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# Creating Belonging

Fujianese Migrant Community and Transnational Motherhood

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Class of 2024

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Undergraduate Senior Thesis

*This thesis is dedicated to my beloved and chaotic Fujianese community; to all the “Aunties” who have cared for me and generously gifted me their time; and to all the dream chasers who have sailed across the sea, far away from their family and loved ones, to create a better future for us.*

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## Introduction

In March of 2023, I traveled from Philadelphia to Cape Town for one month to participate in a long-awaited study abroad journey. On my third night in Cape Town, I was craving Chinese food, so several members of my cohort and I sought out a Chinese restaurant. At the end of the meal, I overheard the restaurant owners and workers speaking in Fuzhounese (福州话), a language commonly spoken by people from Fujian Province, Fuzhou city in southern China. Hearing this familiar language, I felt an instant connection and approached them in my half-broken Fuzhounese. Within a few minutes we were exchanging contact information and asking each other where in Fuzhou city we are from, trying to find common people we may know.

When my group was planning to leave the restaurant, we realized that we couldn't call an Uber due to the lack of cash we carried. The sun had already set for an hour before, and we had been warned by our program coordinator that Cape Town at dark was not safe for us to travel on the streets by foot. So I timidly asked the owners if they could call an Uber for us and promised to pay them back. Instead of calling us an Uber, the owners asked me where my hotel was and offered to drive us back. We hesitantly rejected this kindness because we didn't want to disrupt their business operation, but they reassured us that they would feel more than happy to assist me, because "Fujianese people need to help each other, especially since we are out in the world and far away from our homes."

When one of the owners drove us back to our hotel, he reminded me that if I ever need anything while I'm in Cape Town I should feel free to reach out. Fortunately, I

didn't have to ask for help during my stay. However, they texted me on the last day of my visit, inviting me to a homemade seafood dinner, not knowing that I was leaving that afternoon. When I told them I was departing that day, they were very apologetic for not hosting me sooner and insisted on bringing the feast to me. They quickly cooked up a couple of South African abalones, one of the most famous and expensive delicacies of South Africa, each the size of my palms, and dropped it off where I was staying. Just as my family would care for me, they asked me to notify them when I landed safely at my next destination.

This encounter in South Africa took place a couple of months before proposing a topic for my thesis. It eventually ignited my interest in exploring the reasons behind the instant connections both the restaurant owner and I felt after learning about our shared Fujianese immigrant identity. Particularly, I feel compelled by the question of how migrant communities (which provide essential support for migrants) are formed from these instant familial-like connections. My identity as a Fujianese American woman gave me an opportunity to investigate these questions in the small Fujianese community in the American midwest where I grew up. My observations in the community led me to become interested in the experiences of Fujianese migrant women, who used a variety of techniques to knit together the Fujianese migrant community in the place I was conducting my research.

My interest in community formation initially led me investigate the question of how community care shapes the experience of Fujianese migrant women during a postpartum period called *yuezi* (月子). When the women are in Fujian, during *yuezi*, which is the first month after giving birth, they are expected to be cared for extensively

by their family and showered with gifts and visits from members of their community. However, when Fujianese women and men migrate away from China, they often travel by themselves or with their partner, rarely do other members of their family and friends accompany them. So, how are women being cared for during this period of time?

I initially proposed that women must be cared for by their newly formed community in the United States during their *yuezi*. However, interviews with the women proved me wrong. Instead, my interlocutors showed me that community care appeared moments later in motherhood, during the experiences of parenting.

Like *yuezi*, parenting in Fujian is usually a collective effort. Parents in Fujianese have extensive networks of support - from their own parents, siblings, to their friends and extended family. While parenting is essential to all the Fujianese migrant women and men I've interacted with in the community, Fujianese women carry a larger amount of societal expectation and active work for parenting.

My research with the women led me to look at parenting, asking questions on how Fujianese migrant mothers navigate parenting when they become physically disconnected from the extensive support network that characterizes their home communities in China. Do new communities and networks form in their new home? What enables the formation of new communities and networks? And how does their new community help the migrants with parenting or other aspects of their daily life as an immigrant in the United States?

In order to answer these questions, I interviewed four Fujianese migrant women in their 40s living in the same city in the American Midwest. They've all experienced either giving birth in the United States or China, and raising their children in either

country. I interviewed them during the college semester by calling them through the video chat function of WeChat (a social media app popularly used among Chinese people) for 1.5 hours to 2 hours. I also conducted participant observations at the homes and workplace of two of the interviewees over winter break. I spoke primarily in Mandarin (which I am fluent in) during my interactions and interviews, occasionally with some Fuzhounese (which I am not proficient in), which is the first language of all the interviewees.

I attended large group dinners with all the interviewees and was invited to attend some special moments in their life, such as assisting one of my interviewees purchasing her first house in the United States, and attending the house warming ceremony when they moved in.

My connection with this Fujianese community - as a Fujianese American and a child of one of the Fujianese families in the community - granted me access to many community events with my interviewees. Though I didn't pick my interviewees based on their occupation, most members of the Fujianese community in the city worked in restaurants, therefore my analysis was shifted towards Fujianese women who are co-owners of restaurants with their husbands.

### On Transnational Motherhood

During my interaction with the women, I observed that Fujianese mothers are always trying to provide the best for their children. With limited economic and social resources available in the United States as working class migrant women, they aim to provide



cultural belonging for their children. They provide care and produce belonging by employing both innovative and repetitive strategies. Fujianese migrant mothers are actively practicing what has been theorized as “transnational motherhood.”

The term “transnational motherhood” was coined by Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila in 1997. They conducted a combination of interviews, surveys, and ethnographic research with Latina women working as domestic workers in Los Angeles, who have children living in their country of origin (Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 1997).

Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila used the concept of transnational motherhood to describe mothers who experience “spatial and temporal separation” from their children but continue to mother their children from afar through various means (548).

However, Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila’s concept fails to encapsulate the complex ways that being an immigrant impacts motherhood. For instance, in partial alignment with their concept, Fujianese women experience mothering from afar by engaging in a phenomenon called “satellite parenting,” in which Fujianese couples sent their children (“satellite child”) born in the United States back to Fujian to be raised by their extended family due to the parents’ financial constraints and work obligations in the United States (Wong 2015; Chen 2022). However, when the children return to the United States to reunite with their parents, mothering from afar ends and Fujianese mothers have to navigate how to create belonging for their children in a new country.

Irene Gedalof has addressed the narrowness of the concept of “transnational motherhood,” and re-defines it as a dynamic process of reproducing culture, belonging, and identity by migrant mothers for their children (2009). She interviewed and formed focus groups with first-generation, working class migrant women and mothers from

Sierra Leone living in London to understand how migrant women articulate their care work to foster a sense of belonging for their children. She discovered that the common narrative among feminist migration studies of “juggling between two worlds [to create] material and emotional homes” fails to encapsulate the complexity of the process, and sets a priori that there are two stable places of belonging - England and Sierra Leone (88). Instead, migrant mothers spoke of the process of mothering as a messy and dynamic experience that requires repetition and creativity.

Gedalof’s conceptualization of transnational motherhood well captures Fujianese women’s experience with motherhood in the United States. Fujianese migrant mothers expose and immerse their children in Fuzhounese (language) at their restaurants, while also encouraging them to work at the restaurants and cultivate in them values of hard work and generosity. The women prepare Fujianese foods daily at the restaurant and at homes for their children, connecting their children to Fujian through food and creating belonging for them as Fujianese living in the United States. Through these processes, women practice what Gedalof defined as “transnational motherhood.”

Additionally, while this analysis focuses on transnational motherhood performed by Fujianese migrant mothers to their biological child, Fujianese migrant women also care for other people in the community (outside of their immediate family) in various ways to create belonging.

### On Liminality and *Communitas*

My experience in Cape Town reveals a typical instance when Fujianese migrants can form a strong connection with other Fujianese people just by knowing each other's identity, especially in a foreign country as a fellow migrant away from "home." It can be argued that this instant connection is ignited by hospitality of Fujianese people, but it is also through people's shared identity as Fujianese migrants - an experience of being in a seemingly permanent, liminal status as an immigrant.

The concept of liminality has been popularly utilized across different academic disciplines. However, the term liminality was first coined by anthropologist Arnold van Gennep, conceptualized as a state of transition - the intermediate stage when one person (or a group of people) transitions from one identity within a society to another (Turner 1966). Notably, this state of transition is marked by uncertainty and vulnerability of the individual, where they are neither a part of their social group prior to the transition nor are they yet part of the group they are transitioning into.

Anthropologist Victor Turner further developed the concept of liminality with his work on the initiation rituals among the Ndembu people of Zambia. In his book *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, he challenges Van Gennep and proposes that liminality is not a temporary state - it can be prolonged, such that certain groups of people can be stuck in a permanent state of transition. He pointed out that Christian pilgrims who experience being outside of the society but also within, constantly being in a state of transition from one place to another as an example of liminality being extended (Turner 1966, 107).

Sophie Alkhaled and Innan Sasaki referred to Turner's proposed liminality as "perpetual liminality [...] a state in which the temporal and transitional period have become institutionalised and where the state of social limbo has become indefinite and the three sequenced phases of the rites of passage have become frozen" (Alkhaled and Sasaki 2022, 1586). Perpetual liminality is an apt concept to capture how Fujianese immigrants of my study and Syrian refugee women of Alkhaled and Sasaki's study experience life in their destination communities as immigrants. Fujianese migrants feel a great deal of uncertainty due to their liminal status and a feeling of isolation from the rest of the society. However, this period of uncertainty can also be transformed into a period of potentiality.

Urban anthropology Farha Ghannam employed such possibilities in her work on gender dynamics and mobility of men and women from a low-income neighborhood in urban Cairo, Egypt (Ghannam 2011). Ghannam theorized that as the women and men navigate through urban Cairo, their mobility creates a liminal status, such that they are not at the destination nor the place of origin. Their liminal status grants them an opportunity to become "betwixt and between" two sets of social norms from two worlds, allowing them to "constantly [negotiate] between familiar, encoded ways of being [presented by the neighborhood] and new modes of presentation and conduct [...] in the city at large" (796). The liminal status provides the residents of the neighborhood a possibility of change that was formerly impossible.

Fujianese migrants also exist within a liminal space, where they are betwixt and between two worlds - their past lives in China, and their present lives in the United States. Their liminal status gives them an opportunity to develop strong connections

with other Fujianese migrants in the United States, forming communities that can share resources and support each other in daily lives.

How this intense emotional connection ignites community formation can be partially captured by another concept developed by Turner called *communitas*, which describes the “spontaneous, immediate, [and] concrete” formation of a group of people who are sharing the experience of being in a liminal status (Turner 1966, 127).

*Communitas* is a juxtaposition to the “norm-governed, institutionalized, [and] abstract[ly]” formed social structures and hierarchies in a given society (127). Turner’s concept of *communitas* captures the distinctive bonds generated among people who share liminal status as “a community of comrades and not a structure of hierarchically arrayed positions” (Turner 1970, 238).

*Communitas* can be utilized to theorize Fujianese migrant community formation, because Fujianese migrants share a similar experience of immigration and resettlement, building their restaurants from scratch, and creating a community within the liminal status; however, it fails to encapsulate the complexity of social dynamic and power relations within the Fujianese migrant community. Turner theorized *communitas* as bonds formed within a group of individuals who become indistinctive and homogenous when they enter the liminal space, emphasizing the equal distribution of power. While *communitas* enabled the Fujianese migrants in Cape Town to treat me like I am their daughter, there still exists a power relation regulated by one’s social status and migration history in the Fujianese migrant community, which determines who provides help and who receives help. This thesis aims to explore such examples where

*communitas*-like comradeships are formed, but other factors continue to influence dynamic power relations within the community.

### Main Argument and Chapter Summaries

Drawing from the interviews and ethnographic participation in the community, then deploying theoretical framework of both transnational motherhood and perpetual liminality, I found that Fujianese women practice motherhood by actively weaving together their past in Fujian and present in the United States for their children and their community, attempting to fill in gaps of experiences that are the result of immigration from Fujian.

