

Lost in Translation

An exploration of the identity of Chinese Illegal Migrants in the Netherlands during the 1990's

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Abstract

This paper examines how the identity of illegal Chinese migrants is being negotiated and formulated within the larger Chinese community and within Dutch society at large. This study will focus specifically on Chinese illegal migrants who came to the Netherlands in the 1990s, during which time China was undergoing major political and economic transformations. Research data for this thesis are primarily taken from oral history of respondents with supporting documents and literature. In order to gain greater insight into how their marginal position affected their individual identity, I will try to examine in what manner and which location illegal Chinese migrants found their own community and the social and cultural behavior they have performed in the Netherlands.

Acknowledgements

The inspiration for this thesis came from my previous part-time job at a Chinese restaurant in The Hague. Through my work at the restaurant, I had the opportunity to meet many hard working Chinese people. Despite their marginal social and political status, they were all nice and welcoming people, struggling to survive in alien surroundings.

A large part of this research consists of interview information from all of my eight interviewees (all the interviewees in this paper are anonymized), their life stories. Thank you to Mr. Wang and Mr. Zhang, who not only told me their personal stories, but also referred me to the right people I needed to interview in order to finish this project. My gratitude also goes to the rest of my interviewees and informants for giving me their precious time and efforts to participate in my research.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

In March 2008, in just two weeks time and without warning, hundreds of Chinese migrants coming from all around the Netherlands appeared in Ter Apel, a village in the north of the Netherlands. Ter Apel is far away from the bustling cities, yet home to the Dutch application center for political asylum. This puzzled the local authorities, because normally the number of applicants is around three to five per week. Eventually, it turned out that a big rumor had spread around the Chinese community stating that Queen Beatrix would abdicate the throne on her birthday on April 30 to Crown Prince Willem Alexander, and that he would grant a general pardon for those who had already asked for asylum. However, this did not happen. Another two weeks later, most of these Chinese had disappeared from the emergency center.

Chinese people with their strong restaurant business tradition form a socially vital ethnic group in the Netherlands. According to the Dutch Central Bureau of Statistics (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek), up to 2008 there were 67,772 ethnic Chinese people living in the Netherlands, which formed 0.42% of the total population of the country. Since the 1980s, the Dutch authorities have paid more attention to this specific group of people regarding their migration history, social practice, cultural background and their future development. Besides, there is a huge diversity among the Chinese migrants in the Netherlands, not only concerning their place of origin, but also regarding their different ways of leaving China. The 2008 incident revealed that the number of illegal Chinese migrants living in the Netherlands was unexpectedly large, and this certainly brought troubles to the Dutch government. First of all, processing such a large number of people would bring great administrative difficulties to the authorities, and it would be impossible to place all the migrants in administrative detention under the current Dutch law. Secondly, as for those whose request was rejected, they would choose to continue living illegally in the country and may cause other social and political problems, and deportation to China has proven difficult due to lack of any forms of identification.¹ Moreover, the increasingly severe illegal immigration crimes in China in the recent decades have also attracted the attention of the governments. The question of China's

¹ Wat is mensenhandel" (2008). *COMENSHA*. Accessed on July 1st, 2012.
http://www.mensenhandel.nl/cms/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=13&Itemid=15.

illegal emigration, which takes place mainly in the districts along the coast in Fujian province, caused worries internationally, and the 911 event further strengthened the image of illegal emigration as a nontraditional security factor on the international society.² Since then, various relevant studies have been conducted regarding the major social and political impacts and consequences of illegal migration. They will be briefly discussed in the historiographical paper in the following chapter.

For several decades, most of the illegal migrants originate from Mainland China. Being poor informed by their friends and relatives abroad, they often carried unrealistic expectations about either the Netherlands or Europe as a whole, but were somehow unable to leave China through legal means. Illegal migrants nowadays are part of the overseas Chinese community. It is estimated that the total number of illegal migrants at the beginning of the 1990's was between 100,000 to 150,000 in the Netherlands, among which Chinese formed a small part, although the exact size of the group was unknown. In addition, according to the official report from the Chinese Embassy, about seven hundred illegal Chinese migrants were sent back to China from the Netherlands in 1995.³ I have chosen Chinese illegal migrants who came to the Netherlands in the 1990s as the subject of this research because China was undergoing major political and economic transformations during this period. The loosening governmental policy following the Tian An Men square incident in 1989 brought great opportunities for those who wanted to start a business as well as those who wanted to go abroad to escape poverty in China. Therefore, this period has produced one of the largest groups of illegal Chinese migrants, including to The Netherlands. Of the latter, some of them managed to get their official Dutch identity (via various means), but many of them are still living in illegality. These people form a marginal group within the Chinese community in the Netherlands, their life and social position has been largely understudied. Therefore, research based on this subject is essential and important. Their illegality and inability to speak the Dutch language puts them at a disadvantage in the job market. Without a legal status and often unable to communicate with their fellow Chinese in Cantonese (Cantonese is the most widely spoken dialects in the Chinese communities in the Netherlands but not among the illegal migrants), they have being constantly discriminated against and ignored by their 'own

² Zhou, Yu-E, and Wang, Xian-Feng. (2004) "A Case Study on the Cause of the Modern Illegal Emigration Movement in China's Fujian Coastal Area". *Around Southeast Asia* 3, p. 73.

³ Li,minghuan. *We Need Two Worlds: Chinese immigrant associations in a Western Society*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, p. 51.

people', the established Chinese community. The illegal migrants are a group of invisible people who have been struggling to survive in the Netherlands since the time of their arrival.

Aim of the Study

In the realm of existing studies on Chinese in the Netherlands, much of the literature focuses either on the cultural issues of the first and second generations of Dutch-Chinese, or on the issue of the criminality among Chinese migrants, in particular illegal migrants, but very few have paid attention to the social and cultural conditions of the later group. Most of the illegal Chinese in the Netherlands come from Fujian and Zhejiang province, and some from the Northeastern part of China. Many of these migrants applied for political asylum from the Dutch government, some requests have been granted, yet many migrants remained in the shadow. This thesis focuses on this latter group of people, who are not only at the margins of the Dutch society, but also at the margins within their own ethnic group,

The main research question this paper seeks to address is “How do illegal Chinese in the Netherlands negotiate and formulate their identity?” To provide a comprehensive answer this main research question, a subdivision of smaller sub-questions has been made. The first sub-question will focus on the different means they used to come to the Netherlands, the reason why they came and under what kind of social and political circumstances. The second sub-question will investigate on how they find their own community in the Netherlands. The last sub-question will explore how they cope with their marginal social and cultural position within the larger Chinese community and within Dutch society at large and how this impacted upon their notion of identity.

Oral accounts are essential to this research project. Besides oral accounts from Chinese migrants, written documents have also informed a large part of this paper. Due to the problematic status of interviewees, finding irregular migrants who were willing to be interviewed was very difficult. To establish relationships of trust also proved to be one of the biggest challenges during the whole research project.

Main terms and definitions

Central to this research are the interviews conducted with illegal or formerly illegal migrants, a considerable amount of Chinese, English, and Dutch written sources were used well. Below are the central subjects and terms that will be discussed in this paper:

Illegal Migrants:

The issue of illegal emigration from China has long been capturing the attention of both scholars and politicians. With the economic development in China, the policy of reform and opening-up to the outside world in 1980s, many Chinese migrated and tried to start their own businesses abroad. As a result, the number of illegal emigrants mainly composed of stowaways became larger and larger. According to the statistics, about 200,000 to 400,000 Chinese fled to other countries during the period of 1978 to 1995. From 1979 to 1998, at least 220,000 people illegally emigrated to other countries.⁴

Most of the Chinese illegal migrants who currently live in the Netherlands come from Mainland China, from the following areas in particular: Wenzhou and Qingtian districts, north Fujian and north Guangdong. Migrants from those areas usually keep close contact with their home community and have a strong desire to climb up the socio-economic ladder not only in their adopted country but also in their areas of origin.⁵ Their local communities have often labeled them as rich and lucky people and for those who are still living in China, European countries are among the most desirable destinations. These migrants came mostly via two means: legal entry on a tourist visa or illegal by way of smuggling networks. The first category entails people who apply for the tourist visa but do not go back on time. Such people usually have acquaintances or relatives in the destination countries who can help them for their initial settle down. Soon after, they mostly start work illegally with very low wages and waiting for the opportunity to change their status, often through the application of asylum. The second category forms the majority of the illegal migrants, they come with the help of the international smuggling networks. Large amounts of money need to be paid to certain agencies that help them arrange all the procedure of going abroad.

A large number of Chinese illegal migrants work in the restaurant and catering sectors. Due to the nature of the catering business, the requirement of education and the knowledge of local language are rather minimal; the working hours for illegal migrants are very long and the wages are relatively low. As the majority of the Chinese population in the Netherlands works in the restaurant industry, it is not really difficult for illegal migrants to find jobs in local Chinese restaurants. Due to their illegality, their jobs are usually limited inside the kitchen to avoid being exposed to the public. Most inside works assigned to illegal migrants

⁴ See Zhou, "A Case Study on the Cause of the Modern Illegal Emigration Movement in China's Fujian Coastal Area", p. 74.

⁵ See Li, *We Need Two Worlds*, p. 52.

are very tough and unfavorable by the legal ones. Female illegal migrants also considered as weak and not really favored by most of the Chinese restaurant owners. Thus, many of them are instead work in the sanitary industry, or working as housekeeper for private family, they live with the family and get paid directly from their host. The living conditions for illegal migrants are hard, especially for those who work in the restaurant. Some of the restaurants provide them with housing, usually in the storehouse of the restaurant; others need to find the place on their own. The conditions for those who have already been legalized are much better, they are provided with apartments by the local housing agencies.

Human Smuggling

The term Human Smuggling refers to the facilitation, transportation, attempted transportation or illegal entry of a person or persons across an international border, in violation of one or more countries laws, either clandestinely or through deception, such as the use of fraudulent documents.⁶ It is also defined by the United Nations Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime as "...the procurement, in order to obtain, directly or indirectly, a financial or other material benefit, of the illegal entry of a person into a state party of which the person is not a national."⁷

With the rapid economic development in China, the collusion of international stowaway groups and international organization of criminal society are one major reason that makes the illegal immigration internationalized and organized. Despite a few state-owned companies that are authorized to deal with the business of exporting labor, many informal entities in various forms are action in the transnational brokerage business, among them many have not had government authorization. These unauthorized emigration brokers or agents are labeled as "snake-heads", comprising at least a three-tiered hierarchy linking sources and destination countries. Some of the big "snakeheads" among them have large sums of money at their disposal, which allows them to organize and expand transnational migration networks, to take care of documents or facilities for clients, and to bribe officials in China and the relevant countries.⁸ Widespread people smuggling network has made the large-scale illegal immigration feasible. With the expansion of the scale, fat profits offer good reasons for more

⁶ U.S department of States. (2006) "Fact Sheet, Distinction between Human Smuggling and Human Trafficking." Accessed on July 5th, 2012. <http://www.library.cornell.edu/resrch/citmanage/mla#list>.

⁷ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crimes. "Human Trafficking and Migrant Smuggling". Accessed on July 5th, 2012. <http://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/human-trafficking/what-is-human-trafficking.html?ref=menuaside>.

⁸ Gao, Yun. (2010) *Concealed chains: Labor exploitation and Chinese migrants in Europe*. International Labor Office, p. 23.

international criminal groups to take part. According to the conservative estimate of the International Organization of Migration (IOM) in 2000, there were approximately 150 million migrants worldwide, among whom more than 30 million are illegal ones.⁹ As a result, international criminal groups can rake in over \$10 billion annually, which is on a par with profits through drug smuggling, or even more. It is reported that international criminal groups can profit over \$30 billion every year through people smuggling and illegal emigration.¹⁰ Since the new immigration laws were enacted in 1996, especially after the international community intensified efforts to crack down on illegal immigration and strengthened international cooperation, there have been collusion of international stowaway organizations, international smuggling rings, and international underworld groups as well as the three-dimensional phenomenon of ways to conduct illegal immigration. When it comes to smuggling and illegal immigration, these international criminal groups boast meticulous division of labor and close-knit organization.

Refugee

Refugee is an important term in this paper because all the selected interviewees in this research project are either still under illegal status or have once been illegal. Those who have been legalized are mainly refugees. The term generally refers to a person who is outside their country of origin or habitual residence because they have suffered persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or because they are a member of a persecuted 'social group'.¹¹ Such a person may be referred as an 'asylum seeker' until recognized by the state where she makes her claim. Many western countries offer help to these people out of humanitarian reason. In the Netherlands, seeking political asylum is one of the most commonly used ways to obtain a legal resident permit by Chinese illegal migrants. Nevertheless, very few of them can fit into the category of refugee, the majority of illegal migrants simply take advantage of the loosen government policy in order to change their living condition and social position.

Identity

The term generally means how an individual view and identify him or herself as a person or in

⁹ Zhou, Yu-E, and Wang, Xian-Feng. (2004) "Features of the Modern Illegal Emigration Movement in China—An analysis exemplified by the illegal emigration along the coast in Fujian". *Journal of Jinan University*, No. 2, p. 16.

¹⁰See Zhou, Yu-E, and Wang, Xian-Feng, "Features of the Modern Illegal Emigration Movement in China—An analysis exemplified by the illegal emigration along the coast in Fujian", p. 16.

¹¹ Oxford English Dictionary

a specific group, it can refer to gender, age, nationality, religion, race, etc. Since this research paper is based largely on oral account, by interviewing with the subjects about their life experiences in China and the Netherlands, the author is able to obtain a better understanding of the means and reasons why they left China. These factors have great influences on the social position of the illegal Chinese migrants in the Netherlands as well as the formulation process of their identity.

Alcoff argues that identities are essentially social objects, gaining their intelligibility and force only within a social realm. Thus, a fully developed self requires recognition of its status from others, it was not subjectively self-sufficient, we are recognized as persons with particular qualities, features, and knowledge, so socially recognized identity is a necessity of the self.¹² While in China, these illegal migrants are identified based on the regions in China they come from, as the social setting changed, their identity changed as well. In the Netherlands, they are seen as Chinese by the Dutch people, as illegal migrants by the Dutch government and as restaurant workers, construction workers or cleaning ladies by their fellow Chinese people. Since most of these illegal migrants are poorly educated people with low paid jobs, even within the Chinese communities, they are perceived as lower class and often discriminated by the Dutch-Chinese¹³ communities. By the time these illegal migrants arrived in the Netherlands, a series of new identities have forced upon them, which is beyond their control. Thus, the places where they came from in China, the language they speak, their legal status in the Netherlands and the jobs they had or have been doing together form a constant changing identity of who they are.

