

Waiters, Cooks to Go

By Jennifer 8. Lee

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AT the beginning of every week, a steady stream of Chinese restaurant workers files into the nest of Chinatown employment agencies clustered under the Manhattan Bridge: young men with spiky hair barely out of their teens, smooth-skinned girls who still giggle about their crushes and stocky older men who left their families behind in China years ago.

The workers walk in and out, in and out, checking each of the dozens of dusty single-room agencies. They focus on the white boards and walls of Post-it notes that list the hundreds, if not thousands, of job openings available across the country each week: kitchen helpers, chefs, waitresses, telephone answerers, deliverymen who can drive, deliverymen who don't need to drive.

Among the job seekers one Monday late last month was Xue Qingxi, a 38-year-old immigrant with large, friendly eyes and a bright green T-shirt who arrived in New York City the day before, towing his belongings in two small black rolling suitcases. Feeling it was time for a change, he had just left his job as a cook in a Chinese restaurant in North Carolina. Where, exactly, in North Carolina, he wasn't sure. "It's all rural," he said dismissively. After renting a bed for the night for \$15, he was wandering in and out of the employment agencies the next afternoon, looking for his next job. "I want to leave tonight," he said.

There are more than 36,000 Chinese restaurants in the United States -- more than the number of McDonald's, Wendy's and Burger King restaurants combined, says Chinese Restaurant News, an industry publication. They have popped up in exurban strip malls and on the decaying streets of former industrial centers in the Midwest: buffets, takeouts, sit-downs. And the main hub for staffing that vast network of restaurants -- or at least those that lie east of the Rocky Mountains -- is at the convergence of Forsyth, Division and Eldridge Streets, where the rumble of the subway can be heard overhead.

"It's remarkable how successful the Chinese have been in adapting their food to America, making it so phenomenally available," said Kenneth J. Guest, a sociology professor at Baruch College in New York, who has studied Chinese restaurant workers. "You can go and get a great meal for great prices, based on workers paid well below minimum wage."

Well, on paper at least, the salaries will squeak by minimum wage, especially if tips are taken into consideration. The agencies have posted signs in Chinese explaining the concept of the federal minimum wage law.

The vast majority of these workers, like Mr. Xue, are undocumented, and have paid tens of thousands of dollars for the privilege of being in the United States. In the Delaware-size area around Fuzhou, a southeastern city that has become China's leading exporter of restaurant workers to the United States, the going rate for being smuggled is now upward of \$60,000, Professor Guest said.

The risk of being caught exists, but arrests are sporadic. Last November, United States Immigration and Customs agents detained 80 illegal immigrants and arrested eight people in a raid of Chinese buffets in five New York State counties. In recent years, authorities have also focused on restaurants and employment agencies in Texas, New Mexico, North Dakota, South Dakota, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Ohio and Michigan. The detained illegal immigrants are usually put into deportation proceedings.

But for almost all the workers, including Mr. Xue, the risk is worth it. They care only about three numbers: the monthly salary, the area code where the restaurant is located and the number of hours it takes to travel by bus from New York City to the job.

The monthly salary, for a job that requires six 12-hour days a week, ranges generally from \$1,800 to \$2,700, scaling upward from dishwasher to waitress to cook. It is understood that all jobs beyond commuting distance of New York City include free room and board, provided by the restaurant owner. The owners rent or buy houses or apartments that serve as dorms for the workers.

The jobs can last from a few days (if things don't work out) to several months or longer. The workers are mobile and seldom have roots to the nameless small towns and strip malls they end up in.

For workers who cannot read the names of their destinations in English, area codes serve as the restaurants' main geographical identifiers. The workers do not see America as a series of cities or even states, but as a collection of area codes, almost all with dozens upon dozens of Chinese restaurants looking for help. Maps in every Chinese agency break down the country by area code, with recently introduced area codes scribbled in by hand.

For many restaurant workers, the number of hours by bus is a critical measure of how far they are from the American center of their universe, East Broadway in Chinatown. Almost all travel by bus, because many do not speak English or have identification, so they cannot travel by plane. A network of Chinese bus companies has sprung up to shuttle the restaurant workers from Chinatown to the rest of the country. Some have started to draw non-Chinese

riders, specifically the "Chinatown buses" that run between New York and Boston or Washington. One bus-company sign advertises the destination and the fare: "Minnesota (612, 551, 952, 763) \$150; Wisconsin (920, 715, 608, 414) \$120."

At Sincere Agency on Division Street, which sometimes places more than 100 workers in a day, Mr. Xue found an appealing job as a cook in Ohio (\$2,400 a month, 440 area code, near Cleveland, 10 hours by bus). In the short phone interview with the restaurant owner, the questions were practical. Instead of "What do you see yourself doing in five years?," Mr. Xue was asked: "How many years' experience do you have?" and "Can you leave tonight?"

A verbal agreement was reached, and Mr. Xue pulled out \$30 in cash to pay the agency. Unlike many employment agencies where the employer pays for the match, the employees here pay for the privilege of finding a job. Competition among a growing number of agencies has pushed the going rate down over the years, to \$30, down from 2 percent of one month's salary. Some fly-by-night agencies have pushed it to \$15 or \$20, which causes the regulated agencies to grumble about the cost of rent and insurance.

The agency clerk gave Mr. Xue two slips of paper: one listing the name of the restaurant and the contact number for the owner, the other telling him where to catch a bus to Ohio at 5 o'clock.

As he left to retrieve his things, Mr. Xue got a call on his cellphone from the restaurant telling him that he was not wanted because he was northern Chinese. Language barriers, the restaurant explained. So Mr. Xue returned to Sincere Agency for another job. This time it was in South Carolina, and the bus was leaving at 10 p.m.

By 9:30 that night, Mr. Xue was seated on a cushy white bus with air-conditioning and DVD movies. In the belly of the bus were his two black suitcases holding his white chef's cap, pictures of his son and Chinese novels. He paid \$80 cash for the ticket. When the ride ended, he would have made a 60-hour journey from North Carolina to South Carolina, by way of Manhattan.

As the bus pulled into the sparse night traffic and dimmed its interior lights, almost all the seats were full. About 90 percent of the people on the bus, Mr. Xue said, were heading to work in Chinese restaurants in the South.

The bus joined the tractor-trailers heading south on the Interstate with their goods. They would all arrive after the sun rose the next morning.