Wang Ping’s elegiac poem, “Song of Calling Souls,” outlines the story of the 286 undocumented Chinese immigrants who were on board the *Golden Venture*, a 147-foot long cargo ship that ran aground at Rockaway Beach in Queens, New York, on June 6, 1993. In the poem, Wang assumes the voices of the six immigrants who drowned after jumping into the frigid Atlantic Ocean and whose bodies could not be identified. Although she writes specifically from their perspective, Wang describes the extreme hardships suffered by the majority of illegal Chinese immigrants during their journey to the United States, both on the *Golden Venture* and elsewhere. This journey included the immigrants’ motivations for migrating to the United States, the lengths they took to secure passage on board a ship, the horrifying conditions under which they travelled halfway across the world, and, in the case of the *Golden Venture*, the actual events of the fateful landing in June. Wang tells this historical story in a way that accentuates its tragedy and prepares the reader for the poignant plea for peace at the end through three main poetic techniques. In “Song of Calling Souls,” Wang represents the tragic experience of the *Golden Venture* passengers by using heightened diction to illustrate their initial feelings of hope, juxtaposing those hopes with contrasting feelings of misery, and using the motif of water to emphasize the irony of their fate.

Wang projects the immigrants’ original feelings of hope through heightened diction to emphasize the ambitious motivations that drove the Chinese immigrants to seek a new life in the
United States. She speaks from the perspective of the immigrants, “You ask why we did this?,” and one of their responses is, “New York had more *fu* than Fuzhou, / people there enjoyed ‘perpetual happiness.’”¹ *Fu* means “good fortune” or “prosperity” in Chinese, and China’s poor economic conditions were indeed the primary motive for many Chinese immigrants to seek passage to America. The majority of the illegal Chinese immigrants in the 1980s and 1990s, including those on the *Golden Venture*, were from the isolated, coastal Fujian province of China, so immigration was often the only chance of making any economic gains.² Ko-Lin Chin explains in her study of illegal Chinese immigration that, additionally, because of the province’s proximity to the thriving city of Hong Kong, young adults after 1980 were very aware that greater opportunities existed, and were taught to aggressively seek their fortune far away from their homeland. Thus, he argues that the “opportunity to earn vastly better wages is the biggest incentive for immigrants,” and many residents in the Fujian province saw the United States as the ideal place to make money because of the high worth of U.S. dollars.³ Wang represents this certainty and idealism in the diction of her poem, as the drowned voices do not say that there “might” be more *fu* in New York, or that people there only enjoyed “certain” happiness. Instead, the immigrants are confident that they will find prosperity in the United States, and that this will bring them “perpetual” happiness for the rest of their lives.

Wang gives further reasons for the immigrants’ willingness to risk illegal immigration, which she again emphasizes through diction that invokes hopeful sentiments. She writes in the poem, “we could buy ourselves back for $30,000 within three years,” reflecting the common belief among Chinese immigrants that they would soon begin to earn money and pay off their

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¹ Wang Ping, *Of Flesh & Spirit* (Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, 1998), 70.
debt upon their arrival in the United States. Most Chinese immigrants were also more concerned with their family’s economic well-being than their own and saw success in the United States as a guarantee of hope for their families in China. Wang echoes this hope in the poem as well, when she writes, “Our hard work would bring freedom to the next generation. / Our sons would be prosperous and happy.” Again, her diction emphasizes the immigrants’ hopefulness, as Wang uses the word “freedom” to represent the future instead of more realistic phrases such as “material wealth” or “economic well-being.” The fact that Wang tells the story from the perspective of the drowned immigrants makes this heightened diction even more powerful. Even though, in retrospect, the drowned immigrants know that their dreams did not come to fruition, they still acknowledge the intense hope and optimism with which they left their homeland.

