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# A Genealogy of Gangs in Hong Kong

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## Introduction

In recent years, the field of criminology has become slowly attuned to the intellectual and political legacies of colonialism. As a growing number of scholars attest, despite claims to 'global' criminology there remain uncomfortable convergences of geo-political and intellectual power in the construction of contemporary criminological knowledge (Franko-Aas, 2011). Like the Mercator world-map, shown to underestimate the scale of less developed nations, criminology's world-map remains overwhelming skewed toward North America and Europe (Cain, 2000). Against this backdrop, criminologists have started to develop new theoretical and methodological tools with which to interrogate these epistemological and ontological assumptions (Lee and Laidler, 2013; Carrington et al, 2015). Mirroring these trends, while the field of gang research has to date been premised on definitions and concepts emanating from American and European field sites (Fraser and Hagedorn, 2018), critical gang scholars have increasingly sought to disrupt and decentre the production of global gang research (Winton, 2014).

In this chapter we respond to calls for gang research to critically engage with colonialism and urban history (Brotherton, 2015) through a historical case-study of gangs in colonial-era Hong Kong. The chapter will be set out in four sections. In the first, we briefly situate our argument through a dialogue between recent discussions 'Southern criminology' (Carrington et al, 2015) and critical gang studies. In the second, focusing on the 1845 Triad Ordinance, we discuss the United Kingdom's annexation of Hong Kong, and subsequent criminalisation of Triad gangs as an instance of colonial statecraft akin to territorial gang activity (Rodgers, 2006). The third contrasts the construction of the 1932 Juvenile Crime Ordinance with the statistical picture of youth crime at the time, suggesting an administrative fiat grafted from British law. In the fourth, we suggest that major

policy reforms of the 1970s - including the institution of the Independent Commission Against Corruption in 1974 - had the unintended consequence of creating a youth gang 'problem' where none had previously existed. Departing from the imaginary of gangs as youthful, depoliticised, and distinct from organised crime, we present the genealogy of gangs in Hong Kong as embedded in cultural history, colonial statecraft, and the criminal-political nexus.

**Recentring the World of Gangs**

Following in the wake of debates across the social sciences (Bhambra and Santos, 2016), there is growing recognition of the complex legacies of colonialism within criminology. Like sociology, criminology has had a clear tendency to 'read from the centre' (Connell, 2007: 45). Indeed, for Agozino, criminology is an 'imperialist science' with embedded colonial assumptions, complicit in the exportation of criminal justice policies to colonised nations (Agozino, 2004).  As processes of globalisation confound and disrupt the traditional dualisms of East/West and North/South, there is a pressing need for an expansion of criminology's world-map and a reckoning of the intersections between colonialism and criminology. Postcolonial, decolonial and anti-colonial perspectives have the potential to enlarge and decentre the world-map of criminology in a way that is sensitised to the hierarchies of power embedded in global knowledge-production, creating new spaces for intellectual exchange and dialogue (Blagg, 2008). As Cunneen notes, '[c]olonization and the postcolonial are not historical events but continuing social, political, economic, and cultural processes […] an aftermath of colonialism and it manifests itself in a range of areas (2011: 249).'

In this context, a growing seam of scholars seek to decentre criminological knowledge. There are a range of voices and agendas for those moving beyond the Northern paradigm, from those in Europe, South America, Australia/New Zealand to Asia. Through movements towards a counter-colonial criminology (Agozino, 2004), Asian criminology (Lee and Laidler, 2013), cultural criminology of Asia (Fraser, Lee and Tang, 2017), and Southern criminology (Carrington et al, 2015), scholars have sought to build the foundations for a

wide-ranging critical criminology that privileges field sites and forms of knowledge outside of the global North (Connell, 2007). Across these perspectives, there is broad agreement that the Northern paradigm has been too easily "imported". Instead, it is suggested that differing notions of crime and justice exist in different cultural and geopolitical spaces, making clear that the fit between the "North" and the "South" is incongruous (Laidler, 2018). For Southern and Asian criminologies, there has been an attempt to decolonize the discipline, problematizing the production and unidirectional flow of knowledge, yet there are fundamental differences within, as Moosavi (2018) has observed, there is a need for reflexivity and dialogue.

