

# **Illegal migrants from China**

by

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Paper prepared for presentation at S27 International Migration Section  
XXIV IUSSP general Population Conference, Salvador, Brazil  
18-24 August 2001

**Abstract:**

On the average, there are 100,000-180,000 Chinese people who migrated abroad a year from 1978 to 1995. Among them the illegal migrants accounts for about 20%. The illegal migration can be divided into two kinds, the illegally cross the national border migrants and the illegally staying in a foreign country migrants. The former numbers 80,000-100,000 annually. The ratio of success is 20-40% and there are 20,000 people who could really achieve their aimed destinations. The Chinese illegally staying migrants are mainly distributed in the developed countries. The migrants who illegally staying a foreign country account 5-20% of the total local Oversea Chinese and its average annual rate of growth is 20%. Among the migrants who illegally cross the Western Pacifica Ocean, the people going to North America account for 68%.

There are two kinds of illegal migrants from China. The migrants with no visa who illegally sneak into the country without getting permission from the government and the migrants with invalid a visa who legally moved to the country, illegally stay in there, generally when their visa extension has been rejected and the visa has become invalid. Usually, there are three ways to sneak into a country from China across the sea, by land, and by air. The people who go by land are mainly the ones that go to some neighboring countries such as Vietnam, Russia etc; most of them travel by bus or by train. The ones who travel by sea usually go in groups to place like Thailand, Philippine, Malaysia, Canada, United States, Japan, South Korea, and etc. The third type is the migrant with a forged visa; these mainly go to America, Europe and Australia by air.

The illegal migrants have a long history. Its original motivation was the pursuing of wealth. That is to say, the migrants move from a developing area to a developed area without government's permission. The Chinese life has changed a lot since the economic reformation. But the economic different between China and the developed area is very obvious. There has been a wave of illegal migrants crossing the national border along the Southeast coast (the south of Zhejiang, Fujian, Guangdong and Guangxi provinces) of China since the mid of 1980's. Because of the possibility of huge profit, and hoping to get rich quick, groups who specialized in organizing the illegal crossing of the national border came into being. The illegal move showed us that the pattern was well-organized and very large in scale; as a result, it was more dangerous and bloodier than ever.

**1. The Number Estimation of the No Visa Migrants**

The no visa migration can be categorized into three levels from the administrative point of view. The first level is, the migrant fails to sneak into a country and gets arrested while still in China. The person was suspected to be an illegal migrant while trying to move outside and was discovered and held back inside of China. The second level is, the migrant succeeds in crossing the Chinese border and sneak sneaked out of China, but was found and arrested by the other government outside China. The last level is that the migrant succeeds in illegally moving out of China and got legal status abroad. According to Chinese newspaper and books, the indirectly estimated rate for three groups was 60%, 20% and 20%.

Why does the number of illegal migrants counted by the Chinese government often less than the estimation by foreign countries? One problem is, from the statistics point of view, the migrants often were counted repeatedly. For example, 100 migrants illegally moved to East Europe, and sneaked into Western Europe after being

discovered and banished. Then, they went to U.S. with the help of a smuggling organization. As a result, the international society thought that there were 300 illegal Chinese migrants, but actually there were only 100. Another problem is, some people cross the Chinese border with a legal passport and Visa, but stay past the date of staying limit in the second country and illegally move to the third country. So the illegal moving happens between the second and third country, thus the illegal migrants are counted twice. The last problem is that many illegal migrants are not Chinese who live in China but oversea Chinese in places such as Vietnam, Kampuchea, Indonesia, Philippine, and etc. These are the reasons that lead to the high estimation of illegal migrants from China.

To estimate the number of illegal migrants, we should know the quantity of legal international migrants from China. Here, migrant means that the person left China more than one year without intension to come back, or the person already has the qualification for permanent residency and have become a citizen in the foreign country.

