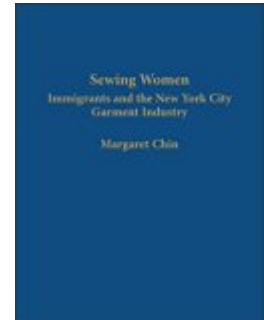**Margaret M. Chin.** *Sewing Women: Immigrants and the New York City Garment Industry.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2005. viii + 197 pp. $50.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-231-13308-1.

Reviewed by Robert Bionaz

Since its inception in the mid-nineteenth century, the New York City garment industry has provided a model for workplace exploitation which depended upon a workforce of mostly urban immigrant women working in appalling conditions for miserable wages. As Margaret Chin demonstrates in *Sewing Women: Immigrants and the New York City Garment Industry*, the modern garment industry continues to rely upon a poorly paid immigrant workforce, and large numbers of Chinese, Mexican, Ecuadorian, and Dominican women now labor in the sewing trades, replacing the Irish, Italians, Eastern European Jews, Puerto Ricans, and African Americans who formerly toiled in the city's sweatshops.

ChinÃ¢'s sociological study focuses on two ethnic segments of the New York City garment industry: shops owned by Chinese who mainly employ legal Chinese immigrants and shops owned by Koreans who employ large numbers of illegal Mexican, Ecuadorian, and Dominican immigrant workers. Her primary argument is that immigrant workers, rather than simply looking for the best-paying jobs, "favor jobs that complement their household roles as parents, providers, or supporters of relatives overseas" (p. 2). Deftly using interviews with workers and owners as her foundation, she takes the reader into the workplace these immigrants inhabit--exploring themes like gender and ethnicity, immigration status, family status, workplace organization, hiring, training, and wages. The result is a study which should be useful to scholars of sociology, labor studies, and immigration policy, as well as historians interested in gender, ethnicity, immigration, and labor history.

Chin begins with a brief overview of the history of the New York City garment industry which describes the various ethnic groups which have historically dominated the industry and which details the development of the production and wage systems used in the needle trades. In chapter 2, she describes the ethnic garment businesses she included in her study, and discusses the workers, their union, and their immigration and family status in general terms. Chapter 3 examines migration strategies used by Chinese and Hispanic workers and their social implications, and chap-

ter 4 focuses on the reasons garment shop owners and garment workers enter the industry. In chapters 5, 6, and 7, Chin examines the reasons for the existence of Chinese and Hispanic workforces from the employers' perspective, describes strategies used by workers to land jobs, then discusses their wages. She then offers two brief chapters reviewing her findings and discussing problems in the industry since the turn of the century and concludes the monograph with a description of her research methods.

In chapters 3 through 7, Chin illuminates workplace practices in an industry with two distinct labor systems. Garment workers in the Chinese segment enjoy some flexibility in their workdays, and are paid mainly by check for the number of finished garments they produce. Chinese garment workers play a vital role in recruitment and training of new employees. In addition, most Chinese workers belong to the Union of Needle Trades, Industrial and Textile Employees (UNITE), and are eligible for health insurance. In contrast, Hispanics working for Korean employers are subject to assembly-line production, more stringent work discipline, and their work entails sewing only portions of garments. These workers are paid an hourly wage. The Hispanic workers in the Korean sector are usually paid in cash, are unorganized and play no role in either recruitment or the training of new employees.

Although the largely immigrant workforce is limited in employment choices and workers in both segments are exploited in terms of earning capacity, these workers are not simply passive victims of an oppressive labor system. Notably, Chin is careful to point out that the structure of both segments owes something to the desire of the workers themselves, desires which are often shaped by family and immigration status. Chinese women come into the United States legally, often with their families. Many of their husbands find work in the food service industry where they work in Chinese restaurants for cash wages and

no benefits. The women who work in the garment industry are able to make money to contribute to the family and secure health insurance for their families. The flexible hours they work enable them to go shopping, drop off or pick up children and run personal errands during the work day. Since their wages are dependent upon the number of whole garments they produce, they are able to work at their own pace, often into the evenings or on the weekends. Chinese women entering the garment industry become part of a social network which acts as a referral service for Chinese employers and which trains and supports workers on the shop floor.

Instead of the informal, semi-artisanal production method used in the Chinese sector, Chin demonstrates how the Korean employers favor assembly-line methods and a very different workforce: illegal Mexican, Dominican, and Ecuadorian immigrants, including a substantial number of men. These people most often come to the United States without families and are simply looking for the best wages possible in order to support children and other family members left behind. Most of these workers eventually plan to return to their native countries. Work for these immigrants is regulated by the clock, and there is little socialization on the shop floor. Garment production is segmented with small groups of workers sewing pieces of cut cloth which are then passed along to other groups until the garment is finished. Maintaining the pace of production is critical to Korean employers and workers must be able to keep pace with the assembly process. These workers are paid in cash. The way workers find jobs in the Korean sector is as impersonal as the work itself. Many wait at the "for hire" corner at 37th Street and Eighth Avenue, others apply in person and those selected are immediately tested to determine if they possess the requisite sewing skills. Since Korean employers hire workers with previous experience who are expected to fit immediately into the production line, there is no structure for training new employees. In contrast to

the Chinese sector, there is no referral process in place among Hispanics working for Korean owners. Indeed, the hiring practices and cash wages paid in this portion of the industry help preserve the anonymity desired by these workers, most of whom are illegal immigrants.

As Chin clearly shows, both segments of the industry pay poorly and many workers feel exploited. The quasi-artisanal system in the Chinese sector creates a set of reciprocal relationships between workers and employers which favor the employers. In return for a relaxed workday, control of entry into the workplace, health insurance, and documented earnings which assists them in their efforts to bring other family members to the United States, these women furnish their employers with built-in referral and on-the-job training services. This informal structure, while enabling Chinese women to find work, also creates vulnerabilities as the new employee's performance reflects on her sponsor. Partly as a result, Chinese women tend to be docile in the workplace, as the workers do not demand higher wages in fear of damaging relationships with other workers or the owners. This results in poorer wages than paid by Korean employers, below five dollars an hour on average. In contrast to the Chinese, most Hispanic workers feel little or no loyalty to employers and move from job to job if dissatisfied. Hispanic workers are looking for steady income and view their wages as "just a promise; the garment shop needs to provide the hours and the work to keep the income stream steady" (p. 126). Although Chin finds that many Hispanic workers leave their original jobs and almost always find better-paying jobs, the wages in this segment of the industry are also abominable: below six dollars an hour.

Although Chin has explored the workplace thoroughly, the monograph's focus on the shop floor with only an occasional foray into the social and cultural world of immigrants outside the garment factory limits the study, sometimes in frustrating ways. For example, what role, if any, does culture play in immigrant work choices? How does culture factor into gender identity and social expectations? In addition, a brief discussion of other industries in which these immigrant groups work would add contextual depth to the monograph. These minor criticisms notwithstanding, Margaret Chin has painted an imaginative and compelling portrait of contemporary immigrant workers in one United States industry built on the often fascinating accounts of the workers themselves. Skillfully using oral sources, she demonstrates how considerations other than wages propel both legal and illegal immigrants into the garment industry.

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Citation: Robert Bionaz. Review of Chin, Margaret M. *Sewing Women: Immigrants and the New York City Garment Industry.* H-Urban, H-Net Reviews. July, 2005.

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