**Kayla:** Before we begin, we’d like to warn you that this episode covers sensitive topics like violence, abortion, and forced sterilization. Names have been changed to respect attorney/client privileges and the privacy of our subjects. Please do not attempt to contact any individuals mentioned in the podcast.

 *Intro Music*

**Kayla**: In the early morning of June 6, 1993, a cargo ship ran aground on a beach in Queens, New York. Nearly three hundred undocumented Chinese immigrants traveled on a ship called the Golden Venture. People on the shore saw the passengers jumping off the ship into frigid waters as it sank. Soon after, sirens blared as emergency services raced to the shore, not entirely sure what was transpiring. After the passengers made it to shore, emergency personnel took their vitals and wrapped them in warm blankets to counter hypothermia. They came to the United States with dreams of a better life. But within the span of a day, they were handcuffed and pressed into buses to unknown locations. It was then that these dreams disintegrated before their very eyes.

 The federal government detained the largest group of passengers in York, Pennsylvania. While in detention, some of these passengers depicted this journey, their hope, and their disappointments in artwork made from tightly folded paper, the only thing available to them at the time. Eventually, York locals provided regular paper and markers. Many of the pieces are of boats, and one of the Golden Venture itself, giving us a unique viewpoint into how the passengers saw their journey. It caught our eye because of how light and colorful it is. It has a cheery sky blue hull, the deck and railings are gleaming white with red trim, and the details are completed with anchors, a dog, and a banner in Chinese script. Colorful pennants hang from the masts and railings, in cherry red, sunset oranges, ocean blue, and sunny yellow. A large seagull-like bird, white with teal wings and a yellow head looks out from the foremost mast, waiting to see what comes, and an American flag flies proudly from the back of the mast. The bright cheeriness of the sculpture conveys the hope with which the passengers looked out onto their journey.

**Sydney:** One might think this ship, this crisis is where the story begins. However, that is far from the truth. What could be so dire that many chose to leave everything they’ve ever known and take on the challenging journey to a foreign country? What made that journey so challenging? And who organized the Golden Venture voyage? We explore these questions and more on this episode of Golden Dreams.

*Transition Music*

**Sydney**: Hello, my name is Sydney Slack.

**Kayla**: And my name is Kayla Buchanan.

**Sydney:** I’d also like to introduce Zehou Zhou, a librarian here at York College of Pennsylvania, where he is more commonly known as ZZ. He acted as a translator and communicator for the Golden Venture passengers. He let us interview him about his role in their fight for asylum. I’ll let him tell you a little more about himself:

**ZZ:** My name is Zehou Zhou and I’m a research librarian here at York College. Well I was mostly an interpreter. I went to the prison to interpret for the press, lawyers, with religious organizations. Anytime they had communication challenges I would interpret for them. And I also was a translator. As a translator I would translate legal documents for them, I would translate their family letters for them, I would write to them to answer their questions from prison, and I would respond to press. I was also a communicator for the guys there because there were outside media outlets that did not know things about Chinese culture or society, political system. So I served that role as a communicator. Occasionally I also served as an educator because sometimes in order to respond to questions to the press you have to help members of press understand social and political context.

 *Transition Music*

**Reasons for Leaving China/ Coming to the United States**

**Sydney:** What would cause a person to leave the country they’ve known their whole life? Not being able to make enough money to support their family? Being fined just for daring to have a second child? Being dragged away from their home, kicking and screaming, to be sterilized against their will? That same thing happening to their spouse or loved one?

 This is exactly what the Golden Venture passengers experienced before undertaking the treacherous and long journey to the United States. Most were seeking asylum from China’s One-Child Policy and the abuses it involved. Some of the passengers were economic migrants, looking for better working opportunities in the United States.[[1]](#footnote-0)

**ZZ**: I remember talking to one sailor who told me he is owning a store, a business in Lancaster, he said, you know, we were talking, talking to each other. He said “I said to myself, my friends, he said this is my moment. I have to take a chance. I have to take a chance, if I don't take the chance I don't have a second chance. I’ve got to go, I’ve got to join them. So it was like he was patting himself on his own back, like I got to go.

