

# WORK CAMPS OR ETHNIC VILLAGES? THE CHINESE SHRIMP CAMPS OF SAN FRANCISCO BAY

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## ABSTRACT

During the late 19th century several Chinese fishing stations were established around San Francisco Bay, dedicated to the capture and processing of shrimp. Originally employing techniques and equipment imported from the Pearl River Delta, the industry evolved to meet local economic conditions, using adaptations possible only through greater capital intensification. The stations functioned both as work camps and as villages. Historical and archaeological evidence is reviewed to assess the stability of these settlements and the economic status and living conditions of the immigrants involved in this industry.

### Introduction

This paper describes an American industry conducted by immigrants: the San Francisco Bay shrimp fishery. In particular, we will attempt to examine the settlements associated with the fishery and to view them as work camps, a perspective sometimes taken by historians of the industry:

Not a stick remains standing today at the site of any shrimp camp except China Camp. That some ruins at least evocative of the first fishery survive there above the surface is perhaps more worthy of note than the disappearance of all the rest. The fishing camps were not made of permanent stuff. People moved in and out of them to the special rhythm of the fishery... It might be better to think of such settlements not as villages but as factories with on-site housing. Thus, though they were often real communities, they were ephemeral, and extraordinarily little is known about them (Brienes 1983:73).

Immigrant labor and migratory labor have long been of interest to social scientists, and recently researchers have focused on the company town as an object of study. But work camps, though they may be described in the context of individual industries (e.g. Kirchner 1980), seem to have attracted little attention in themselves. Consequently, I suggest here a set of definitions. A work camp is a habitation area for workers engaged in a particular industry or occupation, located so as to provide proximity to the work site. Beyond this universal definition, however, we can identify further criteria that, while inclusive enough to cover a wide variety of enterprises, present a clearer but more restricted perspective.

This perspective sees work camps within the context of the industrial revolution, although the work done in them may perpetuate peasant or craft skills of considerable antiquity. In this view, work camps exist to provide the raw materials needed by industry, to create the transportation networks that make mass production possible, to build the public works and

provide the food supplies required by the expanding and urbanized populations created by the industrial revolution. Those involved in work camps of this nature operate in a cash economy; they are employed under contract or hire and—within this context—lack the kin-based attachment to land and labor typical of tribal or peasant society.

Such camps are established at the initiation and selection of capital interests. Usually they are situated away from urban areas and exist to support a single employer within a single industry. They include habitation for workers, but not for non-working family members. Occupation is intended to be short-term or seasonal. Housing—ordinarily provided by the employer—is thus rudimentary and often communal. Any services available to camp occupants are few and basic. The camps, created to serve the ends of capital by providing a setting for wage or piece labor, are stratified: they are occupied by workers and overseers, but not by the capitalists themselves.

Clearly, this description will not fit all the settlements that have been seen as work camps. Thus the "campos" or "colonias" provided by the citrus industry in Southern California were generally permanent establishments located in or adjacent to cities or towns (Gonzalez 1991), while the west's earliest mining camps—remote and ephemeral settlements indeed—were the voluntary creations of independent miners. It is worth investigating, however, how such differences may be tied to the relations of production and how they may be reflected archaeologically.

Two other categories of settlement—company towns and ethnic villages—require definition. For the first I quote L. M. Roth (1992:176):

What is a company town? One definition would be that it is a community devoted to a single industry, with all land and buildings owned by the company and all housing rented to employees. Another definition would include communities with one or

more industries that may have owned all the land at one time but gradually sold off the land to other businesses and homeowner-employees.

I suggest further that a company town differs from a work camp in several (clearly related) ways: a company town is intended to be a permanent settlement, it houses the non-working families of married employees, and it is usually larger than a work camp and offers more amenities.

In regard to ethnic villages I take as a model, for obvious reasons, the Chinese fishing villages of southwest Malaysia (Anderson and Anderson 1977; Lee 1962; Yuzo 1984). In this context an ethnic village is any settlement populated primarily by members of a single minority ethnic group, where its distinctive language, customs and lifeways are in daily and dominant use. Such villages are segregated by custom or by distance from the settlements of the larger society. They house a population with sufficient diversity to perpetuate the patterns of family life characteristic of the culture in question.

