



Snakehead: the extent to which Chinese organised crime groups are involved in human smuggling from China to the UK

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Accepted: 23 March 2022
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Abstract

With human smuggling, trafficking and associated areas such as modern slavery consistently in the news over the past decade governments have established and reinforced a narrative whereby evil organised criminals are responsible for driving the numbers of people migrating. This despite much academic evidence to contrary. Snakeheads have long been linked to facilitating human smuggling from China and tick all the stereotypical boxes for an organised crime ‘folk devil’. An ominous name; shadowy methods; allegedly highly exploitative and a reassuringly ‘foreign’ threat, Snakeheads fit neatly into the narrative above. Using a range of sources including qualitative interviews, survey data, Government statistics and Freedom of Information Requests this paper suggests the reality is very different. That Snakeheads do not fit snugly with media and government perceptions of who smuggles people from China or how they interact with organised crime. It suggests that the smuggling from China is not overseen by nefarious organised crime groups but criminal entrepreneurs.

Keywords Snakehead · Chinese organised crime · Human smuggling · Human trafficking · Illegal migration · Triad

Introduction

The debates over the range and scope of what constitutes ‘organised crime’ and how it has evolved are well documented. As Hobbs notes, the term ‘organised crime’ is surrounded by “extraordinary levels of hype, excitement and anxiety” but there is actually no clear description of what “experts” assert is a very serious problem (2013, p.4). In the media and public consciousness the term organised crime is often

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inextricably linked to what the author would term to be ‘traditional’ organised crime or mafia groups.¹ Traditional groups include the Cosa Nostra, Yakuza, Triads, Russian Mafia and others. Research has consistently shown the characteristics of such groups broadly include hierarchy (structure), initiation, membership, shared ethnographic features and an operating model based on control of a geographic area (Gambetta 1993, Chu 2000, Varese 2001, Hill 2003). A ‘non-traditional group’ would be a more ad-hoc grouping, with a horizontal structure and involving fluid actors who are not bound by ethnicity or culture who may only interact when an opportunity presents itself (see Morselli et al 2011 for discussion on ‘non-traditional’ groups).

Often though, outside of academia, the two are blurred into a broad catch-all term of ‘organised crime’ which can lead to illicit activity being linked or associated in a generic catch all way to organised crime ‘folk devils’.² For example, in the case of Chinese human smuggling, it is frequently asserted that Triads are masterminding this transnational trade, despite research consistently showing this is not the case (Chin 1999; Zhang and Chin 2003; Soudjin 2006; Zhang 2008). This blurring can be seen in the UK where perceptions of Snakeheads and illegal migration from China are inextricably linked to media reporting and imagery surrounding the deaths of Chinese migrants in the Dover and Morecombe Bay incidents.³ Media sources at the time, and some many years later, carry misleading references and assertions relating to either Chinese smuggling, trafficking or organised criminality (see BBC 2001, 2014; Watt 2007; Knox 2019). In coverage of these incidents, and indeed other criminality involving people of Chinese descent (see, for example, BBC 2001, 2014, 2015), traditional organised crime ‘folk devils’ are rolled out, terminology is used interchangeably, and both the exploitative methods and nature of the organised crime groups is claimed by experts or government sources. As human smuggling is, by its nature, illicit, the public, media and politicians have limited understanding of the dynamics. As a result, incidents such as Dover, take on increased significance and influence in shaping perceptions and narratives of how human smuggling operates and who facilitates this trade.

It is perhaps then no surprise when, in October 2019, the bodies of 39 people were found in a lorry in south-east England, the knee-jerk reaction of many was to repeat the narratives from Dover and Morecombe Bay. In the immediate aftermath the narrative that emerged was that shadowy “China-based snakehead organised crime gangs” (Barnes 2019) were responsible and that “Chinese immigrants may have been trafficked by ‘Snakehead’ gangs” (Weatherby 2019). Human smuggling

¹ Numerous other studies distinguish between ‘traditional’ and ‘non-traditional’ – this is not to suggest the author coined this specific term.

² Cohen (2002) wrote about how ‘folk devils’ – persons of groups who are perceived to be outside of mainstream society and involved in criminal or deviant behaviour – are created on the back of a ‘moral panic’ and to whom blame for societal problems or ills are attached. The classic example, as used by Cohen, being of the Mods versus Rockers in 1960’s UK.

³ The Dover incident in 2000 in which 58 Chinese migrants suffocated in a lorry while attempting clandestine entry to the UK; and Morecombe Bay (2004) in which 23 Chinese migrants drowned picking cockles at night were watershed moments in the UK/China illegal migration agenda.

from China was coordinated, it was claimed, by “untouchable Mr Bigs” who preside over a global network (Guardian 2019). It is perhaps easier to visualise an ‘evil’ trafficker rather than a fluid network of people interacting on an ad-hoc basis to support criminal acts. It quickly emerged that the unfortunate souls were Vietnamese rather than Chinese, and Snakeheads disappeared from the narrative.

The coverage of the Essex case is illustrative for three reasons; firstly it demonstrated the continued (unhelpful) interchangeable use of the terms smuggling and trafficking and how these labels are attached to both criminal groups and criminal acts (that is smuggling labelled as trafficking and vice versa); secondly it demonstrated the bias in perceptions of how illegal migration ‘must’ work with implications of global networks pushing or coercing people to migrate; and thirdly, the danger of relying on ‘expert’ opinion with commentators rolled out to support initial media supposition of coordinated organised crime involvement.

This article focuses on the human smuggling from China to the UK; an area that has received scant attention for over a decade. By assessing who is smuggled from China, why, how and some of the methods utilised it aims to provide a clearer picture of the extent of organised crime involvement in illegal migration from China. In the process presenting a more accurate outline of who Snakeheads are and reinforcing the growing range of literature that challenges suggestions that illegal migration is driven by organised crime rather than demand for smuggling services. It will offer views on how future research could be conducted and health warnings associated with a continued reliance on ‘expert opinion’ of what is happening as opposed the ‘lived experience’ of the people being smuggled.

Terminology

Before moving to the main discourse it is important to outline the use of terminology in this article. There are a range of terms, such as irregular migration, illicit migration and illegal migration, which describe broadly similar processes. That is, migrating using means otherwise in accordance with the laws of source, transit or destination countries. These terms have overlapping descriptions but illegal migration best captures, in the view of the author, human smuggling from China which is characterised by unlawful acts and / or elements of deception or dishonesty.

