

# Determined to Flee China, Thousands Take a Long, Dangerous Route to the Southern U.S. Border

In search of economic opportunity or political freedom, Chinese contend with smugglers, bandits and treacherous jungle on trek through Latin America

By [Wenxin Fan](#) and [Shen Lu](#) April 16, 2023 8:08 am ET



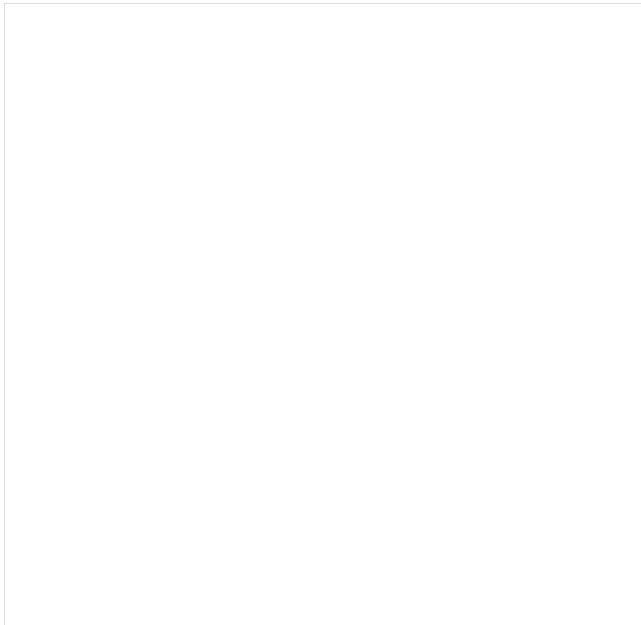
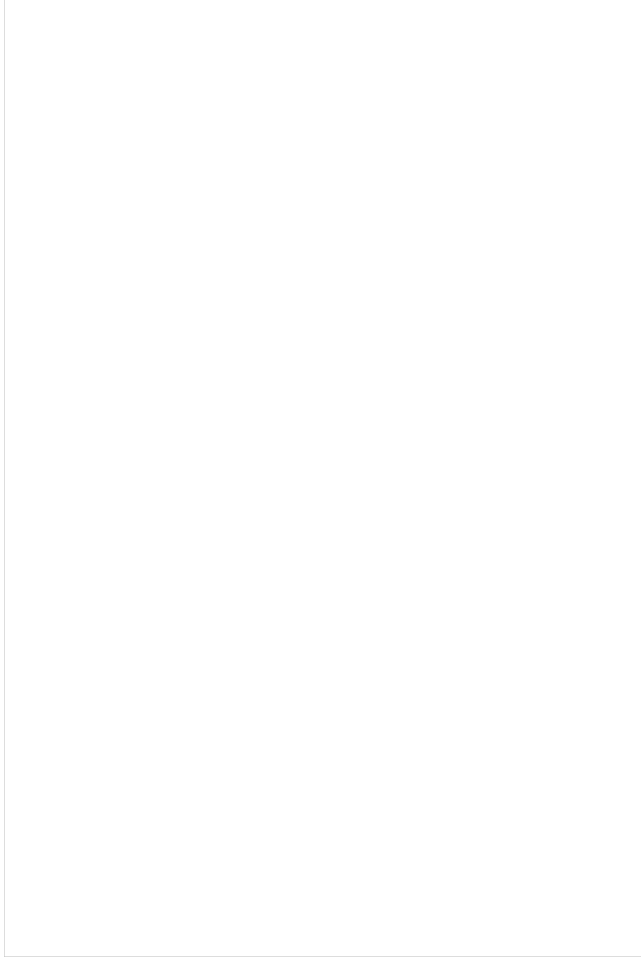
He was soaked through by the crashing waves and he feared the boat would tip over. On his cellphone, he said he typed up a farewell note to his father to send if it seemed he wouldn't make it to the shore on the Panamanian side, where he would start [an arduous jungle trek](#).

Mr. Huang is part of a huge upsurge of [Chinese under Xi Jinping's rule](#) who have risked arrest, drowning and robbery as they pass through some eight nations to reach the southern U.S. border, following in the footsteps

of [hundreds of thousands of Venezuelans, Cubans and others](#).

