



# Chinese Human Smuggling Organizations

Sheldon X. Z

FAMILIES, SOCIAL NETWORKS, AND  
CULTURAL IMPERATIVES

SHELDON X. ZHANG

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*Families, Social Networks, and Cultural Imperatives*

STANFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

STANFORD, CALIFORNIA

Stanford University Press  
Stanford, California

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Printed in the United States of America on acid-free, archival-quality paper

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Zhang, Sheldon.

Chinese human smuggling organizations : families, social networks, and cultural imperatives / Sheldon X. Zhang.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-8047-5741-6 (cloth : alk. paper)

1. Illegal aliens—United States. 2. Human smuggling—United States. 3. Human smuggling—China. 4. United States—Emigration and immigration. 5. China—Emigration and immigration. I. Title.

E184.C5Z429 2008

364.1'3—dc22

2007029374

Typeset at Stanford University Press in 10/14 Janson

## Preface

Illegal entry into the United States by Chinese nationals is not new; organized Chinese human smuggling activities, however, began to emerge only two decades ago. This phenomenon did not receive much public attention until in November 1993 the *Golden Venture*, a Honduras-registered freighter with 286 illegal Chinese immigrants on board, ran aground on New York's Long Island (Fritsch 1993). Ten immigrants drowned while trying to swim ashore. Although this was the most publicized story about undocumented migration from China in the 1990s, it represents only one incident in a much larger context of clandestine smuggling of Chinese nationals to the United States (Liang and Ye 2001, 187). Nonetheless, the *Golden Venture* incident was a watershed event in transnational human smuggling for several reasons. First, it signified the beginning of a tidal wave of illegal Chinese immigrants to the United States after China and the United States resumed their diplomatic relationship. Second, it brought to the front page the potential threat to U.S. national security and the U.S. immigration system of an influx of illegal immigrants from a country bustling with one-fifth the world's population. Third, it compelled U.S. law enforcement and social service agencies to acknowledge the problem of illegal Chinese immigrants as real and serious, and to mobilize resources that were previously directed mostly at curbing illegal migration from Latin America. Fourth, it showcased the tenacity and capability of the smugglers and their transnational networks in moving human cargoes around the world.

Transnational migration has become a global phenomenon that affects practically every nation. Growing international commerce, greater integration of world economy, and advances in communication technology and

mass transportation have not only expanded global exchanges of goods and services, but also spurred the movement of laborers seeking employment opportunities. About 175 million people currently live outside their native countries (roughly 3 percent of world's population), and almost 10 percent of the population in developed nations is made up of foreign-born migrants (United Nations 2002, 2). Currently legal and illegal migrants account for 15 percent of the population in some fifty countries; and the trend of population movement is expected to continue well into the future (National Intelligence Council 2000, 23). The globalization of the marketplace and the integration of manufacturing and distribution processes worldwide can only encourage the movement of laborers, and in turn propel the undercurrent of illegal migration. The pressure for outward migration has already created a booming economy, with brokers and facilitators taking advantage of legal loopholes, forging identity documents, and exploiting loosely guarded borders to assist fee-paying migrants to reach their destination countries.

Human smuggling is a multi-billion dollar business. Unlike their counterparts from Mexico, who generally pay a few hundred to a few thousand dollars to enter the United States illegally (Cornelius 2000), illegal Chinese immigrants must pay tens of thousands of dollars to human smugglers for the journey (Chin 1999). People involved in the smuggling business have demonstrated surprising resiliency in developing new transportation strategies that allow them to stay one step ahead of law enforcement agencies. After the events of September 11, 2001, many suspected that illegal immigration would be significantly curtailed as governments at all levels shored up security measures. The newly established U.S. Department of Homeland Security quickly evolved into a mega-organization, taking on a wide range of functions previously performed by different federal agencies including border security, customs inspection, transportation safety, and emergency response. Inspections at all ports of entry have intensified. Billions of dollars have been spent, but the impact of the nation's security measures on illegal immigration and concomitant human smuggling activities remains in doubt. Recent news reports suggest that illegal entry by foreign nationals, either individually or in an organized manner, has remained largely unabated. Most notably, a *Time* magazine investigation alleged that the 9/11 events had failed to bring about effective measures to tighten the nation's borders and that the situation of illegal immigration had actually become

worse (Barlett and Steele 2004). The report estimated that in excess of three million illegal immigrants entered the United States in 2004, “enough to fill 22,000 Boeing 737-700 airliners, or 60 flights every day for a year” (Barlett and Steele 2004, 51).

