

# GOLDEN VENTURE STUDY GUIDE

- Director/producer note
- What the film is about
- Key questions
- Timed chapter summaries
- Suggested activities

## A NOTE FROM THE DIRECTOR/PRODUCER

“Golden Venture” provides a rich topic for study in classes looking at contemporary issues. Almost every community in the country has been touched by the recent wave of immigration. And most of us have also been touched by the immigration debate, both on the local and national level. The debate has divided the country politically, in a way that has so far blocked a comprehensive legislative solution.

While immigration policy is the film’s central concern – it is a multi-layered narrative that explores other topics worthy of classroom discussion. The film depicts the surprising story of the cross-ideological community coalition that came together to help the Golden Venture passengers. It’s an uncommon story in our partisan times. And the film explores the culture of China’s Fujian province, home country for most of the Chinese who have immigrated to the US in recent years. About 25 percent of the foreign-born living in the US today are from Asia, and a study of the Fujianese diaspora would represent a meaningful addition to a multicultural curriculum.

The movie runs 70 minutes. For a 45 minute class, the film can be shown in two parts. The first class would cover the voyage to America, the detention of the immigrants, and the legal and political struggle that led to their release. The second class would explore where the Golden Venture passengers are today.

In addition to my work in film, I am pursuing a career in education. I’m finishing up an MA in adolescence education at Mercy College and have taught in New York City schools (I’m currently teaching at NYU). I’ve drawn on my experience to put together the suggested lesson plans and other study material. In addition to the film, the film web site ([www.goldenveturemovie.com](http://www.goldenveturemovie.com)) provides background information and links to more information about the Golden Venture, immigration and related topics. I also recommend a site created by Museum of Chinese in the Americas for additional educational resources:

<http://www.moca-nyc.org/MoCA/pdf/uploads/Fly%20to%20Freedom.pdf>.

Please feel free to contact me at [info@goldenveturemovie.com](mailto:info@goldenveturemovie.com). Thanks for your interest in the film.

Peter Cohn

## W/HAT THE FILM IS ABOUT

In June, 1993, the freighter *Golden Venture* ran aground off New York City, with 286 undocumented Chinese immigrants aboard. Passengers had paid at least \$30,000 to be smuggled to the U.S. from Fujian Province, expecting to arrive indebted but unnoticed. But a seemingly golden opportunity quickly evolved into a years-long political and legal struggle. The *Golden Venture* grounding -- within sight of the Statue of Liberty -- fed a media frenzy and became a symbol of a growing national concern over illegal immigration, fueled by the first attempt to topple the World Trade Center, also in 1993. Many passengers were deported over a two-year period, while others were detained for up to four years as their cases for asylum languished in court.

Meanwhile, the would-be immigrants turned to art to soothe their uncertainties, producing, from prison, an astonishing number of elegant sculptures made of nothing more than magazines, cardboard, and homemade glue. With the unwavering support of two legal advocates, a bill now sits in Congress to grant permanent legal residence to *Golden Venture* passengers in the U.S. who still face deportation. At a time when detainment without trial is again a flashpoint of public debate, the fate of the *Golden Venture* passengers is more relevant than ever.

## KEY GOLDEN VENTURE ISSUES

### **-- Immigration policy: America, beacon of freedom?**

As everyone knows, our nation was built by immigrants – from the time of the Pilgrim's to the present day era of massive immigration (both legal and illegal) into the country. Yet many communities are struggling to cope with new immigrants. Critics say that illegal aliens place an unreasonable burden on our neighborhoods, schools, hospitals and places of work. Some even think that immigrants pose a fundamental threat to American culture and values. The *Golden Venture* passengers came to America in search of freedom and \*a better life, at a time when national leaders felt that the country was being overrun by illegal Chinese immigrants, smuggled into the country by criminal organizations. Advocates argued that the *Golden Venture* passengers deserved political asylum. China is not a free country – it is a one-party, communist society. During the Cold War, people who left countries like China were welcome as defectors. In addition, the *Golden Venture* passengers claimed they were fleeing from forced sterilizations and other coercive measures implemented as part of the one-child population control policy.

**Key question:** How do we balance between our tradition of openness and other pressing national interests?

### **-- Community action: Right to Lifers and feminists in the same group?**

The day after the Golden Venture grounding, the passengers were sent to local prisons under contract with the federal government. For many, the destination was the York, Pa. county jail, in southeastern Pennsylvania. Within days, local attorneys volunteered by the dozen to represent the passengers in court. It was a legal struggle that went on for years. The plight of the passengers also moved many local residents and within a few months a cross-ideological coalition came together to work on the detainees' behalf. The group included human rights activists, conservative church groups, students, feminists, Right to Life organizations and ordinary citizens.