These arguments have started to take root in the field of critical gang studies, which seeks out insights and experiences from the global South alongside those in the global North. Winton (2014), for example, critiques the dominance of American gang tropes in the field. As she notes, 'US-style gangs and gang-research have for a long time defined thinking' (Winton, 2014: 49). Instead, Winton emphasises the importance of relational and organisational aspects of gangs, arguing for a shift of emphasis from individual-level violence to structural violence. For Winton gangs are best understood on a continuum of survivalism to expansion, and suggests that 'making sense of contemporary gangs requires the development of more open, flexible approaches' (2014: 414). This scholarship suggests that gangs are a changeable social form that responds to matrices of oppression, including those relating to civil war (Hagedorn, 2008), colonialism (Brotherton, 2015), global inequality (Venkatesh and Kassimir, 2007) and international development (Hazen and Rodgers, 2013). What was once a field of study dominated by the study of young men living in the urban peripheries of Europe and the United States has become gradually more critical, global, and reflexive in orientation.

Despite the growth of critical scholarship in the United States and Europe, there have been few meaningful efforts to engage with the complex legacies of colonialism on gang scholarship. In what follows, we seek to respond to Brotherton's (2015) call for greater engagement with history and colonialism in understanding gangs in a global context. There is a pressing need to root understandings of gangs in the situated historical relations and path-

dependencies within specific urban contexts. Hong Kong is a unique site of research as although its residents are "predominantly of Chinese descendent practicing traditional Chinese cultures and norms", the newer generation are also "substantially influenced by Western cultural values" (Chui and Chan, 2012: 382). As such, existing theory can only operate at "high level of generality" and rarely takes into account the cultural variations and processes underlying the delinquent behaviour (Cheung and Ng, 1988). In this genealogical approach, the city becomes a lens through which global and national forces become refracted and articulated at a local level (Fraser and Hagedorn, 2018). A genealogical approach to gangs in the urban context seeks out the historical, political and social levers that have resulted in contemporary configurations of gangs in that specific context, while seeking out vectors of difference with similar groups elsewhere (Hagedorn, 2008).

**A Genealogy of Gangs in Hong Kong**

Hong Kong's history of gangs is intimately connected with its status as an instance of 'collaborative colonialism' (Law, 2009); an economic colony as opposed to a settlement (Cunneen, 2011: 250). In the 19th century, European nations sought to establish strategic bases through which to control preferential shipping routes in a pattern that has since been described as 'state-organised crime' (Chambliss 1989). Hong Kong was founded during the Opium Wars (1839-1860), in which British naval strength was deployed to force the importation of opium into China (Carroll, 2007). Hong Kong was established as a British treaty port, while Canton, Xia'men and Shanghai were divided up between a number of European nations. The British Government of the time were scathing of its prospects, with Lord Palmerston famously describing the territory as a 'barren rock with nary a house upon it'. Established as a colony in 1841, with further cessation of land in 1898, the territory was for the majority of the twenty-first century governed according to English law, administrative bureaucracy, and custom.

In what follows, we present a history of gangs which seeks to understand their inter-relation with historical, cultural and economic dynamics across time

and space. Our approach is to examine the key turning points and the formation of official responses as the latter has been integral to the definition and public understanding of triad gangs. As we illuminate, Hong Kong's long history with gangs – originally part of an underground political movement in China – emerged centre stage in Hong Kong largely as an adult male criminal group involved in crime and corruption. The link between triads, gangs and young people emerged decades later and remained largely defined and responded to as an adult affair.