Stuart Hall proposes two definitions for the understanding of cultural identity. His work *Cultural Identity and Diaspora* grounded in looking at cultural identity from a migration perspective. His second understanding of cultural identity is that “as well as the many points of similarity, there are also critical points of deep and significant differences which constitute what we really are or what we have become.”¹⁴ This definition proposes looking at a common past and a divergent future of the migrants. In this paper, many of the interviewees share a highly similar background in terms of migration history, illegality in the Dutch society, their

¹² Alcoff, Lina Martin, and Medieta, Eduardo (2003). “Race, Class, Gender and Nationality”. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, p. 5.

¹³ Here I am referring to those Chinese people who were either born in the Netherlands or came to the Netherlands before ten years of age, these people can speak fluent Dutch and have been Dutchnized.

¹⁴ Hall, Stuart. (1993). “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” *Colonial Discourse and Post-colonial theory: A reader*, London Harvester Wheatsheaf, p. 394.

path of legalization, language inability as well as social activity in the Netherlands, and yet they have pursued different life and career paths.

In Hutnik's book *Ethnic Minority Identity: A Sociological Psychological Perspective*, he divides ethnic minority identity into four types: the assimilative, the acculturate, the dissociate, and the marginal type.¹⁵ The assimilative person, embracing the values of the majority group, has a low level of ethnic identity consciousness. The dissociate person reflects the mirror side of the assimilative person: she or he reveals a weak identification with the majority group but identifies with the own ethnic group. The acculturate person has a high level of identification with both the majority and the own group while the marginal person oscillates between the two groups without knowing what to choose, resulting in a weak identification with both groups.¹⁶ Throughout the research project, it will become clear that due to their marginal position within their own community as well as in the Dutch society, illegal Chinese migrants have been weakly identified with both their own ethnic group and the majority group at large.

Research Method

This research project relies mainly on interview data. In-depth interviews have been conducted with eight interviewees; all of them have been transcribed and used for this paper under fake names. Among the eight interviewees, four of them have been legalized through political asylum from the Dutch government, they are now refugee, and another four are still under irregular status. The interviewees can be divided into three groups based on their places of origins in China: three of them are of Fujian origin, among them one woman; there are two male interviewees coming from South Zhejiang province; the rest three interviewees are of Liaoning origin (northeast part of China), among them two women. Interviewees in this research project mainly came to the Netherlands during the 1990s. The chaotic political situation as well as the economic policy in China during the time provided excellent opportunities for the human smuggling business. The contribution of the interviewees does not constitute a representative sample statistically. Interviews were made in four different cities in the Netherlands, included big cities like Rotterdam and The Hague, as well as medium sized cities like Eindhoven and Maastricht. The interviewees included people in

¹⁵ Hutnik as cited in Pang, Ching Lin. (2003) "Too busy working, no time for talking." *The Social Construction of Diversity: Recasting the master narrative of Industrial Nations*. Berghahn Books, p. 90.

¹⁶ See Pang, "Too busy working, no time for talking", p. 90.

catering and services domains.

All the contacts with interviewees were made through acquaintances of the author as well as referrals from local Chinese Church community, where a large group of Chinese can be found. The language of the interview is Mandarin, for all the interview subjects are from non-Cantonese speaking regions. This is due to the fact that human smuggling network is usually popular and active in non-Cantonese speaking area. For the places where Cantonese is the dominate language, people usually migrate through family chain instead of through irregular means. It will become clear through the research that not speaking Cantonese impacts tremendously on their life in the Netherlands.

The function of the interviews is dual. On the one hand, they provided new empirical data. On the other hand, they also furnished data on personal feelings and attitudes of the interviewees with regard to their social and cultural position and their situation in the Netherlands. Both are important aspects, since most of the existing published materials do not provide necessary information needed for this research. Some Chinese and Dutch publications provide practical information, but its significance only becomes clear when related to the interview information. The intention of the interview is to explore how their social and cultural identity has been shaped by their marginal position in the Dutch society.

The importance of oral sources is that it can fill in gaps and flaws in the written sources by tracing the emotional aspects that coincide with the settlement of these illegal migrants in their receiving country, and one important aspect of the study of identity is to listen to the voices of ordinary people. Since not much study has focused on the social and cultural aspects of Chinese illegal migrants, and most of the existing literatures were written by western scholars, which might lead to incomprehensiveness. The use of oral sources can thus minimize the weakness in the written sources. Alessandro Portelli¹⁷ once said that “the first thing that makes oral history different is that they tell us not just what people did, but what they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing and what they now think they did.” It may not add much to what we know of, but they tell us a great deal about it psychological costs.¹⁸ In the thesis, the life of Chinese illegal migrants and how their social

¹⁷ Alessandro Portelli (born July 8, 1942): an Italian scholar of American literature and culture, oral historian, writer for the daily newspaper *il manifesto*, and musicologist.

¹⁸ See Li, *We Need Two Worlds*, p. 21.

position affected their identity in the Dutch society cannot be studied without sufficient oral sources collected from these interviews. Moreover, using interviews as a research approach also served as a platform for more illegal Chinese migrants to express their part in history, which is largely lacking. During the interviews, in addition to their smuggling history, the interviewees also shared their life stories. These stories contain narrator's personal experiences both in China and in the Netherlands, which formed the foundation of how their social behaviors have taken shape and their attitudes towards the receiving country. The aim of the research is to find out to what extent does social position affect individual identity by examining how the interviewees talked about it and which factors stood out as pertinent in the interviews.¹⁹

The expected problems during the interviews would be the interviewee's reluctance to talk about their history and experiences of exploitation. Many of them had very sensitive and controversial immigrant history, they might not be willing to share their memories with others. Some of them were even ashamed of such experiences and attempted to erase the memory of such hardships. Another critical point of using oral sources is that it is difficult to maintain interviewers' perspective as a complete outsider. The author has been working with some of the interviewees for months and thus became friends. While enjoying and benefitting from personal trust and friendship, it is difficult not to share the sorrows and helplessness revealed by the interviewees. However, in this thesis I present their stories, with sympathy, but also with the necessary distance.

Due to the nature of the research, researcher find it difficult to collect enough number of interviewees, the data showed in the paper might also not representative enough because of the limited number of interviewees as well as their place of origin in China. Cantonese speaking illegal migrants were not included in the data, which might affect the correctness of the research.

Finding illegal migrants for an MA-thesis research proved to be a difficult task. Yet, I succeeded in having in-depth interviews with total eight interviewees across the Netherlands. Most interviewees were ready to answer all my questions and provided me with lots of details. Two interviewees demonstrated a clear reluctance to go into detail, but also their

¹⁹ Christiansen, Flemming (2003). *Chinatown, Europe: An Exploration of Overseas Chinese Identity in the 1990s*. Routledge Curzon, p. 2.

positioning helped me in the analyses of this marginal community.

The paper will be structured as follows; a brief history about Chinese in the Netherlands as well as the size of and diversity within the Chinese community will be given in the introductory chapter. In the second chapter, a historiographical debate will provide a clear overview of the academic researches which have been published so far regarding social, cultural and legal aspects of Chinese migrants both in the Netherlands and in Europe. In chapter three, the social and economic setting in China will be discussed in order to provide the reasons and motivations behind the exploitation, together with the whole mechanism of illegal migration. Chapter four will give a picture of the settlement process of illegal migrants in the hosting countries as well as and the prize they have to pay. In the following two chapters, the focus will shift to how they survived within marginal existence and its impacts upon their individual identity. The last chapter seven will serve as a conclusion chapter.

The history of Chinese in the Netherlands

The first trace of Chinese people in Europe begins in the 1880's on a modest scale; Chinese migrants only arrived in significant numbers after the World War II, and with great intensity since the early 1980s. As a result, their communities have not had the opportunity to mature and integrate, but are constantly upset by new waves of immigrants.²⁰ These people arrived from different places in China as well as the other parts of the world, and with many different dialects among them. The largest Chinese communities in Europe are in France, Britain and the Netherlands.

In the Netherlands, the history of Chinese immigrants goes back more than a hundred years; it is one of the oldest ethnic minorities. The first wave of Chinese people came to the Netherlands before the Second World War, and they were known by the local society as poor and hard working sailors. After the war, with the popularization of the catering industry, Dutch people begin to recognize them by their prominent restaurant business. The data from Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek shows that in 2008 there were totally 67,772 ethnic Chinese people lived in the Netherlands, which formed 0.42% of the total Dutch population. The diversity within Chinese communities of Europe is due to differences in the timing and the volume of different waves of migration. The Netherlands is at the crossroads of at least five migration waves; its Chinese community included Cantonese, Zhejiangnese, Southeast

²⁰ See Christiansen, *Chinatown, Europe*, p. 3.

Asians (from Indonesia and Vietnam), Surinamese, and a rapidly growing group of Fujiannese.²¹

The Chinese migration history in the Netherlands is very similar to the European Chinese history. Dr. Liminghuan divided it into three phases: Before 1949 is the inception of the first Europe-oriented migration tide. Within this migration flow, students from East Indies formed the main part, they were also known as Peranakan Chinese, the descendants of Chinese traders who first settled in Indonesia in the 15th and 16th century. Those who came directly from mainland China during this time were pioneers from Guangdong and Zhejiang Province. These two distinct groups of early ethnic Chinese immigrants were different mostly with regards to their country of origin, their migration motives, and their social position in the Dutch society. In the period between 1950 and 1975, the Chinese emigration tide from outside of mainland China. By the end of the World War II, especially with the economic recovery, these second wave Chinese migrants in the Netherlands have developed their unique catering business, which has proven to be a great success. As a result, the well-know chain-migration phenomenon occurred. Nevertheless, this phenomenon did not hold for long, as migration from mainland China to Europe proved to be extremely difficult due to the political changes in the country, especially after the new establishment of the People's Republic of China. In order to find new labor, Chinese restaurateurs focused on places outside China, Hong Kong was one of the biggest migration places at that time. During this period, the number of immigrations from Hong Kong was doubled. After 1976, migration from China suddenly surged again. At the last quarter of the 20th century, the emigration flow to Europe reached its high peak. One major reason behind this large flow of migration is the pursuit of material well-being. Potential economic betterment in wealthy countries has effectively pushed the Chinese into going abroad.²² The softened emigration policies of Chinese government as a reaction to the international rules as well as the lenient immigrant policies of West European countries were both driving forces behind this migration flow. Even by the end of the 1990^s, this massive outflow of people does not show much sign of declining, especially after people experience feelings of disillusionment and cynicism about China's future, caused by the brutal suppression of the 1989 protest movement.²³ Unlike the previous flow, people who migrated after 1976 changed back to the traditional migration areas, they mostly came from the

²¹ Pieke, Frank N. (1998) *The Chinese in Europe*. Macmillan, 1998, p. 4.

²² See Li, *We Need Two Worlds*, p. 40.

²³ See Pieke, *The Chinese in Europe*, p. 3.

provinces of Guangdong, Fujian and Zhejiang in southeast China.

The issue of illegal migration

In the late 1980s, the immigration policies of many European countries have tightened due to the large-scale population flow. Consequently, illegal migration to Europe became an issue. Those Chinese who came neither as guest workers, nor because of family reunion, end up in a place without an established community formed by earlier migrants from their native villages or neighboring towns. A large number of these illegal migrants came with the help of human traffickers who have entered the profitable emigration business. A great number of illegal migrants came from Fujian Province. They first appeared in Europe in the second half of the 1980s', and their arrival was a direct outcome of the active involvement of human trafficking business in Fujian.

Several factors caused the phenomena of trafficking. First, the generous and loosen policies of European countries towards outsiders created opportunities for those who are the victim of family planning policy or communist movements. Many illegal migrants have taken advantage of such policies and successfully obtained official resident permits from the government. The regularization law is also a factor; many illegal Chinese workers have been waiting for the occasional reprieve to legalize their status upon their arrival. Up to now, there is no reliable data regarding the specific number of illegal immigrants, since it is their nature to hide and to slip through the net that both measures and controls immigration.

Chapter Two

Historiographical Debate on the Chinese Migrants

Until now, scholars who are interested in Chinese emigration study and overseas Chinese communities have focused almost exclusively on Southeast Asia, North America and Australia. With the exception of the work of James Watson (1975, 1977a, 1977b), studies of the Chinese in Europe are much less known among students of migration and the overseas Chinese.²⁴ The history of Chinese immigration to Europe dates back to the second half of the 19th century. Today, the total number Chinese in Europe well over half a million. In Europe, research conducted on the overseas Chinese started relatively late, often catering for narrow purposes of policymaking, stressing fact-finding and description rather than comparison, analysis and theory-building. As a result, research frequently remained buried in unpublished reports or dissertations written in the local language.²⁵

The historiographical debate provides a clear background of the research that has been conducted about Chinese immigrants within recent decades regarding social, cultural and legal aspects that are relevant to this paper in particular. Because of the nature of this paper, trafficking, illegality and exploitation are among the key terms that will be investigated throughout the whole paper. My thesis focuses on illegal immigrants. The aim of my research is to find how do illegal Chinese in the Netherlands negotiate and formulate their identity. As the number of relevant studies regarding this specific group of people is limited, the debates provided in this paper will include both research which examines legal, and research which examines illegal Chinese immigrants.

This overview of the relevant literature studies will be delineated into two parts: the first part will be illustrated in a chronological order. It provides a general review about the research which has been conducted so far regarding social and cultural aspects of Chinese immigrant in the Netherlands; the second part contains a combination of English and Chinese publications that focus specifically on the legal issues of Chinese migrants.

²⁴ See Pieke, *The Chinese in Europe*, p. 3.

²⁵ See Pieke, *The Chinese in Europe*, p. 3.

Chinese migrants in the Netherlands

Very little research has been conducted before the Second World War regarding the Chinese as an ethnic group in the Netherlands. It was not until 1936 when sociologist F. Van Heek published a report entitled “Chineesche Immigranten in Nederland” that provided the first and by then the most comprehensive investigation about early Chinese settlers. Nevertheless, due to the nature of the report, which aims at providing a guideline for the policy-makers of the Dutch government, and the author’s limited knowledge of Chinese, the depth of the research is questionable.

