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Cross-Space Consumption: Grassroots Transnationalism among Undocumented Chinese Immigrants in the United States

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Abstract: Drawing on existing studies of immigrant transnationalism, we develop a concept of the “social value of consumption” and use it to explain the phenomenon of cross-space consumption among international migrants. Based on a multi-sited ethnographic study of undocumented Chinese immigrants in New York and their family members in hometowns in Fuzhou, China, we find that, despite the vulnerabilities and precarious circumstances associated with the lack of citizenship rights in the host society, undocumented immigrants manage to realize the social value of consumption across national borders, and that they do so through conspicuous consumption, reciprocal consumption, agent-assisted consumption in their hometowns even without physical presence. As a type of grassroots transnationalism, cross-space consumption enables international migrants to take advantage of differences in economic development, currency exchange rates, and social structures between countries of destination and origin to maximize their expression of social status and to attain or regain social status in their hometowns. While it serves to support the economic well-being of left-behind families and hometown communities and to sustain family ties and social networks, this type of grassroots transnationalism also serves to fuel extravagant rituals, drives up costs of living, reinforces existing social inequality, and creates pressure for continual emigration in the hometown.

Keyword: social value of consumption, cross-space consumption, conspicuous consumption, status attainment, undocumented immigration, hometown development

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INTRODUCTION

International migrants are simultaneously able-body workers and consumers. Existing research has paid ample attention to their role as workers, offering invaluable insight into the causes and consequences of cross-border mobility and processes and outcomes of immigrant adaptation to their host societies (Massey et al. 1998). Prior research has also generated knowledge about impacts of emigration and remittances on the well-being of left-behind families and community development in migrant hometowns (Cohen 2004; Potts 2000; Roberts and Morris 2003). However, the literature on the role migrants as consumers is relative scant. Of the past studies that have focused on migrant consumption, there are different approaches to the migrant consumer. Some assume that migrant consumers are full citizens of the host society or of their hometown societies. In this line of thinking, migrants are like other native consumers, who can exercise their consumer rights according to their economic means and freely express their identity, lifestyle, and social status via the processes of consumption and acculturation either in the host society or in the hometown (Abizadeh and Ghalam 1994; Hao 2004; Hsu and Yang 2013; Lee 2000; Lee and Tse 1994; Morrison 1980; Peñaloza 1994). Other studies, however, assume migrant consumers to be socially marginalized victims. From this approach, migrant consumers are constrained not only by their economic capacities or means but also by their racial/ethnic and social class statuses in the host society or hometown societies (Cvajner 2013; Ong 1999; Schler 2003; Wang and Lo 2007). The value of their consumption is rarely actualized beyond their basic needs (Ong 1999).

There are significant gaps. First, prior research focuses on migrant consumption as it occurs in a single space, either in the migrant's host society or in his or her hometown, but seldom across spaces. Second, prior research on migrant consumption focuses on migrant consumers as physically mobile beings, but rarely on those who are unable or without legal rights to move freely across national borders. Third, prior research focuses on the structural constraints that limit migrant consumers' social status attainment through consumption, but overlooks their agency and ability to cope with structural barriers in maximizing the social value of consumption. For example, migrants often choose to return to their home countries to unleash their consumption desires, which have been suppressed in the host society, in order to feel good and to improve their social reputation (Li 1999; Pries 2001). They also send monetary remittances to their hometowns to be consumed by others in order to show "face" and boost up their own social status. Both examples suggest that migrants are thrift consumers in one space where they are structurally constrained in order to be extravagant in another space where they are free from these structural constraints, a proactive strategy described as "cross-space consumption," (Wang 2005; Wang and Yan 2011).

Our present study aims to fill the gaps in the literature by developing the concept of the "social value of consumption" and using it to explain the phenomenon of cross-space consumption across national borders. Based on a multi-sited ethnographic study of consumption patterns in migrant hometowns in Fuzhou, China, and in-depth interviews with Fundocumented Chinese immigrants in New York and their family members in hometowns, we explore three main questions: (1) What causes the unique pattern of consumption among undocumented immigrants? (2) How do undocumented immigrants engage in cross-space consumption when their physical mobility is highly constrained? (3) What impacts does cross-space consumption have on the migrant, the family left behind, and the local community in the country of origin? We argue that cross-space consumption is a type of

grassroots transnationalism similar to the sending of monetary remittances, but that its impacts on hometown development are more complicated. Cross-space consumption enables international migrants to take advantage of the uneven development, currency exchange rates, and different social structures between countries of destination and origin to maximize their expression of social status and to attain or regain social status in their hometowns. However, this type of grassroots transnationalism can fuel extravagant rituals, drive up costs of living, reinforce existing social inequality, and create pressure for emigration in the hometown.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Our study of dual-space consumption concerns the migrant, his or her monetary remittances, and symbolic expression of social status or actual social status attainment. To develop an analytical framework, we draw on three bodies of the theoretical literature: migration and development, immigrant transnationalism and social mobility, and values of consumption and expression or performance of social status.

Migration and Development

Migration and development have been treated as cause and effect processes in the study of international migration, and remittances by migrants as the intermediate driving force arising from migration to affect development. The development literature focuses on the role of remittances and cast positive light on the relationship between migrant remittances on household welfare and local economic development. From this approach, remittances encourage household consumption, which enables family members to improve their standard of living. Even as the consumption is in non-productive activity, it can yield positive multiplier effects because most of the goods and services are purchased locally or domestically (Lowell and de la Garza 2000). For instance, remittances used for renovating or building houses can directly contribute to basic well-being, health, and safety of family members while stimulating business and employment opportunities related to housing construction in the local economy, which in turn benefit the often poorer non-migrants (Castles and Miller 2003; Cohen 2004; Pessar and Mahler 2003; Roberts and Morris 2003). On the whole, large-scale free migration is highly beneficial for local development in sending communities.

In contrast, the pessimist approach in the immigration literature considers several negative effects of remittances, particular on social inequality, economic disruption, and depopulation. First, migrant remittances serve to reinforce income inequality in sending communities, because international migrants seldom hail from the poorest segment of their place of origin (Adams 1998). Moreover, migrant remittances provide only a temporary, unreliable, and external source of income for families left behind, which is often spent on consumption rather than on productive activity or investment, thereby further increasing the dependency on remittances and undermining local or domestic production (Buch et al. 2002; Massey et al. 1998). Furthermore, migrant remittances disrupt the stable peasant societies, undermining local economies by uprooting their populations and further fuelling out-migrations (de Haas 2010; Jones 1998; Massey et al. 1998).

Immigrant Transnationalism and Social Mobility

The recent literature on immigrant transnationalism has partially reversed the pessimist view of migration and development (Portes and Zhou 2012). Current studies have highlighted the reality of continuing fluid contacts between migrant communities in the host society and their communities of origin in sending localities. These contacts are not haphazard but are *regular* and involve occupations and activities that require *sustained*

interactions over time across national borders for their implementation (Portes 1994). This new school of transnational studies has proliferated to document the diverse, and sometimes surprising, forms that these cross-border activities take, such as cash remittances, homeland trips, long-distance calls or cyberspace communication, and occasional activities (Glick-Schiller et al. 1992; Portes 1994; Portes et al. 1999).

