

Human Cargo Is Hugely Profitable To New York's Chinese Underworld;

Authorities Report a Surge in Smuggling of Immigrants by Boat

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Body

This morning, in the frigid waters off Rockaway Beach, more than 200 **Chinese** illegal **immigrants** jumped for freedom off the side of a grounded freighter.

A week and a half ago, across the Hudson River in Jersey City, 57 **Chinese** were found locked inside an auto body shop, held captive until they came up with tens of thousands of dollars in cash to win their release from those who **smuggled** them into the United States.

In these two separate incidents, **authorities** here have stumbled onto one of the lucrative operations of the emergent **New** York **Chinese underworld** -- **smuggling** young men and women in by the boatload from China for \$ 25,000 to \$ 30,000 a head. The practice has been going on quietly in the **New** York area since the late 1980s.

But in recent months, police and immigration officials said, it has exploded: The smugglers have switched from bringing their **human** contraband in by the handful on planes to by the hundreds on **boats**, and the number of separate **smuggling** operations based in Manhattan's Chinatown has mushroomed. A number of **Chinese**, many of whom want to make their way to **New** York, have been **smuggled** in by **boat** on the West Coast as well, including nearly 200 left by a freighter at the foot of San Francisco's Golden Gate Bridge last month.

Police said that the freighter that ran aground off the borough of Queens today was one of what may be dozens of vessels that have clandestinely brought young **immigrants** -- almost all from the **Chinese** province of Fujian -- into the United States over the last few months. One expert estimates that the total of illegal aliens pouring into Manhattan's Chinatown -- and in fast-growing Fujian communities in Brooklyn and Queens -- is now between 2,500 and 3,000 a month. That makes for a criminal operation worth hundreds of millions of dollars annually to local **underworld** entrepreneurs.

With the **surge** in immigration has come violence. Late last month in Teaneck, N.J., in what police suspect was a turf battle between rival **Chinese smuggling** gangs, a shootout in a quiet suburban neighborhood left four dead. **New** York police say that since November they have investigated 12 cases in which recent **Chinese immigrants** were kidnapped and in some cases brutally beaten because they were unable to pay off their **smuggling** fee. This morning, in the Far Rockaway surf, came the most recent tragedy: seven dead, possibly more, swimming to reach shore.

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"The Fujian Chinese population of Chinatown is exploding and 90 percent of the new people are illegal," said Luke Rettler, a prosecutor who heads the Asian Gang Unit of the Manhattan district attorney's office. "It is an unbelievably lucrative thing for the gangs to be involved with. It's so big now that they are bringing them in by the shipload."

All told today -- including more than 100 who did not jump ship -- the Immigration and Naturalization Service detained 328 Chinese from the grounded freighter, the Golden Venture. So far this year, the INS has caught almost 2,000 Chinese illegally entering the United States. This, INS officials concede, is only a fraction of those who have been successfully smuggled into the country and a dramatic increase from last year. In 1991, only 20 Chinese were intercepted at sea. And even those who have been caught have almost all been released because of the INS's huge backlog in dealing with asylum cases.

"It takes years and years to determine their status, so generally they are released on bond and given the right to work [in the United States] so they can support themselves while they wait for a determination," said Duke Austin, a spokesman for the INS in Washington. "They end up getting precisely what they wanted in the first place."

But the head of New York's INS said the Chinese who jumped ship today would be held in custody until their cases are resolved.

According to police and immigration experts, the smuggling of Chinese into New York began in the mid-to-late 1980s and picked up substantially after the Tiananmen Square massacre that ended massive pro-democracy protests in 1989. Virtually all the immigrants then -- and to this day -- came from Fujian, a poor and largely rural province in southeastern China. The 57 aliens found in Jersey City were all Fujian, as were the majority of those aboard the Golden Venture.

According to U.S. immigration officials, the bulk of smuggling originates there for a combinations of reasons. There is a large Fujian population already in New York, and many are willing to pay for friends and relatives to be brought from China. There is an aggressive and organized group of smugglers with extensive contacts in the towns and villages they left behind in China, and a seemingly unlimited pool of people are desperate to come to the land they call "Meiguo," the beautiful country.

