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THE CHARACTERISTICS OF CHINESE HUMAN SMUGGLERS
---A CROSS-NATIONAL STUDY

Final Report

to the

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FOREWORD

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ABSTRACT

This study attempted to uncover the basic inner workings of Chinese human smuggling organizations and their operations. Through field observations and face-to-face interviews in both the U.S. and China, we found that most human smugglers (also known as snakeheads) were otherwise ordinary citizens whose social networks provided the necessary connections and resources that led to a profitable trade in shipping human cargoes around the world. These individuals came from diverse backgrounds and formed temporary business alliances. Their organizations can be best described as ad hoc task forces. We did not find any godfather type of snakeheads who dominated an entire group of smugglers or command a group of subordinates; but we did find that most smuggling activities were highly specialized and controlled by individuals who would only deal with one another through one-on-one contacts. Policy implications and limitations of the study design are also discussed. This report is intended for law enforcement officials and policy makers who deal with migration and transnational human smuggling issues.

INTRODUCTION

Organized Chinese human smuggling into the United States has been going on for more than two decades, although it rarely catches public attention except for a few daring operations that ended in disasters, such as the death of 58 illegal Chinese immigrants inside a refrigerator truck while attempting to cross into England in Dover (Woods, 2000). After the United States established diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China in 1978, Chinese nationals quickly overwhelmed the legal channels to immigrate to the United States. Consequently, illegal channels have been developed by human smugglers to meet the demand (Chin, 1999). Human smugglers are called "snakeheads" both in China and among overseas Chinese communities.

There are three main smuggling methods, often used in combinations, to transport Chinese nationals into the U.S. One strategy is to travel to Mexico or Canada "by some means" and then illegally cross the borders into the United States (Asimov and Burdman, 1993). A second strategy is to fly into the United States through transit points outside China. These by-air illegal immigrants must have fraudulent documents that enable them to enter the country (Lorch, 1992). As a third strategy, a large number of Chinese were smuggled into the U. S. in fishing trawlers or freighters (Myers, 1992; Zhang and Gaylord, 1996).

Current Knowledge about Chinese Human Smuggling

Chinese human smugglers have been able to develop extensive global networks and transport Chinese nationals to various parts of the world with the U.S. as the most sought-after destination (Zhang and Gaylord, 1996; Zhang, 1997). Taiwan, Hong Kong, Macao,

Japan, Australia, Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands, Mexico, Panama, and Canada have long been plagued by the presence of large numbers of undocumented Chinese (Boyd, 1992; Dubro, 1992; Eager, 1992; Lee, 1992; Tam, 1992; Stalk, 1993; Gross 1996; Marquis and Garvin, 1999). American officials claimed that the Chinese smuggling groups have connections in 51 countries that are either part of the transportation web or are involved in manufacturing fraudulent travel documents, or both (Freedman, 1991; Mydans, 1992). According to an American official, "at any given time, thirty thousand Chinese are stashed away in safe houses around the world, waiting for entry" (Kinhead, 1992: 160).

Around the globe, many countries are reported being used as intermediate stops on the way to the United States, among which Canada and Mexico are ranked atop for obvious reasons. There have also been reports of Chinese nationals staging in Russia for several years, the true extent of which is not known but figures as high as "hundreds of thousands" have been reported (Thompson, 2000).¹ Surinam is another major way station; and the Surinamese government reportedly issues tens of thousands of "work visas" to Chinese nationals each year, far beyond the number of jobs available (Thompson, 2000). Thailand and the Philippines are well known staging areas in Asia, as is Cambodia. This migrational pattern has created a great self-reinforcing effect where by tens of thousands who leave China each year en route to countries in the West fuel the growth of overseas Chinese settlements, which in turn provide an excellent cover as well as support for smuggling operations in stages. These overseas Chinese communities provide the opportunity for "pay as you go" schemes, which allow these Chinese

nationals in migration to work off part of the smuggling fees at each stage of the trip (Thompson, 2000).

Many believe that organized crime groups are behind most smuggling activities because moving human cargoes across the Pacific or over other vast continents requires extensive international coordination and arrangement of services (U.S. Senate, 1992; Bolz, 1995; Myers, 1996; Kwong, 2001). In other words, human smuggling requires organizational responses rather than individual endeavors. What is not clear is the nature and characteristics of these smuggling organizations.

Few have been able to study this subject matter systematically. This is partly because human smuggling is not a traditional choice of racketeering businesses for organized criminals. More importantly, illegal Chinese immigrants have largely been “invisible,” due to linguistic and cultural barriers erected by the Chinese communities. Much of the information about smuggling activities as presented in government reports and news media as well as a few research papers is based on interviews with illegal Chinese immigrants. Systematic gathering of information directly from the snakeheads about their organizations as well as operations had not been attempted prior to this study.

RESEARCH METHOD

Prior to the commencement of this project, we established contacts with researchers in Fuzhou (capital city of Fujian Province in southern China) where the vast majority of illegal Chinese immigrants originated. Researchers from both countries agreed to use the same instrument and similar field protocols to conduct interviews with individuals who participated in the human smuggling business.