The most salient feature of transnationalism is of monetary remittances for supporting migrant families left behind (Durand et al. 1996; Gold 2001; Goldring 2002; Guarnizo et al. 1999; Itzigsohn et al. 1999; Landolt 2001; Levitt 2001; Mahler 1995; Portes et al. 2002). Other forms of transnationalism include religious remittances (Levitt 2007); political remittances (transfer of egalitarian ideology and leadership styles), activism, migrant rights (Piper, 2009); and social remittances (ideas, behaviors, identities, and social capital that flow from communities between countries of destination and origin) (Levitt 1998; Levitt and Lamba-Nieves 2011). These various types of grassroots transnational practices via remittance-sending have profound development implications for sending communities. Remittances in hard currency support the basic subsistence of left-behind families while helping these families to achieve self-sufficiency and social mobility, such as financing family businesses, land acquisition, and construction of new homes for family members and for migrants' own transnational living or retirement needs as well (Durand et al., 1996; Goldring, 2004). Moreover, monetary remittances, even those used for household economics, generate the "multiplier effect" to benefit non-migrant households as well as local and regional developments in migrants' ancestral villages or towns (Durand et al. 1996; Massey and Parrado 1998; Taylor et al. 2003).

Grassroots transnationalism also has significant implications for immigrants' own social mobility. Current studies have shown that contemporary immigrants are now found to achieve economic success and social status, depending not exclusively on rapid acculturation and entrance into mainstream circles of the host society, but on ethnic resources mobilized within diasporic communities, as well as (at least for some) on cultivating strong social networks across national borders. In this sense, transnationalism can serve as an alternative means to social mobility in the host society (Zhou and Lee 2013). Immigrants of diverse socioeconomic backgrounds have been found to engage in varied forms of transnational practices. Highly acculturated and highly educated immigrants have been found quitting their well-paying salaried jobs to engage in economic activities across borders because they can better utilize their skills, bicultural literacy, and social networks to reap material gains. Less acculturated and low-skilled immigrants also engage in transnationalism, but their practices are limited to sending remittances regularly to support families and kin, buying land or building houses for their own transnational lives, and establishing small, sustainable businesses in their homelands. In either case, the immigrants proactively adopt transnationalism as an alternative path to social mobility. For the highly skilled, it enables them to maximize their human capital returns, and, for the low skilled, it enables them to effectively convert the wages earned in the host countries to material gains and social status recognition in their countries of origin (Gold, 2001; Goldring, 2002; Guarnizo et al. 2003; Itzigsohn et al., 1999; Zhou & Lee, 2013).

However, the existing literature has overlooked grassroots transnational practices among undocumented immigrants who are of highly disadvantaged social status, being marginalized in the host society as well as in their own ethnic community, and whose mobility is legal constrained. Many undocumented migrants from low social status are as likely as their legal compatriots to participate in the transnational practices via the sending of monetary remittances back to their hometowns. Take Chinese undocumented immigrants from Fuzhou for example. Our fieldwork reveals that the remittances sent from the undocumented immigrants are no less than those from legal migrants. Their monetary

remittances have left an indelible imprint on the landscape of migrant hometowns or sending villages in Fuzhou, most visibly seen by many grandiose houses built in villages. Their remittances have also impacted economic and sociocultural developments, which have in turn nurtured a more open environment to sustain further immigrant transnationalism (Gan & Deng, 2012).

Values of Consumption and Expression or Performance of Social Status

Immigrants are consumers. Under normal circumstances, an individual's consumption behavior happens within a certain time and in a particular geographical space and is constrained by social class, race/ethnicity, and citizenship statuses (Cvajner 2013; Schler 2003; Wang and Lo 2007). Their consumer behavior is associated not only to their basic needs to reproduce themselves as able-body workers but also to their sociocultural needs in their adaptation to the new society. The existing literature identifies various values of consumption that measure the levels and dimensions of satisfaction of the consumer's demands brought by a particular product or service. These values include the functional value and a set of non-functional values beyond the functional value (Hirschman and Holbrook 1982; Sheth et al. 1991). The most basic value of consumption is the functional value, which is for satisfying the consumer's immediate demand for labor reproduction. Non-functional values are subjective and relative. Hedonic value pertains to the pleasure or displeasure of a product felt by the individual consumer during consumption while symbolic value confers symbolic or cultural meaning to the product being consumed by the individual consumer. Symbolic consumption occurs when the consumer purchases goods and services and use them beyond their immediate or basic needs, often for assisting him or her in creating, confirming, or expressing a social identity or social status (Belk et al. 1982; Hsu and Yang 2013; McCracken 1986). Along with the rapid commercialization of the modern consumer society, more and more consumer goods are produced to provide sign values, which confer social status and prestige, to stimulate conspicuous consumption (Baudrillard 1998; Veblen 1899).

Social value is a broader term, encompassing symbolic and sign values of consumption. It refers to the association of a particular choice with one or more specific social groups to which the consumer makes reference or the particular social status of the group which the consumer expects to match or mimic (Sheth et al. 1991). The social group that provides the basis for a consumption value may be defined by class, gender, race/ethnicity, or immigrant status (Hanser 2008; Hsu and Yang 2013; Lan 2006; Wang and Yan 2011; Yeh and Huang 2009). The social values of consumption play an important role in the psychological and social aspects of the consumer's life (Ahuvia et al. 2005).

We draw on the idea of the social value of consumption to explore how undocumented immigrants express or perform social status via consumption. Consumer goods and services carry and communicate cultural meaning, which is constantly in transit, flows in more than one location (McCracken 1986). For international migrants, their consumption behavior in the new society is influenced by the process of acculturation, which involves the learning of and adapting to new cultural norms and lifestyles in the new context while sustaining the old cultural norms simultaneously (O'Guinn et al. 1986). In a study of lifestyle in New Zealand, Hsu and Yang (2013) find that the consumption of a particular practice, such as engaging in outdoor activities, confers the symbolic value of a healthy lifestyle and makes a statement of social class position in the host society, to which immigrants are adapting. However, many international migrants often limit their consumption to satisfying basic material needs, used for the reproduction of labor without fully realizing the social value of consumption, because of their disadvantaged statuses in the class and racial hierarchies of the host society.

Recent work on consumer behavior among migrants is concerned with explaining why natives or locals and migrants with similar socioeconomic characteristics show different consumer choice behavior and why migrants are more than natives to be frugal and are more likely to engage in conspicuous consumption in the communities of origin rather than in their host societies. In their study of rural-to-urban female migrants in the service sector in urban China, Wang and Yan (2011) show that female migrants are extremely thrifty and restrain from any consumption beyond basic needs in the city they sojourn while become extremely extravagant in their spending when they return to their home villages during holidays. Wang and Yan call this particular consumer behavior “cross-space” consumption. They find that migrant workers adopt this particular consumption behavioral pattern in order to express lost social status in the city they sojourn and regained social status when they return home even for short visits (Wang and Yan 2011). In the process of consumption, the association between the individual or family income and the regular expenditure of different sorts of material and non-material goods and services is called “consumption structure.” Each item in the regular daily expenditure is for the achievement of a certain value(s). Existing studies on migrant consumer behavior focus either on how migrants change their consumer behavior to adapt to that of the host society in order to acculturate, as in the case of Hsu and Yang’s study; or on how migrants change their consumption structure in two different places in order to maximize non-functional values, as in the case of Wang’s study. Both assume that the migrant can exercise his or her agency making rational choices in consumption and that migrants are physically present in a particular place to pursue in non-functional values via conspicuous consumption. However, few studies have looked at the situations in which migrants are either structurally constrained by the host stratification system, or are spatially constrained because of legal barriers (Hanser 2008; Lan 2006). The notion of cross-space consumption across geographical spaces begins to fill the void.

