

[PDF] The Snakehead: An Epic Tale Of The Chinatown Underworld And The American Dream

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Description:

Book Description A mesmerizing narrative about the rise and fall of an unlikely international crime boss.

In the 1980s, a wave of Chinese from Fujian province began arriving in America. Like other immigrant groups before them, they showed up with little money but with an intense work ethic and an unshakeable belief in the promise of the United States. Many of them lived in a world outside the law, working in a shadow economy overseen by the ruthless gangs that ruled the narrow streets of

New York's Chinatown.

The figure who came to dominate this Chinese underworld was a middle-aged grandmother known as Sister Ping. Her path to the American dream began with an unusual business run out of a tiny noodle store on Hester Street. From her perch above the shop, Sister Ping ran a full-service underground bank for illegal Chinese immigrants. But her real business—a business that earned an estimated \$40 million—was smuggling people.

As a “snakehead,” she built a complex—and often vicious—global conglomerate, relying heavily on familial ties, and employing one of Chinatown's most violent gangs to protect her power and profits. Like an underworld CEO, Sister Ping created an intricate smuggling network that stretched from Fujian Province to Hong Kong to Burma to Thailand to Kenya to Guatemala to Mexico. Her ingenuity and drive were awe-inspiring both to the Chinatown community—where she was revered as a homegrown Don Corleone—and to the law enforcement officials who could never quite catch her.

Indeed, Sister Ping's empire only came to light in 1993 when the Golden Venture, a ship loaded with 300 undocumented immigrants, ran aground off a Queens beach. It took New York's fabled “Jade Squad” and the FBI nearly ten years to untangle the criminal network and hone in on its unusual mastermind.

The Snakehead is a panoramic tale of international intrigue and a dramatic portrait of the underground economy in which America's twelve million illegal immigrants live. Based on hundreds of interviews, Patrick Radden Keefe's sweeping narrative tells the story not only of Sister Ping, but of the gangland gunslingers who worked for her, the immigration and law enforcement officials who pursued her, and the generation of penniless immigrants who risked death and braved a 17,000 mile odyssey so that they could realize their own version of the American dream. *The Snakehead* offers an intimate tour of life on the mean streets of Chinatown, a vivid blueprint of organized crime in an age of globalization and a masterful exploration of the ways in which illegal immigration affects us all.

A Q&A with Patrick Radden Keefe Question: Can you tell us a little bit about Sister Ping? She is one of the most unusual "godmothers" in the annals of modern crime.

Answer: Sure. I first found out about Sister Ping in 2006, when she was on trial in New York. It emerged that she was a Chinese woman who had come to the United States in 1981 with no education, didn't speak English, and started smuggling other people—from her home village and then the region in China that she came from—to the U.S. She did this for the better part of two decades, and made \$40 million or so in the process, and then went on the lam. She was the FBI's most wanted Asian organized crime figure for another five or six years before they finally tracked her down in Hong Kong, extradited her to the U.S., and tried her.

Q: If you passed her in the street, or went by her place of work, if you were wandering around Chinatown as a tourist, would you have any idea about what she did?

A: You wouldn't give her a second look. This was a part of what was so fascinating about her; she made an enormous fortune but she made a point of being very humble in her appearance. She worked incredibly long hours, and there was nothing ostentatious about the way she carried herself. And I actually think that this studied anonymity was part of what allowed her to do what she did with impunity for so long. And it also secured her a huge amount of respect within the Chinatown neighborhood, where she was regarded as kind of a humble, hometown heroine who hadn't let the success she'd had go to her head.

Q: Sister Ping was clever enough to distance herself from the more violent aspects of human trafficking. How did she outsource the seedier aspects of what she was doing, and how did that ultimately affect her?