Although Mexican nationals continue to make up the majority of the illegal immigrant population, U.S. Border Patrol agents are encountering a growing number of nationals from other countries or other than Mexicans (OTMs, in Border Patrol parlance) entering from Mexico. They reportedly come from Brazil, Guatemala, China, India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Bulgaria, Russia, Egypt, Iran, and Iraq. The Border Patrol’s records indicate a rapid increase in the apprehension of OTMs, from less than 2 percent of all arrests in 1996 to more than 13 percent a decade later in 2005. Law enforcement agencies increasingly worry that the illegal channels developed by human smugglers will also be used by terrorist organizations to deploy their members.

My fieldwork in China and the United States also suggests that human smugglers continue to find ways to transport their clients and settle them in the rapidly expanding Chinese communities across the country. A drive through towns, large and small, can provide a glimpse of the growing demand for cheap laborers to work in the kitchens of the many successful Chinese buffets. Only a handful of scholars have taken an interest in illegal migration from China, and scholarly literature related to human smuggling is just emerging (Liang and Ye 2001), partly because human smuggling is not a traditional racket of choice for criminal organizations. More important, for many years illegal Chinese immigrants have remained largely “invisible” because of linguistic differences and cultural barriers posed by ethnic enclaves in the United States. As long as these communities’ problems do not spill into the mainstream society, few outsiders have reason to pry into these ethnic enclaves.

Much of our knowledge about human smuggling and illegal Chinese immigration is based on information provided by the immigrants themselves, rather than by smugglers. Willard Myers (1994; 1996), an immigration lawyer who worked with many undocumented immigrants, claimed that a global network of Taiwanese criminals controlled much of the human smuggling trade; he warned about the threat of this influx of illegal Chinese nationals to U.S. national security. Peter Kwong (1997) wrote a book,

based on personal interviews in New York City and a trip to China, about the illegal work force in the underground economy and argued that the increase of Chinese illegal immigration was tied to unfair American labor practices. A few other researchers have also produced scholarly work on Chinese human smuggling (Bolz 1995; Wang 1996). Still, empirical studies on human smuggling and illegal immigration by Chinese nationals remain rare in the United States. Thus far, only two studies have gathered systematic empirical data on a large scale to explore the causes and processes of Chinese human smuggling activities to the United States. One of these studies was funded by the National Science Foundation (NSF) and conducted by Ko-lin Chin and Robert Kelly (1997), who interviewed three hundred smuggled Chinese immigrants in New York in 1993. Among their major findings are:

- Almost 90 percent of the subjects were from the three townships of Changle, Tingjiang, and Mawei. Most were young, married men with little formal education and few professional skills.
- The majority of the subjects admitted that they came to make money, not because they were politically persecuted in China.
- Almost half (48 percent) of the respondents flew into the United States. Another 40 percent crossed the U.S.-Mexican or U.S.-Canadian border overland. Only 12 percent arrived by boat.
- Chinese human smuggling activities were not dominated by traditional crime syndicates, such as China-based secret societies, Hong Kong-based triads, Taiwan-based organized gangs, or even U.S.-based tongs and street gangs.
- Of the 143 respondents who arrived by plane, only seven flew directly from China to the United States. Most had to travel through multiple transit points in other countries; it took on average 106 days for the 143 by-air respondents to complete their travel.
- Most of the respondents who arrived by boat endured horrendous suffering during their voyage. Women were often raped and men beaten by the enforcers on the boats. More than ninety human cargo ships left China between 1989 and 1993. Few were ever detected or intercepted.
- Those who crossed into the United States on land also faced a variety of risks and hardships. The majority first traveled to Mexico or Guatemala

by boat. They suffered not only during the voyage but also while crossing the border.

- Although 37 percent of the study subjects were detected and detained by U.S. authorities at point of entry, only 11 percent of the border-crossing immigrants were caught. Those who traveled by air had a much higher rate of apprehension, at 64 percent. However, all those who were detained at points of entry were immediately released after they filed for political asylum.
- Upon arrival, respondents were kept in safe houses by debt collectors until they paid the entire smuggling fee. Many of those who failed to deliver the payment promptly were tortured by their captors. The average smuggling fee for the whole sample was \$27,700.
- Most of the respondents worked in restaurants, garment factories, or construction firms, where they made about \$1,400 a month. On average they paid off their smuggling debts in less than three years.