Cross-Space Consumption and Social Status Attainment: An Analytical Framework

Cross-space consumption is a strategy adopted by migrants, which refers to means by which individual migrants compress the values of consumption in one geographical space in order to maximize the social value of consumption in a different geographical space. How are undocumented immigrants engaged in cross-space consumption when they cannot be transnationally mobile? In this study, we develop an analytical framework to analyze the paths through which the movement of sociocultural meaning and the bearing of social status are transferred from one location to another and the consequences of such movement.

In the process of consumption, the association between the individual or family income and the regular expenditure of different sorts of material and non-material goods is called “consumption structure.” Each item in the regular daily expenses is for the achievement of one certain value. As individual income increases to exceed the level needed for labor reproduction, the marginal effect of achievement of labor reproduction tends to decrease, which would improve the pursuit of consumers towards non-functional values (Wang 2005). In Figure 1, we analytically simplify the consumer needs into two ideal types, basic needs v. symbolic needs, which form the consumption structure of the international migrant. Immigrants generally can achieve the functional value and part of the hedonic value of consumption in their host societies, but they have difficulty in achieving the symbolic and social values because they are blocked by their marginalized social positions in their host societies due to their disadvantaged racial/ethnic or social class statuses. So in their adaptation, they often adopt the cross-space consumption strategy to transfer the symbolic and social values of consumption back to their hometowns.

Even undocumented migrants, who cannot move freely across geographical spaces, do so. The question is *how*. From our observation, three paths are identified: conspicuous

consumption, reciprocal consumption, and agent-assisted consumption. In our view, these paths can enable the physically absent migrants to express and regain their lost social status and reputation back in their hometowns, while transferring part of the social values of consumption to their family members. However, the overemphasis of the social value of consumption can have profound development implications for hometown communities. Reciprocal consumption contributes to social capital accumulation by strengthening kinship ties that are being dispersed and disrupted in the processes of internal and international migrations. However, conspicuous consumption and agent-assisted consumption serve to fuel extravagant rituals, drives up costs of living, reinforces existing social inequality, and creates pressure for emigration in the hometown. Next, we examine a case study to unfold the process of cross-space consumption, mechanisms of social status attainment, and development implications for hometowns.

[Figure 1 about here]

DATA AND METHODS

In this study, we adopted a multi-pronged approach and conduct transnational multi-sited ethnographies for data collection, which occurred during the summers of 2011 and 2012. We traced the steady flow of emigration from Fuzhou, Fujian Province, China, to New York, USA. Most of the undocumented Chinese immigrants to the United States hail from Fun County and River County (in pseudonyms) in eastern part of Fuzhou.¹ We conducted intensive observations in a town and six villages of River County and Fun County, and two Chinatowns in New York (East Broadway in Manhattan and 8th Avenue in Brooklyn), including Fuzhouese-own restaurants elsewhere in New York.² We interviewed Fuzhouese migrants in New York and their relatives in their hometowns as well as local government officials in Fuzhou.

We focused on undocumented Chinese immigrants (including a small number whose status has been legalized) from Fuzhou for two reasons. First, among undocumented Chinese immigrants, those hailed from Fuzhou constituted a majority and most of them were concentrated in New York (Zhao 2010). Such a focus would allow us to explore in greater detail the paths of cross-space consumption between countries of destination and origin. Second, existing studies find that ethnicity, class, and citizenship status affect consumer choice behavior but overlook how these factors interact and how these factors affect legal and undocumented immigrants differently (Ong 1999; Wang and Lo 2007). There is a large overlap of three characteristics among undocumented immigrants, as they are socially marginalized by ethnic minority status, their low SES status, and undocumented status. The multiple barriers by ethnicity, class, and citizenship limit their consumer choices in their host society as well as hometown. We believe that the study of this most disadvantaged labor migrant group can shed lights on how undocumented immigrants make sense of their lives on the margins of their host society and how transnationalism may be practiced without being physically present in the transnational fields.

FINDINGS

Undocumented Chinese Migrants from Fuzhou, China

The passage of the Hart-Celler Act of 1965 was undoubtedly critical in accelerating Chinese immigration to the United States. However, the surge in contemporary Chinese immigration occurred only after the late 1970s when China launched its massive open-door economic reform and relaxed its emigration restrictions and then the U.S. and China normalized diplomatic relations. The changes made it possible for relatives of U.S. citizens or

longtime U.S. resident aliens to apply for U.S. immigrant visas in China. Initially, most of the U.S.-bound emigrants were from the historically important sending regions in Guangdong Province. Later on, newly established migration networks, including the human smuggling networks, facilitated emigration from other parts of China (Zhou, 2013). As a result, the number of legal immigrants from mainland China and Hong Kong to the United States grew from 283,000 in the 1980s to 650,000 in the 2000s, and has continued to grow at an average of more than 75,000 annually since 2010 without any sign of slowing down. Chinese immigrants to New York City accounted for 20 percent of all Chinese immigrants legally admitted to the United States, and in 2010, New York City had the largest Chinese population of any city outside of Asia (Zhou 2013).

Chinese immigrants from the Fuzhou area have come to the United States in droves since the 1980s, and New York has been their most preferred destination. Accurate number of Fuzhounese is hard to obtain but a major Fuzhounese association in New York City claimed at their number surpassed the half-a-million mark (Zhuang 2003). Compared to other Chinese immigrants, Fuzhounese immigrants have several unique characteristics which affect their patterns of consumption. First, they speak a distinct dialect that is incomprehensible to other Mandarin- or Cantonese-speaking Chinese who live and/or work in Chinatown or in dormitories provided by their employers. The linguistic difference and residential segregation are barriers for them to melt into the existing ethnic community. They thus organize themselves in the form of hometown or clan associations for self-help, just like the old-timers in the old days. Second, most of them are of rural or low-skilled background with little proficiency in English. Like other low skilled Chinese immigrants, they are highly dependent on low-paying work in the Chinese enclave economy and cluster in crowded housing in Chinatowns. However, they are more willing to accept lower wages and living in poorer housing than other regular immigrants, which create both fear and resentment among the coethnics in the existing Chinese immigrant community. Third, a significant fraction of them is undocumented, except for only a fortunately few who have been able to have their immigration statuses legalized (Li 2005). As undocumented, the Fuzhounese experience tremendous hardships and multiple social dislocations. Prior to arrival, they must paid enormous fees to smugglers — from \$18,000 in the mid-1980s to about \$80,000 per person in 2012 — in order to make the journey to New York (Chin 1999; Chu 2010; Kwong 1999; Guest 2011; Liang et al. 2008). So they are heavily in debt upon arrival and must work harder and spend less than other immigrants of similar socioeconomic status. Moreover, they are sojourners who have left their families behind in Fuzhou, hoping to make and save money they earn and eventually return home someday in case that they cannot get their status legalized. Without families around, they lead a sojourning lifestyle very different from their low-skilled counterparts who are settlers. Furthermore, they are stigmatized and socially marginalized not only by mainstream American society but also by the ethnic Chinese community (Guest 2011; Zhao 2010).

