THE WAIZHOU SPECIAL
Exploring the Effects of Immigrant Diffusion on Chinese Restaurant Workers in McMinnville, Tennessee

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For my grandfathers,
陈友 and 高国坟
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Abstract

Massey and Capoferro (2008) have noted the flow of new immigration to non-traditional destinations, such as suburbs, the South, and the Midwest. One such group representing new immigration trends is Chinese immigrants arriving to destinations outside of metropolitan areas throughout the Eastern seaboard, termed waizhou, to work in American Chinese restaurants. McMinnville, Tennessee, a town of 13,000 where I conducted fieldwork, has experienced effects of diffused Chinese migration, evident in the presence of four Chinese restaurants in the modest town. I argue that the diffusion of economy is not consistent with the diffusion of community in McMinnville. Rather than reproducing traditional coethnic communities that previously existed in urban enclaves, and that are integral to immigrants' accumulation of social capital and mobility in the greater secondary economy and society (Zhou 1995), quite the opposite is true in these new destinations. Restaurant workers' experience in new destinations is characterized by slow to no signs of assimilation into mainstream American culture; fractured family relationships; coethnic relations rendered primarily economic and professional, typically lacking a social dimension; and widespread horizontal job mobility with fewer prospects for vertical (upwards) job mobility. These conditions are not necessarily indicative of immigrant objectives or receiving communities' response to the new population, but instead, are endemic to the Chinese restaurant industry, which supplants organic social networks with economically-driven formal networks.
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Interview Subjects

All time durations refer to the duration at the time of interview in August 2011.

Peking Restaurant

The **Peking Restaurant Manager**, name not given, is in her 30s, has worked and lived in Peking Restaurant McMinnville for over 10 years. She is married with three children.

China Wok

Zheng, 28, immigrated to the United States 2-3 years ago and has worked at China Wok for about half a year. He claims to be single, but Tommy and Alan believe he is married to the woman who also works at China Wok.

Ming’s Buffet and Grill

Alan Zhou, 30, is the Manager of Ming’s Buffet and Grill. He immigrated to the United States in 1985 and grew up in New York’s Chinatown. He has worked at Ming’s since its opening five years ago. Tommy believes that he is a partial owner, in addition to being a Manager of Ming's.

Mike Zheng, 32, immigrated to the United States in 2000. He has worked as a waiter in Ming’s for a year. He is single.

Sky Zheng, 30, immigrated to the United States in 2000. He has worked as a waiter in Ming’s for a few months. He is single.

Amy is in her late 20s or early 30s and immigrated to the United States in 2002. She has worked as a waitress in Ming’s for more than a year. She is married with two daughters, both of whom live for periods in the United States and in China. Her older daughter, Cindy, was staying with her in McMinnville during her summer break at the time of my interview, although she usually goes to middle school in New York.

Miya, 28, is a waitress at Ming’s. She is single but has a boyfriend who also works in a Chinese restaurant.

Sentosa

Tommy Liu, 27, immigrated to the United States in 2008 and has worked at Sentosa as the Manager for a few months. He was previously a partial owner with a friend of a take-out restaurant in Memphis.

Mr. Li, 46, immigrated to the United States in 1992, and has worked at Sentosa as a cook for 2 months. He is married to Ms. Yang, who is also employed at Sentosa, and has two
children, an 18-year old daughter who lives in Ohio and an 8-year old son (Ryan) who lives with him and Ms. Yang in McMinnville.

**Ms. Yang**, 40, immigrated to the United States in 2001, and has worked at Sentosa as a waitress for 2 months. She is married to Mr. Li, with whom she has two children.

**Jin**, 36, immigrated to the United States in 2000, and has worked at Sentosa as a cook, sushi chef, and hibachi grill cook for a few months. His wife works in a Chinese restaurant in New Hampshire, and he has two children, a daughter (Kristy) who just started kindergarten in McMinnville, and a younger son, who lives in China. Jin’s wife is Ms. Yang’s sister.

**Sophia**, 26, immigrated to the United States in 2007, and has worked at Sentosa as a waitress for a few months. She is single, but has a boyfriend.

**Judi**, 20, immigrated to the United States half a year ago. Sentosa is the first restaurant she has worked at. She is single.
Preface

In 2008, Jennifer 8. Lee published *The Fortune Cookie Chronicles*, a book documenting her quest to understand the people who work at the 40,000 Chinese restaurants in the United States, a number, she says, that exceeds that of the country’s MacDonalds, Burger Kings, and KFCs combined. Remarkably, Chinese restaurants are independently run and do not have the corporate oversight that fast food chains have, yet they are even more pervasive than the big names in fast food that most people consider as defining cuisines of American culture. The Chinese restaurant has become a ubiquitous phenomenon in the American landscape, and one that has easily been taken for granted. The question of why or how the restaurant arrived at a particular place is rarely asked.

Once in a while, media coverage brings the mystery of Chinese restaurants into public consciousness, but the reported instances are disconnected from each other and lack systematic analysis. Small-town and regional newspapers will sometimes report on police raids of local Chinese restaurants that were employing undocumented restaurant workers, but these instances seem isolated from each other. Clearly, they are not, as the recent news stories regarding the Chinatown bus demonstrate. In the spring of 2011, two prominent Chinatown bus crashes, leading to fatalities of Chinese restaurant workers onboard, shed light on the network that supports the Chinese restaurant economy; a network that has New York as its center, all other places in America with Chinese restaurants as peripheral nodes, and the Chinatown bus as the vehicle that connects the center and periphery.
The Chinatown bus is an umbrella term for privately-run and ethnically-run bus lines that depart from New York City’s Chinatown for destinations all over the Eastern seaboard. Initially founded to bus Chinese restaurant workers from New York to Boston, where labor supply was somewhat more limited, the Chinatown bus has seen remarkable market expansion in the past ten years. For major destinations from New York such as Boston, Washington DC, Philadelphia, and the like, ridership is no longer limited to Chinese restaurant workers, but also budget-conscious students and travelers. Destinations have also grown much more diverse and obscure, as my paper will go on to demonstrate—small towns dotting the American South and Midwest, identifiable to the Chinese restaurant workers onboard only through their exit number on the interstate highway.

The American Chinese restaurant may be independently-run, but it is indubitably part of a well-developed regional economic network. Chinese restaurant work is a natural choice for many recent Chinese immigrants who are unskilled; the skills can be picked up rather quickly (usually in a matter of weeks for cooks, and even less for waiters) and the English language requirements are minimal. Despite the economic downturn, demand for restaurant workers from the over 40,000 Chinese restaurants is stable, and prospective employees can choose between a plentitude of possibilities for where to work.

In order to coordinate labor demand and supply in such a geographically diffused industry, employment agencies (called jieshaosuo, literally “recommendation agency””) have cropped up in New York Chinatown by the dozens, clustered around the East Broadway corridor. They typically organize employers’ requests for a new
worker and then accept around $30 for each “recommendation” that they make to jobseekers. In helping determine whether a job was a good fit, the employment agency may ask the job candidate’s preferences regarding distance from New York, big or small restaurant, sit-down or buffet-style. Finally, once they determined a potential fit, the job candidate would speak to the restaurant owner on the phone and typically, the same evening, the restaurant worker would board to bus to their new workplace.

Once there, workers may stay at a restaurant for a few days, a few months, or a few years—they claim that there are no hard feelings in leaving. Many of them have experience working in dozens of restaurants in multiple states. They typically live with their coworkers in housing provided by the restaurant owner. Some don’t have cars or know how to drive, so they rely on carpooling with their coworkers or the restaurant owner. Without a way of getting around, they rarely explore the town and surrounding area in their spare time, nor do they really want to; in the precious after-work hours and few days off during the month, they tend to sleep in and watch TV. When they can get a few days off at a time, they go back to New York for a brief stint via Chinatown bus to see friends and family, eat well, buy necessities, schedule a doctor’s appointment, get a haircut, and the like. Their lives are in New York; it’s just their work that is elsewhere.

When a job doesn’t pan out, restaurant workers will return to New York’s employment agencies in order to find a new restaurant. The process repeats again, undoubtedly and indefinitely, for tens of thousands of restaurant workers in the United States. My research captures a moment in this seemingly endless cycle.
Introduction
The First Steps

千里之行开始足下(老子)
A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.
Laozi (551-479 BCE)

In the past twenty years, new immigration into the United States has shifted away from traditional destinations towards non-traditional destinations. Between 1985 to 1990 and 1995 to 2000, the share of new Asian immigrants entering the traditional “big five” states (California, New York, Texas, Florida, and Illinois) declined from 60% to 52%, while those entering second tier states increased from 15% to 17%;\(^1\) new destinations rose from 20% to 25% share of new immigrants; and remaining states saw an increase from 5% to 6% (Massey and Capoferro 2008).\(^2\)

Simultaneously, more and more Americans who lived in previously homogenous communities are encountering immigrant culture in their daily lives in various forms, such as the ethnic restaurant. The nation’s 40,000 Chinese restaurants serve as a prominent example, outnumbering the United States’ McDonalds, Burger Kings, and KFCs combined (Lee 2008). The new patterns of immigration not only have implications for the expectations and experiences of the immigrant group, but also a profound effect on the fabric of American life.

Massey and Capoferro (2008) place the movement of immigrants to small

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\(^1\) “Second tier” states are defined as New Jersey, Massachusetts, Washington, Virginia, and Maryland. Until the 1990s, the “big five” and “second tier” destinations accounted for over 80% of all new immigration.

\(^2\) “New destinations” are defined as any state receiving more than 1% of the inflow of any group during the period of observation. All other states are designated as “remaining states.”
towns in the Midwest and South within the context of the modern boom of immigration, which increased 50% between 1990 and 2000 such that by 2006, 16.8 million new immigrants had been admitted in the preceding 16 years (Yu 2008). Traditional immigration theory, including theories of chain migration and cumulative causation, continues to be relevant in explaining immigration growth. According to chain migration theory (Price 1963), initial immigrants arrive at the destination country, and over time, encourage and help their family and friends to join them, typically sponsoring them as well. Within chain migration theory, cumulative causation emphasizes the role of social networks within the process. Massey, Durand, and Malone (2002) building on Myrdal (1957) describe cumulative causation as “each act of migration [altering] the social context within which subsequent migration decisions are made, thus increasing the likelihood of additional movement.” The chain provides potential migrants access to jobs, housing, knowledge, and a support structure, among other forms of social capital that facilitate movement (Massey 1999).

Destination and destination shift is largely absent from traditional immigration theory, although in new literature, Massey and Capoferro (2008) cite labor demand shift as a major cause. The growth of the American South as an immigrant destination is well documented, but research has largely focused Mexican rather than Asian immigration, since Mexicans and Mexican Americans remain the most significant new immigrant group in the region (Leach and Bean 2008, Donato and Tolbert 2008). An existing study of Chinese immigrants in the South is Loewen’s (1988) influential book *The Mississippi Chinese*, which describes the Mississippi Delta Chinese who
were recruited to the region as sharecroppers during the Jim Crow era. The Chinese gradually became prosperous in the region through grocery enterprises to the degree that their social status improved from black to white within the biracially stratified society and they established institutions parallel to white institutions. While Loewen’s research addresses a historical Chinese community, it still offers insight into the potential social and economic mobility of entrepreneurially-minded Chinese immigrants in the present-day South.

A contemporary study of non-Chinese Asian immigrants in the South include Airries (1994, 2006, 2008)’s literature on the Vietnamese in New Orleans. The community originated from 1970s Vietnam War refugees, and while it maintains strong cultural ties to its homeland, significant social capital accumulation and institution building in New Orleans, particularly religious institutions, has created a strong attachment to place for Vietnamese-Americans. Remarkably, only half a year after Hurricane Katrina in July 2006, a reported 80% of Vietnamese had returned to New Orleans to rebuild their homes and businesses (Airriess 2008). Although they address different national groups and historical contexts, Loewen’s (1988) and Airriess’ (2008) accounts both describe ethnic institution building and social and economic integration of Asian immigrant communities in the American South.

Loewen and Airriess’ accounts speak to the present-day situation of Chinese restaurant workers in the South is several ways. The search for work continues to motivate modern migration, as it motivated the Chinese who settled in the Mississippi Delta. The role of networks and cumulative causation is as evident today as in Jim Crow Mississippi and Vietnam War-era New Orleans. The vast majority of Chinese
restaurant workers who work in the South, also known as *waizhou*, come from one province: Fujian. They describe themselves as “Fuzhou people,” referring to the capital of the province, although most of them are from the countryside outside of Fuzhou. Zhao (2010) reports that of the Fuzhouese who have immigrated to America, 80% are from Changle, by Chinese standards a small city of only 800,000. Zhao also cites that of the 200,000 Changle immigrants in the United States, 80% were either smuggled or trafficked into the country. This information reinforces Zhang’s claim (2008) that family and kinship networks must play a large role in determining who is smuggled to the US; the large percentage of Changle immigrants and among them, the large percentage of them who were smuggled, indicate that they chose to immigrate through this channel based on a close tie’s knowledge or experience.

In other ways, Loewen and Airriess’ accounts foreground ways in which Fuzhouese immigration differs from previous Asian immigration to the South. Loewen and Airriess tell community-specific accounts with huge emphases on place, whereas the diffused Chinese restaurant labor network defies a community or place definition. The Mississippi Chinese and New Orleans Vietnamese were also relatively isolated from the regional or national co-ethnic community, or rather one did not exist; whereas Chinese restaurant workers are inextricably tied to New York as their social and economic center. Here, we have to look at the enclave as part of the immigrant experience in conjunction with settlement outside the enclave in order to understand the current situation of Chinese restaurant workers.

Finally, there are differences in the causal relationship of push and pull factors that led to the specific site settlements of the Mississippi Chinese and New Orleans
Vietnamese. The Mississippi Chinese and New Orleans Vietnamese initially settled in their respective destinations largely due to exogenous forces; the Chinese in the Mississippi Delta because of demand for sharecroppers and the Vietnamese in New Orleans because of a coordinated effort on the part of Catholic charities in the city to offer asylum. Presently, Fuzhouese entrepreneurs are entering untapped markets to open restaurants, thereafter attracting labor to the towns in order to staff the restaurants. Restaurant workers arriving in small towns in the South are responding to co-ethnic labor demand and typically have a choice between a plentitude of destinations, basically anywhere with Chinese restaurants.

An ethnic-specific account may partially explain the movement of the Fuzhouese entrepreneurs and workers to the South. Light (1993) recognizes that immigrant networks vary, with some, potentially the Fuzhouese, being more entrepreneurially oriented than others based in part on pre-existing mercantile cultural norms, for example, the Changle Fuzhouese immigrants (Zhao 2010). Zhao points to the risk-taking nature of the Changle entrepreneurial spirit, and how Changle immigrants are willing to open businesses (usually restaurants) in rundown neighborhoods or remote towns. They are able to do so because they have formed their own entrepreneurship network in which they make business deals among themselves, such as lending business start-up capital. It appears that even the immigrant “pioneer” in an American small-town, although geographically isolated, may belong to business networks of other immigrants that connect them to other entrepreneurs all over the US. Sassen (1995)’s empirical findings further establish that local labor market conditions, such as low wages and high unemployment, do not
seem to affect the influx of immigration, which supports Zhao’s claims that Fuzhouese immigrants may be able to rely on the resources of a regional co-ethnic economy to supplement the local one.

Light (1993) further proposes that migration networks feed immigrant entrepreneurship in several ways: by providing low-cost co-ethnic labor to immigrant entrepreneurs; information on the best industries to enter; and mutual assistance, which may be in the form of credit. Ethnic entrepreneurship exists within a total system termed the ethnic economy (Bonacich and Modell 1980), which describes any ethnic or immigrant group’s self-employed, its employers, their coethnic employees, and their unpaid family workers. Within the ethnic economy, news about enclave jobs travels through nested coethnic networks that are closed to outsiders (Greve and Salaff 2006). Greve and Salaff (2006) found in their study in Canadian suburbs that nested coethnic social networks transcend space and allow ethnic entrepreneurs to move successfully outside the ethnic enclave economy.

Immigrants who work for co-ethnic employers within an ethnic enclave economy rather than in low-wage positions in the mainstream economy may receive lower overall wages, but also may have better access to the social capital of their ethnic community, which has long-term positive effect on immigrant earnings. In Zhou’s (2000) study of Chinese residents in New York City, she concluded that low-paying menial jobs in the enclave economy are “part of a time-honored path toward upward social mobility among Chinese immigrants.” Because Chinatowns have a structural duality of the protected sector serving predominantly Asian customers and the “export sector” selling goods and services to people outside the community, the
enclave economy can actually facilitate the entry of immigrants into the larger society from their initial menial labor positions.

The literature has yet to reconcile the presence of Asian immigrants entering new destinations without enclave economies and the social capital effects of working outside an enclave economy that Zhou (2000) implies. Without the spatial and social density of an enclave, how are immigrant workers accumulating social capital and entering “the larger society,” if at all? Massey (2008) suspects that the so called gateway cities that contain ethnic enclave economies were major domains of assimilation for new immigrants, and within the new geographical and temporal (in that there is a continuous influx of new immigration that allows older immigrants to remain connected to their overseas community and culture) framework of immigration, a nontraditional form of assimilation may emerge or assimilation may go unrealized.