*The 1845 Ordinance: Triads, Territory and Control*

Triads have a long history, with historians noting the rise of secret societies attempting to preserve or restore Chinese rule as early as the Han Dynasty (A.D. 1-6) and later with the Ming Dynasty (1368 to 1644 A.D.) (Morgan, 2000). More often, however, their origins are dated around the 1670s (Chan, 1979; see also Bolton et al., 1996). The term "Triad", also known as the "Three United Society" (Chu, 2000), was founded at Tiandihui around the Three Rivers. The term "Triad" came from the three forces of Heaven, Earth, and Man (Chu, 2000). Gradually, as the Triad activities – often involving organized crime - spread among Chinese communities overseas, the English word 'triad' became widespread as a "generic term for the *Tiandihui*" and its "offshoot overseas Chinese communities in Southeast Asia" (Bolton, Hutton, and Pau-fuk, 1996). From the start, the British colonial government, in discussions with Chinese authorities, was well aware of the influx of men associated with a "secret agency" into Hong Kong. Through their triad associations, these men were understood to be plotting the overthrow of the Manchurian Empire (Bickley, 2005).

Triad gangs have long been associated with a distinct argot, rituals, and codes. Initiation ceremonies tended to be  elaborate ceremonies with tests and rituals symbolizing the initiates' "rebirth" and the organization's "new social order," and oath-taking with pledges to the brotherhood in respect of equality, mutual help, secrecy, honesty and integrity, and loyalty (including no betrayals to the police) (Yue, 1993: 34-37). The organization was hierarchical in organisation, including the use of names such as "Dragon Head" or "First Route

Marshall" as the head of the society, the "White Paper Fan" as the administrative manager, and the "Straw Sandal" as the chief messenger/liaison officer among many other names for other positions (Bolton, Hutton, Pau-fuk, 1996: 263).  As Chan (1979) elaborates, Chinese triads stemmed from patriotic secret societies that were "closely guarded" and, members were "punished for breaking an oath of silence" through cruel punishment and even the risk of death.

Although there were triad members in Hong Kong prior to British colonization, almost all triads who had migrated to Hong Kong had joined a society in China, and importantly, attached themselves to certain clan or district organizations (Chu, 2000). As historians have noted, there were at least three distinct types of triads in Hong Kong's early colonial days, formed around ethnicity, trade or as a local territorial gang (Yue 1993). Triads had strong political origins, and anti-government sentiment, with an original desire to overthrow the Ch'ing government in an environment of rising political discontent (Chan 1979: 24). The activities included "printing inflammatory literature", resorting to "offensive mannerism" and "flagrant misconduct" to "instigate the people".

The colonial government recognized the threat posed by this form of political collectivism. Early in the annexation of the territory, civil servants indicated that "the Mandarins persuaded Governor Sir John Davis into passing an Ordinance (Number 1 of 1845)" (Bickley, 2005: 60), with the "preamble" noting the  organized threat to public order from triad organisations. The Ordinance states that  'these associations have objects in View which are incompatible with the Maintenance of good order and constituted authority, and with the security of life and property, and afford, by means of a secret agency, increased facilities for the commission of crime and for the escape of offenders.' As such, the first iteration of the Ordinance proscribed "branding" as part of the punishment. As a magistrate at the time observed, upon expulsion, branded Triad members would be returned to China where their fate would be met with further punishment (Bickley, 2005).  As is noted in the Ordinance:

> Be it enacted and ordained... that... if any person or persons being of Chinese origin in the said Island or its dependencies shall be a member or members of the Triad society or other secret societies... shall in

> consequence thereof be guilty of felony and being duly convicted thereof shall be liable to be imprisoned for any term not exceeding three years with or without hard labour and at the expiration of such term of imprisonment that such person shall be *marked on the right cheek* in the manner usual in the case of military deserters and be expelled from the said Island.

Soone after, administrators objected to branding the cheek as a stigmatizing mark of "permanent infamy," and the ordinance was amended slightly (branding under the arm, discretionary deportation, and restricted to only those involved in Triads rather than other secret societies).

