

opportunity.

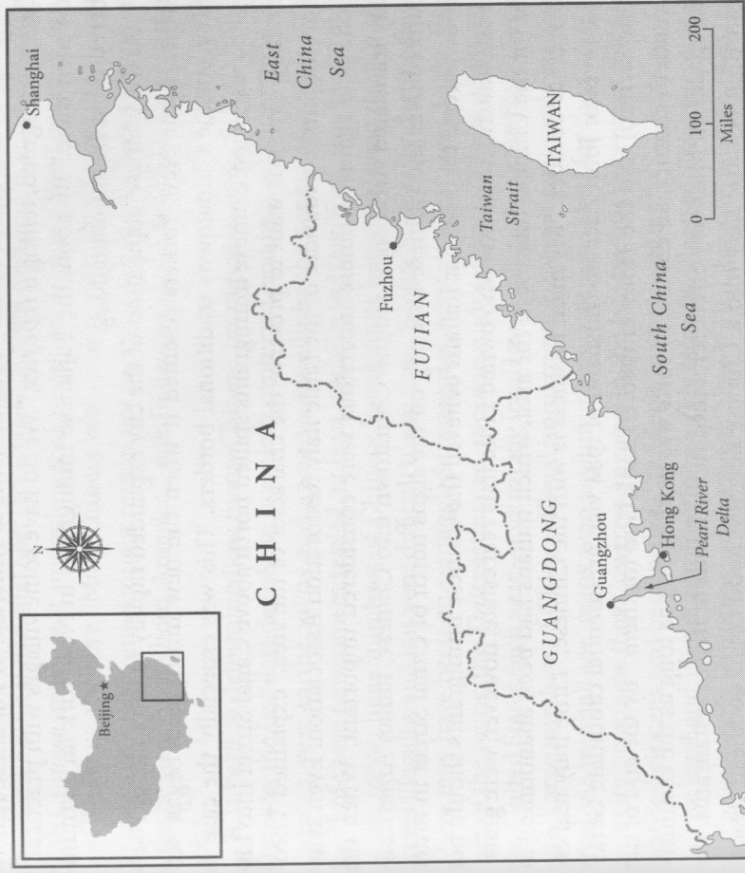
If current demographic trends continue, the Chinese will, before long, displace the Dominicans as New York's biggest immigrant group. New York had a Chinese enclave well before the first Latino and West Indian neighborhoods developed in the 1920s. The city's first Chinatown emerged around 1880 as Chinese immigrants living in the western United States were driven out of their communities by violence and intimidation. Shunned in most other parts of the

city, New York's early Chinese residents created a residential enclave on Mott Street below Canal. By 1900 it included neighboring Pell and Doyers streets. The city's Chinese immigrants were almost all men, and a preponderance of them worked in the laundry business, which the Chinese entered as increasingly middle-class Irish American women abandoned that trade. Many other Chinese immigrants worked as cigar makers, while the enclave's most well-to-do inhabitants were merchants specializing in exports to and imports from China. Most of these immigrants came from one part of China — the counties surrounding the Pearl River delta in the southern province then known as Canton (today Guangdong).<sup>27</sup>

The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 devastated New York's Chinese community, because with virtually no Chinese women in the United States, the enclave seemed destined for eventual extinction. But that did not happen. Like other restricted immigrant groups, the Chinese resorted to illegal immigration, sneaking across the Canadian and Mexican borders or stowing away on ships, strategies made more difficult after 1892, when Congress mandated that Chinese Americans carry government-issued photo identification proving that they had entered the United States legally. The Chinese adapted, however, relying less on illicit border crossings and more on fraudulent legal entry into the United States. The Exclusion Act offered exceptions for merchants and the children of American-born Chinese Americans. Thousands of would-be Chinese immigrants persuaded or paid legal Chinese American merchants to claim the newcomers as their business partners. Even more got Chinese Americans to swear falsely that new immigrants were their children — known in the Chinese American community as “paper sons.” As a result, the Chinese population of New York actually rose after the passage of the Exclusion Act, from about one thousand in 1880 to six thousand in 1900 (though many of these Chinese New Yorkers were legal immigrants who moved to New York from the West, fleeing anti-Chinese violence in the 1880s). The Chinese-born population of the city reached nearly seven thousand in 1930. The Chinese Exclusion Act was repealed in 1943, but China received an annual immigration quota of only 105 slots. Nonetheless, the return of legal immigration facilitated a revival in illegal immigration as well, so that by 1960, more than 21,000 Chinese immigrants lived in New York.<sup>28</sup>

Because the Hart-Celler Act gave preference to immigrants who were joining family members already in the United States, most of the Chinese who arrived in New York in the years immediately after its passage continued to come from Guangdong. Yet because of Chinese emigration restrictions and the fact that the United States did not normalize diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China until 1979, many more of these emigrants came from Hong

## THE GUANGDONG AND FUJIAN PROVINCES OF CHINA



Kong, then still controlled by Great Britain. Many others came from Taiwan. Finally, with the improvement of relations with China and the easing of emigration restrictions by the Chinese government, New York's Chinese population became more varied, though South China still predominated.<sup>29</sup>

In the 1990s, however, the background of New York's Chinese immigrants began to change radically. Large numbers of immigrants, most of them illegal, were starting to arrive from Fujian, the coastal province immediately northeast of Guangdong. Even though Fuzhou, the capital of Fujian province, is just five hundred miles from Guangzhou, the capital of Guangdong, this influx of Fujianese represented a seismic cultural shift for New York's Chinese community. Not only do the two groups eat totally different foods, but often they cannot even speak to each other; the Fujianese speak their own dialect and cannot understand the Cantonese dialects.