The first English publication on the Chinese community in the Netherlands, providing a diverse and comprehensive introduction, was published in 1988. It was an investigative report entitled *The Social Position about Dutch Chinese* published in *China Information* by Professor Pieke .F.N from Leiden University. He dealt specifically with the question of ethnicity that whether the Chinese as an ethnic group should be eligible for official minority status.

This report was also written as a reaction to the new policies in a Minderhedennota (Minorities Bill) laid down by the Minister of Interior Affairs that reorganized the hotchpotch of policies that had implemented in the 1970s into a coherent whole in 1983. In the policy it acknowledged that ethnic minorities had become a permanent feature of Dutch society.²⁶ The Dutch government had thus applied a comprehensive set of policies aimed at remedying the social position of underprivileged ethnic minorities, and entitling certain groups (as a whole, or their individual members) to special government care, such as bilingual education, interpreting and translation service, social work, and financial support to ethnic organizations, among them Chinese was the most prominent.²⁷ Taking into account the diversity of the ethnic Chinese communities, the target population of Pieke’s research was the Chinese from the People’s Republic of China, Hongkong, Taiwan, Singapore and Malaysia that work predominantly in the Chinese catering trade. By analyzing the existing data regarding the core policy area of education, housing and employment of the target population, and by conducting in-depth interviews with various groups of social workers, Chinese leaders and members of Chinese families, the research aims at developing a systematic study of the Chinese

²⁶ Pieke, Frank N. (1988) “The Social Position of the Dutch Chinese: An Outline.” *China Information* 3 (2), p. 14.

²⁷ See Pieke, “The Social Position of the Dutch Chinese: An Outline”, p. 15.

immigration history, their social structure and their viewpoint of their position in the Dutch society, how they view Dutch society as a whole and the possibility of obtaining a minority status. Historically, Dutch people see Chinese communities as rather well off that rarely make claims on authorities, and are groups of self-relying people at the fringe of the society. However, due to the increasing number of the population, self-reliance would no longer be enough; government support would be of great help. Due to the restaurant crisis between 1965-1980, which was caused by the excessive number of restaurants, the degree of unemployment within the Chinese communities has largely increased. Together with the poor language abilities and the general lack of integration among the Chinese communities, Chinese community made itself an unfavorable candidate in the campaign and failed to obtain the official minority status by the Dutch government.²⁸

Through detailed analysis of the social and cultural position of the Chinese communities in recent decades, Pieke in this report tried to make it clear that the Chinese community can no longer solve all its problems on its own. In his research project, all the results were undertaken to investigate to what extent and how urgent these problems are. The results are two handed; on one hand, problems do indeed exist, the increasing level of unemployment, the large demand for cheap rented housing due to the excessive growing of the population within the community, and the children who have come to the Netherlands at a very young age and unable to continue their education due to language are problematic. On the other hand, many Chinese youngsters are doing extremely well in class, better than most of the other ethnic groups. Gradually, with the growing up of the second generation Chinese, a new kind of modern restaurateur is growing both in number and in influence. All these factors combined make that the Chinese community is more diverse and unstable. Some of the Chinese migrants and their descendants are performing really well, such as in educational sphere, in their (Dutch) jobs, or in their modern restaurants. Others are marginalized, unable to finish the school, or unsatisfied with their restaurant jobs... Not only have the social positions of individual Chinese within the Chinese community become highly differentiated, but many problems encountered by the Chinese are inseparable from the structural, long-term processes by which they are caused. Thus, Pieke conclude that minority status could not solve the problems for all Chinese people; still they need to solve their internal issues by using their own efforts.

²⁸See Pieke, "The Social Position of the Dutch Chinese: An Outline", p. 15.

In 1996, Verkuyten from Utrecht University and Kwa from Erasmus University Rotterdam published an article entitled *Ethnic Self-Identification, Ethnic Involvement, and Group Differentiation among Chinese Youth in the Netherlands* which focused on the ethnic identity of the Chinese youth and their involvement in the Dutch society. It is common that the second or third generation immigrants are similar to their older generations regarding their ideology, social practice, attitudes and lifestyles; usually they maintain their ties, in varying degrees, with their own ethnic minority groups. Nevertheless, these later generations can also choose which group they prefer to be identified with, especially in a multicultural setting like the Dutch society, immigrants and their generations redefine themselves and are redefined by others. During this process of redefinition, new categories of social identification are formed.²⁹ It is also argued that social as well as numerical factors define an ethnic group as minority. Many minority groups from Second-and Third-World countries that are now living in the West have relatively disadvantaged positions in terms of socioeconomic and educational opportunities and outcomes. These people often experience prejudice, stereotyping, and discrimination.³⁰ Another factor that can influence self-identification is cultural values. The distinction between individualism and collectivism is considered particularly significant. Traditionally the West is seen as upholding more individualistic values, whereas China holds collectivistic values. Thus, the aim of choosing to study this group was the contrast between collectivistic Chinese value and individualistic Western values. Since Chinese in the Netherlands differ physically from the white majority, and culturally from this majority group because of their values, they experience many negative social consequences, putting them at a disadvantage in terms of power, resources, and status. Empirical evidence from a number of countries has indicated that group membership is an element of self-conception that is more important in collectivistic societies than in individualistic societies and in minority groups living in Western countries such as the Netherlands. The aim of this research is to find out what and how later generations of Chinese immigrants identify themselves. Due to the diversity of the ethnic Chinese groups in the Netherlands, the research treats the community as a whole, but such inclusion might inevitably lead to the inaccuracy of the results.

Dr. Liminghuan from XiaMen University was probably the first Chinese scholar who

²⁹ Kwa, G.A. and Verkuyten, M. (1996). "Ethnic Self Identification, Ethnic Involvement, and Group Differentiation among Chinese Youth in the Netherlands". *Journal of Social Psychology*, p. 35.

³⁰ See Kwa, G.A. and Verkuyten, M, "Ethnic Self Identification, Ethnic Involvement, and Group Differentiation among Chinese Youth in the Netherlands", p. 36.

has conducted a comprehensive study on how Chinese immigrants find their sense of belonging in the hosting country. In 1999, she published one of the most influential works about the Chinese in the Netherlands. Entitled *We need Two Worlds*, the book is based on her PhD dissertation from Leiden University. This is one of the major works that will inform my historiographical discussion as it provides a useful background about the settlement of Chinese people in the Netherlands and their interaction with the mainstream Dutch society. The focus of the book lies on how Chinese ethnic minorities form their sentimental attachment through Chinese associations. She states that often, many ethnic migrants in alien surroundings forge a sense of collectivity, like the Chinese in the Netherlands and without taking individual differences, such as training and experiences before and after their arrival into account, usually they have identified themselves, and have always been identified by non-Chinese people, at the aggregate level by their shared ethnic background.³¹ Thus, in order to ensure a better future in their receiving country, most immigrants organize themselves through various links, and the book focused on the emergence of associations, which is recognized as an important collective symbol. One of the major features of the Chinese migrants is that mostly that they are living between two worlds: one is the world of their origin, which is physically distant, but psychologically familiar world; the other is the world of their everyday life, which remains psychologically distant despite its physical presence.³² The main argument in the book is that Chinese associations could in one way be seen as bridges between these two worlds and create trends towards integration. On the other hand they could also serve as barriers to closer relations with mainstream societies. Dr. Li stressed in her book two important social functions of the Chinese associations:

1. Their manifest function is to form an invisible wall by accentuating the we-group feeling and differentiating their members from outsiders; on the other hand, they have built a bridge to the wider society by acting as a representative agent and as an intermediary towards the authorities and the general population;
2. Meanwhile, a latent function has been the construction of an ethnic niche, that is, a cultural and social space that is distinct from both the receiving and sending societies.³³

³¹See Li, *We Live in Two Worlds*, p. 2.

³² See Li, *We Live in Two Worlds*, p. 2.

³³ See Li, *We Live in Two Worlds*, p. 3.

In chronological order, Dr. Li provides a brief summary about the history of the Chinese Association in the Netherlands, from the pre-War times to the post-War periods. A general typology of contemporary Chinese associations in the Netherlands gives the reader a better understanding and internal view of the composition of the Chinese communities. In the organizational motivations, Dr. Li also discusses the initial founding motives behind the association, the organizational structure of the association, and the social roles played by the associations.³⁴ Despite dealing specifically with the Chinese associations in the Netherlands, Dr. Li also attempts to present a general picture of the Chinese immigration process and a detailed social structure in the earlier chapters of the books, among which a very small part was devoted to the illegal immigrants, which briefly described the means they came to the Netherlands.

In 2010, Verkuyten conducted another research by using a mixed-methods approach to compare the meanings of hyphenated identities (Dutch-Chinese, British-Chinese) in terms of acculturation attitudes across the 2nd generation Chinese in the Netherlands.³⁵ The central question was whether a hyphenated identity corresponds to an integrated acculturation profile in the Chinese communities in The Netherlands. Acculturation theory proposes a framework of cultural change among migrants, taking into account their orientation toward both the maintenance of minority culture and social contact with the majority group. The research framework outlines four acculturation profiles, namely *separation* with an emphasis on cultural maintenance and low contact; *assimilation* with high levels of contact and low cultural maintenance; *integration* with high scores on both dimensions; and last, *marginalization* with neither contact nor cultural maintenance. In addition, the results stated that respondents who identify as both Dutch and Chinese might still differentiate between their ethnic and national group in their acculturation attitudes. This suggests that in The Netherlands, acculturation and identification could remain conceptually different, insofar as the former represents a process of cultural change and the latter entails processes of group identification. This article provides a comprehensive study about the self and social identification of the Dutch-born Chinese people, but does not have any direct relevance with my research subjects.

³⁴ See Li, *We Live in Two Worlds*, p. 15.

³⁵ Belanger, Emmanuell, and Verkuyten, Maykel (2010). "Hyphenated Identities and Acculturation: Second Generation Chinese of Canada and the Netherlands." *An International Journal of Theory and Research* Vol. 10(3), p. 142.

Chinese migrants and their illegality

Several important studies have been conducted in the United States to examine human trafficking that occurs alongside the Chinese migration. Peter Kwong's *Forbidden Workers: Illegal Chinese immigrants and American labor* published in 1990 was one of the most provocative and alarming books, in which the author suggests that the problem of illegal immigration must be viewed and understood as a labor issue within the context of the underlying principle of supply and demand.³⁶ Another in-depth research carried out by Ko-Lin-Chin in 1999 describes a flourishing industry behind the smuggling network, and it mainly considers the social problems and life condition of illegal Chinese migrants in the United States.

In comparison, very little research has been carried out in Europe regarding this subject. It was only until 2010 that a major work concerning illegal Chinese migrants in Europe and the whole exploitation mechanism behind it was published by Dr. Gao Yun, a Chinese scholar and the Legal Officer of the Special action Programmer to Combat Forced Labor at the International Labor Office in Geneva. This book deals specifically with the whole mechanism of labor exploitation and the living and working conditions of illegal Chinese immigrants in Europe. It contains an important part for my research as it provides a detailed theoretical background on the issue of Chinese illegal migrations. Entitled *Concealed Chains-Labor Exploitation and Chinese Migrants in Europe*, the book focuses on a silent community, those who have been transported from China to Europe through international smuggling networks. Estimating the number of irregular migrants is extremely difficult, but according to estimates published by the World Bank, there were over three million undocumented migrants in the European Union as of 2004. Other statistics on slightly earlier periods suggested numbers between 2.6 and 6.4 million. Among them, around 1.9 million Chinese residents and workers and 134,000 irregular migrants were living in Europe in 2005. This is a special category of Chinese migrants whose exact numbers are unknown and whose plight periodically makes the media headlines.³⁷ The book is divided into four parts; the introduction chapter provides an overview of the migration mechanism between China and Europe, and discusses both structures and social conditions that facilitate the smuggling are carefully examined. The following three chapters are case studies on Chinese labor exploitation in three different European countries. A large amount of the information was

³⁶ Gao, Yun. (2010) *Concealed chains: Labor exploitation and Chinese migrants in Europe*. International Labor Office, p. 3

³⁷ See Gao, *Concealed chains*, p. 2.

collected through interviews with illegal immigrants, which contributed to a deeper understanding of the reality encountered by them in the countries of their destination. The clear and detailed structure on the workings of human smuggling provided in this book serves as a stepping-stone to my research project.

Various Chinese publications discuss illegal migration as both a social and a legal issue. In 2004, Zhouyu and Wangxianfeng published an article entitled *A Case Study on the Cause of the Modern Illegal Emigration Movement in China's Fujian Coastal Area*. Such a case study helps people better understand the current illegal migration situation, which helps to construct more effective precautions and undertake better management by the government. The image of illegal migrants that is projected by the local media could also have certain effects on the identity building process of these people abroad. Another similar journal article, written by the same authors is entitled *Features of the Modern Illegal Emigration Movement in China-An analysis exemplified by the illegal emigration along the coast in Fujian*, and also discusses the same issues, but focuses more on the characteristics of the illegal migration movement. This article provides readers with a clear map of the mechanism of the illegal migration as well as the social and political reasons behind the exploitation. Dr. Li in 2001 published a journal regarding the immigration policies within the EU states, she shifted the attention to the interactive relationship between the immigration policies of major countries of EU, and the development of immigration tides in the hometowns for overseas Chinese. Through the process, a deep and comprehensive study about the immigration policies in European countries is needed, in order to guide immigration movements, standardize legal procedures of immigration and adopt a positive attitude towards the general trends of population movement.³⁸

Many studies that focused on the illegal immigrants have been conducted in the United States; these studies examine the human trafficking and smuggling that occurs in the Chinese communities, explore the labor dimension of modern Chinese migrations, and conduct in-depth research on the lifestyle and social problems of illegal Chinese immigrants. However, very few serious studies have been carried out on these subjects in Europe, including the Netherlands. The irregular migration of the Chinese has become one of the

³⁸ Li, Ming-Huan. (2001). "Immigration Policies of EU States and New Chinese Migrants". *Journal of Xia-Men University*, No. 4, p. 105.

major issues in Europe. In France, Chinese restaurants owners have been brought before criminal courts for the serious exploitation of their compatriots in illegal situations; in Belgium, an organization designated by the Government to assist victims of human smuggling and trafficking has regularly put migrants of Chinese origin at the top of their list of victims subject to economic exploitation; in the Netherlands, the 2007 and 2008 reports of the Dutch National Reporter on Trafficking in Human Beings point to the emergence of China as an important country of origin for victims of trafficking.³⁹ Most of the existing literature on Chinese migration is concerned with cultural issues, or with the impenetrable criminality among Chinese migrants. The study of the social position and cultural identity of Chinese illegal migrants is neglected. Those Chinese, who came to the Netherlands through illegal means, especially in the late 1990s, have formed a certain part of the Chinese community in the Netherlands. They have been severely criticized because of their illegal way of entering foreign countries and breaking the international law, but studies have rarely focused on how their social position impacts on their identity, as well as how they perceive and position themselves in a foreign country.