The women I interviewed nurture the next generation of Fujianese against a backdrop of bustling restaurants, social challenges, and precarious economic conditions. Immigration doesn't mark the end of their chapter in Fujian, rather, it's the beginning of a new chapter in the United States, where they create a vibrant Fujianese immigrant community that blends old and new realities. Their liminal status as immigrants gives them the potential to form unusually close bonds - like kins - with each other. Such bonds enable Fujianese migrants to create a home away from home, and contribute to the communities collective survival in the United States.

In Chapter One, I borrow the concept of history as stories with distinct narrators and the perspectives proposed by anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot to reconstruct "a history" of Fujianese migration from stories told by my interviewees. I identify relationships and personal qualities highly valued by Fujianese migrant women to guide my analysis of transnational motherhood and liminality in the following two chapters.

In Chapter Two, I explore the ways in which Fujianese women work to perform transnational motherhood at the restaurant to cultivate Fujianese values and identity within their children. I show how the Fujianese family restaurant is a space in which the boundary between private and public spheres blurr, so it can become both a restricting agent and an empowering agent to perform transnational motherhood.

In Chapter Three, I discuss the factors that lead Fujianese migrant families to enter a perpetually liminal status, leading to their feeling of being alienated from communities around them. I reveal that through shared experiences of perpetual liminality, different Fujianese families form kin-like bonds and perform small acts of kindness in their everyday lives for each other, forming an archipelago of care.

In the final chapter, I link together the analysis for each chapter, and explore some of the shortcomings of this thesis, while also discussing the thesis' implication on present literature and discussion on transnational motherhood, perpetual liminality, and immigration experiences.

## Chapter One: “A History of Fujian”

*When Mazu died, she ascended to the sky to become the Heavenly Mother, the Goddess of Seafarers, and the Protector of Voyagers.*

Mazu (妈祖) is a deity that my family and other Fujianese families around me worship. Her story as the daughter of a fisherman from Fujian Province (福建省), and a woman with special abilities to save those at sea, is told to every child growing up in Fujian. Voyagers often pray to her for help. For instance, it is said that one of ancient China's greatest sea explorers and diplomats, Zheng He, would make a trip to the temple of Mazu to pray for the safety and success of his journey before each of his seven expeditions. To all the Fujianese men and women I've met and spoken to, when it becomes hard to provide for their family, migration over the mountain (to other parts of China) or across the sea (to another part of the world) becomes the ultimate solution. When one embarks on these journeys, they seek out protection from different deities for their journey, and principle among them is Mazu.

As the story of Mazu and her central importance reveals, the history of Fujian Province and the Fujianese people is a story of voyagers, a group of people who are intimately connected to exploration and the sea. In this chapter, I answer to the call of Haitian anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot, who theorized history as not only events that happened but also interpretations of those events (Trouillot 1995). Trouillot speaks of the need to reveal the intricate power-relations found in history telling – including questioning who gets to narrate, and which stories get told.



In this chapter, I draw inspiration from Trouillot by telling a history of Fujian from the perspectives of women who have embarked on a voyage to create a new home in a faraway land, while always keeping part of themselves rooted in the place they sailed from. This chapter explores how Fujianese women view family, generosity, and work ethics as essential values. This chapter aims to set up the foundational understandings that guide the choices Fujianese women make when performing transnational motherhood in Chapter Two and forming communities in Chapter Three.

### A “History” of Migration

Fujian is a province in the southern coast of China, across from Taiwan (台湾). To its southwest is Guang Dong Province (广东省), one of the most important trading ports in southern cities in China, and the only officially designated port for foreign trade between 1759 until the Treaty of Nanjing in 1842 (Howell, 1999). To its northeast is Zhejiang Province (浙江省), which is home to the city of Shanghai (上海市), one of the most economically prosperous cities in modern China (see Fig. 1). The natural geography and coastal position of Fujian has made it a historically militaristic frontier and a region marginalized from the center of politics in China.



Figure 1. Fujian Province is situated on the southern coast of mainland China (Matsuda 2023).

Roughly 95% of Fujian's total landmass is composed of mountainous terrains (Chong, 2013). Of its total landmass, only less than 10% is irrigable for farming. Given its mountainous topography, residents of the region turned to opportunities at sea for sustenance and harvest “the sea as its paddy” (Chong, 2013, 3). Fujianese people use an old colloquial saying, *kao shan chi shan, kao hai chi hai* (靠山吃山, 靠海吃海), or “to live by the mountain and eat from the mountain, to live by the ocean and eat from the ocean” to describe their dependency on their natural environment as direct sources for food and subsistence.

While fishing and shipbuilding are important industries in Fujian, foreign trade has also been an important part of the Fujianese economy. As early as 220 AD (Han Dynasty), records have shown that Fujian served as an important seaport for trade and ship-making in the region. Fujianese merchants have traded with Ryukyu Island (in

Japan) and Taiwan, then eventually following their trade and migrated to different parts of Southeast Asia and beyond (Howell 1999).

At multiple points in Chinese history, including the Yuan Dynasty (AD 1279-1368) and Ming Dynasty (AD 1368-1644), the imperial court and government prohibited foreign trade and seafaring, causing significant damage to the economy of Fujian Province. However, these prohibitions didn't stop foreign trade in the region – rather they forced them underground, often involving complicated networks of kinship connections and bribery (Chong 2013).

Since the Yuan Dynasty, with increasing economic opportunities (for men) at seashores – as sailors and shipbuilders at ports – Fujianese people have been inspired to migrate to Taiwan, Japan, other parts of Southeast Asia, and eventually the Americas (Chong 2013). Some migrants settled in their destination country and created clan or family-based transnational networks of migration. These networks became important for both pre-modern Fujian and present day Fujianese. First, transnational migratory networks are essential resources for subsequent migrants interested in traveling overseas (Lu et al. 2013). Second, overseas workers with families in China send home remittances that help stimulate Fujian's economy.

For example, transnational migratory networks and overseas Fujianese communities became crucial for the reconstruction of Fujian following the Japanese invasion of China in 1938. Japan started their invasion of China from Fujian, due to its strategic coastal position (see Fig. 1). Post invasion, Fujian struggled with reconstruction due to limited support from the mainland government (led by the Chinese Communist Party) who saw Fujian as the frontier between Taiwan (led by the Chinese

Nationalist Party) and mainland (Official Website for Government of Lian-Jiang County 2022). When Fujian's infrastructure was destroyed and its limited farmlands burned, overseas Fujianese earned money abroad and sent it back to Fujian to help with reconstruction. Overseas Fujianese communities also donated significant money to build infrastructure such as schools and roads, including one of the most prestigious universities in Fujian region and mainland China, the University of Xiamen (Howell 1999).

### *Mazu: A Goddess that Embodies Fujianese Values*

Instead of claiming to tell “the History” of Fujianese migration, which supposes that there is only one true history, I choose to tell the histories of Fujian from the perspectives of the women I've interviewed, which allows us to construct histories from their stories. In the process of constructing and retelling, the seemingly definitive line between myths and history becomes blurred. The myth about the goddess of sea Mazu, her story of becoming a deity and her identity as a Fujianese woman becomes intertwined with the history of Fujian and Fujianese women. In this sense, the myth of Mazu embodies the history of Fujian and the stories of Fujianese women.

The deity known among worshipers as Mazu, the Goddess of Seafarers, was born as Lin Mo at approximately AD 960 in Fujian Province (Lü 2015). She was born at the beginning of the Song Dynasty (AD 960-1279) when the rise of the Silk Road created a maritime route for prosperous trade along the southern China coast and

beyond. However, the rise of seafaring was also accompanied by increasing dangers at sea – such as shipwreck, caused by both unpredictable weather and pirate attacks.

According to legend, Lin Mo was a shy and incredibly intelligent girl growing up (Lü 2015; Maup van de Kerkhof 2023). She studied not only literature but also medicine and Buddhism. She was able to forecast weather at sea and performed magical acts known as *wushu* (巫术) to protect people from evil spirits.

Lin Mo refused to marry and committed her life to helping people. In one legend, she was weaving at home one day while her father and brother were at sea. She fell into a trance and saw that her father and brother were stuck in a turbulent storm. In her trance states, she was able to rescue her father. However, while she was trying to rescue her brother, her mother saw her shaking and woke her up from the trance, disrupting the rescue which led to the death of her brother.

Since then, Lin Mo dedicated herself to rescuing sailors, fishermen, and ships at sea, until her death in 987 AD (age 27). Worshipers believed that Lin Mo didn't die, rather she ascended to the sky and became a deity that protects voyagers and seafarers. As a deity, she became known as Mazu, *ma* means mother, and *zu* means the origin or the ancestor. Her name points to her compassionate and caring character and powerful status as the ancestral protector of voyagers.

Mazu is worshiped by many Fujianese migrants, since one of the most dangerous experiences in Fujianese migrants' life is the passage they make across the ocean from Fujian. This border crossing journey has cost thousands of lives since routes were established, including the infamous sinking of the *Golden Venture* in 1993 in New York which carried hundreds of illegalized migrants from Fujian (Keefe 2013).

Mazu is also culturally significant to Fujianese women because she embodies many qualities that Fujianese women deeply value and seek to emulate. One revered quality is her loyalty to her family as a caring daughter and sister to her parents and siblings. Though she was never married nor had any children, the ways she cared for her community makes her a mother-like figure to all those in her community. This form of care not only embodies how mothers are the pillar of the Fujianese community, it also suggests that motherly care and kin-like relationships can be extended to people outside of the immediate family members. My experience in Cape Town of being cared for like a daughter by a Fujianese migrant family illustrates such values (see Introduction for story).

Mazu's generosity towards members of her community, and her dedication to work to save those who seek her protection are important values for Fujianese people. Fujianese women in China and abroad see generosity and supporting each other in the community as essential values. Those who fail to perform such values are often denoted by others in the community as being "selfish" and "unlike the rest of us" which outcasts them (see later section for more discussion on generosity and the danger of being "selfish"). Having a strong work ethic is also a highly valued quality, it can be a measurement of one's character. Mazu worked tirelessly to support people that sought her help until her death, and she continues to dedicate her power to helping others when she becomes a deity.

The widespread worship of Mazu by Fujianese people in different parts of the world suggest one important way in which these values are honed and maintained by the Fujianese diaspora. Especially among the Fujianese women I interviewed, values of

supporting one's family, generosity towards each other, and having a strong work ethic are essential to their identity as Fujianese. As I will illustrate below, these ideals influence the decisions they make in their day to day lives.

Restaurant work requires *chiku* (吃苦)

One of my interviewees, Li Yun<sup>1</sup>, immigrated to the United States with her husband in 2016. She is in her late forties, with small stature and thick hands, and loud laughter that fill a room. Before immigrating to the United States, Li Yun and her husband lived in Liao Ning Province in northern China for nearly twenty years. They ran a small goldsmith shop to support their family back in Fujian. However, when it became increasingly difficult for them to earn enough money in Liao Ning Province, they decided to embark on a journey to find work in the United States, following in the footsteps of many other people they knew from their hometown.

Once Li Yun and her husband landed in the United States, they immediately started working in restaurants, trying to pay off the debts they owed for the border crossing journey. Li Yun has two children, her oldest daughter is in her mid-twenties, and her son is in his teens, and both of them live in China. She supports both of them financially, and calls them constantly to mother from afar. She hopes to bring them to the United States once she and her husband obtain more stable financial status.

When I first met Li Yun, I learned that her hands are very sensitive to water, and everytime after washing dishes her hands would be filled with patches of red rash and

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<sup>1</sup> All names in the thesis are pseudonyms to preserve the anonymity of interviewees.

itching pain. Before working in restaurants, she was able to avoid the discomfort by wearing gloves while washing dishes. Now, she doesn't have the luxury for this extra care. She said, "we all *chiku* (吃苦) to work in the restaurant." Growing up in Fujian, Li Yun is used to working hard and *chiku*, or to swallow bitterness and endure hardship. Like most families in the 1970s in rural Fujian, Li Yun's parents relied on agricultural work for subsistence. Li Yun described her childhood as a mix of playing in the mountains and doing chores. Her family worked hard to grow sweet potatoes, rice, and to raise pigs, but they never had enough to eat so she rarely felt full in the stomach. Fieldwork was tiresome and food was never enough. She has learned to *chiku* since her childhood.

