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University of California, San Diego

## **Migration Merchants: Human Smuggling from Ecuador and China**

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Working Paper 43  
October 2001

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## **Migration Merchants: Human Smuggling from Ecuador and China**

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*Abstract:* Human smuggling is a phenomenon that further blurs the already fuzzy boundaries between economic migrant and refugee, legal and illegal immigrant. Many state policy-makers and NGOs are concerned that if they admit immigrants or refugees who use human smugglers, this will encourage smugglers to further break immigration laws. This paper questions the assumption that illegal migrants are like any other illegal commodity crossing state borders. Kyle argues that most migrant smugglers are social bandits who may be considered unsavory and even dangerous by their home societies, but not as "criminals." Even states that are "victims" of human smugglers do not uniformly paint them as criminal and evil. In contrast to common thieves and smugglers, there is a highly politicized historical dimension to both the motivations of social bandits and to those who see them as either criminals (i.e., transnational organized crime) or "freedom fighters." Although migration research has a significant role to play in the understanding of transnational social banditry, current migration theory does not sufficiently explain the sharp rise in human smuggling around the world, especially in terms of how it conceptualizes "demand." To illustrate these points, special attention will be given to emigration from Ecuador to the United States and Spain, including the organization of illicit "migrant export schemes."

### **Introduction**

News reports and government agencies around the world are documenting the growth over the past decade in human smuggling across international borders in nearly every region of the world. Yet, such disconnected reports illicit more questions than answers regarding the origins and social organization of diverse activities in a myriad of sending and transit regions. The problem with official government estimates and news reports of human smuggling is that they typically weave a global image of professional criminal smuggling rings without moving us much closer to understanding the historical social and economic regional milieus from which clandestine migration is embedded. Such an understanding is necessary if we are to understand how and why so many are turning to, or coerced into, semi-professional and professional smuggling networks for clandestine migration abroad. We can also try to understand how relatively poor people (though often not poor compared to others from their sending community) could mount a complex and expensive clandestine journey.

This chapter compares the historical context, the social organization, and recent trends in undocumented migration from two diverse sending provinces in China and Ecuador. In such migrant exporting schemes, a diverse range of people may profit from migration by providing

either legal or illegal services. Though Kyle, examining the Ecuadorian case, labeled such migration service providers “migration merchants” (2000), this entrepreneurial or market model may be less appropriate to other regions where high levels of malfeasance, coercion, and violence are used to trick, traffic, and trade people into contemporary forms of slavery (Bales 1999; Kyle and Dale 2001). However, we believe that the Chinese case of human smuggling may be profitably examined using this market and regional development model to the extent that, like the Ecuadorian case, there is a clear commodification of the migration process and that most undocumented migrants from China do not end up in actual slavery, but rather are free to pursue their own work once the smuggling fees have been paid (Chin 1999).

By comparing two culturally and politically diverse cases of not simply smuggling activities, but two regions in which migration has become a lucrative business for many, we are better able to understand empirically and inductively those features common to more entrepreneurial forms of migrant commodification arising in specific sub-national regions or provinces. Our goal is to provide an analytical frame, not a normative one with language that can be directly used by policy-makers; we are not suggesting that enforcement agents start referring to those breaking state laws as “migration merchants.” Some of the questions that guide this comparison are the following: Do transnational smuggling organizations arise to meet a preexisting demand or do they create the demand? Why do such activities arise in some sub-national regions but not in others where wage differentials between sending and receiving countries are identical? Given the different sociocultural and political contexts of sending regions, which features of the social organization of human smuggling similar or different among them?

### **Migration Merchants: The Embedded Commodification of Migration**

Organized human smuggling is no longer a straightforward activity of helping migrants cross a single border for a few hundred dollars due to the greater distance of many sending regions. Ironically, it is a trade positively correlated with *greater* border controls, which reduce an *individual* migrant’s ability to “enter without inspection” without professional financial and logistical assistance. The undocumented or falsely documented from South America, Asia, Africa, and Eastern Europe--generally poorer migrants who do not qualify for tourist or student visas--typically have one thing in common: they are aided by individuals and organizations

profiting from the mobilization of people across great legal, physical, and cultural barriers. Only they have the resources to move people, documents, and money across such barriers; with a high demand and a low and risky supply prices for illicit migration services providing a clandestine passage or false documents and training have become quite lucrative.

These “migration merchants” (Kyle 2000), defined as anyone who profits from the migration of others regardless of legality, range from legal travel agencies to sophisticated transnational human smuggling rings operating in half a dozen countries. Historically, migration merchants also included shipping companies and labor recruiters during the Nineteenth and early Twentieth Centuries, though they profited mostly from legal immigration. Today, even modest “mom and pop” smuggling operations operating in remote areas of the world have the resources to get an unauthorized migrant across the US border, often by contracting out some of the more complicated activities to larger transnational rings. Furthermore, many services rendered by migration merchants can be paid for with a usurious loan from a loan shark, including the cost of transportation to the US. Such usurious financing is often part of the same smuggling operation and accounts for much of the profits. Surprisingly, most observers of human smuggling to date have relied heavily on criminal, rather than market, models. A notable exception is Salt and Stein’s excellent exploration of migration as a global business (1997). However, for empirical substance to their formal theorizing they rely heavily on the more coercive examples of trafficking women into Europe and on the logistics of the journey rather than the historical context of such illicit activities.

