“Children of these working class immigrants… have begun to attend Baruch College in significant numbers marking a dramatic transformation within the Fuzhounese population from immigrant laborers to first generation college students.”

—Prof. Ke Liang & Prof. Kenneth J. Guest, Baruch College/CUNY
HISTORICALLY, THE CITY UNIVERSITY of New York has provided access to higher education to new immigrants and their children. That mission continues today as CUNY is home to students from over one hundred countries. This paper looks at the unique immigration and educational experiences of one of these contemporary groups, specifically, the children of recent immigrants from the Fuzhou region of southeast China who have emerged over the past five years as a significant portion of the student body at CUNY’s Baruch College in Manhattan.

Background
The Fuzhounese students in our study trace their roots to a large scale migration from the towns and villages outside Fuzhou, China, which over the past thirty years has transformed the face of New York’s Chinese population. Spurred by economic restructuring in China and the allure of U.S. jobs in Chinese-owned restaurant, garment, and construction trades, as many as several hundred thousand Fuzhounese have entered the U.S. through New York City. Fuzhounese arrivals have fueled a dramatic expansion of Manhattan’s Chinatown, the establishment of a second Chinatown centered in Brooklyn’s Sunset Park, and the growth of the Chinese population in the multi-ethnic Asian community of Flushing, Queens. Fuzhounese now outnumber Cantonese in the Manhattan and Sunset Park Chinatowns. Mandarin has risen in popularity, replacing Cantonese as the primary Chinese dialect. Fuzhounese have established an extensive array of businesses, social service agencies, political organizations, and religious communities.

The steady influx of low-wage, low-skilled workers from rural Fuzhou has fueled a rapid expansion of the Chinese restaurant economy beyond the New York metropolitan region and created a new labor market that continues to draw new immigrants from Fuzhou. Today, Chinatown serves not only as a gateway for new immigrants but also as a dynamic hub for organizing this emerging national ethnic restaurant economy. East Broadway, a vibrant ten-block thoroughfare in Manhattan’s Chinatown, serves as its central engine, replacing Mott Street at the heart of Chinese economic activity. Dozens of employment agencies list jobs in small take-out restaurants and all-you-can-eat restaurants across the country. Chinatown buses deliver restaurant workers overnight to jobs as far away as Florida, Arkansas, Wisconsin, and Maine. Along East Broadway new arrivals access hundreds of small businesses and immigrant service providers that cater to workers who circulate through Chinatown
to distant jobs and back again. This vibrant and fluid ethnic economy frames the lives of Fuzhounese immigrants as they struggle to make a place for themselves and their families in the United States, and provides the context for understanding the Fuzhounese students in our study.

The Study
Our study focuses on the children of these working class immigrants who over the past five years have begun to attend Baruch College in significant numbers, marking a dramatic transformation within the Fuzhounese population from immigrant laborers to first generation college students. Many of the students in our study are themselves recent immigrants from Fuzhou’s surrounding towns and villages, making their immigrant journeys and emergence in U.S. higher education even more unique. CUNY attracts a high number of Asians among the 480,000 enrolled at the twenty-four colleges and institutions, particularly among the undergraduate student population. While Asians comprise 4.7 percent of the U.S. population and 12.6 percent of the population of New York City, they are 18.3 percent of the CUNY undergraduate student body. The number of Asians among Baruch College undergraduates is significantly higher still, reaching 40.4 percent in 2011. Fuzhounese students comprise a large and growing portion of Baruch’s Asian student population, perhaps as much as 10-15 percent.

Between 2010 and 2012 we surveyed 102 Fuzhounese students currently enrolled in Baruch College. Our survey collected demographic characteristics, data on culture, language use, family background, as well as information about immigration and educational experiences. Academic performance was captured by multiple variables: perceived college experiences; self-reported school performance; and official records of high school grade point average (GPA), SAT scores, and cumulative GPA. Ken Guest’s ongoing longitudinal research in the Fuzhounese community provided crucial contextualization and allowed us to place the experiences of Fuzhounese students within the larger narrative of Fuzhounese migration to, and incorporation in, the United States.

Note: Source of data: 1. Census 2010, modified race data; Census 2010 for New York City, modified race data. Respondents who reported two or more races are included in the category of “Other”. 2. “Undergraduate Enrollment by Race and Gender: Fall 2011”, CUNY Office of Institutional Research and Assessment.
A series of focus groups with Fuzhounese students at Baruch assisted to initially frame our research questions. Further in-depth interviews and informal interactions provided rich qualitative ethnographic detail to accompany our quantitative results.

