Savoring Sacrifices: Unraveling the Impact of the Restaurant Industry on Fuzhounese American Lives

Savoring Sacrifices: Unraveling the Impact of the Restaurant Industry on Fuzhounese American Lives

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Abstract

This thesis studies the relationships between the restaurant industry and the lives of Fuzhounese Americans. The Fuzhounese community has long been known for its significant presence in the Chinese restaurant industry in the United States. While scholars have undertaken extensive studies on Fuzhounese immigration, little is written about the new "American" generation.

This thesis explores the complex impacts of the restaurant work culture on the next generation's childhood, adulthood, and future lifestyle. Through semi-structured interviews, I uncover the challenges faced by today's generation, the sacrifices that were made, and their individual desires to better their situation. The information contributed by the interviewees provides small insights into the personal narratives of what a typical Fuzhounese child would experience, and how the restaurant work culture continues to affect their careers, social relationships, family dynamics, and personal well-being.

Dedication

To my family, friends, and fellow FJs.

Thank you for the constant love and support.

Acknowledgments

I am immensely thankful to all those who graciously participated in this research study. The generous sharing of their stories and experiences has been instrumental in bringing this thesis to fruition. Although the individuals interviewed are referred to by pseudonyms, their willingness to share their experiences has contributed to a broader narrative that represents the multifaceted experiences of the Fuzhounese community.

I extend my heartfelt appreciation to Doug Bond, my research advisor, whose guidance has been invaluable from the initial stages of thesis preparation to the final editing. His expertise and support have been indispensable throughout this journey.

I am deeply grateful to my Thesis Director, Nicole Newendorp, for her unwavering belief that storytelling and lived experiences hold profound significance in uncovering captivating insights. Her constant encouragement, support, and guidance have been instrumental in shaping this research.

To my dear family, friends, and colleagues, I extend my sincere thanks for engaging in vibrant conversations, displaying continued interest in my work, and providing needed support for its completion. Your unwavering support has been a constant source of inspiration and motivation.

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Definition of Terms

Fujian: (also spelled Fukien or Hokkien). This southeast province of China borders multiple seas. Fujian faces the East China Sea to the east, it faces the South China Sea to the south, and it faces the Taiwan Strait to the southeast. In written Chinese, it is 福建 (FuJiàn) and the dialect romanization is *Hok-kiàn.*

Fuzhou: (also spelled Foochow, Hokchew, Hokchia, Hokchiu). One of the largest cities in Fujian province, also the capital of Fujian. In written Chinese, it is 福州 (*FúZhōu*) and the dialect romanization is *Hók-ciŭ*.

Fuzhounese: (also spelled Foochowese). Refers to the people of Fuzhou. In written Chinese it is 福州人 (*FúZhōuRén*) and the dialect Romanization is *Hók-ciŭ-nè ng.*

Fujianese: Used interchangeably with Fuzhounese, refers to all people descended from the southeast Fujian Province.

Snakeheads: people who smuggle paid customers into Western countries. Snakeheads are usually members of Chinese gangs who use illegal methods including stolen passports, fake visas, bribery of tour organizations, fabricated business envoys, etc. In written Chinese it is 蛇头; Mandarin romanization is shé tóu; the dialect romanization is chôa-thâu.

Chapter I

Introduction

As a first-born American in my family, I faced challenges similar to those of other Asian Americans who lived in traditional, multi-generational Chinese homes: strict curfews, challenging traditions, and a never-ending struggle to fit in with American society. Although my family lived in the suburbs of Long Island, New York, English was not my first language.

The first few years of my childhood were spent in the back of my grandmother's Chinese take-out restaurant in Jamaica, Queens. My grandma made a makeshift room for me in the basement of the store, and when I was tired I slept in a small cot there. While my overall memories of the restaurant are hazy, I do remember clearly that there was a bulletproof window in the front of the store, with a small opening to exchange money and food. I have been told I was a mischievous child, always trying to snatch a handful of fried rice or banging into the knobs of the wok burners.

When I began to attend kindergarten, both my mom and my aunt were frequently called for parent-teacher conferences because of my behavior: sometimes I hit or bit another classmate, other times I ran out of the classroom. I did not speak English, which was exceedingly frustrating because I could not tell the teachers that I was being bullied or that I needed to use the bathroom. My elementary school had a book reading program which partnered sixth-grade students with kindergarteners. Since there were only two Chinese students in those grades, we were partnered together. But the other girl spoke

only Mandarin and I understood only Fujianese, so communication was next to impossible.

I was placed in the ESL (English as Second Language) program, but even in the first grade I had to attend summer school because I had failed English reading and writing classes during the regular school year. My parents were warned that if I did not pass summer school, I would have to repeat first grade. This was the first time my parents had an inkling that perhaps they should place my American education first over work. From then on, learning English became a top priority—especially because I am the eldest of four siblings. Once I figured out the language, the rest of my siblings could rely on me to guide them. We grew up in this bubble of school, restaurant, and home.

It was not until seventh grade that my parents decided it was now important to learn Mandarin—and the first time I fully recognized that there were other Chinese ethnicities. Thus began my growing interest in learning more about Chinese culture and heritage. I began to watch Chinese dramas and TV shows with my parents, and even started listening to Chinese pop music to learn Mandarin more quickly. In college, I decided to minor in China studies, and I studied abroad in Wuhan and Shanghai during the summer semesters.

But, while I was discovering more about China, I felt something was missing. I had never thought to explore the literature on Fuzhounese (my own) ethnicity. When I had to write an oral history research paper for a course, I realized there was a considerable amount of writing on the topic of Fuzhounese people immigrating to America. Scholars had already dedicated their work to Fuzhounese relocation patterns, migration network data, illegal finances, the underground world of human

trafficking networks, and the Chinese takeout industry.[1] They had thoroughly examined the push and pull factors that drive Fuzhounese individuals to immigrate, with a particular focus on poverty and unequal employment opportunities. It seemed that compared to staying China, in America the Fuzhounese have a better chance to access resources and economic opportunities despite language barriers and discrimination.

However, in coming to the United States, Fuzhounese also face significant risk and exploitative labor conditions because their history is heavily intertwined with human smuggling. Most immigrants rely on so-called "snakehead"[2] networks to provide fraudulent documentation and illegal transportation by land or sea to a destination country, cramming people into hidden compartments, shipping containers, or vehicles. While the smuggling journey is highly risky, fraught with inhuman conditions, and extremely expensive, Fuzhounese people are undeterred and cling resolutely to any hope of escaping their poor/rural lives in China.

Scholars also have found that there is a disconnect between the Fuzhounese in the United States and the Fuzhounese in China. Rural villagers in China see only "glorified success" when their "American" family and friends are able to fund expensive lifestyles. They do not see the reality: that their counterparts are actually debt-ridden "fugitives"

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[1] See, for example: Julie Y. Chu, *Cosmologies of Credit: Transnational Mobility and the Politics of Destination in China* (Durham, NC : Duke University Press, 2010); Kenneth J. Guest, *God in Chinatown: Religion and Survival in New York's Evolving Immigrant Community (*New York: New York University Press, 2003); Haiming Liu, *From Canton Restaurant to Panda Express: A History of Chinese Food in the United States* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2015); Paul J. Smith, "Human Smuggling: Chinese Migrant Trafficking and the Challenge to America's Immigration Tradition," Center for Strategic and International Studies, 1997; Sheldon Zhang, *Chinese Human Smuggling Organizations: Families, Social Networks, and Cultural Imperatives* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008); Linda Zhao, Financing Illegal Migration: Chinese Underground Banks and Human Smuggling in New York City (NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

[2] People who smuggle paying customers into Western countries. They are usually members of Chinese gangs that use illegal methods such as stolen passports, fake visas, bribery, and fabricated business connections.

who work primarily in labor-intensive industries such as construction, garments, and restaurants.

The research completed by numerous scholars remains focused on the past Fuzhounese immigration narrative and experiences and how they have slowly taken control of the Chinese restaurant business. Very few scholars have continued their research to ascertain how the migration journey has affected the current and next generation of Fuzhounese descendants.

Similarly, little has been written about young people who identify as first-generation Fuzhounese American. Yes, people talk about Asian-American assimilation and the challenges faced while growing up in the United States. Within that broad picture, however, is the unique and distinct Fuzhounese experience of working in the family restaurant—experiences that affected Fuzhounese children and youth and their growth into adulthood–setting them apart from their peers. Since the first wave of Fuzhounese migration to America, restaurants have played a crucial role, and the businesses have been the spark to success for this immigrant community. But how has it effected the next generation, the American generation?

In this thesis, I investigate the unique impacts of the family restaurant lifestyle on American-born Fuzhounese youth, and how this lifestyle created an additional layer of challenges for those youth compared to other Asian Americans. My focus is on first-generation, American-born Fuzhounese and their relationship to their Fuzhounese heritage, and more specifically on how the Fuzhounese restaurant business affected Fuzhounese-American youth relative to their generational relationships and life decisions.

This study contributes to the oral history of Fuzhounese in America, adding a new generation's outlook and point of view to the existing Fuzhounese literature. In the following chapters, I present my research and its findings:

1. The majority of interviewees believed that the restaurant work culture had a major impact, often negative, on every aspect of their life, including key life decisions such as education, career choices, and family relationships.
2. Many interviewees still carry the burdens and traumas of moving from childhood into adulthood while living in the Fuzhounese restaurant society.

Research Method

Much of the Fuzhounese population is concentrated in the northeastern U.S. cities, particularly New York City, Boston, and Philadelphia. I wanted to learn more about the lifestyle of Fuzhounese descendants living in the United States, and within that population, to focus on Fuzhounese cultural identity and its relevance to the Chinese restaurant industry, as well as Fuzhounese youth and their integration into American society. To this end, I conducted semi-structured interviews with participants who identified as Americans of Fuzhounese descent.

Further, I was able to reach Fuzhounese people in other states after discovering Fuzhou America, a 501(c)(3) non-profit, volunteer-based organization dedicated to fostering Fuzhou American history, culture, and community. The group's mission is to unite and empower first-generation Fuzhounese people around the world. I contacted the organization via email, and provided information about my research study. In turn, they agreed to help me identify prospective interviewees. I was permitted to create Facebook

posts on Fuzhou America's official Facebook page seeking to recruit participants. Their page has an online community of 8,000+ Fuzhou Americans. My recruitment post was clear that my study was voluntary, and I asked individuals to contact me if they were willing to share their stories.

Fifteen of the participants in this project are Fuzhounese Americans who were born and raised in the United States or Fuzhounese Americans born in the United States but raised in China and have then returned to the U.S. The remaining five were born in China but moved to America at a very young age and are naturalized citizens. The interviews proceeded through a set of semi-structured questions that allowed the Fuzhounese participants to reflect on their experiences growing up in America.

Given the high number of Fuzhounese who arrived in the U.S. via human smuggling networks, I was aware that some interviewees' parents may have arrived in the U.S. without legal documentation. However, I have my own in-depth understanding of this population because I am a first-generation Fuzhounese Chinese-American who grew up in a Fuzhounese immigrant household participating in all the cultural nuances my family, friends, and relatives faced while in living in America. Thus, I did not ask any questions about family members' documentation status, nor did I press the ones who were willing to share information with me.

Participants became part of this project only if they initiated contact with me via email. Before the start of each interview, the interviewee gave oral consent to be recorded. I asked them to narrate only experiences that they felt comfortable sharing. I conducted the interviews via Zoom, an online video communication platform, and audio-recorded each one.

I received an overwhelming number of responses to my online inquiry to recruit individual volunteers for the project, so I selected the first 20 participants who fit all of my participant criteria. All participants were Americans who identified as Fuzhounese heritage and were between 18 and 44 years of age. The age breakdown was: one teenage interviewee, two in their early thirties, three in their forties, and fourteen in the twenties. They were all comfortable speaking in English, and considered it their native/first language. All the oral interviews were conducted in English with a few simple Chinese/Fujianese phrases inter-mixed. All participants were made aware that all recordings would be stored on my password-protected personal computer separate from any sensitive identifying markers. The information obtained through the recorded interviews would be used solely to write a thesis research paper for Harvard Extension School and would be destroyed afterward.

All the interviews were semi-structured with questions that allowed the participants to reflect on their experiences growing up in America (see the Appendix for a copy of the questions). Each interview lasted on average of 1.5 to 2 hours. Since there were sensitive issues that came up in the interviews, I used pseudonyms for all participants whose responses appear in the chapters below, to protect their identity and their stories.

Thesis Structure

The thesis chapters follow the overarching timeline of Fuzhounese Americans growing up in Chinese take-out restaurants. Chapter II provides a brief summary of

broader Chinese immigration policies and their impacts on the growth of the Chinese restaurant industry in the United States.

In Chapter III, I focus on the childhood experiences of Fuzhounese youth. I discuss the physical separation and reunification of many youths from their parents, then segue into Fujianese work culture. That enabled me to introduce participants' childhood memories associated with their family restaurant business.

For all interviewees, the family restaurant was the only source of income. Together we discussed how the participants believe their parents saw them as indispensable employees who could contribute to the family finances; how the expectation that they would work in the business became an unspoken responsibility that participants felt was forced upon them as children. Most, if not all, participants' childhood memories weighed heavily on them, and they expressed dissatisfaction that parents treated them as if they were already adults, despite their young age.

This led to Chapter IV's focus on the transition to college and young adult life. As the interviewees entered their teenage years, many were dismayed to find that the restaurant remained their parents' top priority. It was instilled into every family member that everything revolved around the business: everyday grocery shopping, doctors' appointments, and important life decisions such as college.