In the realm of the study on Chinese people in the Netherlands, focuses were predominantly laid on those who were either born in the Netherlands, who migrated earlier, in particular during the 1950s and 1960s, or had immigrated to the Netherlands before 10 years of age. One group in this array of studies is missing, namely those who initially reached the Netherlands via illegal means. These people, usually originating from Fujian and Zhejiang province, came to the Netherlands mainly in the 1990^s. Some of these irregular Chinese migrants have claimed political asylum from the Dutch government as a mean of legalization and succeeded in doing so, others continued living in the shadows, hoping that one day they will be able to change their illegal status. These people are usually working in the catering and service realms. This research project focuses on this specific group of people. Further investigation will be conducted regarding how and why they came to the Netherlands, the social and historical reasons behind this, where and how they find their sense of belonging, and how they position and identify themselves in an alien surrounding.

³⁹ See Gao, *Concealed chains*, p. 4.

Chapter Three

The Exploitation of Chinese Migrants

Transnational labor brokerage is not a new phenomenon in China. Even though there are hardly any specific records regarding the issue, many documents on migrant workers have shown clues and traces. Its emergence is a by-product of the institutional barriers to transnational migration.⁴⁰ Historical sources have shown that the brokerage between China and Europe first emerged, at the latest, in the early twentieth century, in the rural area of south Zhejiang province.⁴¹ Some local business firms in China at the time functioned as intermediaries; they tried to convince locals of the economic opportunities of migration they would supposedly have, with the aim to make profit on illegal migration by means of arranging the process.

However, this phenomenon was interrupted after the establishment of Peoples' Republic of China, later it was even condemned as counter-revolutionary during the Cultural Revolution (1966-76). By that time, only a few people were able to get permission to go abroad in the context of family reunion. It was only after the reform movement in 1978 that more regulations on emigration rights were implemented; these rights applied to those who had relatives abroad. Besides, within the Cold War period, many western countries also welcomed Chinese migrants due to their detachment of the communist ideology.

At the beginning, helping people to emigrate was motivated by friendship, relationship and empathy. In the Netherlands in the mid-1980s, no brokerage fee was charged by those who helped others to get to Europe, in fact, migration was a happy event, and new arrivals were warmly welcomed by their fellow Chinese people. Nevertheless, the tradition of free service became rare by the end of 1980s and the payment of emigration fee eventually became vital. This was caused by the increasing number of migrants as well as the stricter barriers of the destination countries⁴². The statistics in 1955 shown that there were 11,491 Chinese migrants live in Europe, by the end of 1990s, the total number of Chinese had risen to about

⁴⁰ See Gao, *Concealed chains*, p. 20.

⁴¹ See Gao, *Concealed chains*, p. 20.

⁴² See Gao, *Concealed chains*, p. 23.

one million.⁴³

So what was the cause behind illegal migration, and what exactly was the situation in China that made so many people want to go abroad? How did such a large number of Chinese people enter Europe? Many of them did not have any friends or relatives in the destination countries, and did not meet even the basic requirements of the immigration procedure. What kind of migration mechanism functioned between China and Europe to make migration still possible? This chapter will aim to provide a detailed analysis of the above questions.

The cause of illegal migration and the social-economic background in China

In China, it is not in recent years that the country begins to see the phenomenon of illegal emigration. Since 1950s and the beginning of 1960s, some defectors fled to foreign countries to evade political repression, certainly including some innocent people hit by political persecution as well as people who ran to another country to make a living during famines. With the economical development and the policy of opening-up to the outside world in the 1980s, the number of illegal emigrants has greatly increased. These people travel with fake documents, temporary visa, but mainly through stowaways. According to the statistics, about 200,000 to 400,000 Chinese illegal emigrants fled to other countries in the world during 1978 to 1995. From 1979 to 1998, at least 220,000 people illegally immigrated to other countries.⁴⁴ For some reasons, it is still unknown how many Chinese illegal emigrants there are in the world. Thus, it is imperative to find out what has caused illegal emigration, which was once deemed as treason, and why it is rampant in some areas. The reasons could attribute to both international and national factors, and the social environment of the destinations stowaways choose.

The cause of illegal emigration can be divided into three categories structurally. First, the impact of social environment plays an important role in creating and sustaining the desire of people to migrate. That is to say, the influence from the successful cases of friends or relatives who migrated before them; the stress of finding a satisfactory job in the home country; the affluence and respect bestowed upon returned illegal emigrants, local culture and

⁴³ See Gao, *Concealed chains*, p. 15.

⁴⁴ See Zhou, Yu-E, and Wang, Xian-Feng, "A Case Study on the Cause of the Modern Illegal Emigration Movement in China's Fujian Coastal Area", p. 74.

history.. These are examples of how the social environment plays a role in migration Second, the impact of the environment of the international community. That is, the internationalization of criminal groups of illegal emigration; the attraction to the flow of labor force because of economic globalization; the difference in policies for illegal emigration; the security problem and living environment in China and the social unrest caused by wars play a part in causes of illegal migration.⁴⁵ Third, factors of migrants themselves. That is, their desire for wealth and happiness.

“I want to make more money, they said that those who make it to the America are having a much better life now, they have their own house and car, I want the same life too, I don’t want to live in poverty all my life.”

This is what Wang, the thirty three-year-old Fujianese who arrived in the Netherlands in 1999 told me when I ask him why he decided to leave home. During the interviews, almost all the interviewees to a certain degree have expressed their desire for economic prosperity. Thus, it is not difficult to find that the disparity in their economic status before migrating is the direct cause of illegal emigration. As far as a researcher in the Academy of Social Sciences in Fujian Province concerned, considerable income ratio disparity is the main reason of illegal emigration. This is because the movement of labor force in low-income areas to high-income areas is a tendency of population migration.⁴⁶ According to the academy, illegal emigrants, taking Fujian province as an example, are usually people who earn less than RMB500 Yuan per month. Most of them are farmers without an education or many professional skills other than farming if they illegally immigrate to the USA; they can earn as much as 1000 dollars (RMB10, 000 Yuan) per month. The income ratio is 1 to 20. If they illegally immigrate to Japan, they can earn as much as 150,000 yen (about RMB10, 000 Yuan). The income ratio is also 1 to 20. If they illegally immigrate to Taiwan Province, they can earn as much as 10, 000 New Taiwan dollars (about RMB4000 Yuan). The income ratio is 1 to 10.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Guo, Chao-Feng. (2003). “Overview of the International Illegal Immigration Problem.” *Public Security Study*, No. 11, p. 86.

⁴⁶ Huang, Rui. (2003). “A Probe into the Transnational “Human Smuggling” in the Coasts of Fujian Province”. *Journal of Shandong Public Security College*, No. 1, p. 89.

⁴⁷Deng, Bao-Zhen and Fu, Mei-Lan. (2007). “Current Policy and Situation regarding Human Smuggling in China”. *Today Hu bei Theory Edition*, No. 4, p. 176.

History and migration chain are considered as one major reason for recurrent illegal emigration activities in China as well. The sixty one-year-old Zhang who comes from Fujian province stated:

“Many people in my village went to Europe, they are doing quite well now, they have their own restaurants, the business is really good, those people (Europeans) like Chinese food.”

Residents in Fujian and Zhejiang coastal area have boasted a tradition of overseas trading and going abroad to make a living since ancient times. After Opium War, as one of the five trade ports, Fuzhou Port became a “free trade” area of colonial countries.⁴⁸ During 1920s, the shipping route from Fuzhou had extended to Japan, Korea, South Asia and even to Europe and Australia. For some historical reasons, there exists a migration chain consisting of people in these areas. It is characterized as a culture and motivation that still exert an influence on illegal emigrants nowadays. In Fujian coastal area for instance, a successful illegal emigrant can set a great example for his relatives and friends who will follow his footsteps in recent years. They not only help and support each other, but also invite their own relatives and friends. All in all, the effect of the migration chain is vital in the process of illegal emigration.

Some western scholars attribute the reason of why illegal emigration cannot be eradicated to poverty, oppression, thirst for freedom and human rights. This however is not necessarily the case. Those who emigrate illegally are generally poorly educated. They do not always have too much desire for freedom and human rights. So when I asked the thirty five-year-old Tian, who arrived in the Netherland in 1995 as a teenager about his situation in Zhejiang, he said:

“I don’t like to study, I haven’t even finished my primary school. Most of my friends were just like me, they hung out on the street, doing nothing, or they helped their parents with farming. Our village was very poor, everybody wanted to leave eventually.”

As far as poverty is concerned, it should not be seen as the main cause, since areas

⁴⁸ See Guo, “Overview of the International Illegal Immigration Problem”, p. 86.

such as Fuzhou in Fujian province and Wenzhou in Zhejiang province are among the earliest places to become wealthy. The deep-rooted problem lies in the people's misguided conceptions of migration that are difficult to change. In the city of Changle in Fujian, where illegal emigration is rampant, people do not regard organizers of illegal emigration as criminals. On the contrary, people are grateful to them. During the interview with the fifty six-year-old Lin from Dongbei area, who has been here for 17 years, I asked her about what she thinks of the people who helped her during her migration, she said:

“They are nice people, they arranged everything for me, all I needed to do is to give them what they asked for, I mean those different documents. When I arrived, I got to work immediately. Of course I have paid them, but I think the money is worth spending, I mean they need this money to take care of my journey. And the money can be earned back eventually.”

Other interviewees also expressed the same feelings, none of them blamed or criticized about the existence of the brokerage firms. According to them, these human smugglers helped them to realize their dreams.

In different parts of the world, the loosen immigration policy also contributed partly to the wrongdoings.⁴⁹ The policy of amnesty in Europe have indirectly attracted new immigration flow by encouraging the belief that once migrants were in the country it would be possible to gain legal status. The amnesty in 2002 in Italy alone have regularized 634, 728 migrants, which was by far the largest every granted in the country. In EU countries from the 1970s to 2000, approximately 1.8 million migrants have benefited from amnesties under the name of political humanism.⁵⁰ Thus, politicized humanitarian factors in its laws become causes of illegal immigration.

The collusion of international stowaway groups and international organization of underworld society makes the illegal immigration more internationalized and organized, which is also one of the reasons why it cannot be contained effectively. Widespread people smuggling network has made the large-scale population migration and illegal immigration feasible. With the expansion of the scale, fat profits are good reasons for more international

⁴⁹ See Guo, “Overview of the International Illegal Immigration Problem”, p. 89.

⁵⁰ See Gao, *Concealed chains*, p. 25.

criminal groups to take part. According to the conservative estimate of the International Organization of Migration (IOM) in 2000, there are approximately 150 million migrants worldwide, among which more than 30 million are illegal ones. As a result, international criminal groups can rake in over \$10 billion annually, which is on a par with profits through drug smuggling, even more.

In the era of economic globalization, the global flow of capital leads to the flow of labor force, which in itself is a social economic law. However, because of the increasingly strengthening of public rights in sovereign countries, national interests and security, artificial restrictions blocks the free flow of labor force when sovereign countries are encouraging and promoting the global flow of capital. At this point, the contradiction between economic globalization and the supremacy of national sovereignty will certainly cause illegal immigration. Important events in international economy and politics also affect illegal immigration. For example, the international communist movement from 1989 to 1991 provides opportunities for people in Fujian and Zhejiang coastal areas in China to emigrate to Europe and America.

As a byproduct of the opening and modernization of Chinese society, human trafficking is an illegal part of the international transfer of labor force caused by income ratio smuggling and other illegal emigration problems. It is an international crime, as well historical and global problems. Due to the fact that it contains extremely complicated and deep-rooted social, economic and political factors home and abroad, it will not be eradicated.

The irregular migration mechanism between China and Europe

Most of Chinese illegal migrants were coming from Fujian Coastal, South Zhejiang as well as Dongbei (Northeastern) area. The main reason for its repeated prohibition is the imbalance of the structure of world economy and the drive from economic profits. A detailed analysis of the migration mechanism can provide a clear picture of the human smuggling business in China, more importantly, it can show how the living and working situation of the illegal migrants in their receiving countries, as well as their marginal position in the society

In the 1970s, very few state-owned companies in China were authorized to deal with labor exporting business. In Fujian province, Xiamen International Economic and technical Cooperation Company (XIETC Company) was the only company that was authorized to deal

with labor recruitment for labor export under the banner of the foreign aid program.⁵¹ A decade later, its business has been greatly challenged. The transformation of economic plan in China largely popularized the transnational migration brokerage business. Based on the data from the website of Ministry of Commerce and the website of Ministry of Labor and Social security, in total there have been 2,714 government certified companies allowed to involve in the transnational brokerage business.⁵²

Despite the official authorized companies, many informal units are also actively involved in the transnational brokerage business. They can be divided into three forms. In the first category is the authorized company as described above. They initially obtain the official labor exportation quota from the government, based on contracts between China and the destination countries. In the second category are those private firms or agencies that have some kind of certificate, such as a copy of a certificate to show that they are a branch of an authorized firm or agency, or a certificate of commerce or consultancy dealing with migration affairs.⁵³ The third category concerns those small migration agencies whose legal authorization is unknown. Their marketing strategies involves large scale advertisements all over the country, in which proposed income abroad is very eye-catching and the transnational service fee is very high. Some of these agencies may have a small working station; others simply provide a name of the contact person as well as a telephone number that can be reached. All of them function in the transnational migration market. When state-owned companies dominated the labor export market, these small entities generally did not charge a migration fee, they usually made profits from “sharing” worker’s wages abroad. Among the eight interviewees in this research project, six of them did not paid anything upon their departure. Since many potential migrants cannot meet the requirement of the destination country, the transnational migration market has become a vast area where private firms adopt both regular and irregular approaches.⁵⁴

These unauthorized emigration companies or agents were labeled as “snake-heads” by the Chinese media. They comprise at least a three-tiered hierarchy linking source and destination countries and functions outside of the law.⁵⁵ At the top of the hierarchy are some

⁵¹See Gao, *Concealed chains*, p. 23.