Wang contrasts these hopeful sentiments with resigned feelings of agony and hardship, which highlights the extreme sacrifices that the immigrants had to make in order to fund their illegal passage to the United States. Human trafficking at the time was largely controlled by professional smugglers known as “snakeheads,” who would charge up to $35,000 to arrange an immigrant’s trip from China to the United States. This price was extremely inflated, as the snakeheads would spend the minimal amount necessary to pay for the vessel while keeping up to two-thirds of the payment for themselves as profit. In order to leave China, immigrants first had to pay their snakeheads a down payment, which was usually around 10 to 20 percent of the full amount. In the poem, Wang describes how “From village to village / we bought and sold / anything at hand / socks underwear suits dresses gold even drugs / seven days a week / three

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4 Wang, *Of Flesh & Spirit*, 70.
6 Wang, *Of Flesh & Spirit*, 70.
8 Ibid., 149.
hundred sixty-five days a year” in order to raise enough money for the down payment. The lack of commas between “socks underwear suits dresses gold even drugs” indicates the relentless rush to raise money through any means necessary, and thus the difficulty of the task at hand. Most immigrants still could not afford to make this first down payment, and had to seek help from friends and relatives in China to raise the money, which often took many years. Additionally, immigrants who could not pay the full amount up front worked for years upon their arrival in the United States to pay off the debt to their snakehead. Those who could not repay the debt in the United States were at risk of being held hostage by Chinese gang members, recruited as drug couriers, or targeted for execution. Wang reflects this challenge in the poem as well, writing, “our bodies are not ours, / sold to the ‘snakeheads’ for the trip.” Wang uses a conspicuous tone of resignation here to signify the immigrants’ sacrifice, as she both states the reality of their situation with the snakeheads and offers no alternatives for escaping it.

Despite the enormous cost that the immigrants had to pay to their snakeheads, almost all immigrants experienced horrendously inhumane conditions on the 17,000-mile journey to the United States, which Wang again describes through feelings of misery that starkly contrast the immigrants’ initial feelings of hope. She explains how, “On the boat / we were so close, / hundreds of us in the hold / jammed in and in.” The repetition of the idea of closeness emphasizes the unbearable claustrophobic feeling on the Golden Venture, which indeed was too small to safely make the four-month long journey from Thailand, to Kenya, around the Cape of Good Hope, and across the Atlantic Ocean to New York. During the journey, each passenger was given a small sleeping space in the cargo hold of the ship. Wesley L. Hsu explains in his study of

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9 Wang, Of Flesh & Spirit, 68.
10 Chin, Smuggled Chinese, 5.
12 Wang, Of Flesh & Spirit, 69.
13 Ibid., 72.
the *Golden Venture* incident that the immigrants on board were “confined to this space for the entire trip, an area roughly the size of a coffin,” or “six inches on either side to the next body.”

Wang also recounts the way the passengers were treated, writing, “We sailed the ocean / in the hold of the *Golden Venture* / pigs chickens dogs snakes, / whatever it was they called us.”

She again utilizes a lack of commas, this time in the phrase “pigs chickens dogs snakes,” to highlight how the immigrants were viewed as just one lowly, amorphous mass of animalistic indignity. Indeed, Dennis L. Noble explains in his study of human smuggling to the United States that the enforcers on the ship, or *ma zhais*, would never “treat the passengers as human beings” and often “assaulted those they disliked and raped the women passengers as well.”

On the *Golden Venture*, there was also no running water, no resources for personal hygiene, and just one meager meal served per day. The passengers lived in constant hunger, and many eventually resorted to eating anything that they could.

The voyage was also slow and uneven, compounded by multiple breakdowns and delays, to the point where one passenger said it “was like we floated to the United States from China.”

Wang represents these experiences in her poem as well, writing, “In thirst and hunger we waited. / In fear and hope we waited / to be lifted from the ship’s hold / and alight on the land of paradise.”

Again, she uses repetition for emphasis, this time highlighting the agonizingly long wait during the trip across the Atlantic. Her juxtaposition of this suffering with the immigrants’ optimistic dreams, both in the discussion of the immigrants’ motivations and in the phrase “alight on the land of paradise,” makes the fate of the drowned immigrants all the more tragic in the eyes of the reader.

