

## Preface

MOST AMERICANS became keen observers of the plight of illegal Chinese immigrants in June 1993 when the *Golden Venture*, a human cargo ship with more than 260 passengers aboard, ran aground in shallow waters off a New York City beach (Gladwell and Stassen-Berger 1993a). Eager to complete their dream journey to the United States, ten Chinese citizens drowned while attempting to swim ashore (Fritsch 1993). The stories of desperation filled the evening news and left the American public hungry for answers as to why so many would risk their lives for a chance to come to America.

Perhaps some answers lay in the headlines of four years earlier, when the Chinese government cracked down on a pro-democracy movement in June 1989. The world watched as Chinese soldiers fired on students and other protestors in Tiananmen Square (Kristof and WuDunn 1994). Were the *Golden Venture* passengers disenchanting supporters of democracy or were they, like their predecessors 150 years ago, immigrants who were trying to improve their economic lives? Or perhaps the Tiananmen Square uprising and the surge in illegal immigration were both symptoms of China's underlying political, economic, and social problems.

The *Golden Venture* tragedy made news, but what of the many other clandestine arrivals and deaths that occur as the result of such smuggling operations? In an attempt to understand the desperation that fuels the lucrative and dangerous trafficking in Chinese immigrants, or "human snakes," this book examines the motivations for and methods of covert immigration, the social organization of human smuggling, the experiences of smuggled immigrants after their arrival in the United States, and the issues of controlling clandestine immigration. (Although Chinese who enter the United States legally but stay illegally after their visas have expired are described as illegal or undocumented immigrants by immigration authorities and scholars, their experience is quite different and will not be addressed here.)

## RESEARCH METHODS AND PLAN OF THE BOOK

Although many studies on international migration have been conducted, most focus on Mexican immigrants or the impact of undocumented workers on the American economy (Weintraub 1984; Cornelius 1989; Bean et al. 1990; Delgado 1992). Willard Myers (1992, 1994, 1996, 1997), the director of the Center for the Studies of Asian Organized Crime in Philadelphia, has written extensively about the problem of Chinese human smuggling, but his work is based on his clients' immigration files and interviews with U.S. authorities. Based on informal interviews with a small number of illegal immigrants in New York and a trip to China, Peter Kwong (1997), a professor in Asian Studies, wrote a book on the labor aspect of illegal immigration, arguing that the rise of Chinese illegal immigration is mainly due to unfair American labor practices. Even though a number of academics (Bolz 1995; Zhang and Gaylord 1996; Wang et al. 1997) have also written on Chinese human smuggling, no researcher has yet examined the causes and processes of this smuggling using extensive quantitative and qualitative data.

This study employs multiple research strategies, including a survey of three hundred smuggled Chinese in New York City, interviews with key informants who are familiar with the lifestyle and social problems of illegal Chinese immigrants, a field study in the Chinese immigrant community of New York City, two research trips to sending communities in China, and a systematic collection and analysis of media reports. Readers interested in the details of how I conducted my research will find them in Appendix A.

In Chapter 1, I present the problems associated with illegal Chinese immigration and explain why U.S. authorities are concerned with this issue. Chapter 2 begins with a description of Chinese enthusiasm for emigration to the United States—whether legal or illegal—and looks at the sending communities and at various other factors associated with immigration. The major reasons for clandestine immigration are then examined in the context of existing theories about international migration.

In Chapter 3, I focus on the individual and group characteristics of the smugglers themselves—their modes of operation and the extent of their affiliation with Chinese organized crime and street gangs. I also examine the relationship between smuggling networks and the

authorities in both China and the transit countries. This chapter challenges the popular belief that traditional Chinese gangs and organized crime groups are heavily involved in human smuggling.

Chapters 4, 5, and 6 examine the three routes of entering the United States, by air, sea, and land. Chapter 4 describes how Chinese immigrants leave China by air, which transit countries they are likely to pass through and what happens to them there, and how and where they enter the United States.

The social context and organization of sea smuggling is the subject of Chapter 5. How are the passengers recruited and transported? What happens as the ships cross the Pacific or Atlantic oceans to arrive in America? How are the passengers ferried to American shores? And how do illegal immigrants cope with violence, rape, hunger, and natural disasters on their travels across the ocean?