So many young Fujianese men came to America that in some towns in China there seemed to be hardly any remaining. “In Fuzhou, not much gentlemen,”

one female immigrant told the *Times* in 2001, explaining why she too had immigrated to the United States. "They all come to America." A Fujianese American priest agreed, telling a reporter, "We do have some villages with practically no men there." By 2000, the Fujianese immigrants in New York far outnumbered those from Guangdong.<sup>30</sup>

As the Chinese population of the city expanded rapidly in the wake of Hart-Celler, some New Yorkers resented it when the new immigrants began settling outside Chinatown's traditional borders. This was especially the case in the 1970s, when Chinese immigrants spilled north above Canal Street into Little Italy. "We just want to preserve the character of the area," explained Theodore Tarantini, a founder of the Little Italy Restoration Association. Even symbolic acts against Chinese incursions were considered important. When the city translated street signs around Chinatown into Chinese, Italian Americans painted over the Chinese lettering on the signs north of Canal Street in order to demarcate the line that Italians believed the Chinese immigrants should not cross. Italian Americans who owned Little Italy real estate, however, were grateful for the Chinese interest in the area, which Italians had been abandoning in droves for decades. "My main business is with the Chinese," Little Italy real estate investor John Zaccaro (husband of 1984 vice presidential candidate Geraldine Ferraro) told the *Times* in 1980. "Thank God for them." By the end of the twentieth century, an entente of sorts was worked out: as long as the commercial spaces on Mulberry Street remained in the hands of Italian restaurants, the transition of Little Italy into a Chinese neighborhood could go ahead peacefully.<sup>31</sup>

By that point, Chinatown was growing far more rapidly to the east than to the north. The Fujianese enclave centered on East Broadway on the Lower East Side had grown far larger than the Guangdong stronghold centered on Mott Street. The Fujianese also dominated the Chinatowns that had blossomed in Flushing, Queens (where they displaced the Taiwanese), and Sunset Park, Brooklyn. The advent of the Fujianese immigration had important implications for the size of New York's Chinese population as well, for while a majority of Cantonese immigrants settled in California, most Fujianese immigrants chose New York as their American home.<sup>32</sup>

The Chinese came to the United States for the same reasons as most other immigrants—to better their own financial situation and to secure improved opportunities for their children. In the United States "there is hope," said one Chinese immigrant in the 1990s. "I was seeking a better life." Even though Americans saw Chinese immigrants struggling to survive, often paid well below minimum wage if they were undocumented, the Chinese viewed things differently. As an attorney who represented Chinese clients seeking asylum ob-

erved, "Everyone sends money home no matter how little they're earning so it seems like the streets here are paved with gold." Sometimes the choice to emigrate was not an individual one. "It's a family or clan decision," a source familiar with Chinese immigrant smuggling told a reporter in 1999. "We'll invest in you, you'll help us get there." Most Chinese who considered relocating to the United States had trouble imagining a reason *not* to make the move. "I can't think of a single bad thing about America," one Fujianese remarked. "Life's just better there."<sup>33</sup>

It is hard to determine how many Chinese immigrants came to the United States in the last decades of the twentieth century. Legal immigration averaged 35,000 a year in the 1980s and 42,000 annually in the 1990s, and perhaps a third of these newcomers settled, at least initially, in New York. But by the end of the 1980s, huge numbers of Chinese immigrants began entering the United States illegally, and it is very difficult to estimate the size of this clandestine flow. There may have been one smuggled immigrant for every legal one. In the first half of the 1990s, the *Times* estimated, 100,000 undocumented Chinese entered the United States each year—outpacing legal immigration by more than two to one. Large numbers of Chinese illegal immigrants, however, eventually became legal. As we shall see, many won asylum; many more qualified for the periodic amnesty programs that Congress enacted in the late twentieth century. Others married citizens and became legal residents in that manner.<sup>34</sup>

The legal and illegal immigration worlds often overlapped. Take the case of a relatively early Fujianese immigrant to New York, Cheng Chui Ping. Around 1964, when Ping was fifteen, her father, a sailor, entered the United States illegally by jumping ship in an American port. He worked for more than a decade as a dishwasher in New York's Chinatown, sending money back to his family three or four times a year, until he was deported in 1977. Meanwhile, soon after Ping got married in 1969, she and her husband, Cheung Yick Tak, managed to escape the People's Republic of China and settle in Hong Kong. Despite their good fortune, Ping's husband left for New York too, using the same method to enter the United States as his father-in-law. Yick Tak managed to stay in New York only two years before authorities sent him back to Hong Kong.

When Yick Tak reunited with Ping, he found that in his absence she had fared much better in Hong Kong than he had in New York. Ping had opened a variety store in Hong Kong's Fujianese enclave, and the business thrived. She was a savvy businesswoman and very good with numbers. In 1979 Ping opened a clothing factory across the bay from Hong Kong on the Chinese mainland. By that point, she had given birth to two daughters.

Despite her mercantile success, Ping was not satisfied. In June 1981 she walked into the U.S. consulate in Hong Kong and applied for an immigration



visa. When the consular official interviewing her asked what she would do in America, she said she would work as a domestic servant. Why, the official responded, would she want to trade her life as a businesswoman in Hong Kong for that of a domestic in America? "It is for the sake of my children's future that I am willing to be a servant," she replied. That response satisfied the American, and a few months later she received her visa. She flew to New York via Anchorage in November, leaving her two daughters behind with Yick Tak. A year later, the three of them joined Ping in New York (under the provision allowing immediate family members to join immigrants without numerical limitation). They opened a tiny twelve-foot-wide shop at 145B Hester Street, just east of the Bowery, which was very much like the one she had run in Hong Kong, carrying items sought after by the city's quickly expanding Fujianese immigrant community. "Sister Ping" became a fixture in the community, renowned in particular for helping her fellow Fujianese when they needed a loan or a job.

