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## Asian Organized Crime

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**O**n February 21, 1989, as undercover agents purchased heroin and wiretaps crackled with coded conversations between dealers confidently arranging shipments, FBI Agents and officers of the New York City Police Department executed search warrants at three locations in Queens, NY. Their efforts netted \$3 million in cash and 820 pounds of 90-percent pure Southeast Asian heroin having an estimated street value of over \$1 billion. More importantly, however, law enforcement dealt a devastating blow to this lucrative drug operation. Codenamed "White Mare," this investigation represented the largest heroin bust in the United States and has thus far resulted in the arrests of 44 subjects worldwide, including members of 5 separate Asian drug trafficking cartels.



This case serves as a striking example of the extent to which Asian underworld groups have staked a claim in the criminal marketplace. Indeed, Asian organized crime (AOC) groups are becoming involved at an increasing rate in murder, kidnaping, extortion, gambling, drugs and money laundering. It has been suggested that AOC has the potential to become the future number-one law enforcement problem in the United States.

In order for law enforcement to effectively deal with AOC factions, it is extremely important to acquire an understanding and a working knowledge of these organizations. This article provides an overview of the Chinese and Japanese criminal organizations, in addition to summarizing the unique problems law enforcement encounters with AOC. It also explains the similarities between the La Cosa Nostra (LCN) and AOC, indicating that investigative and prosecutive techniques used against the LCN can be similarly employed to combat AOC.

The President's Commission on Organized Crime has recog-

nized that a working relationship presently exists between the Chinese criminal groups and the LCN. It is speculated that these Chinese groups have provided heroin to the LCN on occasion and that the LCN, in exchange, has furnished the Chinese with loan-sharking capital and untraceable weapons. In addition, there are indications that both groups have performed contract killings on the other's behalf and have jointly cooperated in the operation of illegal gambling establishments.

#### **NONTRADITIONAL ORGANIZED CRIME GROUPS**

The successful prosecution of numerous high-ranking members of the LCN and the LCN "commission" in November 1986, has enabled Federal, State and local law enforcement to redirect a portion of its resources to the inves-

igated the LCN into prominence in the 1920s and 1930s, the illegal drug trade appears to be the vehicle which will move Asian criminals into the mainstream of America today.<sup>1</sup>

#### **Chinese Triads**

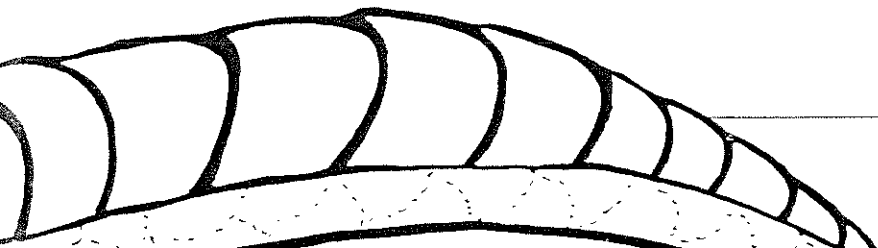
Secret, Chinese criminal societies, known as triads, were originally formed as resistance groups to the Ching Dynasty that ruled China from the early 17th century until 1912. The word "triad" is an English term derived from the societies' sacred emblem — a triangle whose sides represent three basic powers: heaven, earth and man.<sup>2</sup> The triads continued to flourish in Hong Kong and Taiwan throughout the 1950s and 1960s and even controlled many important police posts in Hong Kong until the early 1970s.<sup>3</sup>

While the structure of the triads today varies somewhat, all

“***‘White Mare’ ... represented the largest heroin bust in the United States and has thus far resulted in the arrests of 44 subjects worldwide....***”

tigation of nontraditional organized criminal activity. The groups presently appearing to warrant such investigative attention are the Chinese and Japanese criminal organizations. While there is always room for debate about the degree of organization within these Asian groups, their potential to develop into LCN-type organizations certainly exists. And, much as the illegal trade of alcohol during the Prohibition Era pro-

are based roughly on models and traditions from the past. For example, the initiation ceremony, known as "hanging the blue lantern," still requires recruits to repeat 36 oaths of loyalty, secrecy and brotherhood. The integrity of the organization's secrets is also strictly and brutally enforced by the triad's "Red Pole," an individual trained in the martial arts who, along with other henchmen, is charged with the responsibility



of internal and external security. Triads still heavily rely on fear within the organization, among competitive criminal groups and within the community. The practice of dispatching "hitmen" internationally to reinforce this fear is not uncommon.

The origin, evolution, rituals, practices and even modern activities of the triads are remarkably similar to those of the Sicilian Mafia. In Sicily, loyalty and solidarity are recognized by "omerta," more commonly known as the code of silence. A Chinese proverb, which similarly upholds silence in the face of authority, is, "When alive, don't go to authorities, when dead, don't go to hell." Similar initia-

enable them to operate within the territory of a particular gang. While the first group seldom becomes actively involved in criminal activities, they generally "run with the pack," adding to the belief that the gangs possess a greater power base than they actually have.