Many interviewees believe there is a silent double standard set in place for the next generation: the pressure to excel in school while also fulfilling all the duties required to keep the restaurant fully operational and successful. It seems that parents want their kids to leave the long, hard, labor-intensive work environment—but at the same time they are conflicted by their need to have stable workers in the restaurant.

Most of the participants said that the hardships they faced in their relationships with their families largely stemmed from the family's restaurant business. Even as they grew older and transitioned into adult life—and as their involvement in the restaurant decreased—it still influenced their relationships and communications with their parents and other family members.

Broadly speaking, relationships with the Chinese restaurant industry have continued to affect the intergenerational relationship of Fuzhounese immigrant families, and to shape participants' views of their own current and future family life. Many of the interviewees reflected on childhood grievances, and collectively agreed they would never inflict the same stress and trauma on any children they might have in the future.

Thesis Limitations

It should be noted that this project is subject to potential bias because it is possible that interviewees who took part have strong (often negative) opinions about how growing up in the restaurant affected their lives.

Chapter II

Chinese Immigration and Chinese Restaurants in the United States

The history of Chinese immigration patterns and its direct correlation to Chinese restaurants in the United States is key to understanding the perspective of Fuzhounese Americans, since today's Chinese take-out restaurants have a direct impact on Fuzhounese Americans' experiences and lifestyle. In this chapter, I discuss how Chinese restaurants became established in the United States, and their evolution, contribution, and impact on Fuzhounese immigration.

Although early trade relationships between the United States and China did not involve the restaurant industry, they did pique America's ongoing interest in Chinese goods. The earliest U.S./China business relationship dates to 1784 when the sailing ship *Empress of China* left New York Harbor with approximately 58,000 pounds of wild American ginseng and Spanish silver coins en route to Canton (modern-day Guangzhou). A year and three months later, the ship returned to New York with tons of silk, tea, Chinese porcelains, and other luxuries.[3] Maritime trade between the United States and China continued to increase into the 19th century.

When Britain asserted its dominance over Chinese ports and forced China to accept Western-style free trade as a result of the Opium War of 1839, that caused even more issues for the already economically troubled Qing Empire, and resulted in a major emigration upheaval. First, Western dominance over China's seaports forced millions of

[3] Guest, *God in Chinatown*, 22.

Chinese workers to be sent abroad, often through military force. Second, the economies of towns and cities in coastal China were severely disrupted by the opium trade and war. Many people lost their jobs, fell into poverty, and were forced to take extreme measures, including emigration, in an effort to find economic opportunities that would enable them to survive.[4]

At the same time, many opportunities in the West were fueled by the abolition of slavery, allowing Asian labor to become a cheap substitute This scenario was further fueled by the discovery of gold in California in 1848. By 1852, the Chinese population in the Golden State had reached 25,000—approximately 10% of the total state population at the time.[5] By the following year, merchants recognized that there were enormous business opportunities in California, including restaurant startups.

The first wave of business merchants was quickly followed by lower-class workers. Cheap Chinese labor was welcomed, as there was already a deep history of building American society, such as the completion of the U.S. transcontinental railroad. However, just two decades later, the Chinese laborers became the targets of xenophobic white workers, journalists, and politicians. The U.S. government used Chinese immigrants as a scapegoat for the economic depression that occurred in the 1870s. Angry Americans accused the Chinese of taking away American jobs, and Chinese men were labeled the "yellow peril." Chinese laborers were publicly ostracized and humiliated, and hundreds were hunted, beaten, and killed.[6] Some even viewed the Chinese as being the

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[4] Philip A. Kuhn, *Chinese Among Others: Emigration in Modern Times* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008), 111.

[5] Kuhn, *Chinese Among Others,* 141.

[6] Guest, *God in Chinatown,* 22.

sole reason why white men were forced into unemployment and the loss of wages. That same year, Congress decided to exclude the Chinese (or "Mongolians" as they were called then) from legislation that would grant citizenship through naturalization.[7]

Two years later, Congress created the Chinese Exclusion Act which was signed into law by President Chester Arthur on May 6, 1882. That Act was the United States' first important statute restricting immigration. It established a ten-year absolute moratorium on Chinese laborers entering the country. For the first time in American history, a federal law prohibited the entry of an ethnic working group, justifying that action by saying that to do so would jeopardize the peace in particular districts.[8]

The Exclusion Act became a political agenda against Chinese immigrants. Americans focused racist attacks on Chinese restaurant businesses in an effort to perpetuate the misleading stereotype that Chinese people preferred to eat cats, dogs, and rats. Whereas earlier, Chinese cuisine was accepted and considered a delicious novelty, it was now tainted with racist propaganda. In 1897, there was even a pest control ad that featured a Chinese man, his mouth wide open, preparing to eat a rat. Newspapers began to report that the food being served in Chinese restaurants was made with rat meat. That rat-eating image would be associated with Chinese cuisine for more than 100 years.[9]

Over the years, Congress would tweak and strengthen the law to expand the scope of the term "laborer". In 1888, the Scott Act voided and nullified all re-entrance

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[7] Madeline Yuan-yin Hsu, *Dreaming of Gold, Dreaming of Home: Transnationalism and Migration Between the United States and South China, 1882-1943* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), 62.

[8] "Chinese Exclusion Act (1882)." National Archives and Records Administration. National Archives and Records Administration, August 3, 2022. https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/list.

[9] Liu, *From Canton Restaurant to Panda Express*, 20-25.

identification certificates that were presented to Chinese laborers who were allowed overseas visits back to their homes. As a result, more than 20,000 Chinese workers were trapped abroad in the U.S. In 1892, Congress renewed the 1882 Exclusion Act with the new supplement that the Chinese laborers who had legally arrived in the United States had one year to register for a Certificate of Residence or they would face deportation. The law required every Chinese person to carry a certificate of identification when they travelled, which showed their status as a laborer, scholar, diplomat, or merchant. This requirement made it exceedingly difficult for Chinese residents to re-enter the United States after leaving the country to visit family back home, even if they were of legal status. These residency and identification papers later became known as "green cards" or "alien registration receipt cards." It should be noted that other ethnic immigrants were not required to carry these cards, or even be registered, until 1928.[10]

The Chinese Exclusion Act was repealed in 1943 due to diplomatic pressures and rising demands by foreign alliances formed to combat Axis countries during World War II.[11] Despite the repeal, a set quota of 105 immigration slots were granted to China. However the repeal did eradicate two of the most detestable limitations on Chinese immigration:

1) It abolished racial exclusion and allowed Chinese immigrants to become naturalized citizens; however, unlike other Asian ethnicities, there was a yearly limit of 2,000 visas that could be granted to Chinese immigrants.

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[10] Erika Lee, "Echoes of the Chinese Exclusion Era in Post-9/11 America," *Chinese America, History and Perspectives* (Gale Academic OneFile, 2005): 1.

[11] Hsu, *Dreaming of Gold*, 66.

2) It overturned the 1875 Page Law, which prohibited Chinese women from entering the United States to reunite with their husbands who were American citizens.[12]

The United States government maintained a firm grip on Asian immigration throughout the 20th century. It was not until 1965, when the Hart-Cellar Bill was signed into law by President Lyndon B. Johnson, that the American government finally relaxed its immigration restrictions and policies on people coming from Asia, including China.[13] The Hart-Celler Act allowed 20,000 immigration slots per country of origin, with exceptions to the quotas based on family reunification status: the act allowed the reunion of "immediate relatives," meaning parents, spouses, and unmarried children of naturalized American citizens. Eventually, the law allowed for married children, siblings of citizens, professionals, scientists, and artists. By 1985, Chinese immigrants numbered 711,000 among 1.2 million Asians who arrived in America.[14]

Who are the Fuzhounese?

One might ask where and when did Fuzhounese immigrants come into American history? They were descended from Fujian Province in southeastern People's Republic of China, with many coming from the main provincial city of Fuzhou. The early immigration of Fuzhounese to America, particularly to New York, began in the 1940s when Chinese sailors serving in the U.S. Merchant Marine during WWII were granted residency, with their numbers eventually peaking in the 1980s.

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[12] Kuhn, *Chinese Among Others,* 323.

[13] Min Zhou, and Roberto G. Gonzales, "Divergent Destinies: Children of Immigrants Growing Up in the United States," *Annual Review of Sociology* 45, 1 (2019): 383–399. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-soc-073018-022424.

[14] Kuhn, *Chinese Among Others*, 324.

According to anthropologist Kenneth Guest, contemporary Fuzhounese immigration can be divided into six waves. The first wave began in the late 1970s, and included the Fuzhounese community that had lived outside of China before arriving in the U.S. and were able to obtain legal status under the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA). The second wave of immigrants arrived in the 1980s. They were typically poor rural village adults who were smuggled into the United States. The third wave was comprised of smuggled young adults. The fourth wave occurred in the late 1990s and included children, siblings, and parents of the earlier immigrants. They arrived in America with legal status as a result of family reunification policies.[15] The fifth wave consisted of American-born Fuzhounese children who grew up in the U.S. Finally, the sixth wave includes children who are American citizens, but are sent back to China as babies and raised there before returning to the U.S.[16]

As mentioned, Fuzhounese migrants began emigrating out of China into America as early as the 1940s, and today this group of migrants is one of the largest Chinese immigrant groups to enter the United States. The largest Fuzhounese population outside of mainland China can be found in New York City's Chinatown section. An estimated 300,000 immigrants from the Fuzhou region now reside in the United States, with 60,000 to 70,000 residing in New York City. According to the New York City Fukien American Association, more than 150,000 migrants hail from the city of Changle.[17] What sets them apart from previous Chinese migrants are two factors: the majority of Fuzhounese

[15] Family reunification of immediate relatives refers to visas for close family relationships with a U.S. citizen or U.S. Lawful Permanent Resident who is a green card holder. These relatives include a spouse, unmarried children, siblings, or parents.

[16] Guest, *God in Chinatown*, 30-32.

[17] Guest, *God in Chinatown*, 15-16.

immigrants are less than 30 years old,[18] and most of them arrive in the U.S. undocumented and thousands of dollars in debt.

Economic Factors in China Leading to Immigration

To get to the U.S. during the 1980s and 1990s, thousands of Fujianese immigrants relied on so-called "snakeheads" to smuggle them in, each one paying exorbitant amounts of money for the high-risk passage to America. On the low end, snakeheads charged US$35,000 and up per person, and even then passage was not guaranteed.

Migrant smuggling is not just illegal; migrants also faced major mental and physical challenges. They might be stuffed onto a cargo boat and float for months to several countries before reaching America. Numerous Fujianese migrants have died while in transit to the "new world."[19]

Every Fujianese clung desperately to the slim dream of migrating to America after China's policymakers, in 1958, introduced the *hukou*, or household registration, to establish political stability. Citizens were classified into two categories: agricultural (rural) or nonagricultural (urban) as a solution to the intensifying issue of unemployment. People in the nonagricultural group had full access to urban employment, retirement benefits, free medical services, and public housing. Agricultural citizens (or more bluntly, peasants) were allotted agricultural land for food, work, and lifestyle. The *hukou* system

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[18] Peter Kwong, *Forbidden Workers: Illegal Chinese Immigrants and American Labor* (New York: New Press, 1997).

[19] Corey Kilgannon, and Jeffrey E. Singer, "A Smuggler of Immigrants Dies in Prison but Is Praised in Chinatown," *New York Times*, April 28, 2014. https://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/28/nyregion/cheng-chui-ping-a-smuggler-of-immigrants-dies-in-prison-but-is-praised-in-chinatown.html.

generated significant inequalities in food and social services provided by the government to rural residents.[20]

This policy was especially disastrous to the Fujian region because only 10% of land was cultivable; its residents traditionally relied on local trade and remittances. Other than Fuzhou City, all the other towns were considered rural counties.[21] Not only in Fujian province but across China, people from small villages were at a disadvantage. There was little to no opportunity for them to grow because doors automatically shut tight since their *hukou* labeled them as agricultural. Citizens with non-agricultural status had access to better education, better employment, and better worker benefits in general.

The system inadvertently creates a negative effect economically, socially, and politically. Today, a farmer's annual income is thought to be about one-sixth of the typical urban city resident. Rural Fuzhounese villagers make an annual income of US$500 to US$700 from a year of farming or fishing. If they leave to work in a sweatshop factory, their annual income may increase to US$1,500. But if a villager immigrates to the U.S., working even as a busboy, he could earn an annual income of US$18,000, even more as a chef with a yearly income of US$30,000. One year working in a restaurant in the U.S. equates to 12 years working as a farmer or sweatshop factory worker.[22] Further, the tax rate paid by farmers is three times higher than that of urban residents, which makes it difficult for them to advance their lifestyle.

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[20] Smith, *Human Smuggling,* 24.

[21] Chu, *Cosmologies of Credit*, 65.

[22] Bernard P. Wong, & Chee-Beng Tan, *Chinatowns Around the World: Gilded Ghetto, Ethnopolis, and Cultural Diaspora* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 42-44.

The *hukou* household registration system also creates employment discrimination. Companies and businesses favor urban *hukou* holders because rural *hukou* holders are seen as inferior since they lack a quality education. The majority of the population in Fujian is made up of peasant workers who realized the government was not making efforts to solve their problems. In the late 1970s, millions of rural Chinese peasants made the difficult decision to leave because there was a surplus of 200 million farm laborers. They also realized the general urban public saw them as *wai di ren,* that is, displaced outsiders who were creating increasing stress on urban resources and infrastructure. No matter how much they contributed to society, they would always be regarded as a social nuisance.[23] Hence, even the slimmest possibility of economic opportunity abroad became very appealing.

