

Gangs and the Gig Economy: Triads, Precarity and Illicit Work in Hong Kong

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Paid employment in the criminal economy is, in many ways, the essence of precarious labour yet to date criminological work on the so-called ‘gig economy’ is scarce. Here we apply emergent sociological literature on ‘post-Fordist’ working cultures to precarious youth employment in Hong Kong, arguing: (1) recent reorganizations of labour markets towards flexible entrepreneurship are mirrored in the illicit economy; (2) a shift in structural features of triad gangs has led to a parallel form of ‘network sociality’; and (3) triad-affiliated youth remained rooted in place-based ‘communities of practice’ that form a point of difference from existing theory. In concluding, we reflect on the implications of these arguments for the study of illicit economies, triads and post-Fordist working cultures.

KEY WORDS: youth, triads, precarity, gangs, Hong Kong, illicit economy

INTRODUCTION

In 2019, in the wake of a series of mass protests in Hong Kong, a brutal assault on protesters was carried out by a masked group of attackers. There is evidence that the attackers were affiliated to local triads, with widespread speculation that the groups were acting as ‘thugs-for-hire’ (Varese and Wong 2018; Lo *et al.* 2021). Those arrested were mainly local labourers or unemployed, with a day rate estimated at \$1,000HKD (£95GBP).¹ More recently, in 2021, a major drugs raid that recovered HK\$200 million (£18.7m GBP) of narcotics found that the young people tasked with moving, selling and storing the products were paid \$300HKD (£28GBP) per day.² It is notable in both instances that the pay available from these forms of illicit labour does not differ markedly from minimum-wage employment in Hong Kong, which at \$40HKD (£4.10GBP)

1 <https://www.smh.com.au/world/asia/hong-kong-police-make-arrests-after-triad-attacks-20190723-p529xx.html>.

2 SCMP, 19 August 2021, Hong Kong student arrested in HK\$200 million drugs bust, as police ‘break up’ ‘sophisticated’ gang: <https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/law-and-crime/article/3145643/hong-kong-student-arrested-hk200-million-drugs-bust>.

per hour has recently been found to 'fail' the 'working poor' of the city (Oxfam 2022).³ Today, as Siu and Jin note (2022: 125), 'a pool of new precarious labour' are facing 'severe challenges in Hong Kong'. This substantial reserve army of unskilled workers, coupled with the established political and economic weight of triad societies in Hong Kong (Chu 2000; Lo 2012), creates a set of conditions ripe for exploitative labour. As in the licit economy, 'the riskiest and most stigmatized tasks in domestic and international drug markets are left to unskilled criminal labourers who are almost invariably poorly paid' (Ruggiero and South 1997: 65).

The porous boundary between licit and illicit markets has for many years formed a focal point in studies of criminal markets. Criminal entrepreneurs tend to draw less clear distinctions between legality and illegality than lawmakers might, pursuing profitable activities wherever they are to be found (Hobbs 2013). It is for this reason that Castells (2000) characterizes the global criminal economy as an intrinsic component of the international financial marketplace, creating and exploiting gaps in law and regulation between states for profit. In this context, it is notable that shifts in the organization of the licit economy are often visible in the illicit economy (Venkatesh 2008). As Hobbs notes, for example, the drugs trade 'finds parallels in the legitimate economy where labour (like the mode of production within which it is framed) has become fragmented and old forms of production have become redundant' (Hobbs 1995: xviii). Most recently, global labour markets have been reconfigured by the emergence of a 'gig' economy, involving the 'unbundling of specific tasks which can be performed at specific times... without a traditional intermediary employer' (OECD 2017). Market disruption from app-based, tech-savvy global businesses such as Airbnb, Uber and Amazon have posed sharp challenges to established national industries such as hotels, taxis and postal services. Similarly, recent criminological research has evidenced a notable shift in the operation of drug markets in the wake of Darkweb or app-based methods of purchase and delivery (Bakken *et al.* 2022). To date, however, the subjective features and theoretical implications of these shifts for young workers have yet to be fully explored.

In this paper we seek to contribute new conceptual and empirical knowledge to the study of illicit markets by applying the emergent sociological literature on 'post-Fordist' working cultures to data from a study of youth labour and leisure in Hong Kong. The paper makes three primary arguments. First, reorganizations of traditional labour markets that privilege flexible entrepreneurship are also present among workers in the illicit economy. Though precaritization is not a new phenomenon (Furlong *et al.* 2016), recent years have seen an amplification and acceleration that presents a stark choice for young people excluded from mainstream labour markets. Second, and mirroring these economic trends in the licit economy, a long-term shift in the structural features of triad gangs in Hong Kong has dissipated the forms of interpersonal reciprocity that were once a foundation of their illicit enterprise. As a result, young people report a breakdown in trust that mirrors the forms of 'network sociality' (Wittel 2001) visible in other labour markets. Third, however, unlike urban metropolitan workers in the creative economies, around which the theory of 'immaterial labour' has evolved (Gill and Pratt 2008), young men employed in illicit markets remained rooted in place-based 'communities of practice' and evinced a class-based 'street habitus' (Wacquant 2008; Fraser 2013) that forms an important point of difference from existing theory. In concluding, we reflect on the implications of these arguments for the study of illicit economies, triads and post-Fordist working cultures more broadly.

3 A recent study of triad involvement in 'securing' the protest camps of the Umbrella Movement found similarly that 'each of those who participated in protecting occupiers would receive HK\$1,000 [US\$125] a day. The attendees in Mongkok were provided with free lunch and dinner at designated Chinese tea restaurants' (Lo *et al.* 2021).