⁵²See Gao, *Concealed chains*, p. 24.

⁵³ See Gao, *Concealed chains*, p. 25.

⁵⁴See Gao, *Concealed chains*, p. 25.

⁵⁵See Gao, *Concealed chains*, p. 25.

big “snakeheads”, who usually own multiple passports and live abroad or are settled in Hongkong, Taiwan or Macau. They are extremely wealthy people with large financial means; they arrange and expand transnational migration chains, prepare documents, and in some cases, bribe the officials both in China and abroad. In the middle tier are those institutional brokers that work for the migration companies in the destination countries. Their main functions included training the newly arrived migrants about how to make or prepare documents, how to apply for legal status upon their arrival, or how to hide from the local authority when their visa has expired. Most of the time, they are operating between legal and illegal approaches. At the bottom of the tier there are some local agents who act on an individual basis, they have connections to the middle tier, some even have direct access to the big snakeheads through intermediary contacts.⁵⁶ Their main job is to search for potential clients to relevant brokers or snakeheads, and they earn commission per customer from the higher tiers.

With regards to the eight interviewees, all of them told me that they had chosen local small private agents, through personal contacts. As Fujian and Zhejiang province are among the most active areas in China that involve illegal migration, people from these areas usually have at least some friends or relatives that are familiar with the transnational migration business, and they feel safe and reliable to make a choice through such an acquaintance. Another important fact is that the package fee proposed by most small and private entities is open to negotiation, in some cases they give a discount to people they know. The brokerage fee evolved from a service among family members, relatives, and friends, towards a repayment system, and again to high brokerage fees. Such a system should be contextualized within the cultural framework of the Chinese lineage, which is based on common descent.⁵⁷ The help could range from information preparation about the immigration policies in destination countries as well as financial guarantees.

In Zhejiang province in the early 1980s, the price to emigrate to Europe was about 60,000 Yuan (€7,200). By the end of 1990s, the fee increased to 300,000-400,000 Yuan (€36,000-€48,000).⁵⁸ The service fee appears to fluctuate with the wage level in the receiving country, and on average, the migrants without down payment have to spend about the

⁵⁶ See Gao, *Concealed chains*, p. 26.

⁵⁷ See Gao, *Concealed chains*, p. 27.

⁵⁸ See Gao, *Concealed chains*, p. 28.

equivalent of two till four years' salary to cover the entire recruitment fee. For others, a certain amount of money need to be paid in advance, usually it is about 10 to 50 percentage of the total recruitment fee, but the ratio is largely dependent on the personal relationship between the recruiter and the migrant. While people from Zhejiang and Fujian areas can get the help from their friends or relatives both in the China and abroad due to the long migration history and tradition in these two areas, migrants from Dongbei province are relatively new and have no tradition of a transnational migration past. Thus, they can hardly get any support in the destination countries due to the lack of a social network. Most migrant from Dongbei area were former workers of state-owned companies. By the time they were laid off, they were compensated with a certain sum of money to be trained for re-employment. Some ambitious people who willing to take risks used this money to go to Europe, thus they opened up a new migration niche. Most people from Dongbei area were irregular migrants who do not meet the requirement to work in Europe. In the countries like the Netherlands, where the local ethnic market is dominated by people from Zhejiang and Guangdong area, people from Dongbei, as well as Fujian province usually find themselves in a very vulnerable position.

Chapter Four

The Vulnerability of Chinese Migrants in the Netherlands

In Dutch migration discourse, the migrants without legal status are called *illegalen* (illegal) or *illegale vreemdelingen* (illegal strangers). According to the official definition published by the Dutch Immigration Office, irregular residency refers to the presence in the Netherlands of foreign nationals who are not in possession of a valid residence permit and are therefore obliged to leave the country” (IND, 2005). The fundamental idea is that those without residence permits do not belong to the Dutch society and therefore should be excluded from all the provisions offered by the modern welfare state. In “Undocumented Migration”, a research work published in 2008 on *Country Report the Netherlands* that dealt specifically with the data and trends of illegal migrations in Europe, there are four types of irregular migrants:

- Migrant workers who have come to the Netherlands independently;
- Migrant workers and chain migrants who have come to the Netherlands with the help of family members;
- Migrants seeking asylum who have come to the Netherlands with the help of a human trafficker, also for work purposes;
- Migrants who have crossed the border as victim of cross-border human trafficking or with the help of a human smuggler, without making use of the asylum procedure;⁵⁹

Most of the Chinese legal migrants belong to the later three groups. Many of them arrived in the Netherlands with valid passports, but they were destroyed immediately after their arrival; other arrived with false passports or even without passports. This certainly worsens their already precarious position, and then contributes to a clandestine existence.

The information from European Reintegration Networking estimates that the total number of illegal foreigners in the the Netherlands at the moment is ranging from 60.000 to 100.000 (ERN, 2002). But it is often difficult to find out illegal migrant’ precise country of origin, previous studies have shown that Turkey, Morocco as well as some other African countries were among the main sources of irregular workers. However, in recently decades, many

⁵⁹ Van der Leun, Joanon and Ilies, Maria. (2008) “Undocumented Migration, Counting the Uncountable. Data and Trends across Europe.” *Country Report The Netherlands*, p. 4.

research results point out that China has gradually become the main sender of illegal migrants among Asian countries. Thus, it is confirmed that the main exporting countries for irregular migrants to the Netherlands are Turkey, Morocco and China. Their connection to the Netherlands is the existing migrant groups established in the Netherlands. Most of the Chinese irregular migrants move to big cities and neighborhoods where large Chinese communities can be found. In “Undocumented Migration”, it shows that alongside the presence of legal immigrants, the presence of specific activities that are accessible to irregular immigrants, plays an important role in generating flows of irregular migrants: the more commercial service-sector businesses are located in a given area, the higher the numbers of irregular aliens will be.⁶⁰ Among the eight interviewees, seven of them lived in the city of Rotterdam and The Hague; only one interviewee lived in the southern city of Maastricht.

The benefit of living in such areas is that big cities always economically as well as culturally well developed. Cities like Rotterdam and The Hague are concentrated with big Chinese communities; they provide a number of facilities such as Chinese supermarkets, restaurants as well as hair salons, which fulfill both the needs and leisure of illegal migrants. There is therefore less need for illegal migrants to go out and traverse the city in search for suitable facilities, and thus enables them to stay as invisible as possible. Moreover, religious communities are also present in the cities. One interviewee told me during our meeting that his weekly routine is to visit the Chinese Christian community in Rotterdam’s China town. He goes there for free food as well as making friends, and he revealed that many people like him (irregular workers) go to the church, where they won’t be judged on the basis of who they are. Another important advantage is that the transportation network in big cities provides illegal migrants easy accesses from home to work. Aside from the help given by fellow Chinese acquaintances, a commercially driven factor also contributes to the social and economic needs of illegal immigrants. Due to the large ethnic network in big cities, they can get all sorts of useful information that would help them integrate into the Dutch society, such as how to find a job, an apartment or even medical care either from legal immigrants, or from irregular ones who have stayed in the country for a certain amount of time.

Various studies indicate that Chinese restaurant and ethnic sectors are the main employment area for irregular workers. Within the eight people that I have conducted

⁶⁰ See Van der Leun, Joanon and Ilies, Maria, “Undocumented Migration, Counting the Uncountable. Data and Trends across Europe”, p. 5.

interview with, six of them have previously worked or still working in the Chinese catering sector, only two women are employed by private families as a cleaner. Chinese irregular migrants progress through their employment career in a very similar way. Many of them have at least one contact in the Netherlands before their departure; these contact people could be their relatives, friends or acquaintances from their hometown or area. Three of my interviewees from Fujian province all had a contact person upon their arrival, Tian and Zhen from Zhejiang area had two relatives working in the restaurant sector, Lin from Dongbei also had a friend working for a private family in the Netherlands. The only two interviewees without any help from someone they knew in the Netherlands are Huang from Fujian and Gu from Dongbei. The main responsibility of a contact person is to help them get started. For those without any contacts, they usually rely upon their brokers for their first job and shelter.

The first jobs illegal Chinese migrants can get are usually in the hotel and restaurant business. They work mainly in Cantonese speaking restaurants, regardless of the owners' origin in China, as kitchen help. The average salary they can get vary from €100-€150 per week, plus a bed in a room above or under the restaurant. Working hours are in accordance with the normal opening hours of Chinese restaurants, from 10-12 hours a day, in some cases the hours could be longer, such during the holiday season. Usually the migrants work six, or sometimes even seven days a week.

Wang, Zhang and Lin from Fujian province got their first job in the Chinese restaurants in the city of Rotterdam and The Hague with the help their fellow Fujiannese acquaintances. Due to the contract signed before their departure, they have to work 2-4 years to pay back their debt depended on the average salary of the restaurants they work. In some cases, the restaurant owner and the brokerage made the agreement about the length and salary of the illegal worker beforehand. Wang told me that for the first three years he only received a small sum of money per month from the restaurant owner to cover his living expenses, which was around 150 euro, this is a pocket money received from the restaurant owner because he can eat and sleep in the restaurant. Some of the migrants interviewed left their first job within a short period of time. The reasons are diverse; Tian resigned voluntarily because of the low pay and hard work, Huang left his first job after two months due to the bullying by the owner and the isolation from his fellow Cantonese-speaking colleagues, Zhen was fired by the restaurant owner when the owner found another cheaper irregular worker. She told me that her friend said it is someone from the owner's native area and who speaks Cantonese. It is an

unspoken rule in the restaurant business that employees get paid once a week and in cash, so usually there are no problems with unpaid wages, but Huang told me that the restaurant owners were unwilling or very reluctant to pay him every week, that was also one reason he chose to resign.

Usually, migrants continue with similar jobs after their first employment, working in the catering sector at marginally higher pay, combined with shorter or longer periods of unemployment. They are largely dependent on the constantly changing market for cheap illegal labor. Generally, jobs are found through the illegal migrant's growing network of friends, especially from those who come from the same area as them. In some case they turn to the local Chinese job agency for help. After staying for a considerable amount of time in the Netherlands, many migrants quickly began to explore the other types of employment besides the catering sector. Research indicates that the main employment areas include agricultural work, food processing, cleaning and industrial assembly. In all these types of jobs, Chinese immigrants are either part of a labor gang of a Chinese or non-Chinese gang master, or else individually join the larger informal labor force of immigrants from Eastern Europe, Latin America, Africa and South Asia.⁶¹

After several working experiences in the catering and service sector, many Chinese immigrants were eager to take their career to a higher level. The traditional token of success for Chinese migrants is to start their own business. Unfortunately, very few managed to achieve their dream. Only one interviewee had her dream come true, the Zhejiangnese woman Zhen, who started her own nail salon with the help from some of her fellow Zhejiangnese friends last year. Others have subsequently abandoned their initial dream. However, this may partly due to the fact that the most studies' main focus is irregular Chinese migrants. For those who failed or abandoned to start their own business, many followed the traditional path of upgrade their career and some have become skilled cooks in a restaurant. Fujianese migrant worker Zhang, who is now sixty one year old, is since 2000 the chief of a small restaurant he worked for many years. For others, especially men, construction work is a better choice. Wang told me that during the time while he was unemployed, he found construction work through his fellow Fujianese friend in a Chinese construction company. The pay was much better than working in a Chinese restaurant. More importantly, construction work provides him with more independence, freedom of movement, and security. In the interview, Wang

⁶¹See Gao, *Conceal Chains*, p. 154.

said:

“That was a good job, I worked with two other Chinese and we formed a small team. I was doing really well, I’m strong and tough, and it was easy for me. I took up contracts in The Hague for some months, also in Delft, flooring and tiling in private houses and apartments. There were many building jobs at that time, I earned much more than working in a restaurants. The accommodation was provided; we could sleep in the construction site. I really enjoyed the job.”

Irregular Chinese women who worked in domestic sector usually do not have a clear career path. Those women usually work as nannies or cleaners in the service of Chinese families. Research results shows that of all the sectors, both formal and informal, where immigrant labor is concentrated, domestic service is the sector in which women work the longest hours, often 18 hours per day. In addition, the living conditions are very poor, and in some case, extreme.

Social isolation and burden of debt

Due to their irregular status, most Chinese irregular migrants are facing the constant risk of being reported to the police office or being stopped for questioning. Thus, none of them dares to go out due to the fear of being arrested and consequently sent back home. Another fact is that most of them do not speak Dutch. Although no research has been done regarding the rate of illiteracy of Chinese illegal migrants, it is commonly known that the level of education of Chinese migrants is relatively low compared to other ethnic group. Among my eight interviewees, the highest education level obtained is middle school, and some of them not even finished their primary school. The extremely low educational levels in China as well as the very long working hours in the Netherlands make it difficult for migrants to learn Dutch. Thus, interpreters are needed for their every procedure and every contact with the Dutch society. They are therefore largely dependent on the Chinese community in terms of language and information. Such social isolation explains the reason why Chinese migrants rarely seek assistance from the host society. During the interviews, many of the interviewees revealed that though they were not satisfied with the working conditions and wages they receive, they rarely lodge complains. They are at a disadvantage when it comes to accessing their basic rights, due to their fear of being forced to return to China and the consequences of

repatriation.⁶²

Debt adds largely to the vulnerability of Chinese migrants. They pay a much higher price for their journey to Europe than people of other nationalities. Chinese migrants usually contract a debt before they leave China. During the interviews, many of them confessed that they had borrowed money to finance their departure, either from their friends or from relatives in China. The debts of migrants from Fujian and Zhejiang region were twice as heavy as those of migrants from the other provinces. Most of the migrants from Dongbei have saved enough in China to avoid debt, but practically all immigrants from Zhejiang and Fujian are in serious financial trouble. In some cases, migrants who cannot pay are obliged to work for many years in the service of an employer who withholds their wages in order to transfer the money to the smuggler and thus pay back the travel expenses.⁶³ All three Fujiannese migrants I have interviewed were the victims of such a debt system.