In Fujian, illegal migration slowly transformed into group behavior, a phenomenon whereby numerous entities adopt the same pattern of behavior for a variety of reasons. The group behavior in Fujian province already had a powerful tradition of out-migration known as *zhou shui* (literally translated as "walking the water"). Everyone in this region understood that making a living meant traveling overseas.[24]

By the 1980s approximately over 85% of households in Fuzhou, China, had at least one family member who had emigrated to the United States. Families would rather go into extreme debt than face failure. [25] The rumor was that as long as one was able to

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[23] Li Zhang, *Strangers in the City: Reconfigurations of Space, Power, and Social Networks Within China's Floating Population* (Stanford, CA.: Stanford University Press, 2001), 27.

[24] Smith, *Human Smuggling,* 35.

[25] Julie Y. Chu, "To Be 'Emplaced': Fuzhounese Migration and the Politics of Destination." Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power, 13:395–425, 2006. https://d3qi0qp55mx5f5.cloudfront.net/anthrolpology/docs/Chu-Politics_of_Destination.pdf.

reach the shores of America to open a restaurant business, there was almost guaranteed success of better economic opportunity and stability.

Every family with an "American" in the household became able to build an enormous house in their hometown villages of Fujian. Residents competed against one another to build larger and grander renovations to their homes as proof of their achievement. Many "American guest" mansions were constructed—even though houses were empty because family members no longer lived in China.[26]

The Beginnings of the Chinese Restaurant Business

One of the earliest Chinese restaurants in the United States was named the Canton Restaurant, established in 1849. Its first 300 guests were Chinese people who immigrated from Canton (Guangdong) as the Gold Rush began in California. But the guests were not laborers prepared to enter gold mines; rather, English-speaking Chinese merchants who were interested in making money through trade, not by digging in mines. These Chinese men already had business experience, having lived in the famous international trade center of Canton, and they saw the Gold Rush as an opportunity to turn a profit through businesses such as grocery stores, lodging houses, and restaurants. It did not take long before the years of restaurant skills and business management in China, already latent in the first wave of immigrants to America,[27] led these Chinese businessmen and merchants to set up boarding houses, food emporiums and restaurants.

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[26] Chu, *Cosmologies of Credit,* 43.

[27] Liu, *From Canton Restaurant to Panda Express*, 20-25.

Not surprisingly, the Canton Restaurant left a deep impression on its American customers as well, with its $1 menu and massive 400-seat dining rooms. Everyone found something they liked, ranging from traditional Cantonese food such as sea cucumbers, bird's nest, and duck hearts to American dishes like mutton shops and grilled beef. The restaurant might be compared to an upscale four-star restaurant of today, specializing in sophisticated service and delicious food at low cost to its customers.

Early Resurgence of Chinese Restaurants

After the initial flurry of growth during the Gold Rush era, the Chinese food industry witnessed sagging demand into the late 19th century. But by the early 1900s, the Chinese food industry began an astonishing rebound—this focused on the American palate. From 1900 to 1960, many U.S. households became obsessed with Americanized versions of Chinese food: chop suey, egg rolls, chow mein, egg foo yung.

Then after the immigration reforms of 1965, a new wave of Chinese immigrants arrived, once again changing the Chinese restaurant industry. Those immigrants preferred "genuine" rather than "American" Chinese food, and they set about altering Chinese food to fit American popular tastes.[28] When President Richard Nixon visited China in 1972, the American public read about the twelve-course meals served at the state banquets. This catapulted Chinese food right back into favor across all 50 states. Nixon's visit to China thawed relations between the two countries after years of strained relationship. America's positive attitude toward China grew, interest in Chinese culture grew, and the Chinese immigrant's status increased as well. In turn, the Chinese felt even greater pride in their

[28] Liu, *From Canton Restaurant to Panda Express,* 68.

heritage. New immigrants realized there was a niche to be made by offering inexpensive ethnic meals.[29]

Even before leaving China, Fuzhounese already dreamed of owning their own restaurants. In Fujian villages, there were opportunities to sign up for various restaurant English classes. These included daily lessons on English words and phrases commonly used in restaurants. Photocopies of books published in New York, such as "Practical English for People Working in Chinese Restaurants" or "The Most Practical (Eat In, Take Out) Restaurant English" could be found in many households.[30] Residents listened to and repeated words from cassette tapes recording in an American voice. People learned the details of running a take-out restaurant, or a Chinese buffet, or a dine-in restaurant. They understood the responsibilities of various positions in the restaurants, from front-of-the-house customer-facing jobs to back-end cooks.[31]

Early Fuzhounese immigrants to the United States also learned their restaurant skills from their Cantonese predecessors. After acquiring the needed skills, the Fuzhounese taught that knowledge to their relatives—a cycle that would repeat and evolve into what is today's Chinese take-out restaurant industry.

The American Dream?

While it might have seemed to families left in China that America was full of excellent opportunities, the reality was that most Fuzhounese immigrants in America

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[29] Peter Kwong, *The New Chinatown* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1987), 34.

[30] Chu, *Cosmologies of Credit*.

[31] Chu, *Cosmologies of Credit*.

were being exploited. In China, family members saw mansions being built. They did not know that their Fujianese family members in America worked in restaurants six days a week for 11 to 15 hours a day,[32] all the while struggling with depression, fears of deportation, and the pressures and violence of the marketplace. The Fuzhounese in America lived isolated lives with few breaks since most of their hard-earned income went back to family in China

Most Fuzhounese had dreams just like other Asian immigrants: leave their homes, pursue the "American Dream," find economic opportunity and freedom from persecution. The reality was, many faced discriminatory laws and social attitudes while coping with increasing anti-immigrant sentiments.[33] The arrival of so many Fuzhounese immigrants changed the pattern of immigrant inclusion in America, even as many other Chinese ethnicities looked down on the Fuzhounese. According to Erika Lee:

> Depending on what is happening inside and outside of the United States, certain Asian American groups have been labeled as "good Asians" ("model minorities", "honorary whites," cultural brokers and local citizens), while others have been labeled as "bad Asians" (perpetual foreigners, religious others, unassimilated refugees, spies, terrorists, and the enemy within).

The Fuzhounese seemed to fall into both categories. Originally they were perceived as "good Asians," but after the international media publicized episodes of human smuggling and deaths—a sealed Hungarian trailer filled with migrants who had suffocated (1995), a refrigerator truck in England filled with migrants (2000)—the Fuzhounese people were labeled as "bad." Immigration officers at airports and

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[32] Winnie Tam Hung, "Dowries and Debts: Fuzhounese Youth Geographies of Fear, Resentment, and Obligation," *Journal of Asian American Studies* 18, no. 1 (2015): 11–40. https://doi.org/10.1353/jaas.2015.0004.

[33] Guest, *God in Chinatown*, 18-19.

international entry checkpoints were hyperaware, in a negative way, because they perceived "Fuzhou," or "Fujian" as "a bad, bad place."[34] At the same time, other Chinese ethnicities viewed Fujian province as a breeding ground for "lawbreakers." Negative perceptions were rampant: everyone knows they arrive in hordes to America; they have unimaginable massive debt; they are all illegal aliens, and Fuzhounese are the most brazen. Although the Fuzhounese categorizes themselves as diligent workers, others accused them of being money hungry and reckless. The Cantonese call the Fuzhounese *gan-she-gui* ("fearless ghosts") who were accused of seeing money-making opportunities even in the most dangerous ghetto neighborhood.

The Fuzhounese also brought unwanted interest to Chinese communities in America. Fuzhounese were blamed for unwelcome attention focused on local Chinatown neighborhoods, and they were blamed for everything that was going wrong, such as congested housing, unfair job competition, dirty sidewalks, and increases in violent crimes. For more than 100 years, Cantonese comprised the largest Chinese population in the U.S., and then suddenly there was an infiltration of what the Cantonese felt were these incomprehensible and loud Fuzhounese. In every Chinatown, the Fuzhounese or *wu-sun-fun* ("people with no status") were met with scorn.[35]

Due to overwhelming increases in human trafficking, the influx of Fuzhounese created an imbalanced work environment, as unemployed Chinese competed for increasingly scarce jobs. Since most were paying exorbitant amounts of debt to snakeheads, they were willing to settle for employment at a much lower wage. For

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[34] Chu, *Cosmologies of Credit*, 140-142.

[35] Kwong, *Forbidden Workers*, 103.

instance, in 1995 the lowest job in the restaurant business was dishwashing. Those jobs paid $800 monthly, but the rate dropped to $750 monthly when Mexican immigrants arrived—and even further, to $500 monthly, when the Fuzhounese arrived.[36]

Because of their undocumented status, there was no way the Fuzhounese could compete for higher-paying jobs, so they accepted a shockingly reduced salary. Soon employers were only interested in undocumented immigrants because they were willing to work longer hours for less pay. Long-time legal residents, like the Cantonese, were forced to do the same or risk losing their own jobs.[37] While the Fuzhou people view themselves as noteworthy for their work ethic and thrift, many Cantonese view these traits with a mixture of respect and disdain. Comments of work ethics are coupled with resentment and deprecating remarks about social skills, for example:

> You know how we feel about the Fuzhou people. We feel that they are, it seems, they are a kind of people without any real education. You know, they talk very loudly . . . they talk so loudly, not that *siwen* [gentle, polite, cultivated, etc.].[38]

Since the most popular destination was New York City, almost all Fuzhounese, at some point in their migration story, have lived on East Broadway, the section of Chinatown located right under the Manhattan Bridge. The Fuzhounese immigrants were able to create their own ecosystem on this street because their Cantonese predecessors considered that area a dirty no-man's-land to be avoided and disregarded. But as more

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[36] Kwong, *Forbidden Workers*, 102.

[37] Kwong, *Forbidden Workers*.

[38] Dale Wilson, "Fuzhou Flower Shops of East Broadway: 'Heat and Noise' and the Fashioning of New Traditions," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 32, no. 2 (2006): 291–308. https://doi.org/10.1080/13691830500487217.

immigrants arrived, the small strip slowly expanded into a lively neighborhood full of Fuzhounese eateries and small businesses.[39]

As more immigrants arrived in the 1990s, there were fewer neighborhoods in which new arrivals could open a restaurant. Inevitably, newcomers started to expand outside New York westward toward Ohio and south toward Georgia because New York City had become too saturated. This created two problems:

(1) How were restaurant owners going to find employees since they could no longer rely on the network of friends or family to staff a new restaurant?

(2) How could new employees reach the job location?

The solution came in the form of employment agencies created by the Fuzhounese in the 1980s. These agencies posted newspaper ads encouraging restaurant owners to call the agency if they had job openings. The agency did not charge a fee to the restaurant owner; instead the agency required the job seeker to pay a small fee (perhaps $30) if the agency found a job for. The agency began to build files on job availability and description based on state zip codes. People who were looking for jobs could go to the employment agency, which could easily pair a restaurant owners with new workers. Soon this network was active across all 50 states.[40]

For employment agencies, finding jobs or employees for business owners was a simple task. The greater issue was getting the new, low-skilled immigrants to their work destination. In the beginning, agents bought Greyhound bus tickets, but because the migrants could not speak English, sending them off alone on a Greyhound was not an

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[39] Hung, "Dowries and Debts," 11–40.

[40] Zai Liang, *From Chinatown to Every Town: How Chinese Immigrants Have Expanded the Restaurant Business in the United States* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2023).

ideal solution. The solution: establish a transport system to move the Chinese workers to their destinations. Now the agencies could send new restaurant recruits via unofficial Chinatown bus lines across the United States at very cheap fares. This was a major reason why Fujianese immigrants were able to take control of the Chinese restaurant industry from their Cantonese predecessors. Restaurant owners could establish a new business virtually anywhere without the risk of being unable to find employees to work for them.[41]

[41] Liang, *From Chinatown to Every Town*.

Chapter III

The Childhood of American-Born Fuzhounese

Having provided as brief understanding of how the Chinese restaurant industry correlated with Chinese migration patterns, I will discuss the impacts of the restaurant business on the new generation of Fuzhounese children who were born in the U.S. The previous chapter discussed the older generation of Fuzhounese who came under difficult circumstances, were paid below-minimum salaries, but somehow managed to become restaurant owners.

In this chapter, I explore how that achievement impacted family life as seen from the perspective of the restaurant owners' children. I examine how restaurant work forced many families to separate. How did the physical separation from their parents at a young age impact their emotional connection? I discuss how the work culture in a Fuzhounese restaurant further complicated family ties after the young people were reunited with their parents. The lengthy separation and long grueling work hours led many of my interview participants to question why their parents decided to have children in the first place. For a child, the restaurant work experience made it even harder to cope with typical immigration concerns, such as assimilating into American school life.

It is in this chapter that I can begin to weave into the text the thoughts and anecdotes shared with me by my interview participants. Over the course of two months, I interviewed 20 participants, all of whom identified as being of Fuzhounese descent. Only five were born in China; the other 15 were born in the United States. Four of the 15 born

in the United States grew up and lived in America for their entire lives. All the others were sent back to Fujian, China, to be raised by relatives for the first few years before eventually moving back to the U.S.

