Chapter 6
China Tongs in America: Continuity and Opportunities

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Abstract Tongs are probably the most cited terminology when referring to Chinese organized crime in North America, although the terminology has faded somewhat in recent years from academic writings. However, to most U.S. law enforcement agencies and legislative bodies, tongs are still used to signify the underworld in Chinatowns. Depending on which government source one uses, tongs maybe considered a form of non-traditional Asian criminal enterprises, resembling street gangs more so than the traditional triads in Hong Kong or Yakuza in Japan.

Introduction

Tongs are probably the most cited terminology when referring to Chinese organized crime in North America, although the terminology has faded somewhat in recent years from academic writings. However, to most U.S. law enforcement agencies and legislative bodies, tongs are still used to signify the underworld in Chinatowns. Depending on which government source one uses, tongs maybe considered a form of non-traditional Asian criminal enterprises, resembling street gangs more so than

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the traditional triads in Hong Kong or Yakuza in Japan.[1] In other contexts, tongs are simply lumped together with the Italian mafia, Russian mafia, and Japanese Yakuza, as "traditional" organized crime networks that the U.S. law enforcement had battled for the most part of the twentieth century (Finklea 2010).

Despite the fact that tongs have not been mentioned much by the research community or even in the news media, this paper argues that they are still powerful community entities that cast a long shadow in Chinatowns that few illicit market activities, such as vice and criminal rackets, can escape its control. As a terminology that has its roots in Cantonese dialect, "tongs" may have assumed different identities in an increasingly diverse ethnic Chinese population in North America, but their influence has remained unchanged.

Chinese organized crime is not static. Tongs have also changed over time and come under different names. But the terminology, as a quick or shorthand reference, can still serve as a convenient conceptual start point from which different criminal enterprises involving Chinese nationals can be observed, compared, and interpreted. In later sections, this paper will lay out its argument that criminal enterprises in North America's Chinatowns should be grouped into two broad categories—traditional neighborhood-based activities and transnational or non-territorial activities. Criminally influenced tongs, in U.S. law enforcement's parlance, may still represent the most powerful community organizations that guarantee the smooth transactions of all neighborhood-based vice activities.

Chinese Organized Crime in Its Many Forms

Chinese organized crime is not a singular concept. The best approach to understanding Chinese organized crime remains geo-cultural (Chin 1990, 1996; Finckenauer and Chin 2006)—Hong Kong-based triads, Taiwan-based organized gangs, U.S-based tongs, and Chinatown street gangs. More recently, organized crime in mainland China has received some attention from the research community (Zhang and Chin 2008). Except for their common Chinese descent, these criminal organizations operate in vastly different territories and develop niches in the provision of illicit goods and services. Their operational and organizational characteristics need to be examined in the contexts of their varied historical, cultural, social, and economic conditions that gave rise to their organizational characteristics. Before the discussion of the U.S. tongs, a brief summary is provided for the main types of Chinese criminal organizations.

[1] For instance, see current FBI's official description of Asian organized crimes in the U.S. where criminally influenced tongs are differentiated from other traditional Asian criminal networks, http://www.fbi.gov/about-us/investigate/organizedcrime/asian.

Hong Kong-Based Triads

Triads are probably the best known Chinese criminal organizations, and there have been many books written about them (Bresler 1981; Posner 1988; Booth 1990; Chu 2000; Lintner 2003). Triads are secret fraternities based in Hong Kong. There have been different theories as to how they first emerged. A common account stems from the patriotic secret societies formed centuries ago to fight against the Qing dynasty—a foreign invasion by the Manchurians from the north. The word "triad" loosely translates into "the harmony of three essential elements"—heaven, earth, and humanity. When the Qing dynasty (1644–1911) collapsed in 1911 and the Republic of China was established, these societies began to be involved in criminal activities (Morgan 1960).

There are some 50 triad societies in Hong Kong, of which only 15 come to regular police attention (Leung 1999). According to crime statistics published by the Hong Kong Police Force, triad-related crimes appear to be on a steady decline over the years.[2] Triad organizations participate in illegitimate enterprises (such as gambling and prostitution) as well as legitimate businesses (such as restaurants and import-exports) (Chu 2000). Some triad societies are believed to be well organized, their members highly disciplined, and their leaders the most influential figures in Hong Kong's underworld (Booth 1990). Triad activities are not limited to Hong Kong and its adjacent regions such as Macau. Law enforcement agencies in China have in recent years also reported triad activities. The relationship between Hong Kong triads and the mainland Chinese government has long been suspected. Historically and during the colonial time, the Chinese communist party used triads to maintain its presence in Kong Hong (Gertz 2010). In recent years, there were also reports that triad societies were setting up shops in adjacent areas inside China's Guangdong Province (World Daily News 2000). Triad leaders from Hong Kong are believed to be expanding their social capital into mainland China, forming various business relationships with mainland government officials to gain economic foothold and participated in various economic ventures (Lo 2010).