*Li Yun: I stopped attending school after third grade.*

*Me: Why?*

*Li Yun: Well, as a kid, I saw my parents going into the mountains and it seemed really fun, and I didn't like going to school, so I stopped going.*

*Me: But isn't working in the field very hard?*

*Li Yun: Yes, so I left and headed to Fuzhou when I was thirteen.*

*Me: Thirteen! By yourself?*

*Li Yun: Yeah, I first found a job in Fuzhou city, working as a painter for construction.*

*Me: How long did you work there for?*

*Li Yun: Not very long, just a year. Then I worked in a hotel for a couple of years. I saved enough money and started opening a convenience store.*

*Me: With uncle [her husband]?*



*Li Yun: No, I opened a convenience store before I met him. I opened the store when I was twenty, and married him when I was twenty two. I continued to work in the convenience store after we got married. Living in Fuzhou is expensive.*

*Me: Why did you move to Liao Ning Province?*

*Li Yun: To earn more money. There isn't too much money to earn in Fuzhou, so we had to earn money elsewhere.*

*Me: Working in a restaurant in the United States is harder and more tiring, do you regret coming here?*

*Li Yun: At home [Fujian], it is more comfortable but there is a lot of pressure and not much money to earn, and we have elders and children to take care of. In the United States, as long as you can chiku and work hard, then you can save money. If I have to do everything over again, I will still choose to come to the United States.*

Li Yun's experience with migration within China - from her home town to Fuzhou city, then to Liao Ning Province - to find work opportunities to support herself, her children and elders shows the importance of working hard to provide. Even if it means moving far away from home and distant from their familiar networks of support. For all the Fujianese women I interviewed, *chiku* has always been a part of their life experience.

*Chiku* can be directly translated to having strong work ethics, but through the ways women describe their experiences of *chiku*, another dimension of the concept of *chiku* arises. *Chiku* is not only working hard, but working hard for someone - it is working hard to care for one's loved ones, and working hard to provide.

Like Li Yun, the women I interviewed shared similar life experiences of working in the field with their parents. They are accustomed to enduring hardship of baking under the sun, plowing the field, and harvesting crops for the survival of the family. Going to bed on a half full stomach is part of their memory of their childhood. After their migration to the United States, they worked in restaurants to provide for their family, which also required *chiku*. Restaurant work can last twelve hours a day. During most of the day, workers are standing in front of a pot of heated and splashing oil, sweating in their aching arms from the heavy wok they have to lift.

Enduring *chiku* to provide for their families is what Fujianese men and women have learned from their experiences growing up, and what they hope to instill in their children. The significance of *chiku* as a determinant of a person's character and reliability becomes evident in discussions I've had with Fujianese women about qualities they hope to see in their children's life partner. In my interviews, all the women indicated to me their aspiration for their sons and daughters to form families, and preferably with other Fujianese girls and boys.

Ai Lin, one of the interviewees whose son is in his mid-twenties, emphasized to me why it is important for her son to get married to a Fujianese woman:

*Ai Lin: We Fujianese women can chiku, unlike others. It is best for my son to marry a Fujianese, they will walk through the goods and bads together. You should marry a Fujianese too.*

*Me: I haven't thought too much about that...*

*Ai Lin: Well, Fujianese men can chiku and are very loyal. You know back in those days when men came to the United States to work, northerners [men from*

*northern Chinese] would earn money and go to those places [brothels], leaving their children and wife starving in China. But Fujianese men would never, they are very loyal to their family. They would never go to those places [brothels]. They would work hard to save up and send their money back to China. I would see northerners working in my restaurant do that, but the Fujianese workers would never. I bet your mom would also like you to marry a Fujianese boy.*

Ai Lin believes that not only are Fujianese men and women loyal to their family and care for their children, they work hard to provide for their family and can *chiku*. She has cultivated her son, who helps his father and mother at the restaurant, to be able to *chiku*, which she believes will put him in a good position in terms of marriage and life.

To the Fujianese mothers, being able to *chiku* also denotes a certain level of maturity and responsibility, because only those who can *chiku* are deemed worthy and ready for marriage. *Chiku* is a quality that one person can develop through their experiences, and encouraging their children to work in the restaurant becomes the primary way for Fujianese migrant mothers to honed in this quality into their children (further explored in Chapter Two).

Fujianese communities' endorsement of having strong work ethics and sacrificing for one's family, exemplified by the concept of *chiku*, is placed in similar levels of importance to their esteem for generosity. Being called "a generous person" is considered one of the greatest praises to a Fujianese person. The next section will share two stories demonstrating the importance of generosity in the Fujianese community.

“She’s generous like a Fujianese”

Another key quality of Mazu that Fujianese people highly value and seek to cultivate is generosity. Mazu shared her power by helping people in her community and beyond, not allowing her own greed as a human being with power to guide her actions.

Generosity is a value highly adored by Fujianese people.

Every Fujianese migrant woman I spoke with grew up in poverty, with not enough food to fill their stomach during their childhood because of the economic conditions of rural Fujian. But generosity enabled their survival. All the women remember sharing food and other essential supplies with other families in their town, trying to get by the difficult living conditions together. A story about one of my interviewees Ai Lin’s experiences exemplifies the importance of being generous.

Ai Lin is a Fujianese migrant woman in her forties. She sought political asylum with her husband after arriving in the United States in 2008. Her husband’s two sisters immigrated to the Midwest a couple years before Ai Lin arrived in the United States, so when Ai Lin and her husband arrived, they sought shelter with his sisters. After a couple of years of working, they opened their own Chinese restaurant.

A number of Chinese restaurants in the city are run by Fujianese families, so Ai Lin befriended many Fujianese women. Ai Lin is very generous and welcoming. Every time I visit her, she insists on feeding me with many fruits and shoving snacks into my hands and pockets. It is hard leaving Ai Lin’s restaurant without being fed and gifted with more food.

However, one of Ai Lin’s sisters-in-law, Mei Yi, suffers from the reputation of being ungenerous towards her friends and family. Mei Yi’s reputation came from her

actions at multiple community gatherings, particularly at dinner parties. Fujianese families enjoy hosting dinner parties. At a typical dinner party, the host family provides the space (their restaurant) and fills it with many food and drinks, and all the other families come with a dish or two that they know the host would appreciate. Arriving with a good dish or drinks is important to maintain good relationships in this community, where generosity and reciprocity are highly valued for good relationships.

Women in the Fujianese community dislike how Mei Yi often attends such events without bringing any dishes, nor does she help the host with food preparation, which is another social expectation. At one particular dinner party, the host prepared some delicacies, including lobsters and premium steak. Mei Yi quickly sat in the corner in front of the lobsters and steak, and served herself first with the best parts. Her behavior at the party became a point of tension for multiple Fujianese women, who purposefully left the meaty parts for the children. Additionally, when friends visit her restaurants, Mei Yi rarely asks them to stay for a meal. But when she visits another restaurant, she expects to be fed with good food.

These actions earned Mei Yi a reputation of being an ungenerous and selfish person. This reputation has in turn led to her social exclusion from community events. Mei Yi's reputation has also led women in the community who know Ai Lin very well to take pity on Ai Lin for her association as a sister-in-law to Mei Yi. Unspoken social tensions within the extended family, particularly over Mei Yi's reputation, have led Ai Lin to distance herself from Mei Yi.

On the other hand, generosity displayed by people outside of the Fujianese community can open doors for their entrance into the community. Qiu Ling is an

immigrant woman from Guang Dong Province (广东省) in southern China. She runs a small gift shop in the local mall. Because she is not a good cook, she would often eat out, and that led her to befriend Li Jin, a Fujianese woman whose restaurant is across the street from the mall. Li Jin would often bring food for Qiu Ling when she visits the mall, and Qiu Ling is very appreciative of this so she would give the Li Jin's children toys from her store, help the family when they are understaffed at the restaurant, and bring fresh seafood for the family when she travels to asian grocery stores hours away from the city.

Ai Lin and other women in the Fujianese community are very fond of Qiu Ling for her generosity and kindness, and have invited Qiu Ling to events within the Fujianese community. They've befriended Qiu Ling and think that despite her being from Guang Dong Province, "she's generous like a Fujianese." In this way, Qiu Ling, who would be considered an outsider, is welcomed into the community because of her generosity towards her friends; but Mei Yi, who is a part of the community, becomes socially rejected because of her ungenerous reputation.

Generosity and *chiku* are both highly cherished values among Fujianeses people and their diaspora. Fujianese women exercise transnational motherhood by mobilizing limited resources to cultivate their children with these values. These values are also crucial for promoting community formation - being generous requires creating a reciprocal relationship between two or more people, and being able to *chiku* requires one to care for others and make sacrifices. These values are foundational for the discussion in the next section on kinship-based and community-based networks.

## Not a Mafia, Just Fujianese

In addition to having a reputation for being very generous, Fujianese people have a reputation for their family-based, regional networks. One example of such a kinship-based and community-based network is the transnational migratory networks that enable illegalized border crossing among Fujianese. Recently, there are many tragic stories on Chinese social media (Tiktok and Chinese news outlets) of people who aspire to work abroad by utilizing small, underground smuggling organizations, then ending up organ trafficked and sex trafficked into other Southeastern countries. These stories caused a high level of distrust among potential Fujianese migrants in using unfamiliar networks for border crossing.

Based on various stories I've collected and heard, I learned that Fujianese border-crossers usually utilize their kinship-based and community-based networks for their passage. When a person decides (or often it is a collective decision with involvement of the family) that they want to work in another country to support their family in Fujian, they often utilize familial and kinship connections to find a "snakehead", or *shetou* (蛇头), which is a smuggler who helps navigating and transporting the border crossers to their destination country.

Snakeheads charge a hefty fee for this service. To meet this high fee, many families pool financial support from their friends and extended families, including neighbors. Notably, Fujianese who chose to migrate for work are often individuals from rural areas that have some but not sufficient economic means. In these rural areas, the whole town could share a last name which indicates their shared ancestry. Therefore, neighbors are often still related to the family in some extended connections.

Debts, both monetary and social, accumulated from the border crossing journey are repaid in various ways. Once a person makes a successful border crossing journey and establishes themselves in their destination country, they work to pay back the money they owe. Also, as a part of their social debt, even after they have repaid the monetary amount, immigrants are expected to help people following suit from their community in Fujian. All of my interviewees have experience with supporting others who are planning to immigrate to the United States. Though sometimes it can be described as a social debt, my interviewees also help others who haven't supported them but are related to them. They described this as a social obligation (and not social debt) towards people back in their home communities.

Community is highly valued by Fujianese in Fujian and abroad, but family is their fundamental support system. All of the women I interviewed spoke of their family as their primary source of support - emotionally, financially, and physically. Naturally, they want to be close to their support network when they migrate to a foreign country. This is suggested when I asked them what influenced their decision to settle down in the Midwest, all the women spoke of having relatives in the area that encouraged them to move to the Midwest, then finding opportunities to open their own restaurant led them to settle down there.

Fujianese people see families as the strongest and most trustworthy support network. However, families are not infallible as Mei Yi and Ai Lin's situation illustrate. But for Li Yun, she settled down in the Midwest precisely because of encouragement from her cousin, Lin Jiao, who lives in the area. During the global pandemic, Lin Jiao heard from Li Yun's older sister that Li Yun has remained unemployed in New York City



throughout 2020. Lin Jiao told Li Yun's older sister that there was a Fujianese restaurant owner in town who was selling his Chinese restaurant. Lin Jiao thought it was an excellent opportunity for Li Yun, so she encouraged Li Yun's older sister to communicate with Li Yun about the opportunity.

After speaking with Li Yun's sister, Lin Jiao then video chatted with Li Yun and encouraged her to move to the Midwest. Li Yun had never operated a restaurant before, especially in the United States where she can't speak English fluently, so she was not very confident about moving to take over management. Li Jiao reassured Li Yun that her family would help.

At that time, Lin Jiao's daughter, who was fluent in English, was in her second year of college and far away from home, but she was asked to support this process. Lin Jiao's daughter was given legal documents from the landlord for rental, and in turn spent hours on the phone with city utilities to change accounts and titles. Lin Jiao's husband spent hours surveying the restaurant to make sure everything was working properly, and helping Li Yun and her husband set up the menu. Lin Jiao prepared their house for Li Yun and her husband to stay until they found their own apartment, and drove them around to familiarize them with the city.