Early Childhood in China and America

In the late 19th century, the majority of Chinese immigrant families experienced split households where children and mothers remained in China, and fathers left to work in America.[42] Fuzhounese Americans often grew up without either parent in the picture. Instead, they are similar to Taiwanese "parachute kids," who are sent to live in the U.S., either alone or with distant relatives and caretakers, in order to obtain an American education.[43] In the words of several interviewees:

> I was born here in the United States in the state of Ohio. shortly after I was born, around two to three months old, my grandfather took me from the U.S. to China, to be raised by my other set of grandparents.
>
> — Skylar, 24 years old

> I was originally born in Brooklyn, New York and then a couple months after I was born, I was sent to China, and I stayed with my grandparents up until six or seven-ish. Then I came back to America to live with my parents in Las Vegas. I tell people I was raised for more than half my life in the small Chinese restaurant my parents owned.
>
> — Faye, 18 years old

> I only know stuff from watching videos, short recorded videos on VHS tapes, of other relatives. My parents never told me anything, but they opened their restaurant the same year I was born, 1999. I think I was born in New York and then sent home to China, like those satellite babies, and I stayed there until I reached the age to start kindergarten.
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> — Tyler, 22 years old

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[42] Erika Lee, *The Making of Asian America: A History* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2015).

[43] Lee, *Making of Asian America*.

> I was born in New York, I think 8 months in, I was sent back to Fuzhou specifically a barrier called Guantou. I'm not sure if people are familiar but it's part of the Fujian Providence but more specifically in a place called Lianjiang and then outside of Lianjiang is Guantou which is the countryside area. I was there until 4 and half before I was sent back to New York to be reunited with my parents because they had earned enough money to start their own restaurant.
>
> — Randy, 24 years old

It is not surprising that the majority of the interviewees were sent back to Fujian. After arriving in the U.S., many Fuzhounese immigrants were pressured to get married and have children right away, because they were under the false impression that they were now protected from deportation because they were parents of American citizens.[44] The solution for Fuzhounese parents was to simply send their young children away, back to China for their parents to raise them.

Complicating the situation was the fact that the majority of Fuzhounese immigrants were still paying off their smuggling debt, and could not afford to take time off work to care for their children. So, they paid a relative or friend to fly their newborn child back to Fujian to the care of grandparents. In a worst-case scenario, they would utilize the services of a travel agency who specialized in *pao-ban* or specialized family tasks such as being responsible for sending back newborn babies to China.[45] There is a certain irony in this scenario, since the parents had spent tens of thousands of dollars to be smuggled into the United States.

While childrearing was more affordable in China, parents also sent their children back because they did not have to worry about reentry when that time came. Since the child was a U.S. citizen, he/she could come and go as they pleased. These children are

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[44] Hung, "Dowries and Debts," 11-40.

[45] Kwong. *Forbidden Workers*, 21.

sometimes referred to as “satellite babies”: sent back to China as early as two months old, then typically rejoining their parents in the U.S. when they are old enough to attend school. Although these transitional types of parent-child relationships have not been thoroughly investigated, a 2009 report from research conducted in New York City indicated that 57% of expectant Chinese mothers strongly considered sending their newborn back home to China. Within that group, 75% indicated they would bring back their child to live with them after the child was four years of age—old enough to enroll in kindergarten. A related study found that 72% of mothers who sent their children back to China were undocumented immigrants. The overwhelming reasons were unstable socioeconomic factors, such as unstable parental employment, long and rigid work schedules, legal status of the parents, and a lack of accessible, inexpensive daycare options in the area.[46]

The practice of sending a newborn baby back to China has become more popular over the years. Although there are no concrete studies on exactly how many babies have been sent back, according to the Fukien Benevolent Association of America, an estimated minimum of 20,000 babies were sent back to Fujian province. Typically, most parents buy a one-way airplane ticket to Fujian a few months after their infant is born. They also hand an official letter of authorization of guardianship to the person who is flying with the child to ensure that they can pass through China’s immigration and customs. [47] In this

[46] L. K. Wang, “Chinese American ‘Satellite Babies,’ Raised Between Two Cultures” *Contexts* 17, no. 4 (2018): 24–29. https://doi.org/10.1177/1536504218812865.

[47] Kitching Rhoda Wong, “The *Fengsu*-Driven Practice of Sending Infants to China: The Experiences of Chinese Immigrant Mothers in New York, “ Ph.D. Dissertation, City University of New York, 2015. ProQuest Dissertations Publishing.

way, parents could fulfill family duties and expectations while continuing to earn a dual income that helped to pay off their debt.

The decision to create a "satellite baby" situation may seem cold-hearted since society in general expects that parents should be physically and emotionally present for their children. While numerous reports and studies have stressed the importance of early childhood social, emotional, and cognitive experiences, underprivileged and low-income families are not always able to meet those criteria. That was true for a majority of Fujianese immigrants who could not follow those social standards because married couples typically worked 12-hour shifts, 7 days a week, as hard laborers in restaurants. Further complicating the situation, in New York City—specifically Sunset Park which hosts the largest number of Fuzhounese migrants—couples normally share a crowded two- or three-bedroom space with several other people and very little privacy. Many of the old apartment buildings were subdivided illegally to accommodate demand from incoming immigrants looking for housing.[48]

While most parents might not think about the psychological consequences of sending their child away so they could work to provide for the family, the majority of my interview participants admitted that their long-distance relationship caused irreversible relationship issues that had lifetime impacts. For instance, in a pattern that appeared among the interview participants, most knew virtually nothing about the details of their nuclear family due to the physical separation. A few were unaware they had siblings until they were suddenly reunited under the same roof. Many grew up in the care of their

[48] Kenneth J. Guest, "From Mott Street to East Broadway: Fuzhounese Immigrants and the Revitalization of New York's Chinatown." *Journal of Chinese Overseas* 7, no. 1 (2011)): 24–44. https://doi.org/10.1163/179325411X565399.

grandparents and were not formally re-introduced to their parents before being sent back to America. Once in the U.S., there was no grace period to adjust to the "new" family. Each interviewee told of being immediately thrown into the restaurant to start working.

Randy, age 24 said the concept of family was foreign to him. He was born in New York City but was told he was shipped back to Fuzhou when he was around eight months old. He does not remember much, but he has vague memories of growing up with his grandmother and several other children. While with his grandmother, he was told stories about his parents who lived abroad.

Randy did not know he had a sibling. When he was sent back to China, his older sister, who already lived with their grandma, was old enough to start school, so she was sent back to the U.S. to be reunited with their parents. It was not until Randy was 7 years old that he was introduced to his sister, after arriving in a town somewhere outside of Los Angeles. He said:

> I think I was very ignorant. I didn't even know what a mother was. I just didn't know. My mother's brother's wife, so in English I guess auntie…? This auntie that I was familiar with in Fuzhou took me here. She brought me to my mother. I was very foreign. I cried. I think it took weeks before I somewhat go comfortable with my mom.

While Randy slowly became comfortable with his mom, his dad simply did not know how to interact with him.

Once Randy was reunited with his parents and sister, he was thrust into the restaurant to work. At the age of 7, his dad brought him into the kitchen, gave him a cleaver, and told him to cut broccoli for the whole day. No instructions were given, except how to hold it. He finished the day with a number of bruises—not surprising for a seven-year-old boy trying to hold a cleaver for the first time. Randy remembers:

> I don't know how to explain this but my experience growing up was borderline abusive at some points. I say abusive because he [Father] didn't know how to take care of a kid. So he treated me like one of the kitchen staff. Sometimes he'll yell at me because by yelling at me for a minute, he thought he could save 20 minutes in the long run trying to explain to me why things mattered.

Kate, 40 years old, stated that there was no bond between her and her parents, as they had with her younger siblings who grew up at their parents' side. She was born in China and raised in Hong Kong by her grandparents. Her first memory of meeting her parents was when she was seven or eight years old. The next time she saw them, she was 9 years old, when they brought her back to America with them.

Kate, who lives in Washington, D.C., had a difficult time adjusting to life in the U.S., not only because of the language barrier and culture shock but because she was immediately put into the restaurant business; her earliest memory was scooping rice for customers. This new reality was a shock because in China she was the center of her grandparents' attention, as she was the only grandchild her grandparents knew. In the U.S., she thought her parents seemed like strangers who ordered her to work. After she was sent from China to the U.S., the family expanded as more siblings came along.

One stark memory she remembered clearly was the day she skipped work to sneak out with her American friends. When she returned home, she found her mother had locked her outside and refused to let her enter. She stood outside screaming and banging on the door, begging her mother to open it. The relationship with her mother never improved, and she was labeled as "rebellious." Her mother engrained in Kate's mind from Day One that it took a lot of money to support and feed her—although the same notion was not applied to her younger siblings. Mother and daughter just could not

understand each other; it was difficult to build their relationship since there was no connection in the first place.

Research has found that many Fuzhounese women, living in China, were less than enthusiastic about having children. As they planned to immigrate to the U.S., these young women relied on information from relatives who had already moved abroad. The women recognized the financial opportunities that immigrants could bring to their families.[49] Soon the thought of *chu guó* [traveling abroad] began to take root in their thought and were further encouraged by family members and elders. The young women dreamed of successful lives, never imagining they might end up living on restaurant wages.

At the same time, these young women were expected to be suitable marriage partners and fulfill childbearing expectations. Most expressed a desire to acquire birth certificates certifying that their children were U.S. citizens. But parents without legal status were focused on survival strategies to provide for their families, and their illegal status was a constant worry. Studies have shown that the fear of deportation is directly correlated to anxiety and depression, which might explain why many parents were withdrawn, less likely to communicate or show affectionate interactions with their children.[50]

Even if a child tried to form a new relationship, the restaurant was a wedge that continually interfered. Daniel, 26 years old, pointed out:

> As you grow up, you learn relationships are more of a business partnership about money. Money, money is everything.

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[49] Wong, "The *Fengsu*-Driven Practice of Sending Infants to China."

[50] Hirokazu Yoshikawa, *Immigrants Raising Citizens: Undocumented Parents and Their Children* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2011). http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7758/9781610447072.

A majority of the participants agreed with the question: If money was so important to their parents, what was the point of having children? The participants unanimously agreed that it seemed like the restaurant was their parents' first child, and everything they did revolved around the business.

Paige, age 44, shared:

> I spent most of my time at the restaurant. If I wasn't at school, I would be at the restaurant. I remember taking naps in the back [of the restaurant], you know, on top of all the duck sauce, soy sauce, oil boxes, and stuff like that. Of course, there was always a table in the back of the restaurant, where I did my homework.
>
> I started taking some orders at the front. I would be next to my mom for the most part and take orders, and then, you know, call out the orders to the back. Then, as I got older, I manned the cash register, and did the fried stuff, like chicken wings and egg rolls and stuff like that. Taking care of the soups and rice and all of that, packaging the orders.

Paige's experience illustrates the "normal" childhood of Fuzhounese kids. She said: "Why doesn't anyone question why a child is sitting on a stool behind the counter taking orders? Because you'll probably see the same thing happening at another restaurant." Many participants agreed that their parents, and Fuzhounese immigrants in general, did not believe they were breaking any rules or regulations.

This apparent disregard of rules was another attraction of migrating to the United States. The U.S. government was inconsistent in its enforcement of immigration laws as well as laws specifically related to child labor.[51] According to the Wage and Hour Division of the U.S. Department of Labor, there has been a noticeable surge in child labor infractions and investigations since 2015. The division discovered 2,819 children working illegally in fiscal year 2021, and fined employers some $3.4 million in civil penalties.

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[51] Guest, *God in Chinatown*.

Over the years the agency has encouraged workers, employers, and educators to promote a safe and positive work environment, but for the most part this applied to large companies.[52] A few of the interviewees pointed out that even if there were news reports of child labor abuses, their parents did not consider that having their children work in the family business was the same as forced child labor. Most believed they do not have a close, formal parental bond perhaps their parents simply did not know how to have a "normal" family life — and this contributed to the participants' sense of a "lost childhood."

Daily Life in a Fuzhounese Restaurant

Paige, age 44, recalled with some annoyance and frustration:

> When I was a little older, maybe 16 years old, I started driving. At that time, we had our other restaurant, so I would do deliveries as well. It was school or restaurant. That's why I tell people, to this day that's why I hated vacations. I hated holidays. I hated summer break, because I would always be in the restaurant, and always on weekends, too.

All the participants had remarkably similar descriptions of their typical day, with every one agreeing that they were forced to grow up rapidly. There was an unspoken sense of responsibility that they were expected to assume as long as their parents were in the restaurant business. According to Leo, age 32:

> Because we were so invested in the restaurant industry and building success from it, I do feel that myself and a lot of my friends lost a good portion of our childhood. I feel like other kids were able to do things that I was not able to do. I feel like our childhood was kind of robbed, you know.

[52] "Increases in Child Labor Violations, Young Workers' Injuries Prompts Enhanced Outreach, Strong Enforcement by U.S. Department of Labor." U.S. Department of Labor. July 29, 2022. https://www.dol.gov/newsroom/releases/whd/whd20220729.

Each participant expressed some stage of grievance when recalling their childhood. A few older interviewees have forgiven their families, but the younger ones are still angry at their parents for depriving them of a carefree childhood. Tyler, age 24, said emotionally:

> I was just spiteful of the restaurant experience because I'm seeing other people actually enjoying their childhood, joining sports with friends going to movies with friends, going to visit a friend's house, and these other childhood experiences.
>
> But I was stuck every single day, rushing home after school to help out in the restaurant. The few times I did voice my worries and my opinions about that to my parents like: "Why? I don't like the restaurant. This is unfair. Why? I just did not like it." The only thing I was met with was their response, saying, "The restaurant is your livelihood. Without this, you have nothing."
>
> So I guess I was just blackmailed and coerced into just continuously working, despite me already saying I did not like it.

Such a response might be understandable since most of the parents believed they had gambled their lives for their family. Paying thousands of dollars to be smuggled in, enduring long and tortuous journeys to reach the U.S., [53] perhaps parents expected their children to be more appreciative of what they have.