However, more work needs to be done on the multi-faceted dimensions of human smuggling, including a relaxation of the assumption that because bad things happen during the journey most migrants must be tricked or coerced into a smuggling scheme. While some are, in fact, tricked and exploited as slaves, we know that many migrants around the world seek out smugglers’ services (see Kyle and Koslowski 2001). In this regard, we must ask what independent effect does the commodification of migration have on someone's decision to migrate, especially under such legally, financially, and physically risky conditions? That is, once a market price of getting oneself into the US has been set locally (e.g. \$30,000-50,000 in the case of Fujian), how does that affect the actual migration magnitude and why? An obvious answer is that such efficient commodification of migration allows many to migrate who would otherwise not have been able to do so. For those who do not have the money, information, or education

needed to cross several borders undetected, they are now able to consider migration to the US as an option and can finance it with future earnings.

We suggest, however, that a significant evolution in migration commodification is the price mechanism itself whereby a complex clandestine journey is assigned a price or number that is, at once, real but abstract. In his *Philosophy of Money* (1978), Georg Simmel argued that it is not supply and demand that sets the value but the exchange itself, such that it develops an independent force; the value of an item or service doesn't come from its absolute scarcity but from what people are willing to sacrifice for it in exchange. Thus, when migration is paid for with future sacrifice even relatively poor peasants can consider "paying" thousands of dollars, thereby increasing the exchange value. More importantly, the effect of rising prices is to create more demand since, for locals, it implies that (1) increasing earnings abroad are possible and expected; (2) prices must be rising because migration is popular, and, hence, a successful strategy; and (3) the migrant is "worth" a large amount of money (much more than the sending state is willing to spend per capita on social welfare). By setting a consolidated price for a range of individual migration costs and services it is much easier for the would-be migrant to view it as an entrepreneurial investment with risks and expected benefits not unlike those associated with attaining a college degree. And, like higher education, many are willing to pay the price because it does not only mean greater future earnings but an adventure in personal growth and education resulting in a higher social status--within the home sending region.

We can hypothesize that people weigh the costs with the benefits, but that doesn't get us very far since the question is precisely how the "costs" and "benefits" are perceived locally when filtered through cultural values, social norms, and their conceptions and misconceptions of "America." This is an empirical question related to Max Weber's famous notion of "substantive rationality." A more close-range, historical analysis of the social organization of migrant trafficking reveals a complex process that may be transnational in scope but is built upon a foundation of local, often rural, ignorance and hierarchical social structures of class, ethnicity, and gender; we refer to this process as the embedded commodification of migration. However, by examining two disparate regions we can explore those regional characteristics that facilitated the commodification of migration into a professional service while recognizing that the historical development of migration as a business will also have regional variations.

## The Case of Azuay, Ecuador

Located approximately 300 kilometers south of Quito over mountainous terrain, the province of Azuay includes Ecuador's third largest city, Cuenca (pop. 330,000), and shares a common social and political history with the neighboring province of Cañar. During the colonial period, Azuay was unlike its neighboring regions in that it included unusually large numbers of Spaniards and mestizos compared to the indigenous population. It also avoided the extremes of the colonial systems of debt peonage. However, throughout the colonial period most rural peasants' mobility was severely restricted and regulated, such as the policy of "reducing" the population to *reducciones*, or bounded communities.

The principal change to the Azuayan region after independence from Spain in 1810 was economic rather than social or even political. In the mid-1800s, the new economic activity of weaving straw hats was introduced by local elites. Though the cottage industry of hat weaving was similar to that of cloth weaving, which had succumbed to cheap British imports, in its use of middlemen, the production and marketing process entailed a greater division of labor on a much larger scale with the participation of both men and women, young and old, each finding his or her production niche. The brokering system itself employs a hierarchy of buyers for the export houses located in the city of Cuenca, and independent brokers (known as "dogs"), who sell to the buyers after paying the weaver slightly less for the hat than what the buyer would have paid. The new hat trade got an enormous boost from the 1849 gold rush, in which those passing through Panama as a shortcut to California would buy one the extremely light and tightly woven straw hats made in Azuay; thus, "the Panama" got its name, which has stuck to this day. The hat continued to enjoy enormous popularity throughout the world, providing Azuay a unique and lucrative export for world markets.

Consequently, though still socially and physically isolated from other regions of Ecuador, the economy of nineteenth-century Azuay became increasingly linked to global markets: by 1910, at a time when most of the Ecuadorian Sierra was only exporting surplus agriculture to its neighbors, Cuenca was exporting straw hats to Panama, Jamaica, Mexico, New York, London, Hamburg, Cuba, Chile, Venezuela, Guatemala, Puerto Rico, and Paris (Domínguez 1991). By the 1900s, importers in New York City were the major buyers of Panama Hats, who, in turn, would export all over the world. At the height of the hat trade in the early 1940s, Domínguez

estimates that as many as 250,000 children and adults from the provinces of Azuay and Cañar were engaged in some activity directly related to the production and marketing of "Panama hats" (1991). The full impact of this early and nearly complete dependence on foreign trade, built on the exploitation of a rural labor force, controlled by ignorance and ideology, would be felt in 1947 when the hat trade began to rapidly decline.

A "long decade" of economic depression in Azuay began with the precipitous drop in Panama hat exports in 1947 and its continuous decline every year until the mid-1960s. Cuenca's principal importer of Panama hats, the United States, began to import cheaper "straw" hats from Asia after World War II. Asian countries enjoyed a lower import tariff as part of post-war reconstruction and used a more mechanized, factory method of producing a cheaper paper hat resembling the "Panama," though without its flexibility and durability (Domínguez 1991). Attempts to modernize Azuay's hat industry by creating more efficient, centralized "factories," which could better control the production process and eliminate the usurious middlemen proved difficult; the dispersed, independent weavers produced hats according to a time schedule set by agricultural, familial, and religious duties. Even today, after forty years of the Asian revolution that brought about the local decline, hat production and its commercialization are nearly identical to technology used in the 1840s.