Currently, there is no concrete information to indicate that triad organizations exist as distinct entities in the United States. However, triad members, who have emigrated to the United States, can be found in street gangs, such as the Ghost Shadows, Flying Dragons, Wah Ching, United Bamboo, and Ping On. While street gangs more closely resemble triads in that they are entirely

nese immigrants and Chinese Americans. And, while the economic mainstay of the criminally involved tongs is illegal gambling, some members have been known to direct gang enterprises that include extortion, drug trafficking, robbery and "protection" schemes for prostitution and pornography.

The internal structure of the tongs is also very similar to that of the LCN. The head of the tong, known as the chairman, can be compared to the LCN boss, while the next position in the hierarchy is that of the vice chairman, similar to the underboss. Next in the chain of command is the English-speaking secretary, comparable to the LCN consigliere, followed by secretaries whose responsibilities resemble those of LCN capos. Stationed below the officials are "first grade" tong members and the "look-see" or soldiers.

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tion rites are also present in both organizations, including the commingling of blood and the burning of paper. Last, aside from the fact that both the Mafia and triads are engaged in criminal activity, they also have the ability to generate varying degrees of fear and respect among the general population.<sup>4</sup>

Today, triads are basically comprised of two groups of individuals. The first group, and most likely the largest in number, is made up of individuals who join to avoid harassment. The second group consists of individuals who join to achieve recognition or financial gain, because of a desire to enter the criminal world, or in the case of freelance criminals, to

criminal in nature, the tongs (meaning "meeting hall" or "meeting place") maintain a membership largely composed of noncriminals. However, there does appear to be a growing trend for upper-echelon street gang leaders to belong to both tongs and gangs.

#### **Chinese Tongs**

Many of the tongs in the United States are national organizations with chapters in cities that have large Chinese communities. While the tongs serve primarily as "merchant associations," several of the tongs are used as fronts for vicious Chinese organized crime groups that prey mainly on Chi-

#### **The Japanese Yakuza**

The Japanese organized crime syndicate, known as Yakuza (YAHK-ZA), consists of 2,500 groups with a total membership of approximately 110,000 individuals. The Japanese National Police Agency (NPA) applies the term "Boryokudan," which means "violent ones," to these groups, largely because of their involvement in drugs.<sup>5</sup>

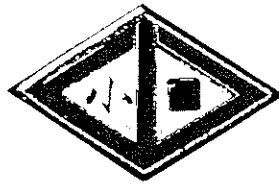
In the past, the Yakuza was accepted in Japanese society, and even though they were primarily involved in prostitution and gambling, they maintained an almost "Robin Hood" image. This reputation has since been transformed as ordinary citizens became the targets of the Yakuza through robberies and street shakedowns.

The general appearance of the Yakuza also changed. After World

### Badges of Major Asian Organized Crime Groups



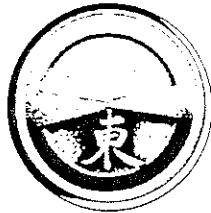
Inagawa Kai



Yamaguchi Gumi



Sumiyoshi Rengo



Toa Yuai Jigyo Kumiai



Nippon Kokusui Kai

War II, they assumed some of the characteristics of their American gangster counterparts, such as dressing in dark suits, dark ties and wearing sunglasses.

Today, due to their openly recognized existence and status in Japanese society, the Yakuza constitutes a separate class with its wealth, members, culture and political ties. In addition, Yakuza members are known to boast outwardly about their affiliation, and each group has its own distinctive lapel pin that the members proudly wear. Gang insignias and flags are also openly displayed on their meeting places and buildings.<sup>6</sup>

Yakuza members undergo almost continuous tattoo operations, displaying snakes, dragons,

waves and mythical figures which symbolize their ancestral or adopted organization and demonstrate their permanent commitment. Tattoos, worn by approximately 75 percent of the Yakuza members, are used to intimidate people outside the organization, even though they are usually concealed by the individual's apparel.

The internal structure of the Yakuza society is arranged in such a manner that all authority and wealth are concentrated in the "oyabun" or boss. A member's status is determined by his efficiency as an "earner," who is required to pass profits to those at levels above him. This is a highly competitive system and is designed to maintain pressure for

production. The Yakuza members, particularly those at the lower levels, are encouraged to find new enterprises with which to satisfy the constant demand from above.<sup>7</sup>

Until 1974, Yakuza interest in the United States was thought to be relatively limited. However, since then, Yakuza activity in the United States has expanded principally for three reasons. First, the United States serves as a source of weapons, since the possession of handguns by private citizens in Japan has been prohibited since World War II. As a result, illegal handguns can be sold to the Japanese for as much as \$5,000-\$7,000 each. Second, the United States serves as a place to invest excess capital. Finally, and per-



*Pictured are the tattooed back and arms of an AOC gang member.*

haps the most significant, the United States is prime territory for their tourist business. Since Japanese tourists, upon arrival in the United States, are generally confined by language to their own countrymen, they have little choice but to go where the tour operators direct them. Naturally, the tourists are subsequently directed to Yakuza-run bars, restaurants and entertainment as a result of previously made arrangements by the proprietors with the tour operators.

