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Deportees Face Harsh Penalties

Huge fines, confinement await emigrants at home

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Fuzhou, Fujian province

Chen Junqiu sailed from Fujian province on a smuggler's ship last spring, hoping to join more than 20 other residents of Housha village in the United States. But the ship was intercepted after just a few days at sea, and the passengers were returned to China.

On his return, the 34-year-old farmer was jailed by the Chinese government and ordered to pay a fine. When his wife got the news, she rushed to the detention center, but she was turned away by guards two days in a row. They told her only that her husband was being interrogated.

REPORT FROM CHINA

Then, on the fourth night after his return, Chen tore a strip of fabric from his trousers, tied it to the ceiling, and hanged himself.

"I didn't get to see him until he died," Chen's widow said, crying throughout an interview.

In a three-week visit to Fujian province, The Chronicle found that emigrants pay dearly when their smuggling missions fail.

Throughout the Fuzhou area, villagers described how deportees return to lives of fear and public humiliation. The fines are so high that it could take a lifetime to pay them, they said. Repeat offenders often get harsher treatment: a stint in China's draconian labor reeducation system.

In the past several years, immigration experts say, hundreds of thousands of people have left Fujian province on smuggling voyages bound for the United States and other countries. They book passage with criminal syndicates, usually paying fares of $25,000 or more. On board the ships, many endure life-threatening conditions, and once they arrive, they often must work for years at menial, low-paying jobs to pay off their smuggling debts.

But as the smuggling trade has grown, governments have cracked down. This year alone, more than 2,000 people have been sent back to China by other countries — including Japan, Mexico, Indonesia and Singapore.

Until recently, U.S. immigration policies prevented those who reached U.S. soil from being sent home. Earlier this year, however, the increasing smuggling-ship traffic caused the Clinton administration to revise immigration and asylum policies.

Officials reasoned that only by sending people home could they dissuade others from making the treacherous journey. Today, several hundred Chinese in the United States have lost their asylum bids and stand to be deported soon.

Although Chinese officials have assured the State Department that the deported people will not be persecuted, interviews in the Fuzhou area suggest that there may be a gap between such assurances and the reality that confronts returned emigres.

In Lianjiang county, officials ushered a ruddy-faced pedicab driver into a conference room, and he took a seat near the window. He had been captured on a smuggling ship bound for the United States, he said, but he insisted that the punishment was mild when he was deported back to China.

"They wouldn't harm us at all," he said, as government officials listened from the adjacent room. "They just urged us not to sneak out of the country again."

As the interview came to a close, the man turned pensive. His 23-year-old nephew is among hundreds of smuggled immigrants being held in U.S. lockups, and he admitted that he is worried. If the nephew is sent back, he hinted, the young man's life could be unbearable. He refused to be specific.

In the farming villages along the rocky Fujian coast, people speak more freely in the absence of government cadres. Virtually every resident knows of someone who was deported and of the hardships they endured.

Chen Junqiu paid the highest price of all.

He grew up on a small island in the mouth of the Min River. The houses scattered through the quiet

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PHOTOS SPECIAL TO THE CHRONICLE

Members of Chen Junqiu's family work in the fields around their home to pay off the debts left when he committed suicide

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island village of Housha look rundown compared with those in the wealthier villages around Fuzhou.

The Chens' humble concrete house is surrounded by neatly planted fields, where the family grows celery, cabbage and other vegetables. They have enough to eat, but Chen managed to earn only about $50 a year, said his father, Chen Zhenyou.

Neighbors — at least 20 of them — had sailed off to Japan and begun sending home sums that were small fortunes in Housha. Last March, Chen tried to join them.

Instead, he and 131 other passengers spent five months in Japanese custody.

Throughout that time, fellow passengers later told the family, Chen was terrified of returning to China. He knew his family would never be able to come up with the money to pay off a $1,000 smuggling loan and the government fines.

Today, Chen's family is bitter that they were never allowed to see him after he was returned. And although his suicide kept them from having to pay his fine, his family remains saddled with the $1,000 debt.

"We owe so much money, it's terribly difficult for the family," his widow said.

Dramatic Increase in Fines

Under increasing pressure to stop the illicit voyages, officials in Fujian have implemented dramatic increases in the fines for illegal emigration.

In interviews, government officials said that the maximum fines levied for illegal emigration are 5,000 yuan — roughly $625 at current exchange rates. But recently returned immigrants or their families and neighbors insist that they paid as much as five times that amount — from $2,125 to $3,400.