Upon their arrival in the Netherlands, they started to work immediately in order to pay off the debt as soon as possible. Usually, they spend as little as possible, not only for their debt, but also to financially support their families at home. During the interview with Zhen, she told me that at beginning she made calculations every day after work. During the first few months, she had a strict budget: she spent €100 for sharing a 20 m² apartment with other two Zhejiangnese girls, €30 for food which she purchased at open market at closing time once a week, €15 for a prepaid telephone card so that she call back home once a while. No transportation fee was included in the list because she used to go to work by bike, and it took her €25 from the black market to buy one. Still, it took her two and half years to pay back the entire service fee. They repayment period usually varies from two to four years. Monthly installments are counted based on a standard Dutch wage, despite the fact that the actual wages earned by migrants are much lower than the average. Such a combination of debt and irregular status traps migrants into an extreme vulnerable situation in their hosting society.

⁶² See Gao, *Concealed Chains*, p. 51.

⁶³ See Gao, *Concealed Chains*, p. 52.

Chapter Five

Identity within the Chinese Community

Given their absence in migrant policies and the general discourse on multiculturalism, the maintenance and experience of the Chinese identity remained a personal matter, with little debate in the larger society.⁶⁴ The earlier group of Chinese immigrants who arrived in the Netherlands at the beginning of the 20th century never had any intention of staying. Both the government and the migrants themselves made little efforts with the integration process and their contact with the Dutch people was very limited. It was only the later groups, especially those who came during and after the war, who gradually became involved in the Netherlands by setting up shops or restaurants.

Chinese people, especially those who are in an irregular position, are characterized by their long and demanding working hours and the resulting social isolation. Thus, the identity of illegal migrants can be seen as an inscribed relation of migrants and immigrant groups to forces and processes associated with the country of origin.⁶⁵ Within Chinese communities, there is an exclusive trust within the group, from which outsiders are excluded. It implies that most of the time, Chinese people work, invest, and socialize only within their own group. The irregular status of illegal Chinese migrants, their ties to China, and their reasons for and methods of coming to the Netherlands have further limited their chances to assimilate or integrate into the major society. Thus, even though they live and work in the Netherlands, their regime of truth is situated within their own immigrant group, with reference to the country of origin.⁶⁶

The diversity among illegal Chinese immigrants in the Netherlands is clear; these differences may concern their illegal Chinese immigrants' occupation, speech, place of origin in China, age as well as gender. Therefore, the best way to capture the identity of illegal Chinese migrants is to explain the different behavior forms with which individual and group interest is asserted.⁶⁷ By looking at how these illegal migrants behave in their hosting society as well as their acceptance by their surrounding, first within their own ethnic community, we can get a better understanding on how they formulate and negotiate their own identity.

⁶⁴See Pang, "Too busy Working", p. 91.

⁶⁵See Pang, "Too busy Working", p. 90.

⁶⁶ See Pang, "Too busy Working", p. 91.

⁶⁷ See Christiansen, *Chinatown, Europe*, p. 43.

Constructing an identity within the restaurant:

Previous research has clearly shown that catering is the sector that uses the largest number of irregular Chinese workers, not only in the Netherlands, but also in the rest of Europe. Due to the culture and migration history of Chinese people, they have voluntarily cocooned themselves, protected from the non-Chinese communities within their host country. As a result, both resident Chinese and new immigrants rarely seek opportunities outside the economic niches they already specialized in.⁶⁸ Among my eight interviewees, six of them have been working or are still working in the catering business. Three Fujiannese interviewees were still bound to the first restaurants they found work in due to the agreement they signed with snakehead in China. Their cases are slightly different from others who have been switching from one place to another, at least in the first couple of years. Wang came from the rural area in Fujian, he was the only child left in China with his mother, who was a farmer. With almost no education and no family support, he came to the Netherlands with the help of local human smuggler in 1999, when he was only 19 years old. In Wang's interview, he said:

“My first job was at a big Chinese restaurant in China Town in The Hague, it was interesting at the beginning, as I was a newcomer and had so much to learn and of all my co-workers were Chinese and have similar backgrounds to me, we talked and made jokes during work. The restaurant started at 12 o'clock and stopped at 1 at night, 7 days a week. Me and my co-worker worked on shift, usually I worked either from 10 a.m. to 10 p.m., or from 3 p.m. till closing time. Each week I get one day off. My main responsibility was preparing the food so the chef could make the dishes in time.”

Wang was lucky, he was young and outspoken, during the first few months, he had built good relationships with his fellow workers, especially the restaurant manager, who also was a Fujiannese and close to his age. The owner of the restaurant was a man from Hong Kong, he was generous and agreeable. From the monthly salary of Wang, around €650, €500 was used to pay back his debt, and he could keep the rest of the money as his monthly expense. The accommodation was provided by the restaurant owner, it was an 8 square meter room, with a

⁶⁸ See Pieke, *The Chinese in Europe*, p. 11.

bed and some basic furniture. In total, he spent three years in this restaurant. Wang was illegal during the first four years in the Netherlands; his application for asylum seeker was only granted in 2002. From 1998 until early 2002, Wang had very few social contacts outside the restaurant sphere. He told me that he had made some friends in the refugee camp, and his two closest friends were Zhen and Tian from Zhejiang province, who are also interviewees in this project. The time for socializing for most illegal migrants remains outside their long working hours, and due to the nature of the restaurant business, they usually socialize during the night. Darkness served as a natural barrier between irregular migrants and the authority and provides them with a sense of security. While asking him if his illegal status had certain effects on the way his co-worker see and identify him, he replied:

“Well, they don’t really care about my legal status, I’m young and fun, they all like me. Regarding the restaurant owner, as far as I get my job done, everything will be ok. But I feel closer and connected to Ming (the restaurant manager), as we are both from Fujian and have more things in common, such as the taste for food...”

Lin on the other hand, was an unfortunate case. He was a communist party member and used to work for the government in China. He came to the Netherland because he was unsatisfied with his salary. Lin has a wife and two sons, both went to the USA after several years since his departure.

“I didn’t get paid well, but I have a big family to take care of...after that incident (Tiananmen Square protests of 1989), I decided to take a risk. China was a mess, loose in government control, many people fled at that time...so one day I was wearing my uniform, the next day, after spending almost all my savings, I was here... Working (in the restaurant) was tough, I was a Zagong for the first two years, so I had to do all the trivial works in the restaurant: wash dishes, place all the food in order, perform the weekly cleaning duty, prepare the food...but I got used to it, I just didn’t like those people, they were rude, poorly educated and stupid... and the owner was very stingy, the food and accommodation was bad, you can’t even imagine...”

The restaurant Lin used to work was also in The Hague, it was small in size and number, so as

a Zagong, he had to do all the necessary works. The owner gave Lin €100 as a pocket money per month, the rest of the salary went to the hand of the human smuggler who helped him abroad. Lin told me that his co-workers always made fun of him, because he was a former party member and ended up like this. The restaurant is not of good nature, many times Lin was provided with bad food. The living condition was also a bit extreme, especially compared to Wang. Lin was sharing a small basement room about 8 square meters with another irregular worker, the room had two beds and a table, there was no drawer to place Lin's stuff, and everything was kept in his suitcase. Lin said the life was like hell back then. His only comfort was his family members in China; he called his wife and sons from time to time to get some spiritual support. Lin had a distant relative in the Netherlands, but they only met briefly when Lin arrived. So basically, Lin had no social contact with anyone in the Netherlands other than his restaurant co-workers. He was completely isolated from society. In total, Lin has spent four years in this restaurant. Four years later, he was asked to work in another restaurant, and that is when the situation started to change at last. The new owner is a Fujiannese man, so Lin has been treated better. Lin has applied for asylum seeker since 1992, but until now he is still under illegal status. His social network however has been built since the time he left the first restaurant. At the end of our conversation, Lin told me that being an illegal migrant has largely affected the way he was treated and seen by his fellow Chinese colleagues, as well as the restaurant owner. He was thrown into the worst living and social conditions. The fear of being reported has isolated him in the restaurant setting, he feels exhausted after hiding from the authority for so many years.

Another Fujiannese irregular worker Zhang has also experienced a similar situation. They share a similar background. Both Zhang and Lin have families to support in China. They are also close in age. Zhang is five years older than Lin and they came to the Netherlands in the same year. Zhang was also bound by the contract with the snakehead and had to stay at a single restaurant for years in order to pay back the debt. What put Zhang into a better position than Lin was that he used to be a cook in China. Being able to cook, Zhang was able to gain the respect from the restaurant owner as well as from his co-workers. Although he also worked as a Zagong, he could sometimes help to cook when the chief was unavailable. Like Lin, Zhang's main social contact was limited in the restaurant sphere, but he was also in constant touch with his family in China, through telephone calls. He told me that his daughter is 25 year old now and has a good job in China. Zhang has spent three years in his first employment. He has become a refugee since 1995. Since then he eventually came out of the

shadow.

Slightly different from the above three Fujianese who were obligated to stay at one place for years, the normal pattern for illegal migrants is to switch from one place to another. As mentioned earlier, all the three Zhejiangese have been working for various restaurants during their time in the Netherlands. Some worked for restaurants within one city, some worked in different cities. Tian was in the first situation. He arrived in the Netherlands in 1995 when he was only eighteen years old. Through a distant relative, who was a legal worker and spent many years in the Netherlands, he started his first job at a medium sized Chinese restaurant as a dishwasher in Rotterdam. His working time was from 2 p.m. till 10 p.m., seven days a week. The workload was very heavy; everyday he had to wash hundreds or even thousands of dishes. However, he only got paid €3 per hour, which was only half of the salary of a regular worker. The restaurant provides him with two meals. During the night, he lived in a small room at his relative's apartment, for which he pay €180 as a preferential price. Each month he had to spend €450 as a payback to the brokerage. What he earned could barely sustain his life, so from time to time he ate the food from his relative. After four months, he quite his first job and his relative helped him get a better one. From 1995 till 1998, he had worked for more than ten restaurants between Rotterdam and The Hague. The reasons for moving between jobs were varying, sometimes it was due to the low payment or no payment, other times the reason was the regular checks from the authority for illegal migrants. For many years he has been playing hide and seek with the Dutch police. Having a relative in the host society greatly helped him in building his social network. Living with a legal migrant, he got the chance to meet many fellow Chinese; some shared the same background with him. So while asking him about how he felt about the life during the first few years in Holland, he said:

“It was ok, not that bad. I have many friends here, so I didn't feel excluded. Only hiding from the police was a bit troublesome. Sometimes I felt discriminated from my co-workers, cause many of them did not want to talk to me, but I was fine. ”

Tian has spent four years to payback his debt. In 2000, he eventually became illegal under the status of refugee.

Zhen is a female Zhejiangese woman; she is also the youngest among the eight

interviewees. When she arrived in the Netherlands, she was a sixteen years old teenager. Just like Tian, she had two sisters in the host country before her departure. Similarly, she got her first job through her sister. She worked at the water bar in a Chinese-Indonesian restaurant in The Hague. The payment was €5 per hour, nine hours a day, and six days a week. Her initial situation was probably the best among all the interviewees. The owner of the restaurant was of Zhejiang origin, but the majority of the staff was from Cantonese speaking areas. Zhen was fired after two months of work, the reason was unknown at first, but later through a co-worker she had a close relationship with, she found out that the owner had find someone who was legal and can speak Cantonese. Through her second job as a cleaning lady at a Chinese hotel, Zhen met her first boyfriend in the Netherlands. Zhen told me that he is a regular migrant, also from Zhejiang area. Since then, Zhen has lived with her boyfriend for many years, until she was legalized and became a refugee. In those years, Zhen also had the opportunity to meet many people in the local Chinese communities, either through her two sisters, or through her boyfriend. Because of that, it took her only two years and a half to pay back all her debt. When I asked her about whether she regretted to come, she replied:

“No, not at all. I think my life here is much better than if I were to be in China. In China, I can only work at a factory with little money, because I have no diploma. But here, I can earn more money, and I was very lucky to find myself a boyfriend, so I can save the money for rent. I have many friends here, and I have two sisters as well. They are all nice people and take good care of me. No one despises me because I used to be illegal. You know, many people were just like me when they first came. The only thing was that my payment was worse than those who have a working permit, but that is understandable.”

The case of Huang was the worst among the three Zhejiangnese interviewees. He began to look for work as soon as he landed in Amsterdam in 1996. With no friends and no relatives in the Netherlands, it was difficult for him. Finally, he was recruited by a small Chinese restaurant. The working and living condition provided were really bad, he was also isolated from his fellow colleagues due to his language inability and illegal status, and worst of all, most of the time the restaurant owner was very reluctant to pay his salary, which was €500 per month. With a large debt on hand, he eventually could stand it no longer and quit. In his efforts to find a new job he met a Zhejiangnese fellow, who introduced him to work at another restaurant in Rotterdam. The living and working situation remained the same, but at least he

got paid on time. From then on, he has constantly been changing his working environment due to his illegal status. He is now working in a restaurant in The Hague, washing dishes. During the interview, he told me:

“ I work 12 hours a day there, six days a week, and my wages is 600 per month, I eat and sleep in the restaurant, I feel like I have been sentenced to death penalty, my hands are in a terrible condition...I have very few friends here, and they are all people like me. In the restaurant nobody talks to me, I think they despise me because I'm illegal. I have a daughter at home, and my wife, I miss them very much...”

During the interview, I became aware of the fact that despite their illegal statuses, those migrants who have stronger family attachment encountered more difficulties while trying to fit into the local Chinese communities. The close ties that Zhen, Lin and Huang built with their relatives in China have increased the distance between themselves and the host society. For those who have relatives or friends in the Netherlands, it is easier to create a sense of belonging, compare to those who have none. On the other hand, illegality has also to a certain degree affected how fellow Chinese people view migrants who are under irregular status. The restaurant owner sees them as cheap labor as well as someone who is disposable. Moreover, the narrative of the migrants also shows that people who come to the Netherlands at a younger age are better integrated into the local Chinese communities. Migrants' place of origin does not have great effect on how they are treated by the local Chinese communities, but the language or dialect they speak is a major issue, which will be discussed later.