When anything comes up that they can't decide by themselves, problems with the landlord or needing someone to translate for their healthcare plans, Li Yun and her husband sought out Lin Jiao's family for advice and support. Lin Jiao's family also happily provided all this support because "we are family" (都是家里人).

While kinship comes through birth, good kinship also requires care to sustain. One way to sustain relationships is by constantly calling each other through the phone,

which Fujianese women excel at. Through phone calls, Fujianese women care for others living in different parts of the United States and in China (explored further in Chapter Three).

Fujianese communities - both abroad and in Fujian - are tightly knitted and interconnected. Therefore, one's behaviors abroad can influence one's reputation and their family's reputation and relationships in Fujian. Fujianeses prized their family and community as the primary source of support, and their family and community often reciprocate such demands with positive responses, which in turns keep the cycle going. In light of the formation of such an unusually tight-knit community, I raise the metaphor of the Italian mafia, which is often presented in popular culture as an example for an unusually tight-knit group based on kinship and sacrifice for each other.

#### Conclusion: Migration as a Necessity and an Aspiration

An Yun was born in 1975, in a small, rural township in Fuzhou city, Fujian Province. She's the second oldest of five children. Her parents were both farmers that tended to the field with limited formal education, and An Yun didn't enjoy working in the fields, so she knew that studying hard was her only way to make it in China. However, no matter how hard she tried, she struggled in school. So, she withdrew from school at the end of middle school and started working from job to job.

When she was around sixteen to seventeen years old, her father received an opportunity to travel to the United States and work. Her father made the border crossing journey and worked extremely hard in restaurants, where most Fujianese migrants in

the United States typically worked and congregated at the time (a phenomenon which continues). Soon, he applied for his son and his wife to immigrate to the United States. At this point, An Yun was in her early twenties, and she dreamed of going to the United States, to do something greater and earning more money for herself. So, she begged her father, and quit her job to study English in the meantime. Finally in 1998, her paperwork came, and she took a flight to the United States from Fuzhou city and landed in New York city.

Unlike An Yun, most of the other women I spoke with immigrated to the United States either with their husband or after their husband had crossed the border. Regardless, all the Fujianese men and women came to the United States to look for opportunities to provide - for their families but also for themselves - an opportunity for something beyond the life they confined in Fujian, where jobs for men and women with limited education in the rural area are limited.

In the stories shared by the women, we identify pieces of values that are cherished by Fujianese women and men. We also see how Mazu, the protector of seafarers and explorers, becomes an important figure for the Fujianese people. She is the mother of all, who cares for the community. She is hardworking and can *chiku*. She is generous and kind hearted, family oriented, strong and prevailing. Life as a migrant in a foreign country is difficult, but these values keep Fujianese men and women strong in their voyage.

In the next chapter, I focus on how Fujianese migrant mothers navigate mothering their children in the United States without familial support. I discuss how they

utilize many resources to perform transnational motherhood, instilling values of generosity and creating belonging for their children by mothering at the restaurant.

## Chapter Two: Mothering at the Restaurant

I arrived at Fang Hua's family restaurant at around 3pm on a weekday. Business was slow, so Fang Hua was chatting with the workers when I walked in and greeted her. They were getting ready to eat lunch, and I was invited to join them. I sat down at the small table in the back of the kitchen with Fang Hua and her four workers. All the workers (except one) at Fang Hua's family restaurant are from the same county in Fuzhou city, and they are all distantly related to Fang Hua.

Even though I had already eaten, it felt impolite to reject a meal, so I accepted their offer and drank some peanut and pork stomach soup. Fang Hua insisted that I try the meatballs, putting one in my empty soup bowl as she praised the meatballs and the Fujianese worker who made them.

*Fang Hua: When we were young, we could only have this [pointing at the meatball] during Lunar New Year.*

*Me: Really?*

*Fang Hua: Oh yes! We would make them from pork, tofu, egg, and some spices. We don't have much to eat during the year, so we would save these meatballs past the New Year.*

*Me: How do you do that? You didn't have refrigerators' back then?*

*Fang Hua: We'd hang them in a basket. When guests visit, my parents would take out a meatball. The meatballs would be hardened on the surface, but they are still edible inside, so we'd peel off the skin and cook it for the guests.*

Fang Hua was happy to be able to recreate this dish and share it with me when I visited, even though she told me it's not exactly the way her parents would make it due to differences in spices available in the United States and Fujian, and the quality of the pork and tofu.

When her nine-year-old son and twelve-year-old daughter arrived at the restaurant for lunch, Fang Hua insisted that they try the meatballs too. Her son refused to try one, which Fang Hua explained to me was part of a broader pattern he had developed to consistently refuse to try new foods and flavors. Over the next ten minutes or so, I watched as Fang Hua tried to convince her son to eat the meatballs. At last, after much cajoling, he finally agreed to take one bite and have his father finish the rest. In the meantime, I listened to this conversation and started answering to the bustling ringing of the business phone...



For Fang Hua and all the interviewees, the restaurant is a paradoxical space, where their motherhood is both challenged and empowered. The restaurant serves as the prominent backdrop for the Fujianese women's experience of motherhood in the United States, because they are families that run restaurants. The restaurant blockades the women from having a proper postpartum healing period of *yuezi* (月子, the postpartum month), prohibiting them from a good healing and a proper start to motherhood. At the same time, the restaurant enables them to instill a sense of identity of being Fujianese within their children, cultivating important values such as *chiku* and generosity, nurturing their children, and creating a sense of belonging as Fujianese

American. The restaurant enables the Fujianese women to perform what Geladof has called “transnational motherhood” (2009).

The restaurant is also a paradoxical place where work, parenting, and community interactions intertwine. This fact contrasts to urban sociologist Ray Oldenburg’s notion of “the third place,” which theorized a space outside of home and work where community is created (Oldenburg 1989). According to Oldenburg, there is a “third place” outside of the home (“the first place”) and work (“the second place”) in people’s daily life. While, for Fujianese families, the restaurant is a “third place-like space” in that these businesses become centers of community life. The restaurant is the site of work and the site where families spend most of their time during the day together (serving as a home), and the place where the community – other Fujianese families – come to gather for dinners and other social events (further discussed in Chapter Three). The restaurant is the space where belonging, meaning, work, and community building are all created.

In this chapter, I explore how the restaurant is the place where family life and work all melt together, and Fujianese women have to be mothers at this paradoxical place that I call “the bridging place.” The restaurant not only allows Fujianese women to provide for their family and mother their children, it also allows the women to cultivate a sense of belonging and identity in their children. The restaurant “bridges” the women’s past experiences with their future, and connects their children to their mothers.

### Restaurant as “the Bridging Place”

Like Fang Hua’s family, many Fujianese families who have migrated to the United States and other parts of the world typically establish and work in small Chinese restaurants. All my interviewees and others in the Fujianese community run take-out restaurants or buffets. The whole family works in the restaurants with a gendered division of labor. Usually the father runs the back kitchen, working with the woks and chopping chicken and beef. Mothers typically handle the fryer, and attend to the customers at the front counter or over the phone. Once the children are old enough, they are typically found helping their mother with the front counter, answering the business phone or packaging the food.

The theory of the third place proposed by Oldenburg captures some of the complexity of the nature of the restaurant. In his book *The Great Good Place*, Oldenburg coins and explores the term “the third place,” which is a space outside of the first place (the home) and second place (the work place), where individuals gather to socialize as a community (Oldenburg 1989). Oldenburg spoke of “the Arabian coffeehouse, the German *bierstuhe*, the Italian *taverna*, and the old country store of the American frontier” as examples of the third place (Oldenburg 1989, 21).

Oldenburg theorized the third place as a space outside of the first place and second place where everyone feels no social hierarchy nor gendered division (with the assumption that these third places host people from the same gender), conversations are enjoyable; a space that is both accessible and welcoming for everyone in the community, serving like “a home away from home” (42). Though the third place is homely, Oldenburg saw it as fundamentally different from home, “homes are private



settings; third places are public” (42). This distinction of American life as one where the first, second, and the third place are completely separate fails to encapsulate the experience of the Fujianese immigrant family at the restaurants.

Instead, I propose to see the restaurant as an intersection between private and public space. Feminist theorist Karen Hagemann points out that the construction of the private and public spheres as separate was based on gendered division of labor in a capitalist society (Hagemann 2013). The public sphere is associated with “work,” or men’s work outside of the home, and the private sphere is associated with “reproductive labor,” which is historically associated with women. The Fujianese family-run restaurant is an intersection between public space and private space, because the restaurant is where both men and women perform both “work outside of home” and “reproductive labor” of child rearing. The restaurant is a space that blurs the border between private and public sphere. An example of this blurring can be seen with how the Fujianese restaurant owners interact with their children at the restaurant.

For instance, after Fang Hua’s family finished their lunch, I sat and conversed with Fang Hua’s younger daughter while Fang Hua’s husband played throwing ball with his nine-year-old son in the dinning area of the restaurant. They were giggling and taking up the whole space, occasionally throwing the ball towards the entrance, where customers could walk in at any moment. When customers started to appear, they stopped playing ball and moved to the back, and Fang Hua’s children started working on their homework at the table next to Fang Hua’s packing station.

Due to the demanding nature of restaurant work, Fang Hua and her husband had to raise their children in the restaurant, despite the children’s occasional resistance to

come. Since dinner time is usually the busiest time for all the restaurants, children typically arrive at the restaurant in time to eat, but then are expected to help their parents when it becomes busy.

At Fang Hua's restaurant, there is a small table with multiple chairs by the station where Fang Hua packs food for the customers. This table is the space for Fang Hua to pack crispy noodles and almond cookies, or make crab rangoon when the children are not around. When the children arrived after school, this same table became the place Fang Hua's children worked on their homework. There are similar designated spaces (with some variation) in the restaurants of Ai Lin and An Yun, who are the other women I interviewed. In each of these three different restaurants, the places allocated for children to play or work on homework were close to the mothers' workstation, an arrangement that allows mothers to keep an eye on their children while working.

Fujianese restaurant children (children of Fujianese restaurant families) play at the restaurant. Sometimes, they cry and make a scene at the restaurants. The nature of the restaurant as a work space becomes blurred when it is utilized by Fujianese parents and children as a private space. This becomes evident when some customers become surprised and even upset at the children's presence in the restaurant.

One of my interviewees, Ai Lin, spoke of a particular incident when a customer was upset at the presence of her son at the restaurant. Her son was ten years old at the time and was seated behind the counter with his iPad, and the customer spotted him and asked accusingly, "shouldn't he be in school?" The customer was uncomfortable seeing the child at the restaurant, which is not home nor school - the appropriate places for children to be in the ordinary American consciousness. The customer was also

questioning Ai Lin's ability as a mother to keep her son at the restaurant. This question and attitude indicates the customers' discomfort at the ways in which Fujianese restaurant spaces fail to keep the traditional boundary between public and private space intact. Home as the private space is defined as where children are allowed to play and cry; and work (or a place of business) as the public space is meant to be free of children's presence, and certainly of their interruptions.

In addition to the restaurant's role in breaking boundaries between private and public space, it is also an important space for Fujianese families to socialize with other Fujianese community members. Importantly, as will be described in greater detail in Chapter Three, restaurants are the center of community care. Therefore, the restaurant can be considered a third place based on Oldenburg's theory.

The nature of the restaurant is a blur between private and public space, an extension of home; it is a space that incorporates qualities of Oldenburg's first, second, and third places. Therefore, I propose to name the restaurant the "bridging place," where work, home, and community are all bridged together. This is a unique space where families work to provide, community care is practiced, and Fujianese women's commitment to mothering is both empowered and challenged. Below, I explore the ways in which Fujianese mothers use this restaurant space to bridge their children with Fujianese culture despite being in a place far away from Fujian. The mothers actively work to create a sense of belonging in their children through the restaurant as a bridging place.

### Challenges for Mothering at the Restaurant: *zuo yuezi* (坐月子)

When conversing with the women I interviewed, they referred to the restaurant directly as a workplace, with a purpose to provide for the family by working in the restaurant; however, these two priorities - working in the restaurant and providing for the family - can come into conflict with each other. This is most evident when speaking of the women's experience with their postpartum healing process, or *zuo yuezi* (坐月子).