Our research findings highlight the specific educational challenges facing Fuzhounese students; the strategies this population employs to adapt to the U.S. educational system, represented specifically by Baruch College and CUNY more generally; and the potential long-term disadvantages for economic and social mobility inherent in their creative strategies for educational success. Our findings challenge many of the assumptions underlying the Model Minority Myth as it pertains to Chinese-Americans and raise questions about potential changes in educational policy and practice which may better prepare recent immigrant students in higher education for economic and social success beyond the academy.

**Breaking the Model Minority Mold**

Despite a history of discrimination and economic disadvantages in the nineteenth and much of the twentieth century, today in the United States, many Asian Americans have achieved approximate parity with Whites in most areas of the labor market. Asian Americans tend to have higher overall education levels by being disproportionately represented in certain segments of higher education. As a result, often Asian Americans are labeled a model minority. Over time, scholars and commentators have attributed this success to factors as varied as Confucian culture, selective migration of well-trained professionals, and the ability of Asian parents to transfer their educational achievements to their children. But the Model Minority Myth masks significant diversity within the Asian American and Chinese American communities. The stories of the Fuzhounese students considered in our study — and their working class, recent immigrant families from rural Chinese communities — do not fit the stereotypical image of the model minority Asian family. Instead, they provide a detailed portrait of one specific segment of a complex and dynamic Chinese population that is succeeding academically against significant odds, and in so doing, raise questions about the general applicability of the model minority stereotype.

**Fuzhounese Students: Specific Challenges**

The Fuzhounese students in our study face a number of unique challenges that directly influence their educational attainment and prospects for future success. In particular, we examined the impact of family background, immigration experience, and social networks on Baruch’s Fuzhounese students.

**Family Background**

As described earlier, most Fuzhounese immigrants arrive to New York directly from rural China with little preparation for life in one of the world’s most intensely urban environments. They settle into one of New York’s Chinese communities, and, with limited or no English language facility, must find employment in the Chinese ethnic economy. Their attention is directed toward establishing a foothold in the U.S. economy, and, as low-skilled workers in low-wage industries, they have little time and few resources to invest in their children’s educational experience. Fuzhounese students in our survey confront the impact of their families’ narrow occupational avenues, low educational attainment, and income limitations. Occupationally, most parents of the students in our survey worked as laborers, while a few owned small businesses. Educationally, few parents are able to assist with their children’s school work. Only 50 percent of parents had completed middle school in China, and only 6 percent of fathers and 5 percent of mothers had any higher
education. In contrast, 50 percent of Asian Americans (28 percent of all Americans) 25 and older hold a Bachelor's degree or higher. As an indicator of family income levels, 85 percent of our respondents have received PELL scholarships, a U.S. Federal grant provided to undergraduates with high unmet financial needs. This compares to fewer than 50 percent of Baruch students and 55 percent of all CUNY students receiving PELL grants. Currently family incomes of less than $50,000 qualify students to receive this scholarship.

It is important to note however, despite low parental income and educational attainment, Fuzhounese students reported receiving significant family support. Most students live at home, relying on family for living expenses and tuition costs not covered by grants. Significantly, only 4 percent of those in our survey work full-time while 48 percent work part-time, leaving significant time to focus on academic pursuits. Ninety percent of students reported living with at least one parent (75 percent with both), though we also know from interviews and fieldwork that many of these parents regularly work out of town for extended periods of time. As a result, students often live in homes where parental presence is inconsistent and where living space may be shared with extended family members.

Clearly the parents of the Fuzhounese students in our sample, though not positioned to provide the levels of material and social support stereotypically associated with model minority parents, still found significant ways to support their children's education. At the same time however, the lack of parental familiarity with U.S. cultural institutions, including educational institutions, and their lack of experience in higher education, combined with very low levels of parental English proficiency, places significant pressure on their children to navigate the U.S. educational system independently.

**Immigration Experiences**

Recent immigration experiences have a significant impact on Fuzhounese students’ educational strategies and outcomes. Only a small proportion of our respondents (13 percent) were born in the United States. The rest were born in China and later migrated to the U.S. Students born in China had spent an average of eight years in the United States, but almost 30 percent of those surveyed had spent six or less years in the U.S. Our findings suggest a significant impact of this recent immigrant experience on language use and engagement in social activities.

