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Grim Life for Smuggled Chinese American Dream Sours in N.Y.

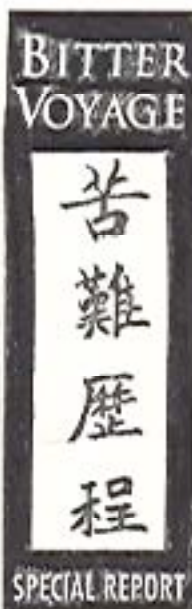
By Pamela Burdman
Chronicle Staff Writer

New York

Chen spends long days riding a bicycle through the helter-skelter traffic of Manhattan, in the hottest afternoons of summer and the coldest nights of winter, delivering food for a midtown Chinese restaurant. When work is done, he comes home to the grimy two-bedroom bunkhouse he shares with 19 roommates.

During a rare break from his work, the bone-thin delivery man sits on the edge of a bunk talking about the bitter disappointment of his life here. In China, he has a wife and two children, and a big, clean house in Fuzhou, the capital of Fujian province. But he heard that a man could make his fortune in New York, and so two years ago, he agreed to pay a smuggler \$30,000 for passage to America.

"Now I think the price is too much," he says in Mandarin, with a cynical laugh. A few of his roommates nod in agreement.



Third of four parts

Because Chen is in the country illegally, he's afraid to reveal his full name. And because he still owes \$10,000 of his smuggling fee, he says he cannot afford even to dream of freedom.

Outside the apartment, the noisy, dirty streets of Chinatown are jammed

with men and women with stories much like Chen's.

In the past 10 years, tens of thousands — perhaps hundreds of thousands — of Fujianese have come to New York's Chinatown. They call East Broadway Fuzhou Street, and Fujianese is the preferred dialect there. Street vendors hawk Fuzhou delicacies, like fried taro root and scallion cakes, and Chinese characters written on shop and office windows beckon the crowds with offers of work permits and Social Security cards.

Common themes echo in the stories of the immigrants: Most say China's

Continued on next page

April 29, 1993



Lin Hungda, 42, and Chen Zhengjian (right) sell Fujianese-style food from a sidewalk stand on East Broadway in New York City; once neighbors in a Fujian village, they arrived illegally in New York about a year ago

Continued from previous page

rapidly growing economy left them in the dust. Each can relate the treacherous route traveled to get to America, the mind-boggling sum paid to smugglers and the hardships endured to pay back the friends or family members who loaned them the money.

How do they describe life in New York? "Ku," they say. Bitter.

Men make up the vast majority of this new community. They mill around the half-dozen employment agencies in the shadow of the Manhattan Bridge, eager for jobs at Chinese restaurants. Tucked inside decaying buildings throughout Chinatown are scores of garment factories where women hunch over their

sewing machines, avoiding the eyes of American visitors.

The smuggled immigrants land in a world where they are isolated and little understood. Few speak English. Fears of retribution from smugglers and discovery by immigration officers force them into an underground — sometimes underworld — existence.

But fierce ambition gives them the will to endure a life most Americans would find unbearable.

10-Year Odyssey

Manager Yang, as his friends respectfully call him, was among the first to come in the new wave of smuggling that began a decade ago.

Continued on next page

Continued from previous page

Now 39, the short, stocky man owns two restaurants. He recently bought a two-story home in New Jersey. He reclines in a black leather armchair, recounting his difficult journey and his 10-year path to success. The fruits of hard labor surround him: a new Toshiba 24-inch television, a karaoke home unit and a halogen lamp still covered in plastic — all purchased in anticipation of the arrival of his wife and two children later this year.



When he left China in 1963, Yang did not know when he would see his family again. But, he recalls, "there's no way I could have made a living if I hadn't left."

An older brother in New York enlisted the help of "snakeheads," as Chinese smugglers are called. First they flew him to Guatemala. Then he and 17 other Fujianese — including two small children — were carried through Mexico in the bed of a small pickup truck, lying packed in a cavity surrounded by wooden crates. At the border, they walked for two hours through a cement pipe with water up to their waists.