CRIME AS BUSINESS: YOUTH, ILLICIT MARKETS AND THE GIG ECONOMY

The study of criminal organizations has, for years, drawn attention to the blurred lines between licit and illicit activities. On one hand, scholars have pointed to criminal activity that occurs within the context of licit employment, be it ‘airline staff members who engage in smuggling cocaine’ (Kleemans and van de Bunt 2008: 186–7) or organized theft from the high street (Ditton 1977). On the other, criminal organizations are frequently engaged in licit industries, be it as a method of money laundering or means of appearing ‘legit’ (von Lampe 2016). These observations have given rise to a burgeoning field of research that approaches criminal markets from the perspective of economics (Reuter 1984), business (Anderson 1979), and enterprise (Smith 1980). For these scholars, organized crime acts as ‘a mirror of the legitimate business world’ (Smith 1980: 187),⁴ or simply ‘part of the business system’ (Ianni and Ianni 1972: 61) with illicit market activity following a comparable logic to the ‘upper world’ (Schelling, cited Allum and Sands 2004: 134–5). While some have focused on the application of economic logic to questions of structure, organization and decision-making in the illicit economy, others have sought to situate the *modus operandi* of criminal markets within the context of the changing political economy (Block and Chambliss 1981; Hobbs 1998; Ruggiero 2000). In what follows, after a brief sketch of these arguments, we explore the significance of post-Fordist working practices on young people involved in the illicit economy, with specific attention to experiences in Hong Kong.

Organized Crime, political economy and post-Fordism

Early scholarship on criminal organizations drew heavily on industrial sociology (Mack 1972; McIntosh 1975) to interrogate the economic logic of illicit markets. As Block and Chambliss (1981: 128) note, ‘[o]rganized crime is not a modern, urban, or lower class phenomenon: it is a historical one whose changes mirror changes in civil society—the political economy’. McIntosh’s (1975) sociology of criminal organizations, for example, traced the emergence of professional crime in a way that parallels the emergence of industrial society, with groups adapting to the specific demands of market opportunities. Picaresque groupings occurred in pre-industrial societies, involved brigands or bandits working as sole operators, while craft-based crime was rooted in industrializing economies, with specialist skills in theft or pickpocketing honed through apprenticeships similar to those in the other manual trades (Mack 1972; Foster 1990). Post-war affluence made possible ‘new stable patterns of professional crime’ (McIntosh 1975: 20) that came to form an occupational subculture (Mack and Kerner 1975) with criminal gangs converting the rugged enterprise of the urban working class into forms of illicit enterprise. As Taylor (2019: 22) argues, ‘[I]ike the Fordist industries that dominated each local working-class area of residence, the local “economies of crime” were highly regulated structures, with their own developed hierarchies and system of recruitment’. These forms of criminal organization were rooted in the same communities that supplied labour to the industrial economy, and the forms of criminal enterprise (Smith 1980) that emerged exhibited similar characteristics (Hobbs 2013). Project crime marked a shift towards the crimes of the urban industrial economy where population density created deposits of wealth that were ripe for armed robbery, safe-cracking or fraud. Business crime, finally, represented an evolution from these localized markets (McIntosh 1976), with groups diversifying into racketeering, protection and other emergent economic opportunities. According to Mack and Kerner (1975: 12), this new generation of ‘able criminals’ were not gangsters but brokers: ‘link-men rather than tycoons’.

4 As Hobbs notes, ‘in the case of professional and organized crime, we are inclined to lurch mindlessly through the looking glass rather than stand back and consider the reflection’ (Hobbs 1995: xix).

Notably, however, these conclusions were drawn as the star of industrialism was beginning to wane. While industrial contraction gradually emerged across the 20th century, there were particular accelerations of unemployment after 1979 that wreaked devastation on former industrial areas (Fraser and Clark 2021). In this context, subsequent sociological accounts of the political economy of organized crime have stressed the significance of post-industrial market economies privileging a ‘new gloves-off entrepreneurship’ (Hobbs 2013: 93), and an increasingly fragmented and delocalized criminal economy. For Ruggiero (2000), criminal markets can no longer be characterized in terms of ‘Fordist’ manufacture—large scale, coherent and local—but rather in terms of the lean, deregulated ‘Toyota’ model of ‘just-in-time’ economics. This post-Fordist economy involves a decentralized ‘urban bazaar’ constituted by ‘a network of retailers, ambulatory vendors, distributors, wholesalers, seasonal workers, who are all required to possess flexibility and versatile skills’ (Ruggiero 2000: 29), in which ‘informal economies and conventional criminal activities end up almost coinciding’ (ibid.: 64). These arguments suggest the need for contemporary theories of organized crime and illicit markets to be attuned to the dynamics of post-Fordism, precarity and flexible ‘gig work’.

Youth, precarity and illicit markets

Precarity has come to play a central role in the contemporary global economy, with post-Fordist economics and neoliberal policies driving an increasingly decentralized and flexible labour market (Gill and Pratt 2008). Locales around the globe are witnessing profound changes in the nature of labour, and the rise of insecure, casualized and occasional work. While these forms of precarity are not new, the rise of various forms of insecure, flexible and precarious employment has further entrenched divisions and created new forms of subjectivity and social relations (Furlong 2015). Standing (2011: 102) characterizes these shifts as having uneven consequences, with some (‘the grinners’) actively seeking flexible work due to savings or security, while others (‘the groaners’) trapped in the precarious economy. These non-standard work schedules and irregular hours impact on young people’s ability to coordinate shared time with significant others, often with negative effects on the sustainability of relationships (Woodman 2012; Whillans 2014).