In Fuzhou, the distinct local Fuzhounese dialect of Chinese is the primary means of verbal communication. Mandarin is a secondary dialect learned in schools and through public media, but generally not spoken at home or in local towns and villages. In any rigorous, structured fashion, few Fuzhounese study English before coming to the United States. As Chart 2 indicates, among students surveyed, once in the United States, the Fuzhounese dialect remained the primary language used at home (58.4 percent). Another 20 percent of households primarily used Mandarin. And while only 11.8 percent continued to use Fuzhounese as their primary language outside the home, the majority (53.9 percent) primarily used Mandarin. English was used by only 4 percent as the primary language at home and only 24.5 percent as the primary language outside the home.

The predominant use of Fuzhounese and Mandarin, at home and outside the home, creates an environment in which Fuzhounese students have only irregular and infrequent opportunities to practice their verbal English skills before entering college. Notably, in our survey, this “language barrier” and “pressure from speaking in class” consistently ranked as the top sources of stress for Fuzhounese students at Baruch. What language proficiency students achieve is directly attributed to immersion in U.S.
educational environments. Students focus intensely on mastering written English in order to succeed in U.S. elementary, middle, and high school examinations, as well as on college entrance exams such as the SAT. Verbal skills of speaking and listening comprehension however develop more slowly.

Social Networks
Social life and educational experiences of Fuzhounese students in our survey are characterized by a dense network of Fuzhounese peers, supplemented by a network of other Chinese and Chinese Americans. Building and utilizing these networks is essential to Fuzhounese student success in higher education, but it also creates potential complications for future economic and social advancement.

Fuzhounese students construct their major peer relationships with significant ethnic concordance.

For instance, of the 55 percent of the sample reporting a significant other, almost half were dating other Fuzhounese, while the other half were dating non-Fuzhounese Chinese or Chinese Americans. Similarly, approximately 80 percent of all primary friendships for the students in our survey had been developed among other Fuzhounese, non-Fuzhounese Chinese or Chinese Americans. Perhaps constrained by limited English language proficiency, Fuzhounese students build dense social networks within the Fuzhounese student population and the larger Chinese and Chinese American population, while much less frequently building social networks with student peers across lines of race and ethnicity. Students rely heavily on these networks for academic support, but the close ethnic concordance significantly limits their opportunities for cross-cultural communication and multi-ethnic network building.

Keys to Success
Despite these significant challenges, the story of Fuzhounese students at Baruch is a story of success. Facing social disadvantages, language barriers, and cultural challenges, Fuzhounese have become a rapidly growing group at Baruch, one of CUNY’s top senior colleges and highly-ranked among the nation’s public universities. Our research offers insights into the contours of these success stories and the strategic adaptations Fuzhounese students are making to gain access to college and succeed academically once there.

Table 1 represents key quantitative indicators of our respondents’ academic performance in high school and coursework at Baruch. The data reveals a population with low high school grade point averages in English, foreign languages, math, and science that still gains access to Baruch, and once there, achieves relative success. Looking inside the numbers, we see that respondents’
high school grade point averages are generally poor in verbal skills, averaging only 60/100 in English and 62/100 in foreign languages over their high school career. Their math and science coursework is only modestly better, averaging 72/100 in math and 70/100 in science. High school records like these generally do not indicate a strong likelihood of college success, certainly not the level of success being attained by the Fuzhounese students in our survey. Their SAT exams, taken prior to attending college, also offer mixed indicators for college success. Students generally performed poorly (451) on the verbal section, but showed improvements in math scores (638), particularly in relation to their high school math grades.

Our qualitative data suggests that the tight-knit interaction within the immigrant community provides important resources for disadvantaged Fuzhounese families at this critical juncture between high school and college. While some students reported using free SAT preparation programs provided by local New York City high schools, many Fuzhounese students also receive additional tutoring within the Chinese community, through non-profit social service organizations and a highly developed network of SAT prep schools. Originally designed to assist earlier Chinese immigrants gain access to higher education, these programs, widely advertised in the Chinese-language press and widely known within the Chinese community, provide a form of social capital available to Fuzhounese students that may not be available to non-Chinese students.