"I could no longer see hope" in China, he said. "If there was any other way, who would be willing to leave their family?"

The Chinese migrants making dangerous treks through Latin America are a subset of the [larger outflow of Chinese of all wealth levels](#). Under Mr. Xi, the private sector has been squeezed, forcing layoffs and driving away entrepreneurs. Others worry political repression will only get more suffocating as Mr. Xi embarks on his third term in power.





Daniel Huang in Los Angeles this month. He entered Latin America in Ecuador and made his way to the southern U.S. border. Allison Zaucha for The Wall Street Journal

The United Nations refugee agency counted 116,868 Chinese seeking asylum around the world at a point measured in mid-2022, up from 15,362 at the end of 2012, the year Mr. Xi took power. The U.N. numbers don't include Chinese who enter other countries using work, tourist or other types of visas—often people with more assets and education—which have also increased in the past decade. China has a population of around 1.4 billion.

In the first three months of this year, 3,855 Chinese migrants crossed the Darién Gap, the 60 miles or so of treacherous terrain connecting South and Central America. That compares with 2,005 for the full year in 2022, and just 376 Chinese total in the years from 2010 to 2021, according to Panama migration data. Chinese nationals were the fourth-largest group making the Darién crossing from Colombia in the three months, the data showed.

The Chinese taking the Latin America route are generally those with low incomes, education levels and skills, who have little to no chance of securing a U.S. visa. Many lost their livelihood in the pandemic, when much of China shut down, or had traumatic encounters with Chinese authorities. This article is based on interviews with more than a dozen Chinese who are either on the trek or have recently arrived in the U.S.

The rush to escape China—now the world's second-largest economy—is reminiscent of earlier waves driven by political convulsions or economic hardship.

In the decades after the 1949 Communist takeover, when China effectively isolated itself from the world, large numbers of Chinese fled famine and political turmoil. Hundreds of thousands of "freedom swimmers" risked their lives as they tried to reach Hong Kong.

In the 1990s, illegal border crossings became a lucrative business. Chinese desperate for economic opportunity borrowed crushing sums that could take years to pay back to pay smugglers called "snakeheads" to sneak them into the U.S. Many came in the hold of decrepit cargo ships. Mostly from Fujian province on China's coast, the migrants transformed the low-skill labor market in the U.S., immigration scholars say. Their number dwindled significantly as the opening of trade improved economic conditions in China.

The current procession through Latin America, while smaller in scale, comes from a country much wealthier overall, and is made up of people from all over China seeking [opportunities or freedom not found at home](#).

## Fitness trainer

Mr. Huang, 30 years old, said he had invested nearly \$3,000 to become a certified fitness trainer. When Covid-19 hit in 2020, many gyms closed. After two jobless years, he was hired at an iPhone plant in central China in November but became involved in [protests over contracts](#). He said he was let go after a scuffle with security guards.

Police in his hometown in Hubei province called to ask him to come explain what happened. The call terrified Mr. Huang, who had been jailed for six months as an 18-year-old after what he says was a false charge that he solicited prostitutes. Worried he would go to jail again, he said he started to plan his departure.

In China, a new hashtag—#zouxian, roughly translated as trek—started gaining popularity last year when some migrants posted footage of their journeys through Latin America on TikTok's Chinese version, Douyin.

After stumbling upon the videos in December, Mr. Huang borrowed \$13,000 from lenders online—a relatively simple process in a country accustomed to online payments and finance. The first obstacle was getting out of China. In the pandemic, China had restricted passport issuance to those who could show they needed it for study, work or business purposes. To get a passport, Mr. Huang paid money online for a fake acceptance letter made to look like it came from a college abroad.

He obtained a visa to Turkey, lied to Chinese border officials that he was going there to survey restaurants and was allowed to go abroad for the first time. In Istanbul, Mr. Huang said he sold his iPhone 13 and bought an outdated model that he thought wouldn't attract robbers on the road. From there he flew to Ecuador, the only country along the Latin America route that lets Chinese enter without a visa.

He arrived in Quito in late January. He and other Chinese people on the flight added each other on messaging apps to keep in touch on the journey. Mr. Huang and a Chinese man from the flight paid a smuggler to help them cross into Colombia by car.