The impact of the hat industry's decline on Azuay and Cañar was immediate and severe, initiating a quiet revolution of economic disarticulation and social disintegration. For many members of the urban elite not directly connected to the hat trade, any financial losses were compensated by their ability to exploit the new vulnerability of the rural and urban labor force. It was, instead, those diverse groups engaged in some activity related to the hat trade (which at its height included over a quarter of the population) that had to seek external remedies to the immediate economic crisis they were experiencing. While the local and national elite did little to respond effectively to the Azuayan crisis of the 1950s, two groups--the "white-mestizo" exporters and the rural peasant-weavers--began two different types of migration which, together, would set the stage for a mass exodus in the 1980s and 1990s.

It is during the 1950s that the first Cuencanos arrived in New York City, mostly young men of wealthy white and mestizo families directly connected to urban hat export houses. They were looking for ways to capitalize financially on their long-standing connections with U.S. importers--and for adventure (Astudillo and Cordero 1990). It is also during the late 1950s that

regular jet airline service connected Cuenca to New York City via Guayaquil: it was now just as easy for a Cuencano to travel to New York City as to Quito, Ecuador's capital.

Thus, the principal antecedent to the current phenomenon of mass international migration based on the selling of one's labor, was the decline in the Panama hat trade after World War-II. In just ten years, the modest international migrations of the 1970s turned into a mass exodus, placing Ecuador "on the map" of global migration flows. This sharp increase in international migration, especially from rural, isolated areas, can only be explained by the reemergence of a centuries-old, institution in the region--the usurious middleman, who profits from the economic and political space afforded by a complacent elite and a naive peasantry; in this case, an integrated network of *tramitadores*, or "facilitators," who provide the range of legal and illegal services needed to make a clandestine trip to the United States. Instead of mediating the hat procurement for export houses as in the hat trade, *tramitadores* work, directly or indirectly, for unscrupulous travel agencies, which are themselves participants in larger formal and underground networks of migration merchants.

Although these facilitating networks are international in scope, they begin with a *tramitador's* sales pitch to the would-be migrant in his or her home village, not unlike the role played by the *perros* in the straw hat trade. The *tramitador* offers to arrange all of the national documents needed to leave Ecuador, visas for intermediary countries, all of the physical travel arrangements, and, depending on the type of trip, a falsified U.S. visa or passport. To pay for all of these services, which now run \$6-10,000 dollars, an amount even the wealthiest of Ecuadorians would balk at, the *tramitador* arranges to have the money lent to the ingenuous peasant by a *chulquero* (loan shark), at usurious interest rates of 10-12 percent, compounded *monthly*, with all land, animals, and possessions of the migrant held as collateral. In addition, numerous local banks and money exchange houses provide the needed financial infrastructure and legal cover for such operations.

Local community-based networks of *tramitadores* (document fixers and smugglers) and *chulqueros* (loan sharks), typically, are closely related by kinship, relying on social ties with a high degree of trust and loyalty, thus allowing for clandestine capitalism to operate with fewer costs (both monetary and psychological) thus maintaining the financial and legal security of the covert economic activity. For example, in one medium-sized Azuayan town with high levels of international migration, all of the money-lenders are members of just five families, and each of



these families is further interlocked through marital ties. As an indication of both the high levels of informal financial capital in circulation and the risks of malfeasance inherent in these types of underground economic relations, according to a judge in this same town, informal money-lenders *lost* over \$600,000 within a six month period to migrant debtors who have simply disappeared after taking several large loans.

Money-lending as an economic institution with a set of rules and customs, has been an historical feature of the region even before the rural economy was completely monetized. The vicissitudes of small-scale and subsistence farming among the peasantry, along with the periodic burden of financing an annual religious festival, have traditionally required the services of money-lenders, who are either co-ethnic villagers or white-mestizo outsiders and whose rates are officially controlled by the state. For example, in times of crop failure, a loan enabled households not only to buy the few necessary household goods but, most importantly, continue the production cycle, which could include temporary coastal migrations and handicraft production.

With corrupt local officials and a network of professional forgers, the necessary local and national documents are bought by the *tramitador*. Often the forger's work is so good that U.S. embassy personnel in Quito cannot figure out how they can circumvent infrared detectors and laminate safeguards developed by the 3M company (personal communication). Next, working with legitimate travel agents, the *tramitador* makes the travel arrangements, which fall broadly into two categories: (a) the direct route to New York City, using a "borrowed" passport or forged visa, which also entails a significant amount of cultural coaching on how to look and act like a "*residente*"; or (b) the tortuous overland route that includes a sophisticated network of Central American and Mexican contacts, "safe houses," and "*coyotes*" (those who actually lead the migrant across the Rio Grande). Since the Mexican government has made attaining a visa to its country more difficult, sometimes *coyotes* are also used to get into Mexico through a Guatemalan farm or by boat.

At every step of the way, from the financing of the trip in Ecuador to the dependence on a nefarious international network spanning half-a-dozen countries, the migrant risks being swindled, jailed, deported, robbed, or violently abused, including rape and murder. Not surprisingly, the main task of the *tramitador* is to gain the confidence, whether founded or unfounded, of the potential "client." As in all confidence games, the con rests on the ability of

the con man to play on preexisting social norms and stereotypes that produce unquestioning trust or even deference.

The particular configuration of financial and human resources brought to bear by each migrant on the problem of getting him or her across a border is often as unique as the Azuayan villages and barrios. The financing of the trip usually involves a combination of personal savings, free loans by relatives, interest loans by friends, and usurious loans by *chulqueros*.