Site Selection

We selected three primary sites for data collection --New York City, Los Angeles, and Fuzhou. The majority of undocumented Fujianese settles in New York City's Chinatown (Kwong, 1997, Chin, 1999). The community is a well-established social and commercial center for new Chinese immigrants (Zhou, 1992). It is situated in the lower east side of Manhattan surrounded by City Hall, an area known as "Little Italy," and the East River. Los Angeles is a major port of entry for illegal Chinese immigrants (Chin, 1999). The Los Angeles International Airport is a popular destination for those by-air illegal immigrants. For those who enter the U.S. from Mexico, most arrive in Los Angeles before they are transported to other parts of the country. For those by-sea immigrants, the long coastal lines and major shipping container yards around Los Angeles are often used for unloading purposes. Fuzhou City, with a population of more than 5.4 million, is located at the northern coastal areas of Fujian Province. The city consists of five districts and eight counties. Most sending communities are located in Mawei, Changle, Tinjiang, Lianjiang, and Fuqing, all located within a 40-mile radius from the center of Fuzhou.

Sampling Method

In this study, a "smuggler" was defined as anyone who played a role in assisting a person entering the United States illegally for a fee. The snowball sampling technique was used (Biernacki and Waldorf, 1981). We solicited subjects through our personal contacts and our research assistants. The subjects in our study were all self-identified snakeheads residing in either China or the U.S.

Two types of interviews were conducted in both countries—formal and informal. Formal interviews involved face-to-face conversations around a predetermined set of semi-structured and open-ended questions. Informal interviews took place over dinner tables or other social gatherings, where formal inquiries into the smuggling business were neither feasible nor socially acceptable. However, in all cases, the subjects were informed of the intention and identity of the interviewer. No deception was used.

In addition to face-to-face interviews, we also visited smuggling-heavy villages in Fuzhou and adjacent regions and the Chinese communities in New York and Los Angeles. Because of the pervasive fear of detection by law enforcement and suspicion of our research purposes, we encountered many difficulties in persuading prospective subjects to come forward. Still, we were able to collect first-hand data with far greater details on the organizational and operational characteristics of Chinese human smuggling than any previously known reports.

Sample Description

As shown in Table 1, a total of 129 interviews were conducted, the majority (86 percent) of which were formal interviews. The majority of our subjects were male (82 percent) and with an education of high school or less (90 percent). They were generally in the 30s and 40s (79 percent) and married (78 percent). The majority of our subjects (75 percent) described themselves as either unemployed or self-employed. As we found out later, those unemployed were mostly self-employed. They considered themselves unemployed only in the sense that they did not have salaried jobs, or it would be hard for them to describe where they drew their income. None of our subjects were destitute by any means.

Table 1 about here

We took a further look at a subset of the sample—the U.S. subjects. Of the 70 subjects we interviewed in New York and Los Angeles, 45 of them (64 percent) entered the U.S. in 1993 and before. The rest 25 (36 percent) came after the year of the *Golden Venture* incident. Forty-four of them (63 percent) entered the country through legal channels, while the rest were smuggled into the U.S. illegally. Surprisingly, the majority of these snakeheads (73 percent) entered the U.S. directly from China. Of the subjects interviewed in the U.S., more than two thirds are either citizens or green card holders; and only about 11 percent were illegal immigrants at the time of the interviews.

FINDINGS

Snakeheads have remained the most elusive element in the study of Chinese human smuggling. Little research has been conducted on these people for obvious reasons. In the following sections, our findings will be presented around the following key questions:

- Who are these people?
- What types of arrangements are commonly found in this business?
- What types of players are commonly found in a smuggling organization?
- What is the power structure of a smuggling organization?

- What kind of connections do they have with one another and with government officials?

Smugglers and Their Backgrounds

People of diverse backgrounds participated in the smuggling business. Our subjects came in all shapes and forms. The list of jobs our subjects told us included close to 70 different types of occupations (or work related identity they chose to associate themselves with), including, to name a few, restaurant owners, car salesman, barber, waiters/waitresses, housewives, handymen, masons, taxi drivers, peasants, seafood retailers, and fruit stand owners. We condensed their occupations into a list of 14 categories, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2 about here

It is clear that except for a few, the vast majority of our subjects did not hold any salaried positions in state-run entities or well established corporations. Human smuggling does not appear to attract people with an aversion to risk-taking behaviors. Although we did manage to interview a few subjects who were employees of government agencies or education institutions, the vast majority of them could probably be considered enterprising agents who were making a living in environments full of uncertainties and risks, such as small retail businesses, independent contractors, or commission based employees.

Through our interviews and interactions with these individuals, we found that they were working with people of still more diverse backgrounds in the smuggling business. It became apparent that this illicit enterprise required no special skills or training, and was open to just about anyone with proper connections and enough courage. One of our subjects commented: “Wherever there are Chinese, there are snakeheads. Snakeheads are people who are willing to take risks [of being arrested] for money.”