Scholars of the effects of these conditions (Adkins 2005) have probed the material, affective and social effects of precarious work in the cultural and creative industries (Gill and Pratt 2008), hospitality sector (Farrugia *et al.* 2018) and service economy (Malin and Chandler 2017; Bates *et al.* 2019; Qi and Li 2020). Flexibility, reputation and networks are increasingly central to this economy with traditional notions associated with work and work-based identity—career aspirations and mobility, loyalty and commitment to the job or employer—increasingly fragmented (Standing 2011). While existing research has focused on cultural and creative workers as ‘representatives of the “brave new world of work”’, there is a need to extend this empirical range to ‘illegalized, casualized and temporary employment’ (Gill and Pratt 2008: 3). Paid employment in the criminal economy is, in many ways, the essence of precarious labour—menial, repetitive and often poorly paid work with exceptionally high risks of injury or arrest (Goffman 2015), with precarity often felt most keenly in communities where the risk of victimization is also present (Fraser *et al.* 2018). As Hardt and Negri (2000: 52) argue, the new forms of subjectivity that emerge from these conditions act ‘on all registers of the social order extending down to the depths of the social world’, encompassing the criminal ‘underworld’ or ‘street field’ (Shammas and Sandberg 2016).

While the ‘gig economy’ has yet to feature in criminological theories of organized crime, there are indications of parallel shifts that bear further investigation. In Chicago, for example, multi-neighbourhood corporate gangs have been ‘supplanted by horizontally organized neighbourhood cliques’ (Aspholm 2020: 6–7), hustling in a fragmented drug economy where gang

identities are increasingly interchangeable (Lopez-Aguado and Walker 2021). As Schilling *et al.* (2019) have determined, there are marked parallels in the strategies young people employ to navigate these new relations across contexts in both global North and South. Drawing on interviews with young people across four cities, the authors found homologous ways of dealing with instability ‘that traverse the North-South divide while being managed tactically in singular ways’ (Schilling *et al.* 2019), echoing comparative studies of criminal street cultures (Heitmeyer *et al.* 2019). In this sense young people’s employment in the illicit economy bears an increasingly striking similarity to conditions of precarity in the mainstream labour market. There is, however, a need for new empirical evidence from diverse geographies, particularly outside of the global North.

Youth and the illicit economy in Hong Kong

The city of Hong Kong has, for many years, been the centre of *laissez-faire* economic policy, known for a form of flexible adaptation and work ethic that propelled its success as a ‘Chinese global city’ (Chiu and Lui 2009). Running parallel to this ascent, however, has been the maintenance of a ‘residual welfare’ system disincentivizing state support, and a ‘twin track’ educational system that simultaneously includes and excludes (Siu and Jin 2022). As a result of these economic policies, Hong Kong scholars have noted a rise in ‘useless’ labourers and ‘insignificant individuals’ who are ‘taken back from the capitalist system in Hong Kong’ (Groves *et al.* 2012). This altogether contributes to high youth unemployment, and ultimately the fragmentation of the life course of many young people (Chiu 2011). As a result, young people are susceptible to exploitative, precarious and non-standard working practices in both licit and illicit economies (Oxfam 2022; Siu and Jin 2022).

The history of triad organization in Hong Kong has traced a different arc to the evolution of organized crime elsewhere, but is similarly tied to the economic fates and fortunes of the industrial economy. Emerging from a confluence of historical, cultural and urban forces, secret societies for Simmel represented a form of refuge where alternative norms could be nurtured (Simmel 1906: 472). Historians noted the rise of secret societies attempting to preserve Chinese rule as early as the Han Dynasty (A.D. 1–6) and later with the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644 A.D.), with the existence of ‘secret societies’ in Hong Kong being noted by the British colonial government almost immediately, with a legal ordinance passed in 1845 (Bolton *et al.* 1996). 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). As Hong Kong rapidly industrialized, developing a global economic reputation for manufacturing and exporting inexpensive and high-quality goods (Sit 1998), triads established a symbiotic relationship with Hong Kong’s local economy, offering services and products in the grey and black zones. This included providing protection for legitimate businesses from attacks of rival gangs and the distribution of heroin (Chu 2000).

By the 1990s, Hong Kong’s manufacturing presence in the global economy declined as China came to be the largest exporter, and Hong Kong shifted towards a service economy and international finance centre. As Lo (2010: 863) suggests, in ‘the early 1990s, Hong Kong’s triad gangs were increasingly forging partnerships with mainland criminal syndicates, providing them with crime techniques, intelligence and cash, in return for cheap manpower, drugs, guns and girls in the sex trade.’ This included members from different groups co-joining on business projects (e.g. underground casinos), members entering into partnerships with legitimate entrepreneurs to monopolize on new legal opportunities (e.g. sole supplier for interior decorations for new residential complexes) and members investing in legitimate businesses especially in the service

and entertainment sectors (Lo and Kwok 2017). At the same time, members of these groups continued to specialize in street-level organized crime (e.g. fake products, illegal bookmaking) (Chu 2000). As Chu (2005: 7) observes, triad traditions of entrepreneurialism continued, but subsequent to the 1997 handover, 'adjusted to the changing environment' becoming more flexible in their economic pursuits, based on individual members' efforts, and in line with the broader laissez-faire policy.

Over time, scholars have noted shifts in the structure and organization of triad groups that demonstrate parallels with post-Fordist working practices and 'just-in-time' economics (Ruggiero 2000). As opposed to the traditional image of corporate, rule-bound and ritualistic organizations, researchers have argued that contemporary triads are 'less and less distinguishable from other youth and street gangs', acting not as a 'job for life' but a contingent and casualized form of employment that takes its place alongside other forms of precarious work (Lee *et al.* 2006; Kwok 2017). In the process, as Varese and Wong note, triads have changed 'from a rather well organized and coordinated set of criminal groups all subscribing to the same rules and rituals, to a more disorganized entities, with low level of internal cohesion, projected towards exploiting business opportunities in China rather than enforcing territorial control' (2018: 28). Notably, Zhang and Chin (2003: 480) have made similar observations regarding the transnational activities of triads, with a trend towards 'freelance' activities and associations involving 'temporary alliances and sporadic engagement ... [and] limited vertical hierarchy'. Like Ruggiero's notion of the 'urban bazaar', Zhang and Chin (2003: 485) argue for the 'emergence of a different criminal subculture whose members come from a wide variety of backgrounds including import-export businessmen, community leaders, restaurant owners, ordinary wage earners, gamblers, housewives and the unemployed'. These shifts demonstrate marked parallels with changes in the licit 'gig economy', with flexible working practices within 21st-century labour markets finding an echo in illicit labour. These changing dynamics suggest the need to re-appraise the nature and meaning of work in the illicit economy in Hong Kong, raising broader questions regarding shifts in political economy.