"Eighty percent of the people in Fujian, if they had the means and the opportunity, would come here," said Dan Stein, executive director of the Federation for American Immigration Reform, a Washington-based lobby group.

From interviews with aliens who have been caught, police and immigration officials said that typically people are brought to the United States if they can find several thousand dollars while in China to serve as a down payment on the cost of passage and can provide the smuggler with a reference in New York who will be held responsible for the balance of the payment.

Over the years, police said, the smugglers have used dozens of different ways to move their human cargo. In the beginning, they put their clients on regular flights from China to New York, using forged passports to get them on board and having them ask for political asylum once they arrived. Others flew them to Central America on tourist visas and then smuggled them into the United States -- either by boat or overland across the Mexican border. Some asked for asylum. Others were smuggled in undetected.

The Golden Venture, which had an Indonesian crew, however, is part of the latest trend in alien smuggling, which involves renting space on big cargo vessels. The ships sail from China directly to U.S. shores -- bringing the Fujians either across the Pacific Ocean to California, and then by plane or bus to Manhattan, or straight to the New York coast in a voyage that can take months.

In a similar incident two weeks ago in San Francisco, a freighter dumped 240 illegal aliens from Fujian at the foot of the Golden Gate Bridge and then sailed back toward international waters, although it was intercepted by Coast Guard cutters. In recent months illegal Chinese immigrants traveling by boat have been captured in San Diego, northern Mexico, Taiwan, Singapore and near the Marshall Islands in the Pacific.

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"The preferred method now is to sneak in under false pretenses, under cover of night, and just unload these people," said Rettler. "They're trying to bypass the whole INS system."

The use of freighters has also made **smuggling** much more lucrative. Using commercial planes limited **smuggling** operations to a handful of people at a time, and added the cost of falsifying passports. Smugglers have been putting 300 to 400 people on vessels like the Golden Venture, which represents gross revenue of \$ 9 million to \$ 12 million per trip. That kind of money, police say, has attracted the attention of all kinds of entrepreneurs over the past year, as well as the interest of organized crime.

"At one time the **smuggling** was concentrated," said Joseph Pollini of the **New** York City Police Department's major case squad. In fact, he said, until two years ago there were only two main **smuggling** operations, run by sets of brothers, with one partner in China and one in Manhattan. Gangs were involved only peripherally -- to ensure through threats, violence and kidnapping that the smugglers were paid.

Having realized the profitability of **smuggling**, gangs now are doing it themselves. It "is maybe a fifth of [a gang's] operation," Pollini said, but the overall amount of alien **smuggling** is "growing fairly well in leaps and bounds." There are now a dozen different **smuggling** networks bringing people to the **New** York area. The money is so enticing, Pollini said, that gangs are actually shifting resources from drug-running to alien-**smuggling**.

"One of the reasons more groups are getting involved is that compared to drugs, the penalties are fairly small," Pollini said. "With drugs you can get life in prison for one offense. But with **smuggling**, if a **boat** is stopped the captain will get maybe 18 months to two years."

What worries law enforcement officials in **New** York is the escalation of violence that has accompanied the rise in **smuggling** in the **Chinese** community and the exploitation of many of those spirited in. Some people who are unable to pay off their cost of passage, they said, are forced to join criminal gangs or, if they are women, pushed into prostitution. The 57 Fujian men found two weeks ago locked inside a small, poorly ventilated warehouse may have been performing forced labor to pay off their fee, police said. Some had been held as long as several weeks.

"You go into one of the Fujian apartments in Chinatown and there are 14 people sleeping there in a room 20 feet by 10," said prosecutor Rettler. "They work in shifts. They work 20 hours a day. They take one day off a month. Some get involved in crime. Some are indentured servants

"I talk to these people and see the conditions they live in over here and I can't imagine that it was any worse in China."

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