

10-1-2011

# China's One Child Policy Fuels Human Trafficking Across Borders

Janet Tso  
*Connecticut College*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.conncoll.edu/sflresearch>

---

## Recommended Citation

Tso, Janet, "China's One Child Policy Fuels Human Trafficking Across Borders" (2011). *Student Foreign Language Research*. Paper 4.  
<http://digitalcommons.conncoll.edu/sflresearch/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Mellon Initiative on Foreign Languages at Digital Commons @ Connecticut College. It has been accepted for inclusion in Student Foreign Language Research by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Connecticut College.

For more information, please contact [bpancier@conncoll.edu](mailto:bpancier@conncoll.edu).

The views expressed in this paper are solely those of the author.

# **China's One-Child Policy Fuels Human Trafficking Across International Borders**

---

Analyzing the Role of the Law and its Detrimental Affects Within the Country and the International Arena

Janet Tso '12  
Mellon Foreign Language Research Grant  
Connecticut College  
Toor Cummings Center for International Studies and the Liberal Arts  
September 27, 2011

## Introduction

Chinatown in New York City was established in the mid-eighteenth century as Chinese immigrants flooded the country for jobs and hopes for a new life. Today, there are thousands of Chinese people inhabiting Chinatown, making it the largest Chinese enclave in the United States. Having family in New York gave me the opportunity to visit and roam the ethnic streets throughout my childhood. Thanks to my time in New York City, I know where to bargain shop, eat local food, and whom to ask for help. This was great background knowledge especially conducting my research this past summer at The Door, Legal Services and the New York Asian Women's Center. As a law intern and Cantonese translator for Attorney Lauren Burke, I worked with Chinese youth from Fujian Province who was coerced by their parents to be smuggle into the United States. Snakehead smugglers are notorious for illegally smuggling in thousands of Chinese immigrants and threatened to repay debts up to \$60,000 USD. The significance of the smuggling ring is that the majority of the clients Attorney Burke represented were Special Juvenile Immigrant Status (SJIS) eligible, meaning the children were neglected and abused children that were coerced into coming to the United States due to several reasons: the one-child policy, economic pressure, and neglectful parenting.

Throughout the summer, I had met over twenty clients who shared similar stories. As a researcher and a law intern, my interaction with the clients was on a professional basis. Being multilingual, I was able to communicate to clients and interviewees in both Mandarin and Cantonese. Besides my interaction with the clients at both agencies, I worked my way around Chinatown with the guide of The Snakehead: An Epic Tale of the Chinatown Underworld and the American Dream by Patrick Radden Keefe. Keefe compiled twenty years of research on the Snakehead smuggling trade in Chinatown, New York. Using his research, I was able to converse with locals and my clients about the history of the Snakeheads and their current status.

### **Daily Life**

During my stay in New York City, I lived with my family in Brooklyn. My apartment building was about a forty-minute subway ride to the heart of Chinatown – Grand Street. Half of my time was spent at The Door and the other time was spent at the New York Asian Women's Center offices. The Door was located on the border of SOHO and Chinatown, where a majority of the clients lived on East Broadway, and the New York Asian Women Center had four branches throughout New York City. Since my offices were in multiple locations, I was always traveling to different offices every day. To conduct my field research, I mainly stayed on East Broadway Street, also called Fujian Street. When we met our clients, Attorney Burke and I would always interview them at The Door or at the New York Asian Women's Center's offices. During my time at the agencies and in my field work, I met a diverse set of people, ranging from clients, family members, shop keepers, restaurant owners, and nail salons technicians.

### **Results**

Upon my return from China, I conducted exploratory field work in Shanghai and Yunnan Province during my study abroad trips. My interactions with the locals were informal questions including their perspectives on the one-child policy and the phenomenon of human trafficking abroad, in particular the Snakehead trade. The intentions were to gain background knowledge for my internships in New York City.

In Manhattan, I had clients that shared common stories. Many clients were born and raised in Fujian Province, they were sent over to the United States by their parents, who either coerced or tricked their children for selfish economic reasons. Mid-way through their journey, the kids were informed about their debts ranging up to \$60,000 USD owed to the Snakeheads. If the child is not caught by U.S.

Custom Agents, they would successfully enter the United States illegally and work as debt bondage slaves. Many stories included children ages sixteen to twenty years old working in Chinese restaurants, hair salons, and nail salons, where they earned about five dollars a day, equal to about a thousand dollars a month. One of my clients explained her monthly budget, a hundred dollars would go to rent, eight hundred would be sent back to her parents in Fujian to pay off the Snakehead smugglers, and then she was left with a hundred or less to spend each month for basic necessities. As children, they are living in the United States alone, not knowing how to speak English, and living in fear from the Snakehead smugglers. Once these children are sent to the United States, they cannot return back home because they would be a disgrace to their family, which goes against the Chinese traditions.