FIELDSITE, METHODS AND DATA

A major ambition of the study was to interrogate contemporary theoretical debates regarding precarious labour through the lens of young people's participation in illicit markets, through grounded empirical observation and historical analysis. Following Chen (2010: 3), we seek to centre Hong Kong as primary of reference as it provides an important site for interrogation given the long-standing presence of triads in the local crime and vice markets and more latterly, in legitimate businesses. Their 'businesses'—whether illegal or legal—have been embedded in the broader shifts in Hong Kong's turn to knowledge and service industries. Triads' responses to these shifts mirror broader economic transformations as the heart of membership moves away from sentiments of loyalty and brotherhood to more fleeting, flexible and temporary connections.

Data and methods

The study, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (United Kingdom) and Research Grants Council (Hong Kong), sought to generate new empirical evidence relating to young people's work and leisure activities in Hong Kong and the United Kingdom (Batchelor *et al.* 2020). The Hong Kong fieldwork was conducted primarily in Yat Tung, a large public housing estate with a mixture of social housing and owner-occupied leases, coupled with high youth populations and perceived 'problem' youth (Fraser *et al.* 2017). Built on the reclaimed land of Lantau Island, the estate is notorious amongst Hong Kongers

for its isolated location and lack of local amenities. Data collection comprised 6 months of observation, seven interviews with local stakeholders, six focus groups and 20 interviews with young people. The focus groups and interviews explored the experiences of a combination of 'ordinary' and 'at risk' youth, accessed through a combination of local non-governmental organizations (NGOs), social work outreach and snowball sampling. The focus groups included 22 participants, with young women and men representing 36 per cent ($n = 8$) and 64 per cent ($n = 14$) of the sample, respectively. The majority of young people were enrolled in school full-time and not working, with slightly more of the young men were working full- and part-time jobs than women.

Young people were asked about their local area, work, identity and plans for the future. It emerged that in the community there existed an archipelago of differently constituted social groupings,⁵ and regularized employment in the illicit economy. This followed with in-depth interviews that included 11 young women and 9 men, with the mean age of both being 20 years (range 17–24 years). The majority were enrolled in full-time study. Unlike participants in focus groups, most participants were working full- or part-time. To better understand the meanings of these identities and their relation to work we conducted another 20 interviews, via an outreach service, with triad-affiliated youths (16 men and 4 women, mean age of both being 15 years, range 13–17). The majority were enrolled in school or vocational training, three were unemployed and another three worked full- or part-time in the service industry. We also interviewed three youth workers from the outreach service, and 15 years of social work logs were translated and analysed alongside a media sources and grey literature.

Access was arranged via an NGO providing social work and detached on-site youth work. Practices of *guanxi* mean that people are more likely to engage in research if they are introduced through a known and trusted intermediary (Park and Lunt 2015), and researchers (both Cantonese and English speaking) accompanied the nightly shift of outreach street-workers, which proved productive both in terms of developing meaningful research relationships and in establishing rapport with potential participants. Interviews took place in the offices of the social work agency, as well as local hang-outs including snooker halls. Interviews were semi-structured in format with all interviewees asked the same key questions but with sufficient space given for interviewees to recount their own narratives. Interview and observational data were transcribed, anonymized, translated and analysed by the project team. Detailed ethical protocols for the provision of informed consent, avoidance of harm and confidentiality were approved, at the time of the study, by the authors' institutional review board.

Analysis has involved an ongoing, iterative process. The research team met regularly during the course of the project, most often online, and in person through study visits to each of the two research sites. Through this approach, we sought to analyse the data set as a whole, drawing on sensitizing concepts and emergent themes elicited from both research sites, including Cantonese and English language concepts. Management and searching of the data involved a combination of hand coding and the use of NVivo. The empirical data presented in this paper focus specifically on a subtheme of precarious and illicit labour, exploring the blurring of criminal markets with the precarious 'gig economy'. Though fieldwork was conducted between 2013 and 2015, analysis has continued in line with unfolding political, cultural and economic shifts in everyday life for young people in Hong Kong.

5 Terms included 'yeh ching' 夜青 or 'young night drifters' (Groves *et al.* 2012), 'gai tong' 街童 meaning 'street children', 'cheun tong' 村童 meaning 'children in public estates', 'tong dong' 童黨 meaning 'youth gang', 'at-risk youth' (Lee 2011) and 'gu wak zai' 蠱惑仔 meaning 'young and dangerous'.

SHADOW ENTREPRENEURIALISM: PRECARIOUS WORK BETWEEN LICIT AND ILLICIT ECONOMIES

The precarity of young people's transitions to work has long been a focus in the sociology of youth. School-to-work transitions have for many years been marked by casualized, part-time or temporary employment (Furlong and Cartmel 2006), with these problems disproportionately impacting on those with fewer educational qualifications. As Furlong and colleagues (2016) suggest, for young adults living in deprived communities the predominant experience is often one of 'churning' between low-paid, insecure 'poor work', poor-quality training and periods of unemployment (see also: Johnston *et al.* 2000; MacDonald and Marsh 2005; Shildrick *et al.* 2010). Against this backdrop, a body of criminological research has established the significance of employment in the criminal economy, with loss of jobs leading some to an apprenticeship into the illicit economy (Nayak 2006).