**Key question:** How does the Golden Venture coalition instruct us on the ways, means and value of community action in our current era of partisan divisiveness?

### **-- China's one-child birth control policy: grounds for asylum?**

Most of the Golden Venture passengers requested political asylum on the grounds that they were fleeing from China's coercive one-child population control policy. Under the policy, couples are limited to only one child – and in many reported cases, men have been forcibly sterilized and women have been required to have abortions. Under the policies of the first President Bush, it was relatively easy for Chinese immigrants with one-child claims to win asylum. Early in the Clinton administration, the policy was changed so that the vast majority of one-child claims were no longer grounds for asylum. In 1996, Congress passed legislation offering one-child asylum each year to a limited number of Chinese asylum seekers.

**Key question:** Should we extend asylum to a larger number of Chinese who claim they are fleeing forced sterilization or abortion?

### **-- Freedom birds: can art influence politics?**

After a few months in jail, the detainees started to make paper art work. The first art was simple pineapples and birds made from folded paper with a technique similar to (but not the same as) origami. As more detainees began to make art, the works and the technique to create it became more complex. The artists still used only materials they could find in the prison -- felt tip pens, glue, water, toilet paper and the magazine sheets -- to make intricate sculptures of pagodas, mythological figures and eagles. The eagles came to be known as "Freedom Birds." The art work inspired the coalition that was forming to help the detainees and eventually the detainees and their supporters sold the art to raise funds for the detainees' legal defense. The art played a key role in bringing public attention to the story of the Golden Venture passengers and in spurring public officials to act on their behalf. President Clinton received two of

the sculptures as gifts in the days before he granted a “parole” to 57 of the passengers who were still in jail after four years.

**Key question:** What does the Golden Venture say about the role art can play in the political process?

**-- From Fujian: how has immigration from China changed in recent decades?**

Fujian is a prosperous province in southeast China, across the straits from Taiwan. Fujianese have been settling abroad for centuries – the Fujianese expatriate community numbers in the millions. Since the 1970s, most of the new immigrants to the US from China have come from Fujian, and the Fujianese immigrants have transformed the nation’s Chinatown enclaves. They have spread far and wide, opening Chinese restaurants and other businesses around the country.

**Key Question:** What are the social and cultural factors that have influenced immigration from China in recent years?

## **VIEWING THE FILM: CHAPTER SUMMARIES**

Chapter DVD start times are in parenthesis.

### **Immigrants** (1:26)

We meet four immigrants from Fujian Province:

Guilin Chen: He had many relatives living in Southeast Asia and the US. He left China to take a job in his cousin's Chinatown garment factory.

Yan Li: He left China after his wife gave birth to their second child, and the authorities threatened to forcibly sterilize him.

Arming He: He left in search of freedom and a better life.

Kaiqu Zheng: He was a construction worker and had a hard time finding work in China. Later in the film, we learn that the Golden Venture was his second attempt to enter the US illegally.

### **Snakeheads** (4:50)

“Snakehead” is a translation of the Chinese word for someone engaged in the illicit trade of people smuggling. In the early 1990's, the snakeheads opened up a major new smuggling route – sending immigrants from China across the Pacific in rusting old freighters and fishing trawlers. The Golden Venture was one of the few known attempts to smuggle undocumented immigrants across the Atlantic.

### **Out of China** (6:34)

The Golden Venture immigrants committed to pay about \$30,000 each to the Snakeheads, with about \$10,000 paid upfront. The money was borrowed from extended family networks, including relatives living abroad. Most left China by walking over the treacherous mountains of Burma, then heading into Bangkok.

Two different vessels were involved in the Golden Venture story. The first broke down in the Indian Ocean, and deposited immigrants in Mombasa, Kenya, where they were stranded for a year. In Feb., 1993, the Golden Venture left Thailand, with about 90 immigrants aboard. Another 200 were picked up off Mombasa.

Almost 300 immigrants then endured the voyage around the southern tip of Africa and across the Atlantic.

### June 6, 1993 (11:31)

The Snakeheads had planned to send small boats to meet the Golden Venture off the coast of Massachusetts. A gang war in New York put the Snakeheads into disarray. Snakeheads aboard the freighter decided to run the freighter aground on a stretch of beach near Breezy Point -- part of a long, thin barrier island in the New York City borough of Queens.

