

## Dover 58

The streets of the UK are paved in gold. Its fields are paved with rich pickings.

These illusory images of life in Britain are sold to the citizens of some of China's more remote parts in an effort to persuade them to part with unimaginably large sums of money. Some of those also part with their lives.

China's gangs called snakeheads actively perpetrate a cynical trade whose goal is the transportation of desperate people across the world. The victims agree to come under persuasion. They are often forced to pay their transporters under pressure and threat.

The world tends to hear about this 'induced' movement of population when the mechanics of the illegal trade fail. The consequences then are truly tragic.

### **The story**

Early on a Monday morning, the 18th June 2000, a fresh team of customs officials were starting the day's first shift. Most had experience of catching smugglers and illegal immigrants at Dover, were on good terms with some of the regular drivers passing through, and knew what to look out for. But nothing could have prepared them for the gruesome discovery they were about to make, which would be broadcast in shocked news headlines around the world. During a routine check on an unfamiliar lorry, the border guards opened the cargo container. They were confronted with what one later described as "a sea of bodies". The lorry contained the corpses of 58 Chinese migrants -- 54 men and 4 women --, most in their 20s, who had asphyxiated during the ferry crossing to England. They had lost their lives in an attempt to attain a better life in the West. There were two survivors, barely still breathing, lying among the bodies.

Who were the people in the container? Where did they come from? The tragic story of the Dover victims has been painstakingly pieced together. It starts a long time before that fateful summer's day, and the trail begins far away from Dover.

Ke Su Di was one of the survivors of the Dover tragedy. He came from Fujian, a poor, rural province in East China, and worked there delivering food, earning around £50 a month.

China's industrial revolution is on a scale the world has never seen. Men and women from across the countryside are flocking to the urban centres, to join the impoverished mass of humanity jostling for jobs in construction or manufacturing, where they must endure arduous conditions and long hours with virtually no employment rights. Industrial accidents are common, but for every worker killed or injured, there are many more available who are desperate to replace him. Urban unemployment in China is estimated to stand at around 15% nationally, but is as high as 80% in some towns. There are no reliable figures for unemployment in mainly rural areas like Fujian, but it is certainly much greater.

But it was not all poverty and scraping by in Fujian. In the villages, huge and vulgar mansions were springing up, five or six storeys high, sweeping away hovels that had been there since time

immemorial. Ostentatious in the extreme, these houses screamed out the wealth of their inhabitants, and propelled them up the social ladder accordingly. Because if you have money there you don't keep quiet about it. With a shortage of women owing to the one-child policy previously in force, in China it is a truth universally acknowledged that a man in possession of an old house will forever be in want of a wife. The old Communist ideas about the dignity of work have given way to a messianic belief in the dignity of wealth.

Nick Broomfield, the film director, visited China and was disconcerted by the modernity and materialism he encountered. Everywhere, he reported, there were brand new buildings, railways and airports on a massive scale, which made "Heathrow look like a bunch of Nissan huts". Broomfield observed that a huge social stigma burdened those who couldn't keep up with the brave new world:

"The people who live in old houses feel they've somehow failed. Everyone wants to live in these new builds; there's none of that Hampstead feeling of, "I'm going to redo and preserve this old house." One man I met, who was living in my favourite of all the houses I'd seen, told me, "This is the worst house in the village. My son would never get married as long as we lived here, that's why he went away."

In the rush towards modernity, all things representative of the old, including important temple complexes, have been abandoned. Broomfield ascribes this process of cultural obliteration to Maoism: "Mao... eradicated all history... It's as if there is no history."

Most of the new houses are built with money made by a family member abroad, one of China's army of (mainly illegal) overseas workers, often earning ten times the local wages. Some of them proclaim the success of their owners who have done well in business in China.

Dramatic modernisation was and is taking place throughout the country on a globally unprecedented scale, as China beckons the world's industrialists to go thither and build their factories and offices and to make the most of its cut-price workforce. Even remote and sleepy provinces like Fujian are being transformed by brand new infrastructure, offices, hotels, bars, brothels and homes that proclaim the wealth of the winners in China's shameless embrace of capitalism. The pace of China's industrial revolution has been unfettered by any bourgeois necessity to be accountable to the population, or indeed, any apparent sense of responsibility towards the population at all.

