When Did They Come to New York?

Although a Wenzhou townspeople association existed in New York City by 1977, most immigrants from Wenzhou came after 1979 when the United States and China resumed diplomatic relations. At that point, a wave of both legal and illegal immigration started, with the 1990s witnessing the greatest influx of the “Chinese capitalists.” A Wenzhounese immigrant in Queens claimed, “It was popular to go overseas because it was said that you could make better money easier there, so I came for that reason.” Wenzhou’s sparseness of arable land has created high competition for jobs and businesses, leading many to search for better opportunities in New York. Furthermore, Wenzhou lacked a full-programmed university until the late 1980s, which led many students to study in America.2

Where Do They Live?

Due to their location in mainland China, Wenzhounese often learned Mandarin in school or through their business experience. As a result, they most often settle among other Mandarin speakers, the Wenzhounese are tightly knit socially and commercially. Even though community estimates differ widely, Wenzhounese most likely number around 50 thousand in New York.2

What Do They Believe?

In 1989, the Chinese government claimed that ten percent of all Christians in China come from Wenzhou.4 This number is certainly lower now due to the explosive growth of Christianity throughout China, but the statement is reflective of Wenzhou’s reputation as the “Jews of China.” However, the majority of Wenzhouese are simply nonreligious or loosely follow Buddhist and Taoist rituals while remaining fiercely materialistic. Up to thirty percent of the Wenzhounese in New York might consider themselves Christian, but as a Wenzhounese pastor in Queens explained, “A lot say they are Christian but do not go to church or practice the religion.” Whereas there are over 160 Chinese churches in Metro New York, there are only two known worship services in the Wenzhou language. However, many Wenzhouese Christians attend Mandarin worship services.

What Are Their Lives Like?

Many visitors to New York frequent Canal Street in Manhattan for bargains on souvenirs or handbags. Because of the Wenzhou propensity to operate light industrial enterprises, the Wenzhounese dominate this souvenir industry from production to point of sale. They are also involved in the garment business, and most Chinese supermarkets in Queens are owned and operated by Wenzhounese. While some return home to visit, almost all Wenzhouese plan on staying in America.

How Can I Pray?

Most Wenzhounese, including Christians, find little time to “practice religion” in New York. Pray that Christians would live for Christ throughout the week and prioritize fellowship with other believers...

2. 2 In 2003, the director of the Wenzhou Office of Chinese Overseas Affairs estimated that 100,000 Wenzhounese live in America. Around one-half of these are believed to live in Metro New York, which would bring the number to 50,000. Many Wenzhounese community leaders in New York estimate their population to be over 100,000, but this seems way too high. See John T. Wu and Kim Mark Liu, “The Wenzhounese Community in New York City: Chinese American History and Perspectives” (2004).
3. Wu and Liu.