With these definitions, we can examine the 19th century Chinese shrimp fishing camps on San Francisco Bay. As we will see, these "camps" exhibit characteristics of all three types of settlement, and these characteristics can be exemplified by both historical and archaeological data. In this context, archaeology can provide evidence of industrial technology and its evolution, of the maintenance of ethnic traditions, and of the permanency of occupation and the economic status of residents.

### The Shrimp Industry

The technology used for catching and processing shrimp had relatively few components, although the nature of these evolved significantly over time (Brienes 1983; Nash 1973). As originally introduced, the fishery was pursued by crews of two or three men, operating out of sampans, who employed a set of several large conical nets staked in the bay facing the tide. The nets were emptied and repositioned at the change of the tide, and the shrimp caught were returned to the camp where they were boiled, spread out on cleared hillsides to dry, then crushed, winnowed to separate the dried meats from the hulls, and bagged for market. Because the shrimp were most abundant in the summer, and because the bulk of the catch had to be dried, the camps were partially abandoned during the winter.

The technology in use was imported wholesale from China. The boats were of Chinese design, while the bag nets were manufactured in China and were similar to nets in use there. The processing technology was patterned in large part on traditional methods of processing rice.

Each boat was run by an independent partnership, which included a man on shore to prepare the boiling vat for the crew's return. Each group had its own pier, its own nets and processing equipment, and its own drying fields, storage sheds, and living quarters. This system of independent partnerships—renewed or reorganized on an annual basis—lasted into the 20th century.

By the 1890s (if not earlier), these partnerships were contracted to large Chinese fish companies in San Francisco. The companies leased the land and presumably owned the structures and equipment utilized by the fishermen. By the end of the century this dependence on outside business interests became increasingly important as the fishery entered a period of capital intensification. Larger boats were introduced, which required five-man crews, but which could handle many more nets and hence much larger shrimp landings. The cleared drying fields were replaced by vast areas of plank decking. Further development was interrupted in 1905 by passage of a law banning export of dried shrimp to China, thus cutting off the major market for the product.

In 1911, this law was followed by one that outlawed the use of the stationary bag nets—then the only efficient means known of taking shrimp. The industry, as a result, collapsed. A few years later, the bag net was relegalized in the South Bay, and subsequently an efficient shrimp trawl was developed for use in the North Bay. The ensuing years witnessed a variety of attempts at mechanization, and although the revived South Bay fishery remained in Chinese hands, the North Bay trawl operations were conducted largely by European and Euroamerican fishermen while Chinese American and Euroamerican wholesalers competed for their landings.

### The Point San Pedro Camps

With this background, I would like to examine the camps located on Point San Pedro in Marin County, which is situated along the shore of San Pablo Bay east of San Rafael. This locality was the site of several shrimp camps founded about 1870.

The population of the Point San Pedro camps was 79 in 1870, rose to a maximum of 469 in 1880, and declined to 56 by 1910 (Table 1). The population was always overwhelmingly (>92%) male and overwhelmingly (>87%) adult. The great majority of camp residents were fishermen (Table 2). Other occupations were "laborers", "cooks", clerks, store keepers, with occasional individuals listed as physician, barber, gardener or teacher. All of the occupants were Cantonese, most of them from Toishan.

After passage of the 1911 law against bag nets, all the camps were abandoned except one, where a single family stayed on. This settlement—now known as China Camp—became a center of the trawl fishery after that technology was developed a few years later. It is the only one of the original shrimp camps still in operation, and it has been included in China Camp State Park. The park contains the sites of two adjacent shrimp camps, both established about 1870. One of these is China Camp. About 120 m (400 ft.) north is located on Rat Rock Cove, the site of a camp that was abandoned after passage of the 1911 law.

In 1980, archaeological investigations were initiated at these two sites in anticipation of building stabilization work at China Camp and the introduction of buried utility lines through both sites. Work was carried out over several seasons

(Fig. 1). Encountered throughout most of China Camp was a buried wet deposit representing the original mudflats that lay behind and beneath the camp and the soil build-up that resulted from erosion off the steep drying fields. These strata were covered by a series of fill layers laid down beginning early in the 20th century. Excavated volume of the buried deposit was about 32 m<sup>3</sup>. The abundant remains recovered from these strata (and occasionally from elsewhere at the two sites) document the diet and material culture of the early occupants and the work carried on at the camp.