A ‘Snakehead’ is the name commonly attached to those who facilitate illegal migration from China. However, it is a contested term with the name erroneously attached or linked not only to illegal migration but a much broader range of criminality involving people of Chinese descent. For the purposes of this article the term is used to denote people of Chinese descent who facilitate illegal migration from China. Similarly, in western countries the label ‘Triad’ is often attached to illegal activity involving people of Chinese descent. Triads are mainly based in Hong Kong with non-traditional Chinese organised crime groups operating on the mainland.⁴

⁴ See Broadhurst (2013) and Wang (2017) for discussion on differences between traditional and non-traditional Chinese groups.

For the purposes of this article Triad refers to Hong Kong Triad groups, some of which have branches overseas.

A recurring theme (frustration) for those researching migration is the interchangeable use of the terms smuggling and trafficking (Campana and Varese 2016; Weitzer 2014). While it is acknowledged that some grey areas exist, the definitions set-out by the United Nations (UN) are clearly distinguishable. In Article 3 of the UN Protocol against the Smuggling of Migrants by Land, Sea and Air it states:

"Smuggling of migrants shall mean the procurement, in order to obtain, directly or indirectly, a financial or other material benefit, of the illegal entry of a person into a State Party of which the person is not a national or a permanent resident" (UN 2000).

The same UN Convention includes a 'Trafficking in Person Protocol' which defines trafficking as:

"...The recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments of benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs."

There is debate about whether it is possible to make such clear distinctions given that, for example, a person could begin as smuggled, then later become trafficked (Laczko 2004; Leman and Janssens 2007) but there is fundamental difference in the definitions. The distinction being, and as will be reflected in the approach taken in this article, that the coercion that characterises trafficking is absent from smuggling. Alternatively, the distinction could be said to be that smuggling involves crime against a country(ies) whereas trafficking is a crime against the person (Diba et al 2017).

Key themes from existing literature

Previous research on the involvement of organised crime in facilitating illegal migration to the UK is limited. While some research has assessed Chinese migration to the UK (Pieke 1999, 2002; Pharoah and Lau 2009) touching on criminal linkages; and other research has documented Chinese organised crime in the UK (Antonopoulos 2013; Wang 2013a, b; Dees 2012); Silverstone (2011) is the only work to date that looks specifically at Chinese human smuggling and organised crime. Silverstone (2011) found that Snakeheads were not part of sprawling global organised crime groups and suggested that those migrating from China to the UK illegally should be considered as smuggled, not trafficked noting that Snakeheads were transporters, not employers of migrants. Indeed Pharoah and Lau (2009) suggested that it is unscrupulous 'agents' who exploit undocumented migrants when they arrive in

the UK. Silverstone (2011) also reinforced some themes identified by Pieke (1999, 2002) which highlighted that migrants were motivated to travel by a mix of economic and societal drivers with Snakeheads often recommended to migrants by friends and family. In the process undermining narratives of nefarious criminal groups exploiting vulnerable migrants with false promises of smooth journeys and riches in the west. Pieke (2004) also highlighted that in many cases illegal migration has the express, or at least complicit, support of local authorities. Further undermining narratives of exploitative criminal networks. Much of this limited range of sources is now dated with the fieldwork for Pieke's seminal work (1999) now over 20 years old. This article brings discussions up to date and outlines how the landscape has changed in the decade since the last research.

Methods and data

The article is based on evidence gathered from the following sources:

- 21 responses to an online survey of migrants who have returned to China having lived in the UK illegally.
- 17 interviews with Chinese illegal migrants residing in the UK.
- Three interviews with Chinese⁵ illegal migrants in immigration detention in the UK.
- 23 interviews with government, law enforcement, multilateral and community leaders with knowledge and experience of the subject matter.
- Information accessed through four Freedom of Information (FoI) requests
- Analysis of government migration statistics.⁶

The novelty of this data set is that it brings together a broader range of different types of evidence than previous UK studies. For example, the work of Pieke (1999, 2002) was based (mainly) on interviews with migrants and some officials; while Silverstone (2011) interviewed migrants, officials and law enforcement. In addition to these sources this research also includes official government statistics, information obtained through FoI requests and interview data from migrants held in detention.

Although it is well documented that some forms of illicit or criminal activity are challenging to research detail of the methods and approach taken are provided here given the paucity of recent comparable studies focussing on this area. The groundbreaking work of Chin (1999), Zhang (2008)⁷ and important work by Soudijn

⁵ One of the three admitted during the interview to being Malaysian but of Chinese descent (much to the surprise off the detention officer who accompanied them). Given though that he was registered as a Chinese national on government systems and employed illegally by Chinese businesses throughout his stay in the UK it was decided to include him in the data collected due to relevant insights and relationships with Chinese people in the UK illegally.

⁶ Due to space constraints this is not reproduced in full for this article but an illustrative example of the data available is at Table One.

⁷ Zhang and Chin have written a large number of articles on Chinese human smuggling to the USA. The references here are specifically the seminal books they have written on the subject and do not reflect the totality of their work.

(2006), highlight the closed nature of the Chinese community and difficulty for non-Chinese researchers to access and discuss sensitive subjects. This was reflected in previous UK research on Chinese migration issues (see Silverstone 2011). Pieke (1999) and Pieke and Thuno (2005) had some success in collecting interview data on migration from China to the UK but this involved conducting field research in China in the 1990s; something that would not seem possible now. Without access to either Snakeheads and / or migrants (see the access Chin 1999 and Zhang 2008 had in their research) understanding definitively the dynamics involved in human smuggling from China is challenging. The result has often been research based on media reporting, interviews with ‘experts’ and reliance on secondary sources to fill the gaps; resulting in superficial overviews of the problem (see for example, Curtis et al 2003; Lintner 2004; Sein 2008; Chu 2011). As one community leader commented during this research:

“The single most challenging area is access, this is reliant on trust. Trust is reliant on relationships, and relationships are the core of all Chinese interactions...People won’t have access unless they have a relationship. If you don’t have access the community is then seen as hard to reach...you only get real answers when you are trusted” (CLI)

To overcome the issue of access the author used a mixed methods approach to data collection and then utilised triangulation (Jick 1979) to draw conclusions. In doing so the author sought to mitigate data gaps (for example, interviews with Snakeheads) by utilising a wide range of sources to support conclusions. Thus avoiding the trap of relying on, for example, ‘experts’ alone.

