

Reframing Fuzhounese American Experiences: Migration, Inequality, and Community Resilience

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Literature Review

Introduction:

- While the early waves of Chinese immigrants arrived in America in the 19th century, the Fuzhounese, originating from Fuzhou in Fujian, China, largely came over in the late 20th century in the “third wave.”

- There is an overrepresentation and fixation on the illicit ways in which the Fuzhounese arrived in America in the current literature, with a specific focus on the ‘snakehead’ smuggling network, which has been given priority over the stories that could and should be shown.

- This literature research project looked at the different ways authors and historians have presented the Fuzhounese, focusing primarily on perspectives and narratives expressed.

- Research goals for the project included reading and parsing through various texts to try to contextualize the frameworks that the Fuzhounese Chinese have been forced into as well as gaining a broader understanding of the history of the Fuzhounese in America, with a focus on New York City.

Texts:

Cosmologies of Credit (Julie Y. Chu)

- Professor Julie Y. Chu explores **what it means to stay behind in a migratory community**, showing how immobility creates **displacement** for the Fuzhounese left in Fuzhou as relatives migrated to America for work.
- She also reveals the hidden reality of the snakehead trade, presenting the stories of those who repeatedly attempted to immigrate to America.

The Snakehead: An Epic Tale of the Chinatown Underworld and the American Dream (Patrick Radden Keefe)

- Patrick Radden Keefe recounts the 1993 Golden Venture shipwreck, which carried nearly 300 Fuzhounese seeking asylum and work in America.
- His focus on the snakehead trade and Chinatown gang violence frames the Fuzhounese community in illicit and prejudicial terms.
- While human smuggling cannot be ignored, Keefe’s **language contributes to the literature that criminalizes the Fuzhounese and worsens public perceptions.**

God in Chinatown (Kenneth J. Guest)

- Professor Kenneth J. Guest presents **ethnographic research on Fuzhounese religious communities** as tools of assimilation and survival in America.
- He examines the stratification of the ethnic enclave and the networks linking New York to China, offering the only major study to emphasize religion’s role in Fuzhounese immigration.
- Guest reframes the Fuzhounese experience as a **narrative of self-preservation and economic advancement.**



Manhattan's Chinatown, East Broadway. This is where the snakehead rings were centralized in New York City. There remains a large Fuzhounese population in the area.

Conclusions:

1. For many of the Fuzhounese, displacement has often been experienced as a byproduct of immobility rather than a clear physical departure from a homeland.

2. The story of the Fuzhounese has too often been told through narratives of crime, smuggling, and illegality, shaping how the community is perceived in the United States. Understanding the Fuzhounese requires moving beyond sensationalized accounts to consider the lived realities of both those who migrate and those who remain behind.

3. Immigration is a process of preservation and resilience, rather than solely economic pursuit.

Further Questions: How strong will the Fuzhounese identity remain in the coming years? How have perceptions of the Fuzhounese changed with the second generation of Fuzhounese Americans?

Question (s):

How have irregular migration patterns, economic exclusion, and media representation shaped the lived experiences and public narratives of Fuzhounese Americans?