Mom and Pop Shops

Most Chinese take-out restaurants were "mom-and-pop" shops, meaning it was family owned and operated. This was especially true of those shops situated outside of New York City. Owing to competition among Chinese take-out restaurants in areas with a large Fuzhounese population (New York City, Philadelphia, and Boston), many chose to relocate to smaller towns where it was easier to start and own their restaurant.

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[53] Jennifer Lee, *The Fortune Cookie Chronicles: Adventures in the World of Chinese Food* (New York: Twelve, 2009).

However, the downside was the difficulty of finding and retaining employees to work in restaurants located in small-town areas. This led many parents to rely on their children to fill the gaps in operating the business.

Hailee, age 23, said it was very difficult for her parents to find employees for their restaurant in their tiny town in Minnesota, where there were no Chinese residents. She thought the restaurant's location had a magnified impact on how much time she and her siblings had to spend at the family's restaurant.

> There's no one else around to work for them [her parents] so I feel like they just decided "Oh, we can just have four kids and then they can work the restaurant," so they could save a lot of money and everything and not have to stress on having outside employees work for them.

On the flip side, because there was no childcare available, parents brought their children to work, both because it saved money and because it was safer than leaving them home alone. Esther, age 25, said that all of her family photos were taken in the restaurant. Every photo of birthdays, Halloween, Christmas, and other holidays were in the restaurant. All of her childhood pictures were taken in the restaurant.

Fuzhounese as Fugitives

The word "fugitive" was used by many of the participants when describing their Fuzhounese family and experiences. Iris, age 22, said, "Fuzhounese are fugitives to the core." Being an undocumented immigrant is traumatic, but it is also a bonding experience shared by many Fuzhounese. As immigrants brought into the U.S. illegally, there is a bond that others could not understand.

To Iris, it is not a coincidence that a majority of Chinese restaurants in America are run by Fuzhounese people. Her childhood memories are full of embarrassing

moments such as illegally entering places to hand out menus from her family restaurant while hiding from potential encounters with friends. But she also said her experience migrating to the U.S. improved her relationship with her mother. They became more like sisters than mother/daughter because together they embarked on a dangerous journey and experienced all its hardships.

Like her Fuzhounese friends, they all wished they could spend less time in the restaurant. She was jealous of her friends whose parents worked "normal 9 to 5" jobs because they had bonding time with their parents every night. Iris was stuck at work, and she resented it. But as she grew older, she began to understand why it happened: her parents simply could not afford to hire others to work in the restaurant. It was key to the family's survival even if it meant utilizing their children as labor.

The Parents' Perspective

For Fuzhounese parents, it is expected that their children will step up and help because they should be grateful for the life the parents are providing. Many parents do not see the "lost childhood" aspect because the parents were forced to embark on an intercontinental migration in order to give their children an easier life. The children do not understand because they do not have the experiences their families faced in China.

Further, since most children return from China to their parents in the U.S. as preteens, parents do not know how to cope with issues around raising children. They resort to physical and verbal punishments because they are unable to adopt "liberal" ways of dealing with children. Over the years, many Western-trained, bilingual social experts have tried to explain to Fuzhounese parents that they need to listen to problems being

voiced by their children, and show patience and praise in resolving these problems. However, the realities of debt payments and providing for the family often complicate the parent/child relationship. They are struggling to provide financial stability and ensure that they are fulfilling the responsibilities of good parents. There is a lack of open communication and understanding which leads to more dysfunctional family ties.[54]

Parents do not realize that their children need time to adapt to American society after being uprooted from China. Not only do children of Fuzhounese immigrants have a hard time connecting with their parents, but they also suffer emotional trauma when they are thrust into the American social environment outside of restaurant life. Most Fuzhounese-Americans grew up with grandparents who spoke only Fuzhounese, so they did not learn mainstream dialects. After arriving in America, the children are exposed only to Fuzhounese in their restaurant life.

Unlike Mandarin and Cantonese-speaking youth, little has been put in place to help Fuzhounese youth adapt to new school environments. Schools have hired an increasing number of Cantonese or Mandarin-speaking counselors and teachers, but that is of no help to someone who speaks only Fujianese. Even in New York City where there is the largest population of Fuzhounese people, there are only a handful of Fuzhounese-speaking teachers. Since Fuzhounese children are often put into ESL, bilingual, or special education programs because they are neither proficient in English nor mainstream Chinese, most become permanently stuck in such classes and do not receive proper special attention.[55] As Tyler, age 24, described:

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[54] Kwong, *Forbidden Workers*.

[55] Wong, "The *Fengsu*-Driven Practice of Sending Infants to China."

> From my perspective, I was just dropped off into the American school with no real preparation. I came back to the U.S. and was shipped straight to the restaurant in Michigan. After starting school, I felt like I lived a double life—the Chinese-Fujianese life and then the American student life.

"Americanization"

Even as the children gradually became "Americanized," they still had difficulty adapting because there was limited time when they could make friends in school. There was no social to connect with other students since the Fuzhounese children were constrained by restaurant hours. Kate, 40 years old, said she was the only Fuzhounese young person in her school and nobody else related to her:

> I'm pretty sure every child goes through that high school stage where you know your parents may not understand everything you do But for me, I think I just wanted a little bit more free time like others. My parents didn't understand me, and neither did the kids at school. Especially because I was the only FJ [Fujianese] child in the whole school. Nobody can understand: "Why can't you go to the movies? Why can't you go to this that? Why can't you hang out?" My answer was, "I have to go back home and work." Nobody understood that it was because of the FJ culture, since it is extremely rare.

Quinn, 25 years old, said that as a child, his identity was highly conflicted. At home and in the restaurant, everything revolved around Fujianese culture. But once he left the house, he entered a different world:

> Some of us, we want to be still attached to our FJ heritage and roots because that's where our parents are from. But then as soon as we step out and we go to school, we see how different the world is. Everyone has their cultural differences and I get conflicted because I didn't fit in. Everyone had their groups, but I was one of only two Chinese. It was me and another girl. I felt very singled out.

Quinn grew up in the Westchester/Yonkers area where there was little Asian presence; the population was predominantly Hispanic, Latino, African American, and a

few Filipinos. There were no commonalities between those cultures and Fujianese—or even Chinese culture in general. During middle school and into high school age, young people develop friendships by spending time with a group of friends based on their common language and culture. But Quinn could not relate. He didn't speak Spanish or Tagalog, nor did he listen to the same music or watch the same TV shows. He simply was not "whitewashed" or "Americanized" because he had not been exposed to those social behaviors in the U.S. This resulted in Quinn being singled out and bullied by his peers as a the only Chinese child whose parents owned a restaurant. Quinn believes it probably did not matter if people knew his family was in the restaurant business, they would still have used the stereotype as a weapon to bully him. There was constant snickering and banters of, "Yo! Can I get an order of General Chou's chicken with pork fried rice?" That school harassment added a whole extra layer of hatred toward working in his family restaurant. Quinn's worst fear was when his few friends visited the take-out store and found out he worked there, because he did not want to be the brunt of their next joke.

Quinn's experiences are not unusual. According to the American Psychological Association, compared to other ethnic groups, 17% of Asian-American students have reported incidents of bullying at school; 54% of Asian-American adolescents who experience bullying say it takes place in class; 11.1% reported that the bullying was due to their race, often including race-related hate words. Chinese-American youth endure more bullying than other ethnicities: 2.8% white victims, 6.2% Latino victims, 7.1% African American victims.[56] Asian-American students receive the most harassment, both

[56] Nellie Tran, "Bullying & Victimization and Asian-American Students," American Psychological Association, 2012. https://www.apa.org/pi/oema/resources/ethnicity-health/asian-american/bullying-and-victimization.

verbal and physical: verbal harassment, such as racial insults, mocking, teasing, and spreading rumors; and physical victimization, such as random slapping, physically threats, punching, and possessions taken.[57] While many Asians fall victim to bullying, it was even more difficult because his family did own a Chinese take-out, so he fell squaring within the stereotype.

The bullying was not just isolated to school situations, it followed Quinn home where he still could not retaliate or protect himself. He said:

> While all Asian American groups are struggling with their mixed identities, and the pressure of not being American enough, or not being Asian enough by foreigners, it is worse when you're followed home to your restaurant where you know you must serve the bullies because your Fuzhounese parent have instilled in you that the customer is king.

Not only do Fuzhounese youth battle school bullying, they must also copy with negative perceptions from other Chinese ethnicities. New generations of Fuzhounese immigrant young people battle what it means to be Asian American, but even more so, specifically Fuzhounese American. Bryan, age 23, stated:

> Being Fuzhounese American is special because it's an identity that exists deeply yet is invisible at the same time. We are still relatively new in the wave of Chinese immigrants since most came in the '80s. Yes, we are Chinese but not wealthy Chinese. In China, if you're from the south and you don't speak Mandarin, you're looked down upon by other parts of China. There's a lot of discrimination in China against the south as you go further up north because we [southern Chinese] are considered peasants.

In many cases, massive debt added to family financial pressures, but the new generation of Fuzhounese Americans know little about what the older generation faced, since it is never properly explained. There is a lack of open communication. Children are expected to "know what to do" and to understand the situation. When asked to give

[57] Tran, "Bullying and Victimization."

background context about how their parents arrived in America or why their parents chose to enter the restaurant business, most of the younger interviewees had similar answers: families came to America for a better economic opportunity; they were smuggled over or through some family visa; they think they went into the restaurant business because it was easy, especially if some relatives already worked in the business. Older interviewees were able to give more detailed answers because they have reached the stage in life where they are facing their childhood traumas and asking their parents for answers.

Even so, there remains a lot of disconnect between generations because of the lack of communication. Older generations do not want to talk about their hardships, instead believing they know what is best for their children. Parents are less attuned to cultural norms. For instance, insisting that a young child deal with customers can be distressing, especially if a customer is unhappy. The language barrier between Fuzhounese elders and customers often means children (who more easily learn English) must be a negotiator in a situation they cannot comprehend. An example was given by 21-year-old Maddison:

> Because my parents weren't very proficient in English, I would be the one to figure out and arrange restaurant bills, household bills, or anything like that if we had problems like them. But obviously as a 15-year-old, I didn't know a lot, so I was very naïve. Any phone call that I picked up, I would immediately believe the conversation. One time I almost got caught in a scam because I gave the scammers personal information. But my excuse at the time was that I was young, a teenager, I was naïve. Looking back now it was immediate, like a red flag. What should I have done? I don't know why my parents put me in that position, but at the same time I understand that they wouldn't have known that they were being scammed.

Maddison further explained that she was often thrown into situations where she had to make "important restaurant financial decisions" because she was the "native

English speaker," implying that she was most qualified to make the right decision. Because her parents depended on her for almost everything, Maddison stated that she developed a lot of anxiety while working in the restaurant which impacted her social life even more. She tried to be like other students and join extracurricular activities after school, but quit because she was driven by guilt. She also felt guilty about frequently asking friends or teachers for rides, or else spending money for taxis when she knew how frugal her family was. She stopped playing the violin because her parents could never come watch her perform, which she found very disheartening. Like Maddison, many of the participants stated that their parents thought sports or clubs were a waste of time. The only thing they needed to focus on was scoring well on exams because good grades in school meant they could go to college. Their parents did not prioritize their children's social well-being as a factor in later success.

Parents also did not realize that their children often coped with American perceptions that all Asian Americans are more successful than other ethnicities, Asians are more intelligent (i.e., naturally gifted in math, science, and technology), rich, hard-working, independent, living the "American dream," submissive, meek, obedient, uncomplaining, spiritually enlightened, and never in need of help.[58]

Further, many Americans perceive Asians as having a higher income compared to Africans, Latinos, and Caucasians. According to the 2006 U.S. census, when combined into one group, Asians have a higher household income ($66,060) than Caucasians ($53,910), Africans ($32,876), and Latinos ($38,853). However, these statistics are over-generalized. In fact, many Asian American families have larger households because they

[58] "Model Minority Stereotypes for Asian Americans," University of Texas at Austin, Counseling and Mental Health Center, 2008. https://cmhc.utexas.edu/modelminority.html.

have more adults contributing to the household income. Indeed, Asian Americans make up a disproportionately high share of the poor community. According to the 2005 U.S. census, 11% of Asian Americans and 8% of Caucasians live below the poverty line, and 18% of Asian Americans comparison to 11% of Caucasians lack health insurance.[59] Americans also believe that a higher percentage of Asian Americans continue on to higher education than Caucasians: the 2000 U.S. census showed that 65% of Asian Americans attended college versus 54% of Caucasians.

Overall, the interviewees expressed that they had a hard time forming a relationship with their parents, adapting to the American education system, all complicated by the challenges of restaurant life. In China, they were carefree "American" children who were spoiled by grandparents. They had no worries since most were too young to attend school during the time they lived in Fuzhou. Then everything changed: they were put on an airplane to the U.S. where they were suddenly reunited with strangers who turned out to be their parents. In turn, the parents were already focused on running a business, with little time to help their child adapt to a new environment.

[59] "Model Minority Stereotype."

Chapter IV

College and Career Decisions

The culture of the restaurant continues to have a deep impact on Fuzhounese Americans as they transition into adulthood. That culture still impacts the way they communicate and interact with their parents and other family members. There are many scars remaining from being forced to take on adult responsibilities as a child but never treated with the respect shown to an adult. Now as these young people transition into adulthood, they still face the same challenges of being forced to accept responsibilities and tasks with little time for personal development.

