



THE ROUTE



STUDY GUIDE

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The Route

Chinese asylum seekers are entering the US via a dangerous route through Latin America seeking new lives. This year, thousands have already made the trip known as “zouxian” or “the walking route.” Many cite a host of reasons for leaving China, from economic uncertainty and Beijing’s harsh COVID-19 policies to human rights. To get to America from China, they have to go through nine countries. There are no roads, the terrain is unforgiving, and migrants regularly fall victim to criminal gangs. Reaching the United States has long been the dream. Thousands of Chinese have embarked on the dangerous route this year. But reaching their destination is no guarantee that their troubles will be over.

About China

The People's Republic of China has a population of about 1.4 people and is the second-most populous country in the world, after India. It takes up most of the East Asian landmass. Its capital city is Beijing (Peking).

China is a Communist Party-led state. The Communist Party of China, under Mao Zedong, founded the country in 1949. Since 2013, it been led by Xi Jinping. The Communist Party maintains a high level of control over both the economy and all of Chinese society. The Congressional Research Service (CRS) explains, “The Chinese Communist Party (CCP), is China’s dominant political institution. It operates a powerful and expansive bureaucracy and tasks itself with ‘exercis[ing] overall leadership over all areas of endeavor in every part of the country.’” CRS continues, “Interlocking Party and government hierarchies extend down to the level of small towns. At every level and in every institution, Party rank takes precedence over government rank.”

In recent years, there has been an increase in the number of people leaving China. A number of different factors are driving migration. Many people were unhappy with the strict lockdowns that were enforced during the COVID 19 pandemic. Some people feel that there is a lack of economic and career prospects. Others complain about strict government control and censorship of civil society, media, and free speech. The desire for religious freedom is another factor motivating migrants. The Pew Research Center reports that religious activity in China is strictly regulated. It explains, “The rules are part of a long-standing strategy by the Chinese government to align religion with communism and ensure loyalty to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), which espouses and promotes atheism.” Overall, it says, “China has ranked among the world’s most restrictive governments every year since Pew Research Center began tracking restrictions on religion in 2007.”¹

Political Asylum

Political asylum is a form of protection that allows a person to remain in a particular country rather than being deported to a country where they are afraid of being persecuted or harmed. As explained by UNHCR, “You only can win asylum if at least one of the reasons someone harmed or may harm you is because of your race, religion, nationality, political opinion (or a political

opinion someone thinks you have), or the fact that you are part of a ‘particular social group.’” Seeking asylum is generally recognized as a human right in nations around the world. According to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, every person has a right to seek asylum from persecution. Many people do so; the United Nations Refugee Council reports that approximately one million people worldwide seek asylum every year.

Like most other countries, the United States recognizes the right to seek asylum. Individuals can apply from either inside or outside the United States. A person who is granted asylum is called an asylee. The U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) states, “To be eligible for asylum status, a principal applicant must, among other requirements, meet the definition of a refugee . . . which states in part that a refugee is a person who is unable or unwilling to return to their country of nationality (or country of last habitual residence, if stateless) because of persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion.”

The U.S. government publishes statistics about the people who apply for asylum. DHS categorizes asylum cases in two ways. Affirmative asylum is when a person arrives in the United States and applies for asylum so that he or she can stay. Defensive asylum is when a person is already subject to removal procedures in immigration court and applies for asylum in order to stop his or her deportation. According to the most recent statistics, in 2023 a total of 456,750 cases of affirmative asylum were filed. 488,620 cases of defensive asylum were received. That year, 54,350 asylum cases were granted in the United States. 4,870 of them were from China.

In both the United States and around the world, the number of people seeking asylum far exceeds the number of people who are accepted for asylum. As a result, wait times are often long, with many asylum seekers are forced to wait for weeks, months, or even years while a decision is made, and many requests are ultimately denied. While they wait for a decision, asylum seekers to the United States may be placed in immigration detention centers or other types of holding facilities while they wait for their case to be decided. Others are released, but monitored closely, and some are sent back to their country of origin to wait.