Hong Kong is no exception to these forces of change. Despite the mirage of Hong Kong's international finance status and *laissez-faire* capitalism, income inequality is sharp. The forces of globalization and neoliberalism also contribute to the city's shift from its industrial and manufacturing presence to its current knowledge-oriented society (Chiu 2011). The education and the labour market have become increasingly disjointed, with the realities of employment ever more distant with stagnant growth in the economy and knowledge-based industries (Augustin-Jean and Cheung 2020). Increasing numbers of young people find ways to access some form of education, and attain 'credentials' to employment, and so the labour pool grows larger. In one focus group (FG05), participants discussed the intense pressure to get into mainstream education:⁶

FG05-04M: Because... Afraid of not catching up well with the study progress. That creates a lot of pressure already. Because... We need to get into university.

L: Getting into university is very important?

FG05-03M: There are a lot of university students nowadays... If you cannot get into university, how can you compete with others?

FG05-02M: Yes... The competition.

FG05-04M: All of you agree with this? Or anyone disagree? Just like Li Ka Shing who did not receive university education but can be very rich?

FG05-02: But that era has passed already. We cannot build our family by making plastic flowers.

The industriousness of Hong Kong in the 1970s, where families laboured in the 'factory without walls' (Gill and Pratt 2008) to make plastic flowers for export, formed a foundation in the economic development of Hong Kong in the latter decades of the 20th century. Chiu and Lui (2009) argue that it was in part the flexible adaptation and work ethic of Hong Kong residents that underpinned its subsequent growth into a 'Chinese global city'—an entrepreneurialism borne of limited space and hard graft. Today, however, as this group suggest, these days are gone.

For young people in the study, job opportunities were primarily low-skilled and part-time in the service sector. If there are no local jobs available, they often seek work, even if only part-time, in other districts, but this becomes a diminishing return with transportation costs. As YPSM stated: 'Young people nowadays, especially with a degree, can't really find a job within this area.

⁶ Quotation extracts include the initial of the interviewer (L) and participants. Young people from the different projects are referenced as: Focus Group (FG), their case number, and male (M) or female (F); Individual interviews as Young Person (YP), their case number, and male (M) or female (F); and Triad interviews as Triad-Affiliated (TA), their case number, and male (M) or female (F).

It's impossible... There're not that many jobs that require high technical skills even at the airport for the university graduates. So you have to find jobs somewhere else.' YP4F similarly had worked part-time in the district, but these low-paying dead-end jobs, she notes, were taken only out of convenience given family and school commitments and transportation costs. Given the shifts in Hong Kong's economic base, there has been an increasing demand for 'flexible, multi-tasking short-term labour'. However, the highly competitive economy means that employers are less willing to train young workers, while the rigid Hong Kong public education system is unable to meet this changing labour market demand (Groves *et al.* 2012). This altogether contributes to high youth unemployment, and ultimately the fragmentation of the life route of many young people (Chiu 2011).

Young participants found their mobility restricted to the housing estate, local shopping mall and occasional part-time work at the airport. These mobilities were further limited by financial constraints—entry into the local cinemas and activities were too expensive for many. Private dwelling space in Hong Kong is at a premium, and as a result, young people spent large quantities of their time 'drifting' and 'killing time' public spaces.⁷ For these youth, education and employment marginality are further aggravated with the isolating distance of the estate from the urban core:

Usually they do nothing. They gather in parks to chat, smoke and drink. They also play games at the video game centers, hanging around. Their life is very dull... Still some of the new joiners think its quite good to hang out everyday and enjoy having a whole group gather to chat but when time goes on and they grow older, they find such life is boring... (SW2).

In this context, triad affiliation emerged as a dominant theme in young people's leisure and work lives. During the fieldwork there were numerous police raids for triad involvement, including one resulting in 60 arrests. Triad affiliation was spoken of as a source of identity and protection, but also—crucially—as a source of income. Basing his findings on several tranches of data collection from the 1980s onward, Lo (2012: 560) argues that young men in marginalized housing estates undergo a process of 'triadization' as they grow up. This process represents a slower and more diffuse process of street socialization, 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'. As gang studies demonstrate, 'hanging out' is not simply idling but involves finding opportunities to sustain the activity of 'hanging out' (Hunt *et al.* 2000). As one social worker (SW1) observes, young men in the estate 'mostly work for money, to buy cigarettes, to have fun, to buy alcohol, to play pool, and karaoke. All of these require money. Their families are not rich, so they have a strong desire for money'.

The triad street economy relies on a floating labour pool, where much time is spent 'hanging around' in pool halls, parks and video game centres waiting for the call to 'work'. This includes providing 'back up' and 'sorting out trouble' at entertainment sites (e.g. bars, clubs, restaurants), regulating unlicensed street hawking, minibuses and fish markets, and 'look out' and protection from others and authorities for vice activities. As TA7M explains, the local triad 'collect local fee and protection fee (收陀地呀, 收保護費呀); to produce and sell drugs; to seduce and threaten female teenagers to trade immorally (不道德交易) ... Like the shadow of an existing entrepreneur'. As such, opportunities for temporary income via the street economy were in many ways preferable to expensive travel for 'gig work' in the service industry. For some, illicit labour in the 'shadow economy' was a first rather than last resort, but one in which precarity was just as present.