These improved scores are key to admission to Baruch. Ultimately, despite low scores on their English SAT sections, their improved math scores raise their combined SAT score high enough to gain admission to Baruch, which heavily emphasizes SAT scores in its admissions decisions. This however does not resolve the language challenges facing them, but it does place them into a coveted institution of higher education.

Once enrolled at Baruch, Fuzhounese students however make certain strategic adaptations to survive and excel in their coursework, achieving an average official GPA of 3.3 out of 4, the equivalent of a B+ or an 87.5 on a one hundred point scale. This appears to be a striking turnaround in academic performance in comparison to their high school performance, where their averages tended to be Cs and Ds. Our findings suggest two key factors in this success: Fuzhounese social networks and strategic selection of majors.

Chart 3 demonstrates clear ethnic concordance for Fuzhounese students’ major
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Average</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>High School Performance</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Verbal Skills</strong></td>
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<td>60/100</td>
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<tr>
<td>High School Foreign Language</td>
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<td>SAT-Verbal</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Non-Verbal Skills</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>High School Math</td>
<td>72/100</td>
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<tr>
<td>High School Science</td>
<td>70/100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SAT-Math</td>
<td>638</td>
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<td><strong>College Performance</strong></td>
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<td>Self-reported Cumulative GPA</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Official Cumulative GPA</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
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Note: Self-reported cumulative GPA was generated from the Baruch Fuzhounese Survey data. All other variables were generated based on students’ official records obtained from the Office for Institutional Research and Program Assessment at Baruch College in July 2012.

social networks. Our interviews indicate that these students tend to take courses together, study together, and prepare for exams together. In a common phenomenon reported by students and faculty, Fuzhounese students regularly sit together in classrooms so that they can translate for one another, collectively addressing language challenges as they emerge during lectures and classroom discussions. Such ethnic peer social networks serve as key strategic adaptations to a linguistically, culturally, and academically challenging environment, generating positive academic outcomes for Baruch’s Fuzhounese student population.

The strategic selection of an academic major also appears to have a positive impact on academic success. Ninety percent of respondents identified themselves as business majors, in comparison to only 10 percent who identified themselves, as majoring in the arts and sciences. Baruch is well known for its undergraduate business programs in finance, accounting, marketing, and information technologies, with 75 percent of all Baruch undergraduates majoring in one business major or another. But the Fuzhounese students surveyed tracked into business majors at even higher numbers. Interviews suggest this tendency reflects a strategic decision to major in courses that emphasize quantitative academic skills, testing student success in working with numbers and statistics, rather than through language competency. These choices build upon Fuzhounese student strengths in math and science while minimizing weaknesses in verbal communication.

**Considerations for the Future**

While strategic adaptations by Fuzhounese students have led to success in college admissions and in selected college coursework, we wonder if these choices also hold within them certain inherent vulnerabilities with long-term implications for upward social and economic mobility after graduation. Intense reliance on social networks comprised predominantly of fellow Fuzhounese, Chinese, and other Chinese Americans appear to be key to academic success for Fuzhounese students at Baruch. But these same networking strategies, reinforced by Fuzhounese and Mandarin language usage in the college set-
ting, also limit students’ exposure to: English language communication opportunities; cross-cultural engagements with non-Chinese students; a broad range of extra curricular activities; and opportunities to develop leadership skills in cross-cultural, extra curricular settings. In addition, students report the need to invest significant time in coursework to establish and maintain their GPAs, thus further limiting their opportunities to access the full range of college life beyond the classroom.

These limitations, built into the strategic adaptations Fuzhounese students have relied on for their academic success, raise important questions about whether Fuzhounese students are being adequately equipped to fully engage U.S. social institutions and labor markets after graduation, and whether their educational credential may adequately predict the economic rewards and upward mobility of Fuzhounese students in the same way it might for others. Are there ways in which greater exposure to diversity training and multi-ethnic student interaction, along with more intensive support for oral communication and writing skills, might encourage students to break out of language, ethnic and religious social networks to participate in the vast extra-curricular life of a diverse campus; enhance language and cultural literacy; and provide opportunities for leadership training and development that might have implications long after graduation? Although this study has focused on the educational experiences of Fuzhounese students, our findings raise significant implications on the current framework for all under-represented groups in higher education, and lead us to consider changes that might improve the quality of outcomes both in college and beyond. It is our intention to pursue these questions further as the Fuzhounese population at Baruch graduates and begins to apply their academic training to the workplace, civil society, family, and community life.

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Notes