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Wherever you live in the United States, you most likely have noticed a Chinese take-out restaurant or all-you-can-eat buffet opening nearby. In strip malls and converted houses, in small towns and large, thousands of new Chinese restaurants are opening across the United States each year. According to restaurant industry sources, there are now over 36,000 Chinese restaurants in the United States, more than the number of Burger King, Wendy’s, and McDonald’s restaurants combined. Chinese food has become a basic part of American culture. Combining fresh food, fast service, and low prices, Chinese restaurants have flooded the landscape by relying on the entrepreneurial efforts of new immigrants and the abundance of unregulated cheap labor. Where have all of these Chinese restaurants come from? And how can they afford to charge $9.99 for all-you-can-eat or deliver a dish of chicken with broccoli with rice and a fortune cookie for $6.95? Answers to our questions lie in New York’s Chinatown, along a little-known street called East Broadway. There, under the shadow of the Manhattan Bridge, beats the heart of Chinatown’s changing ethnic enclave and the operational hub of an expanding ethnic restaurant economy that now stretches across the country as far west as the Rocky Mountains.

New York’s Chinatown exists in the American popular imagination as one of the signature sights of New York City along with the Statue of Liberty, the Empire State Building, and Wall Street. The name, Chinatown, evokes images of crowded streets, curbside fish and vegetable markets, and cheap restaurants. Tourists from across the United States and around the world flock to Mott and Canal Streets to buy Chinese trinkets, sample Chinese food, and bargain for knock-off handbags and watches. But over the past twenty years, the arrival of large numbers of new immigrants from Fuzhou, southeast China, has shifted the center of Chinatown away from Canal and Mott Streets to East Broadway and the Manhattan Bridge, an area most tourists and even native New Yorkers rarely see. Simultaneously, the Fuzhou-based have driven the rapid expansion of the Chinatown restaurant industry into a national restaurant economy. Our stereotypes of Chinatown as a self-contained, exotic, ethnic neighborhood and of Chinese immigrants as a homogenous ethnic group tend to obfuscate and mystify the complex internal dynamics at work in the

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immigrant Chinese community. Whether in Chinatown, New York, or in the expanding ethnic restaurant economy, vulnerable immigrant workers rely on fellow Chinese entrepreneurs for employment opportunities and a pathway of upward mobility. Chinese employers rely on vulnerable cheap labor for profits. These dynamics provide some immigrants with opportunities for entrepreneurial success, but often pit Chinese against Chinese based on differences of regional origin, language, educational background, economic resources, political persuasion, and legal status. As a result, intense exploitation of immigrant Chinese workers by Chinese owners and managers is at the core of this economic expansion.

**Chinatown's New Immigrants**

Over the past twenty-five years hundreds of thousands of new immigrants from the towns and villages outside Fuzhou, in southeast China, have been making their way to New York to work in restaurants, garment shops, and construction trades. Spurred by the lack of opportunities at home and the promise of jobs in New York, able-bodied men and women of all ages have been pouring out of these rural areas, leaving behind hometowns populated only by children, teenagers, and senior citizens. The arrival of the Fuzhouese has transformed New York's Chinese community, supplanting the Cantonese as Chinatown's largest ethnic Chinese community and vying for leadership in the area's economics, politics, social life, and even language use. What is it that draws these thousands of immigrants to New York? And how are they related to our Chinese take-out restaurants and all-you-can-eat buffets in Vermont, Ohio, and Texas?

For most Fuzhouese, New York City is their first stop in America. Here they reconnect with family, friends, and home villagers and begin to mobilize the social and financial capital they will need to repay their migration costs and develop a strategy for survival and success in American society. But their entrance is not easy. Most Fuzhouese are from rural farming and fishing villages. They arrive with no money and may in fact be in significant debt to smugglers who helped them migrate. (The smuggling fee in 2008 was $70,000 per person.) They speak little to no English, have never lived in a major city, and are completely unfamiliar with American culture. In order to survive, Fuzhouese turn to ethnic Chinese economic, social, and religious networks that have grown in and around New York's Chinese community.

**From Ethnic Enclave to Ethnic Economy**

Chinatown itself is often referred to as the quintessential ethnic enclave—an area where immigrants of similar national origin live, work in ethnic businesses, and support each other. In *Latin Journey* (1985) Portes and Bach document the development of an ethnic enclave among Cubans in Miami,
An unregulated free enterprise zone... creates opportunities for some members of the community to succeed by exploiting other disadvantaged Chinese immigrants.

which they see as an emerging, positive model for immigrant incorporation in today's global cities. They argue that the success of Miami's Cuban immigrants derives specifically from the establishment of this ethnic enclave in which successive waves of immigrants utilize networks of ethnic solidarity to mobilize the cultural or social capital that they need to survive and succeed in their new country. The enclave's economic structure, they suggest, enables immigrants to achieve upward social mobility otherwise unavailable to them in the mainstream U.S. economy. In this scenario, they claim, immigrants use social capital—family, hometown, surname, language, common history, and traditions—to find better-paying jobs and more social mobility than are available to them in the “dead-end jobs” of the secondary labor market of the dominant economic structures. Other scholars, including Zhou's work on Chinatown (1992), have accepted Portes's caricature of the enclave as a beneficial model of immigrant incorporation and have sought to apply this theory to various immigrant communities, but with mixed results.