But there, men who said they were Colombian immigration officials picked them up and held them until they offered to surrender their dollars. Mr. Huang had \$700 and his companion had \$1,000. "Money money you! Me go go go!" Mr. Huang said he told the men in English. A spokesperson for Colombia's migration agency said, "In Migration Colombia, it is absolutely forbidden to level illegal charges or receive bribes of any kind." Any complaint would be investigated, the spokesperson said.

After they were released, the other man wanted to give up and go home.

Mr. Huang cut open the sole of his sneaker to retrieve two \$100 bills that he had hidden. It was enough to take them to Necoclí, Colombia, by taxi, the last stop before the Darién Gap.

Mr. Li took videos of a rough boat ride and a bus trip in Colombia during his journey to the U.S. border.

Li Xiaosan

Migrants prepared for the Darién crossing in Necoclí, shopping for tents, flashlights and water-purification pills. The passage through the Darién requires hiking along muddy paths in dense, roadless jungle for a couple of days or more, with little access to fresh water or defense against mosquitoes.

The cost of a trek like the one Mr. Huang was attempting ranges from \$7,000 to \$10,000 to pay for smugglers, transportation and lodging, Chinese migrants say. The going rate for more direct or safer smuggling routes, such as air passage to Mexico where snakehead "agents" bribe customs officials to let Chinese in with forged travel documents, is \$60,000 or more, the migrants say.

In Necoclí, Mr. Huang befriended Li Xiaosan, a leather trader from Guangdong province, who was traveling with his 16-year-old son, Joehan. Mr. Li, 42, had assets in China and had led a fairly comfortable life there. For more than a decade, he had joined protests against pollution and voiced

support for Hong Kong's democracy movement.

In 2019, authorities forced him to delete criticism of Mr. Xi and the Communist Party on social media, including on Twitter, which is blocked in China but available through virtual private networks. He said he was taken in for hours of questioning in 2021, and again last year.

## From China to the Rio Grande

**Over several weeks, Li Xiaosan and his son journeyed to the U.S. border. From Quito, Ecuador, they traveled by car, bus, rickshaw, motorbike, raft and boat, and hiked through the dangerous Darién Gap jungle. The Mexico leg of their trip was also arduous.**



Brownsville, Texas

*Kayak over the Rio Grande*

*into the U.S.*

Tampico

*Arrested for five days*

Acayucan

*Detainment for a day*

*Officials transported*

*Motorbike, taxi, walking*

San Pedro Tapanatepec

*10-hour speedboat ride*

Source: Li Xiaosan  
Emma Brown/THE WALL STREET  
JOURNAL

After the second detention, Mr. Li said he decided to leave. He wanted to get Joehan and his younger brother away from the party

line they were taught in Chinese schools but didn't think the family could get tourist visas. He decided that he and Joehan would go first via Latin America. "If you can trek to the destination, then you are the master of your own fate," he said.

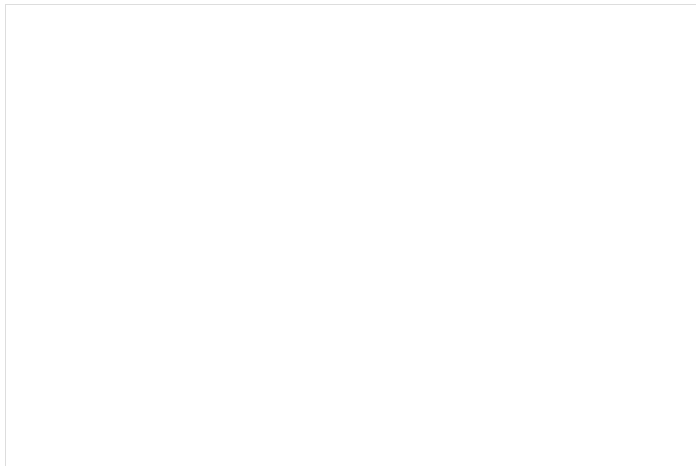
By the time they crossed paths with Mr. Huang, the Lis had been robbed in Ipiales, near Colombia's border with Ecuador. Joehan was ready to give up, sobbing in video chats with his mother and brother in China. "Freedom isn't free," Mr. Li said he told him.

