

## **Trial Starts With Details of Immigrant Smuggling**

The New York Times

May 17, 2005 Tuesday, Late Edition - Final

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**Section:** Section B; Column 2; Metropolitan Desk; Pg. 1

**Length:** 915 words

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### **Body**

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Ever since the rusted freighter Golden Venture grounded off Queens in 1993, federal prosecutors have had their sights on the Chinatown businesswoman known as Sister Ping.

Now 56, Sister Ping had a 15-year career as a top financier and enforcer among "snakeheads," as Chinese smugglers are known, the prosecutors say. They say she channeled funds to the leader of a Chinatown gang to purchase the Golden Venture, which was loaded with smuggled immigrants when it ran aground on a beach in the Rockaways on June 6, 1993. Ten immigrants drowned as they leapt into the roaring surf trying to make it to American shores.

Yesterday, nearly 12 years later, she went on trial in Federal District Court in Manhattan on charges of kidnapping and hostage taking. But the Golden Venture, prosecutors said, was only part of her operation.

While other Chinese smugglers were bringing illegal immigrants to the United States two or three at a time, Sister Ping loaded them by the hundreds in the sweltering holds of cargo ships, turning smuggling into a multimillion-dollar enterprise, a prosecutor, David Burns, said in his opening statement. "She rose to the pinnacle of her profession," he said of Sister Ping, whose given name is Chen Chui Ping. "She was one of the most powerful and successful alien smugglers of our times."

A shipload of more than 100 Chinese immigrants that Sister Ping organized and financed in 1998 ran into stormy waters as it was unloading its human cargo off the shore of Guatemala. One motor boat carrying immigrants to shore capsized and 14 people drowned, Mr. Burns said.

Sister Ping, prosecutors said, knew that the Golden Venture would have the police out looking for her. As the ship sat listing in the waters off Queens, Mr. Burns said, citing wiretap telephone conversations, she dropped from sight in Chinatown and slipped out of the United States in early 1994.

She did not surface again until she was arrested by the authorities in Hong Kong in April 2000, carrying a false passport from Belize under the name Lily Zheng and \$64,000 in American and Hong Kong currency.

Meanwhile, federal prosecutors won guilty pleas or convictions for six smugglers who claimed they knew or worked with Sister Ping. They are cooperating with the government and will testify against her, Mr. Burns said.

Sister Ping's lawyer, Lawrence Hochheiser, said in his opening statement that she was never a smuggler and only ran an underground banking house that made loans to the valiant but illegal Chinese immigrants trying to reach the United States.

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Sister Ping's enterprise was a "money business," Mr. Hochheiser said, and any involvement in smuggling was incidental to her loan-making. "By all accounts it was an honest business," he added, saying that she was never accused of cheating.

Mr. Hochheiser argued that the prosecutors had made "deals with the devil," with cooperating witnesses who he said were "liars and murderers." He said that one of the government's witnesses, Ah Kai, a convicted leader of the notorious Fuk Ching gang in Chinatown, had been "the genius" who ordered the captain of Golden Venture to run aground because he could not find another way to unload the ship.

"You're going to be plenty uncomfortable when you see what these witnesses are made of," Mr. Hochheiser told the 12 jurors.

The government's first witness, Weng Hui, testified that Sister Ping started out in smuggling when she was living in a small sweet-potato farming town in Fujian Province in southeastern China.

Sister Ping, a wily entrepreneur even at the height of China's cultural revolution, saw that the demand was huge for smuggling services to the United States, Mr. Burns said. Instead of sending immigrants one or two at a time by airplane with falsified travel documents, Sister Ping saw that more money could be made by moving large human shipments by boat, Mr. Burns said. She moved from China and set up her headquarters in a storefront at 47 East Broadway in Chinatown, the prosecutor said.

Her customers often traveled the seas for months in "dungeon-like conditions" in the holds of steamships, seared by the heat of the engines, Mr. Burns said. True to her snakehead title, she sent immigrant ships on circuitous courses from China through Thailand, and across the ocean to Guatemala, Belize and Mexico before making it to the United States.

According to the prosecutor and the seven-count indictment, the trouble began for Sister Ping in the 1990's when she had difficulty finding assistants to offload big shiploads of immigrants once they reached this hemisphere. She turned to the Fuk Ching gang to help her with the logistics, even though they had little smuggling experience. In one case, the government charges, Sister Ping paid \$750,000 to gang members to bring three truckloads of immigrants from Boston to New York.

The indictment accuses Sister Ping of repeatedly refusing to release immigrants from New York warehouses, where she ordered them held until they paid her fees -- as much as \$40,000 for a trip to New York from China.

Dressed in a proper black pants suit, Sister Ping, her shoulder-length black hair streaked with gray, sat quietly in the courtroom, listening through headphones to a Chinese translator relaying the lawyers' opening remarks. She is also accused of money-laundering.

"She promised hope and prosperity," the prosecutor charged, "but instead offered only misery and suffering while fattening her purse."

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## Graphic

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Photos: Chen Chui Ping, known as Sister Ping, in a July 2003 F.B.I. photograph. (pg. B1)

Survivors of the 1993 Golden Venture disaster. Ten Chinese immigrants died when the freighter ran aground off Queens. (Photo by Paul De Maria for The New York Times)(pg. B8)

## Classification

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**Language:** ENGLISH

**Publication-Type:** Newspaper

**Subject:** **SMUGGLING** (93%); PUBLIC PROSECUTORS (91%); US FEDERAL GOVERNMENT (90%); ALIEN **SMUGGLING** (90%); IMMIGRATION (89%); ILLEGAL **IMMIGRANTS** (89%); MARINE TRANSPORTATION ACCIDENTS (78%); ARRESTS (78%); GUILTY PLEAS (78%); BEACHES (75%); CRIMINAL CONVICTIONS (74%); KIDNAPPING & ABDUCTION (74%); TESTIMONY (74%); LAW COURTS & TRIBUNALS (73%); PASSPORTS & VISAS (70%); HOSTAGE TAKING (69%); WIRETAPPING (62%)

**Organization:** FEDERAL BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION (59%)

**Industry:** MARINE SHIPPING (78%); MARINE TRANSPORTATION ACCIDENTS (78%); BANKING & FINANCE (71%)

**Person:** Julia Preston; Chen Chui Ping

**Geographic:** NEW YORK, NY, USA (79%); UNITED STATES (94%); HONG KONG (92%); GUATEMALA (79%); New York City; China; Chinatown (NYC)

**Load-Date:** May 17, 2005