In Chapter 6, I explain how smugglers transport Chinese to either Mexico or Canada and thence to the United States over land. The chapter concludes with a comparison of the three main smuggling routes. When the illegal immigrants arrive in the United States, most of them are confined in so-called safe houses by the smugglers until their smuggling fees have been paid (U.S. Senate 1992). In chapter 7, I discuss the likelihood that a Chinese immigrant will be confined in a safe house, the factors associated with the probability of detention, and the length of confinement. I also discuss the tactics that human smugglers employ to force their captives to pay their passage fees.

Chapter 8 looks at the experiences of Chinese immigrants after they leave the safe houses and begin to settle in New York City. Their experiences include finding work, adjusting to new lifestyles, involvement in illegal activities, and further vulnerability to victimization. The common psychological conditions of new immigrants and their future plans are also described.

In Chapter 9, I examine the countermeasures adopted by government officials and law enforcement authorities in the sending, transit, and receiving countries. This chapter concludes with a discussion of the problems immigration authorities face in trying to control clandestine immigration and suggests policies that might ameliorate the smuggling of Chinese.

# 1 In Search of the American Dream

A YEAR AFTER the United States established diplomatic relations with the People's Republic, China liberalized its immigration regulations in order to qualify for most-favored-nation status with the United States (Dowty 1987).<sup>1</sup> Since 1979, tens of thousands of Chinese have legally immigrated to the United States and other countries (Seagrave 1995). U.S. immigration quotas allow only a limited number of Chinese whose family members are U.S. citizens or who are highly educated to immigrate to or visit America (Zhou 1992). Beginning in the late 1980s, some of those who did not have legitimate channels to immigrate began turning to human smugglers for help (U.S. Senate 1992).

After the Chinese government's crackdown on the pro-democracy movement in June 1989, many students and intellectuals fled China to avoid persecution (Kristof and WuDunn 1994). That exodus, the resurrection of left-wing political leaders after the incident, and rampant corruption among government officials left many ordinary Chinese disillusioned with government promises for economic and political reform (Wen 1992). In the aftermath of the crackdown, the number of Chinese who left their country illegally reportedly surged (Arpin 1990; Chan et al. 1990; Kamen 1991a; Mydans 1992). According to U.S. immigration authorities, the number of illegal Chinese immigrants arrested jumped from 288 in 1988 to 1,353 in 1990 (Lorch 1991). Immigration officials in Taiwan, Hong Kong, Macau, Japan, Australia, Hungary, Romania, Italy, Spain, the Netherlands, and Canada were also alarmed by the dramatic increase in the number of undocumented Chinese arriving in their countries (Boyd and Barnes 1992; Dubro 1992; Eager 1992; Lee 1992; Tam 1992; Stalk 1993; Vagg 1993; Dobson and Daswani 1994; Chang 1995; Craig 1995; International Organization for Migration 1995; Smith 1997; Yates 1997).

The United States ranks high among the settlement choices of smuggled Chinese (Kristof 1993).<sup>2</sup> In New York City's Chinatown, the destination for almost all smuggled Chinese in the United States, the arrival

of large numbers of undocumented Chinese has resulted in the expansion into what is known as Little Italy and into the eastern part of the lower east side of Manhattan, an area once populated by Jewish immigrants (City of New York Department of City Planning 1992; Bernstein 1993). Smuggled Chinese choose New York City because most of them have friends and relatives living there and most smuggling networks in the United States are also there (Burdman 1993a).

Smuggled Chinese arrive in the United States by land, sea, or air routes (Smith 1997). Some travel to Mexico or Canada and then cross U.S. borders illegally (Glaberson 1989). Others fly into major American cities via any number of transit points and make their way to their final destination (Lorch 1992; Charasdamrong and Kheunkaew 1992; U.S. Senate 1992). Entering the United States by sea was an especially popular method between August 1991 and July 1993 (Zhang and Gaylord 1996). During that time, thirty-two ships carrying as many as 5,300 Chinese were found in waters near Japan, Taiwan, Indonesia, Australia, Singapore, Haiti, Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, and the United States (Kamen 1991b; Schemo 1993; U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service 1993), though in the aftermath of the *Golden Venture* incident, the use of the sea route diminished significantly (Dunn 1994).

U.S. immigration officials estimated that at any given time in the early 1990s, as many as 4,000 Chinese were waiting in Bolivia to be shuttled to the United States by smugglers (Kinkead 1992); several thousand more were believed to be waiting in Peru and Panama. American officials maintained that Chinese smuggling rings have connections in fifty-one countries that were either part of the transportation web or were involved in the manufacturing of fraudulent travel documents (Freedman 1991; Kamen 1991a; Mydans 1992).<sup>3</sup> According to a senior immigration official interviewed in the early 1990s, "at any given time, thirty thousand Chinese are stashed away in safe houses around the world, waiting for entry" (Kinkead 1992: 160).

