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## Characteristics of Chinese Human Smugglers

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U.S. Department of Justice  
Office of Justice Programs  
National Institute of Justice

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Research in Brief



## Characteristics of Chinese Human Smugglers

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## Characteristics of Chinese Human Smugglers

Findings and conclusions of the research reported here are those of the authors and do not reflect the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.

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## ABOUT THIS REPORT

This study explored the inner workings of Chinese human smuggling organizations by going right to the source—smugglers themselves. Through field observations and face-to-face interviews in both the United States and China, researchers found that most human smugglers in this study were otherwise ordinary citizens. Their social networks provide the necessary connections and resources to conduct a profitable trade in arranging transportation for people who want to leave China illegally.

### What did the researchers find?

Chinese human smugglers come from diverse backgrounds. They form temporary business alliances, and their organizations can best be described as ad hoc task forces. Researchers found no “godfather” figure who dominated an entire group of smugglers or commanded a group of subordinates, but they did find that most smuggling activities are highly specialized and controlled by

individuals who only deal with one another through one-on-one contacts. The smugglers in this study do not perceive themselves as criminals—they feel they are providing a valuable service to Chinese who want to immigrate but cannot do so legally. This view is shared by many in the communities they “serve.” Enforcement efforts need to take into account the unique organization of smuggling enterprises and how smugglers are perceived by themselves and their clients.

### What were the study’s limitations?

The authors note that their inability to find a connection between smugglers and traditional organized crime organizations could be an artifact of the sampling strategy: Subjects were found through personal contacts and a snowball sampling technique (acquiring additional referrals from known contacts), so the full range of those involved in smuggling may not be represented.

*Sheldon Zhang and Ko-lin Chin*

## Characteristics of Chinese Human Smugglers

Organized Chinese human smuggling into the United States has been ongoing for more than two decades. After the United States established diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China in 1978, Chinese nationals quickly overwhelmed legal channels to immigrate to the United States. Consequently, illegal channels were developed to meet the demand.

Chinese human smugglers are called "snakeheads" both in China and in overseas Chinese communities. (People who leave China illegally are often called "human snakes"; thus, those who lead them across the borders are called snakeheads.)

Three main smuggling methods are used, often in combination, to transport Chinese nationals into the United States. One strategy is to travel to Mexico or Canada by some means and then illegally cross the border into the United States. A second strategy is to fly into the United States through transit points outside China. These by-air illegal immigrants have

obtained fraudulent documents that enable them to enter the country. A third strategy is to use fishing trawlers or freighters to smuggle Chinese nationals into the United States.

Many believe that organized crime groups are behind most smuggling activities because moving human cargoes across the Pacific or over continents requires extensive international coordination and arrangement of services; therefore, human smuggling is an organizational rather than an individual enterprise. What is not clear is the nature and characteristics of these smuggling organizations.

Few have studied this subject systematically, partly because illegal Chinese immigrants have largely been "invisible" because of linguistic and cultural barriers present in Chinese communities in the United States. Much of what is known about Chinese smuggling activities is based on interviews with illegal immigrants. Systematic gathering of information



### About the Authors

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## RESEARCH METHODS

Before the project, the study team established contacts with researchers with similar interests in Fuzhou (capital city of Fujian Province in southern China), the point of departure for the majority of illegal Chinese immigrants. Researchers from both countries agreed to use the same methods to conduct interviews with individuals in the human smuggling business.

### Site Selection

Researchers selected three primary sites for data collection—New York City, Los Angeles, and Fuzhou. The majority of undocumented Fujianese settle in New York City's Chinatown, a well-established social and commercial center for new Chinese immigrants. For those who enter the United States from Mexico, most arrive in Los Angeles before they are transported to other parts of the country. Fuzhou City, with a population of more than 5.4 million, is located in the northern coastal area of Fujian Province.

### Sampling Method

In this study, a “smuggler” was defined as anyone who, for a fee, had a role in helping a person to enter the United States illegally. The study team solicited subjects through personal contacts. The subjects in the study were all self-identified smugglers who resided in either China or the United States.

Both formal and informal interviews were conducted in both countries. Formal interviews involved face-to-face conversations around a predetermined set of semistructured and open-ended questions. Informal interviews took place over dinner tables or at other social gatherings where formal inquiries were neither feasible nor socially acceptable. 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, researchers also visited villages in Fuzhou and adjacent regions that have extensive smuggling activity and the Chinese communities in New York and Los Angeles. Because of the subjects' pervasive fear of detection by law enforcement and suspicion of the research purposes, the researchers encountered many difficulties in persuading prospective subjects to come forward. Still, they were able to collect firsthand data that had far greater detail on the organizational and operational characteristics of Chinese human smuggling than any previously known reports. A total of 129 interviews were conducted, the majority (86 percent) of which were formal interviews.