In contrast, Peter Kwong and I have argued (Kwong and Guest, 2000; Guest 2003) that Chinatown's enclave economy has not been primarily a system of mutual support, but an unregulated free enterprise zone that creates opportunities for some members of the community to succeed by exploiting other disadvantaged Chinese immigrants, in this case particularly, recent Fuzhounese arrivals. Ethnic solidarity and cooperation does allow many Fuzhounese immigrants to mobilize the financial and social capital necessary for surviving and succeeding in the United States. But immigrant success is not uniform within the ethnic enclave. Some workers use ethnic solidarity to mobilize the capital to survive. Others parley the situation into paths of upward mobility, particularly through establishing small businesses. Their success, however, is built upon the cheap labor of their fellow immigrants. In Chinatown's ethnic enclave, restaurants, garment shops, and construction jobs operate six days a week, 10–12 hours a day, pay below minimum wage with no overtime pay and no benefits. We have suggested that this co-ethnic exploitation, rather than the more reassuring notion of ethnic solidarity, is actually the primary dynamic at work in the Chinatown ethnic enclave. In fact our research shows that the idea of ethnic solidarity is actually promoted by employers to attract vulnerable workers to the Chinese industries. Owners recruit workers through kinship and hometown networks with the promise that their ethnic ties will lead to better working conditions, higher wages, and greater opportunities for upward mobil-
ity. Vulnerable immigrant workers with few transferable skills and little knowledge of the outside labor market or labor standards turn to fellow Fuzhouese employers for points of entry to the U.S. economy. As the Fuzhouese have expanded the Chinese restaurant industry beyond New York, these complex inter-ethnic dynamics now play out between employers and the chefs, waiters, and delivery people in small take-outs and buffets across the country.

Chinatown: Hub of a National Ethnic Restaurant Economy

The local restaurants that dominate New York’s Chinatown cater heavily to the tourist trade. But in the past decade, Fuzhouese immigrants have turned Chinatown into the center of a vast ethnic economy (Light and Gold 2000) servicing the national network of Chinese restaurants spreading across the United States. East Broadway is its central business district and key staging ground for mobilizing capital, labor, food, and restaurant supplies. The network of restaurants radiates out like the spokes on a delivery bicycle. A restaurant in Pennsylvania or Virginia or North Carolina may rely on the related businesses around East Broadway to supply financial capital, cheap labor, restaurant supplies, and even specialty foods.

The labor that fuels the Chinese restaurant industry is organized primarily through more than two dozen Chinese-run employment agencies located in small storefronts near the Manhattan Bridge. On any given day thousands of Fuzhouese workers circulate among them, looking for jobs. Restaurants across the country looking for cooks, waiters, busboys, receptionists, and delivery people post their jobs in one of the employment agencies. Inside, white boards list jobs by area code, specifying the type of work, the hours, and the monthly salary. Busboys make around $1500, receptionists $2000 and chefs $2500 a month depending on location. For these non-English speaking immigrants, the area code is crucial. A map of the United States posted on the employment agency wall divides the country up accordingly: 715 is Wisconsin, 317 is Indiana and 813 is Florida. Few workers know the names of U.S. cities where they have worked, but they do know the area codes. After identifying an attractive job, the worker will have a telephone interview and negotiate with the owner while still in the employment agency. If they agree on terms, the worker pays the employment agency a $25 fee and quickly makes plans to leave for the restaurant.

Workers flow between restaurant jobs along an elaborate transportation system anchored on East Broadway constructed by the Fuzhouese over the last fifteen years. Beginning in the 1990s, vans began operating routes
from New York to Boston, Philadelphia, and Washington, DC, to deliver restaurant workers to jobs along the way. These popular vans quickly evolved into the now-somewhat-famous Chinatown buses, like Fung Wah, Lucky Star, and Eastern Shuttle, a highly competitive industry that today not only moves Fuzhounese restaurant workers but also college students, tourists, and other bargain hunters, all for unbelievably low prices: $25 roundtrip New York to Boston; $35 roundtrip New York to DC. Despite their reputation for skirting safety regulations, these bus companies have played a central role in the fluid circulation of workers among isolated restaurants throughout the northeastern United States.

As New York’s Fuzhounese population expanded and established satellite Chinatowns in Sunset Park, Brooklyn, Flushing, and Queens, a second bus transportation system has emerged in the last decade, this time within New York City. Today, fleets of fifteen passenger vans shuttle passengers frequently between East Broadway, Sunset Park, and Flushing, delivering Fuzhounese directly from East Broadway’s main business district to their main residential and business districts outside Manhattan. Intense competition between these unregulated van companies keeps fares below the cost of a subway ride.