Despite the precarious circumstances they encounter, the Fuzhounese are generally optimistic, resilient and entrepreneurial. While most are engaged in 3D (dirty, dangerous, demeaning) work in restaurants and fast food takeouts, garment shops, and construction trades in New York's Chinese ethnic economy, they expect to make a lot more money than they did at home and hope to become self-employed in the near future. In the calculations of these undocumented Fuzhounese, once their smuggling debts are repaid, the money they earn in a Chinese restaurant in New York in a year would equal to "at least 12 years" of working in factories in Fuzhou (Guest 2011: 33). After a period of time since arrival in New York, Fuzhou undocumented immigrants are internally divided into two major classes: the labors and the business owners. An extraordinary example is that the Fuzhounese has carved out a niche in the ethnic economy, dominating the ethnic restaurant trade of all-you-can-eat buffets

and take-out restaurants spreading across metropolitan New York and into suburban shopping malls, small towns, and along interstate exits all over the country and catering to a clientele beyond ethnicity (Guest 2011; Zhao 2010). However, the business success of self-employed Fuzhounese in the U.S. has not been given the much deserved social recognition in the Chinese community, except for a few who occupy leadership positions in hometown associations, much less in the mainstream society, yet it has become legendary in the hometowns in Fuzhou. The lack of social space in the U.S. for Fuzhouneses to perform their social status commensurate with their newly earned wealth makes them to adopt the cross-space consumption strategy for social status attainment or compensation (Li and Zhou 2012; Zhou and Li 2015).

The Undocumented Immigrant Consumer: Distorted Consumption Structure

As we have discussed in the previous section, the functional value of consumption is for meeting the material requisites of individual consumers toward the fulfillment of basic needs, such as the reproduction of labor. The consumption structure refers to the ratio of income to different types of consumption needs. New immigrants, especially low-skilled labor migrants, initially encounter severe financial difficulties upon arrival in their new country, partly because of higher cost of living compared to that in their country or origin and partly because of their lower wage earning abilities than their native counterparts. They would deal with these problems by adjusting the consumption structure (Broadfoot 1986; Lee and Tse 1994). Immigrants are thus likely to adopt a retrenchment strategy, reducing the level of consumption for meeting the basic needs, or an active saving strategy, refraining from any consumption deemed unnecessary (Schaeffer 1995). For low-income immigrants, the marginal propensity to consume is relatively low, and the proportion of basic consumption expenditure in foodstuff and housing to their income is relative high. Although they must prioritize on the functional value of consumption, they have to decrease their basic consumer needs to the minimum.

This is especially the case for undocumented immigrants for two additional reasons. Undocumented immigrants are debt-ridden upon arrival. They are force-choice sojourners who cannot do any long-term planning for future resettlement in the host society. Fuzhounese migrants have been smuggled into the United States or via other fee-based informal channels. In order to pay off their transit debts as soon as possible, they have to accept whatever jobs are available even at substandard wages. They also have to restrict their consumption to the level of absolutely necessary for their own reproduction. Most of the undocumented immigrants work in the informal cash economy operated by other Fuzhounese in New York's old and new Chinatowns (Zhao 2010; Guest 2011). Since the late 1990s, Fuzhounese-own restaurants have mushroomed in other parts of the greater New York metropolitan area and rapidly expanded into suburbs of the tri-state (New York, New Jersey and Connecticut) region and southward along interstate highways to Pennsylvania, Connecticut, North Carolina, and South Carolina). The newly arrived Fuzhounese immigrants are spread around these areas as well, working in restaurants and living in crowded group housing provided by restaurant owners as part of their employment agreement. The lifestyle of these workers is simply and monotonous. Here is a description given by Mr. Chen, an undocumented Fuzhounese, who had been in the US for four years and who worked in a buffet restaurant Newark New Jersey at the time of the interview,

We get up around 9 am. The van would take us to the restaurant at 9:30am. We then work all the way until the restaurant closes at 10pm. By the time we get back to our dormitory, we are already dead tired with little energy even to watch TV. The next day would be the same, and the day

*after... 7 days a week... Well, I couldn't work 6 days a week anyway, but I'd rather work 7 days because there is nothing else to do here.*³

When asked what he did for leisure, Mr. Chen gave a bitter smile, "Leisure? Cannot afford to *waste* [emphasis added] money. I would have wait for another five years to think about it." Mr Chen had never been to a movie theater since he arrived in the US and had very few weekend days. A big portion of his income was to pay debt and the rest to be saved for building a house in his home village. He said his plan was to pay off his debt in another year or two and then finish up building up his house at home. A few other immigrants whom we interview also indicated that they had similar plans and that they were able to save more money working outside New York City where "there is nothing much to do beside work" than in the city where "everything is too expensive" and where "there are many compatriots whom you could hang out in your day off."

Left-behind family members also expected immigrants to work and save money rather than to spend some time having fun and waste money. Ms. Zou lived in a village in River County, Fuzhou. She had two sons smuggled out of China to New York, and both her sons worked in restaurants, one in Pennsylvania and the other in Connecticut. She said in the interview,

*Most of them [Fuzhounese] in America would not want to live and work in downtown New York City. Because there are a lot compatriots living there; and the rent and cost of living are very high. Also, if you work in downtown, you would be frequently asked by your friends to take them out for dim-sum or dinner, then you would spend all that money you earned, and you would never save any money. Thus, a lot of people prefer to live and work in suburban areas or more remote areas. If you live in those places, you only see white and black people, not even any Chinese people for a couple of months. But then you can focus on your work and save your money.*⁴

The life of many Fuzhounese migrants is typically "all work and no play." These immigrants barely have days off and leisure time. Generally, they are only allowed to ask one day off per month. During that cherished "one day," they would take time to go to New York's Chinatown to shop for personal items, such as cigarettes and shaving cream, not provided in their dormitories, or to get have a cheap haircut. They have no extra leisure time, nor do they want, to spend any money beyond what is basic.⁵ While this extremely frugal lifestyle represents a retrenchment strategy to help Fuzhounese accomplish a long-term goal, it increases their visibility as the undocumented and the unassimilated among regular Chinese immigrants. Their current state in turn exacerbates their dual marginalization in the ethnic community and the host society.

Increased Desire in Achieving the Social Value of Consumption

Non-functional values of consumption are multiple, referring to consumers' symbolic needs toward the expected hedonic, symbolic, sign, and/or social values brought by consumer goods and services. Most of the immigrant consumers in the host society aim to achieve the functional value of consumption, but often find it hard to achieve non-functional values because of cultural and structural barriers. The existing literature shows that, in the contexts of uneven development between countries of destination and origin and rapid globalization, it is possible for international migrants to transfer non-functional values of consumption via transnational practices in order to achieve hedonic and social values and express or perform

social status via cross-space consumption (Wang and Yan 2011).