The author⁸ collected survey, interview, unpublished data and analysed openly available (but seemingly little used) government immigration statistics, using all of these to identify themes and cross-check information collected. The interview and survey questions centred on the drivers of illegal migration from China, details of the methods used and actors involved. The interviewing of ‘Key Informants’ is recognised as a way to understand issues by engaging subject matter experts and those with specific knowledge of an issue (Parsons 2008). Through use of prior professional experience and by being selective with who was interviewed the author avoided some of the pitfalls of interviewing what could be termed ‘non-expert experts’.⁹

⁸ To conduct some of the interviews with migrants in the UK and assist with the online survey the author utilised the support of two native speaker researchers. Both of whom are experienced in researching sensitive issues relating to Chinese illicit activity.

⁹ An example of a ‘non-expert expert’ would be a local police officer who can speak to and repeat common conceptions of Chinese illegal migration; whereas an expert would be a detective investigating a Chinese Snakehead network.

To protect participants and ensure they felt able to openly engage anonymity was guaranteed. For ease of reference quotes and attributions of both the expert and migrant interviewees have been coded as follows:

LE	UK law enforcement
CL	Chinese community leader
GO	UK Government official
IA	UK intelligence analyst
ML	Multilateral organisation
ANON	Illegal migrant interviewed in the UK
DC	Detention centre detainee interviewed in the UK

Each reference above is followed by a number to differentiate between different respondents within the same groupings of interviewees.

The online survey completed by 21 people who had returned to China having lived in the UK illegally. The link to the survey was disseminated by a trusted third party organisation that supports those returning to China from overseas.

Perhaps due to the challenges involved in obtaining permission relatively few academic studies, and none involving Chinese nationals, have involved interviewing those in UK immigration detention. Given those in detention are awaiting removal they potentially are able to be open about their experience as they have 'nothing to lose'.¹⁰ Having conducted a number of interviews with law enforcement officials as part of this research the author utilised these contacts to request and obtain permission to access a detention centre to interview Chinese nationals in detention awaiting deportation. Although only three of the five detainees scheduled agreed to be interviewed formally, it was worthwhile to obtain perspectives from a group whom it is difficult to access.

As will be highlighted below access to accurate statistics and data relating to illicit activity, such as human smuggling, are difficult to find. The author decided to make selective use of the FoI process to understand if there was unpublished data available which may support the study aims; and also to follow-up on earlier FoI requests not made by the author but relevant to the study to seek updated statistics.

It is recognised that the approach outlined above has limitations. For example, those migrants interviewed in the UK were identified through 'snowball' sampling where the risk is that respondents may reflect the social group or position of those they are referred by. There is though an acceptance that snowball sampling is a common approach for those studying 'hard to reach' communities (Parker et al 2019). This was taken into account when analysing responses and drawing conclusions. Similarly, not being able to access some sources such as Snakeheads or Chinese Government officials could create information bias. This was part of the reason the author sought to bring together a wider range

¹⁰ In the case of those in detention they were asked a slightly different set of interview questions to those living in the UK illegally. This was both due to the fact that a government official sat in on each interview; but also that it was recognised some questions may lead to mistrust of the interviewers. As such, in some of the evidence presented below the number interviewed ranges from n=17 (not including detention centre respondents) and n=20 (including them).

of sources of data than previous studies; to mitigate reliance on a single types of data set. The author acknowledges though that access to snakeheads and Chinese Government sources would have strengthened the evidence base significantly.

Research findings

This section will assess who is smuggled, why, how and what facilitators of illegal migration from China do to enable it. In doing so it will outline where organised crime is actively, or there is scope for it to be, engaged in human smuggling from China. From this analysis it will then be possible to draw conclusions about the extent of organised crime involvement in the process.

Smuggled or trafficked?

Smuggling and trafficking are different acts but given the coercive and exploitative elements in trafficking there would seem to be more scope for criminal involvement in the latter rather than the former. As such it is informative to understand, broadly, whether illegal migration from China should be considered predominantly smuggling or trafficking.

Unsurprisingly there is no exact figure for the illegal Chinese community in the UK. Estimates from researchers have suggested up to 200,000 (Wu 2009) or potentially 125,000 in London alone (Pharoah and Lau 2009). Given these wide ranging and now somewhat dated figures the author sought to access information held by Government. While specific information available was limited¹¹ what was of note, and surprise, is the sheer amount of raw data pertaining to immigration published online (see Home Office, 2018i). A huge amount of data on immigration detention, voluntary returns of undocumented migrants, foreign national offenders and immigration enforcement raids is available. The sheer amount of information could be the basis of a separate study. By pulling together data from a number of different published government spreadsheets sets the author was able to synthesise some interesting statistics.

Table 1 provides some interesting data which sheds some light on the scale of the illegal Chinese community. It indicates that in the period 2004 – 2016 a total of 43,614 Chinese people departed the UK having been identified (either on arrival or afterwards) as being in the country illegally. It is generally accepted that, by their nature, undocumented communities seek to avoid interaction with government. So if the figure above is the number of those that government has interacted with, it is significant not only in terms of the overall total, but also raises questions of the size of the community that has not come to the attention of government.

In terms of trafficking and modern slavery specifically more specific government data is available and the numbers pale in comparison to the numbers above.