Kin- and community-based migration networks make use of the information and resources circulating within them, thereby making migration paths fairly consistent within a given social network. In this way, the path taken by a successful migrant pioneer gets repeated and revised within his or her network. Sometimes this evolutionary process may induce a pioneer, who has already made several trips and may be a *residente*, or "green-card" holder, to become an in-network *tramitador*, *coyote*, or *chulquero* whose services are provided for a lower fee or even free of cost (though reciprocity is assumed). Conversely, it is also common for return migrants to lend money to regional intermediaries (of the *perro* mold), who, in turn, lend at higher rates to professional *chulqueros*, who, in turn, lend to the new migrant at the highest rate; thus forming a pyramid scheme that requires a constant influx of new migrants to keep capital circulating to the top.

To summarize, the merchant export elite engineered the introduction of straw hat production in the mid-1800s which used the same usurious structure of middlemen found during the previous cloth trade. The region was again thrown into an economic crisis when the straw hat trade collapsed in the 1950s due to industrialized Asian competition. This Panama hat trail led directly to New York City, the primary importer of straw hats. Just like the exports that had preceded it, the current export of people from rural areas near Cuenca to New York City is built on the same structures of usurious middlemen who now provide the capital, false documents, and international contacts needed to migrate. These local migration merchants are further connected to a larger process of migration commodification in which Mexico's underground organization plays a crucial role. In this sense, undocumented migration flows from Ecuador and Mexico do not represent completely independent cases. However, high levels of trust rather than heavy-handed enforcement strategies using violence characterize most migrant smuggling schemes.

During the 1990s, the ability for smugglers to instill trust with migrants that they could fulfill their contractual obligations was contrasted by the sharp deterioration of trust in local and

national governments for economic development and political reform. By 2000, Ecuador held the dubious distinction of the Latin American country with the highest inflation, record levels of unemployment, and a banking system in chaos after a scandal in which officials absconded with millions of dollars. Natural disasters added a further insult to injury. There have been five presidents in five years, with the latest one installed after a military coup following a national uprising; lasting only three days, the ruling junta returned the reigns of power over to the former vice-president. President Gustavo Naboia has continued the controversial financial strategies which brought about the unrest, including making the U.S. dollar the official currency of Ecuador.

Though we do not have original research regarding the impact of these recent trends and events on the levels and organization of clandestine migration from Ecuador, news reports tell of an large “exodus” (“As Crises Converge on Ecuador, an Exodus,” 13 July 2000, Los Angeles Times, p. A13). However, tellingly, anecdotal evidence within such reports still focus on the province of Azuay, which may point to the continuing sub-national character of this mass emigration rather than a national exodus. One aspect that continues to change in response to shifting enforcement patterns among transit and destination countries (primarily the U.S.) is the methods used to smuggle migrants. Interestingly, taking a page from the Chinese smugglers’ playbook, Ecuadorian smugglers have turned to using ships to ferry migrants to Guatemala and Mexico where they are off-loaded to continue the journey overland. In June, 2000, the U.S. Coast Guard intercepted 186 Ecuadorian migrants in international Pacific waters; that was the ninth such vessel caught since March, 1999 (*ibid.*), including some that may have ended in tragedy. For example, on February 9, 2000, eighty-four would-be illegal migrants from Ecuador were rescued off the coast of Guatemala after their boat was discovered broken down in high seas (“U.S. Coast Guard rescues Ecuadorans off Guatemala. As the L.A. Times report observes, “Ecuador has become a textbook example of the scenarios that worry diplomats and immigration officials . . . . Beset by uncertainty, this once tranquil South American country has turned into a red-alert origin point for accelerating illegal immigration. . . . The volume and sophistication of seagoing smuggling here rival Chinese and Caribbean operations” (*op cit.*). Clearly, the U.S.-Mexico border enforcement and anti-smuggling policies have done little to deter a substantial flow of illegal migrants from Ecuador. As these reports make clear, Ecuadorian agencies lack both the political will and financial resources to be effective in any migrant deterrence strategy:

most vessels caught by Ecuadorian authorities are simply returned to their owners. However, without further investigation in such traditional sending regions, such as the province of Azuay, we can only assume that the basic foundation of greater trust in those promising a better life abroad continues to outweigh by a large margin faith in Ecuador's leaders to bring about political and economic stability, let alone prosperity.

### **The Case of Fujian, China**

Fujian Province is located in the Southeast coast of China, the closest province to Taiwan across the Taiwan Strait, and had a population of 31 million in 1993. Similar to the Andean topography of Azuay, fully eighty percent of the province is covered by mountains (CMEC 1993). Unlike land-locked Azuay, however, because Fujian is a coastal province and its fishing industry has always been a very important part of its economy and employment. Also, being in the southeastern part of China, Fujian is close to Southeast Asian countries such as Singapore, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Indonesia.

European colonials laid the foundation of Chinese emigration by importing millions of coolies from China (Fujian and Guangdong in particular) to work in their tropical plantations and tin-mines (Alexander 1973). According to Zhu (1991), in 1519, the Portuguese captured a number of Chinese and sent them to Portuguese colonies in Southeast Asia. Dutch and Spaniards also captured Chinese labor. In 1684, a customs house was set up in Xiamen (in Fujian Province) and the port thrived because of the great number of people migrating abroad (Zhu 1991). However, the official emigration policy of the Qing government refused to sanction the emigration of Chinese people, though people from Fujian and Guangdong continued to migrate abroad and seek fortunes outside China.

