

## **SMUGGLED TO NEW YORK;**

### **Immigrant Dream of Plenty Turns to Misery and Regret**

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## **Body**

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It took \$27,000 of borrowed money, a harrowing 52-day voyage by sea eating rotten rice and two days by van and on foot from Mexico before Hua Zhen was finally **smuggled** into the United States from China. That was six weeks ago, before another ship bulging with passengers like him ran aground off of **New York** City, when Mr. Hua was still flush with hope.

Already, gloom has consumed Mr. Hua, who would give only the nickname his friends call him. He is homesick, deeply in debt, and still in pursuit of work while he lives with relatives in **New** Jersey. At best, he hopes to land a job as a dishwasher in a **New York** restaurant and maybe a bunk to call his own above the kitchen. Not until years in the future, once his passage is repaid, does he imagine he will see his wife and 10-year-old son again.

'A Modern-Day Slave Trade'

"I **regret** coming," he said. "I feel like I was tricked. Everybody said life in America is wonderful, that everyone has a big car and a big house."

The swarms of illegal Chinese **immigrants** being **smuggled** into the United States on the promise of a bountiful life all too often find themselves trapped in a bleak existence under the watchful eyes of criminals ready to resort to brutality against those who don't pay their full fare. The hundreds of Chinese who washed up on the shores of Queens early Sunday morning, following a horrifying journey aboard a rusting freighter called the Golden Venture, might do well to learn from the experiences of predecessors like Mr. Hua.

"This is a modern-day slave trade," said Joann Lum, the program director at the Chinese Staff and Workers Association in **New York**, which organizes Chinese workers.

Nonetheless, in the last two years, there has been a sharp rise in illegal immigration as ever-larger boatloads of Chinese are brought in by smugglers believed tied to organized crime. Several dozen ships have been intercepted at various American ports. Just Wednesday, two fishing boats loaded with about 300 illegal Chinese **immigrants** were seized south of San Francisco.

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A shot at the American dream does not come cheap. According to immigrants who have made the odyssey, the "snakeheads" or smugglers usually charge \$20,000 to \$50,000 for a one-way trip, forged passport and some counsel on what to do if caught. Pregnant women must pay more. One woman who refused to give her name said that smugglers with the best reputation for transporting people safely command the highest fees.

Many immigrants sell their belongings to make a down payment, usually at least \$1,500. The smugglers used to require at least 80 percent of the fare in advance, but immigrants said that competition has gotten so torrid that 10 to 15 percent down is now acceptable. The more relatives that one has in America to guarantee the fare, the less the deposit required. Once the immigrants land, those who cannot pay off the balance at once may be saddled with installment payments over several years.

The voyage itself is arduous; inevitably, some die on the way.

Hua Zhen boarded a freighter outside Fuzhou, the capital of Fujian province, where many of the group that landed in New York also originated. Mr. Hua was one of 220 immigrants accompanied by six "enforcers" working for the smugglers. One enforcer repeatedly threatened to kill Mr. Hua if his fare was not paid in full on arrival. "He told me, 'It costs \$1,000 to kill someone in America,' " Mr. Hua said. " 'Your life is cheap.' "

The passengers were fed two bowls of rice a day, along with some cooked vegetables. The rice was sometimes rotten.

At one point, their ship's engine quit and the freighter drifted for eight days before another vessel brought spare parts.

## Landed in Mexico

After 52 days, the immigrants landed in Northern Mexico, where they were loaded into vans in groups of 25 and driven close to the California border. Overnight, they crossed on foot to vans waiting on the other side. But United States Border Patrol agents shot at them, Mr. Hua said, shattering the rear window of one van, and they were captured.

Mr. Hua was held by the United States Immigration and Naturalization Service for a day. But he said that he recited what the smugglers had coached him to say -- that he would kill himself if returned to China -- and was released.

His passage has been paid by 12 relatives, so his debt is to them and not the smugglers. As a result, he is on his own finding work.

Immigrants who owe smugglers are often steered by them into low-paying, bottom-rung jobs in restaurants or the garment industry, Ms. Lum said, and much of their income for years must go to repaying the fare. The pay, she said, is as low as \$2 an hour, less than half of the minimum wage of \$4.25. It is not unusual for the immigrants to work 12 to 14 hours a day, seven days a week. Some of the young women are cajoled into accepting jobs as prostitutes in massage parlors.

A young woman smuggled in from Fujian, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said she came to the United States three years ago after posting a deposit of \$1,500. She was introduced to clothing wholesalers and became a street peddler. Each month, she said, she pays \$500, half of her earnings, to a man in Chinatown whom she said is the collector for many who have been smuggled into this country.

Some other newly arrived immigrants become the equivalent of indentured servants, living in quarters provided by their employer. Often, they are squeezed into shabby rooms, as many as 10 or 12 people together. They share cots with other workers assigned to different shifts, immigration experts say. All too often the housing is the dank basement or back room of the restaurant or massage parlor where they work.

"Their dreams of America are really shattered," Ms. Lum said. "They did not expect to be sucked into a life of slavery. Some say their lives are harder here than in China."

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And woe to anyone who falls behind in paying off his fare, for the smugglers employ enforcers who beat laggards. Another common technique, law-enforcement officials say, is for smugglers to abduct late payers until they are ransomed by relatives; sometimes they are kept for weeks, then charged for room and board. While the enforcers await payment, they typically torture the debtors.

Two-and-a-half years ago, the **New York** police rescued a 30-year-old restaurant worker, Kim Wah Fong, who had fallen behind on his passage fee and had been kidnapped at gunpoint. He was imprisoned in a Bronx apartment building where the police said he was beaten with a hammer. Several of his ribs were cracked.

After his rescue, the police arrested 13 illegal **immigrants** who the authorities described as enforcers for a Hong Kong **smuggling** organization.

A few weeks before that incident, the police had rescued two other illegal **immigrants** who had been severely beaten and burned while being held in a house in Queens.

Some of the illegal **immigrants turn** to crime when legitimate jobs dry up. "Some of the people I know from the ship are working for gangs now," said a 19-year-old man who spoke on condition of anonymity. "If you seem tough enough, they'll take you and teach you how to use a gun."

But few tell friends and relatives back in China about their travails. Indeed, when Hua Zhen telephoned home two weeks ago, he lied and said that everything was fine. He said the truth would have caused his family to worry. "And they probably wouldn't believe me either," he added.

## Classification

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