Taiwan-Based Organized Gangs

Organized crime in Taiwan appeared in the 1930s, during which rapid social and political changes took place after the Japanese ceded its control over the island. Besides the traditional trades (e.g., operating or protecting illegal gambling dens, prostitution houses, collecting debts, and extorting money from store owners), organized crime is also believed to have infiltrated the legitimate businesses. Known members of crime groups were long reported to own restaurants, coffee shops, nightclubs, movie companies, cable television companies, magazine companies, and construction companies (Chi 1985). Large-scale and high-end commerce such as

[2] Crime statistics issued by Hong Kong Police can be found at: http://www.police.gov.hk/ppp_en/09_statistics/csd.html.

futures trading and the stock market were also thought to be infiltrated by criminal organizations (Chen 1986). In recent decades, criminal gangs were also reported deeply involved in drug trafficking (Posner 1988), people smuggling (Myers 1994), arms trafficking, collusive bidding for government projects, and other more sophisticated crimes (Cheng 1993). In recent years, criminal organizations are believed to engage in political activities such as local elections to place their own members or corrupt politicians into public offices (Chin 2003).

Organized Crime in Mainland China

Reports on criminal organizations in the news media are becoming common in China these days. In some places, criminal organizations are thought to have total control of local government officials and major economic sectors. For instance, two criminal organizations were taken down in Yangjiang, a coastal city with a population of 2.4 million in Guangdong Province.[3] The two godfathers, Lin Guoqin and Xu Jianqiang, built their empires the old fashion way, by running gambling dens, brothels, and extortion schemes. Over a decade or so, these two criminal organizations had grown into massive empires in the region, controlling 20 different business sectors, with some 30,000 followers. Businesses such as cement, wholesale fish distribution, taxi service, restaurants, and hotels were completely controlled by these two organizations in the city. The local law enforcement and government agencies were thought to be on the take and have protected these two criminal organizations for years. The central government in Beijing reportedly had to use special investigative forces from other regions to crack the case. In November 2007, hundreds of police were mobilized from far-away regions to assist in the arrests of the two mafia bosses and their top lieutenants during a banquet. After three years of lengthy legal battle, Xu Jianqiang was executed in December 2010, while Lin had a two-year stay on his death sentence.[4]

Criminal organizations based in mainland China are a recent development, although the Chinese government only acknowledges their existence as mafia-type societies (or organizations characteristic of a "dark society"). Organized crime in mainland China was largely non-existent during the early decades of the communist regime. The rapid economic development in the past 30 years has brought about major changes in social mores and engendered an environment conducive to illicit enterprising activities. Organized crime re-emerged since the mid-1980s and has become more complex and mature in the past decade (Liu and Jiang 2011); many are actively involved in such activities as extortion, drug trafficking,

[3] The case was widely reported in China in 2007. A collection of news reports (in Chinese) can be found at: http://yj2971520.blog.163.com/blog/static/55882492007115111832231/.

[4] News reports of the death sentence can be found at: http://news.sina.com.cn/c/p/2010-12-24/004621696855.shtml.

business monopolies, vice activities. Much has been published in recent years about organized criminal activities in China by Chinese scholars. He (2003) explains that two main conditions contribute to the emergence of criminal organizations—political corruption and weakened social control.

In summary, Chinese criminal organizations differ significantly in their historical and cultural backgrounds as well as geographical origins. However, these crime groups also share many similarities, such as hierarchical structure, restricted membership, monopolistic practices in their involved commercial activities, use of violence to control competition or manage inter-group conflicts, and establishment of rituals for group identity and self-perpetuation. Furthermore, these crime groups tend to be territorial; cross-group affiliations or collaborations are rare.

Historical Background of Tongs in America

Following the lures of the gold rush and employment opportunities in railroad construction, rural farmers from southern China, mainly Guangdong Province, first migrated to San Francisco and later to New York and other parts of the country. Facing racism and hostile European laborers who resented the threat of cheap labor from the Far East, these Chinese immigrants kept to themselves with their linguistic and cultural practices but isolated from the mainstream society.