**Sydney:** Beginning as early as the 1950s, China pushed for its citizens to use birth control measures and family planning in order to curb the country’s rapidly growing population.[[2]](#footnote-1) This idea was codified into law in 1980 with the implementation of the one-child policy, which restricted most families to having only one child.[[3]](#footnote-2) While there were some exceptions, most families found to be breaking the policy could be fined and beaten by the officials in charge of implementing the policy locally. Those same officials compelled doctors to sterilize citizens against their will and give abortions even seven or eight months into the pregnancy.

 A man told the immigration judge that he was fined fifteen hundred dollars after the birth of his second child.[[4]](#footnote-3) Local officials took his wife and forcibly sterilized her before fining the family an additional nine thousand-five hundred dollars after the birth of their third child.[[5]](#footnote-4) The man was beaten and his store was vandalized by local officials because he couldn’t afford the appropriate business licenses.[[6]](#footnote-5)

**ZZ**: I talked to somebody whose family went through that he said the roof was gone, they punished them by taking away/ off the roof. The next time they came when another child/sibling born they took away the pigs and the chickens. The punishment was very direct.

**Sydney:** One woman was forced to give birth at seven months so that her baby would be born in 1992 and not 1993 to keep in line with government quotas.[[7]](#footnote-6) Despite the unsanitary conditions and the doctor’s protests, officials pressured the physician into inducing labor.[[8]](#footnote-7) The baby died at just nine hours old, and the mother was left disabled and depressed from the ordeal.[[9]](#footnote-8)

 Police destroyed the house of another Golden Venture passenger because his mother had violated the one-child policy.[[10]](#footnote-9) He believed that if made to return to China, he would be arrested.[[11]](#footnote-10)

 Another passenger detailed how, after the birth of his second child, seven to eight family planning officers came to his home and attempted to forcibly remove them for sterilization, despite his wife still being weak from blood loss during the labor.[[12]](#footnote-11) The husband fought back to protect his wife, ultimately making him a target for the government and forcing the couple to go into hiding.[[13]](#footnote-12)

 These stories barely scratch the surface of the horrific experiences of the Golden Venture passengers. Hundreds more have similar stories, motivating them to escape and make the harrowing journey to the United States.

 *Transition Music*

 Political motivations also compelled these refugees to flee China to avoid retribution for their connections to pro-democracy protests in Tiananmen Square in 1989. The younger generation of Chinese citizens began to veer away from the Communist movement that had long been dominant in China as a result of the booming economy and its side effects in the 1980s.[[14]](#footnote-13) They desired more freedoms, including the right to express their opinions freely.[[15]](#footnote-14) A variety of student protests popped up across China in 1989, over everything from living conditions to the right to choose their own jobs.[[16]](#footnote-15) The most famous of these protests happened in Tiananmen Square. Protestors erected a statue in the square, traditionally a place that represented sovereignty.[[17]](#footnote-16) The all white statue–the Goddess of Democracy–bears a striking resemblance to the Statue of Liberty, carrying a torch in both hands and functioning as a symbol for freedom to the protesters.[[18]](#footnote-17) Months of demonstrations led the Chinese government to suppress student protests using military force on June 4, 1989.[[19]](#footnote-18) After his participation in some of these protests, one Golden Venture passenger stated that he was expelled from school at age fifteen and driven into hiding for two years, despite being a “gifted student.”[[20]](#footnote-19) According to his statement, the Chinese government considered him a political saboteur; he faced at least three years of forced labor if deported.[[21]](#footnote-20) In his own words, the Chinese government had deprived him of “basic human rights to education, livelihood, family privacy, political expression, and [were] threatening to deprive [him] of liberty in the future.”[[22]](#footnote-21)

**Kayla:** So, why would the passengers come all the way to the United States? Surely there was somewhere closer to home, somewhere more sympathetic to their asylum cases? The United States has long had associations with freedoms and rights like those that the student protesters were seeking. It is the kind of place where a person might build themself up from nothing, or make enough money to send back home for his family. Or maybe it was the only place they could afford to go. No matter the reason, all the detainees who ended up across the United States got here because of their journey on the *Golden Venture*. Let’s explore a little more about what that journey was like for the passengers.