7 A common phrase used was 餘暇 'hea': literally to drift along and kill time in an aimless way.

PRECARIOUS WORK AND THE STREET ECONOMY: STREET CAPITAL AS IMMATERIAL LABOUR

The 21st century has seen a discernible shift in labour markets, with international market ‘disruptors’ operating on a franchise model of ‘gig work’ out-pricing traditional local suppliers. One consequence of this change is a decline in enduring, community-based relationships, replaced by more superficial and contingent networks, in which individual entrepreneurs rely on their reputation, person and contacts to make a living in an unstable economy (Gill and Pratt 2008). For individuals navigating these labour markets the tendency is towards ‘informal, insecure and discontinuous employment’ (Gill and Pratt 2008: 2). In the process, the ‘nature of labour itself has also transformed, with the shift from a manufacturing to a service economy bringing cognitive, interactive and affective modes of labour and production to the fore’ (Farrugia 2019: 1089). Although work in the illicit economy does not map directly onto the shift from Fordist to post-Fordist modes of operation, there are nonetheless important parallels. In Chicago, Aspholm has documented ‘the eradication of centralized and local gang leadership hierarchies’, replaced with smaller, more neighbourhood-based outfits ‘unifying with members of longtime rival street organizations’ (2020). Similarly Kwok (2017: 299) found mid-to-high ranking Hong Kong triad members similarly ‘gradually abandoned their triad rituals’.

Immaterial labour, in the form of reputation and contacts, is invaluable in the street economy. As a range of scholars have documented, getting by in the street economy demands a constant vigilance, coupled with bodily fortitude and street-smarts. In recent years, conceptual discussion in this literature has increasingly focused on the Bourdieusian concept of ‘capital’ to discuss these attributes. Bourdieu (1979) outlined the forms of social, economic, cultural and symbolic capital required for success in any given field, and scholars have sought to apply these concepts—particularly social and cultural capital—to criminal labour markets. Sandberg’s research in Oslo (2008) employs the terminology of ‘street’ capital to denote an embodied, streetwise disposition among street-based drug dealers in which bodily capital, language and street-smarts are employed to navigate violent social terrain, or the ‘street field’ (Shammas and Sandberg 2016). Bakkali (2022) similarly outlines the forms of ‘road’ capital associated with street culture in London, with participants who lacked cultural and social capital turning to life ‘on road’. For young men in this study, establishing social networks was vital to gaining an income from the illicit economy. Primarily, this took the form of mutual identification between two persons in a hierarchical relationship. This process, generally known as ‘gan-yan’ (跟人, literally means ‘following a person’) assumes the senior person as ‘big brother’ or ‘big sister’ (see Lo 2012). TA12M had a casual start in his early school days when he simply ‘asked the gang brother to look for [him] one day’, and he believed that to follow somebody was a positive experience. Still, YP16M stressed that the relationship with a big brother was different from other friends of his as there existed a hierarchy:

L: So they think that having someone older can help them ...

YP16M: They think so. For instance, if I were a 13 year old who comes out to play, I need to follow a boss to make me look cool. So I may go find a 16 year old as a boss, and the boss of the 16 year old may be only 18. But I do ‘follow’ him in a way, so I’m following a particular gangster group. When there’s a conflict, I can say that I’m part of that group. They’ll say which group they’re from. It’s like ... for example, I want ... Someone get on the wrong side with me, I want have a fight. So I’ll go find the back up ...

L: So if some other ‘kids’ follow you, you can call yourself ‘boss’?

YP16M: Yes. Yes indeed. For example, if you say ‘hey how about you follow me?’, and if they will, you can call yourself a boss.

These connections involved establishing reciprocal relationships of friendship and trust. The ‘follower’ would be called on to carry out favours for the ‘boss’, and in turn the ‘follower’ received monetary or in-kind benefits (Lo 2012). While these ‘favours’ may start as small tasks like going to the convenience store, they may escalate to crime or violence. The social work logs analysed for the study demonstrated the complex relationship between status, reciprocity and work. One young triad member is quoted as follows ‘I was honoured to take charge of the burglary. If I gained the money, I could be increased status in my gang (Log, 5 March 2009, p. 11). Another stated: ‘Dai Lo (big brother) was very kind. He brought me to Karaoke and shared with drugs. He opened my mind and taught me many skills that resisted others to threaten me. Therefore, I would not reject his orders when he needed me even to commit in crime’ (Log, 13 April 2008, p. 9). It is possible to view this relationship from the opposite side, as in Kwok’s study (2017), where one participant states, ‘money is important to all triads ... They often asked me to pay for their mobile phone bills and entertainment expenses. In return, whenever I asked them to work for me, they never said no’ (226–7).

For followers, the acquisition of skills and status are important for developing networks and acquiring work. Yet it remains the case that they also recognize their fleeting and variable role in the street economy, as TA7M describes:

L: Did you use weapons in fights before?

TA7M: Yes ...

L: What was the case? How come it was so serious that you had to bring weapons?

TA7M: Big ... well ... it was an order from my triad elder brother’s elder brother. It was an order so we had to do it.

L: Did you get paid? Or ...

TA7M: If it is an order from an insider, we don’t get paid. If it is an order from an outsider, yes, we get paid.

L: Can you explain?

TA7M: Such as ... the one I followed was from Shui Fong (Wo On Lok), if there were not enough people in Shui Fong and they wanted help from Shing Wo (Wo Shing Wo), they had to pay Sing Wo for the help.

L: I see. Do you take this kind of job?

TA7M: We don’t because we are small potatoes. Only the big ones get a job like this.

L: Do you answer those calls (應雞, literally meaning answer chicken)?

TA7M: Yes.

While Big Sisters do exist in the triad world, they were in the minority. This may well be related to gendered expectations. Among all participants, there was a general consensus that while young women were generally less involved in violence, but when they do, it’s of a ‘lesser intensity’ and involves personal disputes rather than as with young men where there may be ‘call outs’ to fight as part of ‘business’ (YP3F, YP19F, YP20F). AS YP7M notes, though women may not fight they do get involved in illegal business.

As well as ‘street’ social capital in the form of networks (Ilan 2013), participants in the study also demonstrated the significance of reputation, or cultural capital. As noted above, triad labour depends on a floating labour pool, and this requires having reputation (*dor* in Cantonese) and street presence. Importantly, as elsewhere the investment in street culture can reduce opportunities for mainstream employment. As Shammass and Sandberg note, ‘street social capital may promote one’s chances of carrying out a successful burglary but it comes at the expense of investments in the kind of social capital that is helpful in other parts of society’ (2016: 12). The form of ‘*dor*’ evidenced by participants often involved bodily capital, but this also should

be combined with earning potential. As one triad leader in Kwok's study states, 'money is more important than being violent or good in fighting' (Kwok 2017: 226)—with the aim of 'Heung Dor', namely a reputation for economic success.