The harrowing boat rides carried the migrants from Necoclí across the rough body of water to the edge of the Darién Gap. The Lis and Mr. Huang were among more than a dozen Chinese who started the hike through the jungle.

A rotten stench hovered over some sections of the trek; Mr. Huang said he believed it was caused by dead bodies. The U.N.'s International Organization for Migration said 36 deaths were reported in the Darién Gap last year; the

IOM said it believed many more were uncounted.

While crossing a river with water up to his chest, Mr. Li fell on a slippery rock. Mr. Huang, who had coached swimming, was more confident in the water, but sliding down on a steep trail above a cliff, he once again feared death. It took them two days to get through.



Mr. Li showed Thai, left, and Turkish stamps in his passport, his first two stops on his journey to the U.S. Photo:

Bing Guan for The Wall Street Journal

The Darién is thought of as the hardest part of the trek, but many migrants cited other segments as more dangerous. A 31-year-old Chinese woman, who made the crossing with her dissident husband and an 8-year-old daughter in late January, said she found the long bus rides on bumpy roads in Ecuador and Colombia harder to endure.

A 51-year-old woman from Chengdu, a landlocked city, said the rough boat

crossing from Necoclí was the most terrifying part of the trip for her. Speaking from a hotel in Monterrey, Mexico, early this month, she said her main motivation for leaving was for her 17-year-old son, who traveled with her, to continue school away from the high pressure in the Chinese education system. "I feel a drive in me, a longing for America," she said. "I think it has the best education, technology and culture."

## 'Highway of Death'

A couple of weeks and several hazardous trips by sea and land later, Mr. Huang parted ways with Mr. Li and his son in Mexico. From Mexico City, many Chinese said they paid \$650 to smugglers to take them by car to near the U.S. border. Mr. Huang bought a public bus ticket for one-eighth the price.

Shortly after the bus left, local police intercepted it and dragged him off, he said. He was thrown in jail for 10 days for failing to get the proper transit permit when he entered Mexico. He was released and sent back to Chiapas, Mexico's southernmost state.

He then teamed up to buy two motorbikes with three other Chinese he met there, accessing his bank account by phone for funds. The group headed back north following a bicycle route they downloaded from Google Maps to avoid police. Video clips on Mr. Huang's phone show the maneuvering of a rocky mountain path and his excitement racing down a dirt road.

Within a few days, the group got on Mexico's Highway 101, known as the "Highway of Death" due to the frequency of violent crime. Near the town of La Coma, in Tamaulipas state, a van started to chase them.

Mr. Huang took videos of the hike through the the Darién Gap, left, and traveling by motorbike in Mexico. Center, Mr. Li's video of migrants in the camp before starting to cross the Darién Gap.

Daniel Huang, Li Xiaosan

Shouting "Chino, Chino!" and waving guns, the men in the van signaled them to stop. Mr. Huang rolled the throttle and raced to a nearby military checkpoint for help as his passenger jumped off and ran into the bushes.

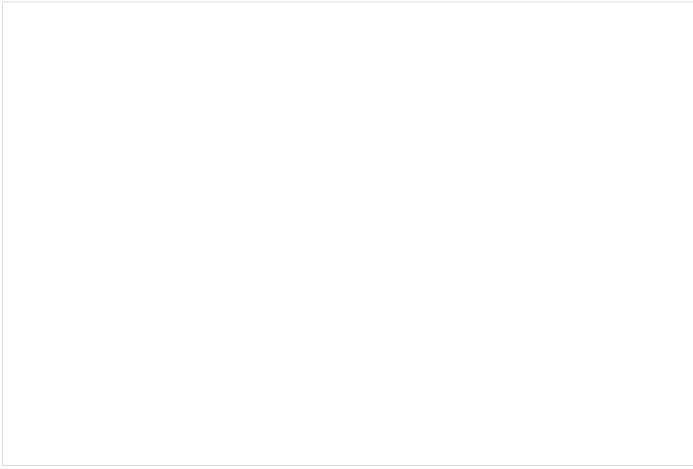
The van forced the second bike to a stop. The rider, Li Quanlong, a construction contractor who had left debts behind in Shandong province, sprinted off the road and crawled under a fence. He was almost through when two gangsters grabbed his feet. They took his shoes but couldn't pull him out, he said.

