

News and Reviews

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PHOTO BY GWENDOLEN CATES

Golden Venture: A Journey into America's Immigration Nightmare

■ Directed by Peter Cohn. 2006. 77 Minutes. In English and Chinese with English subtitles.

The issues of illegal immigration and security of national border have again sparked widespread concerns and debates across the United States. For example, a series of protests clamoring for immigrant rights against the rising tide of anti-immigration legislation flared up in different parts of the country in May 2007. Who are illegal immigrants, why do they come here, and where does the support for and rejection of them come from? How to create a fair, equitable and effective national immigration policy that reflects both our national ideals and needs? Peter Cohn's thoughtful, well-made documentary, *Golden Venture*, offers us many ideas as well as questions to ponder about these important issues.

Focusing on the lives of four immigrants and three York, Pennsylvania, activists, the film tells the

gripping stories of Chinese immigration, U.S. immigration politics, and remarkable perseverance behind the Golden Venture incident. In June 1993, a battered freighter ran aground off the New York coast as it attempted to smuggle over 280 Chinese into the country. Just miles away from the Statue of Liberty, many of the passengers jumped into the icy water and ten died. What awaited the survivors was, however, an increasingly hostile environment of anti-immigration sentiment as a result of fear of terrorism (heightened by the 1993 bombing of World Trade Center) and concern for economic problems (e.g., high unemployment). Worried about "losing control of our border," the then new Clinton administration decided to use the incident as a deterrent example by sending all the survivors (except six who managed to escape and two who received asylum) to a county jail in

York, Pennsylvania. And this started the long struggle of these immigrants to gain freedom and citizenship in the U.S.

This well-paced film is broad in scope and extensively researched, on both sides of the Pacific. Through interviews with four of the Golden Venture passengers, including three now living in the U.S. in legal limbo (one of them illegally re-entered the U.S. after his deportation to China) and one who is back in China, the film gives us a complex sociology of illegal immigration. All the Golden Venture passengers were from Fujian in south China, a province well known for migration to Southeast Asia, Taiwan, and the U.S. since at least the early nineteenth century where an underground transnational network of migration controlled by powerful "sneakheads" (human smuggling gangsters) was created in 1992. People who wanted to seek a better life or to escape restrictive birth control policy had to pay as much as \$30,000 to "get a place" in the network to enter the U.S.

The passengers who survived the horrendous journey from Fujian to New York, compellingly described in the documentary, now found themselves in prison without knowing how long they had to stay there. Some chose to be deported to

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Golden Venture

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China. But almost all of these deportees tried to re-enter the U.S. illegally. For the detainees, all they could do was, as one of them said, “hope and hope.” Outside the prison, while anti-immigration sentiment was spreading across the nation, the film shows us a group of York, Pennsylvania, activists—people of different political and ideological backgrounds, including pro-life and pro-choice advocates along with liberal leftists and right-wing anti-communists—that was appalled by the hostile treatment the immigrants had to go through and found inspiration from American democratic ideals to fight to set them free. It was the perseverance and determination of the activists and the Golden Venture passengers that drew the attention of President Clinton who, in February 1997, granted paroles to everyone still detained. After nearly four years of imprisonment, they were free.

On parole, these immigrants were denied citizenship in the U.S. They could open a Chinese restaurant, they could make money, but they could not get a driver's license or travel to China. Staying away from home for so long, some of them lost their families. And all of them had to work long hours to make do in their displaced life in their new home. On the other hand, the Golden Venture passenger who is living in China looks prosperous and happy, and his daughter says that she would not emigrate to the U.S. because life is just work and it is hard to make money there. So, will the rapid transformation of China into a glob-



...a balanced
and penetrating view
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immigration policies...

al powerhouse and tightening of immigration policy in the U.S. combine to put a stop to illegal migration? Or, will the “Gold Mountain” continue to lure migrants from China as well as other countries? *Golden Venture* is a thoughtful and beautifully made film that both informs and makes us think. It provides a balanced and penetrating view of the complex stories of Chinese migration and the politics of U.S. immigration policies that is invaluable for discussions in college-level classes in anthropology, history, migration studies, political science, and sociology. ■

Golden Venture, an immigrant smuggling ship that ran aground near New York City in 1993. Passengers had paid up to \$30,000 to be brought to the U.S. from China's Fujian Province, expecting to arrive indebted but unnoticed.

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HOW TO PURCHASE: *Golden Venture* is available on DVD and VHS from New Day Films. Prices for DVD are: for college/institution, \$295 for purchase and \$75 for rental; for K-12/public library/community group, \$95 for purchase and \$75 for rental. VHS format is slightly higher.

It is also available in 14-day Flash streaming for \$6.99; see goldenventuremovie.com/buy.htm.

Additional Resources

A free study guide is available online at goldenventuremovie.com/studyguide.htm including suggested classroom activities, a transcript of the film, summaries by section of the film, and a library of declassified policy documents, among them “two documents that prove that the government knew well ahead of the grounding that the Golden Venture was steaming toward the U.S.”