Undocumented Fuzhounese immigrants suppress their consumer needs in order to balance out low wages, heavy debts, and long-term mobility plan. They also have to suppress their symbolic consumer needs in the host society. However, based on our observation, we find that, although they must suppress symbolic consumer needs in the host society to nearly zero, their desire for achieving the social value of consumption is much stronger. This strong desire is a reaction to their double exclusion — from their own ethnic community even as the ethnic community is marginalized by the larger host society. While it is difficult for Chinese immigrants, especially the less acculturated and the undocumented, to express and perform society status in the larger society, it is possible for them to do so in the ethnic space. However, this ethnic space is limited in several respects. First, the ethnic space is too small to offer a significant stage for performing social status performance. Second, people within this ethnic space are too bounded by informal social networks to make one's own status change. Third, there are severe internal divisions within this ethnic space based on the place of origin and socioeconomic status. In the Chinese community, being looked down upon as undocumented migrants and stigmatized by other Chinese coethnics as “rats on the streets” and facing double exclusion. Thus, it is not only difficult for Fuzhounese to express their symbolic needs, much less to achieve the social values of consumption, even inside the ethnic Chinese community. Mr. Huang, who was smuggled into United States in 2007 and remained undocumented, said,

In the beginning, what I did in restaurants was to fetch and carry things around, at \$1,500 per month with meals and housing included. I had no leisure time at all as I needed to work around the clock. Since I didn't spend much, I could save pretty much all of this amount of money. But I need it to pay my debt. Even after I pay off my debt, I would never waste my money in America – because this little money cannot change how people look at you here. You are still a stowaway. I have no social status at all, even I am dying to show that I have made it.⁶

Fuzhounese immigrants who are able to move up to rank of business owners are able to make good income in the ethnic economy. But they are still constrained by the ethnic stratification system of the host society, and they are still blocked, to varying degrees, by the language and cultural barriers to achieve full values of consumption and full expression of social status. Within the ethnic community, the distinction between labor and business classes among the Fuzhounese is less visible to their coethnics. Fuzhounese business owners are often labeled as “stowaways,” “low quality,” “illiterate,” “barbarian,” and uncultured, and treated just like their fellow Fuzhounese of labor class status. Their achieved wealth and economic status are overshadowed by the stigmatized undocumented status. As they are discriminated against as a sub-ethnic group within the ethnic community, their ethnic space in which they can perform and express social status, shrinks even more. For example, Mr. Yang was an undocumented immigrant from Fuzhou. He has now attained legal status and is a naturalized US citizen. He owns two restaurants and two homes in New York City with net worth of nearly \$100 million dollars in New York City. He should be in the upper middle class on economic terms. Being Fuzhounese, he is still regarded as a low-class stowaway by other Chinese judging by his accent. The inability to receive respect further increases his desire for satisfying his symbolic consumer needs. But even with conspicuous consumption, driving a fancy car and wearing name-brand clothing, he is still frustrated by being “mistaken” and “unnoticeable.” So he decided to build a deluxe villa back in his hometown.

He said, “buying houses in the United States does not bring you any ‘dignity’ or ‘respect,’ but doing so back in China can.”⁷

Realization of the Social Value of Consumption in Transnational Spaces

Unable to satisfy their symbolic consumer needs in the host society, Fuzhounese immigrants adopt the strategy of cross-space consumption, shifting their consumption in transnational spaces and via transnational practices. How do they do it when they are economically so disadvantaged and when cannot physically traverse across national borders? One enabling factor is the differential values of currencies. The favorable rate of currency exchange of the US dollar to the Chinese yuan makes the dollar more than six times stronger, though exchange rates have fluctuated in recent years.⁸ The American dollar is of high status symbolically as well. In River County, those living on migrant remittances would tell you, “In America, they earn *mei yuan* [dollars], *beautiful yuan*! Many times better than what we earn here. It really doesn’t matter what you do there. You send a lot of money home.”⁹ Although undocumented Fuzhounese make much less in hourly wages than other low-skilled Chinese immigrants in New York, their earnings are still several times higher than the average personal disposable incomes in their hometowns due to different levels of development and exchange rates between countries of destination and origin.¹⁰ Also being in America or having some relatives in America make the individual highly respected in Fuzhou.

Another enabling factor is the differential values in consumption. The same consumer products cost less in cash but produce more social utilities in migrant hometowns. Such “inflation” in transnational spaces creates the possibilities for immigrants to maximize the value of their meager savings from the entrenchment consumption strategy and allow them to achieve their symbolic needs and express or perform social status to the greatest extent. Ms. Cai spent \$14,000 dollars when she first returned home to her village in River County, she said,

Beautiful yuan [US dollar] is always very strong and valuable back home. The amount of \$14,000 was equal to ¥120,000 yuan then, which was a great sum in hometown. I could use the money to buy lots of gifts for my relatives. Not that they needed these gifts, but they expected the gifts when you were home. I must show them our better life in America, and they would have face when talking to other folks in the village too. I cannot afford to go home often, but when I go, I must spent money and bring gifts.¹¹

A third enabling factor is the positive image of them in their hometowns in Fuzhou. Prior to World War II, Chinese immigrants were considered “guests of the gold mountain” (Zhou 1992). Now Fuzhounese are viewed as “guests from America.” Back in their hometowns, undocumented Fuzhounese immigrants bear this respectful name rather than a stigmatized name of “stowaways.” In River County, “smuggling” is actually not a particularly negative term, but an adventure with self-sacrificing spirit and heroic connotation. The positive image fosters an expectation of a glorious return in themselves and their fellow villagers at home. When the immigrants send remittances home or when they eventually return, their relatives, friends, and fellow villagers would give them social recognition. Their new identity as “guests from America” is constructed by their home villagers but is superior to left-behind non-migrant villagers. The identity construction is transnational and cuts across class lines and is reinforced by migrants’ cross-space consumption. For reasons of social dislocation and double marginalization, undocumented Fuzhounese immigrants actually look

forward to the day when they can return home and consume in hometown like rich people to achieve extra social values. Next we analyze how the Fuzhou immigrants achieve their social value of consumption and compensate for or regain their lost or suppressed social status in their hometowns.

Conspicuous Consumption and the Social Status Attainment

Most of the Fuzhouese immigrants in the United States lived in a closely-knit society of kin, friends, and acquaintances before migration. In such an acquaintance society where people know one another, the existing system of power and social statuses are generally maintained through informal social networks and mechanisms of support and control. Individuals in hometowns are entrenched in the existing system, and it is hard for them to reconstruct and change their own social statuses and identity in a short period of time (Gan and Deng 2012; Wang 2012). However, migrants who have been physically absent from the hometown social system can make change at relative ease across social spaces, and most effectively through conspicuous consumption upon their return to the hometown.

For both legal and undocumented immigrants, their most important expenditure involves building a home in their home village of origin. A home has both functional utility and culturally defined meanings. The Chinese notion of “home” is an extension of kinship. The “ancestral house” in the place of origin serves to anchor the extend family and carry on familial lineage, while also signifying the life-long accomplishment and socioeconomic success (Chen 2008).

Although many undocumented immigrants cannot physically return home to build houses, they would send remittances for home constructions in stages. Many send money at the end of their first year to simply launch the construction and build the foundation of their homes. This way, left-behind families and fellow villagers would know that they are making it in America. Some of the homes would take five to seven years to complete. When the houses were first built, they were built for improving the living conditions of left-behind family members, such as migrants’ parents, spouses, and children. During the long process of house construction, some of adult members of the family would also migrate overseas, mostly via smuggling networks.