What is clear then is that the street economy, like the legitimate economy, is dependent on both material goods (in our case, for example, drugs, stolen property) and 'immaterial labour', 'where labour produces immaterial goods such as a service, a cultural product, knowledge or communication' (Hardt and Negri, 2000: 292). Triads tend to be loosely organized groups, with varying affiliations and alliances (Chu 2000: 39). While there may be some degree of hierarchy, 'street habitus', networks and social capital remain central to sustaining involvement to the immaterial labour of the street economy. For this sample, however, it was not yet clear how committed young people were to advancing specifically in the illicit economy, and were instead navigating between economic opportunities in both the 'street field' and licit economy, requiring a dynamic and flexible set of networks.

NETWORK SOCIALITY AND FRAGMENTATION OF RITUAL

Recent scholarship on youth and precarious employment has increasingly drawn on a rich vein of sociological theory pertaining to economic transformation under advanced capitalism. Drawing together conceptualizations 'relating to post-Fordism, post-industrialization, network society, liquid modernity, information society, "new economy", "new capitalism" and risk society' (Gill and Pratt 2008: 2), this literature seeks to elaborate the new subjectivities and proclivities that emerge for young people embedded in the precarious labour market (Standing 2011). During fieldwork it became clear that participants were similarly composing a 'do-it-yourself' economic patchwork of licit and illicit income, based less on embedded social relations than a form of 'network sociality' (Wittel 2001) composed of temporary alliances. Similar to changes in the gang identity and street-based dynamics of criminal labour elsewhere (Aspholm 2020), youth in Hong Kong reported triad associations as at times ephemeral and flexible, reflecting a shift from the corporate structures of the past.

Triad groups have long been associated with a distinct argot, rituals and codes developed to 'prevent other people pirating triad membership' (Chu 2000: 39). 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 punishments and even risk of death. As early as the 1960s, however, traditions such as hand signs, tattoos and poems were gradually falling out of use; by 1979, a 'gradual loosening of the hierarchical structure' coupled with 'diminishing central power and control' led to an increase in splinter groups (Chan 1979: 45). By the 1990s, initiation ceremonies had '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") containing HK \$36 or \$36.6 (approximately US \$4.50) or even HK \$3.60 (US 50¢)' (Bolton *et al.* 1996).⁸

For the sample in this study, these traditions had taken on a still more ephemeral quality. For participants, the nomenclature of 'following' felt light, akin to a smartphone 'like' on a social media page, and appeared to be relatively interchangeable. TA15M introduced the experience of 'following' a Big Brother as a simple experience in which he just talked to the person about following him, and later they agreed. Similarly, YP14M had a very casual way to start with the person who he knew in school and was just half a year older than he was, as he recalled:

⁸ The Triad Ordinance was amended to reflect these alterations such that 'claiming' Triad membership became a crime in itself. In due course, most arrests of 'triad offenders involve the prosecution of the lower ranks, typically for the crime of 'claiming' triad 'membership' (Bolton *et al.* 1996: 279).

L: You said that you started following a brother since form 2. Why did you want to do that?

YP14M: I don't really know what it means by following a brother. He asked me to follow him. And I said, 'whatever'. And then I am following a brother.

YP10M similarly recalled his following a Big Sister as she initially came to his aid during a confrontation while his peers floated from one Big Brother to another. TA18F describes her secondary school as an environment where gangs, triads and fights occurred, and consequently, 'you become who you are surrounded by'. These experiences suggest a further diminution of the secrecy and ritual attached to triad societies in Hong Kong, with hierarchal social relations merging with normalized peer-group interactions, and guarded nomenclature blurring into everyday speech. Following on from Bolton's findings in the 1990s, in a small number of cases, however, both young men and women reported that the symbolic fee of \$3.60 was levied. This did not prevent TA4M from 'following' of 'several big brothers':

L: How did they pick on you? Did they start with saying something like 'Hey, Hello'.

TA4M: Yeah, and then they would say 'do you want to follow me?' and then I asked 'what do you mean of follow you?'. Then, they asked me to give them \$3.6. After they received the money, they said 'Okay, from now on, whenever you face any danger, you say my name'. You know, 'flesh his name out' (響朵). I then replied 'OK'. Of course I have to pretend I know nothing when I am with them. If you face any problems, call him. Will be fine. He's your big brother so no problem. But of course, I follow several big brothers so far and one of them really treats me quite well. [...]

In the 1970s, Chan reports that this kind of 'switching', termed 'crossing the base', was not uncommon but would lead to physical, social or financial penalties (Chan 1979). More recently, Kwok (2017) reports the practice of switching without penalty on the basis of economic competition. She quotes a junior triad, initiated after the year 2000, as follows: 'I left that Dai Lo because I found him useless. He had no money and no power. He claimed that he could provide us with opportunities to make money, but ended up giving us nothing. He is broke and is not even able to pay our expenses. That's why we all decided to leave him and follow another Dai Lo' (Kwok 2017: 227). A similar phenomenon was reported by two interviewees, both detached social workers with large caseloads of triad-affiliated youth. SW1 noted that 'in the past, there were many rituals ... they still have some of them now, like chopping chicken's head and burning money... but fewer of the rest now... I rarely hear them now. Now the master just needs to ask, "Are you with me now?" and you just need to say yes'. SW2 described how close a big brother and the juniors could be in terms of age and interest and she also related to some social changes that had taken place:

L: Yes ... But you say it wasn't like this back then? Or it's always been like this?