In this chapter, I discuss how working in the family restaurant, first as a child, then as a young adult, continues to have an impact on the decisions young adult now face: where to attend college, choosing a major, and finding a job. One constant remains: the majority of the interviewees, even as young Fuzhounese adults, are still expected to prioritize the family business. That restaurant work experience, accumulated as a child, taught the interviewees to hustle, to work through any challenge or problem, whether it be financial or personal.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, Fuzhounese students felt that their home and restaurant life negatively affected their education and social life as they continued into their college experience. In fact, in 2012 two professors at Baruch College/CUNY, Ken Guest and Ke Liang, did a study of the Fuzhounese students attending college. They found that Fuzhounese students found each other and stayed together. More than 60% of

their best friends and 25% of significant others identified as Fuzhounese descendant. There were clear patterns of social isolation, which separated Fuzhounese students from other Chinese or Chinese American students.[60]

Among the interview participants, 55% responded that they were not involved in extracurricular activities outside of their studies because they also had to work. The students focused all their attention on graduating and finding a suitable career. Most of the major stressors affecting the Fuzhounese students came from:

school/worklife balance	40.32%
personal interest and family expectations	38.71%,
pressures from speaking in class	35.48%,
reading & writing barriers	29.03%
speaking & understanding barriers	24.19% [61]

These are generally the same worries that students faced while in elementary, middle school, and high school—now carried over to their university lives.

Among the interview participants, many strongly believed they would be free of restaurant duties once they graduated from high school and left for university. They reasoned that surely that was why their parents for them to study hard and work hard. But the reality of restaurant life remained. When the parents needed help, or if there were staffing issues, parents expected their children to fill in. This reliance became an issue when their children were making college decisions. While most parents desired their

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[60] Ke Liang, and Ken Guest, "Immigration, Education and Opportunity Among Chinese Americans of Fuzhounese Descent." Asian American/Asian Research Institute, City University of New York, 5 Oct 2012. https://aaari.info/12-10-05guest/.

[61] Liang, and Guest, "Immigration, Education and Opportunity."

children to go to excellent schools, the parents realized that no one was more dependable than family when situations arose. Very quickly the expectation became: the "best" university was the one closest to home. Once again, the restaurant became the first priority.

Most of the participants agreed that they were great pressure to choose a university that was reasonably close to home. Their parents did not care if other schools had better programs for the major they wanted to pursue. Bryan, 23 years old, said when he was accepted at Princeton University, his father decided immediately that Bryan would go there, no questions asked. Yes, it was a top Ivy League school; more importantly, it was close to home.

However, Bryan hesitated, saying he wanted to take a tour of Princeton before deciding. Unlike his father, he considered a range of factors: campus life, curriculum design, academic support, and costs. Because he was interested in engineering, he wavered between the University of Rochester and Stanford University since they each had highly respected engineering programs. He also based his acceptance on financial ability as well as the success and depth of each program.

When his father found out about Bryan's indecision, a heated debate ensued:

> Why the f*** would you go to school in California when you will be so close in New Jersey? Right near us, to family, family in New York City and Connecticut. Why are you doing this?

His dad just could not understand why Bryan was reluctant to go to Princeton since he was the only person in his family to be accepted into an Ivy League university. At the same time, Bryan was baffled as to why his dad was fighting him about going to Stanford since it was just as good. In the end, he gave in to his family's inclination and attended

Princeton, where he again felt like an outlier, just as he had during childhood. Bryan pointed out that in general, the people he met a Princeton did not come from "fugitive" families, and he did not meet any other Fuzhounese in his program. Most of the students came from a successful and wealthy background. Not to diminish others' hardships, but Bryan felt he had to fight hard to survive and to put himself on the same playing field as other students.

Making matters worse, he still had to work at the restaurant throughout the four years at Princeton. His bitterness increased dramatically during that time. As he stated,

> I had this great sense of resentment toward the restaurant. If we opened this restaurant because you wanted me to get into a good school, how are we going to allow it [the restaurant] to increase my chances of failing out of school? Doesn't that make sense, right? I was resentful about that.
>
> I remember during my senior year, I had to write a thesis report, attend four back-to-back seminars, and take on an internship. I was like, okay finally daybreak, let me rest today. But my dad called that Wednesday and wanted me to work that Friday. I was like, I just went to hell and back. I need a break, so I could start writing this report. I only got like two weeks to write like 40 pages, and you're telling me to work!? It's like, why are you doing this to me? I go to Princeton, and I'm going to be an engineer. Why am I still dealing with angry customers because maybe I gave him two fewer fortune cookies?

Many of the interviewees said they always felt "trapped" by the restaurant's needs. Their parents' expectations that they would leave college, go home, and drop by the store to help as needed, had not change since elementary school. Their desire to have a unique college experience was once again dismissed, just as it had been during childhood.

Unlike Bryan whose parents made the final decision about where he would attend university, 22-year-old Jillian intentionally chose a university closer to home. Initially, she felt bad that she could not work in the restaurant if she chose a college that was far

away. The restaurant was operated by her parents, three siblings, and herself. Her two older sisters had already left for school or work obligations, so if she went away to university, the burden would fall on her younger brother. So, like Bryan, Jillian "volunteered" to return home on weekends to work at the restaurant if she did not have exams, as well as during winter and spring break, etc.

In Jillian's case, it was nearly impossible to retain workers in their rural Michigan town. Her 17-year-old brother does all the hard labor, cooking, and cleaning, and everything essential to running the store. Jillian was especially upset with her parents for continuously degrading her brother:

> My mom's always saying stuff like "oh, like I don't know if your little brother is gonna get into college. I might need to keep the restaurant around so he can work at the restaurant if he can't get into any college.

Jillian thought her mom's comments were really mean and abusive:

> Even when my brother messes up or does something wrong, a very small mistake, they'd be like "Oh, you're so f*** dumb, how are you gonna get into college?" I really really wish they would stop that and just retire. We will manage without a restaurant.

Jillian admitted she chose a university nearby in the hope of motivating her brother to push through his senior year of high school and send out college applications. She has made it her responsibility to encourage her brother to attend a university and clung to that chance to get him away from the restaurant life. She admitted that she does not know what will happen to the restaurant business after all the siblings leave and just her parents remain. But she is optimistic that maybe her parents will finally decide to sell the restaurant and retire.

While the others stayed close to home for college, Faye, age 18, had a slightly different experience:

> The restaurant impacted my decision-making process for going out of state for college because I didn't want to stay at home and be forced to help out at the restaurant. I know in my gut that if I stayed in-state, I would have to come back home on the weekends to help. So then going out of state to college was for the experience of leaving the restaurant and like having that distance and little break from that.

Faye said that from childhood it was instilled in her that she had to do well in school to be able to live a comfortable life afterward. There were never any breaks, even on major holidays; the restaurant was always open long hours. Even if this concept was not voiced out loud, as a child she realized that working hard in school was one way to get out of this situation. However, the realities of running the restaurant still trapped her in a position similar to her parents. And even as she sought success, satisfaction, and personal freedom, her parents still did not recognize or prioritize her desires.

Among all the participants, the consensus was that restaurant life had an impact on the next generation's decision to obtain a higher education. Each one said that all their parents wanted was for the participants to pursue a college degree and achieve a better lifestyle than the parents. At the same time, the parents insisted that their children choose a career path that would be financially rewarding. Like other Asian parents, Fuzhounese parents want their children to be doctors, engineers, and lawyers[62]— professions they believe will guarantee a successful future; their children would never have to worry about money because there would always be job opportunities.

For the participants, however, many stated that Fuzhounese immigrants have taken this expectation to a whole new level that is almost toxic. Leo, age 32, described some both aspects of being Fuzhounese:

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[62] M. Chan-Nauli, "The Road Less Traveled: How Asian Cultural Values Impact the Career Choice Tendencies of Asian American K-12 Principals." Ph.D Dissertation, Brandman University, 2018. ProQuest Dissertations Publishing.

> We are very hard-working and ambitious. We like to climb the corporate ladder. But at the same time, we're also very materialistic, and money is a big consideration for us, especially for the elder generation. We're always trying to better ourselves.
>
> But there is a negative side. We're very competitive with each other, but sometimes we take it a little too far. Families try to gain an advantage over the other, to be better than one another. A little friendly competition is healthy, but once you get past a certain point, it's almost toxic because it becomes an obsession. Families are obsessed with showing off who has the latest new car, new bag, new watch, etc. Everything is about money and status. Money impacts your whole life status.

A survey conducted from 2005 to 2008 compared the earnings of four well-regarded professional types in the United States and China: social scientists, medical doctors, lawyers, and engineers. The data showed that engineers in both countries enjoy a salary 25% higher than scientists. In China, scientists earn 25% more than social scientists, 13% more than medical doctors, and 5% more than lawyers. In America, scientists earn 7% less than social scientists, 50% less than medical doctors, and 34% less than lawyers. These results indicate that the financial incentive for working in science is stronger in China than in the United States. Parents of Chinese American students agree, encouraging their children to choose careers in these professions over other industries.[63]

Due to his parent's influence and perspectives on money and status, Oliver, age 26, originally graduated from university with a bachelor's degree in finance because it was the fastest way to make money. He wanted to provide for his parents rather than have them continue work in their restaurant. Although he never felt close to his parents and was, frankly, afraid of them due to physical and verbal abuse, he still wanted to please them. For their part, his parents were proud of him when he obtained a degree in finance

[63] Yu Xie, Chunni Zhang, and Qing Lai, "China's Rise as a Major Contributor to Science and Technology," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 111, no. 26 (2014): 9437–9442. https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1407709111.

and began a corporate job. He just wanted to make his parents happy for once. However, he soon discovered that while his job paid him very well, it was uninteresting. Oliver was so bored that he quit and decided to enroll in nursing school because he had always been interested in medicine. Oliver admitted he still has not informed his parents of his decision. He thinks they will be very angry at his decision to give up such a well-paying opportunity, and they will never understand why he would prefer a career that makes a difference and gives back to the community. While many view nursing as a stable professional job, he expects his parents will be extremely disappointed and will never accept his decision because it is a "risky" move, in their opinion. He was already financially secure, so in his parents' view, he should just stay in the job until retirement. For now, Oliver is avoiding his parents and focusing his energy on graduating from nursing school. "It will take me some time to prove to them that I'm able to be successful, no matter what I do. Then I will finally tell them about that."

It is interesting that three other participants also stated that their parents were not pleased with their decisions to go into the medical field—even though that profession had been encouraged since they were children. Paige, age 44, is a physician. She put herself through college, medical school, pediatric residency, and then a fellowship, and has been in the field for over 15 years. She does not have the same amount of money as her cousins who are business owners and entrepreneurs.

> You know, I don't have the money that say my cousins, who continued in the restaurant business have. I can't show that, I can't be as flashy as them. But I'm glad that at the age of 44, my dad finally told people recently that he is proud of me.

Leo, age 32, felt he had an extra set of challenges to deal with in his family since there were also elderly grandparents and other relatives. Like other Fuzhounese children,

his parents told him he should become a doctor, a lawyer, or perhaps a businessperson, just something that pays a lot of money. Instead of becoming a doctor, he became a registered nurse, and his chosen profession was not accepted well. He felt the older generation viewed it as a "dirty" profession, and that being a doctor was beneath him. They also view nursing as a female profession, and they could not understand why he would choose something like that. Leo explained that he loves what he does, and it makes him happy.

> There's a lot of stereotyping when it comes to job employment in our Fuzhounese culture. You know, being a nurse was viewed as more feminine, even though it's more acceptable to be a teacher. You know, there is always like a gender expectation. A nurse is below being a doctor. Even though my income is actually fairly high in California, and I make more money than both my siblings, they [family] don't feel it's very prestigious.

Jillian, age 22, said her sister decided to go to PA school [to become a physician's assistant], and her parents were not supportive of that decision. Jillian admitted that if her sister had made such a decision ten years ago, their parents would have been happy. But now their mindset has changed. Jillian majored in business and now earns a good salary with less education. So her parents want her sister to shift to a business career because it's difficult to get into PA school.

> I think they [parents] started considering other factors like are we really gonna be able to do that? Because we came from a business background like the Chinese restaurant industry? That's what we grew up knowing, so we know business pretty well. But we don't really know healthcare and the medical field.
>
> They probably also didn't think that we would be able to make it. Because, you know, getting into med school is really hard, as well as dental school and law school. All that takes a lot of work and determination. It's either you work hard to make it, or you don't. Maybe my parents thought that maybe it isn't really worth it because it's so difficult. I think they started to realize there are other high-paying jobs with an easier path.

While most of the participants' decisions on college and careers were impacted by restaurant employment, 40-year-old Gianna had a bigger hurdle to cross: not only was she expected to continue working, but her education was not considered a priority because she was female. It should be noted that Gianna had been accepted into Ivy League schools, but her dad did not care. She was told she could only go to college if was close by, so she would be available to help at the restaurant.

In her parents' opinion, as a female she can just marry a good man. Her parents thought her best opportunity would be to continue working in the restaurant until she married a good man with a stable income. Since her parents refused to contribute financially to her studies, she gave up the Ivy League acceptances and decided to go to a CUNY school instead. Even then she had to work multiple jobs to support herself until graduation. She said:

> I got into very good schools, but to my parents it was not important. At that time, my father only cared that I was close by. I couldn't help out at the restaurant if I went away. Maybe because I'm female as well, you know, Fuzhounese elders say. "Girls can just marry a good man and it's the best thing females can do." My mother expected me to stay because that was what she did. It's like, "I'm such a great daughter [referring to her mom], that I do everything for my parents," and you should be a great daughter and doing everything for us.

At 40 years of age, Gianna hopes that during recent years this mentality has changed, and that younger girls will not have to give up their educational dreams because of the sexist stereotype.