The difficulties faced by the poor in the new China is reflected in the great social pressure on men and women of working age to become illegal workers abroad, often thereby salvaging the 'face' of their families. A Guardian journalist in China chanced upon an all-day and all-night Chinese opera in a village hall, by a troupe of forty players, put on for the village at the expense of a couple celebrating their son's illegal arrival in Japan to work. Broomfield explains what such festivities anticipate:

"The young people go abroad to earn money, and when they come back they build massive five-storey houses that are painted in strange colours and have an odd plastic facing. They look like they're from a Chinese version of Dallas, only they go straight up instead of spreading out, and they move the whole of their extended family in."

Faced with rising prices, Ke Su Di was struggling ever harder to make ends meet. All around him, he saw his friends' families prospering, many on the back of remittances from a family member working illegally in the West. In the new China of cutthroat capitalism, Ke realised he mustn't be left behind. Ke and his family decided to approach the snakeheads, to smuggle him to Britain.

The snakeheads are Chinese people smugglers, so-called because wherever they go, a line of illegal migrants winds surreptitiously behind them. Operating as openly as a travel agency in many rural parts of China, their gangs are often involved in other illicit activities such as drug and goods smuggling. But the smuggling of people is a central and lucrative enterprise; every year tens of thousands of Chinese avail themselves of the snakeheads services to quit China for the West.

As Ke explained:

"In China, life was not too good. I didn't have a good life at home and the snakehead told me there would be no risk . . . we want to come to Britain because you can earn good money. Life is good there."

The people of Fujian have a longstanding tradition of seeking their fortune overseas during hard times, and large family networks scattered around the world. In some villages, four out of five families have a family member abroad. Workers may have to tolerate unpleasant conditions in foreign countries, but these are not much worse than those they might face if they found work in a city in China, and in the West they may well earn ten times the average wage in the Chinese countryside. Myths still abound of streets paved with gold and tales of those who have made their fortunes, while the typically hard, desperate and lonely reality of being an illegal worker in a foreign city is barely mentioned for various reasons: many illegal workers gloss over their situation in telephone calls or letters home so as not to distress their families, and triumphant homecomers don't care to dwell on the bad and undignified times.

The cost depends on the desired destination and is between £15,000 and £20,000 to get to England. The would-be migrant negotiates a payment plan with the snakeheads; some allow their clients to pay the fee back as they earn in their destination country, others require a substantial or full payment either upfront or via a family member on the migrant's successful arrival in the UK (confirmed by telephone call). In the latter cases, the migrant invariably cannot come up with such sums without approaching others – in fortunate circumstances friends and family, otherwise moneylenders, with whom he negotiates a deal and payment plan.

The price of Ke's journey was ¥230,000 (£20,000); apart from an initial deposit, it could be paid in installments once Ke started earning in the UK. Ke intended to send money home to his family, who would in turn pay off the snakeheads. The family and their property were the snakeheads' security. If regular payments were not forthcoming, the snakeheads would turn ugly, threatening and harrasing the debtor's family with increasing severity. If on the other hand, the snakeheads suspect the family has money, while the debtor is penniless, they have been known to force relatives in China to listen over the telephone as the debtor is beaten up by the snakeheads' henchmen in the West. Snakeheads are notorious for their violence, have little hesitation in resorting to murder, and are justly feared.

The snakeheads arranged for Ke to fly from Beijing to Belgrade, the entry point for hundreds of thousands of Chinese into Europe. He was dressed in a particular grey t-shirt and black trousers so that the snakeheads could identify him and, such was the popularity of the Beijing-Belgrade route

among people traffickers, he was issued with a codeword to avoid being picked up mistakenly by a rival gang. Once in Belgrade, he became part of a group of sixteen Chinese illegal immigrants, including Ke Guang Shi, the other survivor of the Dover tragedy. Twenty-two year old Ke Guang Shi was also from Fujian. He said he decided to travel to the UK to escape religious persecution he suffered in China for being a Catholic.

The sixteen were escorted by local smugglers towards Hungary, variously travelling on foot or in vans. They were turned back at the Hungarian border, but succeeded in passing through on a second attempt.

In Hungary, they exchanged the Chinese false passports that had got them to Belgrade for fake Korean ones. Thence they were driven to Austria in a van with blacked-out windows. From Austria, their convoluted route took them to Venice, where they boarded a flight to Paris. From Paris they took the train to Rotterdam, where they were relieved by their traffickers of the Korean passports, to be used again, no doubt, by the next batch of Chinese migrants.

