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Many Stops Along the Smuggler's Trail

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REPORT FROM CHINA

Last of a series

Wenzhou, Zhejiang province

In many of the farming villages along the coast of China's Zhejiang province, almost every family has a relative in a foreign country — indeed, the region is famous for sending people overseas.

And that fame has startling implications for police and government officials who are trying to shut down the \$3 billion-a-year human-smuggling industry. Until recently, they had seen smuggling as a business serving clients from Fujian province who wanted to go to America.

But in the first extended visit by a Western reporter to the smuggling centers of China, *The Chronicle* found that "snakeheads," as the organizers of human-smuggling operations are called, are drawing customers from

provinces throughout southern China and sending them not just to the United States but to wealthy countries around the globe.

Guangdong province has a well-known history of illegal crossings into Hong Kong by a variety of methods — some people swim, some stow away on boats and some go with

smugglers. Other smuggling routes are less commonly known: People from the Xiamen area have ventured across the strait to Taiwan. Several boatloads of people from Guangxi and Guangdong province have landed in Australia. And Zhejiang residents have made illicit journeys all the way to Western Europe.

Government officials worry that if human smuggling expands, the pattern of government corruption and often brutal mistreatment of Chinese emigrants will grow, too. But experts on world population see the exodus as part of a pattern of global migration — legal and illegal. They say it is unlikely to stop, despite anti-immigration sentiments that are leading destination countries to fortify their borders.

The center for smuggling out of Zhejiang province can be found in the free-wheeling port city of Wenzhou, 150 miles up the coast from Fujian's provincial capital, Fuzhou. Two nearby rural areas — Yongjia and Qingtian counties — have the strongest overseas links and the most established smuggling rings.

Even during times when private business was strictly outlawed by the central government, Wenzhounese were known for travel-

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SPECIAL TO THE CHRONICLE

Like many people from inland China, this woman went to the coast in search of economic opportunities; her children were born there

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ing to other provinces and opening underground factories.

The early experiments with capitalism drew denigration during the Cultural Revolution but have made Wenzhou a nationwide model for economic reform. Today, the ferryboats that crisscross the river are full of peddlers hawking everything from cookware to calculators to shoe cloths.

Just a short boat ride from Wenzhou's dingy downtown lies the affluent island of Qidu in Yongjia county. There, golden rice fields create a pastoral backdrop for a lifestyle that could be the envy of villagers around China.

Huge houses, looking more like apartment buildings than single-family dwellings, show signs of Western influence. Some are decorated with red crosses, a symbol of their occupants' Christian faith. Others are engraved with English translations of Chinese good-luck sayings — like "Phenix Golden."

Overseas by 'Back Roads'

Although people in Qidu are reluctant to discuss the smuggling trade openly, mothers whisper that their sons went overseas by "back roads" instead of "on the highway." They say the trips are organized by local snakeheads, or "bosses," with the oldest routes leading to France and Spain.

The links with Europe began in the late 1970s and early '80s, when the Chinese still could get visas. But as European immigration controls tightened in ensuing years, people sought ways to get around the law, and local smuggling networks emerged.

Most of the Chinese who are smuggled to the United States still come from Fujian. More recently, though, some Wenzhounese have hooked up with smugglers from Fujian who specialize in transportation to America.

Immigration attorneys say several hundred Wenzhounese have

come to the United States via smuggling schemes in the past five years — including about 30 passengers on the Golden Venture, the ship that ran aground in New York in June. Researchers recently have reported a small but growing number of smuggled Chinese from other provinces — besides Guangdong and Zhejiang, they have come from Anhui, Guangxi, and Yunnan provinces.

Often, they hear about the smuggling networks when they travel to coastal cities such as Fuzhou or Wenzhou in search of work, says Rutgers University sociologist Ko-lin Chin, a specialist in organized crime who has interviewed smuggled people from at least five provinces.

Although the numbers are too small to be a direct concern for Immigration and Naturalization Service officials, experts worry that an expanding market would cre-

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ate even more wealth and power for the snakeheads.

"Sooner or later, it will spread

to other provinces," said Chin. "Everybody in China is now trying to leave."

The Wenzhouese seem to leave for similar reasons to the Fujianese: to make money, to join relatives, to gain social status for their families. But each region has its favored methods, and the Wenzhouese rarely travel by sea.

A housewife named Xiaoying, for example, said her husband, Gao, had never planned to board a boat for America when he gave up a lucrative position as a foreman with a factory in Guangzhou province. Along with seven of his neighbors from Yongjia county, Gao signed up for a smuggling mission with a local recruiter two years ago. But instead of the prosperity he had expected, Xiaoying said bitterly, he wound up with a bungled mission that Xiaoying blames on Fujianese smugglers. Xiaoying and Gao never expected such troubles.

In the nearby hillsides of Yongjia county, stories of successful emigration abound: Hundreds of people from Yongjia now live in France, Spain, the United States and other developed countries. Gao and his neighbors expected to travel overland to Thailand, where they would board planes for the United States or Central America. But because of snags in the operation, the group was duped into boarding a vessel instead. They got as far as Kenya in October of last year, when the captain reportedly abandoned ship.