The passage of the Triad Ordinance might be read as a legitimate effort to maintain order and reduce crime within the territory. Against a backdrop of racialised stratification of local Chinese populations, however, such policies can be viewed as a political strategy to suppress Chinese collective action. The 1888 European District Ordinance, for example, outlawed the building of 'Chinese tenements' in European enclaves of Hong Kong, while the 1895 Light and Pass Ordinance required Chinese nationals to carry a lamp and identification at night. Despite the creation of this new law and the difficulties of enforcement, the colonial government admitted that triads:

> flourished unchecked, Hong Kong having become its headquarters for the South of China, and three fourths of the Chinese population were believed to have been enrolled as members... and with a Police ignorant not only of the habits and haunts of the most active and dangerous of its members, but unable to converse with those who did know them, it was not at all wonderful that crime should have been on the increase and its detection become every day more difficult (cited in Morgan, 2000: 61).

In subsequent years, Triad associations made use of Hong Kong's population influx and growing economic prosperity, acting as workers unions and hiring their own fighting forces, while 'individual groups strived to control and expand 'territories' and lucrative rackets in labour market monopolies, for gambling, prostitution, loan-sharking, and protection' (Chu 2000). The political and social environment at the time proved conducive to the success of Triads. Drawing upon the "long term resentment" against the colonial government, Triads took an "antagonistic position" towards the government (Chu 2000). By the 1880s, triad societies had taken control of the labor market – a lucrative enterprise as

increasing numbers of coolies were needed for Hong Kong's growing infrastructure and at the docks of trading companies.

Throughout this period, Triad organisations were also engaged in politics. Government inquiries found that triads had infiltrated the civil service, leading to amendments to the 1845 ordinance (Yue, 1993). By 1909, distinct triad organizations had formed alliances so as to avoid competitive, sometimes violent, clashes, and the unwanted aftermath of police intervention (Yue, 1993). While much of their activities revolved around vice and extortion, they were recruited for patriotic rebellions from the 1890s through to the 1911 revolution (Morgan, 2000). During the Japanese occupation of Hong Kong during World War II, triads were understood to have worked for the Japanese, and allowed to continue their vice activities (Liu, 2001). Triad's were implicated in political unrest in the 1956 Shek Kip Mei incident when the influential Triad group, the 14K (associated with the KMT), rioted after the Nationalist flag was destroyed, and resulted in death of a consulate and his spouse. This event led authorities to create a police division to focus solely on controlling triads, who were subsequently reported to have arrested over 10,000 triad members and deported five hundred leaders. Colonial administrators further amended the Triad and Secret Societies Ordinance to include activities related rituals, paraphernalia or claiming membership.

From the start, colonial authorities were aware of triads whom they perceived as politically volatile and a threat to law and order. The 1845 ordinance was, as with other legislation at the time, likely part of a broader colonial strategy to suppress potential collective action whether politically or criminally oriented. Remarkably, despite the phenomenal growth and social change experienced in Hong Kong, the Triads Ordinance, even with amendments, has remained in place throughout the periods of both British and Chinese sovereignty. While the imaginary of gangs from the global North has largely cast gangs as a youth phenomenon, it is clear from the case of Hong Kong, that triads including "localized gangs," were largely understood and defined as an adult phenomenon. This may be related to the cultural specificities of Triads, but it also connected to conceptions of youth in the colony.

*The 1932 Ordinance: Youth, Occidentalism and Disciplinary Welfare*

Up until 1932, there was no formal recognition of youth as a legal category in Hong Kong. The system was initially one of indifference to the needs of young people.When arrested for trivial offenses like hawking and related street obstruction and public health violations, young people were tried in adult courts (Lee, 1989). In the 1930s, however, the colonial government "imported" the rehabilitation model of the UK with the founding of the Juvenile Offenders Ordinance (1932). Transplantation of the British model, with its emphasis on "care and protection" for children, adopted the frame of children as "weak and malleable beings entitled to special care in their own right" and led to the emergence of a penal welfare model of juvenile justice (Lee, 1989: 43), including the establishment of a juvenile court and probation service.