The majority of asylum requests in the United States are not granted. However, according to a recent New York Times article, Chinese migrants are more successful than many other migrants at staying in the United States. The author explains that even if their asylum claims are denied, many Chinese migrants are able to stay in the United States anyway because China will not take them back. She says, “It is a little-discussed wrinkle in the U.S. system: American officials cannot force countries to take back their own citizens. For the most part, this is not an issue. But about a dozen countries are not terribly cooperative, and China is the worst offender.”

Necoclí

Necoclí is a small town located on the northern Caribbean coast of Colombia. It has become a major staging point for migrants seeking to head north thorough the Darién Gap. As migrant numbers increase every year, local resources have been strained. According to ACAPS, an

organization that provides analysis of humanitarian crises. Between January and August 2023, 230,162 migrant departures were registered. Before they depart, these migrants all spend time in Necoclí—sometimes waiting for weeks to get a ride on a boat--and ACAPS reports that the town is unable to meet the demand for food, water, shelter, or medical care.

The Darién Gap

The Darién Gap is an area between Columbia and Panama. Human Rights Watch explains that while almost all of the Americas are connected by the Pan-American Highway, the Darién Gap is an exception. It says, “The highway was never completed through the approximately 10,000-square-mile tropical jungle that covers the northernmost zone of Colombia and a significant portion of Panama’s southernmost province. Indeed, no road runs through it at all. Nor are there bridges, cellphone service, or other infrastructure that would facilitate easy crossing. The region hosts some of the highest mountain ridges in Panama, as well as hundreds of rivers and heavily forested valleys. It is inhabited only sparsely, mostly by Indigenous communities and criminal gangs.” In order to get to the United States, land-based migrants coming from the south need to go through the Darién Gap. According to Panamanian government, in 2023, 520,085 people crossed from Colombia into Panama through the Darien Gap. It reports that 25,565 were from China. The dangers that migrants face in the Darién Gap include high temperatures, flooding and landslides, a lack of safe drinking water, and crocodiles and venomous snakes. Human Rights Watch reports that there are multiple routes through the Darién Gap, with the shorter and safer ones often costing up to \$2,000 U.S. per person.

Study Questions

1. Why are so many people taking this long and dangerous route, as explained in the film?
2. What dangers do they face?
3. How did the COVID 19 pandemic affect migration, as shown in the film?
4. How do you think social media posts about the route are affecting migration?
5. How can social media use benefit migrants, as shown in the film?
6. What do you think are some potential harms associated with social media, in relation to Chinese migration?
7. As revealed by the film, what challenges do migrants face after reaching the United States?

Additional Resources

- Congressional Research Service, “China Primer: China’s Political System,” July 1, 2024.
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- Economist, “How to Escape from China to America,” October 8, 2024.
<https://www.economist.com/interactive/china/2024/10/08/how-to-escape-from-china-to-america>
- Juan Pappier, “How the Treacherous Darien Gap Became a Migration Crossroads of the Americas,” Human Rights Watch, October 10, 2023.
<https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/10/10/how-treacherous-darien-gap-became-migration-crossroads-americas>
- Pew Research Center, “10 Things to Know About China’s Policies on Religion,” October 23, 2023.
<https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2023/10/23/10-things-to-know-about-chinas-policies-on-religion/>
- Eileen Sullivan, “Growing Numbers of Chinese Migrants Are Crossing the Southern Border,” New York Times, November 24, 2023.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/11/24/us/politics/china-migrants-us-border.html>
- Diana Roy, Author and Sabine Baumgartner, “Crossing the Darién Gap: Migrants Risk Death on the Journey to the U.S.,” Council on Foreign Relations, July 22, 2024.
<https://www.cfr.org/article/crossing-darien-gap-migrants-risk-death-journey-us>
- U.S. Department of Homeland Security, “Refugees and Asylees,” updated October 16, 2024.
<https://ohss.dhs.gov/topics/immigration/refugees-and-asylees>

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