However, a truly large exodus of Fujianese began after the Opium War, which China lost to Great Britain. As part of the war settlement, China signed the Treaty of Nanjing on August 29, 1842 (Spence 1991). Article 2 of the Treaty of Nanjing permits the opening of five Chinese port cities-Canton (Guangzhou), Fuzhou, Xiamen, Ningbo, and Shanghai to residence by British subjects and their families. Two of the port cities--Fuzhou and Xiamen are located in Fujian. Following the British, Americans and French also negotiated similar treaties with Qing China with similar privileges for Americans and French.

The signing of these treaties greatly facilitated the exodus of Chinese laborers (Pan 1990). This was also a time in which the industrial revolution was in high gear and the British abolished the international slave trade thus requiring the search for alternative cheap labor for its colonies. In the United States, the discovery of gold in California provided a stimulus for Chinese to emigrate (Sung 1967; Zhou 1991).

Among the push factors for emigration was China's unprecedented population growth during late Ming and mid-Qing period. The best estimates suggest that in 1685, China had a population of 100 million. By 1790, in a matter of about 100 years, China's population reached 301 million--an increase of 200% (Ho 1959; Spence 1991). The rapid growth of China's population created enormous pressure on the economy and infrastructure, throwing many people into poverty. This is especially the case for Fujian where about 80% of its geographical area is covered by mountains. Similar to Azuay, rich merchants and landlords held large tracts of land, which deprived many peasants of their means of livelihood (Zhu 1991). Finally, the Taiping Rebellion (1850-64) which attempted to overthrow the Qing government also created political and economic instability for Chinese society, especially the southern region.

Under these historical circumstances, a large exodus of mostly contract laborers or debtor laborers began. The latter refers to people who went abroad without paying travel expenses upon the condition that they paid their debt. Regardless of their status as laborers, many Chinese were actually treated as *de facto* slaves. Many have argued that this "coolie trade," or "swine trade," is one of the most disturbing periods in Chinese history (Ye 1995; Zhu 1991).

From 1845-1874, Fujian's level of emigration from Xiamen port was modest. Emigration began to increase in 1875 with 16,683 leaving Fujian in that year and reached its peak during the first two decades of the 20th century. In 1915, for example, as many as 126,000 migrated from Fujian, mostly rural peasants. There seems to be a consensus among scholars that the majority of these emigrants went to Southeast Asia and others went to the United States, Australia, and New Zealand.

Chinese emigration was so massive that it changed the demography of many Southeast Asian countries and other countries as well (Poston et al. 1994). In the Philippines, for instance, fully 80 percent of the Chinese are of Fujian origin. Similarly among Chinese populations in Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, and Burma, the Fujianese also account for significant proportions. Many of the Chinese in Southeast Asian countries are very successful and have

been referred to as the "Jews of the East" (Alexander 1973). The overseas Chinese also play an important role in economic development of China by sending remittances back home and also by contributing money to educational institutions in China.

Due to these earlier migration flows from Fujian, many villages are labeled "overseas Chinese villages" (*qiao xiang*). The intensive network between Fujian's *qiao xiang* and overseas Chinese with Fujian origin is shared by many Fujianese. It is common for Fujianese to have relatives living abroad. Emigration is deeply rooted in Fujian's cultural heritage. This tradition, however, of emigration came to a halt during the three decades before 1978 under strong state controls on mobility.

In recent years, New York City's Chinatown has witnessed a large flow of immigrants from China's Fujian Province. Walking down the streets of East Broadway and Eldridge in New York's Chinatown, one sees many shops, restaurants, and employment agencies run by Fujianese. The language spoken in the neighborhood is Fuzhou a dialect, that is the language for people who are from Fuzhou area of Fujian province in China. Kwong (1996) recently argued it is impossible to study Chinatown without careful study of the Fujianese. The New York Times reporter Jane Lii indicated that the "new blood" of Fujianese in Chinatown began to play more and more important role in the community and sometimes challenges the old timers who are from Canton and Taiwan (Lii, 1997). A more recent show-up of Fujianese influence was the parade of celebration of Hong Kong's return to China on June 30, 1997, in Chinatown. It was largely organized by pro-China Fujianese organizations such as United Fujianese Association, and United Chinese Associations of New York, and Fukien-American Association. During the parade, we observed that lots of floats and banners bear the names of major Fujianese immigrant-sending communities, among them Fuqing, Changle, Lianjiang, and Fuzou. Furthermore, the erection of a bronze statue in Chinatown of Lin Ze Xu, a 19th century official from Fujian who helped ignite the Opium War by just saying no to opium and to Britain, further testifies Fujianese's strong presence in New York (Chen, 1997). Though it is impossible to get hard number on the exact size of current Fujianese population, many of them undocumented, conservative estimates suggest some 200,000 illegal immigrants from Fujian were brought to the U.S. in the last 15 years or so (Kwong, 1997, p.9).<sup>1</sup>

The emergence of Fujianese community in New York did not happen overnight. Indeed, since the 1970s immigration from Fujian has began to increase and exploded in the late 1980s

and 1990s. Given the significant income and wage differentials there are clearly motivations for Fujianese to migrate to the United States. One thing is clear, however, economic rationale is not the sole factor to explain the rise of emigration from Fujian. In fact, the per capita income in rural Fujian households rose to the 8<sup>th</sup> place (out of 30 provinces) in 1992, compared to the 12<sup>th</sup> place in 1978 (SSB, 1979, 1993). Despite the strong motivation many Fujianese possess, they still cannot make the journey on their own. There are many players in this process: snake heads (smugglers) who organize the whole smuggling process; recruiters (also known as “Little Snake-head”) in the migrant-sending communities; corrupt Chinese officials who participate in or facilitate the operation; contacts in many transit countries who arrange for chartered flights to the U.S. or are subcontracted to help across U.S. border; enforcers in New York whose task is to threaten and torture illegal migrants until they pay their debt; and finally the snake people (illegal migrants themselves) who usually endure long journeys and harsh working conditions once in the U.S.<sup>2</sup> The smuggling of undocumented Fujianese is a very complex and difficult operation and it will not succeed without an extremely careful plan and collaboration around the globe.