When I started conducting interviews, I was interested in learning how Fujianese migrant women are cared for by their community during their *yuezi* (月子), which is the first month postpartum, and a special period of time when they are expected to be cared for extensively and recover from giving birth. A proper *yuezi* for Fujianese women - according to my interviewees - consists of at least a month resting in bed, being cared for by either their mothers and sisters or a professional nanny called *yuesao* (月嫂), who specializes in taking care of women in their *yuezi*. Every day, the mother would be fed with seven meals, mostly consisting of noodle soup that has vegetables and different types of meat. The newborn will be cared for by other members of the family or the *yuesao*, and the new mother's only responsibility is to stay in bed, sleep, and recover from childbirth.

During the interviews, I learned that for most Fujianese migrant women whose parents are not around and their economic means are limited, they often don't receive the care one would expect for a proper *yuezi*. The restaurant demands that their only close family member around them - their husband - be present in the restaurant to maintain the livelihood of the family. The restaurant also demands the women to recover quickly, without the proper amount of time to heal from giving birth. One of my

interviewees, Fang Hua, had a quite exemplary experience of what doing *yuezi* without much of a support network in the United States was like.

During Fang Hua's latest pregnancy, she and her husband were running a Chinese restaurant together when they found out she was pregnant. She was scheduled to have a C-section, so a few hours before the scheduled session, she left the restaurant to go home, cooked herself a bowl of noodle soup, braided her own hair, and packed her bag for the hospital. After she gave birth, she came home with her baby. Her husband was busy with running the restaurant because that is the only source of income for the family. He would prepare a pot of soup for her everyday and leave it at home.

Instead of having someone prepare all her meals for her, she had to get up and cook the noodles with the soup. She had only three meals a day (as opposed to seven meals) and took care of the baby at the same time (as opposed to being cared for by her family). She talked about the pain she felt from the c-section, and not being able to fully heal from childbirth during her *yuezi*. She attributed many of her present illnesses, such as migraine, back pain, and constant coldness of the body (known as *tihan*, 体寒) to the bad *yuezi* she had - which lacked the proper amount of care since she had to do everything on her own.

Caring for *yuezi* is usually articulated in terms of physical care, but there is also a mental and spiritual level of care that needs to be achieved. Another woman I interviewed, Ai Lin, had her second child in China and had a *yuezi* with all the proper physical care. However, she spoke of her experience as one of immense stress. She was pregnant with her second child at the height of the One Child Policy in China, so

once she learned she was pregnant, she immediately hid out at one of her relative's houses. After she gave birth, she returned to her in-law's house for her *yuezi*, but her newborn was placed in another relative's house to be taken care of.

A few months after her *yuezi*, she and her husband immigrated to the United States to find better work opportunities. The political and economic pressure she experienced prevented her from having the stress-free recovery that she should have had during her *yuezi*, and involuntary physical separation from her son during the first few months of his life – and eventually multiple years after he was born until she received legal status to apply for her son's immigration while she was working in the restaurant – made Ai Lin feel extremely guilty towards her son. She also told me about her health being not as good after the birth of her second child compared to after her first child, which she attributed to her stress after her second *yuezi*.

For women who had the “luxury” of a proper *yuezi* in the United States, they are well aware that they are able to have this proper experience because of the assistance of their family. An Yun gave birth to both of her children in the United States. Her mother-in-law was living with her during her pregnancies and during her *yuezi*, so she was able to have a proper *yuezi*. She often described herself as lucky compared to many other migrant women who work in restaurants, from whom she has heard horror stories of having to do *yuezi* by themselves. An Yun's experience is not typical within the larger scope of stories told by my interviewees nor Shi's ethnography about Fujianese women's experience with maternity in Brooklyn Chinatown (2015). Shi's research revealed that Fujianese women in Brooklyn Chinatown, most of whom are

Fujianese workers in Chinese restaurants, all described being on their own during their *yuezi* due to the lack of close familial network and financial means to hire *yuesao*.

*Yuezi* is an important postpartum period with specific rituals for Fujianese mothers. It is special in many aspects. First, this is a period in a mother's life when they are not expected to perform any work of care and instead are being cared for by others. Secondly, a good *yuezi* signifies a good start into motherhood. *Yuezi* provides a time for women to transition both physically and mentally into being a mother.

*Yuezi* is a period of care not only for the physical body but also for the emotional dimensions that accompany childbirth and becoming a mother to a newborn. Ai Lin had a care network for her *yuezi* after giving birth to her second child, but she wasn't able to relax and have a proper *yuezi* to allow her to recover – both physically and spiritually. Though she was fed seven meals a day and was able to lay in bed for the most part, she was constantly concerned about the future for herself and her newborn, who was prohibited according to the One Child Policy. Additionally, money was running low as both she and her husband went into hiding during her pregnancy. Under these circumstances, her *yuezi* was not considered successful because she was constantly in fear and facing uncertainty about her family's future.

Though I have interviewed Fujianese migrant mothers who currently live in the United States, they also have immigration experiences beyond the United States. Even for migrants within China, the loss of familial network associated with long distance moves can pose particular difficulties during the postpartum period. That is the main reason Li Yun, a Fujianese migrant woman I interviewed, returned to Fuzhou during her pregnancy and stayed until her child was six months old to reunite with her husband in

Liao Ning Province in northern China. For women who have crossed the national border, many factors (financial restraint and the lack of available family members) prevent them from receiving the proper care for their *yuezi*, making their experience of pregnancy and postpartum care far from ideal.

I started my research with the hope to learn how Fujianese women work to care for one another during their *yuezi*, but the stories I heard showed me that everyone, from the women's husband to their close friends in the Fujianese migrant community, are all busy with working in the restaurants. The restaurant inhibits the women from receiving the proper care that they envisioned for themselves and their child. While working in the restaurant allows them to provide financially for their family, the restaurant also prevents the women from receiving the care - emotional and physical - that is required for their health and wellbeing.

### Cultivating Belonging with Meatballs

While the restaurant can act as a factor of constraint that prevents women from receiving the postpartum care they need at the start of motherhood (during *yuezi*), it would be unfair to not see how the restaurant is also an empowering space for Fujianese mothers to do care work that helps instill a sense of belonging as Fujianese Americans in their children.

In the story about meatballs at Fang Hua's restaurant, I watched as Fang Hua performed what Gedalof has described as transnational motherhood, which is a dynamic process of "re-making of specific cultural and historical collectivities of identity



and belonging” by migrant mothers for their children (Gedalof 2009, 82). The Fujianese women I interviewed perform care work and create belonging through the preparation and sharing of food at the restaurant in repetitive and innovative ways.

Food sharing is an important display of generosity and affection among Fujianese families. Fujianese parents don’t often show their affection and care for their children through verbal confirmations or through physical touch, rather, they will remember the food their children enjoy and prepare that for them when they are thinking about their children. When Li Yun’s daughter reunited with Li Yun and her husband after years of separation between China and the United States, Li Yun wasn’t very verbal about her love and how much she missed her. Instead, Li Yun and her husband traveled for three hours to Chicago to purchase their daughter’s favorite foods and prepared them for her. All their love is expressed and bestowed in these dishes, which took time to think of and prepare. For many Fujianese women I interviewed, care and love grows from these moments of food preparation and sharing.

Food preparation and tasting are also essential to cultivate a sense of identity and belonging. As Ing has observed, “through emphasizing ethnic food and cuisine, individuals and groups make their statement of self and others”, thereby creating, sustaining, and cultivating belonging to a certain group (Ing 2011, 87). From the ingredients that are produced at specific places to the emotions that arise from the smell and taste, food is a powerful tool for identity making and belonging.

I observed that with Fang Hua, sharing the meatballs with her children was an important way to both show care and create a sense of connection to Fujianese culture for her children. In the stories Fang Hua told, the meatball emerges as a symbol for

Fang Hua of her childhood in Fujian - her connection to Lunar New Year and family gatherings, memories of her parents and relatives who would visit the house and share in the meatballs, and the atmosphere of belonging in Fujian. However, the meatballs not being “authentic” enough also becomes an important point of defeat to any argument that Fang Hua is trying to recreate something. Fang Hua is aware that the ingredients in the United States are different. She actively talks about the pork meat being fresher and tastier back in her childhood, but she has no complaints about these differences. Rather, she simply highlights them but appreciates the opportunity to share this meatball with me and having the opportunity to have it again.

However, food preparation and tasting also create statements that distinguish one group from the other, as shown through the stark contrast between what Fang Hua’s family cook for their own consumption and what they serve in the restaurant to their customers. All the women I interviewed cooked exclusively Fujianese cuisines for their families. Their meals almost always included a dish of seafood, fresh vegetables, and a pot of soup. Rarely are the kids encouraged to eat what their parents serve to the customers. For instance, Ai Lin discouraged her kids from eating foods they prepared for the customers because they are “heavily deep-fried and unsuitable for our stomach.” By labeling certain foods as more suitable for the Fujianese bodies and rejecting other foods that are “more suitable for their American customers,” the Fujianese women actively separates themselves from their American customers.

At the same time, this line of distinction has a certain limit because Fujianese women are also very fond of other cuisines, such as American breakfast and Vietnamese noodle soups. On days they are off from work, Fang Hua, Ai Lin, Li Yun and

An Yun would invite their Fujianese friends to a local Vietnamese restaurant and enjoy some delicious Pho. Occasionally, they would also take their children to IHOP or other American breakfast restaurants for breakfast or lunch. The Fujianese women I interviewed carefully negotiated what types of food to consume and what types of food to reject. Food choices also become a way for Fujianese women to signal their integration into American society as Fujianese Americans.

As suggested by the definition of transnational motherhood proposed by Geladof, Fang Hua is not juggling between two worlds, the American and the Fuzhounese. Rather, she's bridging these two worlds through food, making adjustments to recipes with ingredients that are available, to better situate herself and her children. The food that she prepares, primarily at the restaurant because of its "strong enough fire for cooking [Fujianese] dishes," helps create a sense of connection for her children – both her son and her daughter – who have rarely visited Fuzhou. Now her children can have a reference point for their identity as Fuzhounese American through the food their mother shares with them. At the same time, Fang Hua evaluates and rejects some foods prepared at the restaurant, the Americanized Chinese foods, as inappropriate for her and her children. It is at the women's restaurant, the bridging place, that this process of negotiation of connections happens.

Many other women I interviewed have similar experiences, using food to create a connection for their children with Fuzhou. For the most part, the Fuzhounese women I interviewed actively discussed how the foods they prepared are different from how it was made in Fuzhou, but they are always happy to have the opportunity to enjoy the food and share them with other Fuzhounese families. The food bridges both their past

and their present, their connection to Fuzhou and their present reality in the United States. The food also creates a sense of community between Fuzhounese families through the practice of food exchange (explored further in Chapter Three).

### Exposure to Fuzhounese Language and *Chiku*

Another way the restaurant empowers Fujianese women is by enabling their children to cultivate new connections with Fujian in language exposure. In the restaurant, Fujianese families usually communicate with each other in Fuzhounese (福州话), a regional language commonly spoken by people in Fuzhou city (the capital city of Fujian Province). In the Fujianese women's generation (born in the 1970s), they were taught Mandarin at school, but spoke Fuzhounese at home. In many rural areas and small townships of Fuzhou, many elders, especially elderly women, speak exclusively in Fuzhounese because of their lack of exposure to Mandarin.

All the Fujianese women felt most comfortable in Fuzhounese, but their children growing up in the United States are losing touch with the language. This is concerning some of the women, including Fang Hua.

*Me: Are the kids still going to Chinese school on Sundays?*

*Fang Hua: Yes. They just go and play there. Three years and Angie [youngest daughter] can still only write her name in Chinese. They [her children] speak only English with each other.*

*Me: What about Fuzhounese? Are the kids picking that up?*

*Fang Hua: Angie can understand some of it but can't really speak it. Her younger brother might not really learn it either.*

*Me: My brother and I listened to our parents speaking Fuzhounese and we learned. Kids can learn like that if you speak to them.*

*Fang Hua: I hope my kids learn too... how are they going to speak to their grandparents in China if they don't speak Fuzhounese?*

This conversation with Fang Hua in her restaurant concerning her children's inability to speak Fuzhounese and their lack of access to good Mandarin education demonstrates the struggle of Fujianese families to cultivate their children's connection with Fujian. However, the restaurant informally serves as a space for familiarizing the children with Fuzhounese.