For the Chinese who came to New York illegally, the beginning of the trip was typically the same—a bus out of Fujian, sneaking across the border into Hong Kong, and then a flight to some other transit point, typically Bangkok. There the immigrants waited weeks, and sometimes months, while their smugglers, known in Chinese as "snakeheads," procured travel documents for their customers. The best documents were real, acquired through bribery at an embassy. Next best was a slightly altered legitimate document, perhaps a Taiwanese passport with a genuine U.S. tourist visa in which the original owner's photo had been carefully removed and replaced with the likeness of an illegal immigrant. About half of the illicit immigrants would then fly to the United States, often taking circuitous routes to help avoid suspicion, because Bangkok had become well known as a jumping-off point for illegal immigrants.<sup>35</sup>

Another 40 percent of Chinese illegal immigrants flew most of the way to the United States but then completed their journey over land. Some flew to Mexico, but many others arrived in Guatemala and had to be smuggled into Mexico before making the attempt to enter the United States. Most then crossed the border on foot, but some were brought into the United States hidden in trucks, buses, or false-bottomed compartments in cars and vans. The head or "big" snakehead typically had "little snakeheads" (often family members) supervise the immigrants on each leg of their journey. One might meet the immigrants in Hong Kong, others would pick them up at the airports in Bangkok and Guatemala City, and yet another would meet them at JFK or LAX or, if they crossed the border by land, at a prearranged location just inside the country. However they made it into the United States, the immigrants would next be brought to what they and their smugglers referred to as a "safe house" in New York.<sup>36</sup>

"Safe house" was really a misnomer. The purpose of the "safe house" was not to keep the immigrants safe from the immigration enforcement authorities, but to keep the newcomers from escaping into America without paying the balance they owed to the snakehead. In the early 1980s, the typical price an immigrant had to pay to be smuggled to New York was \$18,000, but it reached \$25,000 in 1989, \$30,000 in 1993, and \$40,000 by 1998. The immigrant usually provided about a quarter of this fee up front and had to supply the balance on arrival in New York. The immigrants did not carry such a sum on their perilous journey and instead relied on family members (typically in China) to pay the snakehead the remainder. The debt collectors who ran the safe houses, invariably located in windowless basements, made life for the newcomers as unpleasant as possible so that their family members in China would pay the balance due to the snakehead quickly and fully.

"The place I was kept was hell," recalled a forty-year-old man from Fuzhou of his safe house experience. "We were starving all the time. The air was awful." Immigrants whose families paid quickly were allowed to leave before conditions became unbearable. But for the significant minority of immigrants whose families were slow to pay, the safe houses were truly hellish, as was the case for the man from Fuzhou. "They yelled at or beat us whenever they wished," he said, especially when the immigrants were on the phone with their relatives beseeching them to pay the snakehead. "Often, people were beaten until they were bloody." The debt collectors often sexually abused female immigrants whose families did not pay promptly, even raping them if they did not receive payment by the end of the grace period. If after several weeks a female immigrant's family had not paid her debt, she might be "sold" to a brothel and forced to repay her debt that way.<sup>37</sup>

Given the outrageous interest rates they might charge an immigrant's family, Chinese loan sharks were not the source of the cash most illegal immigrants used to pay for their passage to the United States. The majority of smuggled Chinese actually came from middle-class backgrounds, or at least had family members who did, and the money to finance the journey was usually borrowed from those family members. "You borrow \$1,500 from one person, another \$3,000 from another person," one immigrant explained. An immigrant sometimes relied on a wide network of extended family members to meet the snakehead's price. Indeed, one of the reasons so many Chinese immigrants came from Fujian was not because that Chinese province was so poor but because it was so prosperous: its residents could afford the huge snakehead fees. The Fujian economy was so dynamic that the province attracted migrants from other parts of China, such as Sichuan, who knew they could find jobs there that paid better than in their native regions. "The Sichuanese coming here is the same as



us Fujianese going to America," noted one Fuzhou resident. "The Sichuanese are doing the bad jobs that nobody else wants to do here, just like we do in your country."<sup>38</sup>

Having assumed such crushing debt and knowing how shameful it would be if they did not quickly repay the family members who had risked their savings to finance their move to New York, the smuggled immigrants worked extraordinarily hard and practiced incredible frugality so every possible penny could be sent back to China to pay down their debts. The illegal immigrants worked overwhelmingly in one of two kinds of places—either Chinese restaurants or garment factories. A survey in the 1990s found that 80 percent of smuggled Chinese men and 90 percent of women worked in one of these two fields. This was the case even though in China the majority of these immigrants had been employed in the professions, owned a business, or held a clerical position.<sup>39</sup>

Chinese restaurant workers typically labored twelve hours a day, six days a week, with Mondays the usual day off. But often the newest immigrants took part-time jobs on their day off—slipping take-out menus under doors in apartment buildings or manning the kitchen's skeleton crew on Mondays—in order to bring in more cash and pay their debts off faster. Very few of the immigrants had food industry experience. They started off as kitchen helpers, doing anything the cooks needed done—prepping the food, taking out garbage, or cleaning the cookware and dishes. After months or years in that position, an immigrant could become a line cook, an important promotion because it paid nearly 40 percent more, on average, than the entry-level position (\$1,600 per month versus \$1,150 for a kitchen helper in 1993). If an immigrant learned a little English, he might become a deliveryman, a job that typically paid a little more than a kitchen helper but not as much as a cook, though it did offer a break from the monotony of the kitchen. "The boss and the pots and pans and the other workers," said a former farmer from Fujian province who had become a Chinese restaurant cook, when asked about his life in America. "That's it." Other illegal immigrants echoed the same sentiment: "Work. That's all we do."