**ZZ**: The Fujianese are, by virtue of being close to the sea, had a history of immigration, to seek better life in the 19th century. Many Fujianese took the sea to places, to the colonies in Malaysia, to Indonesia, to Singapore, to the Philippines. So they became very entrepreneurs, they were very driven and they were very hardworking. They went to these places under British, Dutch rule and they actually became very successful, so that became the start of a tradition of going overseas to seek a better life. Fujian was also across from Taiwan and which, in the 1980s and early 90s, that was when China opened up in the late 1970s. So one friend of mine from the refugees said when I was a child they always had this candies that would float over the ocean because it was just one strait, just a few miles away. So they would have balloons with all this candies and propaganda material that would land on the beach and they would go grab the candies. So, they also learned about the music. They really were fascinated in the 1980s when China opened up, because between 1949 and 1980,76, China was under the rule of a totalitarian *[rings knocking on table]* named Mao Zedongand he really impoverished the country, impoverished people were so hungry, people were so impoverished that they looked for every opportunity to better their life. And this is in keeping with the history of seeking. Mao closed all the sea routes and if you tried to leave you would be committing political crime and would be subjected to all types of punishments including death. [inaudible] But then, when China opened up they said hey let's go, they picked up their old habit of going to other places. They are right by the sea. So then, they eventually, some people found out that the United States has all those policies that would allow them to come here and there was a chance to get rich and better, and in some cases be more free. So they all came. [inaudible] What happened then when those initial arrivals, when they came, they worked hard, and they made some money, and they sent money home. Neighbors would say “wow you made all this in one year what I have to do half my life.” So that became an advertisement for this move and more and more people joined, to the point that if you were a man and are not interested in coming to America, then there's something wrong with you.

*Transition Music*

**Getting out of China (Sydney)**

The journey from the Fujian Province in China to the United States was neither quick nor easy. Once it became necessary for a person to leave their home, the passengers from the Golden Venture had no choice but to travel to the coast of Burma and pay up to thirty thousand dollars for passage to the United States, which likely obliterated their life savings.[[23]](#footnote-22)

Many traveled on foot for over two thousand miles. Exhaustion beyond belief, a complete lack of food, unclean water, and deadly illness provided harsh obstacles to which many succumbed.[[24]](#footnote-23) The road to Burma was strewn with the bodies of people who just collapsed, unable to get up or ask for help.

**ZZ:** The jungles, literally the jungles and they saw dead bodies on the way. They were exposed to the elements. Snakes, mosquitoes, diseases, so it was a harsh journey. So, they endured that and walked for days, no weeks, through the Burmese jungle and they eventually went through Burma.

**Sydney:** The refugees were at constant risk of getting caught and facing potential torture or even death. Many were fleeing harsh Chinese laws, always fearing capture by authorities that would brutalize and violate them. Even after crossing into Burma, they were not safe. Opium smugglers were abundant on the Burmese-Chinese border.[[25]](#footnote-24) Refugees were verbally and physically abused into submission until their families could pay an unfathomable ransom to the smugglers.[[26]](#footnote-25)

 Should the refugees manage to avoid death due to starvation, dehydration, illness, or capture, they might make it to the Burmese coast. Once there, however, the journey was still not over. Refugees waited in hiding until the smuggling ship was ready to depart.[[27]](#footnote-26) Eventually, it was time to board the ship that would bring them to the United States: the *Golden Venture*.

The Snakehead Organization that planned the voyage was already in communication with supporters in the United States. Let’s hear what ZZ had to say on the subject:

**ZZ:** So, I lived in Amherst, which was, by then, an ethnic enclave so to speak. There was heavily stationed to Koreans and the Chinese. Around the corner, there was a video store. That was back when VHS was popular. And, so I went to that store to borrow videos occasionally. And when I went to the store, I became a friend of the owner called Mr. Wang. He would say to me, “you know, I so busy lately cause this fax machine just working nonstop.” I said give me more information, tell me more about it. He said, “well, I, you know, my fax machine become, inadvertently become a communication tool for people from Fujian who are coming to America.” So they would contact their loved ones or maybe the snakeheads. Local contacts, who to pay, when to arrive, what to give, who would be there. So apparently they did not have their own communication mechanism. So he said, “my store was used as a communication center for these guys.” He was not complaining, he was just explaining the fact to me. Obviously, he charged a small fee for that.