Initiation into the Business

Of the 111 subjects with valid responses, we found that 51 of them had already quit the business at the time of the interviews. For the remaining 60 active snakeheads, 46 of them (or about 77 percent) got involved in the smuggling business for less than three years. In fact, about one third of these snakeheads (19) were in the business for about one year or less at the time of their interviews. There were a few exceptions. One subject was still actively involved in the smuggling business, for 22 years. By and large, we found that the majority of snakeheads had dropped out of the business after about six years. Although we cannot claim our sample to be representative, this pattern appears to suggest that human smuggling, as a business career, has a very limited future prospect.

We found that more often than not, the majority of those in a smuggling organization belonged to a family or a close social circle. As Table 3 shows, more than half of all snakeheads became involved in the business through their relatives, friends, or business associates, although direct recruitment by snakeheads accounted for one third of our subjects. Interestingly enough, about the same portion of the snakeheads (i.e., more

than half) also claimed that their sources of clients also came from their friends and relatives.

Table 3 about here

As for the motive, it was obvious; 92 percent of the respondents cited money as a primary reason for their involvement in the smuggling business. Only eight subjects claimed that their primary motive in this business was to help friends and relatives (to emigrate to the U.S.). Although more than half of the respondents quit their previous jobs after their involvement in the smuggling business, only slightly over one third of the respondents claimed to be doing the business on a full-time basis. The rest were doing it either on a part-time basis or only sporadically.

Human Smuggling as a Moneymaking Business

In this study, we asked our subjects four questions pertaining to the money issue in the smuggling business: (1) how much money they had to spend to get involved in the business; (2) what kind of price they charged their clients for their services; (3) how much profit they could make off each client; and (4) how much money they could made annually from the smuggling business.

When we inquired about whether money was needed initially to get involved in this business, 60 percent of our respondents (out of 110) stated that they had to put up

their own money to get involved in this business. The rest, as we found out, were mostly low level recruiters who received some nominal referral fees after a successful operation. This question also turned out to be among the most difficult areas of inquiry in this study, because of its sensitivity. Many subjects declined to tell us the amounts of money they invested in or made from the smuggling trade. Still many subjects gave us some rough figures, as shown in Table 4. While we acknowledge the inherent drawbacks in our sampling approach, data obtained from our subjects nevertheless provided some glimpses of the enormous financial incentives for involvement in this business.

Table 4 about here

Depending on the roles our subjects played or their responsibilities in a smuggling operation, there was a wide variation in the amounts of money our subjects claimed to have made. As a general rule, since the recruiters oftentimes did not need to put up any of their own money, they also tended to make the least, about \$500 to \$2,000 per client referred. On the other hand, purchasing a boat for sea-based smuggling operations could cost as much as \$500,000.

Because the different types of subjects we included in this study, we found a variety of prices for smuggling fees, which ranged from \$1,000 to \$70,000. As we investigated further into the structure of these fees, we found that figures in the low thousands were mostly referral fees charged by the recruiters. They were only part of the

total amount paid by a smuggled immigrant. We found that the most often quoted total amount of smuggling fees was \$60,000, while the median price was \$50,000. These figures were significantly higher than what we had previously learned from our field activities or news reports. Clearly, the services provided by this illicit business were outpaced by its demand.

The profits were considerable from the reported figures, with a median of \$10,000 and up to \$40,000 per client. Although a few subjects who were serving time in Chinese prisons claimed that they had not yet made any money from their smuggling activities, others claimed to have made up to two million dollars a year. The median annual income from those who responded to our inquiry was \$50,000, which was also the figure that most often cited (i.e., the mode).

We also found that although there appeared to be some consensus on the going price for someone to be smuggled to the U.S., it was difficult to gauge exactly how much money each successive stage of the operation would cost, which was probably due to the dyadic and clandestine nature of the smuggling activities. However, we did uncover some prices for a few specific aspects of the smuggling operation. Although limited in its scope, this list provided some indication that the cost of human smuggling is as unpredictable and varied as the modes of operation in the business itself, as shown in Table 5.² Few subjects could give us an accurate estimate of the cost because most snakeheads charged their own fees in lump sums (i.e., costs and profits combined) for the portions of the operation under their direct control. With the exception of recruiting fees, our subjects claimed that a change in itinerary or transit countries could lead to significant changes in cost. The real expense of a typical smuggling operation, if there is one, may never be

known. However, we know that factors such as the routes and the modes of transportation have significant bearings on the eventual profit; the smoother, simpler or shorter the trip, the higher the profit margin.

Table 5 about here

Organizational Characteristics

Reports from the news media and government agencies often portray Chinese human smugglers as well organized with sophisticated global networks. It was therefore a key area of inquires in this study to explore how these groups were organized and how decisions were made. Our questions revolved around the size of the smuggling group, decision making process, and collaboration with other smuggling groups. One third of the subjects claimed that the core members of their groups were anywhere between two to five individuals, as shown in Table 6. Another 10 percent claimed that their core members were between six to 10 people. However, if there was any clear pattern on this issue, it was the large number of subjects, 40 percent of the sample, who declined to consider themselves as a part of an organization or even a group. These subjects had no problem telling us that they were working with friends or business associates, but they did not think their social circle possessed any qualities of an organization. They were more likely to consider themselves as free agents.