Most of the workers in the restaurants are from townships in Fuzhou city. In general, all my interviewees and other Fujianese restaurant owners prefer to seek out Fujianese workers. Partially it has to do with their view that Fujianese workers are more hardworking than others (see Chapter One for Fujianese work ethics, or *chiku*), but also the shared language of Fuzhounese allows for easier communication and comfortable interactions. One can often hear Fuzhounese being spoken between the front counter and the kitchen at Fujianese owned restaurants. This shared language creates a sense of belonging for those working at the restaurant, but also forms an environment in which children are immersed in their Fuzhounese linguistic identity.

The impact of the language being heard daily in the restaurants can be directly seen by how the children order food and call out the order to the back kitchen.

Fujianese restaurants in the United States have created Fuzhounese terms for

restaurant dishes that were previously non-existent in the language. This creates an unique linguistic identity for Fujianese immigrants. So, if you name a Chinese restaurant dish in Fuzhounese to a Fuzhounese speaker in Fujian, they will not recognize the term nor the dish. Food items will have three names in three different languages - English, Mandarin, and Fuzhounese.

The children of all my interviewees, will call out the order to the back kitchen in Fuzhounese if they are directing it towards their parents or other Fujianese workers. Though this exposure doesn't make the children fluent in conversational Fuzhounese, it does enable the children to have some linguistic fluency in "restaurant Fuzhounese," allowing them to create an unique Fujianese American identity.

In addition to language exposure, assisting and working in the restaurants from a young age has also instilled a strong sense of the values of hard work for their family, or *chiku*, among the children. The Fujianese children learn about the importance of hard work and providing for their family from watching their parents working days and nights in the restaurant, and also themselves working in the restaurants.

An Yun spoke of her experience of arriving in the United States as a teenager with her parents in the 1990s. Her parents worked extremely hard in the restaurants to provide for their family, and she learned from them and followed their path. But in the meantime, she gained an interest in selling insurance. For her, buying insurance provides security for her family, and selling insurance provides another path for her to provide for her family. She studied English, passed exams to qualify as an insurance broker, attended national conferences and workshops to improve herself, and has achieved many accomplishments in her career. An Yun spoke of seeing her father

breaking his back to provide for his family as her motivation for her hard work ethic and learning to *chiku*.

Though I didn't interview any children of the migrant women, I've observed how values of hard work and *chiku* have been instilled in the children of the Fujianese women. Everyone in the community works in the restaurant from before noon until near midnight. Children help their parents with chores such as cleaning the counters, sweeping the floor, assisting the customers, answering the phones, chopping vegetables, and anything that they see their parents need assistance with. At the end of the day, most children are motivated to help their parents so their parents have to do less work and become less tired. In these ways, the restaurant becomes a space to cultivate Fujianese values of family care and *chiku* into the children.

### **Conclusion: Transnational Motherhood at the Restaurant**

To cultivate a sense of belonging and identity in the next generation of Fujianese American youth is a difficult task for the migrant women. As described by Geladof, transnational motherhood is a messy and dynamic process. Every woman started with a limited experience of being a mother. Many experiences and knowledge of motherhood that the women seek from their mothers, such as how to have a proper *yuezi* and how to create Fujianese identity in Fujian, becomes inapplicable to the migrant women, who live in a new country with a different reality and struggles. Additionally, migrant women lose important networks of support in child rearing - their parents, their family, and

friends they've made in the first half of their life - and familiar environment when they move to this new country.

In this context, the restaurant becomes a bridging place. It facilitates the Fujianese migrant women in performing transnational motherhood. While the restaurant creates struggles and limitations for the women in mothering, it also empowers mothers in performing transnational motherhood, as the restaurant becomes an important space for cultivating cultural identity through food preparation, language exposure, and instilling values of *chiku* in the children.

While this chapter emphasizes how Fujianese women care for their children, the next chapter explores the ways Fujianese women care for their community. The concept of liminality is used to analyze the ways in which Fujianese migrants living in a liminal status turns uncertainty into potentiality, building unusually tight-knit relationships that are kin-like with other Fujianese migrants.



### Chapter Three: Community Formation and Archipelago of Care

In 2016, my mother and a couple of Fujianese aunties (a common way to refer to friends of my parents) met each other on a bus ride back from New York City to a city in the Midwest. They all booked tickets and caught a late afternoon ride with a private van company that is widely used among Fujianese families to travel across the country. Since the van my mother took runs the route between New York City and Chicago, my mother and the other Fujianese aunties were quite surprised and excited by the coincidence that they all run Chinese restaurants in the same city in the Midwest. They quickly exchanged contact information, and within a week I was meeting several of them at our restaurant and we paid visits to their restaurants in return.

Soon, our families became close and a community with multiple Fujianese restaurant families started to build. Holidays and birthdays were celebrated together, and dinner parties were hosted on Mondays, when everyone was off from work. In an effort to synchronize with the other restaurant families, when my family opened a new restaurant after selling the old restaurant, we redesigned our store hours so we would also be closed on Mondays.

My mother was often on the phone with the other aunties in group calls. She asked for a pair of air pods for Christmas, which allowed her to enjoy speaking with other aunties while running around taking care of chores in the restaurant. My father would be on the phone with the uncles at night, asking each other the price of products marketed by their supplier for the month. They would place orders for each other when one of their supplier's prices was more competitive. This networking became an

extremely important strategy for the restaurant's survival after the pandemic, when prices for produce significantly increased.



This chapter is centered on the relationship of care created by Fujianese migrant women, who are the important cornerstones and driving agents in the formation and continuation of the community. I borrow the concept of perpetual liminality and *communitas* proposed by anthropologist Victor Turner to discuss the formation of communities under a shared liminal status.

I also draw on the concept of archipelago of care by anthropologist Robert Dejarlais - which poetically describes the way care can exist through small acts of kindness and thoughtful presence in different aspects of daily life like archipelagos surrounding a mainland (Dejarlais 2023). I use the concept of archipelagos of care to describe the ways Fujianese migrant women experience and provide for one another in their community.

Through a shared experience of being trapped in a seemingly perpetual liminal status of being a Fujianese immigrant, the Fujianese women turn it into a space of possibility and form an unusually tight-knit community in the United States. Through many small acts of kindness, an archipelago of care was constructed and gifted to one another in the community, braiding the community together.

“Can you speak English?”

Most of the Fujianese migrant women who are the focus of my study are first generation immigrants with limited socio-political power. Their identity as Fujianese immigrants creates a state of vulnerability and uncertainty in their living experiences. One of their greatest vulnerabilities stems from their struggle with the English language. Almost all the women I spoke to do not speak English fluently. They feel most comfortable speaking in two languages, Mandarin and Fuzhounese, a language spoken in part of Fujian Province. But they spend most of their day in the restaurant speaking a language they feel the least comfortable with, English. They often work at front counters while their husbands work in the back with the woks. They converse with the customers and take their orders in English. But with their accent, they feel alienated.

One afternoon, I visited Fang Hua's family restaurant to see how she and her family were doing. During my visit, her restaurant started getting busy so I took orders from the landline while she fried crab rangoons at the fryer. One of the customers on the phone heard my voice and exclaimed “finally someone who can speak English!” The comment that was geared towards me was also a comment directed to Fang Hua, who was absent at the moment but the subject of comparison. She spends hours on that phone everyday taking orders and serving others, but her identity and impression on others was reduced to “someone who can't speak English.” This is not an exclusive incident, the comments may not be made daily, but the attitude penetrates through these daily interactions the Fujianese women experience. A feeling of alienation, if not repulsion, is often carried through these calls and interactions.

In addition to their interactions with customers, other aspects of the women's daily life also demand them to use their English skills. This includes attending medical appointments for themselves and their children, answering calls from their children's school about issues in school, making calls to pay for bills, and responding to food safety inspections that happen monthly at their restaurant.

Everywhere around them seems to be screaming at them that "to be a normal American means to speak English without an accent." Regardless of having all the paperwork that verifies their citizenship in this country, they seemed to be coming short of being an American. The daily work at the restaurant - which is both mentally and physically demanding - has worn them out by the end of the day, and becomes a barrier for them to learn the language in-depth. The women have seen learning English as a privilege reserved for their children and other people with resources. To be an American is a privilege.

The concept of perpetual liminality proposed by Turner effectively describes the condition in which Fujianese migrant women experience in their daily life in the United States. While liminality is traditionally used to describe a transitional state between stages of transformation from one identity to another, Turner proposed that some people could be stuck in this transitional state (Turner 1966). In this case, the Fujianese women's struggle with English makes the Fujianese migrants feel neither fully Chinese nor American.

### **Fujianese but not Chinese**

In addition to the women's struggle with the English language and their liminal status in relation to broader American society, their Fujianese migrant background also alienates them from the local Chinese immigrant community. The local Chinese Association in this small Midwest city is an organization that advertises themselves as the organization for Chinese people and non-Chinese people with adopted Chinese children. The Fujianese restaurant community rarely interacts with them, even though the Fujianese restaurant families composed almost one third of the total Chinese migrant population in the city.

While I didn't interview anyone from the local Chinese organization, my family's position in the community has enabled me to gain some insights into the role of the local Chinese organization. My parents' background is a little different within the broader Fujianese migrant community. They both received secondary education in China and had "good jobs" before moving. They were a part of the Chinese "middle class" before their immigration; but like all the Fujianese families in the community, they had an aspiration for the United States and gave up their lives in China to come and start anew. My family' background aided our intermingling between the local Fujianese community and the local Chinese Association.

My family and two other families, one of whom is deeply involved with the Association, and the other occasionally participates in the organization's activity, lives in neighboring neighborhoods. My parents' background, friendliness, and proximity to each other have facilitated our good relationships with these two families.

In my conversations with them, I learned that in the associations' advertisement toward potential new members, they speak of the city's Chinese population as one

composed of physicians and engineers and their family, who are all people with *gaosuzhi* (高素质), high moral and intellectual abilities.

Though the Fujianese women had never heard these statements (since they were never invited to join the Association and participate in these conversations), they had all shared a feeling of being disrespected and inferior during their limited interactions with members of the local Chinese Association.

Fang Hua's primary care doctor is an active member in the Association, but Fang Hua doesn't socialize with her doctor outside of the office. Fang Hua spoke of one medical appointment that led to this disconnection. She asked her doctor to write a prescription for an anti-arthritis cream for her father (who lives in China) - which is a small favor that she knew other Chinese doctors would not reject. However, her primary care doctor not only rejected the request, the doctor also made statements that made Fang Hua felt like she was being judged and perceived as "ridiculous" and "backward," or *luohou* (落后), which means unprogressive and uneducated.

Fang Hua has heard comments from other Fujianese women about similar attitudes acted towards Fujianese restaurant families by other members of the Association. Even though Fang Hua and other Fujianese women depend on Chinese-speaking doctors in the area (most of whom are involved in the Chinese Association) for their medical needs, they have never been invited to attend the Association's events, unless the Chinese Association was also asking them to cater for the event.

This feeling of being inferior comes from multiple aspects. First, all the Fujianese migrants I spoke with didn't have the opportunity to finish high school, nor receive

higher education. All of my interviewees described themselves as not being smart enough to do well in school. They feel insecure about their educational background and do not feel they have the high intellectual abilities *per se*. This insecurity becomes the first layer of what makes them feel directly excluded by the description of the “Chinese person” promoted by the Association. Then, their occupation as restaurant workers is in direct opposition to the local Chinese Association’s alignment of Chinese people in the city as “physicians and engineers.”

Regionalistic beliefs in China about Fujianese people that precede their immigration also contribute to their alienation from the local Chinese Association. Culturally speaking, Fujian Province, which is one of the most southern provinces in China, has been known as the “smuggler” and “peripheral” province (Chong 2013, 3). Fujianese restaurant women are well aware that Fujianese people are known to be the opposite of *gaosuzhi*; rather they are characterized in the broader Chinese society as being *disuzhi* (低素质), or people with a lack of moral and intellectual abilities. The women I interviewed and many others feel like they are being looked down upon for their regional background, occupation, and their education level by members of the local Chinese Association.