¹¹ For example, in response to FoI requests the Home Office stated it could not provide data on the following questions:

- i) *The number of people identified or believed to be of Chinese origin who have been identified by the Home Office as having overstayed their visa in the last five years.*
- ii) *The number of Chinese nationals the Home Office have recorded as having no legal right to remain in the UK but are still in the UK at present.*

Table 1 Immigration / migration trends of Chinese nationals taken from published UK Government statistics (Home Office 2018i)

Year	Total refused entry at port and subsequently departed	Total enforced removals	Voluntary removals (including from immigration detention)	Assisted returns	Notified returns	Other verified returns	Total
2004	93	178	10	2	8	0	291
2005	66	316	96	42	41	13	574
2006	112	248	292	122	39	131	944
2007	212	339	553	161	106	286	1657
2008	207	574	946	262	133	551	2673
2009	203	777	1,928	508	240	1,180	4836
2010	125	849	2,432	611	410	1,411	5838
2011	126	652	1,953	377	366	1,210	4684
2012	122	617	2,218	498	347	1,373	5175
2013	173	512	2,547	429	448	1,670	5779
2014	284	423	1,815	214	495	1,106	4337
2015	254	363	1,536	126	483	927	3689
2016	191	266	1,340	46	374	920	3137
Total	2168	6114	17,666	3398	3490	10,778	43,614

Referrals of Chinese nationals to the UK National Referral Mechanism¹² (NRM) totalled 451¹³ in 2018; the fourth highest (NCA, 2019, p.7). The NRM data and alarmist media reporting (see for example, Guardian 2019; Riley 2019) would suggest trafficking from China is a major problem. However, as one law enforcement interviewee commented:

“It seems to be anything to do with the movement of a person is now being labelled as trafficking...10 years ago a male with no baggage and luggage comes to Heathrow they are profiled as illegal entrant...now (they are) profiled as trafficked and as such it is also investigated as such and fed into NRM”
(LE7)

In this research, of the 41 migrants¹⁴ interviewed (n=20) or surveyed (n=21) six stated they felt they may have been trafficked at some point since leaving China. Of these only one stated this took place during their journey. In that specific case they had witnessed another migrant die while crossing a remote part of the Czech border. A further five stated they may have been trafficked, but importantly, this was not during the journey. It will be argued below Snakeheads only facilitate the journey and do not assist migrants to find work or put them into debt bondage. So the five may have been trafficked, but potentially not at the hands of their Snakehead.

When the trafficking numbers (which each year are in the hundreds, not thousands) are compared against both the very rough estimates outlined above for size of the illicit community in the UK and the interview responses it indicates that, as previous research findings (Silverstone 2011), the majority of Chinese people migrating illegally to the UK should be considered as smuggled, rather than trafficked. Especially given the 451 total above is not for confirmed trafficking cases, only referrals (see footnote 9). Previous research (Chin 1999) had indicated that groups such as Triads would generally only be used by Snakeheads where ‘muscle’ is required. This is important as if the numbers of people trafficked are comparatively small when set alongside those smuggled, it could indicate less potential for organised criminal involvement in the smuggling process as smuggling is done with consent rather than coercion.

A common narrative advanced by media and non-government organisations (NGOs) suggests that smugglers force migrants into exploitative jobs to pay back huge smuggling fees. In contrast this research found that, in line with previous

¹² The NRM is the basis for identifying potential victims of Modern Slavery and thus ensuring they receive adequate support. It receives referrals from designated ‘First Responder Organisations’ (a mixture of law enforcement, local government and NGOs); these are then assessed by the ‘Single Competent Authority’ in the Home Office.

¹³ It is important to note this is the number of referrals, not the number of people eventually assessed as victims of trafficking. It should also be noted that those referred to the NRM as potential victims of trafficking may not have been trafficked to the UK (i.e. during their journey). The referral looks at whether they have been a victim of trafficking at any point. So they may have been smuggled to the UK and subsequently been trafficked by an employer rather than by the person who transported them.

¹⁴ 17 migrants interviewed in the UK, 3 in detention and 21 people who had returned to China having lived in the UK illegally.

research (Pieke and Xiang 2007), there is abundant work available and high demand for Chinese migrant labour. As one community leader noted, without the availability of unskilled Chinese migrant labour the UK Chinese takeaway would have become an “endangered species” (CL1). Some of the comments of Chinese interviewees currently working in the UK illegally reflected the ease of finding work:

“You can easily find a job or start your own business” (ANON5)

“It was easy to settle down and find a job in Chinese food industry” (ANON6)

“Easy to work in Chinese takeaway” (ANON7)

As another interviewee explained (paraphrased):

“I came in 2009 as a student studying accountancy and worked part-time as a warehouse cleaner and overstayed my visa....it was easy to find a job and wages are good (£30–40 a day doing building work). Employers have a ‘take it or leave’ approach—either take the money and conditions or there are a lot of other people who want the job” (DC1).

Of 35 people either surveyed or interviewed who answered the question, 29 said they found work through friends (n=24) or relatives (n=5). A further two found work searching online; three others via ‘other’ means (not involving their smuggler). Only one person said that their smuggler assisted them in finding a job.

The evidence collected points towards two key points. Firstly, the idea that the majority of illegal migration from China should be considered as smuggling, not trafficking of persons. Secondly, that it was easy for people to find work themselves or through using ‘trusted’ contacts such as friends and family. This indicates both that there would be limited demand for Snakeheads to provide employment as part of the smuggling service; and that the ease of finding a job would reduce the vulnerability of migrants to exploitation (in the form of employment) by organised crime groups.

Motivations to migrate from China

It is important to understand the key drivers of migration as this will inform the level of motivation and drive individuals have to migrate. For example, the need to migrate from Eritrea to escape mandatory lifetime national service is very different to someone from China motivated to migrate overseas to remit money back home.

The overarching motivation for people to undertake illegal migration was economic. Those interviewed in the UK (n=20) and those surveyed (n=21) were asked to choose their top two reasons for illegal migration to the UK. ‘Earn money’ was by far and away the biggest motivating factor (n=33). This is consistent with previous research (Pharoah and Lau 2009) which identified that

economic factors were the main driver for illegal migration from China. However, this data departs from what Pieke (2002) found which placed a stronger emphasis on regional and cultural factors (alongside economic) as driving migration flows.

Secondary reasons included social and cultural push factors, having friends or family overseas already and a range of other factors. In line with what Pieke and Thuno (2005) found the importance of social and cultural factors, especially links with people already in the UK, was cited by multiple expert interviewees as an important factor in migrant's decision making (GO4, LE9, ML1, GO2, IA3, LE10). It was commented that: "In Fujian it (illegal migration) is almost a tradition or expectation" (LE5) and: "in some hot spots illegal migration is embedded to the point that it has become cultural, and it's just expected that all youngsters will go overseas" (LE9). Another expert compared illegal migration from the Fujian region of China¹⁵ as being the Fujianese equivalent to the 'gap year' that young westerners undertake (LE10). Some who have worked closely with Chinese illegal migrants commented that in Fujianese communities those seen not to be 'maximising opportunities' (i.e. attempting to migrate) risk 'losing face' and being considered as 'letting the family down' (CL3, LE10). So strong are some of the cultural and social dynamics that it was said some migrants feel, even if they are deeply unhappy, that they cannot return home as they might 'lose face', especially if they have not made their money (smuggling fee) back (CL3, GO4, CL1). A community leader commented that this can create a vicious circle, as people who have not 'succeeded' feel obliged to relay positive messaging to friends and family back home as they do not want to lose face; the positive messaging in turn encourages others to make the journey (CL1). An expert had even encountered people who had returned to China but had not told friends or relatives as they were embarrassed having returned 'early' (GO4).