More recently, Fuzhounese entrepreneurs have launched daily service from New York along routes north, west, and south, delivering workers to restaurants as far away as Wisconsin, Illinois, Ohio, the Carolinas, and Florida. Workers find jobs at the East Broadway employment agencies and often later that evening board a van to their out-of-state jobs. They are dropped off at an exit along the interstate. A cell phone call easily alerts their new employer to their arrival; they are retrieved and put to work. These newer van lines are the arteries that provide the life blood of labor to the ethnic economy of Chinese restaurants expanding through the American heartland.

The farther removed from New York, the more restaurants must pay to attract employees. Higher wages may be attractive to some workers, particularly more recent arrivals saddled with heavy debt. But the separation from Chinatown and the isolation in small towns and cities across the country take their toll. In addition, workers must pay their own travel expenses to the job, though the ticket may be reimbursed if they stay three months and the return trip paid after six months. In reality, workers rarely stay at one job more than a couple of months. The work is too grueling. And the life is too isolated. Regardless of job type, everyone works at least six days a week and twelve hours a day.
hours a day. If the job is outside the New York metropolitan area the employer provides housing in the restaurant or at a nearby apartment. Meals are eaten at the restaurant. The intense work schedule, sometimes spilling into a seventh day, leaves little time for leisure or interaction with people outside the restaurant. Workers' limited English skills and their lack of familiarity with the local community and culture leave them sticking close to work until they return to New York City and East Broadway.

For many of these workers, laboring in restaurants across the country, New York remains home base, and they return to East Broadway regularly. The area overflows with recreational activities for workers between jobs. The East Broadway mall, under the Manhattan Bridge, provides one-stop service where they can buy phone cards, rent DVDs, have their hair cut, buy new clothes, send money home to relatives in China through MoneyGram or Western Union, and have their blood pressure checked. Off-the-books gambling operations and brothels are scattered through the neighborhood, and direct bus service is provided to Atlantic City and Connecticut casinos. East Broadway is home to a vast array of social service providers, including lawyers, matchmakers, human smugglers, and financial service centers. Health service providers, both Western and Chinese, licensed and unlicensed, are plentiful, including doctors, dentists, acupuncturists, and pharmacists. Churches, temples, and ritual centers support weddings, funerals, and offerings to the gods as well as providing locations for mobilizing social and financial capital. An extensive network of single-room-occupancy hotels—many the old Bowery flop-houses—offer short-term housing arrangements for transient immigrant workers. Beds rent for $15 to $20 a night and are readily available to the constantly circulating Fuzhounese laborers who return to New York for a period of rest and recuperation from their strenuous restaurant jobs.

Fuzhounese entrepreneurs rely on New York's East Broadway hub for more than access to cheap, vulnerable labor. As the Fuzhounese central business district, East Broadway is also the primary location for mobilizing capital to open a new restaurant, renovate an existing establishment, or trade up to a bigger operation. Fuzhounese entrepreneurs rely heavily on informal credit networks and revolving loan funds to mobilize capital. Kinship networks, hometown associations (of which there are nearly three dozen along East Broadway alone), and even religious communities have mecha-
nisms to provide that capital, usually at substantial interest rates. This modest start-up capital, sometimes as little as $50,000, enables first-time entrepreneurs to launch a small take-out restaurant or buffet in an urban strip mall or small rural town. And where do Chinese restaurants get all those chopsticks, tea cups, packages of soy sauce, and placemats with the Chinese zodiac? Chinatown's restaurant supply stores fill those orders. Owners visit New York to personally order and pick up supplies or have them delivered around the country.

As one nineteen year old, recent arrival from Fuzhou explained to me,

Most of us have the same dream. We want to make some money and make a better life for ourselves and our families. It's not easy for us here. We work really hard. Not everyone is successful. It will probably take me four or five years just to pay off my smuggling debt. In the meantime, I'm getting experience. I started doing bicycle deliveries. Then I was a bus boy and a chef's assistant. Some day I hope I can move up. Be a waiter or even a chef. I could do that! If I can learn some English I could get a job as a receptionist—though they like to have girls do that job. Eventually I hope I can have my own restaurant. Maybe I can be rich too. It's not easy. But I'm just getting started.

—Lu Yang, East Broadway

Lu Yang's dream of economic success, like those of so many recent Chinese immigrant workers, is complicated by the intense system of labor exploitation that undergirds the rapidly expanding ethnic Chinese restaurant economy. Ethnic networks provide jobs to immigrants whose language skills and educational backgrounds leave little opportunity for success in the mainstream U.S. economy. Some are even able to parlay their social capital, hard work, and good fortune into small-scale entrepreneurial success. But that success is not guaranteed. And it comes at a cost. It is built upon the exploitation of fellow Fuzhouese immigrants working in an unregulated labor market. So next time you dine at an all-you-can-eat buffet in Des Moines or Asheville, or order chicken with broccoli from a Chinese take-out in Sheboygen or Tampa, think about the intricate system of entrepreneurialism and cheap labor that goes on beneath the veneer of fortune cookies and fried rice.

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Kenneth J. Guest is assistant professor in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at Baruch College, City University of New York, and author of God in Chinatown: Religion and Survival Among New York's Evolving Immigrant Community.