Waiters had the highest-paying jobs in Chinese restaurants, but that position required more English than most smuggled immigrants were able to master. Younger immigrants from urban parts of China seemed most adept at picking up enough English to win these coveted jobs. In New York's Chinatowns, the newcomers could enroll in "Practical English for Chinese Restaurants," a crash course designed to give them the language skills they needed to work at the front of a restaurant. In 2001 a reporter for the *Times* came across a twenty-four-year-old woman from Fujian who was taking one of these classes. The journalist found her practicing her pronunciation of phrases like "smoking area," "your food will be with you soon," and "it's nice to see you again." Once



Many Chinese immigrant men found their first jobs in New York in the kitchens of Chinese restaurants, even though almost none of them had worked in this field in China.

they gained some experience, many waiters and cooks moved out of the city to staff Chinese restaurants in strip malls all across America, where they hoped to find better pay, cheaper living expenses, and less demanding bosses. Once they paid off their smuggling debts, many of these same cooks and waiters bought an existing restaurant or started one of their own. When they did, they sought their workers from among New York's newest Chinese immigrants.<sup>40</sup>

The arrival of so many Chinese women in New York revitalized the city's garment manufacturing sector, which had been flagging since the 1960s as the immigrant workforce shrank. By 1981, there were about five hundred garment factories operating in Manhattan's Chinatown, employing nearly twenty thousand workers. These jobs had not changed much over the course of the century. The work was still subdivided among many workers, each given a specific task, with pay depending on the complexity of the job. Unlike in the sweatshops of the past, women were doing almost all the work in the garment industry by the 1980s. Other than pressing, still considered a man's job, all the other tasks were performed by women. Older women did most of the "finishing" that had once been assigned to children.

Not only were the tasks largely unchanged, but conditions in garment facto-



When Chinese immigrant women arrived in New York in the 1980s and 1990s, their first job was often in a garment factory, either in lower Manhattan or in a Chinese enclave in Brooklyn or Queens.

ries were essentially the same as well, modern labor laws notwithstanding. Inspectors commonly found fire exits padlocked, just like at the Triangle Waist company. Immigrant women still worked terribly long hours, in crowded, dusty, often stifling conditions. "In the summertime, the temperature inside is so hot. There is no ventilation at all," said one Chinese garment worker. And the pay was still incredibly low. It was not legal to pay workers by the piece unless they were guaranteed minimum wage. Furthermore, those who worked more than a certain number of hours per day or per week had to be paid a higher "overtime" wage, but both these rules were largely ignored, especially when the employer assumed that his workers were illegal immigrants. "I can't do nothing," a Latino sweatshop worker complained in 1995, echoing a sentiment expressed by many Chinese garment workers as well. "If I claim the overtime, they will fire me." As a result, a Chinese American reporter who went undercover to work in a Sunset Park garment factory in 1995 was paid just \$54 for eighty-four hours of work, when the legal minimum (at the minimum wage of \$4.25 for the first forty hours and time and a half for every hour thereafter) was \$450. In order to continue satisfying their employers' seemingly insatiable demands for productivity, Chinese immigrant women who gave birth to children

after arriving in New York often sent the babies to China to be raised by their grandparents so the immigrants could keep their jobs and finish paying off their debts. The children would be brought back to New York when they were old enough to attend public school full-time.<sup>41</sup>

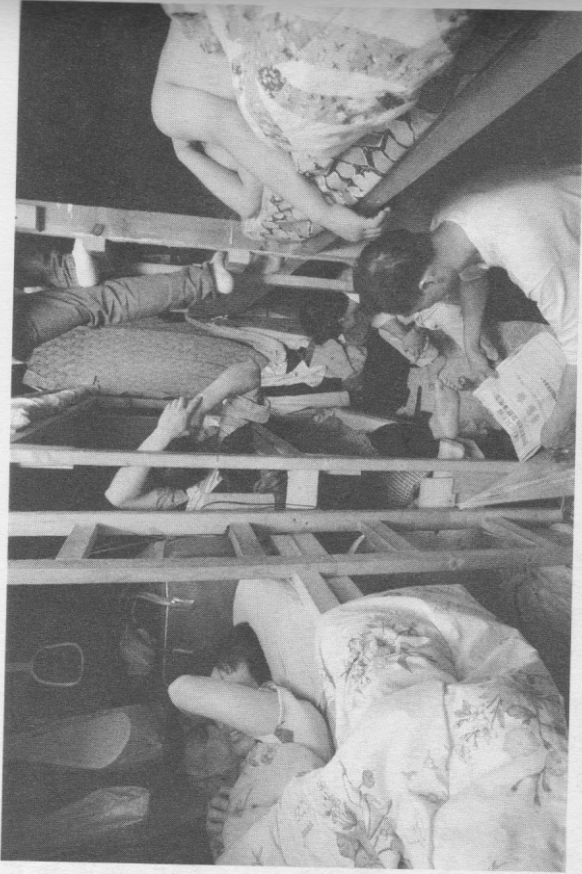
Despite periodic press coverage throughout the 1980s and 1990 of conditions "that rival the most sordid garment factories described and photographed by [Jacob] Riis," garment factory conditions over the course of these decades actually grew worse rather than better. With so many new immigrants pouring into the city, including thousands of undocumented aliens, employers could always find another desperate newcomer willing to work for starvation wages. "In the past, the conditions were not nearly as bad as they are now," said Ying Ye Deng Chan, a fifty-six-year-old Chinese naturalized immigrant, in 1995. During her twelve years doing garment work in New York, she said, "things have gotten much, much worse."<sup>42</sup>