Another factor that contributes to the dynamic of exclusion that Fujianese families feel is the structure and content of the events held by the local Chinese Association. These events rarely seemed useful or available to the Fujianese restaurant families. By point of contrast, Li Yun spoke of New York’s Chinese Associations and organizations with admiration. When she first arrived in the United States in 2016, one of the first cities she stopped at was New York, where her cousin had settled down and was able to

host her and her husband briefly. Her cousin was busy working at the restaurant, so she told Li Yun to visit the local Chinese Associations, where people could help her with her paperwork for health insurance and setting up bank accounts. Li Yun was very grateful for all the support she received from New York's Chinese Association, and she had only praise for New York's local Chinese Association.

By contrast, the Midwest city's Chinese Association offered no such support for newly arrived migrants and focused almost exclusively on organizing events to display Chinese culture. Most of the events held by the local Chinese Association are related to cultural celebrations, such as Lunar New Year, Talent Shows, and Mid-Autumn Festivals. The board of the Chinese Association also serves on the board for the Midwest city's Sister Cities program, which is an international organization that connects two cities in two countries for cultural and commercial exchange, with an historical sister city in southern China.

With this connection, the local Chinese Association supports the Sister Cities program in hosting various cultural events, such as inviting artists from China to perform in the US. However, these social events, almost as a rule, are scheduled on the weekends, usually Friday or Saturday evenings, which are the busiest times for restaurant workers. This choice of time actively excludes Fujianese families and their children from participating and enjoying what should be an event for the local Chinese population, which they are actively and perhaps intentionally excluded from.

So, not only do Fujianese migrant families feel alienated from American society because of their struggle with English, they also feel excluded from the local Chinese community. This places them in a liminal position in relation to American society but also



in relation to the broader Chinese immigrant population in the city. This separation from both larger communities strengthens the bond that Fujianese families form with other Fujianese migrant families they share similar experience with.

### Perpetual Liminality and New Possibilities

All the women I interviewed have to deal with many uncertainties in their lives as immigrants, and the only thing they feel certain about is the day-to-day work in the restaurant. Therefore, when I asked them what they would do in the future after they stop working at the restaurant, they all seemed puzzled by the question. Their condition can be theorized using Turner's concept of perpetual liminality, where individuals are existing within a prolonged state of transition, "they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial" for an indefinite amount of time (Turner 1966, 95).

However, this prolonged state of uncertainty is also an opportunity to create new connections. Urban anthropologist Farha Ghannam discussed how residents from a low-income neighborhood in urban Cairo navigates through the city, the process of the passage is theorized as a process of liminality (Ghannam 2011). The men and women in Ghannam's work were able to reconfigure themselves in this liminal process, opening doors for opportunities that may allow them to transgress social hierarchies. The Fujianese migrant women I spoke with also shared a similar experience of feeling in-between two realities - their life in China and life in the United States - but this experience opened doors to create new connections with other Fujianese families.

For instance, when I asked the women about what they see themselves doing in their retirement, or what they plan to do when they stop working in the restaurant, all of them seemed initially surprised by the question. Fang Hua, who arrived in this Midwest city almost 2 decades ago, told me that she's never thought concretely about retirement, though she is marching towards her fifties. She and her husband have raised the family of five all by themselves through years of restaurant work. Her oldest daughter is in her mid-twenties, and her youngest son is a few years away from turning ten years old. She sees herself continue to work in the restaurant until "there is enough money earned." But when I asked her how much is enough, she said she doesn't know.

A couple years ago, Fang Hua's husband suffered through a severe illness making him no longer fit for the strenuous physical labor that the restaurant demands. Since then, Fang Hua's family has been hiring two to three workers to substitute her husband's position. So, she told me that money has become "harder to earn." The restaurant is the primary source of income for her family, and also for all the workers that work in her restaurant. All of the workers in Fang Hua's restaurant are men in their thirties to forties, with families back in Fujian who rely on the worker's remittance to pay off their home loans, utility bills, and children's education expenses.

With all these responsibilities to carry, Fang Hua is uncertain about her future. However, she hopes to stay in the United States after she stops working. She is sad that her connection with Fujian has broken since her parents death. However, in this context, she values even more the new bonds that have been formed with other Fujianese restaurant families, which will be discussed in the next section.

Ai Lin, another interviewee that runs a Chinese restaurant in the Midwest city, also seemed puzzled by my question of her retirement plans. Ai Lin is about the same age as Fang Hua. Her oldest son is in his early twenties and has a baby on the way, which makes Ai Lin very excited. She plans to take care of her grandchildren while her son and daughter-in-law return to school. At the same time, the restaurant demands her presence, so she is uncertain about the future.

Though she was puzzled by the question of retirement, she eventually came to the conclusion that when both of her own parents and her husband's parents pass away, her connection in China will be lost. She plans to retire and stay in the current city, where both of her sisters-in-laws and her brother's family have also settled. Her oldest son will likely take over the restaurant when she and her husband stop working. The local Fujianese community makes her feel like she has a more stable support system outside of Fujian.

While all the women state that they will feel a lost connection with Fujian when their parents pass away and an uncertainty for their future, the new friends and community they make with the local Fujianese families in the state of uncertainty in many ways substitute the loss of kinship, helping them find a direction for their future.

During my interviews, when I asked the Fujianese women to share examples of when they feel most strongly supported by their community, all of them spoke of an incident when there was an emergency and they had to physically leave the restaurant for an extended period. Fang Hua described the support she received from members of the Fujianese community when her mother-in-law passed away, she and her husband had to quickly return to China for the funeral. She called the other Fujianese restaurant

women about the situation. Without hesitancy, the other families all said they will take care of the restaurant and the children while they are gone for one week and told her not to worry.

All the families helped in ways they could - either by sending in their older children to help the restaurant or coming late at night after their own restaurant was closed to do chores and sideworks (such as making crab rangoon and egg rolls). When Fang Hua and her husband returned, she felt incredibly indebted to the people who helped her in various ways, but she also felt very grateful and happy to have such a strong community that was so willing to step in to support her. This is what she talked about in her retirement, which is to stay close to this community.

The support that the Fujianese community provides can be analyzed as forming an “archipelago of care,” a term coined by Dejarlais to describe the rituals performed by Hyolmo people for those who are dying (Dejarlais 2023). Rituals and acts of compassion are gifted throughout different aspects of daily life for the dying and their family, forming a “archipelago of care.” Fujianese women and their families also experience this form of caring and give each other their kindness and compassion.

In the next three sections, different ways Fujianese women perform “archipelago of care” will be further discussed and analyzed. Their liminal status allows them to turn uncertainty into spaces of possibilities for new relationships to form. These new relationships are based on caring for one another in a new country, which helped them develop a sense of belonging. Taken together, the Fujianese migrant families develop a connection with each other that is close to kin.

## Comrades on the Phone

The Fujianese restaurant families' experience of rejection from the local Chinese community, and alienation from the larger American society due to their struggle with English, and their growing disconnection from family back in China, all combined with their precarious economic circumstances ignite a powerful sense of perpetual liminality. In turn, this shared liminal status fosters the formation of a particularly strong and robust Fujianese community in the United States. The nature of these strong and robust bonds is partially captured by Turner's notion of *communitas*.

*Communitas* describes a group of individuals with a shared liminal status that forms a strong connection with each other. The Fujianese community has a shared immigration experience, struggling in the United States as Fujianese restaurant workers, which causes them to feel a strong connection with each other - like a comradeship, which is also how Turner also theorized the relationships between "liminal entities [... they] develop an intense comradeship and egalitarianism" (Turner 1966, 95). This sense of comradeship is what sparked the conversation on the van ride from New York City described in the opening to this chapter, and this comradeship endures past those hours in the van, which is a signature hallmark of *communitas*.

However, *communitas* also fails to fully encapsulate the dynamic power relations within the Fujianese migrant community. While Turner theorized *communitas* to be a group of individuals with intense feeling of comradeship, it is also an egalitarian community where "secular distinctions of rank and status disappear or are homogenized" (95). But within the Fujianese migrant community, no one has become

homogenized and many “status” can play a role in the relationship dynamic (power dynamic) between members of the community.

First, gender plays a significant role in how Fujianese men and women interact with each other everyday (gender roles and work are discussed in Chapter Two). How long one family has established oneself in the destination country compared to other families can influence how one family is treated within the community. For example, Li Yun and her husband’s relatively fresh arrival to the United States placed them in a position to usually seek and receive help, while other families who have arrived much earlier (such as Fang Hua and An Yun’s family) are more likely to provide support and advice.

Another factor is the amount of *cultural capita* one family has accumulated over the years. One aspect of *cultural capita* is having a good relationship with a local “American,” usually an older “white American ” who frequents their restaurant. This helpful American person helped the Fujianese families navigate through English paperwork during the early days of establishing the restaurant, and became quite close with the family and the children. All the women I interviewed who have established their restaurants for many years have one person who acts like this in their lives.

While the Fujianese migrant community can’t be fully encapsulated by the Turner’s theory of the *communitas*, the women do form a strong connection with each other through their largely shared beliefs on family values and familial structure, conservative spending habits, similar religious practices and practicing rituals, and shared struggles with English and juggling between restaurant work and family. The similarities in their daily lives and their shared cultural, linguistic, and historical

experiences fosters the development of a sisterhood that is outside of the bloodline, a bond similar to kinship.

One tool that is essential for the women to maintain and continually build this comradeship is the cell phone. All the women I spoke to spend long hours on phone calls and video chats with other Fujianese women multiple times throughout the week. Due to their long work hours in the restaurant - six days a week, fourteen hours a day - they typically can't spend time together despite living in the same city. Using their cell phones is the main way for the women to communicate and connect with other women in the restaurants as well as family members back in China.

Women don't enjoy restaurant work, which can be repetitive and laborious. Their daily responsibilities typically require them to stand for long hours behind the counter answering phone calls, in front of the fryer frying chickens, or making crab rangoon or egg rolls. There are many downtimes during these long hours of work: when their children are at school, and there are not many customers who need to be served at the front counter and they are running side chores. These downtimes become the perfect time to *bagua* (八卦), or "speak in eight directions." They call other women on their cell phones to speak with them about anything that's happening around them. These calls could range from an hour to multiple hours. During these times, customers might walk in and need to be attended, but the women will not hang up on the phone; rather they will wait patiently on the phone until the customer leaves so that they can continue to chat.

They usually start the conversation by checking if the other person is busy, asking "在忙吗?" ("Busy?"). Hearing that the other person is not busy, they would start chatting about things happening in their lives, even though they may have just called

each other the day before. Topics of discussion for the Fujianese women have a wide range. Sometimes it's about their children - concerns about their children's education, job, or even marriage prospects. Other times they talk about things they heard from their families in China, about current events in China, or about family matters such as whose cousin got married, who bought a new house, whose children got into which college.

Discussing things happening in China with each other is both fun and important for the women. Their immigration experience has inevitably changed how they interpret and understand certain things from their families back in Fujian, and other Fujianese migrant women (who have undergone similar experiences) can often understand each other's viewpoint. These conversations about China help the women maintain a sense of connection to China, but also a sense of connection with each other in the migrant community because family matters are intimate matters that people usually only share with close friends, or people within the family. By discussing them with each other, intimate kinship-like connections are formed within the migration community.

Sometimes the topic on the phone is to negotiate and plan things for each other. Recently, Li Yun bought a new house and is about to move into it. Once this news spread, other women in the Fujianese restaurant families chatted with each other frequently by phone. They sometimes made multiple calls in a day to discuss what to buy for the housewarming ceremony, or 乔迁之喜. It was important that they buy things that are useful for Li Yun's family, that they not repeat each other's gifts, and that they choose gifts carefully to prevent hindering the good fortune of the family. For example, never buy clocks as housewarming gifts because "giving clock" in Chinese sounds like



“attending a funeral” and that is a bad omen. Every region in Fujian has its own customs about what is appropriate and inappropriate for gift giving during different occasions, so these conversations took multiple women’s joint efforts to decide what would be the best and appropriate gift that would not hinder Li Yun’s luck in any regions of Fujian.

Other times, phone conversations become important to resolve conflicts or seek advice. Since the pandemic, a large number of Fujianese migrants have crossed the border to reach the United States in hopes of earning money and sending remittances back to China to support their family. Women in the Fujianese restaurant community often speak with each other about people they know from their hometown that have reached out to their family for support. Support can include finding an immigration lawyer to take their case, bailing them out of detention centers when they are caught crossing the border, hosting them temporarily, finding a restaurant that will give them a job, and funding some part of their border crossing fee.