Living with Chinese families

Aside from the catering business sector, the domestic service area also employs many vulnerable workers, as well as undocumented migrants and people who do not speak Dutch. Many female illegal migrants, especially those from Dongbei area who have no important community network in the Netherlands often work as nannies, cleaners or general helpers in the service of the Chinese family (mainly people with Zhejiang origin), or in some cases work for people from South-East Asia. These women are usually ranging in age from thirty to fifty years old; many of them have acquired certain professional skills because of their own children. They generally come from towns or cities, and many have a better level of education level compared to the local Chinese people in the Netherlands. Women from Dongbei area

speak standard Mandarin; this is highly appreciated and valued by their employers who do not always have a command of the language. For these women from the north of China, working for compatriots of peasant origin, who are often illiterate, is a social and cultural shock. Therefore, the relationship of economic interdependence and the social-cultural gap between women from Dongbei and people from Zhejiang give rise to deep hostility.⁶⁹ It has been mentioned earlier that women in domestic service usually have the longest working hours, often 21 hours per day. Their payment ranges from €400 to €600 per month, and some of them live in extreme conditions. They are constantly underfed, and sleep either on mattresses or on the floor. One major characteristic of the domestic service is that the employees are always at their employer's disposal, 24 hours a day.

Two of the illegal migrants I have conducted interview with have worked or still working in the domestic service sector in the Netherlands. Ling is a fifty-five years old woman from Liaoning province, Dongbei area, which is in the northeast part of China. The factory where she used to work was closed off by the Chinese government 17 years ago. She received a certain amount of compensation from the factory, which was around €2000. Her husband was also laid off eight years ago, he then became a sanitation worker on the street, earning equal to €40-€50 per month. They have a 25 year old daughter, who is now working at a local company in the Netherlands. After paying over €9000 to a local transnational brokerage, she came to the Netherlands with a business visa. She sold the apartment where her family used to live for a total of €5000 euro, and her brother lent her the rest of the money. Because of that, Ling's family no longer had their own accommodation in China, her husband moved in with his mother, and their daughter went to live with her uncle. By the time Ling arrived in the Netherlands, she found a job through her broker, worked as a nanny with a couple from Wenzhou, Zhejiang province. This Zhejiangnese couple had two children. Ling told me that her living and working conditions were very harsh:

“I had to get up at five o'clock in the morning and went to bed at mid-night, I had one free day every week. During the day, I had to take care of the two children, they were both very young, one boy was four years old, and another girl was six years old. The children always messed up things, so I have to clean the room constantly. I also need to do the entire house works, my employers were not easy people, and they were picky and captious all the time. That time

⁶⁹ See Gao, *Concealed Chains*, p. 67.

for me was really hard, especially I was living with them, and they could put up everything on me. My employer speaks poor Mandarin, you know people from Zhejiang usually have strong accent, so I was also responsible for practicing standard Chinese with the two children. They paid me €615 each month. Sometimes they paid me once a month, sometime once three or four times, it depended on their financial condition.”

During the sixteen years in the Netherlands, Ling has stayed with more than ten families. Most of her employers were Zhejiangnese, some were of Fujian origins. Since very few people from Dongbei speak Cantonese, people from Hong Kong or Guangdong rarely hire them. This is because, unlike working in the restaurant, nannies have to communicate with their employers in order to get their job done, and Cantonese-speaking people are unwilling to deal with none-Cantonese speakers, especially in the private sector. One good thing about working in the domestic service sector is that illegal migrants do not need to worry about expose themselves in the public or being reported and sent back home. Their social contacts are very limited. Despite some occasional visits between their fellow Dongbei friends, their lives are completely isolated from the outside world. Ling has paid back her debt a long time ago. She told me that every month she saves two third of her salary and sends the money back every three months to support her family in China. Ling is now working at a Fujianese family, and is still illegal.

Gu is from the same area as Ling. She arrived in the Netherlands in 1990, her story are very similar to Ling’s. She was laid off from her company years ago, due to the large unemployment flow in China back then. Unlike Ling, she received no compensation from her previous employer, which put her into serious financial trouble. Among the €8500 brokerage fee, €6000 was borrowed either from her friends or from her relatives. She and her husband split up before she left China, the divorce was caused by their disagreement upon Gu’s decision to go abroad. Her husband was also unwilling to share Gu’s large debt. The snakehead introduced Gu to her first job, which was taking care of the children in a Zhejiangnese family. The working hours and condition was also very similar to Ling’s, but the employers were much better people. She spent three years in that family, until the children were put into kindergarten. In total Gu has spent two years and a half to payback all her debt. Gu has worked in more than ten cities in the Netherlands, with more than fifteen employers. Her social contact also remains with people who share the same origin with her. They were all

nannies or cleaning ladies from Dongbei, thus have much in common. By the time we had this interview; Gu was in Maastricht and decided to leave. She told me that she has seen enough of the Netherlands, and want to see if she can make a living in other European countries.

Cantonese or Mandarin: language as an indicator of identity

Identity reflects the quest by members of a certain group to achieve social safety and status and benefit by interacting with each other and with people outside the group. Their main tools for this social interaction include shared stereotypes, behavioral assumptions as well as the use of language.⁷⁰ Many Chinese become speakers of many different Chinese speech-forms because there are many Chinese dialects in their environment. They learn to speak these different dialects in order to survive, to achieve status and influence or to make money. The fact that many Chinese are multi-lingual may indicate that the pressure to overcome the limitation of one's own speech is great.⁷¹ Because of many Chinese speaking different dialects, overseas Chinese communities can be divided into segments, creating speech communities. For example, most Cantonese speakers feel closer to each other and they trust each other more than they trust non-Cantonese speakers. So the place of origin in China has gradually become a non-issue, it is language that plays key role as an identity marker.

Speech segmentation in Europe undergoes changes over time. Until the 1980s, many Cantonese speakers were unwilling to speak Mandarin. A situation that rapidly changed in the late 1980s and 1990s due to the growing global importance of China and because of Hong Kong's return to China in 1997.⁷² Nowadays, in most European countries, Mandarin and Cantonese are the two most important vehicles for public communication between Chinese people.

The most popular language spoken by the local Chinese communities in the Netherlands is still Cantonese. Cantonese, mainly spoken by Chinese from Hong Kong and Guangdong region, is the largest dialect in the Chinese communities abroad. Standard Cantonese, based on Guangzhou dialect and spoken in Hong Kong, too, serves as a lingua franca among Dutch Chinese. It owns this status to the predominance in the Dutch Chinese community of Hong Kong people and their strong culture. Standard Cantonese is an important

⁷⁰See Christiansen, *Chinatown, Europe*, p. 4.

⁷¹ See Christiansen, *Chinatown, Europe*, p. 17.

⁷² See Christiansen, *Chinatown, Europe*, p. 18.

acquired language for Chinese from different linguistic background; it is the vehicle of achieved status.⁷³ In the Chinese catering sector, Cantonese is the dominant language. During the interview, many migrants have expressed how strongly the use of language has affected their restaurant life in the Netherlands. During our interview, Wang told me:

“During my first employment, I was the only one in the restaurant who didn’t speak Cantonese. It was a bit hard for me to communicate with my co-workers. Not all of them were of Guangdong or Hong Kong origin, some are from Zhejiang and Fujian, but they had all learnt to speak Cantonese since they came here, so they spoke good Cantonese after a while, it was not that difficult to learn.”

Lin also complained about how difficult it was if people unable to speak and understand Cantonese:

“Most owners of the restaurant that I worked for were either from Hong Kong or of Guangdong origin, many of them did not speak or even understand Mandarin; I was really frustrated at that time because you basically have no communication with your boss. It was a big problem, you need to find someone to translate, and yet not all your colleagues are nice people, you know...”

Zhen was also clearly aware of the fact that how important it is if someone wants to make a living in Chinese restaurant sector:

“Of course I realized how important speaking Cantonese is, one major reason I got fired from my first employment was because I couldn’t speak Cantonese. Everybody knows that if you want to survive in the Chinese community here, Cantonese is a must. I learnt to speak it long time ago, my boyfriend taught me.”

Huang, who was once isolated from his co-workers because he was unable to speak and

⁷³ See Pieke, *The Chinese in Europe*, p. 141.

understand Cantonese, also expressed a similar feeling:

“It was until then I realized how important it is to speak Cantonese. Those Fujianese and Zhejiangese who work here all speak Cantonese, because those people (referring to the people from Hong Kong or Guangdong origin) are so powerful here, if you want to fit in with them, you should start to speak it, otherwise you do not belong to their group, you will be isolated...”

Therefore, it can be concluded that language plays a key role on migrants' identity. In the case of Chinese illegal migrants in the Netherlands, speaking Cantonese greatly affected how the local Chinese community saw them. A good command of Cantonese can be seen as a marker of one's identity. For irregular migrants, whose working area have been largely limited in the restaurant settings, whose illegal status have put them into already vulnerable positions, being able to speak Cantonese implies that they have to a certain extent accepted by the local Chinese communities.

Chapter Six

Finding an identity outside the Chinese Community

The life of illegal Chinese migrants is largely limited within their own ethnic communities. Nonetheless, many of them have to maintain some necessary contact with the non-Chinese group, so from time to time; they need to get out of their comfort zone. This is especially the case for those who applied for asylum. Once an illegal migrant legalized his or her status, they can eventually walking on the street without fear, and their life will be changed completely.

Chinese asylum seeker in the Netherlands:

Statistic shows that in the year 2001, a quarter of all migrants in the Netherlands were asylum seekers. In the same year, 8% of the asylum seekers in Europe sought asylum in the Netherlands. Based on the total number of asylum seekers, the Netherlands has become the fourth biggest receiving country within the European Union (after Germany, United Kingdom and France).⁷⁴ According to annual reports on migration and international protection statistic published in 2010, there were more than seventy thousand refugees living in the Netherlands in 2008.⁷⁵ In 2007, the number of applications for refugees had reached its lowest level in decades, but the number had increased again in 2008. The following graph shows that the number of Chinese applicants has risen to the third place in 2008, with 557 applications. Especially in April and May 2008 that there was a peak in the influx of Chinese aliens who had submitted an application for asylum.⁷⁶

Asylum applications by main country of citizenship, the Netherlands 2007 and 2008

2007	Amount	%		2008	Amount	%
Iraq	2,004	28%		Iraq	5,027	38%
Somalia	1,875	26%		Somalia	3,842	29%
China	242	3%		China	557	4%

⁷⁴ European Reintegration Networking (2002). "Reintegration Approaches and policies in the Netherlands". Accessed on July 5th. <http://www.reintegration.net/netherlands/index.html>.

⁷⁵ Dutch National Contact Point for the European Migration Network (2010). "Annual Report on Migration and International Protection Statistics." Accessed on July 1st, 2012. <http://emn.intrasoftintl.com/Downloads/download.do;jsessionid=16DD329F537>.

⁷⁶ See Dutch National Contact Point for the European Migration Network, "Annual Report on Migration and International Protection Statistic".

Unknown	218	3%		Afghanistan	395	3%
Iran	187	3%		Iran	322	2%
Nigeria	179	3%		Unknown	302	2%
Afghanistan	156	2%		Eritrea	236	2%
Eritrea	150	2%		Lanka	216	2%
Sierra Leone	135	2%		Armenia	208	2%
Burundi	118	2%		Guinea	154	1%
Others	1,838	26%		Others	2,140	16%
Total	7,102	100%		Total	13,399	100%

The reason was the rumor within the Chinese community in the Netherlands that a succession to the throne was imminent that would be accompanied by an amnesty for illegal aliens.⁷⁷

The percentage of young asylum seekers in the Netherlands is higher than other European countries. In 2001, approximately 140 minors seeking asylum entered the country every week. The majority were from China and Angola.⁷⁸ Four of the interviewees in this research project are now refugees. By the time they applied for asylum seeker, one of them was a minor, and two other claimed to be minors, these are Fujiannese Wang, Zhejiangnese Tian and Zhen. The Central Agency for the reception of asylum seekers (COA) is an independent entity under by the Ministry of Justice. It is responsible for the reception of asylum seekers in the Netherlands. It is authorized to negotiate with municipalities about establishing, acquiring, managing and closing reception centers, and as long as an asylum seeker is in the legal procedures, he or she can live in a COA facility. The main tasks COA carries out includes providing accommodation, giving guidance and information, providing goods and weekly allowances, arranging access to health care, maintaining the safety in reception centers as well as increasing social support for asylum seekers.⁷⁹

Refugee, a new identity

The main application procedure for asylum seeker is as follows: once the person arrives at the asylum application center, an interview will be arranged between that person and officials

⁷⁷ See Dutch National Contact Point for the European Migration Network, “Annual Report on Migration and International Protection Statistic”.

⁷⁸ See European Reintegration Networking, “Reintegration Approaches and policies in the Netherlands”.

⁷⁹ Moreno, Carmen Martagón. (2006). “Reception and Integration of Asylum Seekers in the Netherlands”. *European Network of Asylum Reception organizations*, p. 6.

from the immigration office. After the meeting, the asylum seeker will be told to wait for 48 working hours so that further investigation can be conducted to see if the application of the person in question can be granted. The judging criteria are based on the portfolio of the applicants, which contains detailed information of the general experiences, education as well as training the person has followed in his or her country of origin. Through all the information in it, the authority can establish the person's possibilities in the Netherlands and design a plan for that person accordingly. Successful applicants are allowed to remain in the Netherlands at one of the six orientation and integration centers run by COA. Once the application is granted, asylum seekers will be allowed to start with the integration process while the family or person gets a house from the municipality, which is a time of around three months.⁸⁰ During this period, the person can start with the languages courses of Dutch, which makes it a lot easier for the applicant to find a job and integrating into Dutch society. Despite the procedure of application, I asked interviewees specifically about their life in the camp. In my conversation with Wang:

Interviewer: When you in the asylum camp, did you live with Chinese people or with people from other nationalities?

Wang: I lived with one Chinese guy and two other black guys. I personally prefer to live with Chinese, you know, I was unable to communicate with foreigners. And also Chinese people like to stick together...That was really happy time for me.

Interviewer: What follows?

Wang: You lived there for one or two weeks, then they assigned you to a different camp based on your age and personal situation. The camp can be divided between adults and minors, and between people political refugees and orphans.

Interviewer: So which group did you belong to?

Wang: I told them I was only 17, you know western people are usually unable to differentiate our age.