His companion was dragged into the van but got away after faking a heart attack. Soldiers later found Mr. Huang's passenger by the side of the road, severely dehydrated. The military let the migrants go, but they had lost the motorbikes.

A local Chinese contact near La Coma arranged for someone to drive the four men to the border, where they climbed over a wall and surrendered to U.S. border authorities in Texas. Mr. Huang applied for asylum and was released; he has a hearing later this month.

It was early March, nearly two months after Mr. Huang left China.

Li Xiaosan, the dissident from Guangdong, and his son made it in a shorter time. They rode on a bus to the border near Matamoros and crossed the Rio Grande in a kayak in late February. U.S. border agents detained them and later dropped them off at a migrant shelter run by a church in McAllen, Texas. They are applying for asylum.



Mr. Li attended Easter service at the Chinese Christian Church of Greater Albany. Photo: Bing Guan for The Wall Street Journal

Since the start of the government's budget year in October through February, U.S. Customs and Border Protection agents have apprehended 4,271 Chinese nationals along the southwest border, 12 times the number in the same period a year earlier. Total arrests at the border during the period were 891,774.

Norma Pimentel, who oversees the Catholic Charities of the Rio Grande Valley in McAllen, said the shelter staff used to see a Chinese person once every couple of months. "Now, all of a sudden, we see a surge of people from China," she said, adding that on a day recently, 50 people, or about 25% of the day's refugees, were Chinese.

In the U.S., Chinese asylum seekers have been among the groups with the highest acceptance rate, 67%, in recent decades, according to the Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse, a data-research organization at Syracuse University. Asylum seekers are eligible for work authorization after their asylum application has been pending for 180 days, according to the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services.

By this month, Mr. Li and Joehan had made it to Albany, N.Y. Joehan was enrolled in a public school and Mr. Li was awaiting an asylum court hearing in October and a work permit. He has started tweeting again.

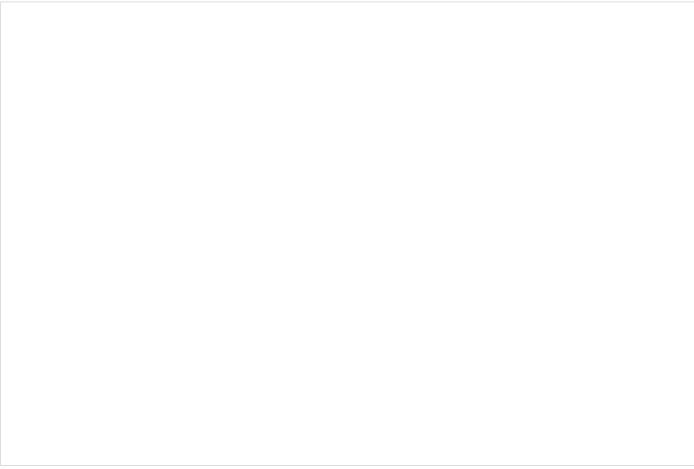
Mr. Huang, meanwhile, had found accommodation in a Los Angeles guesthouse with two dozen Chinese that arrived along the same route.

A 34-year-old man from Hubei province said he had hobbled his way through the Darién Gap after losing several toes years earlier in China when a bulldozer officials used to demolish his house crushed his foot. A businessman from Beijing said he left after receiving death threats from a state-owned company with which he had a dispute.

On a recent Saturday, Mr. Huang and three men shared a bowl of stewed chicken and downed some beer.

"Some people's journey was smooth; mine was very difficult," he said. "But now I'm thankful."





Mr. Huang, center, with other Chinese migrants at his guesthouse in Los Angeles. Photo: Allison Zaucha for The Wall Street Journal

*Juan Forero contributed to this article.*

Write to Wenxin Fan at [wenxin.fan@wsj.com](mailto:wenxin.fan@wsj.com) and Shen Lu at [shen.lu@wsj.com](mailto:shen.lu@wsj.com)