Table 6 about here

When we asked who had the authority to make decisions in a smuggling operation, the responses became somewhat mixed. Only a small number of the subjects (16 percent) claimed that they made all their own decision as to what to do with their roles. Another 19 percent of the subjects stated they usually worked with their partners to reach collective decisions. A large number of the subjects, about 46 percent, claimed that the snakeheads were in charge of the smuggling operation, which indicated some hierarchy. However, many of these subjects were recruiters, who by definition were low-level operatives and responded primarily to requests for clients from other snakeheads. Their lack of decision-making power was not due to a deliberate organizational arrangement or the command structure, but primarily due to their limited connections and resources in the smuggling scheme.

Our field observations and conversations with our subjects seem to support our interpretation of the data. We were unable to establish any clear hierarchical order resembling that of a formal organization; and none of our subjects told us that they were working for a “godfather” somewhere behind the scene. Although we talked to a few successful snakeheads, none would consider themselves as occupying a dominant position in their smuggling network. In most of these conversations, they would describe others in their network as their friends or business partners. While one might speculate that the more resources a partner brings forth the more one may influence the direction

and pace of a smuggling operation, we did not find anyone who had absolute control over an entire smuggling operation. Human smuggling organizations appeared to possess multiple layers with the inner core consisting of only a few close associates; these associates each had their own networks of contacts, who in turn may have further contacts. The smuggling process comprised of a series of networks, each contributing to the eventual goal of landing clients in the U.S.

Although there was little hierarchical differentiation, the division of labor was well developed among smugglers. We probed about the types of tasks in a smuggling operation and whether our subjects shared any responsibility in any of their activities. It was clear that most of our subjects had their own tasks in a smuggling operation. The majority of the subjects (72 percent) claimed that there was clear division of labor within their circle of partners. All snakeheads had specific roles to play, such as client recruitment, travel document procurement, meeting and delivering clients to safe houses, and collecting payments. As one of our smuggler subjects in Los Angeles said: “The division of labor is really clear and refined. Everyone involved is useful in his own way and does his own thing only. There is no leadership in any smuggling rings. Leadership will not emerge because the work involved is so specialized.”

This pattern also received support from our inquiry into whether our subjects were collaborating with other snakeheads (or their business partners) in their smuggling activities. The majority, 71 percent, said they were working alone; the rest said they had collaborated with other smuggling groups in accomplishing their tasks. In general, these snakeheads tended to work with stable partners (64 percent); but more than one third claimed to work with different people.

There was a multitude of roles that these individuals played in a smuggling operation, as shown in Table 7. A large number of our subjects started out as recruiters, probably because it was the easiest way to get involved in the business.

Table 7 about here

As we looked into this business, we have identified several highly specialized roles, which was in accordance with their division of labor:

- *Recruiters*. These were often the relatives or close friends of the would-be migrants who somehow knew the smugglers. They may or may not have any further involvement in the smuggling operation.
- *Coordinators*. These were the central figures in smuggling operations, however they had nothing more than the right connections to acquire necessary services for a fee. Their survival was dependent upon a dyadic relationship with other partners who would provide them with specific services.
- *Transporters*. When an immigrant was to leave China by land or by ship, a China-based transporter would help him or her get to the border or to the smuggling ship. Transporters based in the United States would be responsible for taking smuggled immigrants from airports or seaports to safe houses.
- *Document vendors*. These individuals were well connected and able to produce needed documents to facilitate the transportation of immigrants. Some of these

documents were authentic, obtained through official or unofficial channels, while others were outright fraudulent.

- *Corrupt public officials.* Law enforcement authorities in China and many transit countries were paid to aid the illegal Chinese immigrants entering and exiting their countries. Some corrupt government officials not only act as facilitators but also as core members or partners of a smuggling organization. Subjects who belonged to large smuggling groups normally indicated that local Chinese officials headed their groups.
- *Guides and crew members.* A guide was someone responsible for moving illegal immigrants from one transit point to another, or for aiding immigrants in entering the United States by land or by air. Crew members were people employed by snakeheads to charter smuggling ships or to work on them.
- *Enforcers.* The enforcers, themselves mostly illegal immigrants, were hired by snakeheads to work on the smuggling ships. They were responsible for maintaining order and for distributing food and drinking water.
- *Debt collectors.* U.S.-based debt collectors were responsible for locking up illegal immigrants in safe houses until their smuggling fees were paid. There were also China-based debt collectors.

These roles are by no means exhaustive. The specific roles needed for a smuggling operation may vary, depending on its complexity and the transportation method. Not all roles were required in an operation and some snakeheads may assume more than one role. These roles usually come in successive stages following the sequence of a smuggling operation, with the recruiter at the start and the debt collector at the end.

We further found that once our subjects got involved in the business, more than half of them changed their roles over time. However, their roles did not become more complex. In fact, the majority of the snakeheads (70 percent) continued to play singular roles and their tasks remained rather specialized, as shown in Table 7.