Working conditions also deteriorated in these years because the push for clothing "made in the USA" led the city's garment industry to expand rapidly while city and state budget crises resulted in slashed inspection staffs. In 1995 there were two thousand garment factories openly operating in the city with at least fifty thousand employees, and another two thousand or so illicit sweatshops that may have employed another thirty thousand to forty thousand more. That was at least double the number of shops and workers in the city a decade earlier. By the 1990s, the industry had expanded beyond Chinatown and the Garment District surrounding Manhattan's Seventh Avenue. In the middle of the decade, hundreds of sweatshops could be found in Sunset Park and Williamsburg in Brooklyn, in Corona and Long Island City in Queens, and in the south Bronx.<sup>43</sup>

Illegal home work revived in this period as well. When clothing contractors got big short-term orders that could not be completed in their existing work-space, they had workers do the sewing in their apartments so the order could be completed on time. Pieceworkers could likewise earn extra money and pay off their smuggling debts faster by taking extra sewing home, even though to do so was against the law. "Especially in the Bronx, you'll see a lot of home work," a state labor inspector told a reporter in 1990. "Whole Vietnamese and Cambodian families stay home and make bows and hair bands — the ones sold at newsstands . . . It's cash all the way down the line: ten cents apiece, dollar a dozen, for cutting the ribbon, tying it up, gluing the clip into it . . . If you have four or five family members making hair bands ten to twelve hours a day, seven days a week, you scrape by."<sup>44</sup>

Immigrants who worked incredibly hard to pay off their debts as quickly as possible also went to extraordinary lengths to cut their housing costs to the





Owing tens of thousands of dollars to the “snakeheads” who smuggled them into the United States, Chinese immigrants who entered the United States illegally often cut their housing costs to the bone by living in bunkhouses like this one, in which a dozen or more men might sleep in a single twelve-by-twelve-foot room.

bare minimum. Newly arrived Chinese immigrant men typically lived in tiny bunk rooms that looked like something right out of Riis’s *How the Other Half Lives*. By lining the walls of a one-room, twelve-by-twelve-foot “studio” apartment with triple-tiered bunk beds, a Chinese landlord could charge \$650 per month in rent (to be split by the occupants of the twelve beds) rather than the \$500 per month he might get to rent the room empty to a single tenant. The immigrants found this system appealing because they could each pay just \$54 a month rent, allowing them to send almost every bit of their pay back to China. The most enterprising immigrants might cut their costs even further by subletting their bunks to other immigrants during the hours of the day when they were at work. African, Mexican, and other New York immigrants also employed this system of sharing bunks to maximize their ability to save and thereby send more money back to their homeland.<sup>45</sup>

Despite such living and working conditions, the Chinese did not usually regret their decision to come to America. They felt a deep sense of familial obligation and believed they could better fulfill it in the United States than in China. “I like what I am doing now,” said a nineteen-year-old Fujianese garment worker in the mid-1990s. “All I hope for is to repay the smuggling debts as soon as possible and then send money home to help my family enjoy a com-

fortable life. It’s no big deal that I myself have to endure some hardship here. If a person’s bitterness can bring happiness to so many people, it’s worth it.”

The Chinese also relished the elevated status that accrued to themselves and their families from their immigration to New York. Because of the remittances he had sent, explained a thirty-six-year-old smuggled Fujianese immigrant, “my family became rich. My parents are happy because they are respected by others” now. A twenty-one-year-old from the same Fujianese city cited his own success at *fanshen* — changing his social status — as a reason he did not regret his decision to emigrate. After all, he pointed out, “there are so many opportunities to make money here.”<sup>46</sup>

No Chinese immigrant was more attuned to the opportunities to make money in New York than Sister Ping. Like all of New York’s Chinese immigrants, she chafed at the exorbitant fees that the Bank of China charged to remit money to loved ones back home. The bank profited further when it exchanged the immigrants’ hard-earned dollars for Chinese yuan, something that annoyed the immigrants even more because those yuan became less valuable by the day compared to the dollars the immigrants had brought to the bank. Sister Ping decided to offer her own money transfer service, which would charge less than the Bank of China *and* deliver dollars rather than yuan to the immigrants’ relatives. She was soon moving millions of dollars in remittances from New York to Fujian and payments to snakeheads from Fujian to New York.<sup>47</sup>

Sister Ping also became an immigrant smuggler. As described in Patrick Radden Keefe’s *The Snakehead*, by 1984 she was charging \$18,000 to smuggle Fujianese who could not get visas into the United States. Her business was a family affair. Her sister Susan sneaked the immigrants into Hong Kong, cleaned them up and provided clothes and luggage so they could pass as tourists, and sent them on to Guatemala City, where her brother awaited them. He would move them to Mexico, where Sister Ping often personally oversaw the final leg of the journey, loading the immigrants into a secret compartment in a van and then meeting them on the other side of the border. Then she might fly with them from Los Angeles to New York. Later on, Sister Ping let underlings take these risks while she stayed in New York, tallying up her profits. For several million dollars, she bought the entire building at 47 East Broadway, right across the street from the Bank of China’s headquarters, where she moved her store and opened a restaurant as well. The line often snaking out the door of the shop consisted of customers waiting their turn to send money to China.

