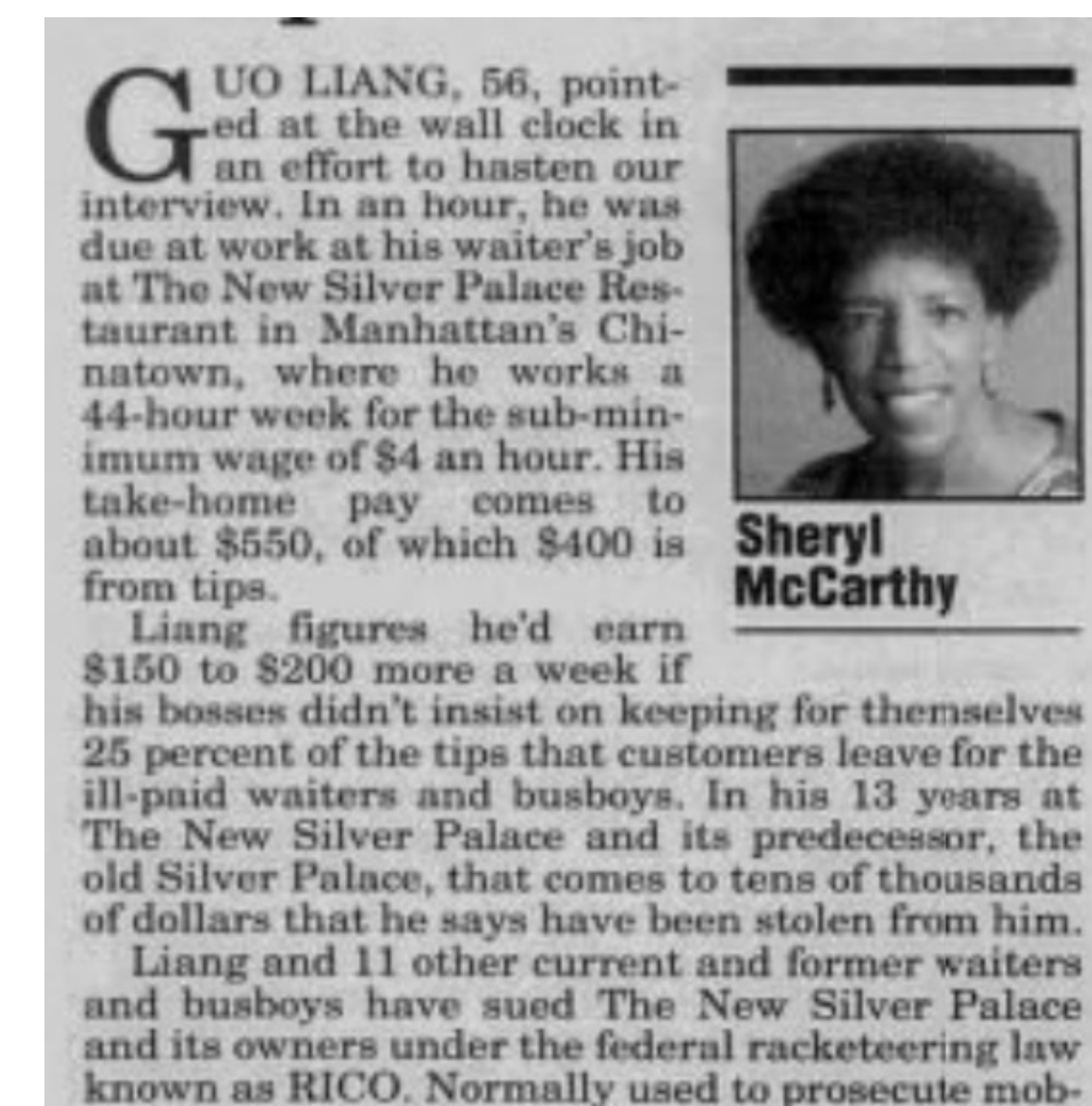
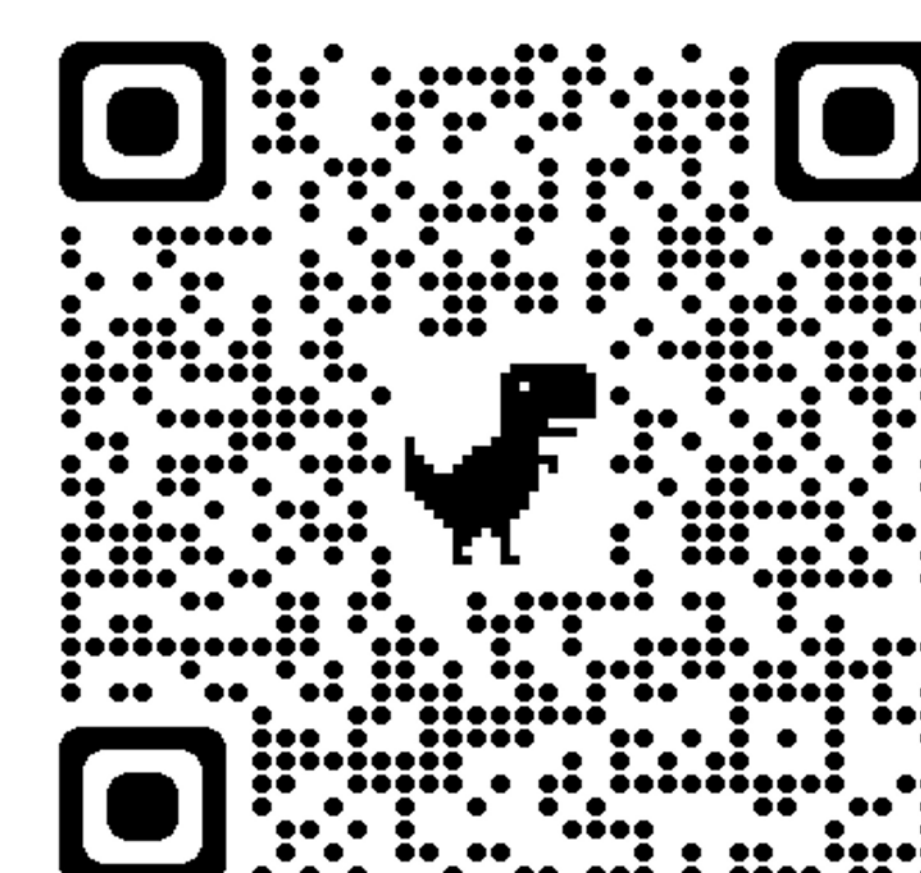


