

GOLDEN VENTURE

A FILM BY PETER COHN



Golden Venture

Written, directed and produced by Peter Cohn

Official Selection, 2006 Tribeca Film Festival
NY NY Documentary Feature Competition

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Short Synopsis

The film chronicles the ongoing struggles of passengers who were aboard the Golden Venture, an immigrant smuggling ship that ran aground near New York City in 1993. Passengers had paid at least \$30,000 to be brought to the U.S. from China's Fujian Province, expecting to arrive indebted but unnoticed. But a seemingly golden opportunity quickly evolved into a hellish descent through the cruel whims of U.S. immigration policy.

The Golden Venture crash fed a media circus and became a symbol of a growing national concern over illegal immigration. Many passengers were deported over a two-year period, while others were detained for up to four years

“Golden Venture” is a global epic, a story of stoic perseverance and unexpected grace, played out in the shadow of national politics and the continuing failure of ever-harsher US immigration policies. At a time when the immigration issue has led to furious debate and high stakes political maneuvering, the fate of the Golden Venture passengers is more relevant than ever.

Synopsis

In June 1993, 286 smuggled Chinese immigrants aboard the freighter Golden Venture ran aground off Queens, NY. The stunned passengers jumped into the icy surf -- ten drowned. It was a worldwide media event. Within hours, images of New York cops dragging bodies from the water flashed around the globe -- images of immigrants so desperate for freedom that they would pay \$30,000 and endure a years-long journey halfway around the world -- just for the possibility of a new life in America.

Their hopes collapsed as the Immigration and Naturalization Service rounded up the survivors.

It had been only months since the first bombing of the World Trade Center and a recession was stoking fears about the economic impact of illegal aliens. The Golden Venture quickly became a metaphor for the failure of US immigration policy. Then, like now, there was strong political pressure to get tough on immigration -- and the Golden Venture survivors quickly became a test case for harsh new policies. It was the starting point for a new era of restrictive measures: blanket detention, rushed hearings and express-lane deportation, often to autocratic countries where torture and public execution are the norm.

INS officials shipped the dazed, emaciated passengers to INS-contracted county jails outside New York. Half of the passengers were deported. Some remained in prisons for four years, finally winning a parole thanks to the determined advocacy of a left-right coalition of lawyers and activists from York, Pa., where many of the detainees were held.

Today, 220 of the Golden Venture passengers live in the US. Many of them are trapped in stateless limbo, isolated from their families, technically "legal" but still subject to sudden deportation. Of the more than 110 passengers who were deported, the film discloses for the first time that about 60 have returned to the US illegally. Although they were beaten, jailed, and in some cases forcibly sterilized when they returned to China, they have virtually no chance of asylum.

The Golden Venture carried 286 anonymous immigrants to within 300 yards of American soil. The film is about survivors of that tragedy who went on to face even more trials -- and heartbreak that doesn't seem to end. They've met different fates, and coped in very different ways. All have been touched by a certain measure of grace. Their story is a real world global epic, a story told by weaving together characters and narrative strands that converge around a common theme of shared struggle and stoic heroism

The Immigrants

We've all heard about characters who "go on a journey." In the case of the Golden Venture, the journey -- physically and emotionally -- is literal, and of almost unimaginable scale. Here, men and women who are anonymous and strange to most Americans -- the cooks, delivery men and entrepreneurs who run the nation's Chinese restaurants -- cross cultural barriers to reveal who they are and why they've endured so much. Their continuing struggles -- for asylum, for stability and for a place in America -- shape the dramatic narrative. The characters include:

- Guilin Chen is a free spirited deliveryman, driving Chinese food to students on the Penn State campus. On his rare days off, he has a second life in the New York disco rave scene. Since he was filmed, Guilin won political asylum. He owns a takeout restaurant in New Jersey and is waiting for his green card.
- Yan Li, who was deported after two years in the York jail. In China, he was arrested, fined, beaten and submitted to forced sterilization. One year later, he paid smugglers \$50,000 for a second illegal passage to the US. Today he is a chef in an Arkansas Chinese restaurant. Yan was reluctant to appear in the film because he feared reprisals against his wife and children in China. His name has been changed and his face obscured in shadow.
- Arming He owns a thriving restaurant in a Florida strip mall. After four years in jail, Arming slowly built a new life for himself in America. He provides employment to a group of friends and relatives who came to Florida to work for him, and he owns a duplex home that they all share, rent free. Like many Golden Venture passengers released under a 1997 presidential "parole," Arming does not have legal status.
- Kaiqu Zheng lives in Changle, Fujian Province. Like many of the Golden Venture detainees, Kaiqu learned how to make paper sculptures while he was in jail. He made eagles, owls, tigers, dinosaurs and other creations, using only folded magazine sheets and a paste of water, glue and tissues. He opted for deportation after two years in the York, PA county jail. He was detained, fined and beaten when he returned to China. Kaiqu has tried to enter the US three times -- the Golden Venture was his second attempt. The first was during the first Gulf War, and he was sent home as a suspected terrorist. He tried one time after the Golden Venture, and was immediately detained at the airport and sent home.

The Advocates

When the detainees were bused to the York County, PA jail in 1993, lawyers and paralegals with no immigration background took their cases. Many began reluctantly, only to fulfill *pro bono* requirements. As the detention dragged on, people from the community began to hold vigils outside the prison. They included Right to Lifers (who were outraged by China's one child population control policies), feminists, human rights activists and ordinary citizens. Twelve years later, a determined band of York activists remains dedicated to helping the former detainees. The Americans are a second strand of the story -- their transformation, their clarity about the issues -- serve to powerfully universalize the themes. The American characters include:

- Beverly Church was a paralegal, a grandmother and registered Republican when the Golden Venture passengers arrived in the York, PA county jail. She went on to become one of the major advocates for the detainees. Today she's still fighting, pressing in Congress for special legislation that would take the paroled passengers out of legal limbo and finally grant them permanent legal residence. The proposed legislation has protected the passengers from deportation for several years.
- Craig Trebilcock was a personal injury lawyer who reluctantly took a Golden Venture case to fulfill a *pro bono* requirement. He became the detainees' lead attorney, launching an epic court battle against the government. Craig was in the Army for four years before he went into private practice in York, and remains active in the Army Reserve, serving in Bosnia and Iraq. Today he practices immigration law full time.

York also played a key role in helping the film makers complete the project. The Strand-Capitol Performing Arts Center is the area's major cultural center, and the theater's foundation provided the completion funding for the film. "Golden Venture" will have its theatrical premiere at the Strand-Capitol in mid-May. In conjunction with the screening, the organizers are planning a series of immigration-related events around York.

The organization that came out of the Golden Venture movement, the Golden Vision Foundation, will be a primary organizer. The goal is to create a series of high profile event to discuss immigration issues -- as they relate to both national and local concerns. In addition, Golden Vision is hoping to capitalize on the momentum of the events to establish an immigrant center in the community, where newcomers can go for help with legal issues and other matters.

Golden Vision has already distinguished itself by establishing Friendship House, a renovated house that shelters immigrants after they are released from detention in York and other facilities around the country.

The Immigration Issue

When the Golden Venture ran aground in mid-1993, the nation was caught up in a major wave of anti-immigrant sentiment. The first World Trade Center bombing and a shooting outside CIA headquarters by a Pakistani Islamic fundamentalist fanned fears that it was too easy for terrorists to get into America. The economy was just coming out of a recession. California was hit particularly hard, and there was a major outpouring of anti-immigrant feeling in the West, culminating in the success of Proposition 187 in 1994.