There is an additional complication to understanding the social capital accumulation and assimilation potential of the new group of Chinese immigrants, particularly those working in the restaurant industry. They are highly physically mobile, tending to move from restaurant to restaurant all over the country, which has a significant impact on their ability to form an investment in a place. Roberts (1995) argues for the use of Merton’s concept of socially expected duration (SED), which is the length of time that an immigrant expects to stay in a place, to understand this phenomenon. In his study of Mexican immigrants, Roberts found that SEDs may be problematic because to a large degree they are prescribed by the immigrant group rather than the individual immigrant and produce a positive feedback cycle of the
expectation producing the expected result. Roberts argues that a short SED undermines the development of community intergenerational links, which undermines immigrant success.

My study of how networks are developing outside of the traditional enclave, in particular for menial laborers such as restaurant workers whose initial social capital is lower than either ethnic entrepreneurs outside of an enclave economy or ethnic workers within an enclave economy, reveals relative stagnation in immigrant agency and mobility within this new immigration pattern. In the future, restaurant workers may be able to better exploit their accumulated social capital from the restaurant industry, but that will unlikely be in the form of more Chinese restaurants. As a single industry ethnic economy, the Chinese restaurant enterprise is a dead end for the formation of coethnic community in *waizhou*. I will argue that the enclave is still a powerful place in the new immigrant geography, and that diffusion is a fluctuation rather than a trajectory for Chinese laborers in the United States.

I am further interested in the accounts of daily life in the new destinations and how the quality of immigrant networks in *waizhou* compare with those in the Zhou's description of the enclave. To different degrees, both Massey’s concern about the additional barriers to acculturation and assimilation in new destinations and Griffith’s account (2008) of community participation and identity renegotiation for “new Southerners” and “new Midwesterners” are valid for Chinese restaurant workers. However, the reception of the host community is only one factor in whether an immigrant group decides to stay in a new destination; economic opportunities and a co-ethnic community are other major considerations that came up in my interviews.
Research Setting

I conducted all of my interviews in the town of McMinnville, which is the seat of Warren County in Middle Tennessee. McMinnville’s population was 13,605 persons in 2010, and at the time of my research had 4 Chinese restaurants, or about 1 for every 3,400 people. I selected the site based on five major reasons: the presence of an Asian population; the presence of Chinese restaurants; its distance from any major metropolitan center; its low economic appeal; and its documented relationship to the Chinatown bus that originates from New York City.

McMinnville is 84.7% white, higher than the national average of 72.4%. The Hispanic population has seen a huge increase in the last 20 years, from about 0.7% of the total town population in 1990 to 12% in 2010, most of whom are Mexican. Asian population increase has been much more modest; there were 127 Asians living in McMinnville in 2010, 15 of whom are Chinese; 3 The Asian population, representing about 1% of the total population of McMinnville, has been stable since 2000, and had almost doubled between 1990 and 2000. It is unlikely that the Asian population increase was due to an increase in the Chinese population; as we can see from the 2010 data, the Chinese population in McMinnville is insignificant (about 0.1%). More likely, the Asian population growth was due to Japanese immigrants associated with managerial positions in the Yorozu Corp automobile metal suspension parts

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3 I had initially selected McMinnville also with the criteria of growth of Asian population in relation to overall population growth in mind. According to the 2000 Census, Asians comprised 0.9% of the town’s population. The American Community Survey’s 5-year estimate projected that the Asian population would rise to 1.9% of the total population between 2005-2009. With the release of the 2010 Census, it is obvious that growth was not so dramatic, and in fact, the Asian population has been quite stable in McMinnville. Although the original selection criterion is moot, McMinnville’s demographics do not exclude it as an appropriate case study for Chinese immigration to small towns in the American South.
manufacturing plant located in McMinnville, and various other Asian immigration. For example, in 2010, there were 23 Japanese, 36 Asian Indians, 32 Vietnamese, and 16 Filipinos living in McMinnville—all other Asian immigrant groups exceed the Chinese.

While the proportion of Chinese residents is lower than the state (about 0.2%) and national average (about 1%), the proportion of Chinese restaurants to residents in the town is higher than the national average, which is about 1 for every 7500 people.\textsuperscript{4} From this high concentration of restaurants, it is evident that Chinese restaurant entrepreneurs are receiving information about the town that compels them to locate there, indicating that information networks are at play.

McMinnville is relatively isolated from metropolitan economies; Nashville and Chattanooga, the closest major cities, are both over 70 miles away. It is also relatively impoverished, with a median household income in 2010 of $27,265 (compared to overall US median household income $62,363) and over a quarter of families living in poverty (compared to overall US 9.9%). Manufacturing is a major industry of McMinnville, which houses a Bridgestone/Firestone tire plant and several lumber manufacturing companies. McMinnville, nicknamed “the Nursery Capital of the World,” is also home to over 450 nurseries that thrive in the mild climate; the nursery industry generates over $300 million in revenue a year for the town and is a major source of demand for Hispanic labor. My conversation with the Tennessee Nursery and Landscape Association indicated that there were not many, if any, Chinese nursery workers, but I have been unable to find data on nursery employment.

\textsuperscript{4} Jennifer 8. Lee’s Jul 2008 TED Talk.
Despite its isolation and relative poverty, McMinnville is a formal destination for Chinese restaurants and restaurant workers—their location to McMinnville is decidedly not haphazard. Jennifer 8. Lee’s blog post in *The Fortunate Cookie Chronicles* (see Image 1 and 2) shows two images of typical Chinatown bus company advertisements posted in Chinatown to attract potential passengers, typically restaurant workers. One ad (Figure 2) included McMinnville on its route and based on the implication that the town is connected to the larger immigrant network based on New York via the bus, as well as earlier-stated factors, I selected McMinnville as my research site.

![Huan Qiu Express Ad](image)

**Figure 1**: Ad for the Huan Qiu Express. The ad explains that the bus passes through the listed area codes (615, ..., 870) and will travel via the I-81 and I-40. The ad also assures passengers that the buses are insured in case of accident. Lee (2009) argues that for Chinese restaurant workers, the simplest way to discern places is by their area code and interstate locations rather than their place names.

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Ultimately, I was not able to find Lucky Bus Travel that purportedly stops in McMinnville, or the company no longer existed, but almost all my interview subjects had traveled to McMinnville by a Chinatown bus called the Tennessee Bus Company, based out of No. 3 Allen Street in New York Chinatown. The Tennessee Bus Company stops in Manchester, 15 minutes away on the I-24; I myself had gotten off the same bus to continue to McMinnville to conduct my fieldwork.

**Research Design**

I selected McMinnville as my research site *because* it is unremarkable from an immigrant’s standpoint: it has no ethnic economy and no significant industry. That said, I do not claim that it is a *typical* destination for Chinese immigrants. My
research question is related to the typical experience of a Chinese immigrant in a small Southern town rather than the experience of a typical Chinese immigrant, and my findings are not necessarily generalizable to the overall Chinese immigrant experience.

I do believe, however, that McMinnville is typical of the kind of town that Chinese immigrants arrive at in order to work at a restaurant in the South. Based on my interviews, it became obvious that McMinnville belonged in a category known as “waizhou,” which means “out of state.” Waizhou is any place significantly far enough from New York and lacking in coethnic character that it is considered a foreign land. Lee’s (2008) chapter entitled “Waizhou, U.S.A.” defines waizhou as the following:

For the Fujianese [same as Fuzhouese], there are only two places in America. There is New York City; then there is everywhere else. Places are not called Indiana or Virginia or Georgia. Instead they are collectively known as waizhou—Mandarin Chinese for “out of state.” Waizhou is more than a geographical description. It is the white space left over where there is no New York, no Chinatown, no East Broadway. Even upstate New York, including the state’s capital, Albany, can be considered waizhou to the Fujianese. Waizhou is where fathers and sons go for weeks and months at a time to sweat twelve-hour days in Chinese restaurants. Waizhou is crisscrossed by interstate bus routes and dotted with little towns, all of which already have or could use a Chinese restaurant. Waizhou schools are better, and the paper towels there are cheaper. The bus system is the Fuzhouese connection to waizhou. If the Fujianese had a Saul Steinberg New Yorker cover to denote their vision of the world, it would show East Broadway, then the rest of New York City, followed by waizhou.

Places such as Nashville and Atlanta, albeit southern cities, have a coethnic presence that can make them more like New York than waizhou. For my interviewees, McMinnville was easily and without further thought characterized as waizhou, as were states such as Arkansas, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Maryland. Places such as New Jersey and Long Island were considered proximal enough to New York that my
subjects often called them “New York,” “New York area,” or “near New York.”

I chose to conduct interviews in order to have the option of asking follow up questions and drawing out individual stories. My interview questions related to the subject’s immigration experience, work experience in America, family and friendship contacts in America, and how the subject arrived at her current employment. I designed my interview questions, which I was not able to pretest, to be simple, straightforward, and non-threatening. Prior to beginning the interview, I would typically show the interviewee the list of questions in order to make them more comfortable with the exchange. I intended for the questions to lead to more detailed and personal discussions, which they often did. Ultimately, however, I regret not phrasing my initial list of questions in more open-ended ways. I found that there were many missed opportunities for richer discussions if I had not asked a question that only accepted a yes/no response.

My list of initial questions form Appendix A and the consent form I designed for the participants can be found in Appendix B.

Data Collection

Prior to arriving in McMinnville, I mailed a letter to each of the four Chinese restaurants (Peking Restaurant, Ming’s Buffet and Grill, China Wok, and Sentosa) introducing my research project and myself. I addressed letters to the managers of the respective restaurants by name, when that was available to me, and to a generic “Manager” when the name was unavailable. I did not seek a response for their interview participation. The manager at Peking Restaurant indicated that she had
received my letter, but no other restaurant referred to the letter at all.

I conducted 14 interviews in total, one of which was with a minor. Of my interviews, one was conducted in Peking Restaurant, six in Ming’s, one in China Wok, and six in Sentosa. All interviews were conducted between August 15 and August 26, 2011 in the four Chinese restaurants located in McMinnville. All of my interviews were conducted in the hours between the lunch and dinner rush, around 2pm to 4pm and they were all conducted during employees’ work time when they were relatively free or taking their lunch break. I found that conducting the interviews in the restaurant did have some impact on the kinds of responses I received, since employees seemed uncomfortable discussing certain topics in the workplace and in the presence of their coworkers and managers.

All interviews were conducted in Mandarin Chinese and lasted between 20 minutes and an hour. During the interviews, I took down a few notes and recorded the conversations in their entirety. Among my recordings, I also have a follow-up interview with a Sentosa employee, a follow-up interview with the minor, and conversations between myself a several restaurant workers, not necessarily related to my interview questions. Ultimately, I decided not to use my interview with Cindy, the minor who is the daughter of a Ming's waitress, or Judi, a young woman working at Sentosa, in my data analysis due to poor recording environments.

During the interviews, it was obvious to me that I was an outsider and certain kinds of information were inaccessible to me. After my first day of interviews, one subject called me after he got off work to tell me that I would never get straight

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6 I did not initially seek IRB Approval to interview minors, but later obtained a revision to the initial terms.
answers out of my subjects with my interview questions. According to him, there was
a lot that would interest me that he chose not to tell me since I did not question him
directly on those issues; he generalized that all Chinese people are the same, and
prefer not to say too much or stir things up. While this initial comment shocked me, I
came to be more aware of the way my subjects answered questions as a source of
information.

Many of my interviews exhibit some internal and external inconsistencies,
likely because my subject felt pressured to respond in a certain way since they were in
their work environment and I was a stranger. For example, one interviewee who said
he did not live with any of his coworkers at the beginning of the interview later said
that he in fact did live with his coworkers. Relationships also seemed to be
contentious; one interviewee reported to me that he and his coworker had no romantic
or familial relationship. Afterwards, employees from other restaurants told me that the
initial interviewee had lied to me, and he and his coworker were actually husband and
wife. While it is not always obvious to me why an interviewee chose not to tell the
truth, I will analyze my data with the assumption that responses may not always be
reliable.

To many of my interview subjects, my questions, particularly regarding why
they came to McMinnville and what their hopes were for the future, seemed naïve.
They would laugh or ask what I meant, and my impression is that they never had to
answer such questions, nor had they ever even thought about them. Regardless, I am
ultimately glad that I asked the “naïve” questions both because my interviewees’
surprise is telling, and their unprepared responses have a different value than a well-
rehearsed response might have.

Thesis roadmap

Each chapter explores the constraints placed on immigrant workers by the structure of Chinese restaurant work through a different slice of the story: mobility, family life, and community. Together, the next three chapters present a narrative of migrant Chinese restaurant work in waizhou.

Chapter 1 narrates the course of the Chinese restaurant worker's journey in light of her economic decisions. The journey begins when she chooses to leave China for the United States in search of meaningful work. This decision has multiple economic dimensions, because in many cases the immigrant must also determine that making a living is worth the emotional cost of leaving home and the financial cost of undocumented entry into America, typically through human smuggling. Once in the United States, immigrants utilize formalized networks that are arbitrated by pay-per-use employment agencies in New York City Chinatown to find restaurant work, a relatively accessible industry for unskilled laborers. They take off for Chinese restaurants all over the Eastern seaboard, the most remote parts of which are termed waizhou. Their stay in waizhou is defined by brevity and anonymity; with few prospects for professional development and vertical mobility within a restaurant, there is little reason for a worker to stay for long in a single restaurant and the shuffle between different Chinese restaurants in different waizhous. The restaurant worker's life is one of dramatic horizontal mobility in the absence of vertical mobility—which begins to be prove challenging once workers start families.
In Chapter 2, I explore the effects of diffusion on Chinese immigrant family life. Chinese restaurant workers have become acclimated to prolonged separation from family as a condition of the immigrant experience and as a further condition of the diffused Chinese restaurant economy. While separation from immediate family and partners is a challenge, the interviews I conducted indicate that it need not be traumatic experience. Separation from one’s children, however, differs because it seems to ultimately have an effect on the relationships between the restaurant workers and their children once they reunite. Relationships with children also differ because of the depth and the term of a parent’s obligation towards his or her children. Restaurant workers who find themselves for the first time needing to develop long-term plans for the benefit of their children’s development must confront the perceived incompatibilities between the restaurant worker lifestyle and the ideal environment in which to raise children. The parents represent a subset of restaurant workers that are beginning to consider, out of necessity, severing former patterns of a constantly mobile lifestyle in exchange for a stable home, potentially in waizhou.

The final chapter discusses the long-term potential for Chinese immigrants in waizhou. The American Chinese restaurant industry has produced a social and economic system that expects short durations of labor, and as a result, workers rarely form relationships, much less communities, during their brief time at each restaurant. At the same time, they often feel satisfied within these constraints, partly because it coincides with a carefree time in their lives when they are not seeking permanence, and partly because they vastly enjoy a heightened sense of self-determination they feel in selecting their destinations and their timeframes. While more Chinese
immigrants may choose to settle in new destinations, it seems unlike to occur as a result of the extension of the ethnic economy in the form of Chinese restaurants into *waizhou*. Many restaurant workers believe Chinese restaurants have reached their peak in the United States—leaving their own fates somewhat uncertain.

The story of Chinese restaurant workers in *waizhou* is still unraveling, even to themselves. I arrived in McMinnville to conduct my interviews during a period of transformation for this relatively new immigrant group; many entered the United States as twenty-somethings, with a desire to work and a distant dream of home. Now, they are in their thirties, struggling with their options for long-term economic stability and family responsibility. Since arriving in *waizhou*, they have constantly been making decisions of whether to stay or go. Their next moves could dramatically change the narrative of the Chinese restaurant worker's story and the landscape of these small towns that they have come to call *waizhou*. 
The story of Chinese America inevitably brings us back to China, where the journey began; the particular story of present-day American Chinese restaurants leads us to the powerhouse metropolitan region of Fuzhou, the capital and largest city of Fujian Province in southeastern China, and home to about 7 million Fuzhouese, about 40% of whom are rural. The city proper is divided into 5 districts, but Fuzhou also has administrative control over 2 county-level cities, Fuqing and Changle, and 6 rural and suburban counties.

When I asked about the hometown of my interview subjects, they all immediately responded “Fuzhou”; when I prodded them further, “Where in Fuzhou?,” their answers did not come as easily. Mike, the Ming's waiter who seemed to be the butt of everyone's jokes, including his own, paused for a moment before responding “Changle. You can write Changle. Many Fuzhouese are from Changle. It is incredible. In Chinatown, a lot of people are from Changle.” Sky, another Ming's waiter, rebutted my question about his origins with, “What do you mean hometown?” When I clarified that I wanted to know whether he was from the city or the country, he said,

Sky: Originally from a suburb. Now it's become part of the city. Do you understand what that means?
SC: What is the name of your suburb?