It did not take long for federal authorities to catch wind of Sister Ping’s immigrant smuggling operation, but when agents of the Immigration and Naturalization Service discovered its complexity and scope — with operations in



Guatemala, Mexico, Thailand, Hong Kong, and China — they realized that they lacked the budget to investigate and prosecute her. They approached the FBI in 1985, but it had no interest in devoting manpower and money to the international investigation of a crime whose maximum penalty was six months in prison. The U.S. attorney's office also declined to take the case. The INS agent in charge of the investigation decided to pay a visit to Sister Ping to at least let her know they were on to her; but she was clearly well versed in the likelihood of prosecution. "You don't have the time to get me," she coolly told the agent. "Or the resources."<sup>48</sup>

In the end, the authorities did get Sister Ping, but only because one of her smuggling operations failed so spectacularly and publicly that authorities were forced to act. Her downfall began in, of all places, Tiananmen Square. In the wake of the massacre of antigovernment protesters that took place there in 1989, President George H. W. Bush issued an executive order in April 1990 declaring that no Chinese citizen who had arrived in the United States, even illegally, before the Tiananmen Square massacre could be deported back to China. The order also stated that "enhanced consideration" should be given to any Chinese seeking asylum who expressed a fear of persecution if they were returned to China because of "that country's policy of forced abortion or coerced sterilization." As a result of Bush's order, the success rate for the Chinese in asylum cases quickly shot up from about 30 percent to 85 percent. And even if such an application failed, one could remain in the United States as long as one could provide evidence (not hard to obtain in Chinatown) that one had entered the United States before the Tiananmen Massacre.

Bush's executive order caused a sensation in Fujian province. "Everybody went crazy," recalled a Chinese journalist covering Fuzhou. "The area was in a frenzy. Farmers put down their tools, students discarded their books, workers quit their jobs, and everybody was talking about nothing but going to America." Sister Ping and other snakeheads were inundated with requests from Fujianese seeking to be smuggled to New York.<sup>49</sup>

There was only one problem. American authorities had begun cracking down on illegal Chinese immigration routed through the Bangkok airport, sending agents there to check documents before would-be immigrants could reach the United States. Sister Ping and other snakeheads now had hundreds of customers stranded in Thailand who needed to be moved. Seeking a new way to get their customers to America, and requiring the ability to send hundreds at a time rather than a dozen, the snakeheads decided to follow the lead of Taiwanese immigrant traffickers and smuggle their customers into the United States by ship. Sister Ping took on a variety of partners in the enterprise, including one who had successfully landed illegal immigrants in Boston from an

oceangoing vessel, using fishing boats to ferry the passengers ashore. It would have made the most sense to transport these immigrants to the West Coast of the United States, "only" an eight-thousand-mile journey from Thailand. But since some ships sent by their competitors had recently been intercepted by authorities in the Pacific, Ping's associates decided that their vessel would take the seventeen-thousand-mile route westward across the Indian Ocean, south around the tip of Africa, and then northward through the South and North Atlantic directly to New York.

The ship leased by the smugglers, the *Najid II*, left southern Thailand in July 1992 with approximately three hundred emigrants. The ship had tiny state-rooms with two beds per room, better than the steerage of old. But there was no running water; the passengers were given a couple of small bottles of water per day to drink and one with which to wash themselves. It soon became clear to the immigrants that the *Najid II* was a broken-down rust bucket on its last legs. Even if it had moved at the snail-like pace of ten nautical miles per hour, it would have been able to make it to New York in two months, but in that amount of time it got only as far as Mauritius, a thousand miles off the east coast of Africa and only a quarter of the way to the United States. The authorities in Mauritius, hearing rumors of the ship's illicit enterprise, refused to let it land, so it limped northward, away from its proper course, toward Kenya. By this point, passengers were getting half rations of water. The authorities in Mombasa banned the ship from landing too, but it anchored in a mangrove swamp anyway. It was in no condition to complete its journey.<sup>50</sup>

By this point the ship's supplies were running out, so the three hundred emigrants lowered whatever cash they had with them down to boats piloted by Kenyans who sold them food. When their cash ran out, the passengers began sneaking into Mombasa, where they sought help at a Chinese restaurant. The owner let the passengers call their relatives, who wired them money directly to the restaurant. Sister Ping dispatched a courier with \$1,000 for each of her twenty customers aboard the ship to help sustain them while she and her partners devised a new means of conveying them to New York. The more prosperous passengers took rooms at a hotel while they waited for their new ship to arrive. When the hotel's Indian restaurant went out of business, some of the *Najid II*'s enterprising passengers took over the space and opened a Chinese restaurant, which quickly became a success.