President Clinton had just taken office and was off to a shaky start. His administration was running scared, looking ahead to upcoming Congressional elections. There were strong forces in Congress taking aim at the system for granting political asylum. In addition, the Golden Venture was only one of many boats carrying Chinese immigrants to the US, and there was a fear that America would be overrun.

There are obvious similarities to the current political situation. Instead of a Democratic president being threatened by anti-immigration forces, a Republican president is under assault by extremists in his own party. While Bill Clinton's rhetoric was always shaded by a concern for human rights and a recognition of the Emma Lazarus "give me your tired" strain of American history, it was during his administration that harsh new laws were enacted, culminating in a major change in the immigration system in 1996. George Bush seems to be taking a different approach -- trying to placate the anti-immigrant constituency with harsh rhetoric, while at the same time seeking to enact a "guest worker" plan that is bitterly opposed by the extreme wing of his party.

As the Golden Venture set sail, the US was already well into a decade of massive immigration, legal and illegal. With more than 10 million immigrants arriving over the decade, the change in the nation's population was much more than just an abstract statistic. The change was very apparent -- and not just in Border States. Many Americans come in contact with new immigrants every day -- sometimes through routine anonymous transactions, and other times in contexts that cause conflict and fear, fueling anti-immigrant rhetoric.

Given the sharp divisions that have opened up in recent months as the immigration issue has heated up, it seems quite unbelievable that in 1993 a true coalition of the left and right came together to advocate for the Golden Venture passengers. The York, PA coalition included Right to Lifers, feminists, fundamentalists, human rights activists, lawyers and businessmen. It was all the more unlikely given that York is a conservative Republican area, not far from the Mason Dixon line, with a declining job base and a history of racial tension.

Making the Film

The film makers secured exclusive and intimate access to Golden Venture passengers and to the American advocates who have been working on their behalf for a dozen years. They also developed a long-distance collaboration with a film maker in Fuzhou in Fujian Province, who tracked down and filmed Golden Venture passengers in China. His material is some of the first uncensored footage ever to come from Fujian.

The film was shot in the verité tradition, going deep into the everyday lives of the subjects. The film depicts a world that is both exotic and mundane: a delivery car with techno music pumping from the CD, a cramped shared apartment in Chinatown, the steaming kitchen of a Chinese restaurant in a Florida strip mall, a family reunion in an after-hours restaurant on East Broadway, an anti-immigrant Colorado Congressman kicking off a bid to run in the 2008 New Hampshire primary, an ecstasy fueled Asian rave on the West Side of Manhattan, Golden Venture passengers pleading for help in a Congressional office building, a wedding filmed in a village outside Changle in Fujian Province.

Director's Statement

Like most New Yorkers, I was amazed by the "Golden Venture" story when I first heard the news on June 7, 1993. A tramp steamer keeled on a sandbar a few miles from Manhattan... immigrants crammed in the hold like Africans in an 18th century slave ship...the iconic image of the survivors in blankets huddling on the beach. And like most New Yorkers, after a few weeks I forgot about it. Four years later, I learned the passengers were still in jail. I was outraged. I oppose our nation's exclusionary immigration policies, and here was a shocking example. So it was a combination of outrage and fascination that caused me to launch this project, 10 years ago.

As a screenwriter, I had heard enough about "characters who go on a journey." The Golden Venture passengers have, of course, gone on a journey -- one of almost unimaginable scale. Four Fujianese men who made this journey are the heroes of the film. They survived the voyage, imprisonment and worse -- and went on to face more trials and heartbreak that doesn't end. At the same time, they've been touched by amazing measures of grace. It came mostly from the people from York, PA who rallied to their support when they arrived in the county jail. Three of the main characters are from York -- a lawyer, a paralegal and a retired factory worker. They represent everything that's good about America.