Uncertainty pervades the attempts to define home, but whether it is a personal uncertainty or an environmental uncertainty is unclear. Perhaps Mike and Sky came from a place where defining political boundaries was unimportant or identifying with one's town was not cultivated. It is also possible that the difficulty in definition comes from the experience of the homeland in transformation; Mike describes the relocation of his Changle compatriots to New York City's Chinatown while Sky suggests the effects of urbanization on previously suburban and rural areas of Fuzhou. Zheng, the 28 year-old host at China Wok, embellishes on the idea of transformation:

Right now, that is to say, most people [from my hometown] have moved to live in the city. But we used to be country people. Now, there are a lot of foreign businesses coming into our town. When I go back now, there are foreign businessmen everywhere. I'm not really that used to it, gives me a feeling of discomfort. Most people at home have already moved away.

The idea of a hometown is becoming less potent as polities bleed together; suburbs into the city, Fuzhou into America. At the same time, people are increasingly mobile, seeking income sources half a day or even half a world away. The seeds of diaspora of Chinese immigration to waizhou were sown in China, even before setting foot in America. The sense of a rootlessness reflected in Mike, Sky, and Zheng's responses ultimately led them to migrant restaurant work in McMinnville.

Most of my interview subjects left Fuzhou for New York a few years after graduating from high school without any work experience. Zheng describes, “After I graduated, there weren't any good jobs that I could find or get. It was all working in a factory or selling things, doing business. Can't make money doing business. Best you
could do was a part-time job.” Some of my interview subjects had had a part-time job, like Sophia, who had sold clothes and shoes at a store for a few months. Jin is the only one who had a full-time job in China, having worked as a machine maintenance technician at a factory. Yet, even he had financial pressure to immigrate to the United States:

In China, the money you make is just enough to eat, drink, and play. The money you make in a month in China is all you have. There’s not enough to live. My parents thought it would be good for me to go to America, make some more.

Jin's parents actually convinced him to immigrate, despite his reluctance. In most cases, parents and other family members were supportive of the unemployed or underemployed twenty-somethings immigrating to America and the majority of families already had several members living and working in the States. As in other migrant communities, the need to work and make money superseded attachments to home or family and the question of whether to leave seemed like a no-brainer, if not out of necessity, then almost out of tradition. Sophia states simply, “Where we're from, everyone leaves for America. Everyone wants to go to the U.S. We're a leaving kind.”

The course is far from simple. It seemed that most of the restaurant workers did not leave Fuzhou sooner because it took them years to obtain a visa or overcome other barriers to immigration, including the cost of smuggling. Mike applied twice and waited 8 years before finally obtaining authorization to immigrate. Immigration through human smuggling was not necessarily quicker either. Mr. Li, a 46-year old cook at Sentosa, arrived to Mexico by boat in 1992 before making it to San Diego by
foot and eventually to New York by plane. He paid snakeheads (human smugglers) $30,000 and he was not alone—he recalled that there were over 200 passengers on his boat to Mexico. His wife Ms. Yang also came to the United States without documentation, but both eventually obtained green cards and Ms. Yang sponsored their grown daughter to come. The cost of undocumented immigration is not only financial, but oftentimes also personal and emotional. Ms. Yang did not immigrate to the United States until 2001, having gone almost a decade without seeing her husband and raising their daughter alone in China. Their daughter, who immigrated to the United States two years ago, spent the latter half of her adolescence without either parent. The cost to be smuggled now, Mr. Li reports, is $80,000 to $90,000—undoubtedly, the waiting between reunions is even lengthier as hopeful immigrants must put together even more money for the opportunity to work.

The cost of immigration is a perpetual pressure on the job search once Chinese immigrants arrive in New York. In a matter of days or weeks after arriving in America, immigrants approach an employment agency in New York City's Chinatown to connect them to restaurant jobs throughout the United States. Tommy describes the entire street of East Broadway lined with employment agencies, as many as 20, from which you can receive a job referral for just $30. “And all the employment agencies get business?” I asked. Tommy responded, “Business is great. Most of the Fuzhouese in America.”
Journey from the Center of the Earth: from New York to waizhou

Alan Zhou, the charismatic 30-year old manager of Ming's Buffet, was born in New York City, but as an infant returned to his parents' hometown Cangshan, near Changle, until he was 3-years old, when he permanently joined his parents in the United States. He went to public school in Chinatown, where he recalls speaking English infrequently. By the time he was 13 or 15, he was working part-time in a restaurant in Chinatown washing dishes and busing tables. His father also worked in a restaurant in Chinatown, but as a cook. Alan's father did not go to waizhou, though; Alan's generation was the first to go. According to Alan, “People didn't even know what 'waizhou' was then. Everyone just worked in Chinatown... What time did this [trend of going to waizhou] start... it already existed in the 80s. But pretty uncommon. I guess in the 90s.”

When Alan finally turned 18, he was able to legally work and sought positions in waizhou restaurants for the first time. Alan's first waizhou was Princeton, New Jersey, from where he was still able to make frequent visits back to New York.

Sometimes I would go back every 2 or 3 days, other times I would only go back on Friday or Saturday. If it's busy, I'll work and not go home until Sunday. Then I'll take the train back. Took it to, what's it called? Ping ping, something Ping. Penn Station!

Other restaurant workers, particularly those that immigrated to the United States 10 or more years ago, recall working in New York Chinatown or the surrounding area (what they dubbed sanzhou, or tri-state, but would typically refer to the entire northeast rather than just the commonly accepted tri-state area of New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut) as their first job in America. After New Jersey, Alan went to
Connecticut, still “in the surrounding areas.” The manager at Peking Restaurant, who immigrated over a decade ago, also initially worked in “the areas surrounding New York, like Long Island, New Jersey.”

Even in their descriptions of “pre-waizhou” days, the geography of America through the eyes of Chinese restaurant workers begins to emerge, even if it is imposed ex post facto in their interviews set in deep waizhou. Different geographical zones exist that emanate from the true center, New York; after that are the areas surrounding New York, which may be an hour to a few hours away by ground transportation—typically, this includes the entire Northeast. Ultimately, beyond these known spaces is waizhou. The latter two zones are defined in relationship to New York, and physical distance approximates social distance in the immigrant restaurant workers' minds; to be away from New York is to be away from friendship and kinship circles that are nested in the coethnic community anchored in New York.

Make no mistake, these pioneer immigrants who are arriving at small cities and towns with nonexistent coethnic communities are not founding Chinatowns or establishing new ethnic institutions in their destinations. Rather, they continue to socially identify with the Chinese community in New York City, and relate to their new destinations in a purely economic framework. Despite the diffusion of Chinese restaurants into the smallest units of the American geography, the enclave continues to serve a central, unifying function for restaurant workers, and arguably, diffusion of Chinese immigrants has not corresponded with the diffusion of Chinese American community or culture.

New York was the point of entry into the United States for all of the restaurant
workers I interviewed, and the major center of Chinese on the east coast, easily justifying the nostalgia that many of the workers felt for it. The manager at Peking, who has by all considerations settled down in McMinnville, having bought a home and raised her children there, still expressed:

For all Chinese immigrants, New York Chinatown is their American hometown. Even I’ll miss New York. There’s a different feeling there, as soon as you get off. There are a lot of Chinese people so you can speak to them and eating is convenient. New York should be every immigrant’s first hometown. That’s my feeling about it. No matter how long I’m away or where I go, I will always miss New York.

Further, for a community of sojourning restaurant workers, New York is oftentimes the place where people have the most permanent connections. Miya talks about how her friends who also work in waizhou restaurants and she coordinate taking time off work, so that they can meet in New York: “Then we'll go to karaoke together and eat dinner together in New York. That's the kind of life we live. We all look forward to going back.” Still others, such as Mike, even have apartments in New York. Mike shares his apartment in Flushing, which is “as big as Ming's bathroom,” with 3 or 4 other people, but they are not in want of space since: “We work in waizhou... we just leave our luggage there.” Since Mike and his apartment mates infrequently have time off to return to New York, they will unlikely all need to stay in the apartment at the same time, and are able to save money by sharing the monthly rent for the space. Regardless of the number of restaurants they have worked in since they left their first American home, or the length of time they have been away, New York is the place that best approximates a permanent residence for many of the restaurant workers, even if they do not actually reside there.
Arguably, the analogy follows that New York is to *waizhou* as Fuzhou is to New York. New York has adopted the identity of the sending community in the eyes of restaurant workers, while the receiving community has shifted to *waizhou*. Fitzgerald (2001) discusses the concept of translocalism: “Long periods of residence generally foster ties to local receiving communities, but these attachments may not be transferred to a perceived national community.” New York and Fuzhou have become conflated to a degree, as a result of the frequent migration that has been occurring between these two localities. The restaurant workers' hyperbolic claim that their entire villages have relocated to New York holds some truth. There is a perceived and real phenomenon of Fuzhou depopulating into New York City, such that it becomes easy to adopt New York as the new homeland; further, many Fuzhouese immigrants may embrace New York because Fuzhou has become an impossible home to return to, due to the constraints of undocumented migration. The enclave may still possess the characteristics that Zhou describes as a transition for new immigrants into their host society; from Fitzgerald, I would also argue that it has taken on new functions as a sending community. Finally, it makes perfect sense that New York and *waizhou* are not the same thing at all for restaurant workers; for migrants, the local experience is rarely elaborated *pars pro toto* to refer to the entire nation. As far as Chinese restaurant workers are concerned, New York and *waizhou* may as well be distinct nations.

Even home, whether it is Fuzhou or New York, becomes easy to leave once making a living becomes a critical issue. Tommy explains that wages are higher in *waizhou* than they are in New York because *waizhou* is far from New York, which is a
convenient place for living, eating, and shopping. Amy echoes Tommy's reasoning, saying that the competition for jobs in New York is too high, prompting her to leave for *waizhou*. If New York is every immigrant's first hometown, then it is understandable that open restaurant positions there are more competitive, and predictably will offer a lower wage. Restaurant wages in *sanzhou*, the areas surrounding New York, might be better than those in New York Chinatown, but workers still will not garner as high wages as by working in *waizhou*, the outer social and geographical limit of Chinese immigrant life. Mike offers direct evidence for this wage differential, recalling making only $1,600 a month in his first job in a Pennsylvania restaurant. He returned to New York after only 3 months, and started a new job farther out in Virginia, where he made a decent living of $3,000, nearly twice the wage of his previous job.

Apart from wages, positions in *waizhou* also have the benefit of being relatively stable, compared to the positions in and near New York. Employers fire workers more frequently when they know that many others are vying for the same position, which is true of the restaurant jobs that are in New York and close by; they have a harder time firing workers if the job is in *waizhou*, far from the convenience and community of New York City. Those who choose *waizhou* jobs have an easier time staying on, should they want to.

As for those who say they prefer *waizhou* life to living in New York, economic considerations, rather than social and cultural comfort, still play a role. Amy says,

Life in *waizhou* is really simple. Everyday, I go to work, get off work, go home and watch some TV, then go to bed. I think life is simple, no funny business. If I were in New York, if your *waizhou* friends came up, you’d have to go out
with them, treat them to dinner, stuff like that. If you don’t go out with them, it’s impolite since they came all the way to New York.

By the same token, Sophia explains:

I didn't want to stay in New York. How do I put it? I prefer being in *waizhou* over New York. Because... it's like this. You don't have to spend much money in *waizhou*. In New York, you have to take cabs, go out to eat, buy groceries, buy fruit... it's always like that. So I don't want to... basically, since I've been in America, I've lived in *waizhou*. That's why I said I like *waizhou*, don't like New York.

Certainly there are many like Sophia who have barely lived in New York, and have spent the vast majority of their immigrant experience in *waizhou*, which becomes the most familiar landscape. Still, neither Amy nor Sophia describe McMinnville as a place they actively want to be in, but rather, as a respite from the negative aspects of living in New York. The same social environment that Miya described with nostalgia, Amy and Sophia see as a nuisance. Living within a strong coethnic community and economy entails social obligations and requisite spending. For a group that is primarily concerned with making and saving money, living in New York is not ideal.

Notably, both Amy and Sophia are at a point where they are looking to settle down; Amy, with her daughter Cindy, and Sophia with her fiancé who also works in *waizhou* restaurants. Their responses indicate that perhaps Chinese immigrant attitudes towards *waizhou* may be on the brink of change, and that they may become more interested in the *waizhou* lifestyle as a long-term investment rather than a short-term economic situation.

The constant reminder that I received during the interviews was that making money is the primary concern for the restaurant workers at their point of immigration. It was not only a reminder for me, but a reminder for themselves as well, that the
workers are in America for strictly economic ends. The circumstances that allowed them to immigrate, potentially human smuggling in the case of some workers, amplify their self-circumscription into a predominantly economic framework within American life. Tommy explains the need for immigrants to make money, through an analogy with Mexican workers who are also employed at Sentosa in more menial positions:

Why do we hire Mexicans? Why are their wages [almost half of] ours? It's because Mexicans come to the United States easily. It's easy for them to come here and it's easy for us to hire them to work. And then, Chinese people have to be smuggled here. In order to be smuggled to the U.S., you have to give tens of thousands of dollars to the smuggler. It costs Mexicans $200 to cross the border. For us, we could pay that off in a day, a week. We who are smuggled for $70, $80,000 need to work for a good several years, the entire time dagong [to work as migrant labor] in the restaurant, making money, repaying money. It takes us 2-3 years, 3-4 years, you understand? This is the world of illegal immigrants. We have to pay the buying and selling piggies price [Chinese euphemism for the coolie trade with origins in the 19th century].

Whether or not Tommy has underestimated the cost of immigration for Mexican laborers, he is convinced that the high cost of smuggling for Chinese immigrants necessitates decision-making that privileges maximum economic outcomes once they set foot in the United States. Tommy also suggests that smuggling is a common thread in the restaurant worker narrative, which could offer one explanation for the proliferation of Chinese restaurants in America—ample labor supply. Vice versa, the Chinese restaurant boom has led to such high demand for co-ethnic labor that it is possible for each new Chinese immigrant to secure a job and pay off the upwards $70,000 cost of human smuggling.

Although I did not ask my subjects direct questions regarding immigration statuses, I received some indication that Tommy was not just overstating the role that
human smuggling plays in supporting the American Chinese restaurant industry. Both
Mr. Li and Ms. Yang candidly identified as undocumented immigrants who have since
received permanent resident statuses. Others, like Tommy, showed enough familiarity
with the process of human smuggling to imply that they were part of that system of
entry into the US or that it is a common experience among his peers. In the
interviews, what is left unsaid tells its own story: none of the restaurant workers I
interviewed, except Alan, had returned to China since they immigrated to the United
States, which for some has been as long as 20 years. Certainly, saving money could be
a motive, but it is also likely that many immigrants cannot return to China, since their
statuses could prevent them from re-entering the United States.

Regardless of an individual's immigration status, the infrastructure that
governs the operation of the Chinese restaurant labor network indiscriminately brings
eager restaurant workers to the most remote units of the American polity to work
kitchens, hibachi grills, buffet tables, and so on. The Chinatown bus, which is the
vehicle that connects New York to the peripheries known as waizhou, is the preferred
mode of transportation for restaurant workers because of one important condition: no
identification is necessary to board the bus, only a ticket. The Tennessee Bus
Company ticket that brought me to my destination on Interstate 24, exit 111, which is
a Kangaroo Express gas station in Manchester, cost $140. It may have been cheaper
than a plane ticket, but probably not by much and probably not by enough to justify
16 hours on the road out of New York. In the end, it hardly matters whether or not my
interview subjects immigrated through undocumented means or not; the system turns
a blind eye to these questions, and is interested only in supplying willing workers to

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the restaurants that rely on their labor.

_**I only dagong: horizontal mobility v. vertical mobility in the restaurant industry**_

“How many restaurants have you worked in?”

“Oh, many! At least 100.”

Mike's deadpan response made his coworkers burst into laughter. He went on to explain that he had been fired from some restaurants after just 2 days because “the boss just doesn't like the look of me,” as well as shortly left others that he simply didn't like. Mike had been working at Ming's for about a year then; he called Ming's a very _wending_ [steady, stable] sort of place where people stay on for 3 or 5 years.

Although unlikely Mike has actually worked in over 100 Chinese restaurants in the 10 years that he has lived in the United States, his answer alludes to the innumerable and anonymity that is intrinsic to the migrant restaurant worker's life. Many of my subjects failed to even give an approximate number for how many restaurants they have worked at, even those that had been working for a far shorter period of time than Mike. Sophia, who immigrated to the United States 4 years ago, responded, “Quite a few, quite a few.” After attempting to count for a few seconds, she repeated, “Quite a few. And I don't even know where they were... Some were a few hours away [from New York], some 10 hours away, some over ten... all distances. There were quite a few.”