Over the next thirty years, the Ordinance was used infrequently. One explanation is that authorities had few concerns about youth delinquency as there seemed to be little of it (Jones and Vagg, 2007) with the exception of "groups of troublesome youth called 'ah feis' or 'teddy boys' comparable to the mods and rockers in the UK" but caused few problems for authorities (Adorjan and Chui, 2014). A second explanation, however, is that "youth" as a distinctive stage of the life-course was not readily apparent in Hong Kong. As Jephcott (1971: 34) put it, 'Hong Kong is essentially a society that as yet has little use for the pleasurable aspects of leisure. It believes in hard work and makes few concessions to childhood or youth.' Hours of employment were long, with children aged 14 working for up to eight hours a day, six days a week (Jephcott 1971).

Reflecting on her experiences of teaching criminology in the West Indies, Cain (2000) discerns two parallel problems in the relationship between criminological research and the global South. The first, rooted in Edward Said's classic work *Orientalism* (1978), is a tendency to exoticize the 'Other' of unknown or foreign cultural contexts – as Comaroff and Comaroff (2012: 1) note, representing such contexts as sites of 'parochial wisdom, or antiquarian traditions, of exotic ways and means'. The other, rooted in an unreflective colonial sensibility, is what Cain terms 'Occidentalism', or the assumption of

sameness. She notes further that street-based groups of men 'were not age-stratified' (Cain 2000: 242), and therefore that 'claims that the relationship between age and crime is a cultural universal should be regarded with astonishment' (Cain 2000: 253).

The introduction of the 1932 Ordinance can be said to represent an instance of what Cain terms Occidentalism (Cain 2000). Grafted onto Hong Kong law by administrative fiat, the Juvenile Crime Ordinance was premised on an assumption of sameness in a British climate bedevilled with popular fears and moral panics over youth (Pearson 1983; Brown 2005). Latterly, in the early 1960s, a series of reforms to divert young persons from incarceration emerged, including the 1962 enactment of the Police Superintendent's Discretionary Scheme. Chan (1988: 21) argues that these reforms were an attempt to "imitate" the "sovereign state rather than a response to juvenile delinquency or child welfare". This imitation had important consequences as the colonial government in the aftermath of what has been termed Hong Kong's 'watershed' (Cheung 2009): the 1966/67 riots.

Against a backdrop of unrest during the Cultural Revolution in China, anti-colonial sentiment in Hong Kong became increasingly evident. These sentiments emerged from extreme inequalities of wealth alongside a lack of social provision, weakness of trade unions, a 60-70 hour working week (Cheung 2009). The first of the riots involved largely poor youth voicing discontent over labour conditions, wages and living standards. The colonial administration's inquiry and subsequent response depoliticized the riots, finding youth alienation required discipline and moral training (Jones and Vagg, 2007; Adorjan and Chui, 2014). In 1967, the second riot, over labour disputes, was led by emerging leftists, with authorities believing some youth had been naively misled. The colonial administration's inquiry framed this second riot as relating less to political disruptions and more squarely on youth economic disadvantage.

These events prompted a step-change in Hong Kong's approach to young people (Cheung, 2009). In the aftermath of the riots, a series of reforms were introduced, in the form of the 'Four Pillars' of housing, education, health and social services (McLaughlin, 1993; Adorjan and Chui 2013). Compulsory education was introduced at both primary and secondary level, and a systematic

improvement of housing, health and welfare. Alongside these reforms, the juvenile courts and probation service began to be used more systematically as a means of responding to youth crime. These apparently bifurcatory reforms have been conceptualised as a form of 'disciplinary welfare' (Gray, 1997), involving welfarist policies with a strong basis in moral guidance, which reverberates to this day. As Vagg (1998: 260) argues, there remains little tolerance for even relatively minor forms of non-conformism, and as a result 'harsh strategies are used with a comparatively large proportion of minor and first offenders, unless they are prepared to demonstrate openly a level of remorse, contrition, and respect for authority.' The techniques of social control deployed on the youthful population during this period therefore reflected the use of both punitive and welfarist policies to control youthful activities, and ensure economic productivity. As Gray (1996: 320) summarises:

> We may be over-emphasising the seriousness of juvenile crime in Hong Kong, dealing with it in an unnecessarily harsh manner, and unjustifiably interfering in young people's lives. Juveniles are also part of the community, and greater attention should be given to protecting their rights and reducing segregation by developing more community-based alternatives to tackle their criminal behaviour. (Gray, 1996: 320)