The snakeheads then flew him to New York for a rendezvous with his brother at a Chinatown teahouse. Once the brother stuffed \$14,000 cash — then the going rate — into the smuggler's hand, Yang was free.

At first he worked seven days a week, 12 hours a day at a relative's restaurant. "I couldn't stand it," he recalls. "I asked my brother, 'Why did you bring me here?' I felt like an idiot, looking through a hole in the restaurant's takeout window."

In the tough Brooklyn neighborhood, Yang was faced with all sorts of hazards. Once, an angry customer fired a gun at him. The bullet came so close to his head, Yang said, "I could feel the wind."

天涯孤獨客四海
飄泊人終日奔波
苦一刻不得空負
千鈞債礙亦百兩金
誰能又肯甘但願衣
錦歸一息氣作半
馬咽淚強飲顏血汗
日在逐誰人能敵幸
可憐有情者隔洋
長短恩往爭堪回
昔夢魂島里牽

*Lonely traveler at the end of earth,
Drifter across the four seas.
Hardships thrust upon me all day long,
With not a single moment left to rest.
A thousand pounds of debt weigh down on me,
Even as I seek a mound of gold.
Far from my village, distant from my home,
But anxious to return with beaded clothes.
Bearing humiliation like an ox or horse,
The tears are pouring down my face.
Blood and sweat flow day and night,
Who, I ask, can undo this misery?
My heart goes out to my poor loved one,
Across the ocean but always in my mind.
By day I don't dare think of things gone by,
But anxious dreams take me back ten thousand miles.*

— by John Zheng, a Fujianese American man living in New York
(translated by Pamela Burdman)

But he persevered, and by 1986 he had paid back his brother and saved \$10,000 — enough to start a restaurant with his cousin in a New Jersey suburb. Seven years later, Yang holds a green card and speaks passable English.

'Old Guests' Help Newcomers

On their visits home, the Manager Yangs of the world become the envy of their villages. By their example, they encourage more and more

Fujianese to find a smuggler and head for "the beautiful country," as the Chinese call America.

"Old guests" like Yang provide crucial support for newcomers. He has already loaned about \$60,000 to various friends and neighbors to finance their journeys to the United States.

The new generation is driven by the same ambition that drove Yang. A 21-year-old named Wang is typical.

Continued on next page



The Confucius statue at the corner of Bowery and Division streets is a Chinatown landmark

Continued from previous page

His air trip from Fuzhou two years ago took him to nine countries, including Thailand, Sri Lanka and England.

Today he boasts of his endurance: He works 14 hours a day, seven days a week, mopping floors, cutting vegetables and sweating over a sizzling wok at a takeout restaurant in the South Bronx.

"I've asked American kids, 'Could you do this job?'" he said.

"They told me, 'Absolutely not.' But as long as there's work to do, no matter how bitter, I'm willing to do it.

"Everybody who gets smuggled travels a rugged road," said Wang. "Why do we want to put up with this? Because in the modern world, society keeps moving forward, and somehow you have to catch up."

But as more and more Fujianese make their way to New York, catching up becomes more difficult.

Continued on next page

Continued from previous page

Leaving New York

New York's Chinese restaurants are not able to accommodate the tide of illegal immigrants, and many newcomers — three of Chen's roommates, for example — simply cannot find jobs. Increasing numbers leave for jobs in New Jersey, Connecticut, even Florida and Ohio. A few have begun to arrive in the Chinatowns of San Francisco and Los Angeles.

Traditionally, most have clung to New York: The sheer numbers make it easier to hide from officials, and the common dialect makes it easier to get around. But today, New York is fraught with danger, particularly for the defenseless illegal immigrants.

Some new arrivals have been kidnaped and tortured by gang members trying to collect smuggling fees.

In one case, several gun-toting men came to a Chinese restaurant and abducted employee Kin Wah Fong, a recent immigrant. They took him to an apartment in the Bronx, where they beat him with a hammer. When police raided the apartment, they found several semiautomatic pistols and an AR-15 rifle. Police arrested 13 captors, all illegal immigrants from Fujian.