### Limitations of the Study

Findings from this study should be considered exploratory and interpreted with caution because of the inherent limitations in using personal contacts and the snowball sampling technique. Although efforts were made to capture a wide sample based on geography, roles, type of smuggling, and organized crime affiliation, the selection of the subjects and their referral networks was limited to the initial contacts in the researchers' own personal networks and therefore systematically biased. For example, a main finding of this study about the absence of a substantiated connection between traditional organized crime groups and the human smuggling trade could be an artifact of the limited access—researchers were able to tap into only the part-time, moonlighting “noncriminals.” Therefore, this study cannot rule out the link between traditional organized crime and human smuggling operations. Note too that this study did not explore human trafficking operations, which involve fraud and coercion to lure or entrap human subjects.

The study's understanding of the organization of Chinese human smuggling operations is built on data gathered from individuals who were not part of the same smuggling organization. The research team was not able to gain entrance into an entire smuggling group and to follow an entire smuggling operation. Therefore, the descriptions of a prototypical “smuggling organization” are an amalgam of different smuggling groups. Still, this research project represents the most detailed examination to date of Chinese human smuggling operations.

directly from the smugglers had not been attempted prior to this study.

### Who are the snakeheads?

Snakeheads have remained the most elusive element in the study of Chinese human smuggling. Through extensive interviews with participants in the smuggling trade (see “Research Methods”), the research team sought to

answer 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 kinds 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. Subjects mentioned close to 70 different occupations, including restaurant owner, car salesman, barber, waiter/waitress, housewife, handyman, mason, taxi driver, peasant, seafood retailer, and fruit stand owner. The occupations were condensed into a list of 13 categories, as shown in exhibit 1.

The majority of the subjects were male (82 percent), and most had a high school education or less (90 percent). They were generally in their 30s and 40s (79 percent) and married (78 percent). The majority of the subjects (75 percent) described themselves as either unemployed or self-employed. Further inquiry showed that most of those “unemployed” were actually self-employed. They considered themselves unemployed because they did not have salaried jobs or it would be hard for them to describe how they obtained

**Exhibit 1. Self-reported occupations of smugglers**

Job category	Frequency	Percent
Small business owner	38	29.4
Unemployed	36	27.9
Service sector	16	12.4
Full-time smuggler	8	6.2
Self-employed	8	6.2
Housewife	5	3.9
Farming	4	3.1
Illicit business owner	4	3.1
Education	3	2.3
Government	3	2.3
Employed in illicit business	2	1.6
Big business owner	1	0.8
Employed by small business	1	0.8
<b>Total</b>	<b>129</b>	<b>100.0</b>

their income. None of the unemployed were impoverished by any means, and all subjects earned a regular income.

Of the 70 U.S. smugglers interviewed in New York and Los Angeles, 45 (64 percent) entered the United States in 1993 or earlier. Forty-four (63 percent) entered the country through legal channels, and the rest were smuggled into the United States illegally. More than two-thirds were either citizens or green card holders, and only about 11 percent were illegal immigrants at the time of the interviews.

During the course of the interviews, it became apparent that participation in the smuggling enterprise required no special skills or training, and it was open to just about anyone with the right connections and enough courage. One of the subjects commented: "Wherever there are Chinese, there are snakeheads. Snakeheads are people who are willing to take risks for money."

#### **Initiation into the business.**

Of the 111 subjects with valid responses, 51 had already quit the business at the time

of the interview. Of the remaining 60 active smugglers, 46 (about 77 percent) had been in the smuggling business for less than 3 years. Most smugglers remain in the business no longer than 6 years. This pattern suggests that human smuggling is a short-term career option.

The majority of those in a smuggling organization belonged to a family or a close social circle. More than half of all smugglers became involved in the business through relatives, friends, or business associates, although direct recruitment by smugglers accounted for one-third of the subjects. More than half of the smugglers also claimed that their sources of clients came from friends and relatives.

About 92 percent of the respondents cited money as a primary motive for their involvement in the smuggling business. Only eight subjects claimed that their primary motive was to help friends and relatives. More than half of the respondents quit their previous jobs after their involvement in the smuggling business, yet only one-third claimed to be in the business full time.