### **1.1 The Number Estimation of Legal Migrants and Illegal Migrants**

The International Organization of Money and Funds estimated that the number of migrants from Mainland China was 270,000 from 1980 to 1990. The census 1990 showed that the number of people who lived in local areas from 1985 to 1990, but worked in foreign countries and had no household registration while temporarily outside was 244,000 in China<sup>1</sup>. The number of oversea migrants was about 50,000 annually. Zhuang (1997) estimated that the total number of legal migrants moving from the Mainland, Taiwan, and Hong Kong to highly developed countries was about 1,425,000, and the number that moved to less developed countries such as Thailand, Philippine, Malaysia, and Indonesia was 100,000 - 200,000 during the period between the late 1970's and 1995. At the same time, the number of illegal migrants moving to developed countries was 200,000-400,000<sup>2</sup>. That means that there were 100,000 Chinese legal migrants annually, illegal emigrants occupied about 20% of them, that's about 20,000 people annually. Obviously, this was the conservative estimate that didn't include the mainlander's move to Hong Kong, Macao or Taiwan. Goldstone (1997) estimated the number of migrants from China was 180,000 annually during the 1980's, including 50,000 who moved to USA of which half were illegal moves<sup>3</sup>. However, Myers estimated (1997) the number of illegal migrants from Fujian province to USA to be 100,000 annually during the 1991-1993, and there was an obvious decrease since 1995<sup>4</sup>. We thought the census data in China was extremely underestimated because of the people were not including in census 1990. The number of migrants from the mainland should be 100,000-180,000 annually in the 1980's. Li (1999) estimated the migrants' number from Wenzhou area of Zhejiang province to Europe was 11,000 annually on average during the time period from 1980 to 1994<sup>5</sup>.

It is a well-known fact that there are many Chinese illegal migrants but the exact number is very difficult to calculate. Before 1997, Hong Kong was affiliated with G.B. The migration data in Hong Kong is fairly accurate, and from that we could calculate the number and increase rate of illegal emigrants from Mainland China. Statistics show that there were 60,000 migrants who moved to Hong Kong during April and May in 1961. And from 1978-1980 there were 200,000 illegal migrants who succeeded in moving to Hong Kong and who got the qualification of permanent residency. The

number of illegal moves across the border to Hong Kong reached over 29,595 annually during the period from 1970 to 1980, in addition the number of illegal migrants who tried to sneak there but failed and was arrested on the border in Hong Kong was 30,669 annually from 1974 to 1980<sup>6</sup>. The number of migrants illegally crossing the border from mainland to Hong Kong was more than 60,000 annually. The number was largest during the period from 1978 to 1980. In October 1980 the Hong Kong government changed their migration policy to “sending back immediately after arrested”, and the number of illegal migrants decreased. The number of illegal mainland migrants who were arrested on the Hong Kong border was 23,300 annually. The number of smuggled people arrested in Hong Kong, and sent back to mainland was 13,800 annually on average from 1981 to 1995. It also shows that the number of illegal migrants to Hong Kong decreased to 37,000 annually during the period from 1981 to 1995, but the number was increasing at the annual rate of 20.2% during the same period. After reuniting with the mainland in 1997, Hong Kong took the measure of “large fine for local habitants” for illegal migrants. As a result, the number of illegal migrants decreased rapidly. But the numbers of the illegal move to the developed countries constantly increased. So the large quantity and the rapid increase rate of mainland migrants were out of the normal estimation of the internal demographist.

Table 1: Arrested number of illegal migrants sneaking from mainland, 1981 to 1995

Year	1981	1982	1983	1984	1985	1986	1987	1988
On the border	7530	8676	4671	9653	12616	16832	22425	135811
Inside HK	1690	2483	2933	3090	3394	3707	4282	7227
Year	1989	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	Average
On the border	5452	9592	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	23326
Inside HK	10389	18234	25600	27700	37600	314	26600	13755

Source: Li, Ruojuan. 1997. “Illegal Migrants from Mainland China to Hong Kong”. *Population Studies*. 1

How many Chinese illegal migrants are there? On June 3 1977, the Chicago Forum quoted the Chinese official statistics that thousands of Chinese were illegally crossing the national border each year, from which the smugglers made over 3 billion U.S. dollars yearly. If each illegal migrant spent \$30,000-50,000 on it, the number of Chinese migrants would about 60,000 to 100,000. Supposing that the number of illegal migrants is calculated as 2,000 annually each coast province such as Jilin, Beijing, Liaoning, Tianjin, Hebei, Shandong, Jiangsu, and Zhejiang, and 15,000 annually in Guangdong and Fujian province, and as 5000 annually in Heilongjiang, Guizhou, Xinjiang, Yuannan, and Hainan which adjoin the neighbour countries, and as 1000 annually each area in the rest 15 province. The number will be 88,000 annually for the entire country. If the success rate of illegal migrants is 20%, the number of the illegal migrants who actually succeed in crossing the border will be about 18,000 annually, which is equivalent to the estimate of Zhang Guotu.