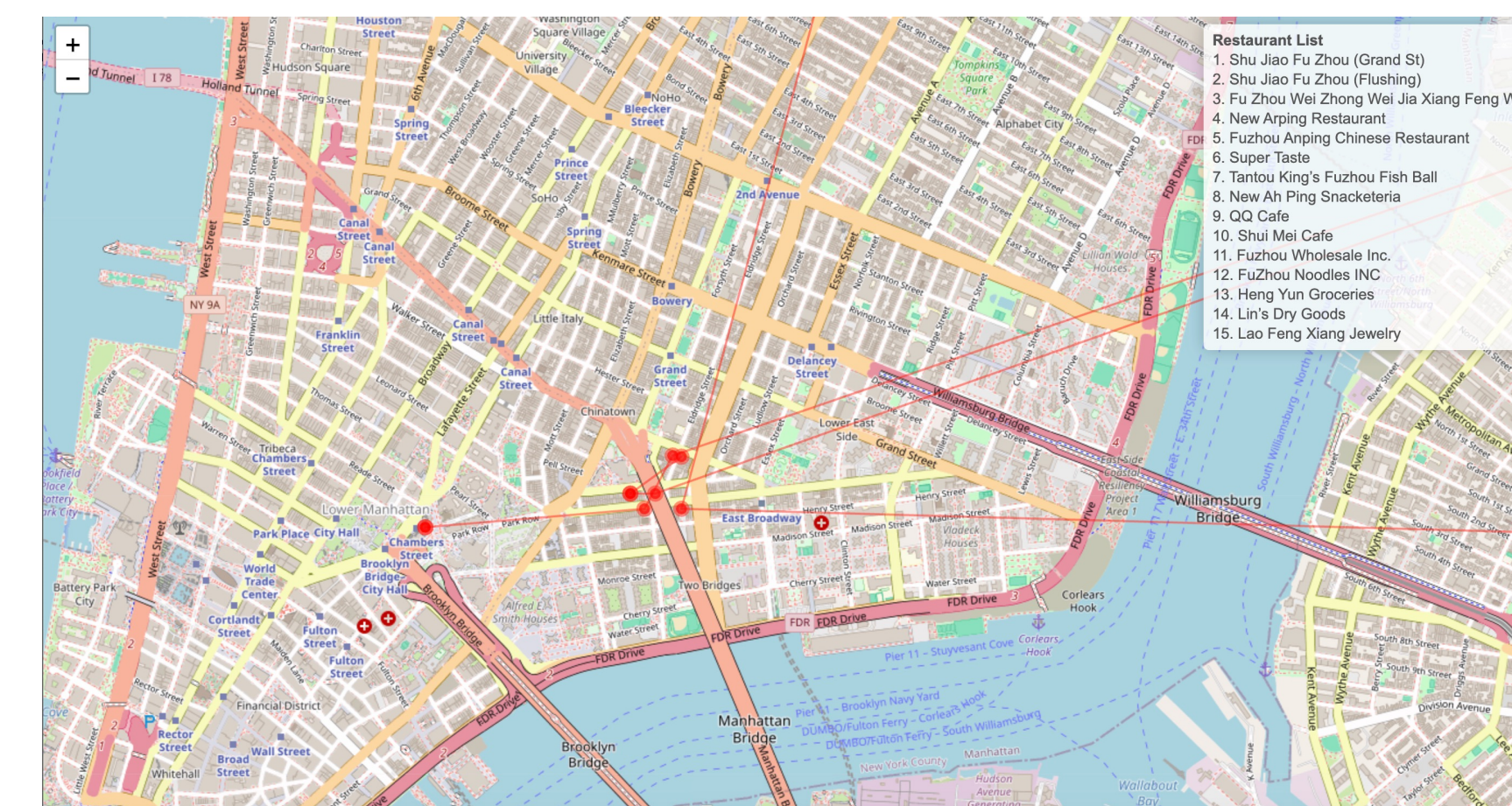
How can **visual documentation** and **spatial mapping** of Fuzhounese restaurants and daily life in Chinatown reveal **the vibrancy of the community, challenging dominant narratives of loss and marginalization**, and offering a **more grounded understanding of Fuzhounese experiences** within the broader Chinese American context?

Documentary Photography

Showing life and continuity in Chinatown rather than struggle and loss.



Brooklyn's Chinatown, Sunset Park. Eighth Avenue in Brooklyn: home to Fuzhounese, Cantonese, and Hispanic communities.



Conclusions:

- As the younger generations of Fuzhounese Chinese Americans grow and become more assimilated to American culture, Fuzhounese culture mainly lies in the hands of, now, the grandparents who made the initial immigration over to America.

- Areas such as East Broadway in Manhattan's Chinatown and Sunset Park in Brooklyn still have large Fuzhounese populations, but the Chinese population in Sunset Park is more distinctly bisected into the Fuzhounese and Cantonese, running alongside the large Puerto Rican and Mexican population.

- Signs of the service work that the Fuzhounese immigrated to America for are clearly depicted in what stores in heavily Fuzhounese communities sell. For instance, shoes that are marketed as being good for restaurant work and standard server uniforms.

Introduction:

- Moving forward from the literature review, a shift in focus was made to find a visual qualitative research method that could best represent the Fuzhounese community.

- Unlike the literature, which frames moments of time for the Fuzhounese community, the photo project aims to show the current reality of those who first immigrated from Fuzhou to New York, showing the vibrancy of what still remains of the culture, the people, and the history.

Methodology:

- Preliminary research included visiting both Manhattan's Chinatown and Sunset Park multiple times and mapping out different outward presenting Fuzhounese restaurants and stores.

- Challenging assumptions of what photos of the neighborhoods may have been expected to look like, understanding the root reasons and narratives that shaped those reflective visual imaginations.

- To document and highlight the Fuzhounese community, I used tools such as **R Studio** and **Google Maps** to map and visualize Fuzhounese restaurants, creating materials that both chart their locations and draw attention to their presence within the neighborhood.



Google Maps detailing Fuzhounese Restaurants and Stores



Photo Project + further readings and research.



A game of Xiangqi (Chinese Chess) played in a park in Manhattan's Chinatown by a group of elderly men.

Works Cited:

Chu, Julie Y. *Cosmologies of Credit: Transnational Mobility and the Politics of Destination in China*. Duke University Press, 2010.

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Radden Keefe, Patrick. *The Snakehead: An Epic Tale of the Chinatown Underworld and the American Dream*. Picador, 2009.