Ke Shi Guang described the journey: "The different snakeheads met us along the route, giving us food, taking charge. At Rotterdam we were met by three Chinese, one of them was from my home town. He had left four or five years ago. We were split into small groups. The one from my town drove us away from the station in a black BMW saloon."

In Rotterdam, the sixteen from Belgrade encountered the rest of their ill-fated companions, who had arrived there on diverse clandestine routes.

The 60 spent the following three days hiding out in Rotterdam at two separate safe houses. On the afternoon of Sunday, 17th June, small vans with windows obscured by sheets of paper arrived, and they were taken to a warehouse in Waalhaven, Rotterdam's harbour area. Here they were to be loaded onto the lorry that would carry them to their long-awaited final destination: Britain.

Six men were waiting for them at the warehouse when they arrived. These included Perry Wacker, 32, the Dutchman who was to drive the lorry. The lorry itself was parked in the centre of the bare warehouse. Its container was refrigerated, and airtight except for a single vent in the front by the driver's cab.

The immigrants were quickly herded into the container. The traffickers provided them with plastic sacks for excrement and 4 buckets of water to drink. Once they were inside, a wooden barrier was erected between the immigrants and the door, and boxes of tomatoes were piled up in front of it, so that, on opening the container, it appeared to hold a cargo of tomatoes. The electricity for the refrigeration had been switched off, and was left switched off throughout the journey.

The snakeheads work with criminal gangs throughout the world to traffic people from country to country. This last stage of the Dover victims' journey, from Rotterdam to England, was contracted out to a Dutch-Turkish criminal gang, headed by a Rotterdam-based Turk called Gursel Ozcan.

Ozcan had taken a large chunk of the market in people-smuggling on the Rotterdam-Dover route; and had actually picked up more contracts than he could readily fulfil. The criminals had a backlog of illegal immigrants hiding-out in rented houses in Rotterdam, and had begun to pack increasing numbers into the lorries, to increase their throughput.

To put law enforcement agencies off the scent, each journey involved the establishment of an entirely new and short-lived legal and logistical set-up. Frequently changing arrangements are the crux of success for criminals controlling large-scale operations that they need to keep below the radar of the authorities. Their adversaries in police departments are alerted by patterns and investigating leads takes time; the international mafias stay a step ahead by keeping things in bewildering flux.

Days before the crossing of the Dover victims, the gang engaged a petty criminal, Van der Speck, to set up the Van der Speck Transport Company. In the name of the new company, they hired the warehouse, purchased the truck, refrigerated container and the dummy cargo of tomatoes. At the same time, they hired Perry Wacker, a underworld figure known to the gang members to be in dire financial straits.

As Wacker drove the lorry towards Zeebrugge, the port from where he would pick up the ferry to Dover, the container would have been horribly uncomfortable for the tightly-packed Chinese. They would have had to sit or squat in cramped conditions. It was a particularly hot day, with temperatures above 30°C, and the container would have heated up, adding to their discomfort. Many of the victims were wearing multiple layers of clothing to reduce the amount of luggage they had to carry. By the time the grim discovery of their bodies was made, most of these extra layers had been discarded.

The lorry rumbled onto the P&O ferry heading for Dover. Wacker turned off the engine and slammed the container's air vent shut, to prevent any noise from within giving away the presence of the Chinese, as customs officers made final checks. The occupants had been previously warned that the air vent would be briefly closed, it was a sign for them to keep completely quiet.

Wacker was supposed to return to the lorry shortly after the ferry set off, and re-open the air vent, but he forgot to do so. Instead he went onto the upper decks for a meal and a movie, leaving his human cargo trapped, with no supply of oxygen.

The carbon dioxide levels must have built up quickly, as the oxygen within the container was used up by the 60 people. They would have become hot, sweaty and short of breath. About an hour and a half into the ferry crossing, the immigrants realised the danger that they were in and started to panic. Ke Su Di later recalled the panic: "Some people removed tomatoes and wanted to kick open the doors...There was also a lot of shouting and screaming but nobody came to help."

The false wall and crates of tomatoes were flung aside, and they reached the substantial door of the refrigeration lorry. In the pitch dark of the lorry's interior, the Chinese attempted to force it open, and to open the air vent from the inside but without success. They screamed and took their shoes off and banged the walls with them to attract attention, but to no avail. The lorry deck was deserted and nobody heard their cries.