Social and cultural factors are important to consider as a key enabler of illegal migration from China is how socially acceptable it is. Previous research noted that those participating, as well as their friends, family and community often do not see illegal migration as a criminal issue and consequently it carries little social stigma (Pieke 2002; Zhang and Chin 2003; Pieke and Xiang 2007). It was commented that illegal migration is not perceived as a 'truly criminal' offence (GO2) and that there is no shame or dishonour in being involved in undertaking trafficking or smuggling with an attitude of 'good luck' to those who want to better themselves by migrating (LE8). As one interviewee commented:

"The general Chinese attitude to illegal migration is; if you are caught then it is a bad thing...in Chinese society there are no absolute truths, so right and wrong is a more flexible concept...The Chinese interpret it (migration laws) as this law does not apply to us, it was not created for us, but deep down they know what they are doing is not right" (CL1)

¹⁵ Fujian was historically the area of China from where much illegal migration to the west emanates from.

The evidence collected suggests migrants are predominantly motivated by economic factors but that social and cultural factors also have strong influence. At the same time the lack of stigma attached to illegal migration creates a permissive environment for it to continue.

While there may be a high degree of motivation amongst some communities in China to migrate, they are not perhaps in the dire straits that, for example, an Afghan family escaping the return of Taliban, are. So, it could be suggested that there is an illegal migration spectrum which, depending on an individual's relative circumstances, may influence the risks they are willing to take and hardships endured. For example, with economic and social factors key drivers Chinese people may be considered to be at the opposite end to, for example, those escaping Government persecution Eritrea or Afghanistan. The evidence above suggests Chinese nationals are often motivated by aspirational rather than absolute factors. As such they may be less willing than others to engage in higher risk or potentially more coercive forms of illegal migration.

The data also above supports the findings or previous studies (Silverstone 2011; Pieke 2002), that migration from China to the UK is demand rather than supply driven. In the Mediterranean NGOs and smugglers are blamed for migrant deaths as 'pull factors' dominate official discourses rather than the focus on 'push' factors like economic or social drivers (Fine 2020). Campana (2017) suggested that governments will struggle to have an impact on human smuggling flows if they focus on supply (i.e. the smugglers who provide an illegal service) rather than the demand (migrants) of smuggling services. This would seem likely to be the case with illegal migration from China as well.

Changing trends in how people migrate from China to the UK and scope for the involvement of organised crime

Understanding how human smuggling from China to the UK operates and what activities Snakeheads undertake shed further light on the extent of organised crime involvement. As noted above illegal migration from China is demand rather than supply driven. Some narratives suggest migrants are tricked into migrating illegally (Xiang 2003) or underestimate the risks (Pieke 2002). However, this research found that generally migrants had a good idea of what was involved in migrating illegally. For example, only one person out of 17 interviewed in the UK suggested life had not lived up to their expectations. The same cohort stated that they got information about travelling illegally from a range of sources, including agents and friends and family, giving no indication of situations of migrants being misled or tricked by Snakeheads. When asked how migrants chose or selected their Snakehead it was of note that of 19 migrants who responded to the question¹⁶ 16 said they found their Snakehead through the recommendation of a friend or family member. The responses to both questions indicate that migrants generally had a good idea of what

¹⁶ This includes those interviewed in detention.

Table 2 Methods of entry to the UK

How did you enter the UK?	Method	Total
Clandestinely	Lorry / car	5
Using fake, fraudulent or stolen documents / visa	Stolen passport / destroyed real passport in-flight claimed asylum on arrival	18
Legally	Tourist / working / business / soft* visa	12
Other	Travelled to Ireland and went across the border to Northern Ireland	4
No response		2
Total		41

*In this process a migrant (through a facilitator or Snakehead) will obtain a visa (whether legally or using false documents) for somewhere in the EU. They target countries with less stringent visa checks and processes than the UK. Experts explained that they then use this visa to travel to a Schengen area country or come to the UK directly as the visa allows them to fly to any Schengen country; they do not have to fly to the country issuing the visa.

to expect in the UK or that they identified their Snakehead through what could be termed a reliable or trusted source.

Responses from the same cohort of 19 to another question is also informative; twelve said they would recommend their Snakehead to others, five said they would not, and two did not respond reinforces this idea. By implication, the above evidence suggests that the Snakehead business model relies on recommendations and word of mouth, but also that they do deliver a service which leads to friends and family feeling comfortable recommending their service to others.

Human smuggling (of all nationalities) to the UK is often associated with people being clandestinely transported into the country via containers or in vehicles; or more recently, crossing the English channel in boats. In the late 1990's and early 2000's Pieke (2002), Zhang (2008) and Chin (1999) all found that smuggling from China was often by boat or through clandestine entry over land borders. This research found that the numbers smuggled clandestinely were small and that now most people smuggled to the UK came with a visa or fraudulent document. For example, Table 2 shows that almost three-quarters (30) of 41 respondents entered the UK legally or using fake documents or fraudulent visas. The 30 respondents and the four who stated they entered the UK through 'other' means all arrived by plane. Meaning 34 of 41 interviewees came via plane rather than clandestinely.

Two Freedom of Information (FoI) requests for this research reinforce this point. They revealed that over eight years between 2010—2017 only 67 people, an average of 8–9 per year believed to be of Chinese origin, have been detected attempting to enter the UK¹⁷ clandestinely (Home Office 2015 and 2018). A further FoI revealed that between 2013 and 2017 only 30 people believed to be of Chinese nationality were actually detected attempting to enter the UK clandestinely while disembarking

¹⁷ The Home Office define 'entering the UK' as those people detected at juxtaposed ports such as Calais rather than in the UK itself.