Women would be on the call with each other, negotiating what type of support they should give to the newly arrived, and what is the proper amount of support. It’s important for them to provide the right amount of support because they don’t want everyone to think they are very well-off, which could result in too many requests; but they also don’t want to be regarded as stingy because some of these families helped them when they were first migrating, and they also have families and reputations in China that need to be maintained. Negotiating this delicate balance is essential to the women on the phones.

Cell phones provide opportunities for the women to talk with each other and maintain their strong connections with other Fujianese families in the Midwest and back

in Fujian. Through cell phones, Fujianese women are at the forefront of making this community in the Midwest, where people may not feel equal, but they feel strongly supported by other members of the community.

### Gifts of Water Spinaches and Growing Community

Another way community bonds between Fujianese women are expressed and strengthened is through the sharing of produce from gardens. Late summer and early fall must be the favorite seasons and the most socially active season for Fujianese restaurant women. It is the season of harvest, where small vegetable gardens behind each Fujianese restaurant families' home are ripened with small patches of southern Chinese vegetables. All the Fujianese women I've known since childhood who own their own homes have a small vegetable garden, with vegetables native to southern China. These vegetables include water spinach, Chinese cucumbers, cherry tomatoes, winter melon, and more.

Fujianese women and men spend a lot of time tending their vegetable gardens. They often wake up early in the morning before leaving for work to water these plants, and return at late night after a long day of work to do the second round of watering. They also built creative fences to keep the rabbits away from eating the vegetables, and DIY trellises for their cucumber plants to climb.

Among all the vegetables every family grows, water spinach is everyone's favorite. It is also the most expensive vegetable at the local Asian grocery store, but it tastes - as one interviewee puts it - "most like home" to the Fujianese families, so water

spinach is like gold for everyone. Water spinach is a common southern Chinese vegetable, with hollow stems and large green leaves. Growing water spinach requires a lot of effort because the plant needs to be constantly watered, a minimum of three times a day for good growth. Once it starts growing, the same plant can be repetitively harvested as long as one cuts from the stem and not the roots. Every Fujianese family cooks their water spinach the same way - stir fried with some oil and garlic, a little bit of salt and some chicken seasoning powder - and they all love it.

In the summer, a common topic of phone conversations is about how everyone's water spinach is growing, and if someone has really nice water spinach that summer, then everyone would be asking how they do it. This topic usually spans the whole summer, until the last harvest of water spinach. When early summer comes, the conversation becomes who has the best water spinach seeds and when is the best time to plant them.

An important act of building community within the Fujianese families is gifting each other produce from their vegetable gardens. Especially gifting a bag full of water spinach to families' whose water spinach is not harvesting well that season. Ai Lin's family harvested abundant water spinach one summer, and all their plants grew incredibly well, with large green leaves and thick stems. Later in the season, when other families' water spinach patches began to harvest less, but her patch was still staying strong, she would share her vegetables with other families. When the water spinach was ready to be harvested, she would task her oldest son with driving to different friends' restaurants and drop off a bundle of the fresh harvest. Ai Lin doesn't expect

anything in return, but other families would always give more produce from their gardens in return, often products that Ai Lin's garden doesn't have.

When Ai Lin's son returns from his trip, the space that was filled with bags of green water spinach becomes full of winter melons, fresh cucumbers, eggplants, bitter melons, and a variety of fresh vegetables. Giving other people vegetables from their garden is an act of compassion, to share their surplus and memories of Fujian through native vegetables. This process of gift giving is a central aspect of community making among Fujianese families. Recipients of gifts feel indebted toward each other, and the desire to give each other more in return, thus creating and strengthening a network of bonds among members of the community.

Anthropologist Marcel Mauss famously analyzed the importance of gift giving. He looked at the practices and meanings behind gift giving in Polynesia and beyond (Mauss 1970). Just as Mauss observed in other contexts, gift giving in the Fujianese community creates bonds of indebtedness that are central to the formation and continuation of community formation. Mauss theorized that receiving gifts generates an obligation to return the gift, "to accept without returning or repaying more is to face subordination" (72).

Giving and receiving gifts is central in enabling the community's consistent interactions. Especially among the Fujianese families, where generosity is an important value, to give gifts and to repay with greater gifts keeps the community alive. Additionally, when children participate in the process of gift-giving, such as Ai Lin's son who transports the vegetables to other families, they also learn to be generous. Therefore, the process of gift giving promotes not only community formation, but it also

enables Fujianese women to perform transnational motherhood in cultivating values of generosity in their children.

### Building Community through “Women Only” Car Rides

In addition to gift giving and receiving, Fujianese families also enjoy celebrating holidays together, and this presents another opportunity to build community. During December and January, every conversation within the Fujianese community touches upon how to celebrate the most important holiday for the Chinese, Lunar New Year. This holiday requires several days of celebration, from New Year’s Eve to New Year’s Day to the first few days of the new year. Each day, there are different rituals, every night there are dinner parties and celebrations. Usually New Year’s Eve dinners are held in the family’s own home, but for the other nights, the families often visit each other and have dinner at different family restaurants together.

The most important thing Fujianese women prepare for during Lunar New Year celebration is the New Year’s Eve and New Year’s Day dinner. These dinners must have the best dishes, and that means traditional Fujianese dishes with fresh seafood and southern vegetables. Preparing this special holiday feast requires a trip to Asian supermarkets in Chicago, which is a couple of hours away.

To prepare for celebrations such as Lunar New Year and Mid-Autumn Festival, or other important dinners, the women often take this trip together in a large van (driven by one of the women) to carry, as the women jointly put it, “half of the grocery store back.” The women would plan these trips with each other over their cell phones a few days in

advance. They work to decide on the day and time they will be leaving, and drive one big van to the grocery store. They spend the car ride chatting and joking with each other. These shopping trips are almost always exclusively composed of only the ladies, having a good time with each other. On these trips, they may continue conversations they had earlier during phone calls or have other, more private conversations.

One of these trips took place last summer, when An Ping (one of the Fujianese women in the community) was hosting her son's girlfriend for the first time. An Ping planned to host a big dinner party to celebrate the girlfriend's arrival and also to introduce her friends to the girl. She wanted to take a trip to Chicago to get groceries for the event. However, when the girl arrived, there were some conflicts that immediately arose between An Ping and her son's girlfriend.

An Ping communicated this situation with the Fujianese women I interviewed, and they all told An Ping that they should discuss more intensively about the matter on the car ride. However, An Ping wanted to take the girl on the car ride, causing the other women to lie to her that there aren't enough seats in the car therefore she couldn't take the girl. An Ping didn't understand the cue, and proposed that they take her big van. This caused some frustration and an odd atmosphere during the car ride. When they returned that evening, an intensive group video chat was held to finish the conversation that should have been discussed in the car.

As this example illustrates, these car rides are important spaces for problem resolution and community formation for the women. In these rides, women share temporary freedom from the stress of running a restaurant and they can discuss private matters with each other, without worrying about their husband or their children

overhearing. These rides don't happen frequently, but every time they happen, the women usually end up with better moods afterward, which is shown by their anticipation for the next car ride. These are moments when they feel supported by their sister-like comradeship, allowing them to enjoy each other's physical presence, which they don't often get to do during regular weeks at the restaurant.

Similarly, holiday celebrations together are important for Fujianese women. If they were in China, New Year celebrations are exclusively reserved for families, and the women would visit and celebrate the holiday with their in-laws. But in the United States, where they don't live close to any relatives or in-laws, they celebrate it with each other. This sharing of celebrations indicates that the degree to which the community formed in the United States is unusual. It is more like a family than just friends.

In the past few years, Fujianese families' group dinners on Lunar New Year in the United States have become more festive and with more dishes than celebrations in China. Fujianese women take photos of all the food and the people attending the dinner to share them on social media and showcase to their families back in China.

Exclamations and comments of admiration around their feast they receive from their parents and families back in Fujian are important to them. These comments are proof that the women have managed to build a good life in the United States despite the hardships, and that they have a community to share food and maintain traditions with.

## Conclusion

In a liminal state of uncertainty and vulnerability, Fujianese migrant families found themselves forming a strong and deep connection with other families who share a perpetual liminal status. Thereby, they transformed uncertainty into new connections. By no means is this community formed by Fujianese families homogenous and “happy go lucky.” Like any social groups, the group dynamics and composition are heterogeneous with intricate power relationships between the members. While this community fails to fully be encapsulated by Turner’s theorization of *communitas*, members of the community still treat each other like comrades and kins. All the interviewees I spoke to feel grateful for each other’s presence and share a sense of comradeship.

The Fujianese women support each other in different aspects of their lives. From giving surplus vegetables to each other when others are running low, organizing shopping trips and resolving familial problems, to providing advice and companionship in everyday life. In all of these ways, Fujianese women and their families show acts of compassion to each other in the community, from different aspects of their daily lives. Conceptualizing care beyond caring for the sick or tending to the young, but as giving different acts of kindness and compassion in different dimensions and periods of life, like archipelagos surrounding the mainland.

Through sharing the experience of living in vulnerability and uncertainty, rejection, and alienation, the Fujianese community is formed. Through acts of care and kindness, gift giving and feeling indebted, a community lives.



## Conclusions: Living to Create, Not to Survive

Throughout the process of writing this thesis, I constantly ask myself one question: why are Fujianese immigrants able to form such strong, kin-like connections with each other so quickly? This question was raised by the phenomenon I experienced in Cape Town, where my identity as a Fujianese abroad ignited an immediate connection between a Fujianese family and I.

This thesis incorporated a variety of theories to tackle this question. From retelling the histories of Fujian and Mazu, analyzing the role of transnational motherhood in cultivating Fujianese identities, to exploring the perpetually liminal status in community formation for Fujianese migrants. All of the stories shared by the interlocutors and the analysis drawn from these stories allowed me to propose that the intense connection I felt and observed are products of being in a liminal status as immigrants.

Being a Fujianese immigrant, having a perpetually liminal status, leads to a lot of uncertainty. But liminality also enables potentiality; while the Fujianese migrants are “betwixt and in between” two worlds, they also have the potentiality to create new connections with other Fujianese immigrants and people from both worlds.

One shortfall of this thesis is its failure to encapsulate all the complexities that go into community formation in the Fujianese community, because I consciously excluded discussion of how Fujianese men participate in such processes. I focused almost exclusively on Fujianese women’s experience because of my access to rich ethnographic data and meaningful conversations with Fujianese migrant women. My

identity as a young, Fujianese-American woman and daughter gave me this valuable access, but it also hindered me from having this sort of conversation with Fujianese men in the community.

As my analysis progresses, I realized that not only has my discussion become highly gendered, the community also reveals itself as highly gendered. The division of labor at the restaurant is consistently gendered, child rearing continues to be primarily the responsibilities of the women, and even food preparation - which is solely performed by Fujianese men at the restaurant - is the responsibility of the women at home. It led me to question the extent of the public and private sphere blurring (explored in Chapter Two), because gender continues to predetermine the type and location of labor performed by men and women in the community.

In light of these discussions, I question the scope of my research and how it can contribute to the ongoing discussion of immigration experiences, perpetual liminality, and transnational motherhood. While my research draws from interviews and participant observations with Fujianese migrant women in a Midwest city in the United States, my experience with such connection in Cape Town shows that this may be a larger-scale phenomenon among the Fujianese diaspora. Small, local migrant communities are an important network of support for many different groups of migrants, and family-oriented networks are not unique to Fujianese communities. I believe that my work can contribute to the larger literature of how migrant women navigate community support and transnational motherhood, and also how liminal status can become a space of possibility for immigrants.

We live in an era where mobility is highly fluid for some people but also heavily restricted for others, the role of migrant communities and its formation becomes an important topic of discussion. Migrant communities provide essential support - may it be emotional, physical, financial, or social - that helps migrants flourish in their destination.

A few days before the deadline for submitting this thesis, I went out to dinner with my Swarthmore network of support - my beloved friends. We ordered food at the local Chinese take-out restaurant. I listened to the sound of the familiar Fuzhounese language from the back kitchen as I unwrapped my fortune cookie. It reads, "we live to create, not to survive."

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