As with the triad societies, the Yakuza organizations bear a striking resemblance to the LCN, particularly with regard to the unwritten laws which govern their activities. For example, Yakuza members are instructed never to reveal the secrets of the organization, never to violate the wife or children of another member, never become personally involved with

drugs, never withhold money from the gang, never appeal to the police or law and never to disobey superiors. One major difference is evident, however. Unlike the Yakuza, the LCN has little or no public standing and must remain an underground organization.<sup>8</sup>

#### **PROBLEMS AOC PRESENTS TO LAW ENFORCEMENT**

The problems encountered by law enforcement with regard to investigating AOC are somewhat unique, primarily due to cultural and social factors. Since the overwhelming majority of Asian crime is confined to the Asian communities or to individuals of Asian extraction, language differences have a tendency to inhibit victims or witnesses from reporting criminal offenses or interacting with non-Asians. Also, as a result of past experiences in their homelands, many Asians are suspicious

of the police, whom they often view as being corrupt or brutal. Furthermore, in the case of victimized Asian tourists, many return home long before judicial proceedings have commenced.

Asian crime is also more difficult to investigate and prosecute because Asian citizens are reluctant to deal with the U.S. criminal justice system. Many do not understand the system and when, for example, a suspect is released on bail, it may appear as though the suspect did not actually commit a crime or paid off the police to secure a release. In fact, leaders of a tong in one area of the United States undertook a campaign to have themselves photographed with high-ranking police and/or city officials, thereby attempting to send out a message to the Asian community that the tong controls these officials. As one would expect, this lack of understanding impedes citizens from reporting crime and/or cooperating with the police.

In addition, many Asian ethnic groups, in particular the Vietnamese, are highly mobile and have family or associates in various parts of the United States. This mobility supplies those involved in criminal activity with convenient "hide outs" in the homes of unsuspecting relatives or associates. Those seeking to escape from law enforcement may also take advantage of unknowing religious or nationalistic organizations legitimately chartered to provide assistance to Asian immigrants seeking to settle in the United States.

In an effort to predict future trends, the relinquishment of Hong Kong by Great Britain pursuant to

the mandate of 1997 should be of fundamental interest to law enforcement. Intelligence indicates, to some extent, that although the Peoples Republic of China has agreed to allow indigenous government operations to continue for at least 50 years, the criminal organizations, or at least high-ranking individuals affiliated with these groups, may flee Hong Kong prior to the colony changing hands and reverting to communist rule.

The United States is likely to be the location of choice for these criminal elements. An intense, concerted effort on the part of U.S. authorities will be required to prevent the mass immigration of

Chinese criminals, particularly since a ready-made criminal infrastructure already exists in the United States in the form of gangs.

### CONCLUSION

In the United States, Chinese and Japanese enterprises are involved in a multitude of illegal activities. Law enforcement must be prepared to face this unique challenge created by these criminal groups. The threats they pose continue to increase and must be dealt with accordingly so that law enforcement and the Nation are not suddenly overwhelmed by this new wave of criminal activity.

### Footnotes

<sup>1</sup>"Asian Organized Crime in the Middle Atlantic-Great Lakes Region." Mid-Atlantic-Great Lakes Region Analytical Unit, President's Commission on Organized Crime of Asian Origin, September 1985.

<sup>2</sup>*Triad Societies in Hong Kong*, Government Press, Hong Kong, China, 1960.

<sup>3</sup>President's Commission on Organized Crime of Asian Origin, Record of Hearing III, October 23-25, 1984, New York, NY.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup>"The Asian Report," Special Investigations Bureau, Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department, Los Angeles, CA, January 1986.

<sup>6</sup>David E. Kaplan and Alec Dubro, *Yakuza: The Explosive Account of Japan's Criminal Underground* (New York: MacMillan Publishing Co., 1986).

<sup>7</sup>Supra note 3.

<sup>8</sup>Supra note 3.

## Unusual Weapon

### Disguised Dagger

While investigating a suspicious vehicle incident, a Seaside Heights, NJ, patrolman discovered a cigarette lighter on a juvenile suspect. Hidden within this ordinary lighter was a knife with a 2-inch blade that extends and retracts by pressing a small button on the casing. With the blade extended, the weapon is 5 inches long.