Picket line outside of the Silver Palace Restaurant in 1994  
(CAAIV Digital Archive)

### Sources

- Chinatown newspapers and outside newspapers (*The Villager* and *The New York Times*).
- Historical archives belonging to the Committee Against Anti-Asian Violence and MOCA.
- Court documents.
- Videos from the 80s and 90s that document the events.

### To Primary Sources



Clipping of newspaper article covering a lawsuit against The New Silver Palace  
(Newsday)

### Discussion and Further Study

- The role of students in bringing about change emphasizes the importance of being politically active – particularly for immigrant groups.
- How immigrant groups continue to face off against outside prejudice by forming their communities.
- Did other immigrant groups, such as the Irish or Italians, who historically settled into the area that is New York City's Chinatown face similar problems when it came to labor and in-group tensions or was this a uniquely Chinese problem?
- Chinatown's garment industry and the labor struggles other elements of this story are not covered in this research.
- While similar to the restaurant industry in the types of problems there is still a lot to be explored as to how the same tensions manifested themselves in the garment industry – particularly concerning the treatment of women and competition from outside garment factories.
- There was a lot of mentioning of Chinese gangsters running restaurants, newspapers, and factors – trying to lower costs as much as possible by keeping wages low – a deeper exploration into how Chinese gangsters have such tight control over the Chinese community could potentially be worth looking into.