

Human Cargo

Report >
China

Human smuggling organizations are currently held responsible for the transport of refugees, bounty hunters, and other migrants to the West. The Dutch Public Prosecutor's Office works on the assumption that the movement of asylum seekers to the Netherlands is to a large extent 'regulated' by the activities of human smugglers. Although the nationalities of both the smugglers and the people transported vary greatly, as do the methods used, it is generally assumed by both the public and criminologists that the pursuit of profit is an important, and probably the most important, motive for human smuggling organizations. A turnover of billions of euros worldwide is attributed to these organizations.

By Melvin Soudijn

Within the spectrum of human smuggling, the smuggling of Chinese nationals provokes a lot of interest, not only among the media, but also in the world of international investigation. There are various possible reasons for this. In the first place, a series of well-publicized incidents have caused the commotion. There is virtually no study, investigation or publication concerning human smuggling from China which does not refer to the Golden Venture incident of 1993 and/or the Dover tragedy of 2000, two extremely dramatic events involving Chinese victims. Furthermore, human smuggling from China, whether rightly or wrongly, is generally believed to present several unique characteristics. The sums of money involved are higher than those paid by any other nationality, abuses, such as slavery, exploitation, and prostitution is rife, the level of organization is extremely high and there (presumably) is associated crime involved (directed by Triads). Finally, in the West there seems to be a fascination for, and simultaneously a fear of, the exotic. To this one could add the enormity of China's population, presenting a huge potential market for smuggling, and the many references in publications on Chinese communities to a 'culture of secrecy'. All this leads to the impression that the authorities cannot seem to get a grip on the community.

Human smuggling from China is

not a recent phenomenon. In his study *Chineesche immigranten in Nederland* (Chinese Immigrants in the Netherlands), published in 1936, F. van Heek notes that various countries have drawn up immigration laws to halt Chinese migration. As a result, attempts were made (and this is still the case today) to circumvent these immigration laws, and human smuggling thrived. Van Heek would not state exactly how many people came into the Netherlands as stowaways, but he suspected that the numbers were very large. Rotterdam, 'as an important shipping centre [...], and with its hundreds of Chinese inhabitants [would constitute] an ideal temporary refuge from which the Chinese emigrant could try to reach the place where he now wishes to live' (p. 82) (translation: MS).

Van Heek also discusses the ways in which these people enter the Netherlands. They may enter with a valid passport, by ship's discharge, as a stowaway, as a deserter from a ship, or clandestinely over a land border. The method of stowing away was not, however, wholly without its dangers. For example, people hid in empty water-tanks or boilers, where the temperature could soar if the ship was sailing in the tropics. This sometimes led to fatalities (p. 82).

Furthermore, Van Heek notes that in the past, staff from the Dutch consulates sometimes issued visas too easily, without ascertaining whether the traveller had sufficient means of sup-

port. Several pedlars from Zhejiang, for instance, had indeed entered the Netherlands with valid passports, but ones to which they were not actually entitled. 'In Europe, too, the Chinese happily make use of such consular benevolence. They let one another know where an "easy" consul is stationed, and send their friends who live in the country in question to the consulate to apply for a visa. The consulate sometimes neglects carefully comparing the passport-photo with the applicant's face, and the visa is issued. The applicant sends it back to his friend who wishes to travel to the Netherlands, and soon afterwards our yellow brother enters our country in a completely legal way' (p. 90) (translation: MS).

In their research report *Chinese ouderen in Amsterdam: verslag van een onderzoek naar de levenssituatie van Chinese ouderen in Amsterdam* (Elderly Chinese people in Amsterdam: research report on the living conditions of elderly Chinese people in Amsterdam), Sciortino et al. discuss the case of a Chinese man, 83 years old in 1993, who recalls how he was persuaded by a former neighbour to come to Europe in 1936 (p. 12). He had to pay what was then the enormous sum of 300 Chinese guilders for the journey. He eventually set out with four others from his village. His wife and young son remained behind. He travelled to Marseilles on a German cargo ship and secretly went ashore. From there he travelled overland to Germany and then to the Netherlands.

Today, would we view the above cases as the result of criminal human smuggling organizations? The answer is probably 'yes'. My doctoral research aims to clarify the structures underlying human smuggling. When should one view 'a little bit of help from your friends' as smuggling? That leads me to the question of what 'smuggling' or 'illegal migration' really is, and whether everything is as closely organized as is generally supposed. The inclusion of a historical perspective might provide us with a better understanding. ◀

References

- Heek, F. van, *Chineesche immigranten in Nederland*, Amsterdam: J. Emmering's Uitgevers (1936).
- Sciortino, R.M.E., A. Wessels and H.B. Teng, *Chinese ouderen in Amsterdam: verslag van een onderzoek naar de levenssituatie van Chinese ouderen in Amsterdam*, Amsterdam: Stichting voor Toegepaste Gerontologie/Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam (1993).

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