*Transition Music*

**The Snakeheads (Kayla)**

The smuggling industry in China is a large operation that takes advantage of Chinese citizens, desperate to escape factors like the one-child policy and forced sterilization.

More commonly known as Snakeheads, these members of Asian crime rings smuggled these passengers out of China for huge amounts of money. In the case of the Golden Venture, these passengers paid anywhere from $15,000 to $30,000 per person. Most migrants could not afford such an excessively high fee. Instead, they would work off their massive debts in the United States. If the men and women making the journey from China to America could not pay, Snakeheads would sometimes beat or assault their families back in China or would hold the individual hostage until their families sent the money to the Snakeheads. Even with fear of indentured servitude to the Snakeheads, the passengers held an even greater fear of remaining in China.

Media outlets have reported situations discussing how the price to pay for many undocumented Chinese immigrants consists of gang rapes, prostitution, and drugs.[[28]](#footnote-27) Several of these stories and others similar, were published several months prior to the arrival of the *Golden Venture* in New York.

One *Golden Venture* passenger, Huang Jin-Lai, was one of the lucky ten granted asylum out of 235. He later told *The Philadelphia Inquirer* that even after gaining asylum, he still lived in fear of the snakeheads: “If it wasn’t for being so afraid of the Snakeheads, everything would be fine now.”[[29]](#footnote-28) He even purposely avoids Chinatown, so that the Snakeheads don’t know of his release. If they were to find out, then both Snakeheads and loan sharks would come after him to pay the remainder of his debt, which is around $20,000. Imagine risking everything to go to a foreign country, gaining asylum in that country, and still having to fear for your life. It seems like a never ending cycle.

While the *Golden Venture* and other smuggling operations were managed by lower level Snakeheads, at the top of the chain were a few individuals. The person often referred to as the mastermind behind the *Golden Venture* was a man named Lee Peng Fei. While he was not physically on the ship, it is believed that he organized the whole operation. In 1995, he was arrested in his house in Thailand and later extradited to the United States to go on trial.[[30]](#footnote-29) Lee Peng Fei would plead guilty to smuggling and admit that it was him who gave the orders that got 6 people killed on the *Golden Venture*. He was sentenced to 20 years in prison.

Another key player in the Golden Venture operation was a woman named Cheng Chui Ping, also known as Sister Ping. Cheng Chui Ping was the head of a smuggling ring that was said to have brought several thousand Chinese citizens to the United States. After evading police forces for several years, Interpol arrested Cheng Chui Ping in 2000 and extradited her to New York in 2003. She was found guilty of several counts including “conspiring to commit illegal human smuggling” and would be sentenced to 35 years in prison.[[31]](#footnote-30) Lastly is a man named Lee Kin Sin who was the documented owner of the *Golden Venture* and a front-man to Lee Peng Fei.[[32]](#footnote-31) Lee Kin Sin was on board of the *Golden Venture* and was responsible for running the ship aground in attempts to arrive at New York Harbor. He would be sentenced to 10 years in prison for the part he played in the smuggling operation. With the arrests of those that spearheaded the *Golden Venture* behind bars, immigrants on the Golden Venture could feel a bit justified. Yet they would have to live with the memories of their difficult journey and arrival in the U.S. for the rest of their lives.

*Transition Music*

**The Journey and Arrival in the United States**

**Sydney:** The trip to the United States was not direct, instead the Golden Venture made many stops along the way to pick up more passengers. The ship stopped first in Thailand and then Kenya, reaching a total of almost three hundred passengers.[[33]](#footnote-32)

**ZZ:** The ship stopped in Kenya, to stop and look for the next step. So they waited in Kenya, and actually you know got out, land, and saw things around. So, they stopped in Kenya waiting for the next, for the ship that can keep on the journey. And I think they waited a few weeks. Some guys actually stayed…“Hey, there’s business to be made here…” actually stayed in Kenya, they did not even move on.