Smugglers of Chinese immigrants must be more sophisticated than coyotes who help Mexicans cross the U.S.-Mexico border (though their operations have also increased in sophistication). Chinese smuggling operations are global in scope and have access to most advanced technology for communication. Their passport and visa factories have the capacity to make fake passports of any country, make fake visas to the U.S., and any other documents as needed. The technology of making fake documents seem to spread across China. On a recent visit to a neighborhood near a major Chinese university in Beijing, we were approached by several people who offered to sell a valid Chinese passport for \$5,000. They also promised to make other documents such as Chinese citizen resident card if requested. In addition, snake heads obtain the most up-to-date political, law enforcement, and climatic information regarding the best possible routes for smuggling “snake people.”

Most migrants get information about recruiters through the word of mouth. In some cases, recruiters are actively looking for potential candidates (Chin, 1999). To make it less threatening, snakeheads often hire women (sometimes these women are snake heads themselves) with children to go around the neighborhood to contact for potential candidates. As in the case of Azuay, potential migrants also use kin and community based networks to connect to smugglers with "good" reputation and high success rate.

Experts in the field do not seem to agree as to where is the center of today's smuggling organization. While Kwong (1997) and Meyers (1997) believe that the masterminds of smuggling organizations are located in Taiwan, Chin emphasizes the transnational nature of smuggling organizations, whose activities encompass the globe. A recent big news in New York's Chinatown is the arrest of Big Sister Ping in Hong Kong, a snakehead from Tingjiang of Fujian province. Big Sister Ping came to New York first as an illegal herself and later started her own small variety shop. Soon she discovered a big business opportunity, helping fellow Fujianese to come to the United States. She allegedly helped many Fujianese come to the United States and was involved in the arrangement of "Golden Venture" smuggling ship in which 10 people died (Barnes, 2000). She is expected to be brought to New York for trial.

An informant from one of the major migrant-sending communities, Changle, told Chin about her smuggler who is a lady from Taiwan in her 40s. According to this informant, this Taiwanese female smuggler frequently travels to the Fuzhou area and this smuggler arranged to have this informant smuggled to the United States by sea. It should be noted that there are some advantages for Taiwanese to carry out the trade of smuggling Fujianese to the U.S. Other than the fact that Taiwan and Fujian are geographically very close to each other, just across the Taiwan Strait, there is a cultural linkage between Fujian and Taiwan. Many people in Taiwan are the descendents of Fujianese who migrated to Taiwan years ago in the Chinese history. They share similar dialect and cultural traditions. This historical-cultural linkage facilitates communication and builds a sense of trust, something particularly needed for venturing to a place thousands of miles away.

Regarding the methods of illegal migrant exporters, there are several strategies, or "channels," through which snake people are smuggled into the U.S. The first channel is to use either genuine or forged documents which allow one to land directly at airports in the United States (such as JFK airport). They would first buy fake Taiwanese, Japanese, Singapore, Malaysian or South Korean passports to apply for U.S. visas as citizen of these countries. Often arranged by travel agencies in the U.S. and China, snake people also mingle with different delegations from China. The only difference is that snake people will simply disappear upon arrival at the destination. Often they are picked up by the smugglers and assigned work in garment and restaurant industries in the New York metro area. The used passports and visas sometimes are recycled for further use (Chin, 1999). However, the Chinese customs officials



can occasionally detect illegal migrants before they sneak out. On December 27, 1997, eight Fujianese were about to board Air China Flight 981 from Shanghai to New York's JFK airport. Chinese customs inspector Ms. Chen Haiyin noted that all 8 Fujianese hold Chinese passports and U.S. immigration visas. These visas, however, looked suspicious and Ms. Chen detained these Fujianese for further inspection of the documents. It turned out that all 8 visas are forged (Xinmin Evening News, 1997).

Another variation of this channel is to take advantage of the U.S. transit without visa (TWOV) privilege as documented by Meyers (1997). For example, snake people could be on a flight from Hong Kong to Antigua with connection in Miami. Once arrive in Miami, snake people can sneak out and get in contact with smugglers waiting for them at the airport (Meyers, 1997).

The second channel requires snake people pass through transit countries before reaching the United States. These transit countries spread across the globe. Some snake people travel on foot and by bus from China's Yunnan province (southwestern China) to Thailand and other Southeast Asian countries and take flights from there to the U.S. (Liu, 1996; Myers, 1997). "Between eastern and western processing and holding centers, more than 43 countries played a transit role in airborne and seaborne smuggling" (Myers, 1997, p.117). Chin's study suggests Bangkok play an extremely important role in this process since most of smuggled migrants stay in Bangkok for a certain period of time before going to another transit country (Chin, 1999). Naturally, Mexico is a major transit country for snake people. Once they arrive in Mexico, the local subcontractors will take them to cross the U.S.-Mexican border.