The boat keeled on a sandbar about 300 yards from the beach. Many of the immigrants jumped overboard and swam to shore. Ten died of drowning or hypothermia. Authorities and the media descended on the beach. The passengers were rounded up by the Immigration and Naturalization Service (the INS), and detained.

The Golden Venture was the largest mass apprehension of undocumented immigrants in US history.

### We Were Not Welcome (18:03)

The Golden Venture passengers arrived in the US at a time when anti-immigrant sentiment was running high. The first attempt to destroy the World Trade Center took place in early 1993, followed by a shooting incident involving a Muslim extremist outside CIA headquarters. In addition, the economy was coming out of recession, and there was a surge of anti-immigration protests, particularly in California.

The Clinton administration decided to make an example of the Golden Venture passengers. Instead of releasing them on bond, the INS shipped the passengers to local prisons around the country, facilities that had been contracted by the INS to serve as immigrant detention centers. About 150 of the immigrants were held in the York, PA county jail.

Local attorneys in York volunteered to represent the Golden Venture passengers in immigration hearings. They included Craig Trebilcock, who was a personal injury attorney, and Beverly Church, a paralegal. Almost none of the immigrants won political asylum. Trebilcock, Church and others pressed on, taking the Golden Venture case into federal court.

### Folded Dreams (28:06)

The detained passengers started to make art from paper, felt tip pens, glue and other material they found in the jail. The art work became increasingly intricate and detailed. The symbolic power of the art drew more supporters to the Golden

Venture cause and played a key role in winning freedom for some of the detainees.

#### Strange Bedfellows (30:30)

The citizens of York were moved by the plight of the detainees. Human rights activists, church groups, Right to Life organizations and feminists came together to form an unusual coalition that held vigils outside the prison every week.

#### Misled (32:48)

After more than a year in jail, some of the detainees decided they would rather go back to China than stay in prison. Both Yan Li and Kaiqu opted for deportation. Both were jailed, fined and beaten when they returned to China. Yan Li was forcibly sterilized.

#### Released (35:34)

In early 1997, President Clinton decided to “parole” the more than 50 Golden Venture passengers who were still in jail. They were released in Feb.

#### Life in the Beautiful Country (39:30)

Today about 220 GV passengers live in the US. Guilin delivers Chinese food in State College, PA. Arming owns a restaurant in Fort Myers, FL.

#### Illegal Alien (44:45)

Yan Li has returned to the US illegally. He paid a anakehead \$50,000 for his second trip to the US, flying into Los Angeles, posing as an engineer on a business trip. He is working as a cook.

#### China (47:46)

Kaiqu lives in Changle in Fujian Province. He made an attempt to go to the US a third time, but was stopped at the airport and sent back.

### 44 Lbs of Luggage (51:11)

Today, about 35 of the passengers paroled by Pres. Clinton still do not have legal status. They are neither legal nor illegal. They face the constant threat of deportation and can't travel back to China to visit their families.

### On the Hill (56:48)

In April, 2004, Beverly Church led a group of former detainees on a lobbying trip to Capitol Hill

### Unfinished Journey (1:00:01)

Conclusion.

## **SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES**

### Class Debate

Classroom debate could focus on the "private bill" now before Congress that would grant permanent legal status to about 35 of the Golden Venture passengers who were paroled by President Clinton in 1997. Arming He, the Florida restaurant owner, is part of this group. A class can be divided into *pro* and *con*, with each group researching the topic and developing arguments.

Students should be guided to address some of the tough questions pertaining to both sides of the argument. Is it wrong to single out a specific group of undocumented immigrants for special, beneficial treatment? Do the Golden Venture passengers deserve relief because they have already spent time in jail? Is it wrong to enact legislation to benefit individuals who have broken the law? Would giving legal status act as a magnet, drawing a new wave of undocumented immigrants from China? Would the private bill correct the great initial injustice that advocates claim was done to the Golden Venture passengers?

### Other assignments

-- Research and writing. Research and write a paper on the Golden Venture as an example of recent trends in immigration to the United States. Another topic would be a paper discussing how the Golden Venture relates to the history of Asian immigration to America, going back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century.



-- Golden Venture art project. Research Golden Venture art and make similar works using the same materials that were used by the Golden Venture detainees.

For an overview and specific instructions:

<http://www.origami-resource-center.com/golden-venture-folding.html>

For directions for making a 500-piece swan:

<http://www.opane.com/swan.html>