⁸⁰See Moreno, "Reception and Integration of Asylum Seekers in the Netherlands", p. 6.

Interviewer: But in 2002, you were 23...

Wang: yes, but they didn't know that, my passport was thrown away a long time ago...And I also told them that both my parents died in China, so I was an orphan...I had to say that, otherwise they wouldn't accept me, I didn't want to be sent back...

Zhen, who was in the same camp with Wang at that time, also expressed how he felt about the life back then:

Interviewer: So you said that all the food and shelter are provided, the living condition was not that bad, right?

Tian: Yes, four people share a place, it was like those contemporary houses, it was like a really big container.

Interviewer: I understand, so how long have you stayed there?

Tian: almost three months, waiting for further instruction from them

Interviewer: ok, so what did you do during that time? Can you go outside during the day?

Tian: yes, you can go out, but you have to return by six o'clock every day, they will stamp you. I play basketball during the day, and do other stuff, it was the happiest time for me in this country, you can ask Wang, he was my roommate in the camp, and I think he felt the same way...

During the conversations, most of the interviewees stated that their life in the asylum center was fun and relaxing, compared to their previous conditions, it was from hell to heaven. It is expected that they all prefer to socialize with people from their own ethnic community. Despite historical and cultural issues, language is the main stumbling block that interferes the development of their social network, as well as their integrating process.

The granting of refugee status has pulled previous illegal migrants out of shadow. They can eventually have a regular life. They can have their own apartment provided by the government, they are properly insured, they work legally and with reasonable salaries, they can go to the language institution to study, and they can marry people and have children, etc. Here is how interviewees described their life when they were officially become refugees:

Wang:

“I am still working in the restaurant, but my salary has changed completely. Now my monthly salary is €2000, after several years working experiences in the restaurant, I have become a Dim Sum cook. I can also speak Cantonese very fluently, so I have no problems with my restaurant life...I also have my own apartment in The Hague, it is very big, almost 70 square meters, and I only pay €350 rent, it is nice.”

Zhang:

“My application was granted in 1995, since then I found myself a good place to work, it is a Chinese restaurant specialized in Sichuan cuisine. You know I used to be a cook in China, so I started as a cook in this restaurant. The restaurant is very popular in The Hague; many people came here for spicy food. And I was promoted and become chief years ago. Now the restaurant pays me a very decent salary, around €3,000 per month, I was fully satisfied. And my co-workers are no longer bullying me because I don't speak Cantonese, I'm the chief you know, the restaurant needs me...”

Zhen:

“I just opened up a nail salon with my sister a year ago in China town, so I'm no longer working for anyone. I feel really good about my life now. I have my own business, a stable income, what else am I looking for? ”

All the former illegal migrants see refugee as a path to liberation. Once they have been legalized, they were no longer the symbol cheap labor and underdogs in the job market.

In addition to the progression of their careers, their social life changed as well. Just two months before the interview, Zhen and Tian got married in the city of The Hague. I was

invited to the wedding ceremony. They have know each other for many years, both share the same background, and once their situation in the Netherlands had been stabilized, they felt that it was time to build a family together. They have now built a large social network within the Zhejiangnese and Fujiannese community. While asking them if they tried to build relationships with people outside their ethnic group, they all replied that they have no intention to do so, not only due to the language issue, but also because they feel more close and comfortable to people who share their ethnic background. Wang's social life also changed dramatically. He told me that five years ago he had a girlfriend who was the daughter of a restaurant owner. She was a nice person in nature, but somehow went after another Chinese because Wang works so hard and had no time to accompany her. They used to live together and have a son. When they split, she took the boy with her, because she was rich and able to provide the boy with a better life. He told me that he has not seen his son for years. He was a bit disappointed and frustrated at that time, but still he never gives up the hope of finding a good partner. It is understandable that restaurant work is essentially boring and exhausting, so he wants to get married to make his life more comforting and warming.

The refugee status has brought certain light into the lives former illegal migrants, it made their social life normal and was even reason for it existing. Nevertheless, it does not help them expanding their social network outside their own ethnic niche. Despite the fact that Chinese love to stick to their own culture, Dutch language could be an influence on their position in the host society.

Learning Dutch language

It has been said that language is a key indicator of the cultural one identifies with. Au, Garey, Bermas and Chan define acculturation as “a cultural, resulting from continuous, and first-hand contact between two distinct cultural groups” and stated that the knowledge of the local language was a critical factor in the acculturation process. In their research, they also notices that Chinese migrants ranked the lowest among all Asians in knowledge of the local languages as they communicated all information in their own language.⁸¹ However, practice a particular language and identify with that culture may not always be an easy task. All the asylum seekers are given the opportunity to study at a language institution in order to learning the Dutch language as they can better integrate into the mainstream society. Nevertheless, most of them work in the catering sector, the long working hours and hard load of work has

⁸¹ Berry, Kim, Minde and Mok (1987) as cited in Au et.al...”The relationship between acculturation”, p. 12.

largely limited their time and energy to study. The relatively low educational level of these former illegal migrants made the study even more difficult. Besides, except for those who working in front of the restaurant, such as waiters or waitresses, most of them work in the kitchen and find it unnecessary to learn the language. During one of the interviews, Wang told me:

“My Dutch was very poor, I have studied Dutch in a government funded institution with many other Chinese for years, but still unable to pass, I just don’t have the time to study, and find it unnecessary for me to speak the language because almost everyone around me speaks Chinese. I never go to the Dutch supermarket, not to mention eating at a non-Chinese restaurant, for me Chinese food is the best food here.”

Wang is not the only person who sees the learning of Dutch language as a kindly but unfavorable gift from the Dutch government. Even for Zhen, who has her own shop opened in the Netherlands, told me that her target customers are the local Chinese people, she said that she do not expect Dutch people to come, that is also why she doing her business in China town. She also confessed that the language was too difficult for her. Ironically, both of them go to the study center every week. They said that they need to pass the Dutch exam in order to have a Dutch passport, because they cannot travel back to China without a Dutch passport, being a refugee means the door to China will be closed to them forever.

The Netherlands: home or just a platform?

In this research project, it is clear that what differentiates illegal migrants from others in the Chinese community in Holland is not only their rough path to the host country, but also their vulnerable position in the host society, as well as clear financial pressures they already bear in mind before their departure. Although all of the interviewees have stayed in the Netherlands for more than fifteen years, many of them still feel strongly detached from their host country, especially those who are still in regular status.

Ling told me that she never felt any sense of belongings in the Netherlands. For sixteen years she has been in the Netherlands, she has always been in almost complete isolation. The fact that she works in the domestic service sector as well as her still illegal status puts her into a much worse position than those of refugees. She gained no respect from

her Chinese employers; they treated her only as cheap labor. Her only social contacts in the Netherlands are those Dongbei women who are in the same situation as her. She told me that her only comfort is her family in China. Her husband retired two years ago and her daughter is working now, they currently live in a rented apartment in China. Due to the increasing housing price in China, she told me that she still need to work here for five more years in order to save enough money to buy her family an apartment. That is also her driving force to stay abroad and work. She maintains constant contact with her husband and daughter. Just like Ling, Gu has no intention of getting an official status in the Netherlands. These people all have the same reason of staying here: to collect enough capital so one day they can return home.

Another two migrants who are still under illegal status are Fujiannese Lin and Zhejiangnese Huang. They both applied for asylum seeker several times, but were rejected. I asked Lin if he has any future plan, he told me that he is still waiting for the chance to legalize himself through political asylum. He said:

“I have spent some many years living like this; I don’t want give up now. I want my family to be proud of me. My children are in the United States, they became legal not long ago. I don’t know, I will wait for one more year, if I still couldn’t make it, maybe I will go to live with my sons.”

Like many other Chinese, Lin sees having Dutch citizenship as something honorable, it symbolize richness and success for him. The same thought also goes for Huang, who also told me that he will not leave the country before he gets a Dutch passport, otherwise he would become a laughing stock back home.

For those who have officially settled down in the Netherlands, the situation is not much different. Having a successful business and a happy marriage here, I expected a different answer from Zhen. However, Zhen told me:

“Yes, I am happy about the life here, but it cannot compare it to the life in China. Living here is boring, there is no entertainment here...I always find nothing to do aside from work. I want to go home after my retirement, but they told me that nowadays everything is expensive in China, I need to save enough

money...”

Like Zhen, Wang also expressed a strong desire to return home:

“I really want to go home, I miss my mother, but I have to first pass the language exam, otherwise I cannot return again, that would be a big loss for me, after so many years hard work...”

Zhang, who is now a chef, also expressed the similar sentiment:

“I decided to work for two more years, and then I will return to China. It has been too long, I miss my wife and daughter.”

The interview results show that some migrants intend to stay for a long time, sometimes for most of their life, only to return after retirement. However, the risk of losing residence rights may lead migrants to postpone or even to abandon a permanent return. Moreover, the lack of economic perspectives in the home country also could be a reason that keeps them away from home. Social network here have played a minor role in migrants’ desire to return home.

Chapter Seven

Conclusion

In the realm of ethnic study of the Chinese in the Netherlands, very little attention has been paid to illegal or former illegal migrants. This paper seeks to answer one main question and two sub-questions: the main question is “How do illegal Chinese in the Netherlands negotiate and formulate their identity?” The three sub-questions are-firstly, “how and why do they come to the Netherlands?” Secondly, “how do they find their own communities?” Last but not least, “how they cope with their marginal social position within the larger Chinese community and within Dutch society at large and its impact on their notion of identity.”

To answer the central question, current illegal migrants and formerly illegal migrants should be dealt with separately. What makes the position of irregular migrants different from the rest of the Chinese migrants is their special status in the society, namely illegality. Illegal migrants in the Chinese communities in the Netherlands share a common migration background: their difficult journey to the Netherlands, their hardship during the days of illegality, their isolation from the mainstream society, their strong attachment to their country of origin as well as their strong desire of returning home. They have remained at the margin in both the local Chinese community and the Dutch society for a number of reasons. Their illegality makes them the victims of labor exploitation, they are also a group of invisible people in the society, and their large debts have brought them extra hardship in work and life. Even when they became recognized as refugees, their limited language abilities as well as working environment further isolated them from the mainstream society. Upon their arrival in the Netherlands, they have been labeled as Chinese illegal migrants by the Dutch authorities, their employers see them as cheap labor force, and their fellow co-workers view them as outsiders due to their inability to speak Cantonese. Conditions changed for some of them when some of them when they became recognized as refugees. In the eyes of Dutch authorities, they were considered to be either the victims of political abuse in their country of origin, or beneficiaries of the western humanitarian policy. Discrimination by their Chinese employers as well as their co-workers ended. They have thus become the inspiration for those still living in the shadow, because they have achieved what those people are still wanting to get. After being successfully survived in a foreign country, they are making their best effort to make fortune, so by the time they go back home, their return will be glorious.

The answer of the first sub-question “how and why do they come to the Netherlands” should be answered within a historical as well as economic context. The reason why these people came to the Netherlands and how they came here has largely influenced their acceptance in the host country as well as their social practice. All of the eight interviewees have on different levels pointed out that they came to the Netherlands mainly for economic reason. The disparity in economical development in China, the impact of social environment, the influence from the successful cases, the unemployment rate in the home country, the active involvement of the transnational brokerage as well as the loosen migration policies in Western countries are also among the direct causes of illegal migration. Illegal migrants came to the Netherlands with the help of the local human smugglers, they were asked to pay a large service fee in order to leave China. The fee can be paid either in China before their departure, or through a repayment system which involves a period from two to four years. Many migrants have someone they know in the host country. Many migrants have someone they know in the host country, but for people from Dongbei it is usually different, and they have to rely either on the snakehead or on their own. This also has certain effect on their building of identity in the Netherlands.

To answer the second sub-question “how do they find their own communities”, most illegal migrants had contact persons in the Netherlands before their departure, they could be their relatives, friends or acquaintances from their hometown or area who help them help them get started. For those without any acquaintances, their brokers are usually responsible for arranging their first job as well as the place to live. Most of the Chinese irregular migrants living in big cities can find large Chinese communities, which makes their life a lot easier, both economically and culturally. Cities like Rotterdam and The Hague are always among their first choices. Due to their limited educational level as well as limited language skills, Chinese restaurant and ethnic sectors are the main employment area for irregular workers. Aside from the catering business sector, the domestic service area also employs many vulnerable workers as well as undocumented migrants and people who do not speak Dutch. Most female illegal migrants are working in the private sphere; their jobs include being nannies, cleaners or general helpers in the service of the Chinese.

To answer the last sub-question “how they cope with their marginal social position within the larger Chinese community and within Dutch society at large and its impact on their notion of identity”. For most illegal migrants, working has consumed most of their time.

Because of their large debts that need to be paid off as well as their special status in the host society that makes them constantly hide from the authority, they have hardly any time for leisure. Even their social life within the Chinese community has been largely limited to mainly other illegal migrants, with whom they feel more connected with. In order to avoid discrimination and increase job opportunities, some of them were forced to learn Cantonese. Others were simply quit and under constant unemployment. All of them have tried to change their illegality by applying for asylum, and many did succeed. On the other hand, many of the illegal migrants remain in close contact with their family and relatives in China. Where they were able to change their illegal status, their social practice has changed at the same time. Their social contact within the Dutch was enriched by their change of status, they went out more often, attended language school, and started their own businesses... The future of these people is different, some of them have eventually settled down in the Netherlands, others are either still living in an unstable life, or decided to leave. However, judging by the fact that their ultimate goal for most of them is to return to China and seeing being in the Netherlands mainly as tool to accumulate their financial means, it is obvious that they are unwilling to make effort to adjust themselves to the Dutch society.

In Hutnik's theory about the four different types of ethnic minority: the assimilative, the acculturate, the dissociate, and the marginal type.⁸² Both Chinese illegal migrants and refugees belong to the last type, the marginal person. They reveal weak identification with the Dutch society because of their history of migration, the strong attachment to their own culture and the inability to speak the Dutch language. On the other hand, their problematic resident status also makes them the victims of labor abuse as well as subjects of discrimination within their own ethnic group. They are a group of people who have a marginal position in the Chinese community in the Netherlands. By sharing common experiences such as their migration history and being underdogs in the labor market, these provide a context for illegal migrants across the Netherlands, and it is also what holds them together in a common identity

⁸² See Pang, "Too busy for working," p. 90.

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