After the panic came resignation. The survivors describe how the Chinese realised that no-one was going to hear them. They realised too that they would probably die. They sat down in a circle, unable to see one another, held hands and ate tomatoes, because it is believed in China that you should not die on an empty stomach. As the last of the oxygen was exhausted, they gasped for air and passed out, suffocated.

When Wacker returned to the lorry, it is not clear that he knew anything was wrong. The lorry ponderously manoeuvred off the ferry and joined the slow queue of cargo vehicles leaving Dover port. Half an hour later, it was searched by customs officers.

Wacker's lorry drew their attention because it fitted the profile of a vehicle used for smuggling. It had not travelled through Dover before, and its passage had been paid in cash. When he was stopped, Wacker laughed and joked with the officials, as the searching officers looked over the lorry. He played innocent.

As the officers opened the door of the container, they were struck by the heat. Surveying the chaos within, one officer initially thought that fallen pallets lay all over the floor. Then, as he looked more closely, and his eyes adjusted to the light, he realised the true horror of what lay in front of him. Among the scattered tomatoes and the discarded clothes, lay 60 bodies; 58 dead from asphyxiation and the two unconscious survivors, Ke Su Di and Ke Shi Guang.

Ke Su Di and Ke Shi Guang were taken to hospital where they were treated for dehydration and kept under guard. Wacker was arrested. He claimed that he was innocent, that he had not helped with loading the truck and that he had believed that he was transporting tomatoes. However, Wacker's fingerprints were found on the tomato crates and his DNA was found on cigarette butts in the area where the immigrants had been loaded onto the truck. He was charged with 58 counts of manslaughter and conspiracy to smuggle illegal immigrants and sentenced to 14 years in jail.

The police discovered in the pockets of many of the Dover victims, the telephone number of a 29-year-old Chinese woman living in London's Chinatown, called Ying Guo. She was the snakeheads' London representative, and would have billeted and put them to work, sorted out documents and steered them through procedures like sending money to their families and the snakeheads. Ke Su Di explained how they were told: "if we were arrested in England that we should ring Ms Guo on the number and she would get us bailed straight away".

Ying Guo was arrested by the British police. Charged with conspiracy to facilitate the entry of illegal immigrants, she was later sentenced to 6 years in jail.

There were 9 arrests made in Holland, comprising 6 Dutch and 3 Turks. Seven were convicted. The two leaders Gursel Ozcan and Hacir Demi were each jailed for nine years while the others received sentences ranging from 30 months to seven years.

Ke Su Di's application for political asylum was refused. However, he was eventually given permission by the Home Secretary Jack Straw to remain in England for 4 years, in exchange for testifying in court against the people-traffickers.

There was another trial too. Lawyers representing families of some of the victims unsuccessfully sued the British and Dutch governments for compensation from the national victims of crime schemes.

The route into Europe taken by Ke Su Di was a common one; most Chinese illegal immigrants approach from the East. They are often flown into Moscow, Belgrade or another city in Eastern Europe or Russia where enforcement is lax, officials may be bought and entry is easiest. They then travel, like Ke Su Di, in vans, lorries or on foot into Western Europe, often transiting the Czech

Republic or Hungary. Those travelling to England, normally make the last hop hidden in lorries aboard ferries.

Chinese illegal immigration is not restricted to Europe, by any means. Many are smuggled into the US or Canada, which they reach by various clandestine means: flying directly on false passports, flying to Mexico then crossing the border, or reaching the US coast on ships. Australia is another popular destination for Chinese immigrants, who are again smuggled in aboard boats or with fake documents

Corruption of officials and forgery of documents are very important elements of the trafficking process for the snakeheads. Corruption is rife in China, where most officials turn a blind eye to the activities of the people smugglers, and some can be persuaded to issue false documents. Border guards in the transit countries may be bribed. Western countries are also not immune to the bribery of the snakeheads. The bribery of officials is the single largest cost for the snakeheads.

The snakeheads obtain many of their false documents in East Asia, where a cottage industry of passport forgers operates. These documents allow the snakeheads to fly people, sometimes in small groups, internationally.

Ke Shi Guang's later explained that his expectations of the travel arrangements differed greatly from the actual journey he undertook. The snakeheads had led him to believe that he would be flown all of the way to England, travelling on his own legitimate passport, rather than being smuggled through Europe.

He had expected though, that were he successfully brought into the country by the snakeheads, he would have to work for them to pay off his debts. Once illegal immigrants arrive in a Western country, the smuggled individuals will often end up having to work for the snakeheads or their associates, either because they are forced to or because they have nowhere else to go.