Official estimates say annual per capita income in rural Fuzhou is 1,109 yuan, or $138. Even without interest, then, it would take 15 to 25 years for the average villager to earn such sums.

Government officials dismissed the stories, saying all of the deportees had paid their fines and returned home within a matter of days. One Lianjiang county official admitted that in July, when more than 600 Chinese were flown home from Mexico, each was charged 10,000 yuan — $1,250. That amounts to more than $750,000, even though the emigrants were flown to Fujian at no cost to the Chinese government.

Repeated questions about the fines elicited defensive reactions from officials. "It's not a question of the amount," said Chen Jinbao, vice secretary of the Communist Party in Changle county. "It's a question of achieving our goal. The fines should be both realistic and effective."

In fact, the fines are a heavy burden on the deportees and their

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families. And those who cannot afford them remain in detention centers, local residents say.

One old man, afraid to reveal where he lived, met with reporters on a grassy hillside overlooking his farming village and the Min River beyond. His appearance spoke of poverty. His face was weathered, his pants tattered, his sandals dusty. At times he broke down as he told his son's tale.

Seven months ago, the young man left for America on a smuggling ship, but the voyage ended abruptly in July when U.S. Coast Guard officers intercepted the vessel near Mexico. The Mexican government sent the passengers back to China.

The old man has survived by raising rabbits — eating some, selling the rest. He has been waiting for his son to return to the village, but the young man has spent the past three months in a county detention center, with no prospect of coming home.

The old man recounted how three other villagers returned home — after their families paid 27,500 yuan ($3,400) to public security officials. But he said he has no way of paying such a sum.

"I would sell my house," he said. "But it's only worth three or four thousand yuan. I've tried to borrow money from people. They say, 'You're so old, how will you be able to pay me back?' "

Then he began to weep. "Even if I went out and begged," he said, "I wouldn't collect that much money."

Village leaders wrote an official letter explaining his poverty, but the document had no effect on prison guards. They refused to release his son.

Recently, the old man visited his son at the detention center. He recalled the boy's words: "I can't think of anything to say to you. You raised me for 20 years. I thought I'd make some money and send it back to you. Now look what's happened."

Chen Junqiu's widow and his father, Chen Zhenyou

Secretive Officials

It is not known how many deported Fujianese remain in area detention centers for the same reason. Officials are secretive about conditions there and forbid visits by foreign journalists. But the centers are cited repeatedly by human-rights groups for forced confessions, beatings and torture.

In the Lianjiang county facility, a raised platform serves as a bed for about 30 men, said Zheng Changzhong, a Guantou resident who spent 20 days there this year. Each night, some prisoners had to sleep on the concrete floor. There were no study sessions, Zheng said. At times, the prisoners were ordered to sit silently without moving for hours on end.

Many prisoners manage to get out, usually by borrowing money to pay their fines. But some see only one way to repay the loans: Make another run for America.

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Zheng Changzhong's wife borrowed 25,000 yuan at high interest rates to secure his release. But Zheng says it is impossible to repay his debt if he stays in China. He owes 1,000 yuan per month in interest alone, but he earns less than half that doing construction work.

"Unless I'm willing to rob a bank," he said, "how could I ever make that much money?"

Repeat offenders — those who had been smuggled two or more times — have been sentenced to one to three years in labor re-education camps. Zheng said about 30 passengers from his smuggling ship had been deported once before. Their families were ordered to pay 20,000 yuan ($2,500) in fines, and they remain in the detention center awaiting sentencing.

Requests to visit Fujian's re-education camps were denied, but the camps are notorious among human rights experts for deplorable conditions and arbitrary administration of justice.

By name, a labor re-education camp "sounds innocuous," said Human Rights Watch/Asia Watch Washington director Mike Jendrzejczyk. "But neither the living nor the working conditions are anything that you'd want to experience."

Punishment Defended

Chinese officials defend their punishment system, saying it provides a crucial deterrent to human-smuggling. "If we didn't fine them, even more people would leave," said Fujian province spokesman Wei Kunsheng.

Punishment, however, seems to fall disproportionately on the poor. People with relatives overseas can usually borrow money to pay off their fines. Several residents and former inmates said that people with the right connections manage to slip out the "back door" of prisons. Even third-time offenders, some said, can escape re-education camps if they have some clout with local officials.

But for those without money, connections or relatives overseas, there is no easy solution. For them, the punishment can be insurmountable.