Table 3 Journey length and number of transit countries

Journey length	Number of countries travelled through*					Total
	Direct	1	2	3	4	
0–3 days	12	6	1			19
Less than one week		1	2			3
Less than one month		4	2	2	1	9
Less than six months			3	2		7
6 – 12 months						3
12 – 24 months						0
Did not respond						1

*It should be noted that a small number of respondents were unsure how many countries they had travelled through. Where this was the case ($\times 3$ respondents) the author entered the lower amount

at a UK port (Home Office 2019). Based on these statistics, on average over the last decade, less than ten Chinese people a year are detected attempting to enter the UK clandestinely; indicating that this is no longer a significant method of entry.

An interviewee stated that now it could cost as little as £2000–3000 to get the fake documents required to obtain a visa (LE5). One interviewee explained how Snakeheads obtained fraudulent documents in China to support legitimate visa applications:

“...some Snakeheads can help set up identity and accounts (fake real estate property registration for example) in other cities/provinces in China to get resident status, and such status indication on travel documents helps with travel/visa applications leaving the country” (ANON16)

An expert, who has dealt with illegal migration from China for a number of years, noted that provision of false documents to obtain a visa would be even supported by call centres to respond to document verification checks (LE9). A migrant interviewed in the UK described how their Snakehead and lawyers in Chinatown provided all the counterfeit documents required for Tier One (investors / entrepreneurs) visa for the Isle of Man; going to the extent of setting up a ghost business for them (ANON10). An expert interviewee who works closely with Chinese migrants in China characterised the use of fake or forged documents as being an example of the ‘semi-legal’ methods Snakeheads use to get people to the UK (ML1). The evidence above indicates perhaps that the relatively inexpensive cost to obtain fake documents and the sophistication of the industry supporting this may have impacted on the use of clandestine methods.

It was also noted that recent years the cost of being smuggled from China had reduced and routes become quicker and more direct (CL2). An intelligence analyst suggested that migrants now arrive on flights in a matter of days rather than much longer time frames in the late 90’s when the sea route was popular (IA1). As one of the migrants interviewed in the UK commented: “They (Snakeheads) arranged easy travelling. You no longer risk going by foot, boat or lorry” (ANON5). This is reinforced by the data in Table 3 which shows that journey lengths of the cohort (n = 41)

were generally short with over three quarters ($n=31$) indicating the journey was less than a month and almost half ($n=19$) saying it lasted only a few days.

The length of journey and cost will depend in part on the method and route used by the Snakehead. Route and method may also depend on the type of smuggling network and skills / resources of those involved. As one expert described, if the Snakehead uses a route involving multiple stages and countries i.e. train to Russia, onwards via several European countries, to the UK, then the network will involve multiple people potentially of different nationalities (GO4). Indeed, one interviewee outlined using their own passport to get to Russia, then burned this document; crossed to Ukraine on foot; went to Czech Republic by lorry; took trains to Italy then France and then a lorry to the UK (ANON4). At the other end of the spectrum an interviewee simply boarded a flight in Shanghai and flew to London with a fraudulently obtained working visa (ANON3). Indeed, the experience of multiple interviewees related to short journeys using stolen passports or fraudulently obtained visas (for example, obtaining a student visa using falsified documents) to fly direct (or via an EU country) to the UK. The simplicity of the process meant the only person in the network they encountered was the single Snakehead; there may have been others involved but it was not a sprawling multinational cohort.

This analysis does not seek to suggest there is one specific route or method used, if anything it identified multiple variations of each, but broad themes were clear. A trend towards shorter journeys, direct routes and use of false or fraudulently obtained documentation rather than clandestine entry is clear. This supports the idea that shorter journeys and use legal means of entry (i.e. fraudulent visas or those obtained with the intention of not complying with them) reduce, arguably, the scope for organised criminal involvement. Shorter and more direct journeys that do not use clandestine entry negate the need for sprawling networks spanning the globe to transport migrants from country to country or guide them over hazardous border crossings. This trend towards simpler / quicker methods and routes may indicate less scope for organised criminal involvement as criminal support to manage safe houses or transport migrants are not required.

How journeys are funded

One area of potential organised crime involvement would be if criminals were lending money to migrants; or if the Snakeheads themselves were loaning funds so as to place migrants in debt bondage. Media and political reporting frequently portrays migrants as being in debt bondage from their transportation fees and therefore ripe for exploitation (Weitzer 2014). A UK government report suggested that Chinese migrants were particularly vulnerable as the fees paid are higher than many other nationalities; this can result, it was claimed, in migrants being forced into exploitative jobs on arrival where their pay is split between their illegal employer and loan shark (Webb and Burrows 2009). Some experts interviewed reinforced this point, claiming that there was a high degree of debt bondage for those smuggled from China which resulted in forced labour, sex work or other exploitation to pay off the debts (IA2, LE9). However, another interviewee, who has been involved in numerous operations targeting Chinese illegal workers, when asked if debt bondage was

involved said: “No, supposition says it does but it is difficult to identify any tangible evidence” (LE4).

Research by Zhang (2008) and Chin (1999) found that Snakeheads mainly required smuggling fees to be paid up-front, which meant that it was rare for migrants to be in debt bondage to Snakeheads. This was supported by one interviewee who commented that smugglers have less power over Chinese migrants as payment is often upfront (IA1). Another suggested that media portrayals portraying Chinese migrants in debt bondage are inaccurate as in their experience Chinese people paid up-front (IA3). This research found that under a third ($n=6$) of migrants interviewed in the UK ($n=17$) paid for their whole journey pre-departure with 10 paying on arrival and one paying in segments. It cannot then be assumed that payment is always up-front and the risk of debt bondage is completely mitigated.

To understand more about potential debt bondage or involvement of loan-sharks, either of which could indicate organised crime involvement, it is important to understand more about how smuggling journeys were financed. One expert suggested that debt bondage was generally to illegal lenders and not the Snakehead, something that was unique to Chinese smuggling operations in their experience (IA2). Pieke and Thuno (2005) found that village elders lent money to finance smuggling fees while Soudijn (2006) found friends and family ‘pre-finance’ trips for migrants; meaning no debt to the Snakehead is incurred. Of 20 migrants interviewed 11 stated friends and family financed their journey; three stated they borrowed the money and six said they funded the journey through ‘other’ (unspecified) means. As a follow-up interviewees were then asked what interest they paid on any borrowed funds. Seven respondents stated they did not pay interest; six said it was at an interest rate of 0–25% and seven did not respond. While the overall picture this paints is not conclusive it is notable that none of the responses to these two questions or elsewhere in the interview (for example in response to another question or in free-comments box at the end) suggested interviewees were paying excessive rates of interest. This is consistent with earlier research findings which found Chinese migrants were not in fact paying huge interest fees for loans obtained to travel (Silverstone 2011).