## Results

The artifacts and features encountered will be used here to discuss the technology employed at the camps, the ethnicity of the residents as indicated by material culture, and the economic status and permanency of the occupants.

### Technology

Various aspects of the shrimping technology are represented in the archaeological record. The tidal mudflats in front of each settlement contain remnants of the piers that once extended out into the Bay. At Rat Rock Cove the lower hull of a sampan lies still buried in the mud, while the excavations at China Camp repeatedly uncovered the bases of posts used to support the wooden drying decks installed in the 1890s. The brick fireboxes of boiling vats used to process the shrimp have repeatedly been encountered during the excavations, and the size and configuration of these features can be seen to have evolved in accord with other developments in the fishery (Schulz and Lortie 1985; Schulz 1988).

In addition to these features, various artifacts also derive from work processes carried on at the camp. These include remnants of baskets used to carry shrimp and fish, and fish hooks used on unbaited set lines for sturgeon (Schulz 1995). Probably the most diagnostic artifact recovered is a portion of a wooden rake used to turn the shrimp on the drying fields (Fig. 2). Less obvious perhaps are the remains of lamps recovered at the site, which include four glass lamp bodies and at least 27 chimneys—all of American or European manufacture—plus the remains of a few Chinese rush lamps. The relative abundance of such artifacts here is undoubtedly due to their frequent use in the workplace. The necessity of fishing bag nets with the tides meant that the boat crews not infrequently left before dawn or returned after dark: in the latter case the boiling operations would have been carried out at night.

### Material Culture

That the material culture represented at the camps was overwhelmingly Chinese will surprise no one familiar with overseas Chinese sites. This continuity of material culture in a new land is especially evident in regard to foodways. Bioarchaeological studies carried out thus far indicate a predominance of traditional Cantonese foods; the dominance of pork remains

over beef, in fact, seems to be stronger than in any previously investigated site.

In regard to ceramic tablewares, of 256 minimum vessels, 224 (87.5%) represent Asian wares. Glass and ceramic storage and retail containers numbered 202 vessels, 127 (62.8%) of them being derived from China. In addition to these wares, the site yielded two charcoal braziers (at least one stamped with the mark of a Guangdong manufacturer), the rusted remnant of a wok, several wok brushes, portions of several grinding bowls, various other food preparation vessels, and several chop sticks. Thus, with the exception of the glass bottles of American or European manufacture—which may have been filled by Chinese merchants—the assemblage is overwhelmingly of Chinese origin. It thus documents the perpetuation not only of traditional dietary patterns, but of traditional food preparation techniques and table customs as well.

### Permanency of Occupation and Economic Status

While we know that many of the shrimp camps were occupied for more than 40 years, it is difficult from historical records to document the permanency of occupation by individual residents. Contemporary directories excluded such settlements, and the census manuscripts provide notoriously unreliable records of Chinese names. Archaeology can provide an indirect measure of permanency of occupation, as well as of economic status.

Any review of overseas Chinese artifact assemblages quickly reveals that the vast majority of the ceramic tablewares recovered are of only four styles. The names that archaeologists have applied to these types are amazingly varied, but the designations Double Happiness, Bamboo, Celadon and Four Seasons are probably as common as any. As a group these decorative types can be termed the Four Styles. Of the assemblage of Asian tablewares recovered at China Camp, 79% of sherds and 71% of vessels are of the Four Styles.

Thanks to research in 19th-century account books by Sando and Felton (1993), we have in the relative costs for these wares, an economic scale that can be applied to 19th-century assemblages. At China Camp, inexpensive wares (Double Happiness and Bamboo) account for less than 20% of vessels and 34% of sherds (Tables 3, 4). When these percentages are compared to those from temporary work camps and from Chinese laundries, the shrimp camp assemblage can be seen to be markedly more expensive than the former group but quite similar to those from the laundries (Fig. 3). In addition to cost, these figures result from the diversity of vessel forms in the assemblage: the inexpensive wares occur almost entirely as rice bowls while the more costly styles occur in a variety of forms (Tables 3, 4). This diversity, of course, is a measure of residential stability, since maintaining a wide variety of vessel forms is functional only if residence is of prolonged duration.