The 1993 survey in New York City conducted by Chin and Kelly (1997) was significant in many aspects. It was the first large-scale empirical effort to gather information on the characteristics of the tidal wave of illegal Chinese immigrants, which started in the mid-1980s and accelerated after the crack-down on the democracy movement in Tiananmen Square in 1989. Chin's study and subsequent book (1999) provided critical firsthand information on the nature and extent of Chinese human smuggling.

The other study, which Ko-lin Chin and I worked on with researchers in the city of Fuzhou, was underwritten by the National Institute of Justice (NIJ), the research arm of the U.S. Department of Justice (Zhang and Chin 2002a). Fuzhou and its adjacent counties have long been considered the capital of Chinese human smuggling activities. The vast majority of illegal Chinese immigrants who arrived in America in the 1980s and 1990s came from this region. Data collection activities for the NIJ study, which the current book project is based on, were carried out between 1999 and 2001. Unlike most other studies, which gathered data from illegal immigrants about the smuggling process, our research team interviewed smugglers in New York, Los Angeles, and the Fuzhou area. Multiple strategies were employed in the data collection, including face-to-face interviewing, field observation, and researching government documents and press reports.



The objective of this book is to uncover the inner workings of Chinese human smuggling organizations and the patterns of their operations, and to provide a conceptual explanation of how these individuals, who come from a wide range of backgrounds, were able to engage in group-oriented transactions and to deliver their services with surprisingly high levels of success and efficiency. There are two major components to this book. The first is to shed light on the elusive players behind this illicit enterprise by means of a descriptive narrative about who these smugglers were, where they came from, how they perceived themselves, and how they conducted their smuggling business. The second is to give a conceptual analysis of how and why these otherwise ordinary individuals were able to turn human smuggling into a global business. I construct a theoretical paradigm to attempt to provide a better understanding of small group transactions and the smugglers' remarkable ability to thrive in a hostile and uncertain market environment.

In Chapter 1 I present a historical overview of illegal entry by Chinese nationals to the United States as well as discussing recent trends in the operation of illegal smuggling enterprises. I also provide a synopsis of some of the most prominent explanations of the causes of international migration, and offer my own understanding of the unique characteristics associated with illegal Chinese migration from Fujian Province to the United States.

Chapter 2 provides a descriptive analysis of the human smugglers interviewed in this study. I have also added to this description other smugglers whom I encountered over the years before and since the NIJ study. In this chapter, I present their basic demographic characteristics, describe their varied pathways into the business, and discuss their perceptions of the roles they played in the smuggling process.

In Chapter 3, I present the various strategies and methods used by smugglers to recruit and prepare their clients for the journey to America. The emphasis of the chapter is on smuggling activities inside China.

Chapter 4 discusses the funneling effect of successive outward migrations by Chinese nationals, which has spread across the globe. I describe the methods employed by human smugglers to move their clients slowly and methodically along the many way stations to their eventual destinations. Many illegal immigrants were stuck in transit countries, often for years. The emphasis is on smuggling activities in transit countries.

In Chapter 5, I describe the U.S.-based smugglers and highlight the differences between them and their counterparts in mainland China. The emphasis is on the arrival and payment collection processes of the smuggling activities.

In Chapter 6, I present the scant information we gathered from this study on profits of the business, the cost of doing business, and how partners shared the smuggling fees.

Chapter 7 analyzes the organizational and operational patterns of these human smugglers. In this chapter, I also describe how human smugglers looked for market opportunities and formed alliances with others to pool resources to carry out specific smuggling tasks. I also describe the specific roles involved in smuggling operations and their corresponding structural arrangements.

Chapter 8 presents a conceptual framework, the *dyadic cartwheel network*, to explain how structural patterns emerged from these human smuggling organizations and how these unique structures provided efficient ways for smugglers to protect themselves and to maximize potential profits. I place my theoretical discussion within a comparative context of two major theoretical approaches in organized crime literature—the corporate model and the enterprise model.

Chapter 9 offers a brief review of traditional Chinese criminal organizations—Hong Kong triads, Taiwan criminal organizations, U.S. tongs and Chinatown gangs—and provides an analysis of the connection (or lack thereof) between human smugglers and traditional Chinese crime groups. In this chapter, I describe the structural and organizational differences between these two criminal entities, and examine the market conditions and organizational factors that may explain the absence of any large-scale involvement by traditional Chinese criminal organizations in transnational human smuggling activities. I argue that traditional criminal organizations are ill equipped structurally to deal with the uncertainties and challenges common in an enterprise-oriented market environment.