It is also of note that of the 17 people interviewed in the UK three said they paid between 6000–15,000 renminbi, 11 paid 16,000–25,000 renminbi, two paid 26,000–40,000 renminbi and one over 40,000 renminbi. Translated roughly (noting that the exchange rate has changed dramatically over the last 20 years) to UK pounds, figures ranged from £700 to £38,000 for the journey. To be more definitive a larger survey size would be required but as a snapshot it highlights the range of fees paid but also challenges the assumption that huge amounts are borrowed to finance the journey. It also suggests that the cost to migrate to the UK illegally has dropped significantly since the work of Pieke and Thuno (2005) where costs were in the tens of thousand but also since the most recent research by Silverstone (2011) where the cheapest fee was £8500.

The evidence above challenges narratives which suggest that migrants are forced into debt bondage by those transporting them and also have to pay-off exorbitant smuggling fees; it also reinforces earlier points suggesting that most people are smuggled, not trafficked, from China. It would seem that Chinese people being smuggled to the UK pay for their journey in a number of different ways and it is

simply not as clear cut as the distinction Zhang (2008) and Chin (1999) found during their research. Migrants may find themselves in debt bondage to actors other than Snakeheads, but the evidence indicates neither widespread debt bondage nor any Snakehead involvement in this. There could be scope for organised crime to be involved in a limited number of smuggling cases if they are loaning money to migrants. This would need to be explored further but the balance of evidence in this section, considering the earlier discourse on how people choose their snakehead based on recommendations of trusted sources and that migration from China is an established and family supported endeavour, it seems unlikely migrants would seek to loan money from organised crime or put themselves in debt bondage. Instead it indicates business-like transactions between migrants and interlocutors, who are often known to them, to deliver an illicit service. There was no evidence indicating Triad or organised crime involvement.

Discussion

There is a tendency for ‘westerners’ to ‘produce and reproduce’ rumours and myths about Chinese organised crime and how it operates (Antonopoulos 2013, p.7). The opium dens of Victorian England were blamed for corrupting society by supplying drugs, rather than acknowledging the demand for the substance. The Chinese people who ran these dens were portrayed as an insidious ‘foreign threat’ and scapegoat for society’s ills (Hobbs 2013). It is convenient for law enforcement to identify foreign actors as an organised crime threat as this is a way of:

“...absolving mainstream society of responsibility for a perceived decline in moral values and exaggerating the threat from an alien and nebulous enemy... folk devils that had to be attacked by collective action” (Woodiwiss and Hobbs, 2008, p.106–120)

The label of ‘organised crime’ or ‘criminal’ is attached broadly and inconsistently to a range of actors of Chinese origin (see, for example, BBC 2001, 2014, 2015). By attaching the label of organised crime this provides the impression that governments and law enforcement ‘know’ their enemy and as such, will be able to effectively address issue, by pursuing those ostensibly responsible. Focusing narratives and responses on organised crime enables a government to build solidarity through highlighting acts by the ‘other’ (people outside of the mainstream), as being responsible for behaviour outside of social norms. In the process uniting people behind government action (Stenson 2008).

Snakeheads are a modern example of this ‘foreign’ threat. Seemingly mysterious people with global networks and vast resources supposedly deceiving and exploiting ‘victims’ and driving illegal migration from China. It is more convenient for governments to frame the issue in this light than to admit there is consistent demand for unskilled labour in the west and very willing communities in China wanting to migrate. The author does not suggest that those smuggled do not face hardship or that a person’s illegal status does not make them vulnerable to exploitation. Research has warned though of the danger of applying western conceptions of smuggling and smugglers;

these do not always reflect the lived experience those actually being smuggled (see Brachet 2018, Whittle and Antonopoulos, 2020). Labelling activity as organised crime, smuggling or suggesting it is driven by a ‘foreign’ threat can distort an accurate assessment of an issue; this applies to human smuggling from China. Campana (2020) highlighted the dated nature and crude assumptions about how smugglers operate and identified business like characteristics such as money back guarantees, building trust, maintaining a good reputation (i.e. to enable smugglers to be recommended by friends and family) and delivering on agreements. This research found commonalities with the work of Campana and others (see, for example, Zhang et al 2018) who have sought to debunk myths and assumptions of who smugglers are and how they operate. For example, with the Snakehead operating model based on recommendations, delivering a service and not exploiting (whether physically or financially) those they smuggle.

There are traditional and non-traditional organised crime groups of Chinese descent. For example, there are the well-known traditional groups such as the Hong Kong Triads or Taiwanese United Bamboo (who also operate on the mainland), but also newer mainland groups that have developed post-Mao. The latter might fall into the ‘new’ forms of organised crime group described by Morselli et al (2011) which comprise of looser networks of individuals rather than more traditional hierarchically structured groups. Research suggests that while Triads continue to evolve their business model, as can be seen in Hong Kong where they have become involved in political violence (see Varese and Wong 2016), there has been no evidence to suggest they heavily engaged in more transnational criminality like human smuggling. Research on Chinese (mainland) based organised crime and its characteristics has taken place (see Chu 2000 and 2005, Wang, 2013a, b, 2013a, 2017, Zhang and Chin 2003, 2008, Broadhurst, 2013) but no organisations have been identified that could be described as similar to the traditional groups such as Triads. Based on existing research and the findings of this study, Snakeheads do not appear to fit snugly into either the traditional or non-traditional category.

