1 Introduction

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Although human smuggling is not exclusive to one particular ethnic group, a few notorious incidents have focused much attention on the smuggling of Chinese nationals for years. In June 1993, for example, the cargo ship “Golden Venture” ran aground off the US coast near New York. It carried 286 Chinese illegal immigrants on board. Several drowned when they tried to swim ashore but were overcome by the cold water. The ensuing investigation revealed that conditions on board were abominable and accounts of the horrors the passengers suffered during the journey found their way to the media. In later years similar transports were discovered (Wang, 1996). This drew attention to the smuggling of Chinese people in particular in the United States. The so-called Dover tragedy caused a similar uproar in Europe. On 19 June 2000 a cargo truck was found in Dover containing the bodies of 58 Chinese nationals who had died of suffocation. Only two survived the journey. The investigations and prosecutions that followed exposed a large group of human smugglers in the Netherlands.

In addition to such notorious incidents, Chinese human smuggling is also connected with several alarming observations. Early 2004, 21 illegal Chinese cockle-pickers drowned near Morecambe in Great Britain. According to media reports, they were being grossly exploited. There were allegations of gang masters forcing these illegal immigrants to do dangerous work under appalling conditions for very low wages to earn back the money they owed for being smuggled out of China (BBC, 2004). If we limit the scope to the Netherlands, which in the following chapters will become the focus of this study, exploitation ensuing from Chinese human smuggling is also considered a problem. Bovenkerk and Fijnaut, for example, states that some of the people smuggled into the country are recruited by the criminal organizations that bring them here (Bovenkerk & Fijnaut, 1996). Vogels et al. also report that illegal migrants are forced to extort, threaten and kidnap people in their own Chinese community in order to pay off their debts (Vogels, Geense, & Martens, 1999: 124). These debts are estimated at tens of thousands of euros per person, which is the cost of smuggling them from China (Godfroid & Vinckx, 1999: 37, 63, 233; Vogels et al., 1999: 123). Furthermore there are suspicions that underage female Chinese asylum seekers are forced into prostitution (Hoogendoorn, 1999; Venicz & Vanwesenbeeck, 1998). The Dutch authorities also assume that human smugglers are to a great extent responsible for the influx of asylum seekers (Tweede Kamer, 1995: 1; Van der Molen-Maesen, 1996; 1999). As a result, therefore, “the criminal prosecution of human smugglers [has become] an essential element in managing migration flows” (Tweede Kamer, 1995: 1).

However, cracking down on human smugglers is no simple affair. Apart from difficulties arising investigating and prosecution, repressive government action can also have perverse effects. It might inflate smuggling prices and raise
the risk for small-time smugglers and thereby give rise to professional large-scale smuggling organizations (Akinbingöl, 2003; Florin, 1996).

1.2 Objective

In the media, the literature and even police investigations, Chinese people who are somehow involved in human smuggling on the wrong side of the law are often nicknamed shetou. This is a Chinese word that literally means ‘snakehead’, and is never applied to other nationalities. It alludes to the head of a snake, which cunningly leads the rest of the body to its destination.

Such a term can be distracting however. It clearly focuses on ethnic Chinese smugglers although the smuggling of Chinese people is not always a purely Chinese issue. Reports on the investigation of the Dover tragedy for example, show that Dutch and Turkish individuals were also involved. Furthermore, the term shetou says very little about what such a person actually does nor how he cooperates with others. It is these two latter questions that in particular have been addressed in some landmark studies (Chin, 1999; Kwong, 1997, 2001; Wang, 1996; Zhang & Chin, 2002; Zhang & Gaylord, 1996).

However, these studies of Chinese human smuggling originate in the United States and hardly pay attention to Europe, let alone the Netherlands. That begs the question to what extent the American findings apply to the Netherlands. The difference in geographical position alone suggests there will be differences in smuggling methods. Furthermore, US society has different laws, a different social security system and a more open labor market than the Netherlands. This can affect the sort of smugglers involved, the choice of destination and perhaps the type of migrant. Another important difference is that the Netherlands is regularly used as a transit country (IAM 2005). The US, the land of unlimited opportunity with its ‘golden mountains’, is unlikely to be used for that purpose. Only a few Chinese would want to be smuggled into another country once they had reached America. This has certain consequences. A tight labor market in the Netherlands may prompt migrants to seek better conditions elsewhere. However, if the US employment situation took a turn for the worse, migrants may tighten their belt a little more, work harder or even turn to crime to survive.