Self-Perception as a Human Smuggler

As Chin (1999) found in his New York survey, smuggled Chinese nationals often considered snakeheads as philanthropists or “normal people” who merely wanted to make some money. We attempted to explore the same question in this study, asking our subjects to comment on their roles in this business and their thoughts about their involvement in this business. As shown in Table 8, there were no simple answers. None considered themselves as criminals, although we believe they were all aware of the criminal nature of their business activities. They seemed to be more concerned about the process of the work, the headaches, the excitement, the money, and even the responsibilities to their clients than about the morality of their entrepreneurial ventures.

Table 8 about here

In general, we found that snakeheads tended to have positive opinions about themselves. They saw themselves as upstanding businesspeople or even do-gooders who helped their friends and neighbors in their search for a better life and to have a chance to

achieve the American dream. Some even claimed that their business ventures could help solve many China's pressing social problems, such as overpopulation and unemployment. As one snakehead said, "I have nothing to feel bad about being a snakehead. I don't lie to my clients, nor ask for additional payments after their arrival in the U.S., nor physically abuse anyone. In fact, I feel like I am doing something positive for China. There are so many unemployed people here, and we have a huge population. We not only help China to solve these problems but also increase the amount of foreign currency being wired back to China."

Although helping the government solve pressing social problems might be a little stretch of their true intention, these snakeheads nonetheless considered themselves as making an honest living. As one snakehead in Fuzhou emphatically told us, "My family is proud of what I am doing. To be a snakehead, you need to have a good reputation. Most snakeheads are overseas Chinese who come back to Fuzhou to involve in this business. Local people are highly unlikely to be able to establish a good reputation. Like Sister Ping, her clients are extremely comfortable having their money in her hands because she has such an impeccable reputation. People know that she will never ever take the money and run. Many people envy us, and their eyes turn red whenever they see us making so much money. I don't steal nor rob people; nor do I lie to my clients. I have no uneasy feelings about what I am doing."

Some of the subjects did expressed concerns about the safety of their work (worries over being caught). The fact that neither the migrants nor the smugglers consider transnational human smuggling a crime and that they would rather view it as a "good deed" might help explain why so many otherwise law-abiding people, including reputed

businesspeople and community leaders, are affiliated with the human trade. Another important reason may be the seduction of tremendous profits one can make from an “occupation” that requires neither fixed working hours and nor special skills.

Corruption and Bribery

Systematic corruption and bribery are essential in Chinese human smuggling, because without the collusion of government officials few can leave China with ease. We found that corruption methods varied widely depending on the type of services desired, and that only a small number of snakeheads claimed to have regular connections with government officials, as shown in Table 9. The same was true with their connections with police, customs or border patrol officials. Close to half of all snakeheads in our study had no such connections. Understandably, these special relations with corrupt officials were most likely restricted to the few who were at the most inner circles of smuggling organizations.

Table 9 about here

In our conversations with the snakeheads, we found that the corrupt officials tended to occupy low-level but crucial government functions such as passport inspectors at border check points, clerical staff for passport applications, and officials issuing documents for residential or marital verifications. These government positions are crucial

to the success of an operation and therefore are often eagerly pursued by the smugglers, who nonetheless complained about the greed of some of the corrupt officials, as one of our subjects said, “You think the snakeheads are criminals? It’s the government officials that are the real criminals! You bribe them and they allow you to move a few people out but you’ll never know when they are going to arrest you. They take our money and arrest us whenever they feel like it. Why? Because they have to prove to their superiors that they are doing their job and deserve to be promoted. We work hard to make money from the human trade but these government officials take the money from our pocket with relative ease. Some officials not only ask for bribes but also demand to share the profits. In other words, they are like our shareholders but they need not invest any money on the business and take any risks.”

On the other hand, many of our subjects gladly shared their profits with their government contacts. To them, this was a two-way street, as one of subjects elaborated, “We need to know all kinds of people and that’s why our expenses are formidable. Whenever we go out to eat, drink, and have fun with women, we always pay the bills. Otherwise, how else are you going to establish a good relationship with government officials? We also can’t put all the profits in our own pockets. Nobody can by himself move his clients through various checkpoints and obstacles. We need the help from those who are capable of getting the passports quickly and we need people who can help us to *maiguan* (or bribing custom and immigration officials). At any rate, it is a business where everybody makes money.”

Connection with Traditional Organized Crime Groups

The connection between human smuggling and Chinese organized crime have long been speculated (U.S. Senate, 1992; Bolz, 1995; Myers, 1996) and remained a main area of inquiry in this study. In our sample, we were able to interview nine subjects who claimed to be members of organized crime groups; and six of these snakeheads claimed that they got involved in the smuggling activities because of their criminal organizations, while the other three were recruited into the business by snakeheads who were not connected with any organized crime groups, as shown in Table 9. Although these six subjects represented only a small minority in our study sample, the finding nonetheless was significant in the sense that we were able to find some linkage between the two.

However, exactly how much significance we can make out of this connection with traditional organized crime is debatable. A clear fact in this study was that the vast majority of the snakeheads had nothing to do with the traditional Chinese crimes groups. We found instead that our subjects in general took efforts not to entangle with any street gangs or other crime groups in the Chinese community. Before they became involved in human smuggling, many of our subjects thought that the business must be related to organized crime groups, and they were surprised to find out later that they were wrong. One major reason could be that being a gangster was not in anyway an advantage in recruiting customers, getting close to government officials, or establishing a global network.

