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Book Review: Chinese Human Smuggling Organizations

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BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

Sheldon X. Zhang, *Chinese Human Smuggling Organizations: Families, Social Networks, and Cultural Imperatives*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008. \$US 45.00 hardcover (978-0-8047-5741-6)

Chinese Human Smuggling Organizations has two main objectives, both of which are met. First, with empirical data, the author exposes the inner workings of Chinese human smuggling organizations. Second, he analyzes the process by which “ordinary” citizens are able to turn human smuggling into a global business operating within a “hostile and uncertain market environment” (p. xvi). This book provides details and analysis seldom found in research pertaining to criminal organizations.

The book is on “smuggling” rather than “trafficking” of immigrants, using the United Nations distinction in which “smuggling” involves the willing participation of the illegal migrant (even when conditions may not be as promised), rather than the involuntary participation and violation of human rights implied by “human trafficking” (p. 22). Zhang uses the term “snakehead” for anyone who brokers services and facilitates the illegal entry of persons into foreign countries. A number of characteristics set this book apart from other studies of illegal migration. Most important is the methodology. While other researchers, such as Ko-lin Chin (whose work is used and acknowledged by Zhang), have interviewed those who have been smuggled, this research involves face-to-face interviews with the actual smugglers themselves in addition to field observation and an analysis of government documents and press reports.

The book begins with a solid review of the history of legal and illegal China-to-US immigration. To study illegal migration one must understand the context: political, economic, and social environments; the motivations of the illegal migrating populations and of legal migrant groups; and the identity of those who exploit and/or are serviced by the illegal migrants. Macro and cultural factors explain the “push” to the US from China, as well as factors unique to Fujian, such as transitions within China and the end of the *bukou* system that allowed Chinese citizens to change residences without permission from the authorities (p. 19). Fujian also has a long history of sea-based smuggling, secret societies, and outward migration.

Zhang found three “basic prerequisites” to a transnational Chinese smuggling organization: an existing market demand, a tight social network, and an opportunity to build a relationship with snakeheads (p. 129). The job requires mainly “connections” rather than specific special skills. The network consists of snakeheads who work with other snakeheads. There is a significant discrepancy between police, public, and political rhetoric of the rigidity of organized crime, and smugglers who saw themselves more as colleagues than as a part of a sophisticated “organization.” Snakeheads emphasized the “casual and sporadic nature of their business activities.” Where a person “fit” within the operation depended on their ability to fill certain roles, such as recruitment (of clients, of US passport and green-card holders for use of their documents, or of eligible bachelors for fraudulent marriages), preparation of documents (for business delegations, fraudulent marriages, or students and trainee visas), and photo substitutions. In small operations, the snakehead handled everything for select clients.

Good relations appear to be at the root of the success of these operations. While traditional police approaches to organized crime preferred to see rigid family or ethnic hierarchical structures, the picture that emerges of the snakehead operations in this study is of networks, loyalty, good service, and fluidity. The “structure” was “amorphous” rather than the “godfather” type of hierarchy. Even the “big snakeheads” spoke only of a network of friends and contacts (p. 108). Depending on the perspective of the writer, *guanxi* (having the right personal connections) can be portrayed as criminogenic or a positive aspect of Asian life. At its simplest, *guanxi* refers to the loyalty and obligation ties that bind families, kin, and lineage villages throughout China. Beyond this, it allows for global interactions along network lines, and in addition to ordinary legal exchanges, these global *guanxi* networks may facilitate the smuggling of drugs, aliens, weapons, and any legitimate or illegitimate commodity for which there is a market.

Globalization encourages illegal smuggling through *guanxi* networks. First, Chinese living abroad return home bearing generous gifts from North America, and the comparison in life styles becomes very clear. Second, the potential migrant knows that he/she can expect assistance from *guanxi* members in North America (and elsewhere). Third, the importance of “saving face” means that even when the passage is terrible and life in the new host country is awful, illegal immigrants will write home very positively, thus encouraging other *guanxi* members to make the trip.

Similar to Chin’s findings in *Smuggled Chinese: Clandestine Immigration to the United States* (1999), snakeheads saw themselves largely

as philanthropists or as ordinary business persons. Doing good by providing a valuable service *and* making money was a source of pride for families as long as the “business” was conducted “honourably” (not demanding additional money upon arrival and no physical abuse). Yet the study did reveal that roles within the organizations included enforcers on the ships, to watch and maintain order for the month-long trips, and debt collectors whose job was to threaten nonpaying clients in the US. Unlike some other forms of organized crime, violence was claimed to be limited to debt collection and was not against other snakeheads. For example, there was no evidence of movement toward a territorial monopoly or control over the market.

These illicit entrepreneurs could enter or leave the smuggling business without the dire consequences often associated with departure from a criminal organization. Concerns over personal safety, inability to sustain a reliable smuggling network, or weariness dealing with corrupt Chinese officials were reasons for leaving the business. There was no sense of being “in it for life or else”; leaving or staying in the business was a decision based on balancing risks and profits. The amounts clients paid in order to be smuggled nearly doubled between 1992–2000. While law enforcement takes credit for this increase, their contribution is only part of the answer, another part being a significant imbalance between demand for the service and the number of smuggling “specialists” able to deliver it. Despite the apparently large profits, there are also high risks and high costs including bribes and illegal documents. If clients are arrested it is common for the snakehead to pay to repatriate them.

The literature on organized crime emphasizes how important corruption is to any successful criminal operation. A criminal enterprise that involves crossing borders is particularly vulnerable to the ability to corrupt, influence, or intimidate “legitimate” partners such as border guards, police officers, government officials, immigration lawyers, and refugee workers. While the author reports that corruption is rampant in China, Zhang’s study did not expose US corruptions and there was a sense that the snakeheads did not know how to go about approaching US officials or to establish the type of relationship that would guarantee assistance in criminal smuggling.

Chinese Human Smuggling Organizations is an important book that offers essential information for policy makers, law enforcement, and academics interested in this large and profitable illicit market. Sheldon Zhang’s empirical research emphasizes the critical role played by corruption and the complicity of “legitimate” professionals in illicit markets. Law enforcement efforts that target only the snakeheads, without an

equal focus on the facilitators in the smuggling operations, will continue to be ineffective.

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Dr. Margaret Beare served as the first Director of the Nathanson Centre for the Study of Organized Crime and Corruption, located within Osgoode Hall Law School, York University (Toronto, Canada) from 1996–2006. She holds the position of Professor within the Sociology and Law departments. Her previous research includes her books *Criminal Conspiracies*, *Organized Crime in Canada*; an edited book titled *Critical Reflections on Transnational Organized Crime, Money Laundering and Corruption*; a coauthored book *Money Laundering in Canada: Chasing Dirty and Dangerous Dollars*, and a coedited manuscript pertaining to police independence titled *Police and Government Relations: Who's Calling the Shots*. An edited book *Honouring Social Justice: Honouring Dianne Martin* was published in 2008.