Brown (2005) argues that the so-called 'discovery' of juvenile delinquency in the late nineteenth century in the UK was related less to increased rates of crime, and more to the desire to control and regulate working-class youth in a period of low economic productivity. For Brown, the category of 'delinquency' developed amid broader ideas of child-saving and class-based moral education, coinciding with an economic need for factory-workers, and a public zeal for reform. Brown also makes a clear connection between colonialism and imperialist constructions of youth, with similar logics applied to young people in the processes of colonisation. In Hong Kong, it is notable that these shifts in policy took place amid a change in economic production mode, towards an increasing demand for flexible, short-term labour. The move toward compulsory education resulted in a twin-track educational system in which those who were less educated were denied access to economic opportunity (Groves, Ho and Chiu 2011). This

altogether contributes to high youth unemployment, and ultimately the fragmentation of the life route of many young people (Chiu, 2005).

From the 1930s through to the 1970s, then, young people increasingly came under the watchful eye of colonial authorities. Despite young people's initial legal invisibility, this gradually shifted with Hong Kong's rapid social and economic changes and political discomfort at youth-led political protests. The juvenile courts, initially transplanted from the British model, came to adopt a distinct   paternalistic approach, guided by the principles of discipline and control.  At the same time, triad presence continued, and became embedded within Hong Kong's informal economy, and for which its members' were recruited among the growing population of unemployed youth. There was, however, no reference to youth street gangs as has been commonly understood in the United States and Europe.

*The 1974 Foundation: Corruption, Reform and the Problem of Gangs*

By the 1970s, it became clear that Hong Kong's social ecosystem was buttressed by a criminal and political equilibrium in which palms were greased and blind eyes turned. This structured system of bribery represented a microcosm of the broader system of 'collaborative colonialism' at play in Hong Kong society at large (Law 2009). Alongside the sweeping reforms in housing, education, health and social services (Adorjan and Chui, 2013), the Governor Murray McLehose founded the Independent Commission Against Corruption (ICAC). The establishment of ICAC was the direct result of the public exposure and condemnation of the symbiotic relationship and syndicated corruption that had developed between Triads (and their vice activities) and strategically placed police officers (Yue, 1993). Lo (1999) argues that the concentration of power in the hands of a small number of elite colonial officials rendered the system uniquely open to corrupt practices. In this context, civil servants were 'not accountable ... [and] had the power to manipulate their positions for private gain, whereas criminals used money in exchange for protection and administrative fixes' (Lo, 1999: 76). By 1960, it was estimated that there were 600,000 triad-members in Hong Kong - one in every seven of the Hong Kong Chinese

population of 6 million (Lo, 1999). As reflected by Lui Lok, a powerful detective staff sergeant, he said that "law did exist, police enforcing did not" (Lo, 1999:67).

It is notable that during this period that Triad gangs began to emerge elsewhere. The passage of the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965 resulted in Chinese, particularly from the southern region and Hong Kong, migrating for family reunification during the late 1960s and early 1970s. It was at this time that Chinese gangs, often affiliated with martial arts clubs and Tongs (Chinese mutual aid societies), came to be a fixture of New York's and San Francisco's Chinatowns (Joe, 1994; Zhang and Chin, 2003). In Southeast Asia, North America, and Europe, Chinese 'Tongs' emerged as mutual aid societies to provide welfare, support, and social control for local Chinese residents (Chu 2000; Chan 1979). Today, although triad members have distinct affiliations to a particular society, they nevertheless believe they are part of the "universal triad brotherhood" who are "under the same roof of the Hung Family" in protection of each other (Chu, 2000). This suggests that whereas gangs are, generally, territorially rooted on a neighborhood level, triads hold a broader sense of diasporic identity (Brotherton, 2009).