Poston gave us rough estimates<sup>7</sup>. He assumed that the floating population\* of 80 million increases to 125 million by the year 2005 to 2010 in China. Assume that jobs

\* “the floating population” is the people leave their home and looking for jobs to various areas in China.

will not be available for from 20% and 50% of the floaters; this means that between 25 and 60 million floats could well be looking for jobs outside China in 2005 and between 35 and 88 million in 2010. But does not seem to be happening.

Chen gave the statistics data, taken from August 1991 to April 1994, which included 33 ships carrying a total of 5336 illegal migrants in West Pacific<sup>8</sup>. The data showed us that each ship took 172 people, and about 2000 illegal migrants each year. We also can see that 58% of the ship as well as 68% of the illegal migrants try to move to U.S. and Canada, about 9% of the ship as well as 8% of the illegal migrants try to migrate to Japan, Singapore, and about 33% of the ship as well as 24% of the illegal migrants try to land in South America. But they may include a lot of Vietnam Chinese, Laos Chinese as well as Cambodia Chinese.

### **1.1 Some cases of Illegal migration to USA**

The illegal migrants who moved to USA were mostly from Mexico and other countries of Latin America, but there were also many from South Asia and East Europe, but the total number of Chinese illegal migrants was not that much. China did not belong to the top 20 countries whose number of the illegal migrants was the most in USA, that is to say, the total number was less than 30,000 in U.S.A according to the estimate by US Immigration and Naturalization Service<sup>9</sup>.

During the period 1991 to 1993 about 24 ships, as well as 3000 illegal migrants were intercepted, most of them came from Fujian province. So the number of the illegal migrants to U.S. was about 1,000 annually<sup>10</sup>. In 1993 an old ship carrying 293 Fujian illegal migrants sailed in the Indian Ocean and Atlantic Ocean for three months<sup>11</sup>. On June 6, 1993 after running aground, some of them swam to the land near the bay in New York in the dark. At the end, six of them were drowned and the rest were all arrested except for another six of them who escaped. On May 30 1998, the US police discovered an abandoned yacht in New Jersey, and then the police arrested 22 drenching male migrants who all came from Fujian. On Dec 28, 1999, about 23 illegal migrants from Fujian were discovered in Los Angeles; at the same time 7 females, 12 males, as well as 2 children were arrested in the same port<sup>12</sup>. All these cases originated from the container ships of Hong Kong, This kind ship only takes 10-12 days to get to USA. It is a new trend for illegal migrants to move by container ships.

### **1.2 Some cases of Illegal Migration to Europe**

On June 19, 2000, about 60 illegal migrants were discovered in a refrigerator container, which was full of tomatoes from Belgium, among which 58 were dead of lack of fresh air on Dover port in England. It was the most unprecedented tragedy in the recent years. It shocked not only England and China but also the rest of the world. By some reports<sup>13</sup>, the number of Chinese illegal migrants who moved to Paris was 3000 to 4000 annually. Illegal migrants occupied 20% among the 100,000 oversea Chinese in Paris. On July 18, 2000, the Italian police took a unified action in 15 cities. The policy said that about 5,000 Chinese illegal migrants moved to Italy annually organized by 3 groups of criminals on average<sup>14</sup>.

### **1.3 Some cases of Illegal Migration to Australia**

On Sept 1998, about 53 Chinese, 42 males and 11 females including 5 crew members, were in an organized group sneaking to Australia. Each paid 15,000 Chinese Yuan to buy food, water, diesel oil and other necessities including satellite communications equipment. After one month at sea, when they were close to Australian and ship grounded on an island, they ran out of food and oil and had to ask the local police to help. 20 days later, they were deported back to China and ended their month of adventures<sup>15</sup>. On April 10 1999, about 56 illegal migrants were arrested on the northern coast. On Nov 15, 1999, another 40 Chinese were arrested in Australia.

### **1.4 Some cases of Illegal migrant to Canada**

On average there were about 800 illegal Chinese migrants per year smuggling into Canada. On July 1999, an old goods ship with no indication of what country it was from carried 123 illegal migrants from Fujian China and drifted about in the sea for over 40 days then crossed the border into the territorial waters of Vancouver. On Aug 11, 1999<sup>16</sup>, there was another mysterious ship carrying 130 Chinese illegal migrants wandering in the open sea of B.C. province. A few days later this ship ran into Victoria Island, dumped all the people, and escaped back to the open sea. In 1999 alone there were about 600 illegal migrants arrested in Canada. Canada is a migration country, it welcomes the migrants but illegal ships would have a bad influence on the society.