Unlike Mexican illegal immigrants who enter the United States at relatively little financial cost (Cornelius 1989), illegal Chinese immigrants reportedly must pay smugglers about \$30,000 for their services (U.S. Senate 1992). The thousands of Chinese smuggled out of their country each year make human trafficking a very lucrative business (Mooney and Zyla 1993; Smith 1997). One case illustrates the point: A forty-one-year-old Chinese woman convicted for human smuggling was alleged

to have earned approximately \$30 million during the several years of her smuggling career (Chan and Dao 1990d). In 1992, a senior immigration official estimated that Chinese organized crime groups were making more than \$1 billion a year from human smuggling operations (U.S. Senate 1992). Others suggest that Chinese smugglers earn more—about \$3.2 billion annually—from the human trade (Myers 1994).

Because few Chinese can afford the high cost of illegal immigration (Li 1997), those who want to come to the United States must seek help from friends and relatives in China to raise the money for a down payment, which is reported to be 10 to 20 percent of the entire fee. When that is not enough, as it usually is not, they seek financial commitments from friends, relatives, or other "guarantors," often business owners in the United States, to pay the balance upon their arrival. Once here, they repay their guarantors by working in places such as restaurants or garment factories.

Although most illegal immigrants work hard to repay their debts, some have disputes with their "snakeheads," the term commonly used for human smugglers (Kifner 1991), perhaps about a delay in the smuggling process, a dispute over the amount they owe, or difficulty paying the balance.<sup>4</sup> Those unable to pay may be kidnapped and tortured by Chinese gang members hired by smugglers to collect the smuggling fee (Lorch 1991); their relatives and friends who guaranteed their payment may also be at risk for this treatment (Strom 1991). Their illegal status and high debt render them vulnerable in other ways. Chinese gangs and criminal groups may recruit them as drug couriers (Chan and Dao 1990a), enforcers in illicit businesses (Kifner 1991), or prostitutes to ensure payment of their debts (Y. Chan 1993b). Smuggled Chinese experience great difficulty in adapting to their new social setting because of cultural differences, language barriers, and unfamiliar work environments (Burdman 1993d). Largely limited to employment in restaurants and garment factories owned by Chinese businessmen, illegal immigrants generally work long hours for unlawfully low wages and without health insurance and other benefits (Kwong 1997). Most find themselves living in crowded and dilapidated apartments in conditions that recall the notorious tenements of the nineteenth century (Rimer 1992).

When illegal Chinese immigrants are victimized by criminals or exploited by employers, they are understandably reluctant to seek help from law enforcement and government agencies (Kinkead 1992).

Because most of them have left their families behind in China, they have little emotional support in times of need (Myers 1997). According to social workers, many Chinese illegals, frustrated and depressed about their predicament, indulge in heavy gambling or drinking (Hatfield 1989). Illegals also have limited access to legitimate recreational activities, a lack that has led to the proliferation of brothels and gambling dens in New York City's Chinatown (Chin 1996). The increased demand for illegal services has in turn enabled the Chinese underworld to expand its criminal operations (Lay 1993). As I will show in later chapters, these illegal immigrants envisioned a very different life for themselves when they left their homes. It is no wonder, then, that they experience enormous stress in the settlement process (Kinkead 1992).

### CONCERN OVER ILLEGAL CHINESE IMMIGRATION

According to official U.S. estimates, approximately half a million Chinese were residing in the United States illegally in 1991 (English 1991). This number includes smuggled Chinese not only from China but also from Taiwan, Hong Kong, and other countries. It also includes not only those transported by human traffickers but also those who entered the country with valid non-immigration visas and then remained illegally after their visas expired.

Estimates of the annual number of smuggled Chinese immigrants vary from ten thousand to one hundred thousand (Smith 1997). The latest estimate, made by the Interagency Working Group (1995) that was established by the White House to monitor the Chinese human trade, suggests that smugglers bring in up to fifty thousand Chinese per year.

It is fair to say no one really knows for sure how many Chinese have been smuggled into the United States over the past decade (Smith 1997), but according to official statistics, the number of illegal immigrants from China in the United States is relatively low compared to the number of illegal immigrants from other countries. INS data show that in terms of the number of illegal immigrants in the United States, China ranks twenty-first among countries of origin (City of New York Department of City Planning 1993).