One consequence of these internal and external processes was a diffusion of ritual and symbolism within Triad organisations. While certain traditions remained, such as participation in the lion dance, martial arts dojo, and the existence of hand signs and poems, other traditions were discarded. Chan notes a 'gradual loosening of the hierarchical structure' coupled with 'diminishing central power and control', leading to an increase in splinter groups (Chan 1979: 45).  The Triad Ordinance was amended to reflect these alterations such that 'claiming' Triad membership became a crime in itself. As Bolton, Hutton, and Pau-fuk (1996) note:

> It was argued by the authorities that the triads, as a result of police pressure, had ceased to conform to the model of triad societies presented in the colonial literature on triads … and enshrined in the law. They had, for instance, largely ceased to hold set-piece initiation ceremonies, since these had been the target of police raids. In most cases the ritual has been reduced to a simple verbal exchange, sometimes accompanied by the gift of a so-called 'lucky money' envelope in the form of a 'red packet' ('lai see' or 'lai sze', leih sih) containing HK $36 or $36.6 (approximately US $4.50) or even HK $3.60 (US 50¢).

These changes were significant in relation to the development of youth gang formations. Given the symbolism of rituals to "excite the feelings of individuals" allowing the secret societies to "claim them totally" (Chan 1979, p. 35), the loss of rituals had important implications. With the loss of the initiation ceremony, recruitment and vetting practices were weakened, and the experience of socialisation into Triad norms diminished (Chan 1979: 117). One consequence was the rise of localised factions that are more akin to youth gangs. As Chan notes, 'young, strong armed elements form[ed] their own splinter groups to operate rackets whilst still younger delinquent gangs terrorise neighbourhood "turf"' (Chan 1979: 34). Chan notes that the primary reason for joining a Triad was to seek protection and security (1979). For example, one claimed that he joined the Triad because "I feel obliged to join the Triad because I owed them, I was protected from them when I needed it." One claimed that his *dai lo,* or big brother, also provided him with a place to stay overnight when he was involved in a family conflict and left home (Chan 1979). Therefore, in addition to exclusive gang and/or Triad activities that the *dai lo* might involve one with, the institution also represents a source of refuge outside of home when many become adrift.

By the 1980s it was clear that triad businesses continued, particularly in sex work, drug trafficking, gambling and extortion (Yue, 1993). At the same time, the government's earlier pillars of reform resulted in the full-fledged emergence of social work, with a particular focus on outreach to youth, who were increasingly perceived as "latch-key" and "at risk." Social workers of the time recount their experiences in working with "boy gangs" whom they understood from traditional theories of youth gangs from the United States (Kwok, 1988; Wong, 1989). Kwok (1988: 56-57) observed that many troublesome youngsters were likely to join the triads, and concurred with the government's view:

> Triad activities are of a menace in two main ways: gang activity, the threatening behavior, the assaults, the intimidation and the blackmail, and deep involvement in organized crimes like drugs, protection rackets, vice and gambling... A discussion document [from the government] also outlined a typical progression of a delinquent's involvement in organized crime. It states that a boy may join a youth gang involved in juvenile delinquent behaviors. If he agrees to follow the leader who is a triad member, he will gradually be involved in gang fights, settlement talks and other organized

crime. Of course, not all the boys joining youth gangs will become involved in triad related activities and will take a criminal career.

Similarly, Lo (2011) has addressed the process through which such youth gang formations relate to adult Triad groups. Basing his findings on several tranches of data-collection from the 1980s onward, Lo argues that young people in marginalised housing estates undergo a process of 'triadization' as they grow up. This process represents a slower and more diffuse process of street socialisation, in which alienated, street-based youth 'gradually inherit and adapt triad norms and values through interaction with their friends in youth gangs under the umbrella of triad societies' (Lo, 2011: 560).