The comparison with laundries here is of some interest. Like the shrimp camps, Chinese laundries were organized as independent partnerships, and like the fishermen the partners

were engaged in a small business with high risk and low return. Although the work was long and onerous, involvement allowed the participants to escape being locked into the lower stratum of the segmented labor market—the “reserve army of labor”—where working conditions were likely to be worse and returns less, and from which escape was difficult (Ong 1981b; cf. Ong 1981a; Woirol 1992:62-64).

### Discussion

The available evidence does not suggest a consistent correspondence of the shrimp camps with either work camps, company towns or ethnic villages, as defined above. Rather, they share characteristics of all three categories of settlement (Table 5). Resemblance to ethnic villages can be seen in the fact that all the occupants were from a restricted area of Guangdong, routinely spoke only Cantonese, and had a material culture almost entirely of Chinese derivation. Furthermore, unlike those immigrants who provided labor in agriculture or construction, the economic transactions of the fishermen were exclusively with *Huáqiáo* buyers and businessmen. They also employed a technology largely imported from China. Even the

capital intensification that affected the industry after the 1890s can be seen as paralleling the economic circumstance of ethnic fisheries—including Chinese fisheries—elsewhere in the world.

Initially, however, the camps included only men. Women and children were present by 1880, but thereafter never exceeded 14% of the population. In this regard the shrimp camps resembled the bachelor society of the greater *Huáqiáo* population and differed from ethnic villages. The settlements resembled work camps in this regard as well as in the seasonality of the work and the rudimentary nature of camp construction.

The shrimp camps, in sum, share only some characteristics of work camps as defined here; that is, settlements of workers completely subservient to large capital. In part this destructiveness seems to be due to the nature of the industry, which favored resource extraction by small partnerships with only secondary subordination to outside capital. In part it may be due to the relative economic success of the fishermen and the size and isolation of the settlement which allowed the reestablishment of at least some aspects of village life in a foreign setting.

Table 1. Point San Pedro Shrimp Camps: Sex and Age Distribution.

Year	Adult Males	Adult Females	Subadult Males	Subadult Females	Total
1870	78	0	1	0	79
1880	416	17	24	12	469
1900	115	6	8	4	133
1910	46	3	7	0	56

Table 2. Point San Pedro Shrimp Camps: Occupation of Adult Males.

Year	Fishermen	Laborers	Store Kprs.	Other	Total
1870	78	0	0	0	78
1880	342	23	5	46	416
1900	84	24	4	3	115
1910	40	0	2	4	46

Table 3. China Camp Ceramics: Frequencies of Four Principal Tableware Styles (Minimum Vessel Counts).

Form	Dbl.Happ.	Bamboo	Celadon	4 Flowers	Total
Large Bowls	0	0	0	7	7
Rice Bowls	4	27	17	2	50
Small Bowls	2	0	4	4	10
Saucers	0	0	2	11	13
Tea Cups	0	0	40	7	47
Wine Cups	0	0	14	11	25
Spoons	0	0	1	7	8
TOTAL	6	27	78	49	160
Percent	3.8	16.9	48.7	30.6	100.0

Table 4. China Camp Ceramics: Frequencies of Four Principal Tableware Styles (Sherd Counts).

Form	Dbl.Happ.	Bamboo	Celadon	4 Flowers	Total
Large Bowls	0	0	0	78	78
Rice Bowls	16	262	139	17	434
Small Bowls	13	0	14	17	44
Saucers	0	0	2	44	46
Tea Cups	0	0	193	15	208
Wine Cups	0	0	33	12	45
Spoons	0	0	2	12	14
TOTAL	29	262	383	195	869
Percent	3.3	30.2	44.1	22.4	100.0

Table 5. Shrimp Camp Correspondence to Settlement Categories.

Shrimp Camps:	Work Camps	Company Towns	Ethnic Villages
Isolated location	+	+	+
Ethnic homogeneity	?	?	+
Ethnic material culture	?	?	+
Traditional technology	-	-	+
Demographic imbalance	+	-	-
Contracted partnerships	-	-	+
Seasonal occupation	+	-	-
Long-term occupation	-	+	+
Single industry	+	+	?
Multiple employers	-	-	+
Presence of merchants, etc.	-	+	+