Dramatic horizontal mobility is a central organizing element of the American Chinese restaurant experience. There are no penalties for leaving a job one does not like, because it is easy enough to find another through the employment agencies
located in New York Chinatown. High horizontal mobility comes at the cost of conventional vertical mobility; if a restaurant worker is constantly switching jobs to work at a different restaurant, she does not accumulate the necessary social capital to be promoted to a better position within the restaurant. I do not think it true that Chinese restaurant workers prefer horizontal mobility over vertical mobility, and that is why they fail to stay at a single restaurant for an extended period of time. Rather, I think the lived experience and derived perceptions of the restaurant workers is consistent with structural preclusion of vertical mobility. There are major obstacles, both perceived and real, for waiters and cooks to become managers and restaurant owners, although the Horatio Alger myth certainly circulates among the workers. Few of them seem to buy into it though, or seem to believe that it is a conceivable part of their life path. In the minds of the restaurant workers, jobs are the same no matter where they go and there is no sense that some may be better for their professional development or economic potential. The result is the mass interchangeability that characterizes the Chinese restaurant world: interchangeability of workers, of jobs, of places.

Soon after arriving in New York, potential restaurants workers' roles become set based on their existing skill set, establishing early on a certain inflexibility within the Chinese restaurant world for professional growth and mobility. Immigrant workers can perform one of two main roles: waitstaff or cook. The roles are gendered to a degree; based on my observations in McMinnville, more men seem to work in the kitchen and more women seem to wait tables. Both waitstaff and cooks earn a similar salary, although according to Tommy, the convention in buffet restaurants is that
waitstaff only earn their tips and receive no base wage. Most agree that waiters tend to have an easier job than the cooks, who work in the kitchen all day. According to Mike, there is no training available for newcomers to either position:

> When you first get to a restaurant, if you have the skills, you'll cook but if you didn't, you wouldn't cook. From the beginning, they look for people who have the skills, experts. The experienced ones. They ask, was your father a cook, who's stir fried something before? If you have a bit of English, you're a waiter.

It is unlikely to be as cut and dry as Mike makes it out to be; according to Jin, he did not know how to cook at all when he first arrived in America. His friend referred him to a restaurant that needed an extra hand, and he worked there for almost a week without pay in order to learn how to cook. Jin started from the basics, first learning how to hold a knife, then how to chop vegetables, then meat, and finally how to cook dishes.

Jin's story calls attention to a detail common to all of the restaurant workers' stories: that none of them had ever worked in restaurants before arriving in the United States and restaurant work is a new trade for all of them. Most likely then, the truth falls somewhere between Mike's and Jin's accounts; there was probably a short period of basic training for all the workers when they first started working in restaurants, perhaps less so for waiters with a working level of English and cooks with substantial cooking experience, but Mike is probably right in that the restaurants are not interested in training workers in an entirely new skill set if they already have some experience that favors them for a certain role. Once in these roles, they become set.

None of my subjects have moved from working in the kitchen to waiting tables or vice versa.
There is one example of a worker hired to fulfill multiple functions, Zheng, who does everything from cook to work the register to clear tables, depending on where he is needed in China Wok, a small take-out restaurant. His role in China Wok, which evades the circumscribed responsibilities that define waiters' and cooks' roles at other restaurants, actually became a cause for suspicion among workers at other restaurants in McMinnville: Tommy believes that Zheng is actually the son of the restaurant owner, and not a typical migrant restaurant worker that comes through McMinnville. Whether or not Tommy is right, the association between clearly defined roles and restaurant work is a strong one, which is a practical result of the restaurant structure but also probably functions to prevent horizontally mobile workers from gaining overall knowledge of how to run a restaurant—that is, vertical mobility. It is interesting that my only interview subject who transcends the defined roles of waitstaff, cook, or manager, is potentially someone who has a very different life path from the rest of my interview subjects—running a family business rather than perpetually moving between insipid *waizhou* restaurants.

There is potential for professional development in small ways that could improve a restaurant worker's desirability and help her garner higher wages. Jin previously worked in the kitchen as a cook, but found it tiring and eventually learned how to make sushi and work a hibachi grill, which is his current role at Sentosa. For workers who are willing to learn, Jin says, a lot of restaurants are open to teaching them on the job. Having these additional culinary skills makes job applicants more desirable to restaurant employers, because they allow a restaurant to be more competitive in a typically tight market.
On learning to make sushi, Zheng says, “If someone were to teach me, I would definitely want to learn. It's good to learn more and good especially now when there are so many Chinese restaurants.” He seemed less optimistic than Jin regarding opportunities to pick up new restaurant skills, but admitted that they were available:

There's no one way to learn. Some are introduced to it by their relatives [who are] already working in a Japanese restaurant as a shifu [master chef] and they tell the boss that they have a relative coming to study with them. They won't receive wages and they'll work in the restaurant doing small tasks and study sushi. You have to see if you have relatives in the field, you have to see about circumstances.

Connections play a large role in the Chinese restaurant industry, just as they do in most lines of work. Having well-positioned family working or managing in restaurants clearly improves a worker's access to new skills and potential roles. One also has to be willing to forego wages in order to learn new skills, which creates a further divide in restaurant workers' access to professional development between those with more resources and connections and those without. Regardless, these supplementary restaurant skills appear to have a relatively small impact in terms of improving overall economic mobility within the Chinese restaurant system.

The lack of economic mobility within restaurants seems to feed in part off of worker perceptions of immobility. Embedded in the restaurant world, the best life course that restaurant workers can imagine is to become an owner of a Chinese restaurant. Combined, my interview subjects have decades of experience in dozens of different restaurants, yet all claim to have had limited exposure to restaurant management and ownership, and consider achieving either to be a pipe dream. They distinguish between being an entrepreneur and to dagong, which broadly means to
work a temporary or casual job; it also has the connotation of working for someone else. Alan and Tommy have both had experience in restaurant management, and potentially partial ownership as well, yet immediately deprecate their abilities to open their own restaurants: “As if it's that easy,” he scoffed at me. “How to run a successful restaurant? I want to know that too! Right now, if anyone knew how to run a successful restaurant, no one would dagong,” Tommy said. Alan emphasized his own shortcomings, which are common to what other restaurant workers expressed: “I haven't really been exposed to this myself, how to site a restaurant. I only dagong.”

Workers, even those who are as experienced as Alan and Tommy, seem to accept their circumscribed role as wage laborers within the restaurant hierarchy, even though others consider them to be in better positions than waiters or cooks; Mike, for example, often expressed envy that Alan spoke better English and thus could be a manager, whereas he felt like the position was unattainable to him. All restaurant workers expressed insecurity in their own abilities, captured in the word dagong. They feel no ownership over their own work or achievements because the restaurant system has convinced them they are interchangeable and expendable day laborers.

It is impossible that day laborers never advance to restaurant management and ownership, and Tommy acknowledges that. Still, when I prodded him on how economic mobility occurs, he emphasized an individual's lack of control over improving her own circumstances.

SC: Why do you think there are people who work in the kitchen their whole lives and some that can advance and become owners?
T: Favorable circumstances. Like you have money, your relatives have money, or your English is very good and you can basically understand everything, and you can do restaurants. There are a lot of conditions that are limiting. Why do
you think people stay in the kitchen? Because if you don't understand English, you can't understand anything that's going on outside. There are some who don't understand English but can still open restaurants because they have good friends and their friends know a little. You have to think about a person's friends too. This is a hard question to answer. It might be that your friend has gone out [to open a restaurant] and says to you, do you have any money that you can lend me to invest in a restaurant?

Tommy described precisely the situation in which he became a partial owner of a take-out restaurant in Memphis, but his account emphasizes luck over experience. Having money and speaking English are important, but so is the ambiguously vague criteria “you can do restaurants.” Once again, connections seem to play a large role in who is able to get ahead in the restaurant game. Perception easily becomes reality in workers' views of economic mobility. Whether it is as difficult to break into the restaurant industry as Tommy claims hardly seems to matter; no one around him even believes it's worth trying.

Yet, most of my subjects, particularly those without spouses and children, seem relatively unperturbed by and even content with the constant upheaval of restaurant work. I argue that feelings of economic pressure and obstacles to work promotion are mediated by the feelings of extreme freedom and individual choice in selecting a workplace. Zheng from China Wok describes his approach in selecting a new restaurant and the experience of using an employment agency in Chinatown. His account also reveals that young and single restaurants workers are not necessarily sacrificing social needs when they go to *waizhou* for work, but in fact, that employers must provide benefits in addition to a good wage in order to make their restaurants attractive to young workers:

In general, you have to see what preferences you have, whether you want to
work in a buffet restaurant or a take-out restaurant. First, you have to choose between those two. Next, you choose by how many people work there. You can tell how business is by how many people they hire. If they're employing a lot of people, then you can tell that it's a relatively busy restaurant. So you have to decide if you want to be working hard consistently from day to night or if you'd rather work at a slower joint. You have to choose. It's actually really simple. You can really decide after knowing two or three things, you don't have to ask the boss, aiya, do you have internet there, do you have cute girls there? People ask all kinds of questions, really detailed questions. Are there cute waitresses? How many people work at the front? Inside the agency, I've heard all kinds of ridiculous questions. Sounds like those people aren't even coming to work, they're horse racing.

From Zheng's account, it would be a mistake to say that restaurant workers are only interested in wages when it comes to choosing where to work. In fact, some would even choose to work in more laid-back restaurants and probably earn fewer tips than to burn out by working endlessly in a busy restaurant. Zheng considers himself not picky, which explains his acrimonious tone when describing the “ridiculous” questions he has overheard in the employment agencies. These questions however reveal that there is a diversity of priorities among Chinese immigrants seeking restaurant work, and that even if making money is a primary goal, restaurant workers have different considerations at varying points that could become as or more important than making money. Zheng's account shows that restaurant workers leaving for *waizhou* are aware that they are losing the convenience and community of the enclave, and require employers to acknowledge and reconcile that loss. Internet and cute girls may seem superficial to Zheng, but they reveal that employers and employees both have leverage in negotiating work conditions prior to hiring. Jin's story is just one example that the workplace is not just an economic realm for the restaurant workers, but must serve social functions as well—he met his wife in a
restaurant where they worked together.

Jin's interview offers further evidence that restaurant culture and preventing burnout is important to workers when choosing a job; while he chose to work in buffet restaurants, his wife works in a sit-down Chinese restaurant in Vermont because,

In a sit-down restaurant with table service, you’re only busy when there are customers. If there aren’t customers, there’s not much to do. You have your own time. Sit-down restaurant customers’ manners are somewhat better. Unlike at buffets, they’re less wasteful, have better attitudes. At sit-down restaurants, they pay for what they order and even their tone towards you is a lot better.

Exercising workplace preferences actually seems quite common amongst Chinese restaurant workers. Before I conducted my interviews, I expected restaurant workers to express resignation to having no control over their work environment; while that may be so, my interviews reveal that they are satisfied with their freedom to leave and choose a different establishment as a form of exercising their preferences. They may even value their preferences to the degree that they are not willing to negotiate them for their relationships, as in the case of Jin and his wife; their reasons for living and working apart are probably complicated, but Jin indicated that their preference for different kinds of workplaces plays a role.

*Should I stay or should I go?: differential obligations in economic v. social networks*

Outside of employment agencies, the other ways that restaurant workers find jobs is through family recommendations and friend recommendations, which seems to produce strikingly different workplace cultures. The Peking manager started working in restaurant after her husband had been there for some time. Zheng and his coworker,
a woman who other restaurant workers in McMinnville allege to be his wife, are
possibly related to the China Wok owner, and came to McMinnville to take over the
family business. Amy and Sky were both old friends of Alan, and came to work at
Ming's at his request. The pre-existing friendships in Ming's produce a much more
congenial atmosphere than at Sentosa, where all of the workers arrived through
employment agency referrals. At Ming's, I observed that everyone took their lunch
break (the lull between lunch and dinner) together and ate over conversation. By
contrast, the Sentosa employees sat apart when they ate. The employees at Ming's
also enjoy a level of relative freedom compared to those at Sentosa; they could
typically take time off whenever they wanted, and Alan would cover their stations for
the day without telling the boss, who is generally off-site, whereas Sentosa employees
receive a set day off every week and need to directly ask the boss for additional time
away.

Ming's and Sentosa exemplify different types of work environments that are
the products of different kinds of networks in play; employment agencies are a
formalized substitute for close ties like family and friends that give new and
established immigrants alike access to jobs, as well as other resources. The
employment agencies serve a very narrow function of matching restaurant workers to
waizhou restaurant jobs, but qualitative details, such as individual personalities and
work atmosphere, are beyond their purview. It is up to each restaurant worker to go to
the restaurant and see for herself whether the match actually fits. This shortcoming on
the part of employment agencies' mode of operation explains the high turnover rate
that restaurant workers report, and on the flip side, explains why Mike called Ming's a
stable workplace—it is staffed with people who already know each other and know
that they will get along.

It is uncommon for restaurant workers to stay at any one restaurant for as long
as some have stayed at Ming's. Amy referred to her year at Ming's as “a very long
time” and later said it was “too long” and she was looking to leave. Just as the
immigrant workers have a distinct geography that is constructed based on their
experience of traveling to *waizhou*, they also have a distinct temporality that is
endemic to migrant restaurant work. A year is typically considered a long time, with a
few outlier examples of workers staying several years at the same restaurant—Alan
has been at Ming's for 5 years, Jin previously worked at the same restaurant as his
wife for 4 years, and Mike had worked in restaurant in Florida for 3 years. The
examples at the other end of the spectrum are much more numerous: stories of staying
only a few months, a few weeks, even a few days.

There are numerous reasons to leave a restaurant, some of which the workers
are not even able to verbalize. It comes down to a feeling of discomfort or insecurity,
and since leaving is a widely accepted part of the restaurant worker's life course, it is
done without a second thought. Jin struggles to explain how his thought process
works when he decides to leave:

How do I put it? Sometimes it has to do with the Chinese people you work
with, sometimes with wages, or you don’t like the people or don’t like the way
you interact with them. At that point, you’re already mentally preparing to
leave. When you’re working, if you feel like there’s an element of insecurity or
something’s off or they don’t like your work, you just leave.

Because all relationships within the Chinese restaurant system are strictly economic,
there are no emotional ties to people or place that would stop a worker from leaving a
job that she finds less than ideal. For the same reason, it is easy and common for employers to fire unsuitable workers, as Jin also notes. They may fire a worker who does not meet their expectations or their reasoning could be much more ambivalent, as in Mike's explanation for why he has been fired after only a few days: “They just didn't like the look of me.” In a network that is defined by formalized economic ties rather than organic social ties, there are no feelings of obligations from either party.

Even for those who have been at the same restaurant for a long time, the habit of leaving inevitably rears its head again. Since there are no prospects for a promotion or raise for waiters or cooks, there are no professional benefits to working in the same restaurant for years at a time. Rather, working at the same place for too long is seen as a disadvantage because workers grow bored or begin to feel tied down. Jin describes how young workers feel if they stay for too long:

Some people think if they work at one restaurant for a long time, they’ll get bored, they won’t learn anything new, they don’t want things to get fixed, they’d rather run to one place and then the next. That way, everyday can be different and you can learn something new everyday.

Leaving is the ultimate exercise of freedom for young restaurant workers. It is a decision that they completely possess and need not justify to anyone else. Jin also alludes to a sense of adventure among sojourning restaurant workers, and an optimism regarding the experiences that await them in the future. Of course, choosing to leave does not always just boil down to boredom, but often accounts for other factors, such as economics. Amy discusses her reasons for wanting to leave Ming's: “I’ve been here too long... I want to go somewhere else because there’s no business here. Everyday, I’m bored. And I have a kid. It’s not just about me, I have to think
about my kid.” For parents like Jin and Amy, leaving for the sake of leaving is not a factor anymore; they must consider leaving in terms of providing their children with the most stable economic circumstances. In the next chapter, I will further explore the effects of migrant restaurant work on family life decisions.

Even if some workers describe leaving as the ultimate kind of freedom, Jin's and Amy's interviews reveal that leaving can also be a burden when there are external pressures present, such as children. Ultimately, even if the choice to leave is entirely the worker's, they still must operate within the framework of Chinese restaurant work and navigate the parameters imposed by the industry. Within this system, workers may be able to leave easily, but staying is often outside of their control. Zheng describes the factors outside of a worker's control that delimit her ability to exercise her preferences:

It's like, if you had something personal come up and you had to leave for a week or two or the boss has a relative who just came to America and wants that person to come work here, he can't just hire both of us. Relatives come first and there's no way around that. If a relative comes, you just have to leave and go back to Chinatown and look for a new job... A lot of unforeseen factors. It's not about, oh I want to stay here or not, a lot of things can happen.

Fundamentally, there is no stability to a restaurant worker's life. They are wage laborers who have no claim over a position in any restaurant, even if they have been working there for years. It makes sense why many restaurant workers described their situation as not guiding—meaning not “set” or “fixed.” At any point, their employment status could change and they have to pack and return to New York. It also makes sense why, of those able to discuss what an ideal future looks like to them, most talked about owning their own restaurant; owning their own business is the only way
to prevent these “unforeseen factors” from causing dramatic shifts in their lives.