By the 1990s, youth involvement in street-based groups became a focus of the government's attention. Terms introduced into public debate include "yeh ching" 夜青 or "young night drifters" (Groves et al, 2011), "gai tong" 街童 meaning 'street children', "cheun tong" 村童 meaning 'children in public estates', "tong dong" 童党 meaning 'youth gang', "at-risk youth" (Lee, 2011), "fei zai" 飛仔, meaning youth with behavior that is not socially acceptable (Lee 2011), "B boys" for those with a passion for breakdancing (Groves et al, 2011) and "gu wak zai" 蠱惑仔. meaning 'young and dangerous youth'. Altogether, a majority of the labels associated with gangs and triads hold a negative connotation by the society. Such popular fears featured in legislative council discussions on the proposed organized crime bill. As Eric Li, from the Hong Kong Legislative Council, stated:

> Many of our youth are attracted by curiosity to the mysterious rules and organization of triad societies. They are falsely led to believe that triad societies are gatherings of 'heroes' who will fend for each other out of a sense of brotherhood and that triad membership is something to be proud of; so they join the societies voluntarily. There are also innocent young people who are intimidated by triad members into joining. There are still others who would fall pretty to the temptation of material gain and become triads and engage in illegal activities. (Mr. Eric Li, 18 December 1991, Hong Kong Legislative Council).

From the 1970s through the 1980s, Hong Kong witnessed rapid population growth and economic development. The impact of these changes on triads and youth gangs was twofold. First it clearly impacted and disrupted the symbiotic relations between triads and authorities, resulting in the formation of ICAC. In

doing so, triad groups' became more flexible, accommodating and reconfiguring their organizations, businesses, and relationships, including a more active engagement with young people. As Triad gangs became more diffuse, they came to resemble street-based youth gangs. As Kwok notes: "since triads are disorganised, it is more appropriate to name them gangs. They are opportunists; you can find their footsteps wherever the money lies" (Kwok, 2017: 19). Second, the changes felt in Hong Kong included a growing visibility of a youth population were perceived as "at risk" with their "latchkey" status and in need of structure, guidance and supervision. These "needs" could be addressed through compulsory education and social work intervention, informed by British social work traditions. The subsequent 'discovery' of the problem of youth gangs in the territory therefore emerged both from changes within Triad organisations, youth unemployment, and the growth of social work services.

**Conclusion**

It would be fair to say that the distinct organization of Hong Kong's triad gangs has been shaped through colonial statecraft. Policies that were intended to control political and criminal mobilisations gave way to a more symbiotic relationship. Ironically, Hong Kong was a lucrative and entrepreneurial entrepot for both British Governments and Triads. Historical reflections remind us of the shifts, turns and accommodations the colonial authorities made in their relations with Triads. Importantly, it is also worth noting that the undercurrent of Triads' involvement in politic, has also surfaced at various points in Hong Kong's history. From local labour disputes to the Shek Kip Mei riots and the Japanese occupation, Triad gangs have mobilised as a non state actor with political power.

These historical antecedents help illuminate the contemporary political moment. Formerly known as a centre of laissez-faire economics (Chiu and Lui, 2009) and low rates of crime (Broadhurst, Lee and Chan, 2002), today Hong Kong is increasingly a byword for mass protest, civil disobedience and police brutality; and Triad gangs have once again played a part. In the current wake of a series of mass protests against a new Extradition Bill (2019), protesters were assaulted by a masked group of attackers. Dressed in white, and wielding metal

poles, the group attacked members of the public at random as they travelled home to Yuen Long, in the northern territories of Hong Kong. At least forty-five were injured. There is clear evidence that the attackers were triad-affiliated, and widespread speculation that the attack was politically motivated, with the triad gangs acting as 'thugs-for-hire' for political forces (Varese and Wong, 2019). It is widely speculated that Triad groups have forged allegiances with mainland China, reflecting the shifting sands of 'collaborative colonialism' at play in the territory (Law, 2009).

How do "youth gangs", so fundamental to the criminology of the United States and Europe, fit into the Hong Kong context? Historical analysis suggests that despite the transplantation of the juvenile court in the 1930s, the notion of "youth" was not fully recognised as legal and social entity until the 1970s, when political concerns over youth unrest prompted wide-ranging interventions. The ramifications of these changes were significant, in effect constituting the conditions for street-based youth gangs to develop. In effect, then, the youth gang phenomenon in Hong Kong can be said to be a consequence of colonialism.

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