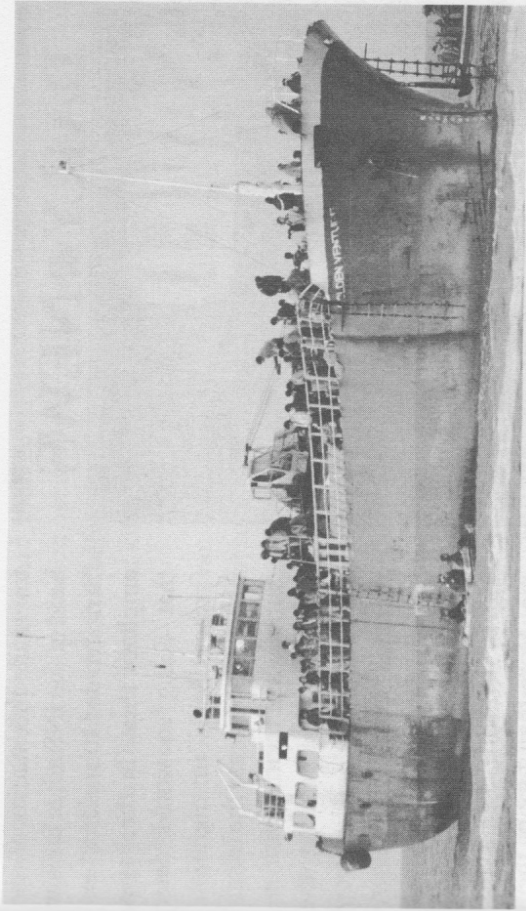
Sister Ping's partners decided that rather than lease another ship, they would buy one. After all, they expected to be making quite a few smuggling trips over the coming years. By the time they found one they could afford (a cargo ship they aptly renamed the *Golden Venture*), hired a crew, sailed it from Thailand to Mombasa with nearly one hundred additional immigrants, and readied it for

the long voyage to New York, it was April. But only two hundred of the original three hundred passengers from the *Nadi II* boarded the *Golden Venture* for the final leg of their journey. Some had gone back to China. Others had found alternate transportation to the United States. A few even stayed in Mombasa to run the Chinese restaurant they had opened. But when Sister Ping's twenty passengers were ferried to the ship and saw they would have to sleep on plywood boards on the floor of a dank and bare cargo hold rather than in beds, most of them refused to go aboard. The *Golden Venture* left with only two of them, infuriating Sister Ping.<sup>51</sup>

By this point, the story of the three hundred illegal would-be immigrants stranded in Mombasa had made international news. The *South China Post* even reported the name of the emigrants' new ship and the smugglers' plan to take it to New York. But such was the state of immigration enforcement in those days that the United States made no effort to intercept the vessel. As the *Golden Venture* neared New York at the beginning of June, a full year after the original passengers had left Thailand, the snakeheads on board received instructions to proceed to the Massachusetts coast instead. When they got there, however, none of the promised fishing boats appeared to ferry the passengers to shore. A shootout between rival Chinatown gangs that took place across the Hudson from New York City in Teaneck, New Jersey, had left dead or under arrest most of the leaders of the gang Sister Ping had hired to offload the *Golden Venture*'s passengers. This gang had so dominated the East Coast offloading of Chinese illegal immigrants that no trustworthy substitutes could be found to do the job. With the *Golden Venture* passengers on starvation rations and rail thin by this point, the snakeheads on board gave the crewman steering the vessel orders to head to New York. (The captain had been locked in his cabin when he said he wanted to proceed to the Azores to get more supplies.) Eleven months and more than seventeen thousand miles after leaving Thailand, the snakeheads had decided that the ordeal had to end, one way or another. The passengers, who by this point had been subsisting for months on peanuts and rice boiled in rusty water, felt the same way.<sup>52</sup>

One of the more audacious snakeheads proposed sailing right up the East River and offloading the passengers at one of the abandoned piers on the outskirts of Chinatown. But eventually they decided to run the ship aground on Rockaway Beach, just a half a mile from where Anthony Camardo had been caught trying to land his boatload of smuggled Sicilians seventy years earlier. At about 1:30 a.m. on Sunday morning June 6, the helmsman aimed the ship straight toward the beachfront promenade at Jacob Riis Park and set the motor to full throttle. The snakeheads told the immigrants to brace themselves.

About two hundred yards from shore, there was a loud thud as the ship sud-

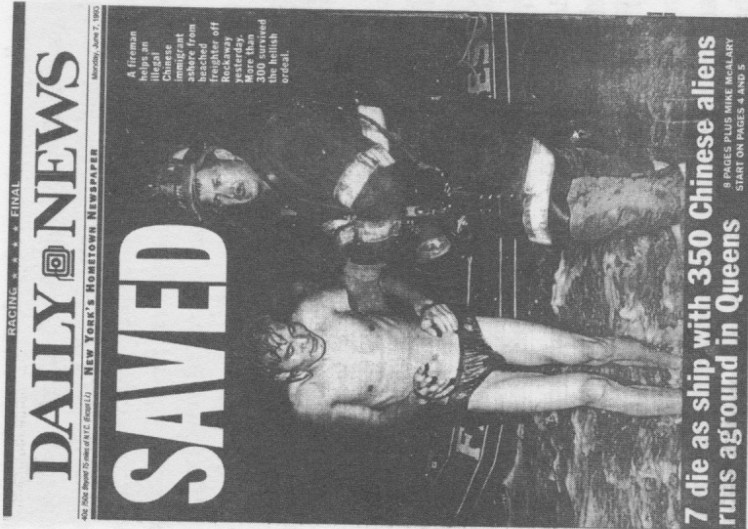


The *Golden Venture* with the one hundred passengers who refused to jump into the water still on board. That a ship of this size brought three times this number of immigrants to New York in a barren cargo hold is hard to fathom.