You know, the organizers of the Snakeheads were just so ingenious, they were so creative. So creative that they created all kinds of routes. I remember this guy I talked to, not from the *Golden Venture*, but from Fujian, he said “I have seen the pyramids, have you?” I said no, I have not. [inaudible] “I stopped by Egypt, we had time, we visited the pyramids.” And then they came here. Another friend of mine who’s also from Fujian, said “I was into one country and out another country, I went through about 6, 7 countries before I arrived in America.”

**Sydney**: Only after rounding Cape Horn did the final leg begin to bring them to New York City.[[34]](#footnote-33) Passengers traveled the entire time under abysmal conditions. They were only allowed in the cargo hold of the ship, where they lacked basic human necessities like beds, walls, and bathrooms.[[35]](#footnote-34) Nearly three hundred people–men, women, and children–shared the appalling experience in this limited space.[[36]](#footnote-35) Many of the refugees detained in York remember not having space to sit, much less move around.[[37]](#footnote-36) Passengers were given hardly any food or clean water, weakening them and making them even more susceptible to illness.[[38]](#footnote-37) They survived on a diet of “stale peanuts and rice.”[[39]](#footnote-38) These men and women had to relieve themselves in whatever space they could find, unable to clean themselves or do anything to maintain basic hygiene. Many of them had few possessions to their name, often just the clothes they wore onto the ship.[[40]](#footnote-39)

 The refugees endured these hardships for six long, excruciating months.[[41]](#footnote-40) For comparison, it only took the Mayflower mere sixty days to reach the shores of Massachusetts 373 years earlier.[[42]](#footnote-41) Yet, the ship would never physically reach the shores of the United States. The *Golden Venture* approached the shore of Queens at night, when a heavy storm was stirring up waves and obscuring the sky.[[43]](#footnote-42) Passengers never got the opportunity to see the Statue of Liberty before the ship hit a sandbar and started going under.[[44]](#footnote-43) They expected to be welcomed to America by her bright torch, hopeful and excited to start new lives. Instead, their entry into this country was dark and chaotic, an unfortunate omen of what their first few years here would look like.

**ZZ:** The communication line broke up. Maybe Mr. Wang’s fax machine broke down [laughter]. So, that the pick up arrangement fell through and that’s why they had to decide to have a forceful landing anyway and ask these guys to jump. Cause once you jump, you reach the land, you are eligible for political asylum.

**Sydney**: More than a hundred of the passengers jumped into the frigid water with all their belongings: some had a single garbage bag, but most had only the clothes on their back.[[45]](#footnote-44) They did their best to swim to shore, while holding on to their belongings and fighting the current simultaneously.As a result, many suffered from hypothermia and ten died during this horrific escape attempt.[[46]](#footnote-45)

 The US Coast Guard and other rescue teams did their best to help these desperate men and women to shore. Officials did everything they could, covering the passengers in warm blankets and transferring them to emergency rooms.[[47]](#footnote-46)

 Then came the inevitable question: what should the United States government do with these refugees? Over two hundred undocumented Chinese immigrants came to the United States seeking asylum and a better life. They did not arrive secretly, as they may have hoped. Instead, their traumatic journey blanketed the news the next morning, and tragic visuals reached Americans over their morning coffee.

**ZZ:** I think I saw some TV coverage. It was on national TV. All three major networks cover it, cause you have the Coast Guard, the helicopters… And you know, being Chinese American, I naturally was drawn to news like that.

*Transition Music*

**Sydney:** So, I was wondering, we’ve done all this research into the Golden Venture passengers, their reasons for leaving China, their journey over here, we initially looked at that bright, colorful boat sculpture they had made. I was wondering, after hearing all this tragedy, this hardship that these people had to go through, how does that change your opinion or how does that make you reflect on that initial boat sculpture?

**Kayla:** I feel like the boat sculpture kinda represents the initial hope that they had had back in China of what would life for them in the United States. Like, thinking about all of the bright colors could represent all of the opportunities that they could see themselves having access to. And the boat would be the biggest step to get there. So, I think even after what they had endured on the boat, the fact that they still looked at it with such brightness and such hope is astonishing to me. What about you? What did you think when you saw the boat?