For Kate, also 40 years old, her family's expectations were not as extreme, but they did expect her to uphold her female integrity and abide by their expectations. While her parents supported her while attending college, she was expected to study, study,

study, and no dating in college. Immediately after she graduated, the next stage of her life would be marriage and having children. Kate said:

> I was extremely fortunate to give birth to two sons and a daughter because like most Fuzhounese, my family always held that alpha male tradition. Because I have two sons, no one can look down on me. Other relatives exclaim that I'm so lucky and intentionally always single out someone if they only had daughters or couldn't have children at all.

As Fuzhounese youth move into adulthood, the residual effects of their childhood are apparent, trickling into their decision making along with other complicating factors. They are still afraid to express their thoughts and opinions, or they are held back by parents who still treat them as children who do not have the capacity to make their own decisions. The frustrations and limitations brought on by the restaurant work culture is still being projected onto the next stages of their lives, even as many try desperately to get away.

Chapter V

Adulthood

Throughout this project, the interviewees expressed a similar view: the moment they were brought back to the U.S., they were all thrown into an adult lifestyle of work and studies. They missed a carefree childhood, but some thought that working in the harsh conditions of a restaurant did have certain "benefits" as an adult. In this chapter, I discuss work integrity and diligence which working in a restaurant instilled in each interviewee. Most believed those characteristics shaped them into better adults, more willing to persist, for better or worse, in positions that were difficult.

A consistent opinion shared by all the participants was that they wished their parents could understand the need for consideration of mental health. They agreed that a certain restaurant mentality of "just get it done" affected their mental health and current family relationships. It took many of them a long time to come to terms with the fact that their experience as children enduring the stress of working in a restaurant had taken a huge toll. I also briefly discuss how restaurant life impacted not only Fuzhounese relationships with their parents, but also the impact of the work culture on other family ties and issues of trust.

The "Hustle" Culture

Because many Fuzhounese Americans have essentially been trained to work hard at a young age in the family restaurant, the result is a new generation that could be called

the "hustle" culture. While young Fuzhounese work harder than ever to prove to their parents that they can be successful, the new generation has also prioritized their mental health over monetary concerns. According to *Forbes*, 77% of Americans reported feeling burned out at work. Of that number, 42% quit their jobs as a result of the mental and emotional strain brought on by working long hours and attempting to live up to the harmful excesses of the hustle culture.[64]

Interviewee Iris, age 22, said that elderly Fuzhounese family members did not recognize mental health as an issue. Their mindset is simple: if you're not working, you're failing. Work is the center of life, and the long hours will pay off. Essentially, the older Fuzhounese value workaholics and making money as the most important aspects of life.

Fuzhounese restaurant owners are different from their Cantonese predecessors and peers. The Cantonese know how to enjoy life and spend time with their family, while the Fuzhounese concentrate on working and making money, and the restaurant business is the only source of income for the family. In a study by Winnie Hung, one participant stated:

> Cantonese families care more about family time, so they won't do the hard work, and they will take care of themselves. Fuzhounese are hardworking because they still owe money.
>
> Cantonese workers in restaurants work fewer hours, start work on time and finish work on time. Fuzhounese will start work early and finish work later to earn more.[65]

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[64] Artis Rozentals, "Council Post: The Hustle Culture Has No Future—Enter the Break Culture," *Forbes*, October 12, 2022. https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbesbusinesscouncil/2022/04/29/the-hustle-culture-has-no-future-enter-the-break-culture/?sh=56ade73918ca.

[65] Hung, "Dowries and Debts," 11-40.

This aligns with what Claire, age 22, shared: life for the older generation revolves around family, while younger generations have become a bit more selfish and make decisions that are best for them individually.

Healthcare

According to U.S. census data, the number of Asians in the U.S. will increase by 213% between 2000 and 2050. Most unmet health needs among Asian Americans are experienced by adolescents, who comprise 13.4% of the Asian American population in the U.S.[66] Despite research suggesting that they have a larger need for services than the general population, particularly Asian American youth are underrepresented as users of public mental health agencies' services.

Further, Li and Keshavan found there is a heightened demand for mental health services among Asian American youth, although they are under-represented users of public agencies' services. This under-utilization is particularly alarming because there has been a surge of depression, suicide planning, and suicide attempts among Asian high school students. The authors also found that mental health stigma and prejudice amongst the Asian population delays treatment for mental illnesses among Asian American youth and their families.[67]

In a short survey of Fuzhounese patients in a mental health clinic in New York's Chinatown, of the 216 patients who visited the clinic, 63 (29%) were Fuzhounese. Of the

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[66] H. Li, & M. Keshavan, "Mental health of Asian American populations: Challenges and Opportunities," *Asian Journal of Psychiatry* 3, no. 4 (2010): 161–162. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ajp.2010.11.001.

[67] Li, & Keshavan, "Mental Health of Asian American Populations," 161.

63 Fuzhounese patients, 32 (51%) were unauthorized immigrants. Comparing this group to a group of 31 documented Fuzhounese patients and 62 documented non-Fuzhounese Chinese patients, the survey found higher rates of hospitalization and rehospitalization, lower treatment compliance, less understanding of mental illness, and numerous social disadvantages. Overall, the study demonstrated a strong correlation between undocumented status and poor mental health outcomes.[68]

Gianna, age 40, said parents may never understand mental health as a problem because the parents have been through what they perceive as much worse situations. Because their restaurant was located in a poor neighborhood, they had experienced many robberies and were held at gunpoint so many times they lost count. For the parent, nothing their children experienced in a professional/corporate setting could be as dangerous. For the parents, work burnout does not compare to life endangerment, so their children should just carry on.

Marriage

Asian American families are more inclined to be stable, experience fewer divorces, and have fewer families with a female head of household in comparison with American families. Asian Americans have a higher marriage rate (65% Asians vs. 61% Whites) and lower divorce rate (4% Asian vs. 10.5% Whites). Experts believe Asian

[68] Samuel Law, Miles Hutton, and Diana Chan, "Clinical, Social, and Service Use Characteristics of Fuzhounese Undocumented Immigrant Patients." *Psychiatric Services* 54, no. 7 (2003): 1034–1037. https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.ps.54.7.1034.

Americans have lower divorce rates because comparatively few Asian American families have an income below the poverty line. [69]

Women in China are taught to avoid divorce at all costs. Chinese society discriminates against divorce and single-parent families, and are especially harsh on divorced women. Many Chinese ethnicities, including the Fujianese, believe that divorce has a stronger negative effect on the children's well-being than growing up in a difficult marriage—an ironic statement given the laments and complaints by participants in this study. Just as parents expect their children to continue working in a difficult environment, so they also expected their children to remain in their marriage, no matter what the circumstances may be. In Chinese society, women are pressured to stay in unhappy, even abusive, marriages. Only in the last decade have women in China slowly begun to assert more control over their personal lives. Today approximately 74% of requests for divorce are filed by women in China.[70] Thus, it seems that, in general, Chinese women have slowly progressed forward.

Abby, age 30, raised the topic of divorce as a huge taboo in Fuzhounese American households. Because Fuzhounese communities in America are very close-knit, everyone is aware of everyone else's business, and you "lose face" if others find out about a couple's arguments or disagreements at home. I have shown that prestige and status are of great concern for elderly Fuzhounese. In Abby's case, her parents had loud, abrasive arguments every single day:

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[69] "Asian and Pacific Islanders," National Healthy Marriage Resource Center, 2004. http://www.healthymarriageinfo.org/research-policy/marriage-facts-and-research/marriage-and-divorce-statistics-by-culture/asian-and-pacific-islanders/.

[70] Jeremy Goldkorn, "More than 70 Percent of Divorces in China are Initiated by Women," The China Project, June 2, 2020. https://thechinaproject.com/2019/11/13/more-than-70-percent-of-divorces-in-china-are-initiated-by-women/.

> Restaurant conflicts happen, and tensions ran high between my parents because they work together all day, they come home, and they're sleeping in the same bed. So, of course, stuff that happens at home probably translates over to the restaurant. My sister and I try to be like that middle person in their problems because FJ people, we're nosy, we're in each other's businesses. So, you don't want everyone to know what's going on in your home, you want everyone to think that you're happy, I guess, and there's no issues. I feel like with divorce, that's a huge stigma in our culture. You don't hear about people getting divorced or anything like that.

Her parent's conflicts became so bad they were fighting daily in front of customers and employees. But when friends and relatives were around, they always put on happy faces. No one knew about the mental stress Abby and her sister endured every day as they mediated their parents' fights and dealt with the aftermath, all of which inevitably affected their restaurant business.

Fellow participant Randy, age 24, pointed out that one rarely hears of divorces among Fujian people even if the couples hate each other. Most marriages among elderly Chinese were arranged by their parents and other family members. According to Randy,

> The difference between those earlier marriages and Fuzhounese marriages is that they [elderly] will suck it up throughout a shitty marriage rather than seek a divorce because they do not want to cause a riff amongst the whole family.

This is what sets Fuzhounese apart from other ethnic groups: their stubbornness in putting the collective good of the family above their own happiness. Randy said:

> My dad always made this comment that he does not like Beijing people. He hates their guts. He hates their guts simply because he feels their families are weak. Like, if they can't even get through a marriage together what other hardships could they face? Meanwhile, FJs have faced life-or-death situations, solved financial poverty issues, so living through an unhappy marriage is nothing, by comparison.

Family Allegiance and Trust

The engrained, constant refrain of hard work and long hours has a major impact on everyday family relationships. Conversely, it also creates a layer of mistrust toward anyone who is not part of the Fuzhounese family. All Fuzhounese believe that "blood is thicker than water," also that a strong sense of family is unbreakable, even though family members may migrate around the world. Faithfulness and allegiance to family are never forgotten, and information and business opportunities are shared no matter where they are located. As a New York City community leader stated: "Fuzhounese are loyal to their people . . . they would loan a couple of thousand dollars to their village kin without even thinking twice—not to mention what they would do for their relatives."[71]

No one other than family can understand the hardships each family may have endured during their undocumented/illegal migration into the U.S., because a majority of them went through nearly identical journeys. As Leo, age 32, stated:

> Retaining the FJ culture is very big. For my family, it's always like, Are they Chinese? Yes or no? If they are, the next thing they would ask is, Are they Fuzhounese? Yes or no? As soon as I say Yes, it's like everybody is much more open and more approachable to them. Their view of the person changes, or at least that's what the perception is.

Thus, when it comes to hiring restaurant employees, it will always be likely that a Fuzhounese will be hired over another Chinese ethnicity. Fuzhounese are more trusting of other Fuzhounese, and find other Fuzhounese to be more trustworthy. Everyone is believed to be extremely hard working since they, too, started their new life with nothing.

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[71] Kwong, *Forbidden Workers*.

Hiring decisions and finding suitable employees were made easier when Chinatown hiring agencies started to focus on immigrants from the Fujian region.[72]

Tying everything back to family, trust, and relationships shaped by Fuzhounese work culture, all of the interviewees agreed that they wished their parents paid more attention to them. They believe that even if a fraction of the attention paid to the restaurant business had been bestowed on them as children and young adults, it would have made all of their relationships and decisions better. Growing up, no one heard the phrases "I love you," or "I'm proud of you." Receiving a hug from their parents was virtually nonexistent in their memories.

Three of the older participants, who are married, and have children or are planning to, made it abundantly clear that they will raise their kids in a manner completely opposite of their parents' style. They have decided that adopting the "American" parenting style of punishments and rewards is a better fit compared to the trauma they have faced. For example, Tyler, age 24, made it clear he would be very involved with his children if he has them in the future. He wants his Fuzhounese parents to become aware of the negative effects their restaurant had on his life. He is equally unhappy about the fact that, in his view, his parents saw the customers' experience as worth more than his well-being. Tyler was forced to learn everything on his own, he said:

> I've learned everything on my own. How I am as a person, how to be good, and how to function as a person. It was all stuff I've had to learn independently because there was no real mentor or tutor in my life. It would have been a lot more helpful if I had the two most consistent and trusted adults in my life be more consciously aware and present in my childhood development. So, they could oversee me learning from my mistakes.

[72] Sam Dolnick, "Many Immigrants' Job Search Starts in Chinatown." *New York Times,* February 22, 2011. https://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/23/nyregion/23chinatown.html.

Tyler wants his parents to understand that just because he is physically grown up does not mean he is mentally stable. For a long time, he did not understand how to process feelings, especially if things did not go the way he wanted. As unhealthy and incredible as it sounds, Tyler said he learned everything about emotions—learning, processing, and dealing with them—through watching anime. He compared himself to soldiers who had lost their commander. He was thrown into a new hostile environment [the restaurant] and was expected to listen to his parents' instructions on how to make everything work. During his work in the restaurant, he did not have an opinion or voice. He was so depressed that he developed a skin condition in which he burst into a rash when he was overly depressed and anxious. To this day, his parents refuse to believe that his skin condition is directly correlated to his mental health, even though multiple doctors have stated that it is due to his level of stress.

Skylar, age 25, who is Tyler's older sister, agreed that in the future she would like to emphasize the importance of mental health to the next generation of Fuzhounese Americans. She wants them to know that it should not be a taboo topic. In their family, Skylar's cousin has been diagnosed with bipolar disorder, and the medication has completely transformed his personality. Before he was ambitious, outgoing, and proactive; now he can barely think for himself and relies on his mother to make decisions for him. Skylar's aunt is ashamed of the situation because the family blames her for failing to keep her son under control.

Like most other Chinese ethnicities, the Fuzhounese mindset is very patriarchal. Sons are expected to provide for the family, and families face humiliation when they do not measure up to social standards. Skylar noted:

> It's very taboo. They [aunt and uncle] keep my cousin out of the spotlight. When they have friends visit their house, they send my cousin over to my house and my dad babysits my cousin.