denly ran aground on a sandbar. The passengers were ordered to leap overboard and swim to shore. "We were told as long as we set foot on American soil, we would be able to stay in this country," one of the passengers later recounted. In the pandemonium that followed, about two hundred passengers jumped into the water. A storm had just passed through, and the sea was rough and choppy with high swells. The shock of the fifty-degree water stunned many of the immigrants. Others were overwhelmed by the waves or pulled away from the beach by the riptide. Of the ten who drowned or died of heart attacks in the water, one was an immigrant for whom Sister Ping was responsible. The rest of the passengers who jumped into the ocean eventually dragged themselves onto the beach or were rescued by policemen who happened upon the scene and the Coast Guardsmen they called for help. As the immigrants came ashore, they vomited seawater and shivered uncontrollably; many were slightly purple from being in the cold water for so long. Others rolled in the sand in a kind of mad delirium. After daybreak, the Coast Guard boarded the ship, stepping carefully to avoid the small piles of feces all over the deck, and rescued the one hundred or so passengers who remained on board.<sup>53</sup>

The *Golden Venture* passengers, who had waited so long to experience the wonders of America, must have been sorely disappointed at their reception. President Bill Clinton vowed to use the incident to show the nations of the world that America would not "lose control of our borders." Even before Clin-





With smuggled immigrants literally washing up on the city's shoreline in 1993, New Yorkers could no longer ignore the issue of illegal immigration or its consequences.

mented aliens, and so forth. The analogy is apt, for just as it is virtually impossible to redirect the flow of a river — water goes where it wants to go — it is likewise almost impossible to stem the flow of people into a nation whose borders are so vast and whose citizens refuse to be subjected to constant identity checks. The stories of the *Golden Venture's* passengers after they were washed ashore in Queens bear this out. Of the 260 or so who made it to the beach alive in 1993, about 220 were still living in the United States a dozen years later. Fifty disappeared into American society, either slipping away from the authorities at Riis Park or failing to appear in court after judges granted them bail. Another fifty won their asylum cases. After embarrassing news stories about the fifty-five who still languished in the York detention center more than three years after their arrival, President Clinton summarily released them as well — an act that did not make them legal but did allow them to stay in the United States. One hundred and ten of their compatriots at York had been deported, but by

ton made this statement, the head of the INS office in New York decided to make an example of them in the hopes that doing so would deter further illegal immigration. Rather than release the immigrants while their asylum applications were pending, the standard procedure, he threw them all in jail. They were initially detained in New Jersey, but most were eventually moved to York, Pennsylvania. More than fifty of them spent three and a half years behind bars. The case of the *Golden Venture*, according to the *Times*, had “set off a national argument about illegal immigration.”<sup>54</sup>

When we discuss immigration, we inevitably make analogies to water. We talk about the “flow” of immigration, the “flood” of undocumented aliens, and so forth. The analogy is apt, for just as it is virtually impossible to redirect the flow of a river — water goes where it wants to go — it is likewise almost impossible to stem the flow of people into a nation whose borders are so vast and whose citizens refuse to be subjected to constant identity checks. The stories of the *Golden Venture's* passengers after they were washed ashore in Queens bear this out. Of the 260 or so who made it to the beach alive in 1993, about 220 were still living in the United States a dozen years later. Fifty disappeared into American society, either slipping away from the authorities at Riis Park or failing to appear in court after judges granted them bail. Another fifty won their asylum cases. After embarrassing news stories about the fifty-five who still languished in the York detention center more than three years after their arrival, President Clinton summarily released them as well — an act that did not make them legal but did allow them to stay in the United States. One hundred and ten of their compatriots at York had been deported, but by

2006, at least sixty of them had sneaked back in, including one who forced to undergo a sterilization operation upon his return to China had fathered three children before he boarded the *Golden Venture* worked in Chinese restaurant kitchens, while others by that point owned their own businesses.<sup>55</sup>

After the *Golden Venture* ran aground, Sister Ping initially remained in New York, operating her restaurant and other enterprises, legal and illegal, from 47 East Broadway. She was lucky that she had let her business partners buy and operate the *Golden Venture*. But as it became clear that many of those already arrested associates were spilling their guts to the authorities in the hopes of receiving reduced sentences, she decided in September 1994 to flee to Hong Kong. Knowing so many passport forgers, Sister Ping continued to move easily around the world, overseeing her snakehead operations. Meanwhile, twenty-two others had either pleaded guilty or been convicted of crimes connected to the *Golden Venture's* voyage. The last, labeled the “mastermind” of the ship’s journey by the press, was arrested in Thailand while polishing his Mercedes-Benz.

The FBI eventually managed to track down Sister Ping by following her children, and in April 2000, American agents helped the Hong Kong police arrest her to face a U.S. indictment for alien smuggling, hostage taking (holding immigrants in safe houses until they paid their fees), trafficking in ransom proceeds, and two counts of money laundering. She managed to drag out the fight over her extradition to the United States for three years, and by the time the case went to trial in 2005, New York’s tabloid press had concluded that *she* was the true mastermind behind the *Golden Venture*, or as a *Daily News* headline put it, “EVIL INCARNATE.” The jury convicted her on three of the five counts, and the judge, apparently agreeing with the *Daily News's* assessment, sentenced her to the maximum penalty allowed, thirty-five years. Yet when she died of pancreatic cancer in a Texas prison in April 2014, the reaction in New York suggested that the Chinese, even many of her own brutalized customers, did not view her as evil at all. One called her “a modern day Robin Hood.” To Chinese immigrants, Sister Ping had offered them what Americans selfishly withheld — the opportunity to escape China, move to New York, and pursue the American dream.<sup>56</sup>

The third-largest immigrant group in New York in the decades after the implementation of the Hart-Celler Act was from Jamaica. Yet Jamaicans are most appropriately considered not on their own but as part of the non-Hispanic Caribbean immigrant population commonly known as “West Indians.” If grouped together, the newcomers from Jamaica, Haiti, Trinidad and Tobago, Guyana,