We are keenly aware that the lack of connections between human smugglers and the traditional Chinese crime organizations could very well be an artifact of our sampling strategy—the fact that we were only able to tap into the superficial circle of independent

entrepreneurs. The more organized and closely guarded groups, such as those managed and controlled by traditional organized crime groups, were off limits to us and our contacts.

SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

After years of field activities, we have come to believe that human smuggling, as an organized crime, is vastly different from any other traditional racketeering activities. This enterprise thrives on flexible and temporary international networks, in which groups of daring entrepreneurs contribute their time, energy, expertise, and capital to generate lucrative profits. By and large, these enterprising agents worked for themselves and the contacts within the smuggling organization were mostly one-on-one. If we were to build a profile of a “typical” smuggler, we would list the following attributes:

- Male;
- Marginally educated (usually with a high school education or less);
- Married;
- In his 30s or 40s;
- Self-employed, whose income does not depend on salaries;
- Engaged in the human smuggling business on a part-time basis or sporadically;
- Well connected in his social network;
- Dealing with his smuggling partners on a one-on-one basis;
- Making money for the service he provides to the smuggling operation, with little or no control over how other members of the operation go about their tasks.

In this study, although smuggling organizations had little hierarchical differentiation, the division of labor appeared to be highly developed. Each member operates to fulfill specific functions, with minimum redundancies, although the majority snakeheads in this study switched roles over time. These unique organizational attributes were probably due to operational necessity rather than by design. For instance, such a business arrangement could prevent unscrupulous partners from cutting out the middleman, maximize profit potentials for the involved individuals, and minimize risks of detection and arrest by law enforcement agencies.

Although we found some tenuous connections between traditional organized crime groups and the human smuggling trade, we are doubtful about the extensiveness of their involvement in the business. This observation does not challenge the involvement of Chinese organized crime in human smuggling. Nor does it deny the fact that individual members of organized crime groups may well participate in this business for their own personal gains, instead of acting upon the interests of their organizations. If there was one main theme in the findings of this study, it would be the relative lack of organization among these diverse groups of entrepreneurs. Based on our data, traditional organized crime groups at best played a secondary or incidental role in most smuggling operations.

Two other findings from this study are also worth noting in terms of their implications on public policies to combat this activity. First is that our subjects did not perceive themselves, nor did they think they were perceived by others in their communities, as criminals. Consequently little social stigma is attached to anyone engaging in this business. Oftentimes the activities performed by these entrepreneurs

were legal or at worst legally ambiguous, such as arranging marriage certificates or travel documents. This perceived normalcy has particular relevance to public and criminal justice policy regarding this transnational problem. If, in fact, there is wide support or tolerance for these individuals and the services they provide, it is questionable whether law enforcement will deter such activities merely by threat of punishment.

A second noteworthy finding is the role that corrupt government officials play in smuggling activities. With little social stigma attached to the activity and the immense profit potential, snakeheads are findings it easy to collude with corrupt civil servants and public security officials.

Our findings on the structure and operations of these Chinese human smuggling operations run against the descriptions commonly held by law enforcement. However, there is considerable research in recent decades that supports the findings discussed here, that is, the so-called organized crime is more disorganized than organized. Many scholars over the years have argued for an “enterprise model” (Passas and Nelken, 1993; Block and Chambliss, 1981; Van-Duyne, 1997). This model suggests flexible and adaptive networks that can easily expand and contract to deal with the uncertainties of the criminal enterprise. The entrepreneurs are organized only to the extent that they can effectively carry out illicit activities, which is a rather utilitarian or rational behavior as the economists have described (Reuter, 1983; Savona, 1990). A number of studies have focused on the entrepreneurial nature of organized crime and described the transitory alliances of bold risk takers who seize opportunities to make large profits on their investments (Dobinson, 1993; Potter, 1994). Apart from a relatively small core group, most associates are brought in as needed to provide special services.

It is not hard to infer policy implications from the findings of this study. First of all, the traditional law enforcement strategy of looking for the “godfathers” in human smuggling should be abandoned. This policy suggestion is made based on our belief that these non-traditional criminals are responsible for transporting the majority of Chinese nationals who are willing to pay for their services to migrate to countries where there are better economic opportunities. Because of their diverse backgrounds and involvement in legitimate businesses, they are more likely than traditional Chinese organized crime groups (i.e. gangs, tongs, and triads) to infiltrate the larger society through human smuggling, money laundering, and other types of transnational crime. It is difficult to penetrate the non-traditional organized crime subculture because members have no criminal records, no identifiable organization, and no rigid structure. Since their illegal activities are non-predatory, they can thrive without the assistance of any traditional gang bosses in their communities.

Second, law enforcement efforts should be focused and localized that target at specific groups or individuals identified as snakeheads. A hierarchically structured criminal organization can be best dealt with by the removal of the leadership (i.e., the strategy of going after the big fish), while small entrepreneurial groups are most sensitive to disruption of resources (i.e., removal of any linkage in the network).