SW2: When you get into a gangster society, you're in it for life. And if you wish to leave or follow another boss, you'll be beaten up. You can only leave afterwards. But now it's different. Now you can follow this boss tomorrow, then you can follow another boss the day after.

L: Do you know why it's so different from before?

SW2: Hmm ... I think it's the changes of the society. The gangsters back then may really be a means to earn a living. You really have to work. Possibly you spend your whole life working for that gangster group. But it's not the case now. Teenagers have many different paths laid before them nowadays. Yes ... So when they grow up they may want to settle and not want to go on. Then they may have many other choices for them.

As Beck (1992) suggests, young people may piece together a ‘do-it-yourself’ identity between work and leisure, though as others have suggested this remained structured by economic opportunity (Atkinson 2007; Roberts 2010). For these participants, it is clear that the process of ‘following’ is one that was fluid and fleeting, and not based on deep or ongoing social relations. Rather, it was one specific form of social networks that could be leveraged for financial reward, or local status.

Similarly, participants offered insight into the shifting context of ‘leaving’ the triad. At one time, the principle that ‘once a person has been initiated into a triad society only death can release him’ was commonly expressed (Chu 2000: 34). Some respondents in this study, however, reported the process of disaffiliation as relatively straightforward. TA2M found it troublesome to have frequent police attention and sought to leave, while TA16M (p. 57) found it ‘somehow meaningless’ as one ‘fight[s] with people but [doesn’t] get paid for it’. As a result, he ended the relationship, paying a symbolic fee of \$10.6. For TA6M, it was a natural process to ‘unfollow’ as he got more detached from the group. TA13M’s group was charged by the police ‘anti-triad force’,⁹ granting him an easy exit. Others had a less smooth transition. TA14M, despite knowing the ‘unspoken rule’, reported that he was beaten up and sent to the hospital with a bone fracture when trying to leave. As SW1 notes, echoing Standing’s points on the ‘grinners’ and ‘groaners’ (2011): ‘The masters choose their subordinates, but the subordinates choose their masters too. In their mind, even though you are my master, I can still choose to serve another master. They do change their gang. I can’t say it is always the case, but it does exist’.

CONCLUSION

In this paper we have sought to analyse changes in the licit economy as they apply to the study of illicit labour, drawing out the connective tissue between theories of post-Fordist labour markets and recent empirical evidence pertaining to young people engaged in illicit labour. We have attempted to contribute new theoretical concepts and adduce empirical evidence to further criminological knowledge in this ‘brave new world’ of illicit work. Based on a larger comparative study of youth work labour between Hong Kong and the United Kingdom, we have drawn on 40 interviews with young people in the territory, half of whom were triad-affiliated. From these narratives alongside observational data, we argue that young people’s reciprocal relationship with triad leaders—once the foundation for guarded ritual and strict hierarchy—has fragmented in a way that echoes the ‘network sociality’ (Wittel 2001) of post-Fordist working cultures. While illicit work has always been the epitome of precarity—involving impermanence, risk and exploitation—these shifts mean that triad employment takes its place among an archipelago of exploitative employers in Hong Kong, among whom young men must navigate with a combination of social networks and ‘street’ capital (Sandberg 2008). A number of important implications flow from this argument.

First, in bringing together contemporary sociological concerns surrounding post-Fordist working practice with criminological debates focused on criminal groups and illicit markets, our intention has been to demonstrate the contingency of moral distinctions between ‘licit’ and ‘illicit’ labour from the perspective of those involved. For these youth, the realities of making a living accorded with neither the niceties of existing divisions of academic labour nor the arbitrary distinctions between criminal or simply exploitative labour. In some ways, it might be argued that the remaining vestiges of *communitas* and group loyalty to be found in triad groups are more appealing than atomized and impersonal labour in the gig economy. This contributes to long-standing concerns within sociological and critical criminology that seek to decentre the

9 反黑, a colloquial name under the police Organized Crime and Triad Bureau, OCTB.

causes of crime from that of the individual or community, and instead ask larger questions of the structural arrangements of society and how processes of criminalization perpetuate inequality.

Second, the reinsertion of political economy into the boundary between licit and illicit work exposes an area that is ripe for future theoretical and empirical inquiry. The richness of theorization of post-Fordist working practices represents a deep vein for criminologists to tap, with implications for a range of illicit and illegal working cultures. The concept of ‘network sociality’ (Wittel 2001), for instance, which suggests the growth of ephemeral, flexible and instrumental interpersonal relationships, has resonance with recent studies of youth ‘gangs’ in Chicago, London and beyond (Hulley and Young 2021) in which the ‘liquid friendships’ (Bauman 2013) engendered by social media have also been glimpsed ‘on road’. The notion of ‘immaterial labour’ (Gill and Pratt 2008), which trains an analytical lens on the intangible, atmospheric and emotional registers of work, has important reverberations with existing work on the ‘symbolic capital’ of violent reputation (Sandberg 2008) and emergent literature on so-called ‘atmospheric’ criminology (Fraser and Matthews 2021). On the other side, the combination of such concepts with the criminological lexicon may also enlarge and expand the range of sociological theory, which has to date steered noticeably clear from the messy business of illicit work.

Finally, however, it is important to not get carried away. Despite rhetorical similarity between the replacement of citywide taxi firms with Uber (Tucker 2017), and the reorganization of corporate gang structures towards local entrepreneurial networks (Hobbs 2013; Aspholm 2020), there is a need for much deeper empirical evidence to fully realize the extent and significance of any change. As scholars have demonstrated, precarity is not new (Furlong *et al.* 2016) and many of the conditions described here have been occurring for some time. The notion of the ‘floating labour pool’, be it in the app-based gig economy of the pool halls of Hong Kong, has a central concept to the sociology of labour markets for many years. Through this theoretical and empirical exploration, however, we hope to have provided sufficient evidence to warrant further discussion.

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