The family never talks about her cousin's bipolar disorder, nor do they recognize or accept it as a mental illness. To Skylar, it sometimes seems like there is no language from which to discuss the problem, and instead her cousin is just deemed as being lazy. While society is changing, acknowledging the disorder and creating new terminologies, among those in the older generation it is categorized as *liu mang* (lazy lout or hooligan). In Fuzhou, male villagers who failed to leave and become successful were branded with this stereotyped reputation, and perceived as able-bodied youths who were squandering away their productive capacities at other people's expense.[73]

In many cases, descendants of Fuzhounese immigrants do not realize that their parents cannot accept the idea of mental illness because the concept is simply foreign to them. Parents also do not realize that the pressures they place on their children to uphold family values may also trigger mental anxiety. Tyler, age 24, believes that while his sister and he had a similar childhood, she was more carefree because she is female. He is the only son on his father's side of the family, so he not only has to carry on the family name but he is also expected to support the elder generation of the family. He said:

> My grandfather had three kids: my uncle, my aunt, and my dad, who is the youngest. My uncle never had kids; my aunt is female so there's no emphasis on the importance on her kids. I'm the only grandson and they've pressured me so much on how to be successful and worthy. I am expected to financially support all of them, my parents, and my two sets of uncles and aunts. Somehow, I'm supposed to support them all on my single intern American salary.

[73] Chu, *Cosmologies of Credit*.

Tyler admits that not even his sister understands his high anxiety because he is moving through this situation with no help or guidance. He is certain his sister would never understand because he is the male, the only son of the family, yet he cannot voice his opinions. Tyler tried to talk about this generational expectation of family financial support with his parents, but again and again he has been denied any kind of mental support. Tyler wished his family members would sit down and have an open discussion with him about why this duty has fallen on him, especially since he is a new graduate still attempting to find a full-time job.

Homosexuality

Just as Fuzhounese youth are expected to work a job they hate or to stay in a terrible marriage, sons must uphold the family honor and carry on the family line. As a result, the topic of homosexuality and queer identity has been avoided in most Fuzhounese households. According to Pew Research published in 2013, which included 37,653 respondents, there are 11.3 million LGBTQ+ adults in the U.S., among which 40% are people of color and 3% identify as Asian American.[74] Until 2001, in China homosexuality was considered to be a mental illness. Even now, 57% of people in China reject the notion that society should accept homosexuality. Only 21% of respondents in China stated that society should accept queer individuals. On the other hand, in America,

[74] Pew Research Center, "A Survey of LGBT Americans," Pew Research Center's Social & Demographic Trends Project, June 13, 2013. https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2013/06/13/a-survey-of-lgbt-americans/.

60% of survey participants supported the LGBTQ+ community, while 33% were against it.[75]

China has long been influenced by traditional patriarchal mainstream beliefs that perpetuate gender inequality, beginning with considerations such as women being inferior to men, and emphasizing men's responsibility to continue the family lineage, viewing the absence of descendants as the gravest form of non-familial behavior.

A study conducted in the Asian cities of Hanoi, Shanghai, and Taipei revealed a small percentage of adolescents and young adults who hold positive views of homosexuality. Queer people face significant stigma and discrimination across all aspects of social life, including the absence of supportive policies, legislation, and endorsements by governmental and socio-political organizations.[76] In China, the stigma of homosexuality influenced factors such as social status and relationships, the value of family, perceptions of immorality and abnormality, and adherence to gender stereotypes of masculinity. The immense pressure on Chinese gay men often leads to situations where they are compelled to enter marriages with women, a reality that is frequently reported in the media. Negative public attitudes toward gay men has detrimental effects on their mental health, resulting in feelings of frustration, distress, and depression.[77]

While being queer is more accepted in the U.S., a majority of Fuzhounese families are against it. The older generation still considers it to be a mental disorder that

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[75] Pew Research Center, "The Global Divide on Homosexuality," Pew Research Center's Global Attitudes Project, June 4, 2013. https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2013/06/04/the-global-divide-on-homosexuality/.

[76] Xiaojun Liu, et al., "Mental Health Status and Associated Contributing Factors Among Gay Men in China," *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 15, no. 6 (2018): 1065. https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph15061065.

[77] Liu, et al., "Mental Health Status," 1065.

needs to be and can be fixed. According to Leo, age 32, who openly identifies as queer and gay, Fuzhounese simply cannot come to terms with homosexuality. He thinks that may be because they continue to adhere to the traditional standard for males to carry on the family name. While daughters may think their parents are strict with them, in reality, if a cherished son does something wrong, parents are often disappointed and affected. Leo said:

> For boys, you're bringing someone else into the family. You must marry an FJ person, and you can't marry an FJ person, then at least marry a Chinese person. After that it is, they don't have to be from mainland China, they can be just ethically Chinese. Or they can be from Taiwan.
>
> While I do think that sons are more valued, they also place a higher expectation on us. But you know, I also feel like culturally, being a boy, we expect that we must take care of our parents.
>
> When we get married, we must make more than our spouse, we have to. The man must make more money and take on more financial responsibilities in order to be more respected.

For years, Leo skirted around the topic of his sexuality whenever his mother pushed him into blind dates until one day he got fed up and confronted his mother during a phone call. He said, "I like boys!" Her reaction was, as expected, silence, confusion, frustration, discomfort, and embarrassment: "What do you mean, you don't like girls? How can you be this way?"

It was a mixture of multiple emotions, and they just stopped talking. A few days later his mother called and essentially just told him he could not do this and that he would have to marry a girl for the sake of his family. Leo argued that if his parents could not accept his sexual orientation, then making him get married to a girl should be the last thing they do. Girls have an intuition, and they can tell the sexuality of guys. If his parents did not want to lose face, and if they did not want outsiders to know, then the best option was to stay quiet.

His mother's only response was that he couldn't tell a soul about his "secret." What she did not know was that he had told his siblings some years earlier, and even for them it took them about six months to process the news. For Leo, it wasn't until last year that he reached out to his mother to wish her well for Chinese New Year. But their relationship is no longer the same, and he could not understand why. Not until he reached out to some queer Fuzhounese friends did he understand why he was being treated differently:

> Think about this, you know you're not a parent. You have to understand that in a few minutes, you destroyed every hope and vision they had for you. So you have to remember, you have to treat it like they lost a child. The vision they thought they had is never going to be there.

Like most Fuzhounese Americans, Leo's relationship with his parents was never intimate or affectionate. However, after coming out as queer, it became even more distant. His relationship with his family became "Don't ask. Don't tell." He is unsure if they understand that being homosexual is not a choice or a decision that he chose to make.

Communication

This chapter has shown that open communication is difficult for Fuzhounese Americans and their parents. Cultural and language barriers make it difficult for the generations to have open discussions about problems, emotions, and hardships that each generation faced and is facing.

Many of the interviewees believe that if all Fuzhounese parents would try family therapy, that might be a starting point for rebuilding better, more solid relationships. For Esther, age 25, therapy was not as effective as she had hoped it might be. She finally

persuaded her mother to go to a few family counseling sessions with a psychologist, but her mother just listened, nodded, and smiled. Afterward, her mother said she did not understand the importance of the sessions, but if it made Esther happier, she would go see the doctor again.

Being Fuzhounese adds an extra layer of challenge to therapy sessions because the Fuzhounese dialect is not common. Most doctors are fluent in either Mandarin or Cantonese, while the older Fuzhounese generation usually has little comprehension of either of those dialects. Several of the interviewees said they were not sure if their feelings or worries were being conveyed to their parents. The problem comes because the participant thinks in English, translating into Mandarin, and then into Fuzhounese for their parents to understand. If the participant's language skills are lacking, they try to find a friend or relative to help translate but even then, the communication is murky. Most of the participants feel that their parents may never truly understand the son or daughter's inner thoughts and feelings, so some have decided to simply give up the attempt.

Chapter VI

Conclusion

This thesis focused on the experiences of 20 Fuzhounese-American participants who worked in Chinese restaurants during their childhood. The study offers valuable insights into how these early experiences shaped their decisions during different stages of their lives.

It is important to acknowledge that the narratives presented in this research may be biased, because participants who volunteered may have been motivated by a desire to share negative experiences. On the other hand, individuals who had more positive memories of their childhood and currently lead happier lives may not have felt inclined to contribute their stories.

While I was careful to ask only questions directly related to the interviewees' family immigration status, it is safe to infer that their migration experiences directly impacted their decision to start a restaurant business. Arriving undocumented to America, with massive indebtedness, most Fuzhounese could only rely on family who had already paved the way in the U.S. The parents saw that owning a restaurant could provide a stable income despite long hours, and they sought to create that sense of stability for their own family.

The restaurant business has become a step-and-repeat process. One Fuzhounese teaches the recipes that Cantonese predecessors have perfected, then they branch out and open their own restaurant in a less competitive region. Like other immigrant families, the

elder generation is primarily focused on providing for their children and creating opportunities that the parent never had.

But, as the interviewees pointed out, their parents' agendas and goals were very different from their children. Fuzhounese parents seemed to be driven by the need for money, while the next generation prioritized happiness, self-fulfillment, and healthy mental stability.

Despite variations in the impacts of these experiences on each of the participants, it is evident that Fuzhounese youth carry significant fears and traumas that need to be addressed. The burden of shouldering the adult responsibilities needed to run a restaurant while simultaneously navigating childhood and school, has had a largely negative effect on the interviewees' lives. Those burdens of restaurant responsibility never full disappeared.

And even as their parents gradually retire from the restaurant business, the participants still struggle to connect with their families. The restaurant work culture severely impacted the communications and interactions with their parents. Despite becoming an adult, the participants lamented that they are still treated as children who cannot make their own decisions. Their thoughts and feelings are continually and consistently dismissed, and they are expected to accept parental decisions without question.

Even as the children seek success, satisfaction, and personal freedom, their parents do not recognize it. The participants remain misunderstood and silently judged by parents who may or may not fully comprehend their struggles.

Future Research

While this project has yielded significant conclusions, and sheds light on the enduring influence of the restaurant work culture on the lives of Fuzhounese individuals, it is important to recognize that the findings presented here capture only a fraction of the overall narrative in this population. To gain a comprehensive understanding, it is important to conduct further investigations and expand the research to encompass a larger pool of American Fuzhounese descendants. Such research may lead to more diverse, or similar, conclusions, but in any case will provide meticulous and broader perspectives on the impact of restaurant work experiences on current Fuzhounese American lifestyles.

Appendix

Interview Questions

Background Questions:

1. How old are you? Tell me something about your family.
2. Did you grow up and live in the United States? Or were you born here but grew up in China? How long has it been since you came back to the States?
3. What is your educational background?
4. Are you currently a student or have you joined the workforce?
5. What industry is your job part of?

Cultural Identity Questions:

1. How much do you identify with Fuzhounese heritage?
2. Do you understand the language or cultural nuances?
3. In your own words how would you define Fuzhounese identity? Any specific traits that differ from other Chinese ethnicities?
4. How would you describe the American Fuzhou identity?

Personal Experience:

1. Tell me something you're comfortable sharing about your family's journey to the U.S.. What kind of work did they do? Who came with them?
2. Was your family involved in the restaurant industry? If, so please elaborate. Who and what were their roles?
3. Why did your family choose to be involved in the restaurant business? Was it personal preference? Or were there limiting factors or conditions?
4. Have you personally been involved in the restaurant industry? What was your role?
    a. If yes, please explain what a typical day was like for you working at a restaurant. Did you work part-time or full-time?
    b. If no, do you have other Fuzhounese American friends or relatives who were involved in the restaurant industry? How do you think your experience compares to theirs?

5. How do you define Fuzhou culture and heritage?

6. In your opinion, how do you think the elder Fuzhounese immigrants would define "Fuzhou identity"?

7. How do you think the "American" Fuzhou identity has changed over time? (In comparison to the older generation of Fuzhounese immigrants, how has the restaurant tie changed?)

8. In your opinion, what is the most distinct similarity between the generations?

9. What is the greatest difference between the two generations?

10. Are the characteristics of "success" in the Fuzhounese community still the same or different?

11. If there are differences, are there challenges in communicating or navigating with family because of personal preferences?

12. What kind of differences or conflicts have you experienced in decision making? How do you think your experience compares to other Fuzhounese American friends?

13. What do you think your parents or elder family members would like to change about the restaurant industry?

14. If you could change one thing about the restaurant industry, what would it be?

    a. If you could choose any kind of job or role what would that be?

15. Where do you see yourself ten years from now?

16. Is there something else about your Fuzhounese American identity and the restaurant industry that I did not ask about that you would like to tell me?

17. If not involved restaurant business, how did you end up where you are now? (Is there still a connection with your current industry?)

18. Would you consider going back/joining the restaurant industry?

19. How do you think your thought process or decision-making process differs from the older wave of Fuzhounese immigrants?

20. Fuzhounese communities are scattered across the United States. Do you think geographic location affects the mindset and ways of thinking of first-generation Fuzhounese Americans?

21. Does the geographic setting affect restaurant ties to the Fuzhounese identity?

22. Give an example of a time when your opinion conflicted with the parent or older generation over work choices/decisions? What was the result?

23. Is there any information you would like to share about your family migration process that is relevant to the restaurant industry and Fuzhounese cultural identity?

24. Has a particular experience in the journey affected the way your family settled in America? Was it a positive or negative impact? How did it shape the family identity?

25. Is there anything from your personal experience that you believe is relevant to this project that you would like to share? Any opinions, preferences, or perspectives that have not been mentioned?

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