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16 Noble, *The U.S. Coast Guard’s War*, 102.
17 Hsu, “The Tragedy of the *Golden Venture*,” 324.
18 Noble, *The U.S. Coast Guard’s War*, 101-102.
Wang likewise utilizes the motif of water to represent the tragic loss of the immigrants’ dream to reach America, which first appears when she describes the simple, fisherman’s lifestyle that the immigrants left behind. As previously stated, most of the *Golden Venture* immigrants came from the coastal province of Fujian. Because 80 percent of the region was mountainous, very little land was arable. Consequently, many immigrants lived in one of the two major seaports in the province, Fuzhou City and Xiamen, or in other coastal areas such as Changle City, Mawei District, or Lianjiang County. Wang mentions both “the cliffs of Fuzhou” and “the waters of Changle” as part of the immigrants’ homeland at the beginning of the poem. She describes the peaceful, subsistent lifestyle of the Fujianese, with the “Fisherman’s dwellings everywhere,” “small boats offshore,” and “salty winds,” and she explains through the drowned voices, “Fishing kept us out on the waves.” In reality, not all of the *Golden Venture* immigrants were fishermen while living in Fujian. Nevertheless, the ocean was essential for many immigrants’ livelihoods before they left for the United States, so Wang capitalizes on the figure of the fisherman in order to accentuate the water motif from the very beginning of the poem.

Wang then uses the water motif to emphasize the irony in the fate of the drowned immigrants, as the *Golden Venture*’s journey ended in devastating tragedy when the ship grounded in New York Harbor, just a few miles away from the Statue of Liberty. At around 2 a.m. on June 6, 1993, the keel of the ship struck a sandbar 200 yards away from Jacob Riis Park in Queens, immediately setting off panic among the passengers. Robert D. McFadden reported for *The New York Times* that the ship was “suddenly dead in the water, hull plates groaning as if coming apart,” and passengers responded by either jumping 15 to 20 feet off of the ship or

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20 Noble, *The U.S. Coast Guard’s War*, 96-97.
23 Ibid., 67, 68.
climbing down ladders that were thrown over the side. They instantly felt the numbing cold upon jumping into the 53-degree surf, and some went into cardiac arrest upon impact. Those who were not injured from the jump either swam or waded to shore, and a U.S. Coast Guard officer later said that, while applying CPR on the beach, he “could feel the gristle of their bodies, the cartilage. They walked up out of the water, collapsed on the beach, and died.” Wang vividly describes this accident in her poem, writing:

“Jump,” someone shouted,
“the ship is sinking, the police are coming!”
so we jumped
into the night
into the raging sea,
our breasts smothered
by foam and weeds,
our passions tangled,
the breath beaten from our bodies.

Wang no longer presents the ocean as a source of livelihood, but as a tumultuous and unforgiving force that swallows both the immigrants’ physical bodies and their zealous dreams. Of the ten immigrants who died during the incident, most drowned while attempting to swim to the beach, while two others died of heart attacks. Their bodies were washed up to shore, and the six that could not be identified were buried together in a common grave in Paterson, New Jersey. Again, Wang contrasts this fateful night with the description of their home in China to underline the fact that the same ocean that used to sustain these immigrants was now claiming

25 Noble, The U.S. Coast Guard’s War, 120.
26 Wang, Of Flesh & Spirit, 71.
27 McFadden, “Smuggled to New York.”
their lives. Because of these tragically ironic deaths, the drowned immigrants were neither home nor in their new life, but caught in the vast void of the ocean between. Wang also uses the water motif in the poem’s form to illustrate this point, as she staggers the lines throughout to make them look like waves flowing in and out on the shore. Officials said later that there was in fact little danger when the *Golden Venture* struck the sandbar, but after the harrowing journey that the passengers had just endured, they thought that they had suddenly been placed in jeopardy and were not going to risk sinking with the ship just steps away from their dream.28

Wang’s purpose in writing “Song of Calling Souls” is not just to tell the historical account of the *Golden Venture*, but also to add an emotional dimension to the story. She ends the poem with a moving plea from the drowned voices to not let their names be forgotten when their souls were lost at sea and their bodies were unceremoniously thrown together in a mass grave thousands of miles away from home. The heightened diction that she uses to present the feelings of hope, the contrasts she makes by juxtaposing those hopes with feelings of misery, and the irony she indicates with the water motif all tell the *Golden Venture* story in a way that emphasizes the extent of the tragedy for the drowned immigrants. The immigrants started with passionately ambitious hopes for freedom and fortune, and after enduring years of incredible hardship to undertake the enormous risk of illegal immigration, they were consumed by the ocean within sight of their dream. After using poetic devices to tell the historical narrative, Wang then uses the impact of the tragic story to give extra life to the touching prayer at the end of the poem, when the drowned voices surface once more to ask for peace at last.

28 McFadden, “Smuggled to New York.”
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Bibliography