Another channel is how the ill-fated Golden Venture ship arrived in the U.S., through the sea. Snake heads often use crumbling freighters or fishing vessels owned by Taiwanese (Liu, 1996). A 1996 US Coast Guard report estimates the number of Chinese crossing the Pacific by boat to 400-600 a month (Kwong, 1997). As documented by Chin (p. 157, 1996), between 1991 and 1993, thirty-two ships with a total of 5,300 Chinese were found in the waters of Japan, Taiwan, Indonesia, Australia, Singapore, Hawaii, Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, and the United States. In sum, whatever channels snake people use to enter the United States, it is very clear that they cannot make it to the United States without the involvement of snake heads.

Among the three channels, the more common ways of smuggling immigrants to the U.S. were the first and second channels. This is confirmed by Chin's recent study (Chin, 1999).

Among the 298 Fujianese Chin interviewed, 47% entered the U.S. by air, 41% entered the U.S. by land, and only about 12% entered the U.S. by sea (Chin, 1999).

By 2000—after several years of increased US enforcement activity and legal penalties—while the three channels of smuggling continue to be used, some new patterns of smuggling operations seem to emerge in the last three years or so. The first characteristic of this recent trend is to use diverse kinds of methods to smuggle migrants to maximize the possibility of success, these include more relying on airplane and cargo ships. Although cargo ships are thought to be safer and more comfortable than crumbling freighters or fishing vessels that were used in smuggling operation in earlier years, accidents do happen. On January 12, 2000, the New York Times reported that 15 men from Fujian were found in the giant freighter called the Cape May in Seattle, Washington. Three bodies of dead men were also found inside the cargo container (Verhovek, 2000). These illegal Chinese migrants, survived or dead, just finished a 15-day journey inside the cargo container from Hong Kong to Seattle. A week earlier, 30 stowaways on cargo ships were found in Long Beach, California (Whitaker, 2000). This new trend is not limited to the United States, but happened in Canada and European countries as well. Perhaps the most tragic event in the history of human smuggling occurred in June 2000. A total of 58 Fujianese migrants are found dead of suffocation in a locked truck in the British port city of Dover (Hoge, 2000). More recently in Hong Kong, carbon monoxide detectors uncovered 26 would-be stowaways from Fujian (Rosenthal, 2000). This series of episodes of stowaways in containers on cargo ships represents a new strategy of smuggling Chinese immigrants to the United States.

This change in smuggling strategy perhaps reflects several things. Recently, the United States has stepped out coast guard patrol efforts to intercept ships carrying undocumented Chinese migrants. The idea is to intercept the ships before their approaching to the United States and return them to China before anyone can claim asylum. Because of this, landing on the U.S. territory by the sea may be increasingly difficult. At the same time, the Chinese government began to implement a tough policy to punish migrants who are deported to China. In October 1999, the Chinese government announced a new law which allows the government to put illegal migrants in prison for one year plus heavy fine (AMN, 2000). China's earlier policy mainly aimed to punish the smugglers. Migrants were seen as victims and therefore were subject to rather lenient punishment. In an interview with a reporter recently, Chin (2000) suggested that

one of the reasons for the increasing reliance on direct flight to the U.S. is the fact that migrants who arrived in earlier years on fishing vessels had terrifying experience and they do not want their relatives or friends to go through the same experience again (World Journal, 2000a).

The second characteristic of recent trend of human smuggling is that more and more women and under aged individuals are involved. One reason is family reunification. It is usually the case that young men in the households migrate first. After they have been working in New York for a few years and paid the debt, they usually want to bring their family members to the United States. The quickest way to do so is to have their family members smuggled into the United States. Our interviews with some of the recently arrived women and under aged migrants from Fujian suggest that immigration officials seem to be more sympathetic to them than to adult men. These women often talk about their traumatic experiences of living with husbands absent: difficulty of raising children on their own and sometime sexual harassment from village cadres. The case with young children also deserve attention. These children seem to be taken care of well in INS detention center in the United States and they can even take some English lessons while in detention center. In addition, because of their age, they will not be punished even if they are deported back to China (World Journal, 2000b).

The third characteristic of the new trend is more “creative” use of political asylum as a tool for permanent settlement in the United States. One of the most frequently used cause for political asylum for Fujianese migrant is China’s “One Child Policy.” Since the late 1970s, religion has been revitalized in many parts of Fujian. Some migrants also claim lack of religious freedom for political asylum (Liang, forthcoming). In addition to China’s “One Child Policy” and religious freedom, some also claim that they are gay and they face discrimination in China. China’s political climate is also a barometer of cause of political asylum for Fujianese migrants. Recently, Fujianese migrants began to claim that they are persecuted by the Chinese government because they practice Falun Gong, a blend of traditional slow-motion exercises, ancient Eastern philosophies, and the beliefs of its founder Li Hongzhi, who now lives in New York City (Rothenthal, 2000a). Declared by the Chinese government as a evil cult and members are prohibited from practicing together, although some individuals still practice individually, mostly at home. It should be noted that most the political asylum cases are fraudulent. In one case, a Fujianese migrant claimed that he was persecuted because he practiced Falun Gong in China. The immigration judge actually called his wife to confirm this. It turned out that his wife had no

knowledge about her husband ever practiced Falun Gong in Fujian.

In sum, seven years after the “Golden Venture” fiasco, illegal migration from Fujian continues to draw world-wide attention. Despite law enforcement officials in both the United States and China stepped out their efforts to stop the flow of illegal migration, the tide of illegal migration does not seem to abate. To be sure, there are things that have changed. One is the smuggling fee has nearly doubled from \$28,000 in the early 1990 to current price of nearly \$60,000. Another thing that is also changing is that smugglers constantly change strategies and tactics in order to minimize the risk of detection and maximize the chance of success. Given such a high profit margin, it is without any doubt that the migration merchants-snake heads will make every effort to continue this operation.

