



**External  
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Yuling Chen

***43.654°N 79.385°W***

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Prior to being known as Toronto's City Hall and Nathan Phillips Square, the area that stretched from York and Elizabeth street between Queen and Dundas was considered a slum – a district where refugees, people of colour and other marginalized communities had subsequently lived. Founded in the early 1800s by Thorton Blackburn, a refugee slave from Kentucky who started Toronto's first taxicab company, this area, known as the Ward, became the place where many of Toronto's Chinese community called their home from the 1890s to 1961. In her search for how Toronto's Spadina Chinatown came to be, video artist Yuling Chen was surprised to learn of an earlier Chinatown, and maps out the faded memory of one business' story in her work, *43.654°N 79.385°W*.

Due to rampant discrimination, early Chinese settlers were only able to take up occupations in hand laundries, grocery stores and restaurants. At the time, laundries were commonly viewed as women's work and an undesirable task for men. Chinese men and families took on the work because they saw an opportunity where they could make a living and because it was one of the few options

available for them at the time.<sup>1</sup> Owning their own business also allowed them to hire their friends and family and avoid the tyranny of working under a potentially racist white employer. Despite this, Torontonians falsely believed that Chinese laundries competed with their business leading to publicly called boycotts and demands for the city government to cancel or withhold business licenses from Chinese operators. In 1894, the Toronto Star published an article (written by a non-Chinese man), that lamented the plight of the men, women and girls whose economic survival was dependent on the laundry industry and the Chinese who were pushing them out. The article, titled, “The Evil the Chinese do,” argued that Chinese laundries were dirty and an incubator of disease.<sup>2</sup> In response to this, in 1902, a municipal bylaw imposed a then hefty \$50 on Chinese laundries. Toronto’s first African-Canadian politician Alderman William P. Hubbard, advocated on behalf of the Chinese community and the fee was then minimized to a charge between \$5 to \$25.<sup>3</sup>

In 1945, Toronto’s post-war plans to unveil a modern city hall had resulted in the displacement of the Chinese community. At the time, the Chinese community had owned 55% of Chinatown. Two-thirds of the area would be expropriated in the late 1940s and 1950s.<sup>4</sup> Businesses either closed or moved, though many could not afford to relocate. In 1955, a demolition of many spaces within the first Chinatown took place. Concrete poured over where the Chinese once lived and erased the businesses, signs and homes that stood as evidence of their presence in that area.

In my conversations with various members of the Chinese-Canadian community, many of us living in Toronto feel a great sense of responsibility to

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<sup>1</sup> Arlene Chan, *The Chinese in Toronto*, 40.

<sup>2</sup> Chan, *The Chinese in Toronto*, 43.

<sup>3</sup> Arlene Chan, *Against All Odds, The Chinese Laundry*, Published in *The Ward*, 39.

<sup>4</sup> Kristyn Wong-Tam, *Remembering Toronto’s First Chinatown*, Published in *The Ward*, 271.

both pay tribute to our ancestors who have laid the path for us to live here and to make stories of resistance known to the general public. Kristyn-Wong Tam, the now councilor of this district, writes that her office looks over what was once Elizabeth street, where the majority of the Chinese lived, and reflects on how she advocated for this history to be honoured through a commemorative plaque.

One of the last hand laundries in Toronto, Chow Keong Hand Laundry and Cleaners, originally opened on Elizabeth Street but has now moved up University Avenue to Avenue Rd. In her video, draped with a long piece of golden silk around her thigh, Yuling Chen walks from Nathan Phillips Square up to the doors of Chow Keong Hand Laundry. During her walk, the silk accumulates the dirt and debris of the city. It entangles her legs and is also occasionally stepped on by pedestrians. Upon reaching her destination, she lays the golden silk at their doorstep. The video then cuts to scenes of Yuling performing the three steps of hand laundry at home on this sheet of fabric.

The artist's choice of material highlights the labour and care that early Chinese Laundry workers put into their work. Silk is a delicate fabric that cannot be machine-washed nor spot-treated without it being ruined. Instead, it must be gently hand-washed. Choosing gold, a colour once exclusively reserved for the emperor of Chinatown, implies that this labour is to be respected, noticed and honoured. Although it is unlikely that many Chinese hand launders were routinely washing silk, the tenderness of treating silk allows viewers to recognize the act of hand-washing as incomparable to its mechanical counter part.

The location of the former and current Chow Keong Hand Laundry marks a shift from the perception of hand laundry as a lowly and unclean occupation to a now near luxury service that perhaps only few in Yorkville can afford. Hand laundry is now elevated to the status of a service reserved for one's most precious belongings, and with that, a sense of trust is invested to those who wash them.

Chen believes that the most precious thing you can give to someone is labour. In an age and location where laundry machines prevail, the time, sweat and care that hand laundering requires is easily remised. She describes the process of washing and ironing the silk as unexpectedly tiresome and that performing this task granted her a new level of appreciation for the work that early Chinese laundry owners did sixteen to eighteen hours a day. Draped on a line next to the video with a tag that states the geographical coordinates of the heart of Toronto's first Chinatown, Chen hangs both the cleaned silk and this shameful part of the city's out to dry.

-Shellie Zhang