The four Golden Venture passengers in the film approach life with stoicism, determination, and acceptance -- some with incredible humor, others with somber resignation. Guilin Chen was delivering Chinese food in State College, PA when we first met. Guilin shattered any stereotypes about Chinese delivery guys. He opened his life to us: we rode shotgun on his route and tagged along for a crazy night in a Manhattan disco. Arming He, who owns a restaurant in Florida, was equally generous -- but there were no discos in his world. Instead, he is a model of responsibility and fortitude, who has managed to accomplish so much despite the terrible uncertainty that surrounds his life. Yan Li (his assumed name) overcame his fear of retribution by the Chinese government when he consented to an interview. He's the soul and poetic voice of the film. And then there's Kaiqu Zheng. I've never met Kaiqu -- he was filmed in China by a fellow film maker based in Fuzhou. Both shooter and subject also risked problems with the government to be in the film. Thanks to their courage, we can present a freewheeling snapshot of life in Fujian Province.

I hope the film is an assault on US immigration policy. People who should be welcomed are jailed and deported to countries that brutalize them. And of course I also hope "Golden Venture" works just as a movie. To me, it's a celebration of humanity, a testament to the powerful spirit that can move us to venture across the sea to a strange land.

Director's Bio

Peter Cohn is a New York-based writer and film maker. "Golden Venture" is his second feature and his first documentary. He has been working on a film about the Golden Venture since 1997.

He produced, co-wrote and directed "Drunks," a film set in a Manhattan Alcoholics Anonymous meeting, starring Richard Lewis, Faye Dunaway, Dianne Wiest, Parker Posey and Spalding Gray. "Drunks" was shown at Sundance in 1996, premiered on Showtime and was released in 1997 to widespread critical acclaim. The New York Times called it "superbly realized." "Drunks" won the motion picture industry's Prism Award for 1997, in recognition of the film's realistic depiction of alcohol and drug addiction.

He has written screenplays for Fox, Disney, MGM and a wide range of US and European independent producers. His publications include "The Official Stockbrokers Handbook" (Putnam, 1985) and "The Reagan Report" (Doubleday, 1984). He was a co-founder of Off The Wall Street Journal, a satirical newspaper distributed nationally in 1982 and 1983. Other satirical publications include "Meet Mr. Bomb" and "The Irrational Inquirer."

He began his writing career as a journalist, first at the Richmond Times Dispatch and then at the Hartford Courant. He is a graduate of the University of Chicago, where he was editor of the student newspaper, The Chicago Maroon.

Credits

Writer, producer, director

Peter Cohn

Narrator

Tim Robbins

Director of photography

Etienne Sauret

Editors

Thavisouk Phrasavath

Peter Kinoy

Music

Miranda Hentoff

Associate Producer

Zhihong Shi

China segment Producer

Changfu Chang

Animation Graphics

Paul Kiernan

Underwater photography.

Ryan Boggs,

Joe Marino

Sound editor/mixer

Benny Mouthon

Online editor/Colorist

Travis Antolik

Assistant Editor

Aaron Lutz-Kinoy

Additional photography

Greg Smith

Assistant Sound Editor

Stephen Hastings

Translators

Qing Liu

Shasha Dai

Yee Yeo Chang

Xin Yi Puah

Transcription

Ben Winters

Vicky Kuperman

Assistant Camera

Phil Raymond

Tom Donatelli

Brian Murphy

Post Production Consultant

Dara Kell

Additional footage research

Phil Raymond

Archival footage and images

ABC News Videosource

NY 1 News

BBC Motion Gallery

CNN ImageSource

Dept. of Homeland Security

Joseph DeMaria

WGAL-TV

WPMT-TV

US Coast Guard

Associated Press

Getty Images

South China Morning Post

Museum of the Chinese in the Americas

The film makers would like to acknowledge the US Coast Guard for its generous assistance during the production.

End Music

“False Traveling Monk”

Written by

Cui Jian

Performed by

Cui Jian

Courtesy of

Beijing Eastwest Music Production Co. Ltd.

Website and Print Design

Elisabeth Fraller

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