**Sydney:** You make some really good points. It’s very reminiscent of what ZZ had to say about the reasons that people left China. They saw, they had friends or family that came to America and saw the opportunities available to them. And despite their hardships, despite the horrific things they had to endure to get here, they really did still have that hope and were hanging on to that American Dream, despite being detained by the very country they hoped would help them. ZZ also mentioned a somewhat funny story, about one of the passengers who was unfortunately deported after arriving in the United States. But even once he was back in China, he tried to come here again. It so happened to be on a boat called the Whoops 2, which is what makes this story sadly ironic. But this man was deported once from the United States, came back on the Whoops 2, and then was unfortunately deported again, but the fact that he even tried, that he was willing to endure all those things over again, to experience that hardship just for the chance to create a new life in the United States, I mean, that either has to speak to just how awful life was in China or how much the American Dream is really represented across the world.

**Kayla:** Yeah, I think we can kinda bring up with him in particular, how resilient he was. And, you even mentioned it, getting on a boat called the Whoops 2, which I feel like foreshadowed what was gonna happen, and yet still doing it, just demonstrated his resilience.

**Sydney:** So, Kayla, after our interview with ZZ, what story stood out to you most? What was the most interesting, in your opinion?

**Kayla:** To me, the most interesting story was definitely the one he was telling about a friend, when he was a kid in the Fujian province. Since they were right near Taiwan, just an ocean across, Taiwan would send over these balloons with baskets of candy and propaganda material. I felt that that was a very creative method because you know the children would be running to get that candy. They would bring the baskets home and their parents would likely see the propaganda. Children, of course, not really caring about the propaganda, more so the candy. Just sending over propaganda wouldn’t necessarily get everyone’s attention. The candy would.

**Sydney:** I mean, it just goes to show the length at which these governments would go to indoctrinate people and put their opinions onto the public in order to maintain their regime and it’s only in a country like that that something like the one-child policy could come to light and endure as long as it has. Even today, China is still feeling the effects of that one-child policy. And it really hasn’t gone away. That will be a common thread through many of our episodes: is what, ultimately, is the impact of the one-child policy and the other factors that forced people to flee China? How do those reasons affect their asylum cases, or their expectations in the United States?

**Kayla:** Now, was there something during ZZ’s interview that kinda stuck out to you?
**Sydney:** I was rather surprised when he lived right around the corner from a video store owner, Mr. Wang, who was actually possibly the one in communication with the *Golden Venture* and their plans to land in New York. I find it really interesting, one of those weird maybe fate-is-at-play-here kind of things, that even though ZZ wasn’t involved with the *Golden Venture* until the passengers arrived for detention in York, that’s when he initially met them, he was potentially connected to their network much earlier than that. And that’s rather fascinating, how these kinds of things come full circle.

**Kayla:** I thought it was interesting, at the end he mentioned how even Mr. Wang was doing this, it was still gonna cost you like a small fee cause he is a businessman, of course he needs to make his money’s worth. But he still wants to help people.

**Sydney:** Mhmm. ZZ was a great source of information, and we really appreciate that he was able to take the time to work with us. And we would like to thank you, our listeners, for being involved in this project and bringing our research to light and spreading the news, so thank you!

**Kayla:** Yes, thank you.

*Transition Music*

**Kayla**: This podcast is a production of the spring 2024 Podcasting the Past class at York College of Pennsylvania. This episode was written and edited by Kayla Buchanan and Sydney Slack. It was reviewed by Laila Brown, Zach Grossman, Ryn Johnson, Shane Mundis, and Dr. Jacqueline Beatty. Thank you to Zehou Zhou for allowing us to interview him, to Professor Schiffman for his guidance and access to the studio, and to the York Bar Association for access to legal documents. Theme music and sound effects are courtesy of StoryBlocks.

*Outro Music*

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38. Cohn, *Golden Venture*. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
39. Wes Allison, “Change in law, hope for freedom,” *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, January 19, 1997, 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
40. Cohn, *Golden Venture*. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
41. Zhou, interview. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
42. Zhou, interview. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
43. Cohn, *Golden Venture*. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
44. Cohn, *Golden Venture*. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
45. Cohn, *Golden Venture*. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
46. Cohn, *Golden Venture*. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
47. Cohn, *Golden Venture*. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)