If the number of undocumented Chinese in the United States is relatively low compared to other ethnic groups, why has the arrival of illegal Chinese become a major concern for U.S. law enforcement and

immigration authorities? For one thing, the illegal passage of Chinese immigrants appears to be relatively more risky than that of other immigrant groups. Many smuggled Chinese have reportedly lost their lives in accidents in transit countries or on U.S. borders (Smith 1997). Those who do make it to the United States safely may be subject to kidnapping and torture at the hands of debt-collectors and other criminals who prey upon them. Smuggling-related violence among the Chinese has captured the attention of authorities because these incidents are widely reported in the media (Kifner 1991; Strom 1991; Rabinovitz 1992; Fiason 1993c; Dunn 1995).

In addition, the ways Chinese enter the United States are unlike those of other immigrant groups. Even though a substantial number of Italians and Poles live illegally in New York City, they tend to enter the United States legally, or at least quietly (City of New York Department of City Planning 1993). The arrival of illegal Chinese immigrants, by contrast, often draws attention, especially arrival by boat. Between January 1992 and July 1995, for example, thirty-six ships crowded with Chinese passengers were detected near U.S. waters. Other, undetected ships sailed right through San Francisco Bay and unloaded hundreds of Chinese on the city's dock (Brazil et al. 1993). From the U.S. Coast Guard's perspective, United States national security is seriously threatened by the armada of human smuggling ships (U.S. Coast Guard 1996). In the aftermath of the *Golden Venture* incident, President Clinton characterized Chinese human smuggling as a threat to national security and authorized the National Security Council to direct the U.S. response (Freedberg 1993).

There is also the matter of Chinese organized crime, which has grown in tandem with illegal Chinese immigration, much to the concern of U.S. authorities (Booth 1991; Lavigne 1991; Dubro 1992; Chin 1990, 1996; Kleinecht 1996). Many in the law enforcement community are convinced that members of Chinese organized crime groups are actively involved in human trafficking (U.S. Senate 1992; Burdman 1993b; Boltz 1995). The United Nations, for example, has estimated that as many as fifty Hong Kong-based triad groups or criminal organizations are responsible for trafficking as many as one hundred thousand illegals per year to the United States, raking in billions of dollars for their services (Schmid 1996). As one anonymous law enforcement official quoted in the *San Francisco Chronicle* put it, human smuggling empowers the Chinese underworld:



"If they said, 'We'll smuggle anybody to the United States for free,' I wouldn't be concerned for a minute. [But] this is a huge revenue source, a portion of which is flowing directly into these criminal organizations and strengthening their power to expand, power to corrupt, power to bribe" (Burdman 1993b: A1). Not only do these criminal groups reap financial gains, they also gain potential recruits through the arrival of a large number of young, aggressive males. In addition, U.S. authorities are concerned that smuggled Chinese are being used by smugglers to carry heroin and other drugs into the United States in exchange for a discount in their smuggling fees (Wren 1996; Smith 1997). Thus, unlike illegal immigration among other nationalities, unlawful immigration by Chinese is considered by U.S. law enforcement authorities to be a factor in the growth of Chinese organized crime worldwide (Smith 1997).

Currently, for reasons discussed in the next chapter, most Chinese who are smuggled into the United States come mainly from the Fuzhou area, located on the northeast coast of Fujian Province. U.S. authorities fear that arrival of a large number of Chinese from Fujian Province may trigger an outflow of Chinese from other provinces such as Zhejiang (Kwong 1997).<sup>5</sup> The U.S. policy is basically to stop the influx of illegal Chinese immigration before it gets out of control.

Finally, U.S. authorities are unhappy with the abuse of the U.S. political asylum program by smuggled Chinese who apply for political asylum once they arrive in the United States (Weiner 1993; Greenhouse 1994). The Refugee Act of 1980 makes a person eligible for asylum if he or she has suffered past persecution or has a well-founded fear of persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion (Ignatius 1993). The number of Chinese applications not only clogs the already overwhelmed asylum program but also undermines the system's ability to determine the authenticity of applicants' claims (Conover 1993).<sup>6</sup>

There are many theories on the causes of international migration (Massey et al. 1993). Researchers are concerned with the push and pull of both legal and illegal immigration because they want to know what motivates people to leave their homes for foreign lands (Todaro 1976; Piore 1979; Todaro and Maruszko 1987; Morawska 1990; Stark 1991; Gurak and Caces 1992; Taylor 1992). In the next chapter, I examine the circumstances and forces that lead many Chinese to leave their families and risk their lives for the elusive promise of a better life in America.