Fateful Voyage to America

Finally, the Golden Venture arrived to pick up the passengers in March. Gao's journey came to a fateful end 70 days later, when the ship went aground off Queens. Ten passengers died in the surf and the others were arrested by U.S. agents on Rockaway Beach.

"After undergoing all kinds of misery, I've finally arrived in the



United States," he wrote home from a U.S. jail. "I guess God protected me. I'm still alive. It sure is a piece of luck amidst adversity."

Greater adversity may be in store: Today, Xiaoying's worst fear is that her husband will be sent back to China, where he would be required to pay steep fines.

'Sooner or later, (the smuggling operations) will spread to other provinces'

— KO-LIN CHIN,
RUTGERS UNIVERSITY SOCIOLOGIST

As more and more of their neighbors are setting up new homes in Hong Kong, Western Europe and America, Chinese in coastal provinces find the overseas journeys harder and harder to resist. Experts say the exodus reflects global migration trends.

Earlier this year, the U.N. Population Fund announced that worldwide migration had reached new heights, with most of the movement motivated by economic disparities. The U.N. study found that worldwide, more than 100 million people are living outside their home countries — about twice the number living overseas just four years before.

"On a scale unknown in history," the U.N. report read, "people around the world are uprooting themselves and migrating in search of a better life."

And, the report noted, "Where legal channels are closed, migrants will enter by whatever means are available to them." That suggests that the market for smuggling stands to expand.

Eastern Europe Now a Magnet

With the collapse of Soviet communism, Eastern Europe has emerged in recent years as a global magnet for migration. Seeing the region as a springboard to Western Europe and the United States,

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smugglers from both Wenzhou and Fuzhou were quick to gain footholds there.

Two years ago, more than 40,000 Chinese citizens were living in Hungary without permission, said Peter Lazar, a Hungarian diplomat in Beijing. Today, only about 10,000 remain, and Lazar assumes that the rest have gone to Western countries.

A middle-age art teacher from Beijing said that when she visited her brother in Budapest in 1981, a Fujianese snakehead lived in the apartment above his. "Every day, there was a line of people at their house," she recalled. All were bound for Western Europe or the United States.

Some 20,000 Chinese live in the Czech Republic and Slovakia today, and more than 100,000 are in Moscow, according to estimates from diplomats in the capital. Although some start businesses and remain in the countries, officials acknowledge that an undetermined number are merely waiting for the chance to head west.

But that is not as easy now as it has been. Rising nativist sentiment in Western Europe has motivated governments there to take harsher measures against immigration in general — and illegal immigration in particular.

Even as worldwide desire to emigrate mounts and methods for emigration proliferate, the most popular destinations are committing more resources than ever to blocking immigration.

One Man's Obstacles

On a brisk fall morning on Beijing's Embassy Row, a young man from a Wenzhou suburb talked about the obstacles separating him from his hopes of being smuggled to Spain, where thousands of Wen-

zhouese now reside. Once there, he planned to get a job at one of the many Chinese restaurants that opened in Barcelona before the 1992 Olympics.

"I have nothing to do at home," the boyish-looking 22-year-old said with a shrug.

His efforts began when his sister, who lives in Prague, sent him an invitation to visit her for a month. The local police station issued a document verifying their relationship. Next, he had to get the paper notarized and then stamped by the Chinese Foreign Ministry.

Finally, the young man traveled for more than 30 hours by bus and train to Beijing to apply for a Czech visa. From Prague, he planned to move on to Spain using smuggling channels.

"Usually, you walk across the border to Germany or Austria," he said, "and somebody will pick you up and drive you to Spain." Typically, the smugglers will take only people with relatives in Spain — and only after the relatives guarantee the \$10,000 smuggling fee.

An Even Better Guarantee

But the young man had an even better guarantee: His sister's husband had been smuggling people from Prague to Spain for more than a year.

Despite the good connections, though, he got a taste of the new hard line against immigration. He emerged from the Czech Embassy without a visa and without the invitation letter. A Czech official had confiscated his documents, calling his sister's visa phony.

"I did what my sister told me," he said, puzzled. "I don't know why it didn't work."

Methods of emigrating that worked in the past seemed to be getting harder for everyone in China: Of the more than 20 Chinese who applied for Czech visas that day, all but one were refused.

Still, the man said, there were other options. He could seek passage to Moscow, for example. If the Russian Embassy would not issue a

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— 22-YEAR-OLD WHOSE ATTEMPT TO LEAVE WAS UNSUCCESSFUL

visa, he could walk across the border in northeastern China. Someone working for his brother-in-law would pick him up in Moscow and shuttle him to Prague.

Given the obstacles, the young man's confidence seemed curious. But he had seen his neighbors go out and make better lives for themselves, and he was determined to do the same.

The same spirit has motivated hundreds of thousands of Chinese to gamble their lives on treacherous journeys around the globe, earning billions of dollars for the human-smuggling industry. And the same resolve makes any government crackdown on smuggling an overwhelming challenge.

"China has already opened up," conceded a Chinese anti-smuggling official. "People want to go out into the world."

Chronicle correspondent Ningrong Liu contributed to this report.

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