The introduction of family ties into the Chinese restaurant can cause upheaval for other workers, even if they are owners. Two years ago, Tommy was a partial owner of a take-out restaurant in Memphis, which he ran with his friend, a confident young man, who Tommy described as a pro at dating and prone to switching girlfriends every few months. Tommy's friend's uncle had helped them pick the location for the Memphis storefront, and the family has become incredibly successful running *waizhou* restaurants. Although Tommy and his friend had known each other since they lived in Fuzhou, Tommy still felt the need to leave when family loyalties became obvious: “Because his family was large, sometimes when they were working together, I felt like I didn't belong. It's better for a family to work together.” Despite the semblance of security that partial restaurant ownership with his friend may have presented, Tommy's story reveals that ultimately, the economic ties formed through the restaurant industry are consistently passed over for family ties. The value system of prioritizing family has been preserved beyond the enclave, leaving those without a claim, without a job.

**Conclusion**

The result of the high horizontal mobility that is structured into the Chinese restaurant industry has been to force restaurant workers into a double bind. While they feel immense freedom to leave any job because of the ease of finding a new one, they also admit to feeling that important factors that dictate their ability to stay at a job are outside of their control. They may feel bored if they stay at the same restaurant
for too long, but cooking American Chinese food and waiting tables is the same wherever they go. There are no benefits to staying at a single location for too long, as there are no opportunities to advance within the management structure, but gaining experience at more restaurants is not a path to economic mobility either.

The system functions in a way that perpetuates itself, with economic and social consequences; it ensures that there are always willing restaurant workers because they are sufficiently satisfied with their own agency within the structure—but there are also very few alternatives other than to continue to the next restaurant. Socially, the coethnic restaurant labor system establishes the vocabulary with which the workers relate to each other. Since most workers arrive at their jobs through a formal network structure, employment agency referrals, the premise for their relationships are based on economic and professional grounds. Forming social relationships, even for workers within restaurants let alone between restaurants, is not part of the initial premise of coming to waizhou.
Tolstoy opened *Anna Karenina* with the unforgettable line: “All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.” While unlikely to have read the novel, the men and women who work in Chinese restaurants in McMinnville would agree with the sentiment.

The Chinatown bus leaving New York for Tennessee on the warm summer evening in August had its predictable share of young men and women in their 20s, wearing Abercrombie t-shirts and immersed in their iPhone screens, slinging Hollister shopping bags that probably held snacks from the long journey ahead. But among the banter and chatter of the adults, there were also the cries of children running around, and the successive cries of their grandparents attempting to catch them. The grandmas were armed with heavy blankets, amply prepared to keep the kids from catching a cold in their sleep during the overnight ride on the heavily air-conditioned bus. During refueling stops in the middle of the night, the children obediently filed off the bus, their eyes still heavy from sleep, to use the gas station bathrooms at the behest of their parents and grandparents.
There are two distinctive and stereotypical stories that I could tell about the pioneer immigrant enterprise. One is the family business; that a couple moves to a small town to open a family restaurant and raise their kids with lawns and better schools, eventually becoming full members of the community. The other story is of the sojourning restaurant worker, which I have begun to describe: the single and highly mobile young man or woman who works for a few years, a few months, or even just a few days in a restaurant before moving on to something better. Place and length of stay is of little import, just work.
Figure 4: A child asleep on the Chinatown bus, while another (his brother?) peers out the window behind him.
The truth is that these stories are beginning to bleed together, causing massive complications for restaurant workers who sojourn for work in the South. The twenty-somethings who began working in Chinese restaurants 10 years ago are now married with children, and attempting to negotiate their transitory labor patterns with the commitment to raising a family. The main obstacle is, in these young parents’ opinion, that they have little control over their own fate since they must sell their labor in a diffused market in order to make a living, and while all sorts of solutions seem to exist to continue working in restaurants and raise children, none seem to completely satisfy the workers.

*Relationships with Parents and Siblings*

Separation from family is a given condition with migration in general and Chinese restaurant work in *waizhou* in particular. Of all the restaurant workers I talked to, only one, the manager of Peking Restaurant, had her parents in America and living with her in McMinnville. As for the rest, their parents remained behind in Fuzhou, and some subjects indicated that they sent part of their paycheck home every month to support their parents and help them save up to buy a house.

Many interview subjects actually did have siblings living and working in America, but typically in different restaurants or industries in other states. Ms. Yang for example has an older sister working in Ohio, a younger brother in Arkansas, and another younger sister presently looking for work. Her coworker, Tommy, has an older brother who works in Indiana; they are all in restaurants. Tommy talked about why that is the case:
Well, look at the conditions in *waizhou*. There’s just not enough work to go around, so it doesn’t make sense to come together. Basically, most families split up. Why do you think people open their own restaurants? Because it’s more stable, and a family can work and live together there. They don’t always have to be on the move and thinking about making money. It’s impossible though for a family of 4 or 5 to find work together in one restaurant. They must split up and go to different restaurants.

The workers I spoke to did not express disappointment at being apart from their parents or siblings, and, perhaps knowing the reality that Tommy describes all too well, did not express any expectation that their family should be reunited in the workplace.

*Marital Relationships*

For some of my subjects, spouses may or may not fall into the same category as parents and siblings. I interviewed one married couple, a shy pair, Ms. Yang, 40, and Mr. Li, 46, who worked together in Sentosa and before that in Arkansas, but prior to Ms. Yang’s immigration in 2001, they had been separated since Mr. Li immigrated in 1992. Li left China when his wife was pregnant with their first child, and didn’t meet their grown daughter in person until two years ago when she immigrated to the US as a teenager. The 18 year-old now lives in Ohio with Yang’s sister, although it’s not entirely clear why. The pair had a second child in the US, an 8 year-old named Ryan, who began his schooling in Arkansas where the couple previously worked and started 2nd grade in McMinnville the day that I met them. It was obvious that Yang and Li purposefully sought restaurants where they could work together, she as a waitress and he as a cook, so that they could be together and take care of Ryan.

The manager of Peking Restaurant also lived with her husband, but no longer
worked with him. Her husband arrived in McMinnville first, at the recommendation of his uncle who worked at a restaurant in a nearby town. The couple met and married in New York, and he convinced her to come down to McMinnville. They have lived in McMinnville for over 10 years and have a home and 3 children together. Most recently, her husband left Peking Restaurant to manage a Chinese restaurant in a town over an hour away since business had grown slow at Peking Restaurant. In many ways, the Peking Restaurant manager’s story sets her apart from the rest of the restaurant workers in McMinnville, even other restaurant managers such as Tommy and Alan. She owned her own home, indicating that she had a long-term investment in McMinnville; her parents lived with her; and her children were born and raised in McMinnville and had always gone to McMinnville schools. Her life is fairly stable and predictable, or guding, something that many workers, particularly those with children, talked about with longing.

Yang and Li and the Peking Restaurant manager were the workers I encountered who prioritized their marriages over or on par with their work. My two other married subjects were in different positions. Since immigrating in 2002, Amy had not seen her husband, who stayed in Fuzhou and works in construction. She said her husband isn’t interested in immigrating to the United States because he’s used to his life in China and knew that immigrant life was difficult. Their separation has led to their two daughters’ constant movement between China and the United States; currently, Amy’s older daughter Cindy lives in New York apart from Amy and her younger daughter lives in China with her father, although both have been in the other’s position. I asked whether she was able to accept living apart from her husband
long-term, and raising her two daughters alone in America. She responded:

We’ve been apart for so long now that there’s not really any special feelings. We’ve been apart for a long time. I’ve been here for 9 years. How do I put it? I’m used to this lifestyle. And the “what ifs” aren’t worth thinking about.

Momentum and habit seemed to factor hugely into Amy’s, among others’, decisions regarding plans about the future. Especially for those who have been in America for a long time and become used to an independent lifestyle, such as Amy, it has become difficult to imagine a life that could integrate elements of her past.

Amy’s vision of family life produces an alternative to what traditional theories of chain migration propose and the American dream has mythologized: the eventual reunification of families simultaneous, with upward economic mobility and the two-parent household defining the ideal and stable immigrant family life. Yet, Amy’s description of her ideal future indicates that her family’s future without a present second parent is no less stable or comfortable than the mythologized immigrant American dream:

I’ve already decided that if my younger daughter is coming back [from China], we will move to waizhou and not stay in New York anymore. We’ll rent a place, buy a car, live our lives out there because in two years, Cindy [Amy’s older daughter] will be older [14] and be able to take care of her younger sister so I can go to work during the day and come home at night. Because going to school in waizhou, they can pick it up better. In Chinatown, other than speaking English in the classroom, you’re speaking Chinese the rest of the time. I don’t want them to be that way. I really don’t want it. That’s why I want them to go to school, and they must do well.

The diffusion of restaurant work into small American towns may have led to a redefinition of traditional family roles by allowing immigrants independence from co-ethnic social pressures and traditional roles. It is remarkable that Amy is the sojourning laborer in America rather than her husband, and that they voluntarily live
apart from each other due to their economic preferences. Dreby (2010) notes that
migrating mothers are becoming increasingly common in a previously male-
dominated transnational labor movement; and such a phenomenon, while
inadvertently replicating global disparities of wealth, also serves to challenge gender-
based inequalities within families. Diffused immigrant life may have encouraged Amy
and other migrant mothers to break free from gender roles and constitute a revised
and renewed American dream of independence and self-sufficiency.

Jin, 36, a self-described reformed wild child, married his wife 6 years ago after
meeting at restaurant they worked at together. They have a daughter, Kristy, who just
started kindergarten in McMinnville, and a younger son who lives in China with his
grandparents. Jin and his wife have been apart for 10 months since his wife took a
waitress job at a sit-down Chinese restaurant with table service in New Hampshire
and Jin took a chef position at Sentosa in McMinnville. When asked if they would
reunite, Jin responded:

Jin: It's not for sure. Have to look at the situation at hand. This is hard to say.
SC: You won’t move to New Hampshire?
Jin: New Hampshire isn’t her place either. It’s someone else’s, it’s where she
works. It doesn’t count as our own place. If we were to move, we would move
to New York. She has an apartment she rents [in New York]. When I have time
off, I go back to the apartment.

Both Jin and Amy describe place and having a place as becoming important once
children enter the picture. For Jin, the lack of a place is a source of distress and has a
negative influence on his confidence that he and his wife will reunite. The place to
reunite necessarily precedes the desire to reunite in his point-of-view.

Furthermore, Jin points out the everlasting inequality between work and home.
His implication is that legal ownership defines belonging, and working somewhere does not indicate any long-term claim or attachment to the place, since they are not the owners but the sojourning laborers. The closest that Jin has to a “place” is New York, where he and his wife have a rented apartment that they stay in whenever they return. To defray costs of renting an unused apartment, they mostly likely share the space with other Fuzhouese restaurant workers who are only returning to New York every few months. That is not property ownership either—what makes New York more of Jin’s place than Tennessee or New Hampshire? It has been the backdrop of his entire immigrant experience, the place of imminent return and perpetual takeoff. It is also the location of his co-ethnic social community, where he has an identity and a basis of interaction with others outside of being the Chinese restaurant cook. Perhaps these factors are what make a place in Jin’s mind, or at least are valuable enough that they are sufficient proxies for property ownership. It could also be that, since housing is typically covered by employers when restaurant workers arrive in waizhou, Jin feels that his housing in McMinnville is just an extension of his work.

**Parental Relationships**

In contrast to the ambivalence that the Chinese restaurant workers could feel towards separation from their immediate family and partners, those who identified as parents expressed a strong commitment to their relationships with their children. They showed this commitment through making long-term decisions around their children’s education and well-being as well as through expressing or actualizing a desire to live together with their children in order to better fulfill parental obligations. At the same
time however, the workers’ relationships with their children are not any simpler as a result of the strength of their conviction to be good parents; in fact, relationships with one’s children are markedly more complex than relationships with immediate family or spouses due to constraints imposed by the diffused Chinese restaurant economy.

There are multiple reasons why Chinese restaurant worker parents may consider their relationship with their children differently than their other kinship ties. For Amy, who has two daughters, ages 10 and 12, one’s parents and children occupying separate categories is perfectly natural. When I asked whether she would like her parents to move to the United States to join her, she responded:

One or two months is fine but not long-term. I don’t want them to stay in the United States because they’ve lived in China for so long, after all, that they’re used to that... I think old people should stay in China. Young kids—they should come to America.

Amy’s reasons for raising her children in America are not sentimental—she does not mention her own preferences at all. She views the issue very pragmatically: it is impractical to relocate her elderly parents who are used to a certain way of life, but acceptable to relocate children, since their habits are not as deeply rooted in a place and their academic and economic opportunities are better in the United States.

The nature of the mother-child relationship becomes clearer when Amy describes her ideal future:

I don’t want her [Cindy, Amy’s daughter] to work in a restaurant. I don’t want her to do this. I want her to be like an American, just the same as the kids who grow up in America. Graduate college and then if she wants to keep studying something else, keep studying. She can work part-time and study part-time to put herself through school and that way, with an education, finding a job will be easier and her job will be more laid-back. She won’t have to be like me, having to chuqu [go out] to find work. She can have a guding [fixed] job.
Amy expects that her economic and social situation will stay the same for the rest of her life; however, for her daughters, there is a possibility for a better life. Amy describes a typical story of first-generation immigrant struggles that allow for the next generation, their children, to be socially and economically mobile and prosperous. Interestingly, her narrative lacks sentimental details—she never mentions missing her daughters or wanting to be a part of their lives—only practical details. It is obvious that Amy’s commitment to improving her daughters’ opportunities is real, or else she would not be able to accept working in restaurants and not having a *guding* [fixed] job. This commitment, though, is best expressed through material rather than emotional support and ends. It is unclear whether these terms are limited to describing Amy’s views on parenting and good parenting outcomes or whether they might be generalizable to a contemporary Chinese and Chinese-American view of parenting.

Jin's voice noticeably softens when he talks about his 4 year-old daughter Kristy and a 3-year old son; he describes his commitment to parenting much more abstractly than Amy does and his narrative speaks to the desire to parent as a part of the natural life cycle:

> You have different ways of thinking at different points in your life. When I was young, when I was a teenager, all I could think about was having fun, and I would spend all the money I made with my friends on tobacco. Now that I’m older and married, I have to think what’s best for my family, what my kids need. Every stage in your life is different. At my age, I have to think about the kids.

Despite the difference in rhetoric, Jin and Amy are both concerned with making decisions that would produce the best outcomes for their children. The precedence that childrearing takes over marital and other familial relationships, and even personal
considerations, is certainly not unusual; it is a common life experience, regardless of culture, socioeconomic status, or line of work. The difference, however, for Jin, Amy, and the other restaurant workers who are parents, is that their decisions to give their children the best life chances often ironically comes at great sacrifice to their relationships with their kids due to their migrant lifestyle.

In order to provide a stable upbringing for their children, all of the Chinese restaurant worker parents I spoke with, except the Peking Restaurant manager, sent their children back to China as infants to be raised by grandparents and other close family. This setup typically allows the immigrant parents to maintain their full-time jobs while saving money on childcare, since the cost of living is much lower in China and family members generally only accept a token fee for caring for the children. Once the children reach school age, they typically return to the United States, where they are often meeting their parents for the first time that they can remember. That decision has produced a noticeable strain on family life, and is an unspoken source of tension and regret for some of the parents.

Ms. Yang and Mr. Li have an 18 year-old daughter, who currently lives in Ohio. Ms. Yang was pregnant with their daughter when Mr. Li immigrated to the United States in 1992; he did not meet her until she finally immigrated to the United States less than two years ago as a teenager. Ms. Yang followed her husband to America in 2001, so she was also separated from her daughter for the better part of her adolescence. Because both Mr. Li and Ms. Yang were initially undocumented, they were unable to return to China to visit their daughter and had to wait to receive green cards before they could sponsor her to join them. The couple had their 8-year
old son, Ryan, after they reunited in the United States. They sent him back to China
when he was just an infant to be raised by Ms. Yang’s mother, his grandmother. Ryan
only returned to the United States two years ago to start school in Arkansas, where the
couple worked at the time. Ryan moved with Ms. Yang and Mr. Li to their new jobs in
McMinnville, but their daughter remained apart in Ohio.

When I asked Ms. Yang about why her daughter did not live with the family,
she had difficulty answering the question, indicating it might have been a sensitive
question, an intimate question, or a difficult decision to make.

SC: You said your daughter wasn’t here.
Yang: My daughter is working with my sister.
SC: Where is your sister?
Yang: She’s in, um, Ohio.
SC: In Ohio…
Yang: And she’s also studying.
SC: So is she in high school or in college?
Yang: High school, 12th grade.
SC: Has she started school yet?
Yang: She’s also starting today.
SC: Why are you split up this way? Why doesn’t she go to high school here?
Yang: Because she lived there before. I just came from there.
SC: So you’ve lived in Ohio?
Yang: No I haven’t.
SC: So she’s been with your sister this whole time?
Yang: No…
SC: So she’s there because she doesn’t want to change high schools? Since
you move so much, it must be a hassle to always change schools.
Yang: [hesitation] Right. We’re always moving. We don’t have a guding
[fixed] school. So she’d rather be with my sister.