The Chinese culture is deeply rooted in patriarchal values, based on the one-child policy, parents' desire for boys result from two factors, social security and an heir to continue the family line. Social security in China includes old age insurance, maternity insurance, social welfare, social security in rural areas, and etc. The ones listed are the most important insurance programs for parents because with only one child, Chinese p/parents and grandparents are depending on their one child and grandchild to take care of them during old age. Especially in the Chinese tradition, boys are typically who bears the responsibility. In most cases, families left with first born females result to a few solutions: first is gendercide, which is the murder of the child based on their sex, second, is to abandon the child somewhere where someone will eventually find and raise the baby or the baby will slowly die, third, is for a relative to take in the child as an illegal person who is not registered in the Chinese Hukuo system, which is a government identity system. All of my clients shared similar experiences of one of or all of the factors listed above. Consequently, thousands of parents have sent their children to western countries such as the United States to work. The trap in this trend is that Snakehead smugglers trick parents into believing that their children will make ten times more than their living status in rural

China and the child will be able to pay off their debts within two years. Nevertheless, uneducated rural parents fall for the trap and send their unwanted child across international borders to make money. The results are unsettling. Once the child lands in the United States, they are forced to work in execrable conditions, earning less than minimum wages, fear of deportation, fear of violence from the Snakeheads, psychological depression, negative health affects, and massive family pressure to make money. The children are treated like slaves and suicide thoughts were prevalent in the affidavits. Their stories, told in tears and mumbled in Chinese, were heart-wrenching. Thus working for Attorney Burke, we had more than eighty pro-bono cases to help clients get Special Juvenile Immigrant Status, Work Authorization Cards, Green Cards, and eventually, permanent legal residency.

### **Conclusion**

In closing, I conclude that the one child policy is indeed factor but what are driving the human trafficking trade across international borders are the failing economic market, government corruption, and greed for social insurance. My goal to further this research would continue collecting more stories of undocumented clients living in the United States and conducting on-ground research in the heartland of Snakehead customers, Fujian. Looking through my research, economic suffrage was the main reason. Globalization has created a shortage of jobs in rural areas such as Fujian, resulting in the exodus of migrants in urban Chinese cities such as Shanghai, Guangdong, and Beijing, but when these cities enforce laws to oppress migrants, their last solution is to move abroad. Culturally, rural folks called *nongcun* (农村) are not progressive as urban cities such as Shanghai. The cultural tradition is for girls to stay at home while boys go to school and work. Even today, parents favor boys more than girls because of social insurance. With the one child policy, families are only allowed one child to take care of both their parents and their grandparents. It becomes a heavy obligation for that one child, so parents would rather have a son to bear all the responsibilities. In closing, deeply rooted misogynistic values

are still ingrained in rural families thus, making them the most affected and vulnerable group to the one-child policy, economic burden, and government corruption.

Since I could not use the affidavits Attorney Burke collected for legal confidentiality reasons, I cannot expose the identities or personal stories of the clients. Rather, I am working with my Attorney Burke to get in contact with previous clients to interview them again separately for the purpose of my research for my independent study on Feminist Ethnography with Professor Shubra Sharma from the Gender and Women's Studies Department with the advising of Professor Amy Dooling from the East Asian Studies Department. There were many heart-felt stories of clients around my age and their struggles at home, their journey to the United States, and living in hiding in the United States.

### **Experience of a Lifetime**

As a researcher for the past three years, my work this past summer changed my life. I am a Hong Kong American born that has great pride in my heritage. It wasn't until my interactions with my clients this summer that I began to identify my career path. Undoubtedly, China as an economic power is evident but their human rights abuses have simply been ignored. The reality of human trafficking in China is unprecedented. The stories of children and teenagers being abused and neglected by their families in China, then coerced into coming to the United States to work as debt bondage slaves is heinous. What America doesn't understand is these children being ostracized and abused work in the most obvious places, Chinese restaurants, massage parlors, and even hair salons. This realization didn't hit me until I spoke to my regular waitress at a Malaysian restaurant in Chinatown, who I found out used Snakeheads to enter the United States. She voluntarily came but she nonchalantly mentioned the other four kids in the kitchen working. That moment struck me as a light bulb, there needs to be change. The fact that there are children working illegally in the United States isn't the problem, it is their stories. I will never forget one client that I met, who was just 18 years old, she works in a Chinese

restaurant in the United States. She was forced to come to work in the U.S. by her parents who severely abused her since the day she was born. As my supervisor and I interviewed her, our client explained that her older sister was, too, trafficked by her parents and explained, when she said me, she immediately thought of her older sister. As an intern, I have to keep a professional and sympathetic relationship with my clients, but that moment changed my life forever.