

## *For Immigrant Family, No Easy Journeys*

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By Jennifer 8. Lee

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Yan Hua Zheng was worried about the crabs: they might not survive a 20-hour bus ride. She knew that her two daughters, who moved to the mountains of north Georgia two months earlier, missed fresh crab, a Fujianese favorite, but the crabs are no good unless they go into the pot alive.

So Ms. Zheng instead bought Chinese groceries that could endure her own journey to rural Georgia. She was moving from New York to reunite with her family. She rode the subway back home to Herald Square from Chinatown with orange and red shopping bags teeming with pickled radishes, dried mushrooms, shredded pork and soy milk.

Packing to leave a city after a decade is hard. Leaving via Greyhound is even harder: life has to be collapsed into bags that do not exceed 70 pounds. And a lifetime of experiences must be collapsed into the space of a single bus seat, to be expanded again only when the door opens and lets in the strangeness of a new environment, a new climate, a new stage of life.

Ms. Zheng, 39, moved to Manhattan a decade ago from her hometown in Fujian, a coastal province in southeastern China. At Thanksgiving time, she was making the second leg of her life journey, to Hiawassee, a small town in the northeast corner of Georgia.

In the last decade, waves of rural immigrants from Fujian have come to New York City. Tens of thousands arrived illegally, paying \$30,000, \$50,000 and even more to organized gangs of smugglers -- known as snakeheads -- to buy their chance at the American dream. In New York, they crowded each other out, out of homes, out of jobs.

Now the Fujianese are fanning out from New York City: north to Boston, south to Virginia, west to Tennessee. Some, like Ms. Zheng's family, are landing in small towns in the rural South like Hiawassee. "Every state has a Chinese restaurant," she said, explaining the feasibility of such moves. "Americans depend on us to eat."

She was leaving the only place in the country that had an identity to the Fujianese: New York City. Other parts of the United States are not called Indiana or Virginia or Georgia. Instead they are collectively known as waizhou -- Mandarin Chinese for "out of state."

For the Fujianese, waizhou is more than a geographic description. It is the white space left over where there is no New York, no Chinatown, no East Broadway. Waizhou is where fathers and sons go away for weeks and months at a time to work 12-hour days in Chinese restaurants. Waizhou is crisscrossed by Greyhound bus routes and dotted with little towns, all of which either already have or could use a Chinese restaurant. Waizhou schools are better. In waizhou, supermarkets sell crab meat prepackaged in boxes.

Ms. Zheng was reluctant to leave, but her husband had insisted on buying a Chinese restaurant in Hiawassee, a town of 850 people that prides itself for being two hours away from everywhere, including Atlanta. He argued that the restaurant could give them the financial and family stability that eluded them in New York. Her husband and two daughters left months before; now she was going with her young son in her lap to join them.

## A Second Migration

Ms. Zheng came to New York after paying \$30,000 to snakeheads for a fake passport and a plane ticket. She left her husband, John Ni, behind with their 4-year-old daughter, Jolin. Three years later, Mr. Ni left Jolin, too. He was given asylum in the United States on religious grounds, and that allowed his wife to become a legal resident as well.

He had no idea of how hard it would be to earn American money with poor English skills. In Fujian, he had graduated from college and held a low-stress job as an accountant. But in the United States, he worked as a waiter, slowly learning the restaurant business. Ms. Zheng worked in garment factories. Sometimes she even slept there, her head by the sewing machine.

They lived at 31st and Broadway, in a building filled with Fujianese crowded four or five to a room. The building is a study in the art of vertical living: bunk beds, wooden lofts, shelves that reach to the ceiling, boards strung across pipes to create storage space. It is a building full of takeout deliverymen. At night, the doorway is surrounded by dozens of chained bicycles.

In 1998, they had another daughter, Nancy, whom they sent back to China to be raised by her grandparents. A year later, they had a son. They named him Jeffrey but called him Momo, from their local Chinese dialect for "no hair." Ms. Zheng decided to keep him at her side.

A year and a half ago, Jolin got a visa and moved here, joining parents she had not seen in 10 years, in a one-room apartment. Nancy was brought by her grandparents three months later.

John Ni was from the countryside, and had never really felt comfortable with life in Manhattan, the crowds, the clutter, the smells. He was tired of their family living in a single room where they cooked in a makeshift kitchen in the bathroom.

In July, the couple heard from a friend about a modest Chinese restaurant called China Grill for sale in Hiawassee, a town whose name Ms. Zheng could barely pronounce. Mr. Ni went down to see the place. It was in a strip mall, sandwiched between a Dairy Queen and a Subway sandwich shop. The eight tables were set with A.I. steak sauce and Chinese zodiac place mats. The letters out front were in faux Chinese calligraphy.

Mr. Ni liked Hiawassee: it was small and the landscape reminded him of home. For the same rent as they paid for their 250-square-foot room in New York City, the family could get a 1,250-square-foot apartment with two bedrooms, seven closets and a washer and dryer. On the phone, he told Jolin that she could go fishing in the nearby lake.

Hiawassee seemed safer than a big city, where stories of men being beaten or killed while delivering food was a common currency among the Fujianese. A relative of Ms. Zheng's was shot and killed in a restaurant holdup a few years ago in Philadelphia. She hated the idea of living in the middle of nowhere, but she relented.