### **1.5 Some cases of Illegal mover to Developing Countries**

Many Chinese moved to South Asia, South America, Caribbean area, and Africa as the mid-way to the west. They thought that the corruption and the bad management of the governments of these areas would make it easier to get the legal rights to migrants to west. Secondly, the small population of these countries and the closer geographic positions to developed countries, made it seem that moving from there to the developed countries is easier than directly from China.

Mexico is closer to USA that makes it more attractive to illegal migrants. Every year, the Mexico government sends 110,000 to 120,000 illegal migrants back to their original country, and 90% of them were from Mid America and South America. Among them, the Chinese illegal migrants are ranked fifth. In Aug. 1998, Mexico government rented a commercial airplane to send 225 illegal Chinese migrants back to China.

In Nov 1997, two Chinese fishing boats carried 110 migrants after sailing for over 8000 kilometers and arrived on the border of France-New Caledonia on the South Pacific Ocean. As soon as they rushed ashore, the local government detained them collectively. The island, New Caledonia, was 20,000 square kilometers with a population of 200,000. It was very large compared to Taiwan. The illegal migrants thought that the local residents could easily accept them, but in fact, it was just the opposite. The officials said that these migrants left their native land mostly due to the economic reasons, so they don't have the right to become political refugees.

### **1.6 Migrants arrested while still in Mainland China**

Actually most of the illegal migrants were discovered and held back by the Chinese government in time. On average more than 10,000 illegal migrants as well as 400 organizers were discovered and arrested annually during the last 20 years. According to

the recent records of “The Almanac of Chinese Law”, In 1990 there were 1897 illegal migrants hunted down and seized, and 18410 were discovered and held back for holding fake documents. About 5525 illegal migrants were hunted down and seized in 1993. In 1994, about 259 smugglers and 8453 illegal migrants were hunted down and seized, in which 31% of them were found at the airport, 46% of them were found at the coast, and the others were found on the border. In 1995, about 8056 illegal migrants were hunted down and seized in which 51% of them were found at the airport, 40% of them were found at the coast, and the other were found on the border. In 1996 about 934 cases of illegally migrants with 834 smugglers and 2039 related persons were discovered. And in 1998, 1097 cases with 10896 illegal migrants and 341 smugglers were hunted down. It should be fair to say that the Chinese government is quite firm with the illegal migrants.

### **1.7 Age-Sex structure of illegal migrants**

Illegal Chinese migrants mainly come from Fujian, Guangdong and Zhejiang provinces. They normally have a 9-12 year education in school with poor English skills. They're mainly were between 18 and 40 years old, and females usually make up no more than 30% of the total. Most illegal migrants are usually peasants, jobless residents, lay-off workers, or low incoming and bad-post workers in cities or suburbs.

## **2. The Number of the Migrants with Invalid Visa**

Another form of invalidly staying in a foreign country is the illegal migrant who has overdue visa or invalid visas; some of them went abroad with the strong purpose of staying at the beginning. Some went to the developed countries with short-term visas in the name of tours or business, and then they disappear after entering the countries. The illegal staying usually was called “black”. They lose all rights such as receiving education, working, medical treatment and they couldn't even go back to visit their relatives once they are “black”. These people are very afraid of meeting with the police, because any form of small crime might lead to an investigation that would reveal they are illegal status, then they would be deported and would be banished forever. The only way to solve the problem is being careful, working and waiting for amnesty.

The rejection rate of visas applicants for Chinese people is quite high. We face the same situation wherever we go USA, Canada, Japan or Australia. In fact, the situation is connected with the large population, less quotes of visas as well as the large rate of the illegal migrants. For example, the rejection rate of visas for Chinese to Australia is as high as 30%. One of main reason was that the rate of short-term visitors who failed to come back is as high as 11% while the rate for other countries were only 1.3%. In the 1990's the number who did not come back in time was 2000 to 4000 annually by estimation. The rejection rate of visas applicants was 76% in Canadian embassy at Beijing area in 1997. However, the rates were zero in Canadian embassy at Tokyo and New Delhi areas, while the rate were 1%, 5% and 6% in areas of Taipei, Hong Kong, and Seoul respectively. A cycle came into being: high rejecting rates and few quotes led to more illegal migrants; and more illegal migrants led to even higher rejecting rates and fewer quotes, ..... To interrupt this circle, it depends on the efforts of both the governments and the people.