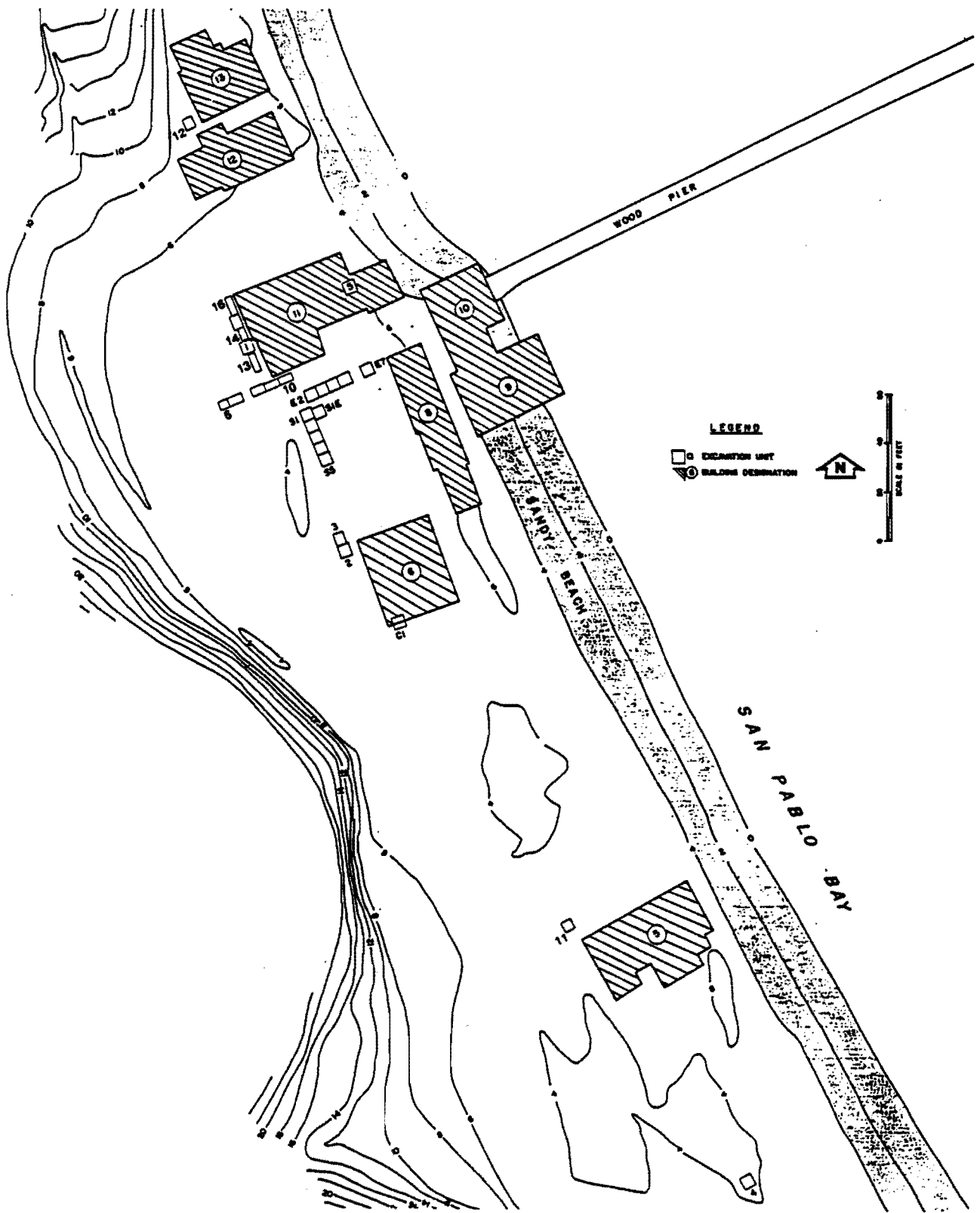


Figure 1. Map of the surviving settlement at China Camp, showing archaeological units.



STAMPING SHRIMPS.