Third, law enforcement agencies should closely monitor on the development of both the triad subculture and the Chinese smuggling subculture simultaneously and to prevent the coalition of these two equally destructive forces.

Fourth, law enforcement should look into the peripheral services in the U.S. that are just as important as the corrupt officials in China that used by many snakeheads to

arrange legal documents, establish businesses and corporations, and to provide necessary legal and other professional representations when confronted by the authorities.

The events of 9/11 have heightened the nation's awareness of the presence of undocumented immigrants in the U.S. Human smuggling activities undoubtedly have been affected by the war on terrorism and the recent policy changes that aim at tightening the borders and intensifying surveillance over foreign nationals living in the U.S.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Findings from this study should be considered exploratory and interpreted with caution because of the inherent limitations in the use of personal contacts and the snowball sampling technique. To increase the smuggler sample's "representativeness," we strove to: (1) recruiting a representative number of respondents from the various types of smugglers; (2) soliciting subjects in three different sites: New York, Los Angeles, and Fuzhou; (3) including subjects who are involved in different methods of trafficking; (4) recruiting both former and active smugglers; and (5) including smugglers with and without gang or organized crime affiliation. Still, the selection of the subjects and their referral networks was entirely limited to the initial contacts in our own personal networks and therefore systematically biased. It could be very possible that our referrals led us to smuggling networks that were composed of more honorable, upstanding, less violent, more part-time smugglers. Our inability to substantiate links between traditional organized crime groups and the human smuggling trade could be an artifact of our access limitation—the fact that we were only able to tap into the part-time, moonlighting "non-criminals" and not those serious well-organized professionals. It is impossible therefore

to rule out the significance or role of traditional organized crime and their relationships with the big snakeheads in the smuggling business.

Another limitation of this study was that our understandings of the organizational features of Chinese human smuggling were built upon data gathered from individuals who were not part of the same organization. In other words, we were trying to describe the organization of human smuggling in the same manner the proverbial blind Hindus were describing the elephant. We inferred organizational features from characteristics provided by unrelated individuals. We were unable to “infiltrate” one or two smuggling groups and followed an entire smuggling operation from start to finish; and therefore our descriptions of the “smuggling organization” was at best fragmented and disjointed. Although we were able to identify some distinctive “roles” according to what the smugglers told us, we did not get an in-depth look at a complete organization to examine its various components. The lack of hierarchical relations and of evidence of well-organized smuggling groups in the data may result from our sampling technique rather than a bankable finding.

ENDNOTE

¹ It should be noted that not all of the Chinese nationals at these staging stations are headed to the United States, as many of them settle either along the way or seek entrance into Western Europe.

² One type of major expenses not included in Table 5 is the expenditure for food and lodging for migrants in transit points. Depending on the number of transit points (from one up to nine) and the duration of the stay (from a few days to a few months), the expense may range from a few hundred to several thousand dollars per migrant.

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Table 1. Demographics of Snakehead Subjects

	Frequency	Percent
<u>Interview Format</u>		
Formal	111	86.0
Informal	18	14.0
Total	129	100.0
<u>Gender</u>		
Male	105	82.0
Female	23	18.0
Total	128	100.0
<u>Education</u>		
No formal education	5	4.2
Grade school	29	24.2
Junior high	31	25.8
High school	43	35.8
College	12	10.0
Total	120	100.0
<u>Marital Status</u>		
Married	100	78.7
Single	21	16.5
Divorced/separated	6	4.7
Total	127	100.0
<u>Age</u>		
21-30	18	14.1
31-40	65	50.8
41-50	36	28.1
51 and above	9	7.0
Total	128	100.0
<u>Employment</u>		
Full time employed	28	21.7
Self-employed	57	44.2
Unemployed	40	31.0
Retired	4	3.1
Total	129	100.0
<u>Citizenship/Legal Status</u>		
U.S.citizen	29	22.5
U.S. green card holder	24	18.6
U.S. legal non-immigrant	17	13.2
U.S. illegal immigrant	12	9.3
Chinese citizens only	47	36.4
Total	129	100.0

Table 2. Respondent Employment Status

Job Category	Frequency	Percent
1. Big business owner	1	.8
2. Education	3	2.3
3. Employed by small business	1	.8
4. Farming	4	3.1
5. Full time smuggler	8	6.2
6. Government	3	2.3
7. Housewife	5	3.9
8. Illicit business	2	1.6
9. Illicit business owner	4	3.1
10. Self employed	8	6.2
11. Service sector	16	12.4
12. Small business	1	.8
13. Small business owner	37	28.7
14. Unemployed	36	27.9
Total	129	100.0