'More Gang Involvement'

Since 1991, the Police Department's Major Case Squad has handled 24 kidnaping cases and made more than 100 smuggling-related arrests, according to Lieutenant Joseph Pollini.

"There's an increase in the amount of people getting smuggled," he observed. "There's more

gang involvement, and the gang people demand more money for working for the smugglers."

Violent crimes — kidnapings, beatings and homicides — are relatively rare. But one kidnaping, or one beating, serves as a stern warning to thousands of Chinese.

Said one beating victim: "Once you get over here, the snakeheads rule the heavens."

Because they fear the police, the illegal immigrants are easy prey for criminals. For example, one Fujianese waiter said gang members robbed the apartment he shared with about 30 other men. The

gangsters made off with hard-earned cash the men had been storing in their pillowcases, but nobody called the police.

As jobs grow more scarce, the immigrants are also sometimes recruited to join gangs. According to Pollini, some young arrivals are offered lower fees on their journeys if they perform jobs for the gangs, such as collecting smuggling fees.



Lin's partner, Chen, counted the day's take, about \$130 for the two of them, as they closed up shop around 7 p.m.

美
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—
meiguo:
beautiful
country,
America

In recent years, the ranks of gangs such as the Fuk-ting (the Young Fujianese) have swelled, say police. Steven Wong, a Fujianese American who counsels young immigrants in his spare time, says the temptation to join a gang is almost irresistible, especially when the youths see how readily gang members exact protection payments from Chinese merchants.

Wong recounted the story told by one young man: "My boss treats me like a slave," the youth said. "Meanwhile, four guys who were smuggled in with me came into our restaurant, banged on the table, and he treated them like kings. He opened the cash register and handed them \$300."

Few Services Offered

The huge number of new immigrants overwhelms the few services available to the fledgling Fujianese community. Many new immigrants head down to Catherine Street to seek help at the makeshift quarters of the Church of Grace, New York's only Fujianese church. But the congregation cannot find homes and jobs for thousands of their compatriots.

Continued on next page



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"Every day we see tragedies," says church member John Zheng. "They don't realize how tough the life will be."

When church members go back to visit China, they try to discourage further migration. But members of the Fuzhou community say the warnings usually fall on deaf ears.

"I knew it wasn't easy to survive in America," says a 27-year-old man named Lin. "I didn't want to come." But people from his village were flocking to New York, and he said his family pressured him to join "the blind rush."

After working two restaurant jobs for two years, Lin has paid his \$25,000 travel debt. Today, he has a room to himself in a four-bedroom apartment on the Upper West Side. He studies English and has begun to save some money.

Continued on next page

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do it'***

— WANG,
who works 98 hours a
week in a restaurant



PHOTOS BY TOM LEVY/THE CHRONICLE

Food vendor Lin Hungda talked with his wife in a rare phone call to China

Continued from previous page

He would have preferred to remain in China, but he makes the best of his situation. "It's too late for regrets," he shrugs.

Others remain convinced that

they made the right decision, no matter how difficult the life in New York. Wang, at 19, is looking far to the future for a payoff.

"If I suffer," he says, "the next generation can live better."

April 29, 1993

Twenty illegal Chinese immigrants from Fujian province live in this two-bedroom apartment on Allen Street in New York. The five men in these photographs wanted their identities hidden. The man at right, wearing a San Francisco Giants sweatshirt, smoked while sitting on his bunk, one of 12 sleeping places shared by the 20 men. Next to his Chinese newspaper were his tape player and headphones for listening to English lessons.

*'New York is
tightening up.
They come to
New York and
things are not
really that
good, so they
are dispersing
all over
the place'*

— PETER KWONG,
professor of history at
Columbia University



April 29, 1993



Each of the men does his own cooking at this electric stove in the tiny kitchen

Below, two bicycles leaned against a kitchen wall under a crowded towel rack. The bicycle with the basket is used by a resident who delivers Chinese takeout food



April 29, 1993



The cook enjoyed his rice, topped with store-bought pickled vegetables, while sitting on a lower bunk in the living room



A snapshot of family left behind in China reminds one man why he came so far seeking work