In recent years, the rural areas of Fuzhou have witnessed this distinctive scene: various types of multi-storied, oversized mansions standing or being built in the middle of the rice paddies or in odd locations in a village. From the distance, these homes look grandiose, Western, and out of place. Getting closer, most of these large luxury mansions are either locked without visibly routine maintenance or are nearly empty. Of the homes that are occupied, most have just an elderly person, or an elderly couple, with a housekeeper living there. Most of the homeowners are emigrants overseas who are physically absent. From our field observation, the western-style mansions in River County are utilized only when the immigrants (the legal ones) return home occasionally.

However, the houses that migrants build and maintain in their hometowns are status symbols, which also represent a familial obligation in keeping and maintaining family relations thousands of miles apart and an imagined home to which migrants would return someday in the future. In describing this empty-mansion scene, a village cadre Mr. Gao put it this way,

Your house is a most visible statement of success. You want to show success as soon as possible in order to justify your move and to make your families here feel proud. So everybody is doing it because no one wants to lag behind. I cannot think of any family with relatives in the US that I know who has not done it.¹²

Thus, sending remittances home to be consumed in the construction of luxury houses is less for utility and more for the realization of symbolic or sign values. The empty or much underutilized mansions allow the absentee owner to display their newly attained social status or compensate for their status loss in the US. By such cross-space consumption, even the undocumented immigrants are able to gain social status recognition at home within a relatively short period of time.

Reciprocal Consumption and Maintenance of Social Ties

Reciprocal consumption is a second path of cross-space consumption practiced by Fuzhounese immigrants. The luxurious and conspicuous consumption of migrants and their families in hometowns has the potential of causing jealousy and resentment among non-migrants and families without overseas relatives, which can dampen the positive image of the “guest from America” and disrupt social relations in a closely-knit hometown society. To balance social relations, migrants’ consumption in their hometowns also takes on the character of “reciprocity,” spending to show off while simultaneously maintaining social ties that may be disrupted through the process of migration and conspicuous consumption. Reciprocal consumption is primarily through wedding and funeral rituals.

Ritual is a regular means to consolidate the relations among members of a social group (Durkheim, [1912]1976). Weddings and funerals in Fuzhou are not just family events but a communal event that involves the whole village in a closely knit society. In migrant hometowns of Fuzhou, the basic cost of a funeral is at least \$16,000 (or ¥100,000 yuan), and it may go up to \$80,000 (or half a million yuan). There are also million-yuan funerals. Funeral expenditures include not only the necessary costs directly related to the funeral, but also social costs associated with the funeral ritual. In Fuzhou, the ritual would include a communal banquet, to which the whole village is expected to be invited. In traditional practice, the invitees would give the mourning family red packets with cash as donations to help defray the costs of the funeral, and the mourning family would also give each invitee a thank-you red packet with a symbolic amount of cash at the end of the funeral banquet. These rituals can be costly to families without regular incomes and migrant remittances, which may even cause these families to detach from the social network so as to avoid being invited and having to pay money. To reverse this potential social disruption, migrants would use this ritual to give money out rather than to take money in. Mr. Zheng described,

These days, you make money by attending someone else’s funeral. You give 100 yuan in a red packet, but would get back a “thank-you” red packet that contains at least 200 yuan. It wasn’t like that before 1980. Now, a lot of people go overseas, and they make big money. So they want to show a good face to the family and the whole village.¹³

Mr. Lin, a Fuzhounese immigrant in New York, explained,

Basically it is a family face-saving feat. Few families in Fuzhou can afford such funerals without money sent back by overseas Chinese.¹⁴

When Mr. Lin’s father passed away two years prior to our interview, he spent more than a million Chinese yuan on his funeral. At that time, he held an extravagant funeral banquet of 70 tables with nearly 700 participants and gave a thank-you red packet of ¥500 to each participant. In the past, funeral participants needed to hand in cash gifts; and in present days, they receive a significant amount of cash instead. The mourning family and the

migrants who send remittances to pay for the costs both receive social recognition from the participants, who constitute the community. After each funeral, people always gossip about how much this family spent on building the tomb and hiring monks to perform the burial ritual, how many tables this family set up for the guests, what kind of food offered on the table, and how much money the family gave out in the thank-you red packets. “Well, nowadays, you wouldn’t mind going to more of these funerals. You have a good meal, hang out with friends, and, most importantly, get paid. The mourning family have ‘face’ when a lot of people show up.”¹⁵

Like funerals, weddings are also ritualistic. Wedding banquets are generally more glamorous and more expensive than funeral banquets, for they include entertainment programs as well as in-kind takeaway gifts in addition to thank-you cash red packets. Guests attending the wedding are given tangible gifts to take away, such as a bag of rice, a bottle of cooking oil, a carton of cigarettes, a bottle of liquor, toothpastes, tooth brushes, soap, and detergent.¹⁶

Weddings include many more expenses than funerals, such as pre-wedding betrothal gifts from the groom’s family, dowry from the bride’s family, and meeting gifts from guests. In Fuzhou, the basic price of a betrothal gift should be at least ¥53,000 yuan (\$8,500). If the groom is a migrant overseas, the price is much higher, but the bride’s family may return a good portion of the betrothal gift in the hope that the groom would take the bride overseas and help her family migrate later.¹⁷ The rate of dowry varies, but it can go up as high as one million yuan if the groom is a migrant overseas. In Fuzhou, the high-priced dowry is actually in exchange for the bride and her family to move to America in the future, while compensating for the groom’s travel expenses when he was smuggled into the United States earlier. So compared to the smuggling fee of \$80,000, one million yuan for the prospect of a safe journey to America for the bride’s family is “a good deal.”¹⁸

Meeting gifts, or wedding gifts, are given by the guests to the newlyweds and are usually in the preferred form of cash rather than in-kind. The amount of meeting gifts varies, based on the status of the host family, the participant, and the closeness in relations with the newly-weds. Based on our fieldwork in Fuzhou, the norm is a minimum of ¥500 yuan.¹⁹ The uniqueness of the practice is that the meeting gifts are announced at the wedding. At the beginning of the wedding banquet, the matchmaker would read aloud the amount of meeting gift of each guest. In a closely knit society, no one give less than the normative amount. Those who give higher amount of cash in meeting gifts would normally be close family members. In this occasion, relatives or best friends overseas usually give a lot more, twice as much to more than ten times as much as the norm. Such publicly known gift-giving would boost up the status and social recognition of the most generous givers. In a wedding, the newlyweds can reap a large amount of money in gifts.²⁰ But the newlyweds are sometimes expected to donate part of the money to communal welfare and for philanthropic purposes (Portes and Zhou 2012).