Most Chinese immigrants arriving in the UK do not speak English, have no documents and no local knowledge. They have very little choice but to turn to the snakeheads to find work. In this way they are very often exploited. They tend to work for well below the minimum wage, in poor conditions and long hours, pay their gangmasters for food and accommodation, as well as having a huge debt to pay off to the snakeheads. Most end up working in Chinese restaurants, factories or agriculture. In the worst cases, they are enslaved and the women forced to work as prostitutes.

But many of the illegals continue to feel that their hard conditions and large debts are a necessary evil in a world with no better options. Many go on to pay off their debts and improve their families standard of living in China.

Gui Chan, 38, left behind his wife and children in 1998. He paid a snakehead £9000 to go to Hungary with a false passport. He travelled West hidden in vans and lorries until he reached Kent, when he phoned his family, and told them to pay the snakeheads £17000 for his passage. Gui applied for asylum and took up some manual jobs in London's Chinatown, before becoming a labourer on building sites in Birmingham.

The success of his migration prompted Gui to suggest that his brother, Quan Chan, follow him. He took up the suggestion but never made it; Quan Chan was one of the 58 found dead at Dover.

Snakeheads' ventures are not restricted to the smuggling of willing Chinese people to Western countries. Snakehead gangs are also responsible for the coercive trafficking, especially of prostitutes, around the Far East, and occasionally to the West. For example, Chinese snakeheads, working with Vietnamese criminal gangs, have been implicated in the kidnapping and forced smuggling of young boys into England to work cultivating cannabis.

Rival gangs of snakeheads compete against one another. Sometimes the tension boils over to open warfare, and they try to disrupt one another's operations by kidnapping batches of immigrants en route, so as to discredit their rivals and grasp a larger chunk of the smuggling trade back in China.

The tragedy of the Dover 58 was not an isolated incidents; rather it was one in a long line of disasters involving trafficked Chinese immigrants, and indeed, illegal immigrants more generally.

One of the best-known is the case of the Golden Venture, a ship smuggling 300 Chinese immigrants to the USA, that ran aground off the shore of Rockaway, New York, on June 16 1993. Ten people died trying to swim ashore. Though years' earlier, the stories of the victims were very similar. They were from Fujian, had lost their livelihoods, and hoped to find better lives in the West. Most of the survivors were deported back to China or ended up American prisons.

A few years after the Dover tragedy, in July 2003, illegals again registered briefly on the public consciousness in the UK when two incidents followed in close succession. First a train hit a van of farm workers driven by a 24-year old Iraqi on an unmanned level crossing, killing three and seriously injuring six, and later that month two Polish labourers died when they became entangled in farm machinery. In January 2004, a Chinese man dropped dead after stamping the Samsung logo onto microwaves for twenty four hours without a break at a Hartlepool factory. A Korean company, Samsung's annual report that year boasted of record UK factory profits through "unit cost reduction". Then in February 2004, twenty-three Chinese cockle-pickers drowned at Morecambe Bay.

The dangers faced by illegal migrants are global and horrifying. The worst accidents are generally at sea. In May 2007, 36 Haitian immigrants died after their boat sank in the Atlantic half a mile from the shore of the Turks and Caicos island. The inadequate, overladen boat had been carrying about 150 people towards America. In December 2007, 51 migrants drowned after a boat sank near Seferihisar in Turkey and 50 died in a shipwreck near Dakhla in Western Sahara.

It is thought that thousands of immigrants die each year just trying to enter Europe, They die from drowning, heat, starvation and suffocation. A few are shot by border guards. One is known to have died because she could not obtain insulin. The incidents that make the news are doubtless the tip of the iceberg; most perish in unknown circumstances.

The British government treated the Dover tragedy simply as a crime, and studiously avoided a discussion of the wider issue of Britain's moribund asylum and immigration system. Successive measures since then have been concerned with perpetuating and reinforcing the status quo, which most observers regard as inoperable. Without a Soviet level of bureaucracy that would restrict all our freedoms to an intolerable degree, the fantasies peddled by politicians of a Fortress Britain can never be implemented. While the West continues to declaim the virtues of a free market at the same time as it vigorously restricts the free movement of labour, there will always be more people ready to risk the perilous journey halfway across the world, dreaming of improving their lot in life. For the people-traffickers, it remains 'business as usual' for the foreseeable future.