Little is known about how smuggling to or through the Netherlands is organized. Information from the Netherlands indicates only the global travel routes, the means of transport used or the length of time a smuggling operation takes (Buitenhuis, 2000; INDIAC, 2000). The Dutch authorities report the involvement of triads and groups of major organized criminals, but give no details about how these groups actually function (IAM, 2001a: 64; 2002; Bovenkerk & Fijnaut, 1996). Occasionally, a few members of the Chinese community are interviewed. This produces anecdotal information that suggests a streamlined organisation is involved, but still provides little insight into precisely how the smuggling is organized (Braam, 2003; Godfroid & Vinckx, 1999; Husken & Kagie, 2002). Although the smuggling of Chinese nationals is considered a classic example of major organized crime, there is little empirical evidence to support this assumption.
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The lack of knowledge about Chinese human smuggling in the Netherlands is all the more remarkable considering the fact that several studies of the Chinese community have been conducted since the Second World War. However, the focus of these studies was their position in society, how they experience their ethnicity and the related problems (ACB/LFCON, 1994; Benton & Vermeulen, 1987; Blaak, Engelhard, de Frenne, & Sproet, 2004; Hira, 1997; Li, 1999a, 1999b; Pieke, 1988; Tseng, 1983; Vellinga & Wolters, 1966; Vellinga & Wolters, 1973; Vermeulen, 1984). Other recurring themes in studies of Chinese people in the Netherlands are childrearing and the education of children in Chinese families, the position of elderly Chinese and ethnic entrepreneurship (Geense & Pels, 1998; Rijkschroeff, 1998; Sciortino, Wessels, & Teng, 1993). The fact that most of the researchers have a sociological or anthropological background probably explains to some extent why these studies focus on analyzing the position that the Chinese have in society. Another important factor is the debate at government level about minorities in the Netherlands that began in the early 1980s. The Chinese themselves were interested in the question whether they as a group should be included in the special minorities policy of the Dutch government. For example, Turkish, Moroccan and Surinamese immigrants already had official minority status. Inclusion in the minorities policy would make the Chinese eligible for minority grants.

Human smuggling and illegality are not dealt with in such studies. At most, these studies acknowledge the presence of illegal Chinese aliens or that illegal entry of the Netherlands occurred (Benton & Vermeulen, 1987: 9; Groenendijk, 1987: 87, 88; Vellinga & Wolters, 1966: ii, 66; Vermeulen, 1984: 115; Vogels et al., 1999; Willems & Cottaar, 1989: 125). The way these people got into the country is virtually ignored. It could be that some researchers were afraid to delve into illegality or illicit behavior for fear of stigmatizing migrant communities (Kyle & Koslowski, 2001: 11,12).

Two exceptions emerged recently. Pieke et al. conducted specific research in Europe on the transnational Chinese community from Fujian province (Pieke, Nyíri, Thuno, & Ceccagno, 2004). Their field interviews provided some information about illegal migration, too. The organization of human smuggling was shown to be relatively simple. The study was limited, however, because it focused only on Chinese from Fujian province, while Europe has many migrants from Zhejiang province as well. The second study was carried out by Staring et al. (Staring et al., 2005). They were commissioned by the Rotterdam police to examine human smuggling involving the port of Rotterdam. They analyzed 11 police investigations and identified two model types of smuggling organizations on a sliding scale from poorly organized to well organized. The Chinese were found to be well organized. However, as the researchers themselves point out, the cases selected for this study were limited geographically to Rotterdam. Furthermore, only three human smuggling cases involved Chinese. Those three cases are, in fact, closely related to each other and are therefore not necessarily representative of Chinese human smuggling in the rest of the Netherlands.

1. After receiving ‘observer’ status in 2002, the Chinese community was finally granted official minority status in 2004.
In summary, therefore, no extensive research has been conducted into the specific phenomenon of Chinese human smuggling in the Dutch context. The aim of this thesis is to provide more information about this issue through systematic empirical research. The focus is not so much on the smuggling routes that migrants take or how migrants survive in Dutch society, but on the organizers of the smuggling process. Who are they? How do they work together? Can specific characteristics be identified? For example, are they involved in other types of criminality as well?

The main research question is: Who are the smugglers of Chinese people and how is Chinese human smuggling organized in the Netherlands? The next chapter elaborates further on this general question.