Table 3. Initial Involvement in Smuggling Business

	Frequency	Percent
<u>Introduced to Smuggling Business by</u>		
Relatives and friends	49	44.5
Business associates	6	5.5
Recruited by snakeheads	38	34.5
Self-initiated	11	10.0
Part of Organized Crime Group	6	5.5
Total	110	100.0
<u>Sources of Clients</u>		
Relatives and Friends	54	49.1
Referrals from Other Clients	14	12.7
Referrals from Specific Regions	25	22.7
Recruiter network	17	15.5
Total	110	100.0
<u>Motivations in Smuggling Business</u>		
Money	64	57.7
To Help Friends	8	7.2
Money and to Help Friends	37	33.3
To Pay debt	2	1.8
Total	111	100.0
<u>Whether Quit Prior Job After Involvement in Smuggling Business</u>		
No	53	48.2
Yes	57	51.8
Total	110	100.0
<u>Time Involvement in Smuggling Business</u>		
Full time		
Half time or Part Time	39	36.4
Sporadic	23	21.5
Total	45	42.1
	107	100.0

Table 4. Smuggling Fees and Profits

	Median	Mode	Range
Investment in Smuggling Business (N=71)	\$3,000	\$0	\$0~\$500,000
Smuggling Fees (N=81)	\$50,000	\$60,000	\$1,000~\$70,000
Profit Per Client (N=69)	\$10,000	\$10,000	\$117~\$40,000
Annual Income from Smuggling Business (N=82)	\$50,000	\$50,000	\$0~2,000,000

Table 5. Prices on Specific Smuggling Services

Services	Most Quoted Price Range
Passport purchase	\$10,000~25,000
Expenses for passport seller in China	\$5,000
Photo substitution (passport photo alteration)	\$3,000~\$5,000
<i>Maiguan</i> (bribery at border check point)	\$8,000
Client recruitment	\$500~\$1,000
Escort (through transit points)	\$4,000~\$5,000
Bribery of port inspector (to allow stowaway)	\$1,000~\$5,000
Smuggling boat captain payoff (per trip)	\$200,000
Debt collection fee (per client)	\$500
Eligible bachelors (for fraudulent marriages)	\$5,000~\$30,000

Table 6. Organizational Features of the Smuggling Rings

	Frequency	Percent
<u>Number of Core Members</u>		
Refuse to acknowledge group identity	45	40.9
2-3 core members	30	27.3
4-5 core members	18	16.4
6-7 core members	6	5.5
8-10 core members	4	3.6
11-20 core members	3	2.7
More than 20 members	4	3.6
Total	110	100.0
<u>Clarity in Division of Labor</u>		
Clear division of labor	76	72.4
Somewhat clear division of labor	5	4.8
Unclear division of labor	14	13.3
Difficult to describe	2	1.9
No idea	8	7.6
Total	105	100.0
<u>Who Makes Decisions</u>		
Independent decision	18	16.5
Collective decision	21	19.3
Snakehead in charge	50	45.9
Follow boss instruction	10	9.2
Depends on contribution/ability	3	2.8
No idea	7	6.4
Total	109	100.0
<u>Collaboration with Other Smuggling Groups</u>		
Yes		
No	30	28.8
Total	74	71.2
	104	100.0
<u>Choice of Partners</u>		
Stable Partners	70	63.6
Unstable Partners	40	36.4
Total	110	100.0

Table 7. Specialized Roles in Smuggling Operation

	Frequency	Percent
<u>Initial Roles in Smuggling Business</u>		
Photo Substitution	3	2.7
Fraudulent Marriage	5	4.5
B1/B2 Travel Visas Arrangement	10	9.0
Transporter	8	7.2
Recruiter	52	46.8
Fraudulent Document Arrangement	12	10.8
Debt Collector	14	12.6
Legal Service Arrangement	2	1.8
Unspecified Roles	5	4.5
Total	111	100.0
<u>Whether Initial Roles Changed Overtime</u>		
Yes	60	57.1
No	45	42.9
Total	105	100.0
<u>Current Roles in Smuggling Business</u>		
Single Roles	78	70.3
Multiple Roles	30	27.0
Complex Roles	3	2.7
Total	111	100.0
<u>Complexity in Smuggling Tasks</u>		
Single set of process	82	74.5
Multiple approaches	25	22.7
Complex methods	2	1.8
Self-controlled	1	.9
Total	110	100.0

Table 8. Perceptions of Roles in Smuggling Business

	Frequency	Percent
<u>Thoughts on Roles in Smuggling</u>		
Mutual benefit	7	7.2
Reputation as a businessman	4	4.1
A lot of responsibility	20	20.6
Try to do my best	11	11.3
Hard work and lots of fun	3	3.1
Necessary work	8	8.2
Only do proper/legal things	4	4.1
Work for good pay	19	19.6
Safety and profit	10	10.3
Forced to do smuggling	3	3.1
Not easy—lots of headache	8	8.2
Total	97	100.0

Table 9. Main Operational Features

	Frequency	Percent
<u>Connections with government officials</u>		
None	44	47.8
Some connections	18	19.6
Many connections	30	32.6
Total	92	100.0
<u>Connections with police/INS/customs</u>		
None	45	46.9
Some connections	14	14.6
Many connections	37	38.5
Total	96	100.0
<u>Membership in Traditional Organized Crime</u>		
<u>Groups</u>		
Yes	9	7.0
No	120	93.0
Total	129	100.0