Bound for the Golden Mountain: The social organization of Chinese alien smuggling *

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Abstract. This paper describes and analyzes the structural and operational features of Chinese alien smuggling. Interviews with aliens, smugglers and law enforcement officials in China, Hong Kong and the U.S. reveal this activity to be a complex process comprising a number of distinct operational stages. Our data suggest Chinese alien smuggling groups vary in their level of organization but most are best understood as task forces, or small groups of people assembled to perform a particular piece of work. These task forces are typically linked to international social networks characterized by overlapping, dyadic relationships; a high level of role differentiation; and a limited degree of hierarchy. Such groups are highly responsive to changing socio-legal and market constraints.

Introduction

Chinese alien smuggling is not a new phenomenon, but the involvement of organized crime groups in the large-scale transport of such cargo is a relatively recent development. Estimates of the number of Chinese annually smuggled into the U.S. vary, but officials of the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) put the current figure at around 100,000. It has been estimated that more than half a million Chinese have been smuggled into the U.S. since 1984 alone.

Unlike other forms of organized crime, such as gambling and drug trafficking, Chinese alien smuggling has received scant attention from social scientists. In large part, this is due to the formidable cultural and language barriers that make access to this topic difficult if not impossible for most Western criminologists. Thus most of what passes for conventional wisdom about the activity derives not from academic research but from the media. Nevertheless, nearly everyone who has investigated Chinese alien smuggling,
including journalists, law enforcement officials and social scientists, agrees that the level of planning and investment required to transport hundreds of thousands of people from China to various countries throughout the world suggests it to be a major industry.

One aspect of this phenomenon is the growing globalization of these crime groups, which have greatly expanded their international networks of way-stations and are now capable of transporting vast numbers of illegal aliens to North America, Europe and the former Soviet Union. China’s Public Security Bureau estimates there are half a million Chinese nationals in such places as Bangkok, Moscow and Ho Chi Minh City waiting to complete their journeys. To reach their destinations, complicated routes have been developed linking dozens of countries including the Dominican Republic, Mexico, Romania, Bulgaria and Brazil.4

The globalization of Chinese alien smuggling, together with the increased involvement of ethnic Chinese in the international drug trade, signal an increased level of organization among Chinese crime groups, which have historically focused on extortion, prostitution and gambling within their own communities. Growing evidence suggests Chinese crime groups have been quick to adapt to the world’s fast-changing economic and political environment, while law enforcement organizations at all levels and in all countries appear ill-equipped and poorly prepared to meet these challenges. Field research on Chinese alien smuggling, therefore, would seem to be a necessary first step in the development of effective counter-measures dealing with this activity.

In this article, we shall explore the meaning of organized crime, especially as it applies to Chinese crime groups; analyze the structural and operational features of Chinese alien smuggling; and offer some final observations on its current status.

**Methods**

This study is based primarily on fieldwork. Sheldon X. Zhang conducted interviews with informants, principally smugglers and illegal aliens and their families, in China and the U.S. All interviews followed a consistent protocol and centered on the question of how smugglers organize and conduct their activities. Additional interviews were conducted with law enforcement officials in the U.S., China and Hong Kong, and with journalists in Hong Kong and the U.S. Other data sources included U.S. government documents, and news reports, feature articles and editorials published in Hong Kong, China and the U.S.