This research suggests that Snakeheads are not ruthless and coercive organised criminal gangs. Instead they should be viewed as ‘criminal entrepreneurs’; those who seek to profit from the demand for services that states have criminalised (Kleemans 2012). The service Snakeheads provide is to facilitate, using illegal or dishonest means, people to travel out of China. The author would suggest there is a spectrum of human smuggling networks which are dependent on the method, route and resources available to the Snakehead. For example, at one end of the scale a Snakehead may work alone to facilitate human smuggling from China by supporting fraudulent business or student visa applications; these could be the criminal entrepreneurs referenced above. At the other end of the spectrum there may be ad-hoc groups of criminals spread across different countries who support smuggling operations on different legs of the journey or provide requisite stolen and/or forged documents at different points on the journey. These ad-hoc groups may have different backgrounds, skill-sets and even nationalities and come together, as described by Zhang (2008) and Morselli et al (2011); on an ad-hoc basis to facilitate illegal migration from China. As such the author believes Snakeheads could be defined as facilitators or coordinators who utilize local and/or international contacts to work alone, or with others, to facilitate transnational human smuggling using means or

methods which are, seen through Chinese eyes, as acceptable or quasi-legal, but by countries of destination as illegal or, at best, dishonest.

Evidence of Triad or other organised crime involvement

Interviewees (n=20) were asked directly whether they believed Triads or other organised crime groups were involved in facilitating their journey from China to the UK. Given that at the time of the research there was no direct translation of the term ‘organised crime’ in mandarin,¹⁸ and the broad interpretation of what the amorphous term ‘organised crime’ means, this question could have been better phrased. Ten respondents said ‘yes’, 6 stated ‘no’, and a further 4 either did not respond or were non-committal. Some of those who said ‘yes’ commented:

“Yes, they stole lots of passports” (ANON12)

“Yes – they can provide all kinds of passports and documents needed” (ANON13)

“Yes – there are a network organising sex-workers in China to come to the UK – but we are free and not ill-treated” (ANON1)

While some of the non-committal interviewees commented:

“Couldn’t say—only dealt with underlings of snakeheads, but believe the top boss must have guanxi and capabilities” (ANON17)

“It is a long chain of co-operation. Many officials in EU countries are bribed” (ANON1)

The responses above indicate a perception amongst interviewees that access to certain resources of capabilities would indicate wider organised criminal involvement. Triads and other traditional types of organised crime were not referenced. It is possible the higher number of ‘yes’ responses reflect a degree of confusion over the meaning of the term ‘organised crime’ and the difference between that and more general criminality. This idea is further reinforced when the evidence presented above on migrants identifying their Snakehead through friends and family recommendations and the, relatively, simple methods now used to facilitate smuggling.

Conclusion

This study has built on the solid (if sparse) research conducted to date on migration from China to the UK (notably by Pieke 1999, Pharoah and Lau 2009 and Silverstone 2011) and identified some developments in the field. The methods used by Snakeheads have become shorter, more direct and, anecdotally it would seem, cheaper. The motivations of those migrating also now seem to have a stronger emphasis on the economic drivers as opposed to the cultural and societal factors Pieke (2002) indicated as being paramount. While the limitations of this study are

¹⁸ A new law was agreed in December 2021 by the ‘Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress’ intending clarify this point. It will come into force in May 2022 according to media reporting.

recognised, for example the lack of access to Snakeheads, it has sought to bring together a broader spectrum of evidence than previous studies. In doing so, it has not identified evidence of organised crime involvement and instead would suggest that small and loose ‘white collar’ networks facilitate human smuggling from China to the UK.

Although the question as to whether Triads or other organised crime were involved in the illegal migration from China to the UK has not been answered conclusively or directly there is still robust evidence that indicates this was unlikely to be the case. In their responses, a majority of the respondents noted that they were: smuggled rather than trafficked; had access to abundant employment opportunities; were motivated by economic drivers and cultural expectations to migrate from China; used relatively easy, quick and less expensive (compared with historic costs) methods of smuggling (false travel documents, transportation and routes, for example); and used reliable or trustworthy service providers who provided a specific transportation service. In addition, the migrants either had money to finance their trip or had access to funds from licit sources to fund their trip, and there was no evidence that debt bondage was imposed upon the illegal migrants by Triads or organised crime, or through coercion (threats or violence). Overall, this shows that not only were Triads or organised crime unlikely to have been engaged in the China-UK human smuggling process but that there was little scope for their involvement.

By looking for evidence of organised crime across different aspects of the illegal migration process, this research has tentatively identified that if the following factors are present this would indicate limited scope for organised criminal involvement:

- An economic rather than absolute motivation. An example of an absolute motivation might be a former Afghan government official escaping the Taliban.
- A permissive and / or supportive migration culture in departure (sending) areas.
- Access to information from friends and / or family about journeys, employment and smugglers.
- Abundant demand for unskilled labour (ease of finding work)
- Access to funds from sources not related to the smuggler.
- Shorter and more direct journeys

To summarise, if a person seeking to migrate has limited alternatives and means in the areas identified above then they are likely to be vulnerable to trafficking. If one is prone to being trafficked, then they are more likely to encounter organised crime as trafficking activities are conducive to organised crime tactics such as (attempted) violence, coercion and control.

The areas above could form the basis for a developing a generalised analytical framework for discerning the degree to which organised crime is engaged in illegal migration processes. This would need to be tested further using case studies involving different geographical contexts and ethnicities other than China and the UK to understand whether the proposed framework can help them better dissect organised crime involvement and be applied more broadly.¹⁹

¹⁹ The author is grateful to Dr Alex Chung for insight and discussion in developing this idea.

Future research should look to utilise debriefing material and any available information from those being smuggled, or the smugglers themselves. The lived experience of those involved in illegal migration is the most authoritative evidence but is too often drowned out by media and government narratives where ‘expert’ opinion have disproportionate weight. To accurately understand and address illegal migration from China governments and law enforcement will need to look beyond the tired ‘Godfathers and Gangsters’ paradigms and go after the more disconcerting networks of criminal entrepreneurs who will be harder to identify, tackle and sell to the public as evil empires. More precision in use of terminology would go a long way to avoiding the misconceptions and misunderstandings that abound in this area of research. It will continue to be difficult to assess and address human smuggling if the overall narrative is anchored in emotive and misleading rhetoric around organised crime and exploitation.

Acknowledgements The author would like to thank the Editor in Chief of the journal, Georgios Antonopoulos and the anonymous reviewers, as well as Will Hughes and Alex Chung for their comments and suggestions on earlier drafts of this paper.

Funding Within the last three years no funding was received to assist with the preparation of this manuscript.

Declarations

Ethics approval Approval was obtained from the ethics committee of London Metropolitan University. The procedures used in this study adhere to the tenets of the Declaration of Helsinki.

Financial interests The author has no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

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