The journey starts along the seafaring coastal towns of Fujian Province in China, less than one hundred miles away from Taiwan. Although Fuzhou City is the largest city in the area, the surrounding areas, such as Changle, Mawei, Fuxing, Putian, as well as Lianjiang County, have been the seedbeds of most illegal Chinese immigration to America over the past three decades. In these areas, snakeheads—the term used for those who smuggle Fuzhouhese into America—opened markets to convert venture into America as if they were starting a legitimate tourism package. With the cost of smugglers’ services all around and the astounding salaries the Fuzhouhese are told they can make in America, the price of $30,000 to $60,000 to set foot in New York City is too tempting for many Fuzhouhese to pass up. Borrowing money up front from family and friends, the snakeheads, who charge up to twenty-five percent interest annually, the migrants set out on their adventure along a variety of routes, most of which consist of long, crowded boat rides and an eventual crossing of the Mexican border. Upon arrival in New York City, the hub of the estimated 300,000 Fuzhouhese in America, they quickly find jobs through employment agencies, usually in a Chinese restaurant in the city or elsewhere in the US. It can take over five years for the smuggled Chinese immigrants to pay off the snakehead, and if they delay payment, they risk beatings or kidnappings of members in China. Although Fuzhouhese are very transient within the US, up to 70,000 thousand can be found in Metro New York at any given time.1

When Did They Come to New York?

Although some Fuzhouhese were already in Metro New York, the mass migration from the surrounding areas of Fuzhou City started in the 1980s. These immigrants were largely illegal, but amnesty that occurred in 1986 and 1990 legalized many, allowing Fuzhouhese to bring family over on reunification visas.2 Many Fuzhouhese are still smuggled through, however, and Fuzhouhese remains the largest source of recent Chinese immigration to America. When both Fuzhouhese parents are in New York, their children are primarily sent back to China until they are of school age.

Where Do They Live?

In Manhattan’s Chinatown Square, a statue of Commissioner Lin Ze Xu—a Fuzhouhese hero who defied the British importation of opium—stands in the center of the Chinatown village. Traditionally, the seafaring Fuzhouhese have prayed to the sea goddess Mazu for protection, and this practice has carried over to New York.3 However, Fuzhouhese religion is somewhat malleable, and although many do not attend places of worship, they mix Chinese traditional wisdom and Buddhist and Taoist rituals to bring balance to their lives. In the US, the Fuzhouhese do not make their money by fishing, so protection from the sea is no longer a priority, but protection from immigration officials. As news has spread throughout the US, the Fuzhouhese do not make their money by fishing, so protection from the sea faces east towards East Broadway. The positioning of the statue is symbolic of a dramatic shift in New York’s Chinese population, as the statue has its back turned to the old Chinatown center, dominated by the Cantonese, and looks out over East Broadway, the main Fuzhouhese hub in the US. The Fuzhouhese also make up a large portion of Brooklyn’s Chinatown around 8th Avenue in Sunset Park.

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