Both funeral and wedding rituals are major family events. When immigrants pay visits home, they are also expected to give their relatives and friends homecoming meeting gifts. The expenses incurred are borne primarily by international migrants to promote reciprocity in a closely knit society in a migrant hometown. While reciprocal consumption serves as communal welfare while helping to maintain kinship ties and social relations, it also drives up costs of communal rituals. As a result, young family members are pushed to go overseas by any means possible, because, in the words of a villager, “without relatives overseas, people in Fuzhou cannot afford to get married, and they cannot even afford to die.”²¹

Agent-assisted consumption is a third path through which migrants attempt to gain social status in their hometowns. The consumers in agent-assisted consumption are not the migrants but migrants' relatives back in hometowns. Migrants send remittances home to their families, and the constant flow of remittances has not only created a class of dependents but also stimulated conspicuous consumption among relatives in migrant hometowns. While out-migration causes the decrease in the size of the local population in migrant sending communities, remittances and cross-space consumptions help foster a culture of migration that not only functions to push people out but also breed a "parasite" class (Fei 2006: 96). This parasite class lives on migrant remittances, acting as agents to help remittances senders realize the social values of consumption in hometowns. Mr. Li, who worked in the government office of River County, depicted vividly how this parasite class was formed in an interview,

In our town, most of people work oversea but buy things here. The backbreaking pains of one person overseas can bring happiness to the whole family here at home. Although migrants lead a tough life out there [in the US], they are also rewarded when they send money back to their families. They are hesitant to spend one extra dime out there, and they will try their best to save every single penny they make. For example, if they earn \$3000, they would like to send all of this money back to their family. They uphold a spirit of sacrifice. They keep thinking that there is still a family back in their hometown; so they work hard and suppress their desire for any unnecessary consumption, in order to send the money back to their family members ... Their family member, on the other hand, are living a comfortable and even luxurious life – just enjoying spending money and consuming on behalf of their overseas relatives. They let others know that they have rich overseas relatives. The overseas relatives get the pleasure of being looked up to and being depended upon.²²

Stay-behind family members and relatives are so dependent upon remittances that they become important agents for the migrants overseas in consumption. Because they spent on easy money, members of this parasite class inadvertently contribute to rising consumer goods in hometown as well as the rising value of land and prices of real estate in Fuzhou. In fact, it cost us more to conduct fieldwork in Fuzhou than in some of the most expensive cities in China, such as Guangzhou and Shenzhen. Mr. Li explained,

People in Fuzhou don't seem to care about the price of food. In the supermarket, they just grab whatever they think is good and put it into their baskets without look at or asking for the price first. All the good food would be grabbed at whatever price offered. Even fish would cost several hundred yuan per kilogram, when you can get the same fish in the city for just under 100 yuan. These people spend and spend like there is no tomorrow while their relatives overseas save and save and send.²³

What Mr. Li expressed may be exaggerated, but it does capture the fact without migrant remittances, no one in town can afford such a high level of consumption. Migrant remittances enable left-behind family members and relatives to lead a more comfortable and luxurious life than others without remittance incomes in the hometown. These dependents and relatives who rely on the oversea remittances are actually adopting "agent-assisted leisure" and "agent-assisted consumption" (Veblen 1899). What they do reflects well on the

“success” of migrants overseas, which reinforce the positive image and high status of the guests from America. Overseas remittances also take left-behind family members out of the labor force, enabling them to engage in “consumption” and “enjoying life” rather than in productive work. Left-behind families consume in ways that help achieve the social values of consumption for the remittance senders. Consequently, agent-assisted consumption reinforces the income inequality in migrant sending communities. Family without the migrant outside cannot afford the sharp increase in the prices of land, real estate, even rental housing, and overall cost of living in Fuzhou. This in turn creates pressure for out-migration, making migrant hometowns even more dependent.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

International migrants strive to make it in the host society for different purposes. Some work themselves up the social ladder to integrate into the host society’s middleclass while others sojourn with the intention to return. To cope with cultural and structural barriers that restrict their rate of success, many immigrants straddle multiple geographical spaces and engage in various forms of transnationalism. A unique type of grassroots transnationalism is cross-space consumption. Based on a multi-sited ethnographic study of undocumented Fuzhouese immigrants in the United States and their left-behind families in Fuzhou, China, we have analyzed the causes, mechanisms, and consequences of cross-space consumption.

Fuzhouese immigrants in the United States, who are in disadvantaged social positions as ethnic minorities, low-skilled workers, and undocumented migrants, face double exclusion by the ethnic Chinese community and the host society. Their precarious circumstances force them into a unique pattern of cross-space consumption. As immigrants, Fuzhouese lead a life of “all work and no play.” As consumers, however, they display a cross-space consumer behavior. On the one hand, they suppress their basic consumer needs to a minimum in the United States in order to maximize cash savings and then fulfill their family obligations and their own symbolic consumer needs by unleashing all their savings in bulk in their hometowns. On the other hand, they spend lavishly in Fuzhou by exercise their agency, utilize family ties, and rely on the existing social structures of the hometown society to practice cross-space consumption through three major paths — conspicuous consumption, reciprocal consumption, and agent-assisted consumption. And they have achieved noticeable success in achieving the social value of consumption not only because of the economic advantages in the host country, such as higher levels of income and favorable current exchange rates, but also because of the cultural conditions, such as rituals, and institutional settings, such as left-behind families and social networks.

Cross-space consumption enables international migrants, especially those who are in extreme disadvantaged circumstances, to maximize the social value of consumption and realize social recognition or status compensation in migrant hometowns. However, the overemphasis of the social value of consumption across national borders has profound development implications for sending communities. First, monetary remittances for cross-space consumption provide much needed resources to sustain the local economy. For example, house construction that is fed on migrants’ desire for “face,” social reputation, or social status compensation, has indeed stimulated the growth of the construction industry and related industries and created jobs in the local labor market. Rituals also stimulate retail trade and the hospitality industry. However, such economic development may stimulate further emigration overseas and internal migration from other parts of China. Both in- and out-migration streams may cause the gradual breakdown of the local social structures of the closely knit society, which has served as an important institutional basis for cross-space consumption. Randomly constructed housing with nearly empty occupancy in migrant

villages may also deteriorate over the long run, which may become nuisance for future urban planning and development.

Second, monetary remittances for cross-space consumption contribute to social capital accumulation. Reciprocal consumption has a significant effect on the maintaining and strengthening kinship ties that are being dispersed and disrupted in the processes of internal and international migrations. Rituals attract big crowds. Participants do not have to bear any financial burden because their participation is paid for by migrants via thank-you packets. In return, participants give “face” to the “guests from America” and their families. The size and extravagance of the communal fanfare confers social reputation and status and thus helps migrants realize the social value of consumption. However, such practices foster a culture of emigration and exacerbate the pressure for emigration, while taking a heavy toll of the migrants. As more and more young adults are going overseas, the closely knit hometown society would age and shrink, losing its strength to serve as a viable platform for migrants’ social status performance.

Third, monetary remittances for cross-space consumption support an emergent “parasitic” lifestyle for left-behind families in hometowns. Part of the social value and other non-functional values of consumption are transferred to migrants’ families and relatives, who show off their oversea relatives’ social status and reputation via agent-assisted consumption. Because money comes in handy, the agent-consumers spend not only extravagantly but also irresponsively. This rising “parasitic class” relies on oversea remittances, while “waiting” to emigrate through legally or illegal means. The increase in disposable income through remittances widens the existing income gap between families with overseas relatives and those without as well as families of internal migrants. In particular, families without relatives overseas and remittances not only remain in the lower income class, but also have to bear the sharp increase in the prices of land, housing, and goods and services, which has exacerbated the rising cost of living in Fuzhou. They are also under high social pressure to participate in rituals. As a result, more and more people look for out-migration to ameliorate their economic circumstance, which further undermines local economic and deteriorates the stable peasant society.