## Human smuggling as a moneymaking business

Subjects were asked four questions regarding money in the smuggling business: (1) how much money they had to spend up front to get involved in the business, (2) how much they charged for their services, (3) how much profit they could make off each client, and (4) how much money they could make annually from the smuggling business.

About 60 percent of respondents (out of 110) said they had to put up their own money to get involved in the business. Those who did not

were mostly low-level recruiters who received nominal referral fees after a successful operation.

Because of the different types of subjects included in the study, researchers found a wide range of smuggling fees—from \$500 to \$200,000 (see exhibit 2). The lower range was mostly referral fees charged by the recruiters and only part of the total amount paid by a smuggled immigrant. The total fees cited most frequently were in the higher range—\$50,000 to \$60,000 (see exhibit 3).

Similarly, depending on their roles and responsibilities in a smuggling operation, a wide variation was found in the

**Exhibit 2. Prices for specific smuggling services**

Service	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
Maignan (bribery at border checkpoint)	\$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)	\$500–50% recovered
Eligible bachelors (for fraudulent marriages)	\$5,000–\$30,000

**Exhibit 3. Smuggling fees and profits**

	<b>Median</b>	<b>Mode</b>	<b>Range</b>
Investment in smuggling business ( <i>N</i> = 71)	\$3,000	\$0	\$0–\$500,000
Smuggling fees ( <i>N</i> = 81)	\$50,000	\$60,000	\$1,000–\$70,000
Profit per client ( <i>N</i> = 69)	\$10,000	\$10,000	\$117–\$40,000
Annual income from smuggling business ( <i>N</i> = 82)	\$50,000	\$50,000	\$0–\$2,000,000

amounts of money subjects claimed to have made. Because the recruiters usually did not put up any of their own money, they tended to make the least, about \$500 to \$2,000 per client referred. For other smugglers, however, reported profits were considerable, with a median of \$10,000 and up to \$40,000 per client (see exhibit 3). 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 \$2 million a year. The median annual income from those who responded was \$50,000, which was also the figure most often cited.

**Organizational characteristics**

Chinese human smugglers are often described as well

organized with sophisticated global networks. A key area of inquiry in this study was how these groups were organized and how organizational decisions were made. One-third of the subjects put the number of core members of their groups at between two and five people. Another 10 percent claimed that the number of their group’s core members was between six and ten people. However, most striking 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 saying 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.

The study team was unable to establish a clear hierarchical order (as in a formal organization) for smuggling operations, and none of the subjects said that they were working for a “godfather” or central figure who operated behind the scenes. However, because researchers found the participants through personal contacts, they may not have identified smugglers who operate within traditional Chinese crime networks; these conclusions, therefore, are subject to further investigation.

Although researchers talked to some successful smugglers, none considered themselves as occupying a dominant position in their smuggling network. They described others in their network as friends or business partners. No one was found who had absolute control over an entire smuggling operation. 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 might have further contacts. The smuggling process was composed of a series of networks, each contributing to the eventual goal of landing clients in the United States.

Although little hierarchical organization was found, the division of labor was well developed among smugglers. It was clear that most of the subjects had their own specialized tasks in the smuggling operation. The majority of the subjects (72 percent) claimed that a clear division of labor existed within their circle of partners. All smugglers had specific roles to play (see “‘Snakehead’ Roles”).

As one Los Angeles-based smuggler 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.”

### **Self-perception as a human smuggler**

None of the subjects considered themselves criminals, although they were all aware of the illegal nature of their business activities. They seemed more concerned about the process of the work and even the responsibilities to their clients than about the morality of their activities.

## “SNAKEHEAD” ROLES

From the interviews, the research team identified several highly specialized roles in a smuggling operation, reflecting the strict division of labor in the business. A large number of subjects started out as recruiters, the easiest way to get involved in the business.

*Recruiters* are often relatives or close friends of the would-be immigrants who somehow know the smugglers. They may or may not have any further involvement in the smuggling operation.

*Coordinators* are central figures in smuggling operations because they have the connections to acquire necessary services for a fee. Their survival depends on their relationship with other partners who have access to those services.

*Transporters* help immigrants leave and enter countries. China-based transporters get immigrants to the border or the smuggling ship. U.S.-based transporters take smuggled immigrants from airports or seaports to safe houses.

*Document vendors* are well connected and able to produce documents to facilitate the transportation of immigrants. Some documents are authentic, obtained through official or unofficial channels, while others are fraudulent.