Chapter 10 presents a group of female subjects in this study who were active participants in human smuggling, and analyzes the important role that gender may play in this illicit business. I put forth the argument that it was no accident that a sizable group of women, some of them with worldwide notoriety in both law enforcement and immigrant communities, became

involved and even successful in this business, a departure from traditional racketeering activities.

Finally, Chapter 11 presents my thoughts on the future of illegal Chinese immigration to the United States and what the authorities in China and in this country can do to best manage, if not necessarily eliminate, the flow of illegal immigrants, which has been the main lifeline for maintaining a vibrant underground economy in the United States. I also include smugglers' own assessments of the future of their business, and discuss the challenges confronting policy makers and law enforcement agencies in both China and the United States. I also highlight areas of interest for future research on transnational Chinese human smuggling.

## Acknowledgments

I am grateful to many individuals who have contributed to the data collection for this study and to the production of this manuscript. First of all, I want to thank Ko-lin Chin of Rutgers University, a personal friend and the co-principal investigator in the project that laid the foundation of this manuscript. Ko-lin played an instrumental role in the design, planning, and implementation of this study. Our collaboration has led to several conference papers and journal articles. It was only after he became overwhelmed by his many other research and writing obligations that he asked me to assume the sole authorship. Still, I consider this book a product of our joint effort, although I take full responsibility for the views presented herein, as well as any errors and omissions that I may have overlooked.

Therese Baker-Degler, my mentor for many years, encouraged me from the beginning to consider producing a book manuscript from this multi-year project and sending it to Stanford University Press as a possible outlet. She edited and polished several earlier papers based on this study, and reminded me to steer away from academic jargon and parlance unique to the human smuggling trade so that this book could reach a larger audience.

I want to thank Feng Chen and Baihua Chen in Los Angeles for their connections in the immigrant community, which helped me get in touch with many prospective subjects. I appreciate their stories about human smuggling activities, both in China and in the United States, which illuminated the inner workings of this business.

Special thanks go to Darwin Tchan, Jorge Guzman, Scott Morris, Jim Hays, Roger Thompson, and Jeannette Chu of the former U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) for their assistance in this study and

for sharing their insight into and knowledge of federal anti-smuggling efforts. Their sustained support and interest in my project over the years have provided much-needed encouragement.

I want to thank the subjects, in particular, for entrusting me and the members of my team with the most sensitive information about their involvement in this illicit business. I also want to thank my fellow researchers in China, whose familiarity with local cultural nuances greatly enhanced my understanding of the social context of the smuggling business. Without these individuals, whose identities I am not at liberty to disclose, this study would not have been possible.

Muriel Bell, my editor at Stanford University Press, nurtured this book project from the beginning. I greatly appreciate her measured advice and editorial suggestions. I want to thank Kirsten Oster for keeping the project on track and for chasing reviewers for their feedback. Carlo Morselli at University of Montreal and Chu Yiu Kong of Hong Kong University helped sharpen the analysis and argument in several parts of this manuscript. Their enthusiastic endorsement and support of this project are much appreciated. I also want to thank the anonymous reviewers of this manuscript for their helpful comments.

Special thanks go to Jennifer Bursik, who cheerfully agreed to review and polish this manuscript on short notice. Her words of encouragement over the years on my other works are greatly appreciated.

Many other people helped in the production of this manuscript. Donna-Marie and Jack Cruickshank, Philip Gay, and Robert Winslow have read, edited, and improved drafts of this manuscript. I very much appreciate their comments, their suggestions, and most important of all, their friendship. Although their suggestions have been valuable and are incorporated into the final text, I may have inadvertently overlooked some. Again, I am solely responsible for any errors and omissions in this final product.

Finally, and most important, I thank my wife, Susan, for her unwavering support and understanding during this protracted intrusion, and for pulling double duty in taking care of our young children while I was away doing fieldwork. I am also grateful to my in-laws, Ken and Iva, for providing much-needed childcare on numerous occasions.

Major financial support for this study was provided by a grant (1999-IJ-CX-0028) from the National Institute of Justice (NIJ), Office of Justice

Programs of the U.S. Department of Justice. Lois Mock, my grant manager at NIJ, provided administrative oversight for this study. The opinions expressed in this book are solely mine and do not necessarily represent the views or policies of the U.S. government. Parts of this study have previously been presented at conferences and published in journals.

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