A: Well, this in some ways was what brought about her downfall, in that she was always a perfectionist, and when she started out as a smuggler in the early 1980s she would transport people herself. By that I mean, she would be there in Hong Kong when she put them on a plane; they would be flown to Guatemala, she would be there in Guatemala when they arrived. They would be escorted up through Mexico; she would meet them in California, then she would fly back with them to New York City. But as her operation grew, and the word spread—really, around the world—that this was a woman who could move anyone from point A to point B, it got so large that she could no longer oversee everything herself, and she had to start subcontracting. And this, in some ways, was her great mistake, because she subcontracted to a very violent gang of youths in Chinatown known as the Fuk Ching gang, and the gang, ultimately—because they were less scrupulous than she was about issues of safety and things like that—ended up mismanaging things. There were a number of these journeys that ended in death, and then a number of murders as well.

Q: Tell us what the title *The Snakehead* means.

A: The snakehead is the name, the Chinese name, to refer to these human smugglers, who basically emerged in China in the 1960s and 1970s, helping smuggle people out of China. But then in the late 1980s and early 1990s—basically after Tiananmen Square—it became a massive (many say four- to six-billion-dollar-a-year) industry. These were the snakeheads, and among the snakeheads Sister Ping was the most prolific and certainly the most famous.

In the case of *The Golden Venture*, they would bring these ships to the U.S., and they wouldn't want to bring them right to the shore in California or Massachusetts or New York—as you can imagine, it would look a little strange to have a freighter coming up, to appear in Brooklyn and drop off hundreds of Chinese people. So they would bring them to about a hundred miles off shore, out in the open ocean, and then they would send out small fishing boats which would offload the ships. This was called offloading and it was actually a kind of niche in the industry. And the gangsters were the ones who occupied this niche. They would take these fishing boats out and bring the passengers back in. Because Sister Ping had outsourced offloading to one of these gangs, the gang happened to have a lot of inner turmoil in the early part of 1993, precisely because they were making so much money in the snakehead business and they didn't know how to divide it, and so there was a massive shoot-out just weeks before *The Golden Venture* arrived, and the guys who were supposed to go and offload the ship were all killed in the shootout. All of the guys who had gone to kill them were hoping they could be the ones to go and offload it and collect the money from the passengers, but they were all locked up and put in prison. So when the ship arrived, there was nobody to offload it, and that was why it came in—all the way in, to the Rockaways, in Queens, and actually ran aground right there on the beach in the media capital of the world.

Q: Of course, the real payoff for the reader is this reading experience—this is an amazing crime story with incredible twists and turns.

A: Yeah; it's funny, I really didn't anticipate this to be the case when I began the research. As I started digging in and talking to law enforcement sources and finding out about these various underworld figures, in Chinatown but also in places like Bangkok, I began to realize the relationships between them. One of the things that's interesting in the book is that you realize that a whole series of people were actually cooperating with American authorities at different times over the years, that we'd never really known about. And in many cases, they were going to American authorities and giving them information about one another. There was an interesting, almost spy-

versus-spy game going on between these ruthless, but also very enterprising and business-minded, underworld figures.

(Photo © Sai Srikandarajah)

--This text refers to the edition.

From Publishers Weekly Starred Review. Keefe (*Chatter*) examines America's complicated relationship with immigration in this brilliant account of Cheng Chui Ping, known as Sister Ping, who built a multimillion-dollar empire as a snakehead, smuggling Chinese immigrants into America. Sister Ping herself entered the U.S. legally in 1981 from China's Fuzhou province, but was soon known among Fujianese immigrants in Manhattan's Chinatown as the go-to for advice, loans and connections to bring their families to America. Her empire grew so large that she contracted out muscle work to the local gang, the Fuk Ching. Keefe points to the *Golden Venture*—a ship full of Fujianese illegals that ran fatally aground in 1993—as the beginning of the end for Sister Ping. She was sentenced in 2000 to 35 years in prison for conspiracy, money laundering and trafficking. Despite an enormous cast of characters in a huge underground web of global crime, Keefe's account maintains the swift pace of a thriller. With the immigration debate still boiling, this exploration of how far people will go to achieve the American dream is a must-read. (*July 21*)

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