Since Ms. Yang’s interview was one of the first ones I conducted during my
fieldwork, part of the difficulty with my questions certainly arose from Ms. Yang’s
discomfort with me as a researcher and my poorly-phrased and relatively close-ended
questions.
Despite the less than ideal interview circumstances, Ms. Yang’s sensitivity and difficulty responding still provide some insight into her attitudes towards the situation. Ms. Yang had a hard time explaining why her daughter lived with her sister in Ohio. From what I can gather, it is because her daughter started out living there and for the sake of continuity of school enrollment, has decided to stay there. However, it was difficult to understand why Ms. Yang and Mr. Li’s daughter was in Ohio in the first place; two years ago, when their daughter reportedly immigrated to the United States, the couple was living in Arkansas, and Ryan had likely recently joined them as well in order to start kindergarten. Why had their daughter not done the same and moved to Arkansas with them? The possibility that Ms. Yang’s sister was more settled in Ohio than the couple had been in Arkansas seems possible, but could not be the entire explanation since Ms. Yang’s sister is also a Chinese restaurant worker who probably faced the same job insecurities that restaurant workers in McMinnville do.

The remaining possibility lies in Ms. Yang’s explanation, “she’d rather be with my sister.” It sounds like their daughter particularly trusted or liked her aunt, or at least more so than she did her parents. The strain in her relationship with her parents could be a result of their estrangement for almost her entire life, which could have led to, at best, an indifference towards them, and at worst, resentment. In her work on Mexican migrant families, Dreby (2010:143) describes, “With time, parents may easily lose touch with their children's development, which can occur remarkably quickly in contrast to the slow pace in which parents meet their goals as migrant workers.” While Li and Yang may have felt that by taking jobs in Chinese restaurants in America, they were being the best possible caregivers and providers for their
daughter; their daughter, on the other hand, may have only agreed with that decision to varying degrees throughout her formative teenage years. It is possible too that Ryan’s birth in the United States when she was already 10 years old may have been another source of trauma. While it is difficult to draw conclusive statements about each party’s feelings towards the family situation, it is obvious that separation has taken a toll on family life. All family members have been separated from each other for varying lengths of time, and even now, when everyone is physically in the United States, it is a struggle to reunite as a family.

Amy also left her two daughters to be raised in China, but unlike Ms. Yang and Mr. Li’s children, they are still going back and forth and have yet to completely settle in either China or the United States. Amy’s older daughter, Cindy, was born in China before Amy immigrated, and Cindy’s younger sister was born in the United States. At the time of my interview, Cindy, 12 years-old and the eldest, was staying with her mother in McMinnville while on summer break. She immigrated to the United States a year and a half ago and has been living and going to school in New York since. In China, she had been living with her father and grandparents in their family home. Before immigrating, Cindy had not seen her mother since Amy herself had immigrated five years earlier. Now in New York, she lives with an older woman who she calls aiyi, which is a polite and familial term for an older woman equivalent to “aunt,” although the aiyi is not her relative. In exchange for pay, the aiyi takes care of children whose Chinese immigrant parents are not able to take care of their children themselves. The parents, generally restaurant workers, may work in waizhou or closer to New York, but regardless, prefer that their children not have to switch schools
whenever they change their jobs; and so, believing that their lives lack stability, entrust the care of their children in the aiyi’s hands. Cindy lives with about a dozen other restaurant workers’ children, and sees her mom every 3 to 4 months.

As for Cindy’s younger sister, Amy said, “She often comes and goes… She was with me for some time but I didn’t want her to come with me to waizhou.” Amy’s younger daughter had enrolled in school in the United States for a year or two, then returned to China, but will presumably come back to the U.S. once more. According to Amy,

I want her to stay in China for two years and then come back for fourth or fifth grade and study in English. Because in America, the majority of schools teach in English and I don’t want her to get too old or else she won’t be able to pick it up. She’s Chinese and she can’t really speak Chinese… makes me lose face. She used to not be able to read or write a single character… pisses me off! And now you’re like that too [to Cindy]!

Amy reveals one of the motivations behind her daughters’ frequent movement between China and the U.S.: their academic and linguistic benefit. Earlier in the conversation, Amy had described how she would want to move to waizhou permanently if and when her younger daughter rejoins Amy and Cindy in the United States: “Because going to school in waizhou, they can pick [English] up better. In Chinatown, other than speaking English in the classroom, you’re speaking Chinese the rest of the time. I don’t want them to be that way.” Ironically, Amy’s desire for her daughters to master both English and Chinese has led her to dictate a dramatically unstable lifestyle for both of them involving frequent movement between continents in their young lives.

Just as in Amy’s description of her ideal future circumstances, her present
motivation is her children’s ultimate material welfare. The unintended result of Amy’s decisions has been to sacrifice her children’s ability to acclimate to a single environment and have a stable support system in exchange for a perceived future gain from living in both China and the United States. Amy’s parenting, albeit well intentioned, has had potentially negative effects on Cindy and her sister’s academic development. According to Cindy, who may have been exaggerating out of sibling rivalry, her sister struggles with both English and Chinese because she moves back and forth so much and is immersed in a Chinese-speaking environment (Brooklyn Chinatown) when she is in the United States. Same goes for Cindy, who said she mostly spoke Chinese in school and at the aiyi’s house. If they move as a family to waizhou in two years, the psychological and academic effects of constant environment change may preclude accepting any place as a true home and make academic achievement difficult. Amy’s plan, so well-calculated, may lack the desired results to justify a decade of family separation.

Of all my interview subjects, Jin was the most explicit about his regret over his children’s lack of an established home and his desire to get to know them. He said, “My relationship with my child is important to me… After all, the child moved to China and we missed that time to connect. Now that she’s in America, I want to be with her more and try to understand her more.” Jin has two children, a 5-year old named Kristy and a 3-year old son, both born in the United States. When his children were infants, Jin and his wife sent them to be raised in China, where Jin’s son still lives with his wife’s parents. Kristy just returned to the United States a few months ago in order to start school. She currently lives with her father Jin, as well as Ryan,
Mr. Li, and Ms. Yang, who is her mother’s sister.

Jin anticipates that his son will join them in the United States the following year to start school as well, and even then, “Nothing’s for sure, we have to see. [Whether he will live with me or his mother] is hard to say. If things are stable here, then he’ll come here and be with his sister. If things aren’t settled here, then he’ll probably live in New York and go to school there, get settled.” As I raised earlier in the chapter, the idea of being “settled” somewhere and having a place to call his own is especially important to Jin. The desire to be “settled” is mentioned by almost all other interview subjects, but Jin specifically problematizes the lack of an established home in relation to raising children:

That was among my goals [to start settling down in McMinnville by having Kristy start school there]. I want her to start school here and study here and don’t want her to follow me where I have to run to; that’s bad for her studies, and that’s a tiring life. She’s still small, she can’t go where adults have to go. It would be too tiring for her. Even if she were older and in school, it still wouldn’t be good.

The process of becoming a parent is a powerful way in which the cycle of endless movement between Chinese restaurants becomes disrupted. Caring for a child foregrounds for Jin the ways in which the migrant restaurant worker lifestyle is incompatible with being a good father. As I also showed with Ms. Yang, Mr. Li, and Amy, once children are in the picture, settling down permanently becomes an inevitable consideration. Having others care for their children in China or New York is a temporary solution, and all the parents feel the desire and obligation to find a set place where they can raise their children.

The eventual or in progress reunion between parents and children require a
confrontation with the choices that the restaurant worker parents have had to make due to their own economic constraints, including prolonged periods of separation. Children, who in the past had typically only known their parents as voices on the phone or computer screen, have to renegotiate their relationships with their parents even as the parents are making long-term plans for their children. Jin is very conscious of the dynamic that being absent in his daughter’s life has produced:

Jin: I scold her a lot. And she’s also very scared of me.
SC: She’s scared of you?
Jin: But I really don’t want her to be scared of me. Sometimes I hold back from yelling at her because if you scold them too much, they’ll be more afraid of you.
SC: Is she scared of her mother?
Jin: Yes.
SC: Also scared? Maybe she’s not scared of her grandparents [who she grew up with in China].
Jin: No, she’s not. And not scared of her uncle. Just scared of us.
SC: When she’s more familiar with you, she won’t be afraid anymore.
Jin: Right. When she just got here, she wasn’t used to it. When she gets used to it, things will get better.

Cindy also expressed that her and her mother don’t really know each other and that Cindy felt afraid of Amy too. Perhaps Cindy’s discomfort is also somewhat based on Amy’s personality, as she is more aggressive and quicker to scold her child than Jin was in the interactions I observed between the parents and children. But despite the personality differences and whether or not Amy is aware of Cindy’s feelings as Jin expressly is aware of Kristy’s, the children’s fear seem rather natural given their recent migration to a foreign country and their transition from living with family they knew well to their parent, who may be a complete stranger to them.

The long-term effects of the workers’ and their children’s childhood separations is unclear, but for the time being, it creates certain tensions in their
relationships that the restaurant worker parents are not able to account for in their long-term planning. Of course, most parents probably do not expect the initial childhood separation to have a long-term effect, and expect that, as Jin expressed in his interview, “When [Kristy] gets used to it, things will get better.” It seems rather likely that Jin is correct and more exposure to her father over time will allow Kristy to feel comfortable with him. However, I can’t help but also think of Ms. Yang and Mr. Li’s daughter who lives apart from them in Ohio after being separated from them for 7 and 16 years, respectively. It is possible that a fractured parent-child relationship may never completely heal, despite parents’ best intentions and even when circumstances allow them to finally reunite. Without a doubt, separation has been a challenge to restaurant workers’ family lives, but the depth and long-term effects of these separations is uncertain.

Whether or not they are quite ready for it, the need to provide predictable lifestyles for their children do force highly mobile restaurant workers to consider their long-term future in America and start establishing roots in a single place. When I asked Jin whether he considered returning to Fuzhou, where his family still lives, he responded, “It won’t be this soon. It’ll be at least another 10 years; I have to wait for my daughter to grow up.” Ms. Yang, in response to the same question, expressed surprise at the idea: “Return to Fuzhou? [surprised] My kids are already going to school here. Maybe in a year, during school vacation, we’ll all go back together just for fun.” For better or worse, they are giving up their previously mobile lifestyles, and also determining to stay in America until their children have completed their educations. Their responses are in contrast with the ones that single Chinese restaurant workers
gave to questions regarding their future plans, to which they often responded, “I don’t know.” While the Chinese restaurant workers with children may not know much better how much longer they will be able to stay at the restaurant they are currently working in, as they are still subject to the whims of the highly diffused and mobile market, they must start planning within the framework of uncertainty.

Despite the stresses associated with getting to know one’s child for the first time and with long-term planning in a highly uncertain environment, parenting provides, in some ways, a source of psychological relief because it justifies the difficulties that the restaurant workers presently endure. According to Jin,

Now, we count as… how do I put it? We’re first generation immigrants. We’re tired, we have to do a lot and a lot of what we do is for the enjoyment of the second generation of immigrants. So we don’t have much that’s permanent, no permanent home. Right now, it’s all for the end of making money so that our sons and daughters can have a better life. And then life in America won’t be so tiring. For first generation immigrants arriving America, we don’t understand what people are saying, everyday, all we can do is work and make money and bring it home for our children to go to school, go to college, and grow up.

While thinking about the long-term leads to mental roadblocks for most of my interview subjects, thinking about their children’s futures opens up new territory for restaurant worker parents. In some ways, this is wearying because the long road ahead becomes visible. In other ways, it also seems to provide some pleasure for the parents because they are forced to articulate a vision for the future. Setting down roots and making plans may have initially been out of consideration for their children, but I argue that it has positive benefits for their parents as well, particularly at the middle-aged stage that most of them are in. Their current struggles become justified and they become empowered to craft their own narrative apart from the cycle of going from
restaurant to restaurant. As Amy described in rather great detail, “We’ll rent a place, buy a car, live our lives out there because in two years, [Cindy] will be older and be able to take care of her younger sister so I can go to work during the day and come home at night.” The vision may actually be more liberating than confining for the restaurant workers who are confronting their parental responsibilities: for the first time, their ultimate goal is not simply earning money but earning money to provide for their children, and they are able to adopt another identity—as a mother or father, rather than an interchangeable restaurant worker. Children inject meaning into the restaurant workers’ lives, where there previously may have been none.

Conclusion

Chinese restaurant workers have become acclimated to prolonged separation from family as a condition of the immigrant experience and as a further condition of the diffused Chinese restaurant economy. While separation from immediate family and partners is a challenge, the interviews I conducted indicate that it is not a traumatic experience. Separation from one’s children, however, differs because it seems to ultimately have an effect on the relationships between the restaurant workers and their children once they reunite. Relationships with children also differ because of the depth and the term of a parent’s obligation towards his or her children. Having children and planning for their children’s futures in America are shaking up the restaurant workers’ previously endless routine of moving from restaurant to restaurant in search of work. The potential outcome of the restaurant workers’ initial period of separation from their children is still unknown, but regardless of the incompletely
negotiated parent-child relationships, the families must move forward together for the benefit of the children’s educations and well-being.
Chapter 3
We Are Not This Town's Immigrants
Evaluating Potential for Community and Adaptation in Waizhou

After my first day of interviews in McMinnville, I received a call from Tommy, the young, inquisitive manager from Sentosa, and the first restaurant worker I had interviewed that day. “You're asking the wrong questions,” he told me. “You'll never find out anything with your questions. I can give you a real interview. What are you trying to do?”

I was shocked by his unflinching attitude towards my naivete as a researcher, but quickly recovered. I told him that I was interested in understanding how this town's immigrants arrived here and what the lives of this town's immigrants were like, broadly defined. He interrupted me. “Why do you keep calling us this town's immigrants? We are not this town's immigrants.”

Although naturalization and citizenship have always been considered national issues, and most recently, a source of tension between state and federal authorities, assimilation and acculturation have always occurred through an interaction between an immigrant and her immediate landscape—that is, on the local level. More so than abstract ideas espoused in a nation's founding documents, tangible and visible landscape and local community that become internalized as daily experience serve as an immigrant's initial access point to the host society, and continue to be an important point of reference throughout her time in a new country. Tommy's words, “We are not this town's immigrants,” are an active defiance of acculturation. Destination is not
Acculturation and assimilation, although often used interchangeably, have different meanings. Acculturation allows minority groups to adopt aspects of majority culture and attitudes while maintaining a distinct albeit altered identity. In assimilation, the minority group eventually replaces its own customs and attitudes with those of the dominant culture until they are ultimately absorbed by the host society. Massey (2008) uses a third term—adaptation. Adaptation is defined as adjusting oneself to different conditions or environmental changes. If the maintenance of a separate cultural identity is a scale, then adaptation occupies the far end, with assimilation flanking the other. My interviews suggest that acculturation, much less assimilation, has never been a goal of Chinese restaurant workers who arrive in McMinnville. Rather, they seek to adapt in so far as it is necessary to survive and through the process of long-term adaptation, immigrants will inadvertently begin to acculturate to the host society.

Alba and Nee (2003) argue for a reconceptualized approach to assimilation in immigration studies, one that rejects assimilation as single trajectory and reinstates the individual immigrant and immigrant family's agency. Alba and Nee redefine assimilation as “the cumulative by-product of choices made by individuals seeking to take advantage of opportunities to improve their life chances and well-being through purposeful action.” Their understanding of assimilation suggests that immigrants make active decisions in their life course to improve their material and social well-being—that is, they adapt—and assimilation, and by extension acculturation, are by-products rather than goals.
Improving life chances tends not to be the primary concern of a recent working-class immigrant, who has more immediate economic concerns; acculturation and assimilation require a long-term commitment to a place since they are the result of the accumulation of social capital over a lifetime, rather than daily concerns of how to get the next meal on the table. Even the manager at Peking, who of my interview subjects is the most acculturated, spoke of her time as a recent immigrant as being far from her present circumstances:

The first task is to stabilize family life, second is the problem of making money. When you immigrate to someone else’s country, your first necessity is money and you have to make a decision to take the easiest job to make money and then take it from there.

Now, she and her husband own a home in McMinnville, where her children grew up and go to school. She is thinking about going to vocational school to switch to a different industry, because restaurants have become harder to run and work in. But, when she first arrived in the United States, she had to make decisions that had nothing to do with her long-term well-being, but rather strive to meet immediate needs. Her story is an indication that setting down roots is rarely an initial concern of immigration, but occurs incrementally through economically beneficial decision-making. Could her immigrant success story of sorts be in the making for other restaurant workers in waizhou?

Other restaurant workers I talked to seemed far from planning their long-term well-being, with the exception of those who had children. The restaurant workers are primarily a new immigrant group, many having entered the United States in the past 10 years. Many also happened to be young, around 30 years old or younger, and
unmarried. They have yet to encounter the need to change their lifestyles in such a way that requires long-term commitments, to work or to place. The delay in long-term planning also comes from a short socially expected duration (SED), which Roberts (1995) describes as the length of time an immigrant expects to stay in a place. Roberts found a short SED to be problematic in the Mexican migrant community, because it is often prescribed by the group rather than determined by the individual migrant, and because it undermines the development of community intergenerational links, which in turn undermines immigrant success.