Japan is a neighbor country of China; they are just separated by the sea. The illegal

migrants have special interest in Japan due to the short distance and similar culture. An unregistered foreigner is a foreigner who was discovered by Japanese government, this includes the overdue foreigners with invalid visas or the illegal migrants with no visas. The number of unregistered Chinese in Japan increased 25.2% annually on average (see from table 2), which also occupied 3-10% of the total number of unregistered foreigners in Japan.

Table 2. The number of unregistered Chinese in Japan and its percent of the total

Year	1983	1984	1985	1986	1987	1988	1989	1990	1991	1992	1993
Peopl e	528	466	427	356	494	502	588	1142	1162	3167	4989
%	11.1	6.8	5.6	3.4	3.5	2.8	2.6	3.1	3.5	5.1	7.8
%*	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	4.4	3.5	3.5	3.8	5.1	n.a.	n.a.

Source: Wang, Guixin.1997.“The distribution of Oversea Chinese in Japan” Chinese Population Science 4:14-21.  
\* It included the people came from Taiwan.

Actually, the overseas Chinese who hold invalid visas in Japan was far more than 5000. According to an estimation by the Japanese government, by May 1993 the number of overdue Chinese had reached 33,000 (Table 3), this is 11.2% of the total international migrants with invalid visa in Japan, and accounted for 15.9% of legal migrants from China to Japan at the same period. The illegal Chinese migrants with invalid visa increased at the rate of 40.7% annually in Japan from 1990 to 1994. The main reason was the large economic difference between China and Japan. The GNP per capita in Japan was 68 times as much as it in China. Secondly, the open labor forces market between urban and rural in China. The others would already replace some professional position if they came back to China not in time. The direct reason was that in the 1980s the Japanese government put forward a plan to recruit 10,000 overseas students in Japan due to a lack of workers for physical labor that was dirty, heavy, and dangerous. After that, many schools in Japan closed down due to the bad economic situation. Plenty of Chinese students did not come back China, so they just roamed around to the society and became illegal migrants.

Table 3. The number of the overdue Chinese in Japan and the percent of the total

	June 1990	May 1991	May 1992	May 1993	May 1994
People	10039	17353	25737	33312	39378
% Of the Total	9.4	10.9	9.2	11.2	13.5

Source: same as the Table 2.

The illegal migrants in USA are also was very concentrated; there were about 200,000-400,000. And every year, the number of Chinese with invalid visa was increasing by more than 25,000 by some estimation. Thousands of Chinese with invalid visas still live in the UK and France respectively. Many spent the rest of their life working and waiting for the amnesty.



### **3. Main reasons for illegal Migration in China**

The illegal migration is a large part of the international migration. Illegal migration is unavoidable if there are economic differences between countries and regions. So the basic way to reduce the illegal migrants is to develop economy, and reduce the differences between the regions. Scholars in China took the tolerant attitude to illegal migrants. They feel that a large population, less job opportunities, lower labor productivity, and lower incomes were the primary reasons of illegal migration in China<sup>17</sup>. Another second reason was that the immigration laws were not complete in some developed areas. The quotas of visa should not be evenly distributed by country, but by the population of the country. That means that China, with 1,300 million populations should have more migrant quotas than other countries. So the illegal migration is a result of legal international migration. Scholars feel that it is not absolutely necessary to take measures to punish the migrants with invalid visas, but instead we should pay special attention to those with cheating and violent behaviors in the international migration.

The Chinese government has a different opinion. The government feels that illegal migration not only violates the national laws of immigration and emigration, but also jeopardizes the public security stability of relatives or friends thus destroying the local economy. A lot of illegal migrants die on their way to their destination. Why has the number of migrants increased in recent years? Many migrants thought the developed countries with high GDP are richer countries, and they could earn a lot of money if they worked there. People in Fujian areas have a tradition of illegal migration, and a lot of residents have relationships oversea. The illegal migration tends to become global, and the number has become large in China.

In general, the Chinese government thinks illegal migration does harm to international cooperation. Diplomatic measures and laws are needed to solve the problem of illegal migration. The Chinese government has taken a lot of measures to deal with the illegal migration, for example, to develop national economy, educate people to obey the laws, and put down and strike severely the illegal migrants. However the illegal migration is global problem and a lot of illegal crime groups have their bases in the countries out of China. It needs close cooperation with all the related countries. China hope to strengthen the international cooperation, increase the visa quota of legal Chinese migration and work together to solve the problem of illegal migration.

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