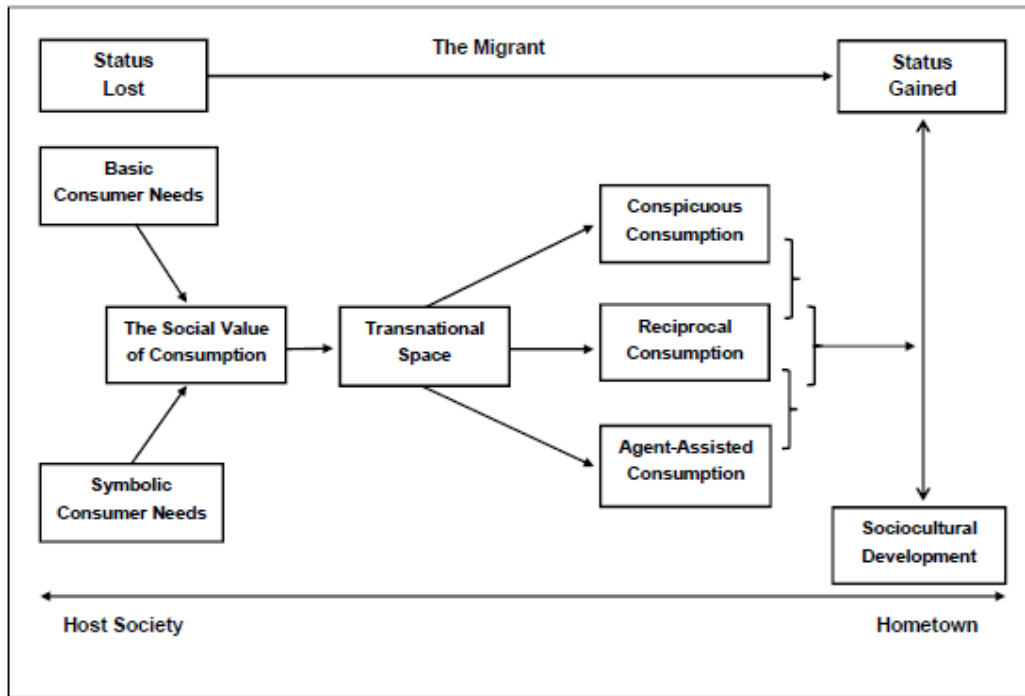
We should also point out that the local government, business community, and civil society of a hometown play an important role in promoting migrants’ cross-space consumption that help preserve the existing structure of power, which should be explored further in future research (Li and Zhou 2012; Zhou and Lee 2015). For example, local government officials are gatekeepers and approving authorities of development, e.g., licenses and permits of construction and business. They are also distinguished invitees to ritualistic fanfare and their presence confers face, reputation, and status. This existing system of power reinforced by intertwining family and social networks serve to privilege families with migrants overseas to the exclusion of internal migrants whose number is seen increasing in hometowns.

Moreover, for undocumented immigrants, cross-space consumption serves to improve their social reputation and status only within the existing social structures of a closely knit society in their hometown and up to and certain point. The existing social structures offer a valuable platform on which migrants express and perform social status in person or via agents and local institutions. Through various forms of remittance-drive consumption, migrants and their left-behind families contribute to maintaining and strengthening the traditional social structures and the social ties that bind them. However, once the social structures and families are transformed through continuous out-migration pushed by remittance-driven consumption patterns, the platform may deteriorate and break down.

Cross-space consumption is negatively influence migrants’ integration into their host country. The reason is because the achievement of non-functional values of consumption

across national borders is contingent upon context. The host society and hometown provide two different sociocultural spaces for consumption. But these contexts are constantly changing. As immigrants become more integrated into their ethnic community and host society in the long-run, the amount of remittances that support the revived traditional rituals and newly acquired parasitic lifestyle in hometowns may shrink. So how much longer this type of grassroots transnationalism sustains itself remains an empirical question.

Figure 1: Cross-Space Consumption and Social Status Attainment



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NOTES

¹ Fuzhou is the capital of Fujian Province. The municipality encompasses 5 urban districts, two county-level cities, and 6 counties. Fun County and River County are on the east coast of Fuzhou, from which most of the undocumented immigrants in United States hail. Most of the overseas compatriots from Fun County and River County are new immigrants, emigrating from China after the mid-1980s. We use pseudonyms for people and places.

² Intensive fieldwork was conducted in several time periods: July to August 2011, and June 2012 in Fuzhou; December 2011 to February 2012, and July 2012 in New York and New Jersey. We collected data mainly through participant observations, in-depth interviews, and random chats with participants in local facilities, such as cultural centers, reading rooms/libraries, restaurants, neighborhood shops in both New York-New Jersey and Fuzhou. We also observed events, such as weddings and funerals, in Fuzhou.

³ Interview with Mr. Chen in Brooklyn's Chinatown when he visited friend there, July 5th, 2011.

⁴ Interview with Ms. Zou, a village official of River County, Fuzhou, August 2nd, 2011.

⁵ Interview with Ms. Wu, a Fuzhou immigrant and a lobby manager in a restaurant of Chinatown, New York City, January 8th, 2011.

⁶ Interview in Manhattan's Chinatown in New York City, with Mr. Huang, an undocumented Fuzhounese immigrant, December 25th, 2011.

⁷ Interview with Mr. Yang, formerly undocumented and now a naturalized US citizen, in his house "Qingzhi Villa" in a village in River County, Fuzhou, August 6th, 2011.

⁸ Exchange rate in 2012 was \$1 to ¥6.35 yuan.

⁹ Conversation with a group of elderly people in a village reading room during fieldwork in Fun County, Fuzhou, June 25th, 2012.

¹⁰ According to official statistics in 2012, annual personal disposable incomes were: \$4,757 (urban) and \$2,096 (rural) in Fun County; \$3,943 (urban) and \$1,627 (rural) in River County. Our own fieldwork shows that the average annual earnings of Fuzhou immigrants in New York was around \$24,000, which was five to 15 times as high as the average level of personal incomes in Fuzhou (Fuzhou Municipal Statistic Bureau 2013).

¹¹ Interview with Ms. Cai, formerly undocumented and now a naturalized US citizen, in Manhattan's Chinatown in New York City, December 12th, 2011.

¹² Interview with Mr. Gao in a village of Fun County, Fuzhou, June 25th, 2012.

¹³ Interview with Mr. Zheng, formerly undocumented and now a naturalized US citizen, in his house in New York City.

¹⁴ Interview with Mr. Lin in his house in a village in River County, Fuzhou, August 6th, 2011.

¹⁵ Interview with Ms Peng in Fun County, Fuzhou, June 25th, 2012.

¹⁶ Interview with Ms. Zou, a village official in River County, Fuzhou, August 2nd, 2011.

¹⁷ Interview with Mr. Dong, a villager in River County, Fuzhou, August 3rd, 2011.

¹⁸ Casual chat with participants at a wedding in Fun County, Fuzhou, June 24th, 2012.

¹⁹ Interview with Mr. Dong, a villager in River County, Fuzhou, August 3rd, 2011.

²⁰ Interview with Mr. Li, an official working in a town government office of River County, Fuzhou, July 25th, 2011.

²¹ Interview with Ms. Zou, a village official in River County, Fuzhou, August 2nd, 2011.

²² Interview with Mr. Li, an official working in a town government office of River County, Fuzhou, August 4th, 2011.

²³ Interview with Mr. Li, an official working in a town government office of River County, Fuzhou, July 30th, 2011.