While Roberts writes about Mexican immigrants, he might as well have been describing the Chinese restaurant workers. As Roberts argues, a short SED is often imposed by the group rather than determined by the individual, and ultimately it becomes self-perpetuating. Restaurant workers consider themselves migrants, and hesitate to make connections to any place or group. Without connections, they feel more compelled to leave when challenges or ennui arise. The structure of the industry is satisfactory in the short-term; but in the long-term, as parents like Jin and Amy realize, it works to supersede individual preferences.

Restaurant work presents structural factors that discourage workers from forming the kinds of community ties—both with the coethnic community and with the destination community—that allow for long-term decision-making. The development in waizhou of a single economy, the Chinese restaurant, creates a pretense of competition between the Chinese immigrants in McMinnville. Further exacerbated by their arrival through economically-driven employment agencies, rather than close ties, there is an alienation that begins between workers that extends to the worker and her
environment. I will argue that these are intertwined alienations; that being part of a coethnic community gives immigrants the resources to make long-term plans and set down roots in a new place.

Min Zhou (1992) argues that the coethnic enclave economy facilitates immigrant success due to its dual structure, which offers the benefits of a coethnic community while also facilitating new immigrants' introduction into the American economy. These benefits existed in the spatially concentrated and diversified economy in New York Chinatown, where manifold industries such as restaurants, garment, retail, and real estate thrived, and immigrants' sense of community began to emerge as they patronized their fellow immigrants' businesses after they got off work. In waizhou, there is no reason for Chinese immigrants to go over to each other's restaurants, and most have not crossed the street and done so. My interviews reveal the distrust and suspicions that restaurant workers harbor of each other that are the result of the lack of community in waizhou. The lack of coethnic community is not inherent in the nature of waizhou itself, which can be seen from the firm establishment of an immigrant Hispanic community in McMinnville over the past decade. Rather, it is the structure of the restaurant industry in waizhou that undermines the formation of community, and ultimately, creates an obstacle to acculturation of Chinese restaurant workers.

*A Chinese restaurant-eat-Chinese-restaurant world: tight markets in small towns*

As of 2010, there were three Chinese restaurants in McMinnville, each with their own niche of sorts. Peking is the community staple, the first Asian buffet to open
in McMinnville over a decade ago. China Wok offers quick and fresh take-out without the frills. Ming's Buffet and Grill offers a full buffet, sushi, and hibachi grill, and ample seating for its many McMinnville enthusiasts. In late 2010, Sentosa opened, stunning residents and other Chinese restaurants in the area. The renovated space offered a full buffet, sushi, and hibachi grill, and its interior was decorated to a caliber that is not found at any other restaurants in McMinnville. The lobby where guests wait to be seated by the host has a chandelier hanging from the ceiling. On top of it all, Sentosa offers an all-you-can-eat lunch for $4 and dinner for $6 on weekdays. By comparison, Ming's buffet costs $6.95 for lunch and $9.50 for dinner.

As a result of Sentosa's entry, all Chinese restaurants in the area had to slash their prices. Then, they could only play the waiting game to see who would win out.

The other restaurants complained bitterly about Sentosa's price tactics, and their criticisms were not restricted to the objective reality of more competition being introduced into a tight market. It extended to the nature of the Chinese restaurant industry and of the Chinese restauranteurs behind it. When I visited, the manager at Peking complained about having no business, even after already lowering prices.

If the population is small, it doesn’t make sense to open a lot of restaurants. Like right now, the competition is so steep. And it’s something that only Chinese people would do because maybe laowai [Anglos] might want to come in to do business too but they won’t open exactly the same kind of business. They [Chinese restaurants] rely on slashing prices to steal customers from competitors; this isn’t a good method... In a place where there are not a lot of people, you have to push everyone else out [in order to have business]. From the beginning, this psychology is not that normal. I think Chinese people have to reconcile this issue a bit.

The Peking manager's complaints quickly went from being against an overly competitive environment to Chinese restauranteurs' methods to her coethnics'
psychology. Any ethnic solidarity she may feel is obscured by her distaste with the economic jockeying in the Chinese restaurant industry. She even goes so far as to suggest that cold economic competition is a character flaw of the Chinese people. Yet, the subtext is equally revealing; she admits herself that the Chinese all open exactly the same kind of business in waizhou—restaurants. The restaurant industry structure is built up and self-perpetuating at this point, and it does not occur to Chinese immigrant entrepreneurs to venture into other industries, as economically calculating as the Peking manager make them out to be. Restaurant battles are a problem endemic to the industry, but they have interpersonal consequences for individual restaurant workers, who are left blaming each other for being too cutthroat.

Across the street, at Ming’s, Alan and other workers had their own complaints about Sentosa. The day before I talked to Alan, I noticed that the restaurant had rented out the entire back room out for a private party. I asked him about it, but it turned out that the group had just asked to use the space, and only 5 people ended up eating out of the full dining room. Alan agreed to it, even though Ming’s received less than $40 for the trouble. “It's okay,” he said glumly, “At least looking at them, you think the restaurant is very busy.”

The restaurant had been quieter since Sentosa opened. Amy claimed that she wanted to start looking for a new job. “There’s no business here. Everyday, I’m bored.”

Alan's salary is not dependent on tips, but he felt the heat of competition differently. He worried he would be out of a job soon. His typical cheerfulness would break down into frustration whenever he talked about the restaurant competition in
the town:

Alan: Look at this! Look! Right across the street, that close, and they open up! Why do they open? Why do they open? SC: I don't know. Alan: You don't know? They want to shut us down. SC: Is this what doing business is like? There's no room for cooperation? Alan: Cooperation, what cooperation? They're wishing you dead at any given time. This kind of thing, I've seen it so many times that I know what it is. In a small town of just over 10,000 people, all of a sudden coming in when we still had a lot of customers like they were going to eat dinner and say, we have all this stuff, our restaurant has all these things. They said that.

Apparently, management from Sentosa had come into Ming's before, prior to their grand opening, and flaunted their restaurant's amenities to Ming's staff, probably in an effort to intimidate the competition. All's fair in war, and in McMinnville, a town of just over 13,000 residents, a war was brewing between the Chinese restaurants.

The fact that McMinnville already had 3 Chinese restaurants did not seem to be a cause for concern for the entrepreneurs behind Sentosa, even though the entry of a fourth restaurant would mean that there was now one Chinese restaurant for every 3,400 McMinnville resident, which is more than twice the national average. Restaurant workers who gave their best guesses about how to open a Chinese restaurant all cited location as an important factor. After all, like Tommy said, “If you don't pick a good place and just randomly choose a location, that's $100,000 down the drain.” Of all places, it seems counterintuitive to try a hand in a town that already has 3 Chinese restaurants—except unless, like the Peking manager and Alan suggest, Sentosa is relying on the fact that it can force the other restaurants to close.

Alan's allegation that Sentosa “wants to shut us down” may hold a touch of

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irony, considering how other restaurants perceive Ming's motives. Zheng recounts information that he heard from the China Wok owner, which is that Ming's is owned by a group of 4 or 5 owners, who own 7 or 8 Chinese restaurants in total all over Tennessee. “It's as though they want to take over the entire state of Tennessee,” Zheng heatedly said; his point was that Ming's was not an amateur enterprise, and its management knew exactly what it was doing when it came to McMinnville.

According to Zheng, when Peking Restaurant first opened, it was located across the street from where it once was. However, when Ming's opened in its present location in Northgate Shopping Center, it asked the mall owner to sign a contract stipulating that the mall will not lease more than one unit out as a Chinese restaurant. “That way, they force the other restaurant out. And they have a right to do that because they signed their contract first and the other restaurant didn't.” Despite Peking's longstanding place in Northgate as McMinnville's oldest Chinese restaurant, Ming's owners appealed to the mall management with the allure of opening a larger Chinese restaurant. As a result, Peking's lease was not renewed and it had to move across the street to its present location.

The back and forth between the restaurants, including the allegations that each restaurant has regarding other restaurants' practices, hints at how removed restaurant workers have become from their identities as a coethnic and social community. Relationships between restaurant workers are strained in McMinnville because they are competing in an oversaturated ethnic economy of only 1 type of business, the restaurant. The successful enclave economy, as Zhou (1992) describes, depends on its ability to serve both the coethnic and greater population. There is no possibility of
coethnic patronage in *waizhou*, where everyone is in the same business and survival depends on driving each other out. Sentosa is not unique in its strategy. It is simply doing business.

The fact that Sentosa opened in McMinnville rather than a less saturated market could also indicate something else: that there are no more less saturated markets. As Mike said, “Look at this place; it's so remote and it's poor and it's still like this”—could there be any more towns that don't have Chinese restaurants?

Tommy believes that Chinese restaurants are near capacity in the United States. “It's hard to find places for restaurants anymore. Almost every place almost has a Chinese restaurant. It's like McDonald's or KFC. It's the case in the entire United States. You can go off the beaten path and still find take-out, or a buffet.”

American Chinese restaurants may be approaching its twilight in the United States, leaving the workers that have acclimated to its system economically stranded. A restructuring of immigrant labor could have positive consequences as well, as it may encourage former restaurant workers to venture into other types of business and potentially establish a true coethnic community in *waizhou* that does not have its basis on competition between restaurants. Still, that point may be far off. Like Tommy said to me, “I've never seen it. I've never seen a Chinese restaurant fail.”

*The Zhengs of Guantou: economic versus social relationships in waizhou*

The Bobby Ray Memorial Parkway separates the four Chinese restaurants of McMinnville, each restaurant perhaps a quarter mile apart from the next. From each, you can certainly see at least another Chinese restaurant, if not all of them. Crossing
the parkway is somewhat precarious, because there are no cross signals for pedestrians, but that's not why the restaurant workers have not crossed Bobby Ray.

Tommy offered me a second, “real” interview, and so I returned to Sentosa to see what I missed the first time. Tommy seemed less jovial than he did during the first interview, but was still as curious as ever. He peered over some of my notes from other interviews, without restraint. “Who's from Shanghai?” he asked me. “No one,” I replied, “Judy has worked in Shanghai before, so I jotted it down. No one is from Shanghai; everyone is from Fuzhou.” It struck me that these were the sorts of details that may have never come up before between Tommy and his coworker. “Who is this? Who is 46?” he asked incredulously, reading my notes. I responded, “That's your Mr. Li, who works here.” Tommy nodded, remembering that his Mr. Li was indeed 46. These facts were fairly basic and scantily intimate, yet still were not the kinds of information that Tommy knew of the people with whom he spent the majority of his days at Sentosa.

“This one also has the surname Zheng, this 28 year-old.” Tommy said, pointing to my notes on Zheng, the host at China Wok. “We have the same hometown. I am also from Guantou.”

“Perhaps you know him?” I eagerly asked.

“I know him,” Tommy disinterestedly responded.

Guantou is a zhen, which roughly translates to a township, and includes an urban core that encompasses surrounding villages. It is a fourth-level political subdivision, after province, prefecture, and county. Guantou is a township of 5,790
inhabitants\textsuperscript{8}—less than half the size of McMinnville. Tommy and Zheng share their surname no less; the Chinese commonly say that people who share the same last name shared the same ancestors, long ago. A long time ago, they were family.

Tommy seemed far less interested in the discovery of his fellow Guantou townsman 8,000 miles away from home than he was in who Zheng was in McMinnville, Tennessee. “The male [Zheng] should be the boss' son. The female [his coworker] should be his wife.” I had heard this from other people in the town, both restaurant workers and McMinnville residents, but Zheng himself had actively denied any relation to his coworker, or the restaurant owner.

“Do you say that because they're a man and a woman?”

“No, it's not that. It's because that's a married couple's restaurant. If they hired someone else... it wouldn't be worth it, you know? They wouldn't make a profit... it has to be a family restaurant in order to make any money.”

“He wasn't willing to say that he was the boss; he said that he just worked there.”

“He won't say that to you.”

“You think he's actually the boss.”

“Yes the boss,” Tommy replied emphatically. “There's an older man who is his father. His mother has come too. Two generations work there.” I could never know for sure whether Zheng truly was the son of the China Wok owner, although certain clues seem to support this claim, such as his flexible role within the restaurant that varies

\textsuperscript{8}Trip Mondo. \textit{Guantou in China (Fujian)}. Retrieved May 12, 2012, from [http://www.tripmondo.com/china/fujian/guantou/].
between cook, waitstaff, and cashier; and the detailed knowledge he possessed of Ming's management, which he claimed he heard from the boss. Without knowing whether Tommy or Zheng was telling the truth, one of the most interesting dynamics to emerge out of this interaction with Tommy was his concern over Zheng's status at China Wok rather than Zheng's ties to his hometown. Tommy has dissociated fellow restaurant workers as potential sources of mutual aid and community, but has instead come to see them exclusively in the framework of competition between Chinese restaurants. Ties that may have existed in the mainland are no longer relevant, when the restaurants in McMinnville are fighting to stay open.

I tried to probe deeper into how Tommy came to know Zheng's backstory, but he only became exasperated with me. To him, it was all completely clear:

Once you've worked in restaurants long enough, you know everything. You deal with kitchen people all day and they are basically the same elsewhere too. If you've been in a place long enough, you know other people's business... With us Fuzhouese, you need only to look at them and know. You can know a lot about them by looking.

Tommy may not have realized that by belittling all restaurant workers as being singly interested in making money and going to great lengths to obscure their secrets to success from other workers, he extends his disparaging treatment to himself. He spoke of Fuzhouese immigrants, not as an economic and social community, but as an grimy, underhanded group who all participate in secretive activity. Tommy dismisses their potential to be trustworthy companions, and in doing so, dismisses his own ability to be more than what other restaurant workers expect him to be.

As the interaction with Tommy indicates, seeking signs of social connections between restaurant workers was a futile pursuit. There was no reason to form ties with
other restaurant workers, even if the two workers had a common history, as Tommy and Zheng did. For the most part, the restaurant workers were strangers to each other, although some had heard about or seen the other workers from other restaurants. Mike, the reluctant bachelor, mentioned, “All of us in the restaurant are single. All of us. Are all the ones at Sentosa single too? Some of them are pretty cute...”

Impressions form at a distance, and the possibility of direct contact is entertained but never realized. Still, Mike's lighthearted search for a mate shows that there is a desire to connect with others, particularly in the rather lonely place that 

waizhou could be for restaurant workers. The animosity is an outcome of the economic system, but it has produced social constraints.

The only friendships I encountered between the Chinese immigrants in McMinnville were between the restaurant workers at Ming's. Several people, including Sky and Miya, had come to work for Ming's based on their old friend Alan's recommendations. Although Mike had come later through an employment agency, and Amy through an internet posting, the atmosphere produced by the core of old friends easily wove in newcomers. Alan, the quintessentially approachable manager, readily covered for his friends when they wanted to take a day off. I would go into Ming's to see Alan making sushi, working the kitchen, or bringing customers their drinks; the owner was not aware of these improvised roles, thus Alan was neither compensated nor fired for informally helping his friends.

Miya said that even though McMinnville is poor, of the 7 to 8 restaurants she has worked in, Ming's has truly been the best. There is a sense of balance between work and play at Ming's that reduces the pressures of competition that the workers
must feel. Miya asked Alan whether she could take off for New Year's, because she simply couldn't work then. He thoroughly supported her. “He said 'Go.' Because when we work, we work very hard so when we get off, we must thoroughly enjoy it and be happy,” Miya said.

Happiness, so elusive in a waizhou Chinese restaurant, can nearly become a reason for competition too. Sky echoes Miya and calls McMinnville, “Too poor. Not much to do here for fun. But when I'm with everyone, I feel very happy.” Suddenly, he turns his attention back to Sentosa. “We are happier here than over there, right? Are they happy over there?”

_A day in the life in McMinnville_

While the Chinese restaurants are at war, a different immigrant story is taking hold of McMinnville. In the past 10 years, McMinnville has experienced dramatic demographic changes, but not of its Asian population. Between the 2000 and 2010 census, McMinnville's Hispanic population doubled from 868 people (6.8% of the total population) to 1,627 people (11.9% of total). En route to one of McMinnville's 4 Chinese restaurants, I would encounter Mexican restaurants and supermarkets. The store signs and window script are entirely in Spanish; no English side-by-side translations. It was clear that these businesses served the coethnic population, and did not need to appeal to the average McMinnville resident. The case was entirely

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different for the Chinese restaurants. Their main clients are Anglo McMinnville natives, and as such, China Wok and Sentosa do not even have Chinese names associated with their restaurants. None of the 4 restaurants' menus have Chinese either.

There are major characteristics that differentiate the Chinese and Hispanic groups in McMinnville, such that it is unseemly to compare why one group chose to set down roots and the other did not. The Hispanic population is much larger in McMinnville than is the Chinese population, which is also also true of the greater United States by a factor of about 13.11 According to Anglo residents, Hispanic migrants previously arrived in McMinnville as workers for the town's more than 450 plant nurseries that form the backbone of the town's economy; present-day Hispanic immigrants work in many occupations, including agriculture, construction, food, and retail. They began buying homes, some choosing to marry McMinnville residents, and raising children. Wally Stern, a community resident, reports seeing Hispanic immigrants engaged in community activities, including attending school, participating in sports, eating out, and shopping. While orders of magnitude separate the McMinnville Hispanic and Chinese populations in terms of population size, duration of group activity in the area, and types of group economic activity, permanent Hispanic residence implies that other immigrant groups could pursue the same path in McMinnville, including the Chinese.