### **Comparing Azuay and Fujian**

In comparing Azuay and Fujian, the similarities of these two provinces in their development of a migrant export industry is all the more striking given the sociodemographic, cultural, and political differences of the two regions. Fujian is a much more populous coastal province than Azuay, experiencing high levels of internal immigration itself from interior provinces. The increasing flow of Fujianese immigrants is the result of interplay of many complex factors: China's transition to a market oriented economy since late 1970s and its relaxed emigration policy has certainly contributed to an increased exodus. Similarly, the politics of Chinese immigration to the United States are very different than that of Ecuadorian immigration; most Chinese during the 1990s were able to take advantage of relatively advantageous and ever-changing asylum policies and procedures, which, while not always granting asylum, nevertheless made it much less likely that a Fujianese illegal migrant would be immediately sent home compared to their Ecuadorian counterparts.

That said, the features common to these two regions are remarkable: they are both sub-national regions, long characterized by weak political control and dynamic economic growth, specializing before emigration in legal and illegal exports. Fujian was the leader in the opium trade; Azuay specialized in "Panama Hats." Furthermore, distinctive dialects and dress can be found in Fujian and Azuay in relation to their respective national societies. Neither province is the poorest among other sub-national provinces. Though Azuay and Fujian are culturally distinct, both regions have been outward-looking for well over a century, though they have

remained predominantly rural. Azuay's and Fujian's economic dynamism in earlier periods led to significant demographic growth which both regions have been unable to absorb economically. These mountainous regions have also remained marginal to the national sphere of power and influence. The failure of grand development schemes and export commodities is balanced by the enduring "entrepreneurial" bent of many rural inhabitants in both regions.

Given these intriguing historical analogues between Azuay and Fujian, how does the inception and organization of human smuggling in each region compare? To state the obvious, it is nearly impossible for a migrant from either rural Ecuador or China to cross great distances, and often several borders, to enter the US clandestinely without a highly organized strategy and the various kinds of resources that entails. The primary export from both Azuay and Fujian is its own citizens; such massive undocumented migrations would not be possible without a range of legitimate and underground migration merchants offering "packages" similar to those of travel agencies. Some of the smuggling routes used by Fujianese and Azuayans overlap, indicating a more systemic phenomenon rather than two completely independent cases. In Azuay, contemporary migration is facilitated by a structure similar to the cottage industry of hat weaving which dominated the region for the century preceding transnational migration. Most migrants are lent the money with usurious interest rates to pay for professional smugglers, often lent to them by the smugglers themselves or their collaborators. While the Fujian case of human smuggling is roughly similar to the Azuayan case, the entire extended family of the Fujianese migrant is more likely to play a direct and important role in the smuggling process through burdensome financial commitments. Enforcement of malfeasance not only relies on pressure from social networks but also through more violent means.

Apart from the roughly similar outward social organization of migration merchants and their migrant clients, a more fundamental characteristic found in both regions is the lack of trust in the local and national governments—especially high levels of corruption—and the willingness to trust in a dream abroad and the people who would help them realize that dream. In contrast, a great deal of trust typically exists among migrants and smugglers and within smuggling operations. Smugglers are often quite open about their activities in the sending communities. The need for trust in the migration merchants, especially those to whom a migrant is entrusting his life and liberty is obvious; less obvious, is a need for those engaged in border-line or serious crimes to be able to trust those they smuggle. Enforcement of such things as debt collection

through violence is both expensive and counter-productive for those who view migration services as a business opportunity. In the case of Azuay, for example, the use of violence is quite rare—instead, the penalty for renegeing on a loan is never being able to return to one’s home community. While Fujianese migrants can expect the real threat of violence by those hired as “enforcers,” most pay the loan either immediately or soon after arrival (Chin 1999). Much of the time, in both cases, the smuggler-migrant relationship is not nearly as coldly contractual as it may seem since many are family relatives, friends, or co-villagers.

## **Conclusion**

While all clandestine or falsely documented border crossers are criminalized by receiving societies, the reality of the social organization of the global trade in migrants, including a renewed commodification of humans, suggests implications for a rethinking of migration enforcement policies and human rights implications. Deductively, we may be led to conclude that large criminal organizations must be behind such complex and geographically dispersed operations. However, inductive research tends not to bear out this assumption for two reasons: first, the actions and actors involved in a human smuggling are not uniformly criminal at all stages of the process, with a great deal of diversity in the number and strategies of smuggling operations; second, the size and nature of migrant export schemes is limited by a important social, not technical or legal dimensions—the need for trust between migrants and smugglers and within migrant smuggling schemes.

Unlike abstract criminal approaches to this phenomena, we view the general commodification of migration as being driven by both social and economic forces intimately embedded in regional historical developments and ethnic and gender stratifications. The centrality of ethnic boundaries to this process reduces the specter of larger and more powerful smuggling organizations spreading across the social landscape of the disillusioned and the dispossessed; we hypothesize that while group boundaries facilitate such activities through high levels of trust and enforcement, they also hinder unfettered expansion. When expansion by organizations to other regions does occur it is not random but rather requires similar conditions of distinctive group identity, weak central government controls, and broker capitalism. To be sure, there is still much global potential for professional migration services, especially from regions undergoing transitions to a full market economy.

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## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> According to Fukien American Association in New York, there are 150,000 natives of the Changle county alone living in the New York metro area (cited in Hood (1997), p.91).

<sup>2</sup> "Ren she" literally translates "people snake" and "she tou" means "snake heads." According to Xin (p. 131, 1993), these terms were first used by people from Guangdong who initiated the process of undocumented migration to the United States. Legend has it that if one transports a single snake, it will likely die, while many snakes transported together will survive the journey.