*Corrupt public officials* are the authorities in China and many transit countries who are paid to aid illegal Chinese immigrants. Some corrupt government officials act not only as facilitators but also as core members or partners of a smuggling organization. Subjects who belonged to large smuggling groups often indicated that local Chinese officials headed their groups.

*Guides* are responsible for moving illegal immigrants from one transit point to another or assisting immigrants who are entering the United States.

*Crew members* are employed by snakeheads to charter or to work on smuggling ships.

*Enforcers* mostly are illegal immigrants themselves who are hired to work on the smuggling ships. They maintain order and distribute food and drinking water.

*Debt collectors* are based in the United States and are responsible for locking up illegal immigrants in safe houses until their smuggling fees are paid. Additional debt collectors are based in China.

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 are necessarily required in any particular operation. After 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 smugglers (70 percent) continued to play single roles and their tasks remained rather specialized.

They saw themselves as upstanding businesspeople who helped their friends and neighbors. Some even claimed that their business ventures helped alleviate some of China's pressing social problems, such as overpopulation and unemployment. They viewed themselves as making an honest living.

Understanding that both immigrants and smugglers consider transnational human smuggling more of a "good deed" than a crime may help explain why so many otherwise law-abiding people become involved in human trade. Another possible explanation is the tremendous profits one can make from an "occupation" that requires neither fixed working hours nor special skills.

### **Corruption and bribery**

Smugglers reported that corruption and bribery are a component of their smuggling operations in China. Methods varied widely depending on the type of services desired. Corrupt officials tended to occupy such low-level but crucial government functions as passport inspectors at border checkpoints,

clerical staff for passport applications, and officials who issue documents for residential or marital verifications.

### **Connection with traditional organized crime groups**

Researchers were able to interview nine subjects who claimed to be members of organized crime groups. Six of them claimed they got involved in smuggling activities through their criminal organizations, while the other three were recruited into the business by smugglers not connected with any organized crime groups.

The significance of the connection of these six smugglers to traditional organized crime is debatable. The vast majority of the smugglers in the study had nothing to do with traditional Chinese crime groups. In fact, most subjects took pains not to entangle their activities with any street gangs or other crime groups in the Chinese community. And as noted above, most study participants did not consider themselves criminals.

However, the lack of connection found between human smugglers and traditional Chinese crime organizations also could be an artifact of the sampling strategy. Any more organized and closely guarded groups, such as those managed and controlled by traditional organized crime groups, might have been unavailable to the researchers and their contacts. But if one theme has emerged from this study, it would be the relative lack of organization among these diverse networks of entrepreneurs. Based on the data, traditional organized crime groups at best played a secondary or incidental role in most smuggling operations.

After years of field activities, the researchers have come to believe that human smuggling differs vastly from 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 work for themselves, and contacts within the smuggling organization are mostly one on one.

## Policy implications

Several study findings have implications for public policies designed to combat this activity. An important finding is that the smugglers do not see themselves as criminals, and neither do others in their communities. Consequently, little social stigma is attached to this business. If, in fact, there is wide support or tolerance for these individuals and the services they provide, it is questionable whether law enforcement will be able to deter such activities merely by threat of exposure and punishment.

Another noteworthy finding is the role that smugglers say corrupt government officials play in smuggling activities. With little social stigma attached to the activity and the immense profit potential, smugglers say they find it easy to collude with corrupt civil servants and public security officials.

Findings on the structure and operations of these Chinese human smuggling operations run counter to the hierarchical organized crime definition frequently employed by law enforcement and are more consistent with the “enterprise model” of criminal



activity. This model describes flexible and adaptive networks that expand or contract as needed to deal with the uncertainties of the criminal enterprise. The participants are organized only for the purpose of carrying out the illicit activity.

Thus, the traditional law enforcement strategy of looking for the “godfathers” in human smuggling operations should be reexamined. Yet it may be difficult to expose this non-traditional organized crime subculture because members have no criminal records, no identifiable organization, and no rigid structure. Because their illegal activities are nonpredatory, they can blend with the larger society and thrive without the assistance of any traditional gang bosses in their communities.

Law enforcement efforts should be focused and localized to target specific networks or individuals identified as smugglers. The smuggling networks can be broken by disrupting their tenuous organizational relations; and the removal of one link in the smuggling process can often bring down the entire smuggling organization, such as through close supervision and frequent rotations at the border checkpoints or government document processing counters. The time may be right to act because human smuggling activities undoubtedly have been affected by the war on terrorism and recent policy changes that aim at tightening the borders and intensifying surveillance over foreign nationals living in the United States.

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