a

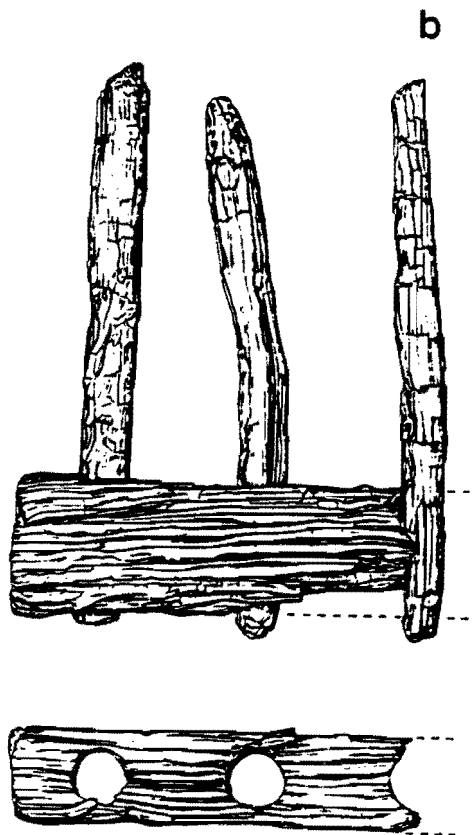


Figure 2. Wooden shrimp rakes: a) Contemporary illustration of rake lying on drying field (Walsh 1893); b) Archaeological specimen from China Camp.

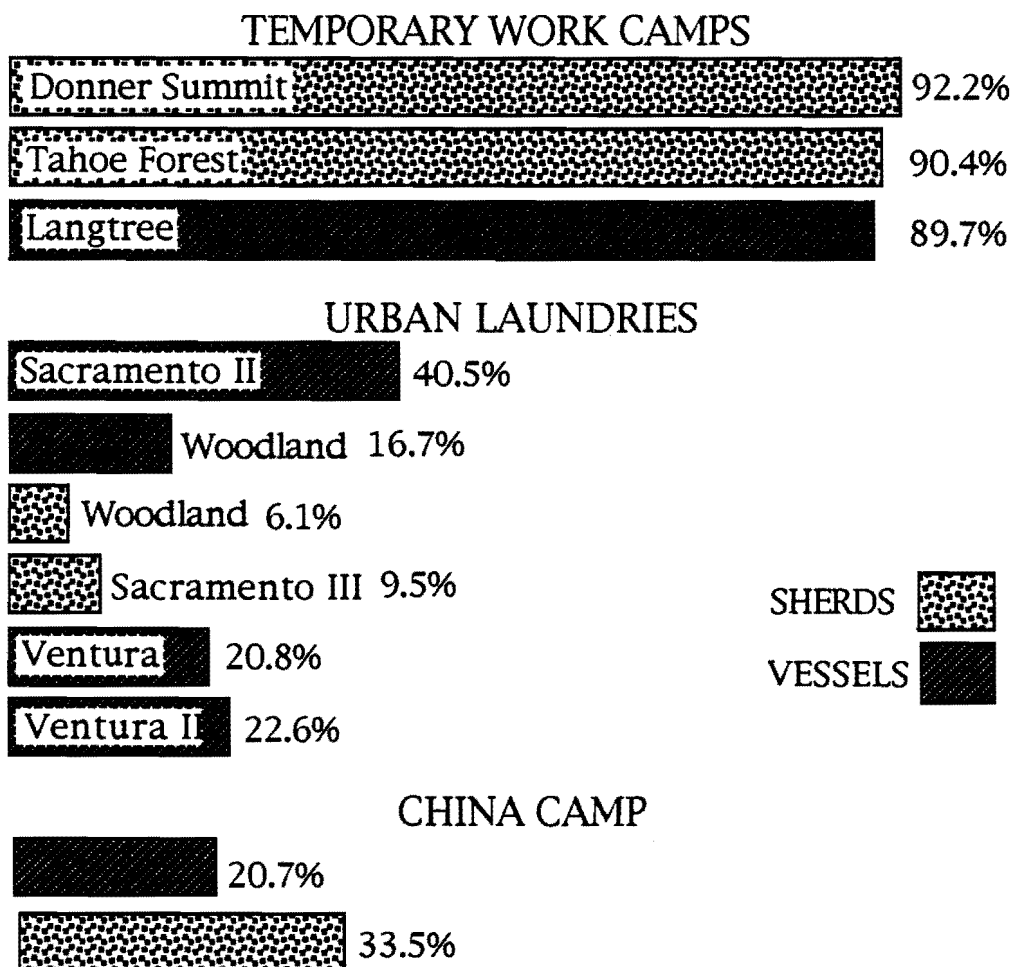


Figure 3. Percentage of inexpensive wares (Double Happiness, Bamboo) among ceramic tablewares of the "Four Styles": China Camp compared with temporary work camps and urban laundries. Comparative data from Felton, Lortie and Schulz (1984: Table 13).

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