Setting down roots in a place requires taking up space. Ownership, which most

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1150.5 million self-identified Hispanics in 2010 as opposed to 3.8 million Chinese according to the U.S. Census Bureau.
restaurant workers consider to be the foundation of a stable residency, is only part of the equation. Participation and contribution to shared and communal experiences is another. The activities that Wally described earlier, school, sports, shopping, and eating, are not unusual in that they are all part of a typical life course. They also establish participants as part of a greater community and embed them in visible physical and social spaces. If a strength of a connection lies in the number of ties an individual has to a place, then someone who is participating in more activities likely has a stronger attachment to the place than someone participating in fewer community events.

One of the most remarkable elements of a restaurant worker's life is in its unremarkable experience of landscape. Mr. Li describes his typical day since he started working in restaurants: going to work at 10am and getting off at 10pm, with one day off a week. This schedule is fairly common for restaurant workers regardless of restaurant. After they get off work, it is already late, and they typically stay in until they go to bed. Most restaurant workers live with their coworkers, in housing that is rented out by their employer. Sophia says, “I think living anywhere in America is the same. Just really busy working, always working. During the day, I work and at night, I sleep, talk on the phone, go online.” Talking on the phone and using the internet, which Zheng had ridiculed as an excessive request that restaurant workers make of employers, are actually essential ways that the workers connect to the outside world. Many maintain their primary relationships through these two modes of communication: with parents in China and with siblings, as well as spouses, significant others, and friends in other waizhous. On days off, restaurant workers
typically sleep in; Sophia reports sleeping until 1 or 2pm. *Waizhous* become indistinguishable from each other when the place outside of the restaurant where workers are spending the most time is the internet.

From most of the Chinese immigrants' perspectives, McMinnville does not have much to offer in terms of entertainment even if they had more time to explore town. For the workers, that has its advantages and disadvantages. “If you're talking about trying to make money, then this is a good place because there are no fun places to go. You won't spend money,” Zheng said. Zheng does not have a car, and is dropped off at work by his boss every morning. The boss sometimes lends him the car, but usually, Zheng is limited in his ability to travel in the area.

I have one day off a week. But I don't go out, since there's no one to take me out. Even if you're off the boss has things to do and no one takes you out. Sometimes if you become friends with the boss' friends or you make laowai [Anglo] friends, then you might go out with them.

Mike does have his own car, “but there's nowhere to go. You know that even the Greyhound doesn't come here. No mall, no Best Buy.” It is true that the town is small, but it is unclear what the restaurant workers would consider worthwhile activities in any setting. The kinds of activities Wally described Hispanic immigrants engaging in are not necessarily “fun” activities. They are routine parts of how Hispanic immigrants live in McMinnville, yet they undoubtedly become “attractions” for new Hispanic immigrants who are unsure of whether they should stay or go. Without a coethnic Chinese community engaging new immigrants arriving to McMinnville, finding meaning in the new landscape is inevitably challenging.
**What is to come: the future of Chinese restaurant workers in the United States**

Is there potential for Chinese immigrants to establish meaningful homes and community in *waizhou*? If destination is not destiny, as Tommy insisted, then all of the restaurant workers' stints in McMinnville are pure accident, and my field interviews simply captured a brief moment in which the dust has settled before making its way back up again. They are not this town's immigrants, but immigrants who have happened to come to this town. Ultimately, what I am uncovering in McMinnville may not be a trend at all, but a phase.

Most of my interview subjects had difficulty verbalizing what their ideal future looks like. There are those, like Sophia, who have not been in the United States for long, and still dream of returning home. “Ideally... I want to go home and open my own store. Buy a house, open my own store, do all the things I'd do if I had money,” Sophia said. Her ventures in America are towards the end of making money so that she can realize her ideal life in China. The vague projections of an ideal life almost always includes a greater ability to dictate one's own life than is presently available, be it in China or America.

Once an immigrant stays longer, that idea of returning home often starts to fade. Restaurant workers who have been in the United States for over 10 years have a hard time imagining that they will return to China. Miya remarked that she no longer has friends there; they are all working in America. Of those who imagine they will stay, it is furthermore difficult to visualize building a life that is not intertwined in the Chinese restaurant industry. Tommy says,

> The future? Even I don't know what my ideal future is. Make money. After
making money, open my own restaurant. What else could I do? If there's anything good to invest in, invest in that and get a guding [steady, reliable] income. A steady income is the most important. In the past, us Fuzhouese, we had nothing.

Goals are the product of both presence and absence of certain circumstances in a restaurant worker's experience. The Chinese restaurant has been the primary organizing element of a third to a half of most of the worker's lives. Projecting into the future, it is obvious why they should consider their success in relation to the Chinese restaurant. To own a restaurant is the ultimate achievement in the value system that they have adopted, because it is the highest form of certainty available to them. Uncertainty has plagued their existence from youth—"In the past, us Fuzhouese, we had nothing." Their entire lives has been an attempt to escape their world's central uncertainty: economic upheaval. Tommy and the other restaurant workers seek a stability that has evaded them since they lived in China, and the challenge of describing the future lies in never having experienced what they most value.

If a stable lifestyle were available, it seems inconsequential to many workers whether they live in New York or waizhou. Jin imagines returning to New York and getting a place with his wife and children, while Amy would eventually like to stay in waizhou, find a steady job, get a car, and raise her two daughters in a small town. In many ways, the Peking Restaurant manager has established in McMinnville the kind of stability that other restaurant workers seek. She has become a long-term resident of McMinnville, and has set down roots in various ways, including moving her parents out to live with her, buying a house, and sending her children to local schools. Still,
she is largely alone as a Chinese immigrant in *waizhou*, and in her interview, describes the challenges that come with it:

Living here… living anywhere is okay, after all, it’s just a matter of finding a job. After all, if you can get along fine with your neighbors, then it doesn’t matter where you live. For immigrants, a huge part of it is seeing whether there is an accepting environment… America’s [immigrant] history is over 200 years long but it seems like there’s a lot of modern immigration that people aren’t willing to accept. Still, they judge you solely on the basis that you look different, even though lots [of Chinese] are ABCs [American-born Chinese]. There are also Hispanics, Africans here and they’ve were born here and grew up here, but because their skin color is different, despite the fact that they are basically American, they’re treated differently.

Even after living in McMinnville for so long, the Peking manager did not identify it as an irreplaceable home. Rather, she describes her home of 10 years in terms of her work there, and has suggested in other parts of her interview that if business continued to decline at Peking, she would find work elsewhere and potentially move away. The restaurant worker's outlook does not seem to change, even if she has settled down.

The Peking manager also touches upon the issue of prejudice, a feeling that may be amplified by the lack of a coethnic community in McMinnville. Zhou argues that one of the main functions of Chinatown is to insulate Chinese immigrants from social and economic discrimination from the greater host culture. Without the strength of a significant community in a small town, Chinese immigrants are less insulated—not only from discrimination, but from the effects of other challenges to immigrant life that are often mediated by the mutual support of a community of peers. The Peking manager, who possesses a seemingly ideal life, is still defining her own ideal in *waizhou*. 
Ultimately, most restaurant workers are resigned to the fact that they cannot dictate what is to come, and their ideal future is best described as staying amenable to the tumult of restaurant life. Jin, who is struggling with the tensions that arise from working in Chinese restaurants and raising a child, can only hope to be able to continue working, whether it is in a Chinese restaurant or not and whether it is in waizhou or not. He cannot afford to make any bigger plans.

It’s hard to talk about what is to come. You don’t know what’s going to find you. The most important thing is to still be able and can keep working. It’s hard to make a decision. What kind of decision am I making? How am I deciding to live here if something’s wrong with my ability to work? If you can do it, then it’ll happen. I have to look at the circumstances, but if I can have a stable life, I definitely want it. Sometimes, it’s not about what you can do; it’s about how you are right now.

Jin recognizes that there are too many factors in play that prevent him from setting his own goals, which is endemic of Chinese restaurant work conditions. He eloquently articulates the perspective of restaurant workers with his final words: “Sometimes, it's not about what you can do; it's about how you are right now.” Many restaurant workers have become accustomed to living from day to day, week to week, month to month. Some may dream of the day that their lives are stable, predictable, fixed—guding—but the reality is that uncertainty has become the greatest certainty in their lives. Their day-to-day coping mechanism is to not dwell too much on the question of what is to come. On occasion when the workers are actively confronted about their futures, the most productive course to take is to embrace the uncertainty.

Conclusion

The hierarchy of concerns that restaurant workers must address in their daily
lives is reason enough for why the formation of community in *waizhou* has been nonexistent. As Jin's thoughtful comment reveals, workers are hardly in the mode of sustaining long-term commitments to themselves, let alone a community of peers. They are writing their own stories as they go, and the ending is far from clear.

As immigration continues to increase of both educated and working-class Chinese, it is quite possible that Chinese immigrants will eventually firmly establish communities in *waizhou*, but prospects seem rather unlikely as a direct result of restaurant diffusion. Restaurants have served to introduce but not integrate migrants to new destinations, which has precluded any kind of stable interaction with place. Yet there are multiple indications that the Chinese restaurant industry is on the brink of transformation, including the saturation of the market in *waizhou*, the shifting relative desirability of immigration to the United States, and the aging demographic of workers. What is to come is unknown, but it may very well be different from what restaurant workers have known for the past 20 years.
Conclusion
The Journey Continues

Just a few weeks after I completed my interviews in McMinnville, Peking Restaurant, the oldest Chinese restaurant in McMinnville, closed its doors in early September 2011. A few months later, Sentosa lost the price war that it had initiated in the quiet town, and closed its doors as well after being open for just over a year. As of May 2012, there are 2 Chinese restaurants in McMinnville again, China Wok and Ming's Buffet. Ming's buffet price has gone back up to $6.95 for lunch, now that it need not worry about competing with Sentosa's prices.

At the start of the year, Alan finally left Ming's after more than 5 years of living and working in McMinnville. He has been working at a restaurant in Nashville for the past 5 months. Leaving was hard, he said, but work is work after all. He still talks on the phone with his old friends from Ming's, including Mike, Amy, Sky, and Miya, who are all still in McMinnville. Both Sky and Amy are preparing to leave though in order to go back to China; Sky, for a visit, and Amy, to bring her younger daughter back to finally live in the United States permanently with her older sister Cindy. Cindy is just a year away from starting high school.

In short, life continues for the restaurant workers of McMinnville. Many of the people who I interviewed in August 2011 have likely dispersed to other waizhous. I can only wonder if Jin, Mr. Li, and Ms. Yang found a stable solution for schooling for Kristy and Ryan; whether Mr. Li and Ms. Yang were able to find another restaurant that would hire both of them so that they can stay together. The Peking Manager may
still be in McMinnville, but she had expressed a desire to go to school and switch to a
different field of work—Peking closing was certainly that opportunity for her to
explore these ambitions.

As much as I was able to find out during my time in McMinnville and the few
follow-up calls I made after, much more remains unknown. I observed only a brief
sliver of the restaurant workers' lives in McMinnville, and I had every assurance from
my interview subjects that stasis is always temporary. Even in August 2011, the
Chinese restaurants and their workers were in flux, but the trajectory was and still is
hard to discern. Two Chinese restaurants closed in the past year, but more
restauranters could attempt what Sentosa had and open a new storefront in the small
town. On the other hand, it is possible, as some restaurant workers alleged, that
Chinese restaurants are beginning their decline in America, and the past year in
McMinnville was part of a trend.

The restaurant workers who I spoke with in August seem to have rightfully
emphasized the lack of certainty on their part in projecting the future. Amy, who
sounded as though she were on the verge of leaving Ming's in the summer of 2011,
ended up on staying another year. Alan left McMinnville for Nashville, despite Ming's
being the most stable job he has held since he was a teenager. At the very least, Amy
and Alan were able to stay and leave of their own accord. The workers of Peking and
Sentosa were forced to find other options once their restaurants closed. Even those
who had hoped that McMinnville could become a permanent home, like Jin, Mr. Li,
and Ms. Yang, were ultimately subject to the whims of a competitive market and an
impersonal industry. Workers have adapted to an unpredictable lifestyle, because thus
far, it has been the easiest course. The easiest course may have also been the best one up until this point, but as restaurant workers begin to think about finding a partner, raising children, and settling down, their understanding of the best course is bound to change.

Restaurant work has placed profound constraints on immigrant economic mobility, family life, and community-building. There are ways in which each facet is beginning to reveal cracks under pressure. Mike spoke about switching to the construction industry rather than staying in restaurants because the instability of the restaurant world was too tiring for him, now that he's in his 30s. Amy, Jin, Mr. Li, and Ms. Yang are committed to providing their children with a stable home to improve their life chances beyond restaurants. They consistently emphasized the importance of an education for their sons and daughters; Alan, born and raised in the United States, frequently lamented not having been more focused in school and ending up in restaurants as a result. Amy said it herself: she does not want Cindy to become a restaurant worker. Workers with families are finding their priorities are shifting; even if they have been able to endure the instability of restaurant life, they would not choose it if it prevents them from fulfilling obligations to their children.

Economy is only one part of the workers' lives, as much as they emphasize it as their primary motive as immigrants in America. Community is the other, and the desire for community is evident in workers' frequent returns to New York to see friends and family. The community in New York sustains them in the long-term, and allows them to go back to waizhou for months at a time to work in the absence of the social pleasures of a coethnic community. Some restaurant workers, such as those at
Ming's, have formed their own micro-community in *waizhou*, but socializing with coworkers and workers at competing restaurants remains more uncommon than not. Ultimately, coethnic communities will not begin to form in *waizhou* until immigrants make long-term commitments to their destinations, which has proved impractical under the constraints of the restaurant industry.

I have only been able to capture a moment in the never ending and anonymous cycle of movement of restaurant workers arriving to *waizhou* for work. Borrowing from a famous concept in physics, the uncertainty principle, there is a limit on the precision with which certain pairs of physical properties of a particle, such as position and momentum, can be known. The uncertainty principle could be an apt analogy, both for the fate of restaurant workers, and for the limitations of this research. The story of the restaurant workers is as much in their movements over time as it is in the stasis. The immigrant success story has been told and retold many times in American lore; yet, it is rarely obvious to the audience that the end is unclear to the immigrants who are living the story.

This paper is about what happens between coming and staying. It describes a community in transformation, one that may be on the brink of becoming something else. What is to come for the restaurant workers in America remains unknown, even to themselves. The best they can do, as Jin said, is worry about right now.
Appendix A

Sample Questions

Short Answer Questions:
Name 名字
Age 年龄
Gender 性别
Hometown 家乡
Current Occupation 工作
Place of Current Occupation 工作地区
Duration of Current Employment 工作时段
Previous Occupations in the US 工作经历
Duration of Residence in the US
Duration of Residence in Current Town
Intended Duration of Stay in Current Town
English Language Level 英文水平

Long Answer Questions:
-Where did you live when you first immigrated here? 你来美国初时住那里？
-What kinds of jobs did you do when you first immigrated here? 你从移民来的的时候到现在做过什么工作？
-How did you find jobs? 你怎么找工作？
-Did the people who helped you immigrate to the US also help you locate a job? 帮助你移民到美国的人也帮你找工作吗？
-Do you have family in the US? Where do they live? How do you communicate? 你在美国有家人吗？他们住那里？你们怎么沟通？
-When did you first hear about this town? 你什么时候听过别人提到这个城市/ 镇？
-Why did you decide to move to this town? 你为什么选择搬到这个城市？
-How did you arrive at this town? 你通过什么交通方式来到这个城市？
-Did anyone help you get settled when you first moved to this town? 你初时来到这个城市有人帮你适应新地方吗？
-What kinds of jobs have you had in this town? 你在这个城市做过什么样的工作？
-How have you adjusted to this town? 你住惯这个城市了吗？
-Do you plan to stay in this town long-term? 你会长期待在这个城市吗？
Appendix B

Interview Consent Form

Stanford University
Sociology Department
August 2011

By signing this form, I agree to be interviewed by Stephanie Chan regarding my immigration and work experiences in the United States. I accept $20 at the conclusion of the interview as my compensation. I retain the right to refuse to answer any question and to withhold my name. Information given in the interview will not be shared with any other party, and will only be used for academic purposes, disassociated from my name.

I agree to the terms above:

_________________________________________  __________________________
Signature                                                   Date

_________________________________________
Printed Name

Please direct any further questions to Stephanie at (917) 470-7587.

访问同意书
斯坦福大学
社会学系
2011年8月

我签名同意被Stephanie Chan（陈凯琳）访问我关于我在美国的移民和工作经历。访问结束，我收$20作为奖励金。我有权保留我的权益拒绝回答任何问题并不公开我的名字。访问者不会跟第三者分享我所透露的资料，也只会在学业上使用我所透露的资料除了我本人的名字。

我同意以上所说的规则：

_________________________________________  __________________________
签名                                                   日期

_________________________________________
写名

有任何问题，请通知Stephanie Chan（陈凯琳）：（917）470-7587。
Works Cited