In September, after borrowing money from friends and family, they bought the restaurant, for \$60,000. Mr. Ni went first, buying a 1992 Cutlass Cierra for \$1,300. Then he learned to drive.

Nancy and Jolin took the Greyhound down to Hiawassee in October; Ms. Zheng stayed behind with Momo to deal with a crisis. Their apartment had been robbed in August, and someone stole a safe with \$10,000 in cash, jewelry and many legal papers -- including birth certificates and passports. Ms. Zheng was stuck here a little while longer untangling the mess.

In Georgia, business was slow -- the tourist season in the Appalachians was over -- but the customers were friendly. One man gave Mr. Ni a fishing rod. A local artist took the girls to register at school. On the first day of classes, one of Jolin's classmates asked her if she was in New York on Sept. 11, 2001. She couldn't understand what the other child said. Then a boy went up to the board and drew two buildings and a plane.

Jolin found waizhou boring, but she also found beauty. On her first trip to Atlanta, she gazed out at 14 lanes of densely packed car lights -- one river of red, one white -- that flowed to and from the night horizon on Interstate 85. "They look like ants moving up a mountain," she said. "It's prettier than New York."

There was a wonderful place called "Wama," which was huge, and sold everything from milk to underwear to televisions, at good prices. The man at the door gave out yellow smiley stickers that said "WAL-MART."

But she was surprised by the Chinatowns in waizhou. The ones on Atlanta's Buford Highway were U-shaped strip malls. And instead of densely packed streets, the "Chinatowns" had huge parking lots that overflowed on weekends.

### Atlanta Has Fresh Crabs

Greyhound doesn't stop in Hiawassee, so when she finally straightened out everything in New York, Ms. Zheng bought a ticket for Gainesville, Ga. -- an hour of winding mountain roads away.

She left on Nov. 26. On the way to the Port Authority bus terminal, she passed bands practicing for the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade in Herald Square. At the terminal, Ms. Zheng looked for her gate with seven bags and a toddler in tow. A woman with a polka dot scarf waiting at the gate tried to be helpful. "Donde va?" she asked. Ms. Zheng stared back.

Ms. Zheng sat near the front, next to the lady in the polka dot scarf, because the back of buses made her carsick. When the Lincoln Tunnel spit out the bus into New Jersey, Ms. Zheng held her son and looked back at the Manhattan skyline. She had paid \$30,000 to move to New York; she had paid \$59 to Greyhound to leave.

Momo, quickly tiring of his confined space, exasperated some other passengers with his thorough exploration of the bus.

"Who has cold medicine to knock him out?" piped up one man.

"What he needs is a shot of rum -- straight up," called out another passenger.

Ms. Zheng did not understand what they were saying, but she could read the tone of their voices.

The industrial landscape of Interstate 95 melted into the hollow stretches of Interstate 85. Baltimore. Richmond, Va., where there was a delay. Charlotte, N.C., where she had to change buses. Spartanburg, N.C., Greenville, S.C. The hills and trees along Interstate 85 reminded Ms. Zheng of her village and her father's farm. The temperature rose, and there were leaves on the trees.

In the Charlotte bus depot, she met a Fujianese man on his way back to Tennessee after a New York City vacation. He gave Ms. Zheng almost \$100 worth of seafood that he was afraid would spoil because his bus was delayed.

The clams and abalone were still fresh, but the crabs had died between Richmond and Charlotte. They were big ones, the kind that cost \$7 a pound.

After 24 hours, Ms. Zheng arrived at her final bus depot. She waited and waited for her husband. A voice pierced through the crowd. "Hello! Hello!"

Mr. Ni rushed up, scooped up his son and hugged him. Husband and wife looked at each other. They had not seen each other for two months. There was no embrace.

It was 3 a.m. by the time they reached their home in Hiawassee, where there was still some clean white mountain snow on the ground. Mr. Ni turned on the bedroom light and shook his daughters. Jolin woke up, bleary-eyed. She looked around and her face brightened when she realized who was there. She immediately hugged her little brother. "He smells," she said.

Nancy continued to sleep on the mattress on the floor. "She's gotten chubbier," Ms. Zheng observed, looking at her younger daughter. She'd been eating snacks from the restaurant, Jolin explained.

Jolin dragged the bags in from the car. She jumped on 14 videotapes her mother had brought of a popular Chinese serial opera. Mr. Ni swung Momo around, laughing.

Ms. Zheng watched the two of them. For the first time in their lives, the pieces of the family puzzle were complete. It was a family that barely knew each other, but now had only each other to depend on.

After the restaurant closed the next night, the family had their first dinner together in months. Ms. Zheng brought out the chilled clams from Charlotte to go along with the stir-fried broccoli and sesame chicken. The clam was good when dipped in wasabi mixed with soy sauce. But it wasn't crab.

So at her first opportunity, Ms. Zheng endured a two-hour journey of winding roads to Atlanta. (She threw up twice; New York subways are not adequate preparation for winding roads.) She brought back two bags of crabs and steamed them for dinner. "They are not much more expensive than in New York," she said.

The family sat around the table. They had no need for crab crackers, breaking the warm red shells with fingers and teeth. It was a lot of effort for thin slivers of white crab meat and spoonful of orange roe. But they thought it was worth it. "Fujianese are not afraid of hard work," Jolin said.