Tongs in the United States first appeared in San Francisco in the 1850s after the initial waves of Chinese immigrants. The word 'tong' is the phonetic translation of the Chinese word "堂", which means 'hall' or 'gathering place'. Prior to the emergence of tongs, Chinese communities in the United States were controlled by dominant families or district associations. Much in line with their homeland cultural practice, migrants who had the same last names (suggesting a shared ancestral lineage) were able to seek refuge and protection from these family associations. Migrants with different last names or from unrelated villages were excluded by these established associations (Chin 1990). To fend for themselves, they banded together and established the tongs, usually under some benevolent names. Tong members came from diverse backgrounds and sought solace among their compatriots. These were typically low-skilled migrants whose livelihood was restricted by the confines of the Chinatown. Because there were no special entrance criteria by the tongs, they expanded rapidly. More than thirty tongs were formed in the United States at the turn of the twentieth century. Many of these tongs still exist in Chinatowns in America. A stroll down the main streets in Chinatown today in San Francisco or New York City, one can still spot these gathering places.

Based on research by Chin (1990, 1996), these tongs, like the familial associations, provided many services to newly arrived immigrants who otherwise would be exposed to a foreign and hostile environment such as referrals for jobs, housing, networking, and recreational activities (e.g., gambling, prostitution, and

opium dens). These days English and even citizenship classes are offered under the auspices of these organizations. During major Chinese holidays, tongs are also among the most active community members who organize parades and other cultural events.

More than a century ago and till today, tongs are powerful brokers in the Chinese community, mediating individual and group conflicts. Most tong members are gainfully employed or have their own businesses. They pay dues to their tongs and visit them occasionally to meet people or to gamble, and attend the association's banquets and picnics a few times a year. Leaders of the tongs are typically prominent community members, often interacting with local government agencies on behalf of their constituents. These tong leaders also make decisions and control the groups' daily affairs.

Chin (1996) found that members of tongs were active not only in vice but also in developing stakes in conventional businesses. For example, Chin found in his fieldwork in New York's Chinatown that tong members also owned or operated restaurants, retail stores, vegetable stands, car services, ice cream parlors, fish markets, and video stores. At a higher and more professional level, they also owned or operated wholesale supply firms, factories, banks, and employment agencies.

Changing Demographics and Evolving Tongs

There is no monolithic Chinese criminal organization in the U.S. But one thing has remained constant. All reported cases of Chinese organized crime have thus far involved first generation immigrants, living either inside or close to Chinese communities and engaging in activities that are mostly injurious to their own ethnic group. As Chin (1996) points out, Chinese organized crime in the U.S. is a complex social phenomenon, reflecting the diverse geographical regions where the immigrants come from. For instance, in communities where large numbers of Cantonese speaking Chinese immigrants reside, tongs have emerged as the predominant community structures where criminal elements congregate. Triad elements are likely to reside in communities where large numbers of immigrants from Hong Kong congregate. Taiwan-based criminal organizations are likely to find accomplices among immigrants who migrated from the island.

To understand Chinese organized crime in North America, one needs to recognize the complexity of geo-cultural and linguistic influences as well as the degree of assimilation. For one thing, multi-generation Chinese-Americans, whose ancestors came to the U.S. many generations ago, are often well integrated into the mainstream society. Most no longer speak Chinese and have no contact with the new immigrant community. There are quite a few of these fully Americanized Chinese in America. There have been no documented cases to suggest that these Chinese are involved in any form of organized crime.

Then there are a large number of new immigrants, those who arrived in North American after the 1950s. Although all ethnic Chinese, they come from different cultural backgrounds and speak different dialects, and as a result tend to form different social networks. While the well educated professionals may have a much wider range of settlement choices, the majority of Chinese immigrants, particularly those with limited language ability, tend to concentrate in areas of shared social and cultural characteristics.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, ethnic Chinese make up the largest group of the Asian population in the U.S., about 22% or roughly 3.5 million.[5] As a whole Chinese-Americans grow steadily over the past few decades due to rapid immigration from mainland China, Taiwan, Vietnam, and Southeast Asia. Chinese immigrants tend to concentrate in a few states in the U.S., including California, New York, Texas, and New Jersey. By and large, Chinese populations live in urban areas. The three metropolitan areas with the highest concentration of ethnic Chinese, based on the 2009 American Community Survey by the U.S. Census Bureau, are New York City, San Francisco-San Jose area, and the greater Los Angeles area.[6] In recent years, Chinese immigrants have also spread in large numbers to other urban centers, including Houston, Seattle, Boston, and Chicago.

Tongs and Organized Crime

Chinese tongs have always attracted some levels of official attention in the U.S. As recent in 2010, the Congressional Research Service (the official non-partisan research arm of the U.S. Congress) continued to acknowledge the law enforcement's continued battle through most of the twentieth century against such traditional organized crime networks as the Italian Mafia, Russian Mafia, Japanese Yakuza, and Chinese Tongs (Finklea 2010: 4). Some of their most profitable activities included gambling, loan sharking, narcotics trafficking, extortion, prostitution, bootlegging, and fraud.

Historically, tongs are active in operating or providing protection for opium dens, gambling clubs, and brothels. Their role in the vice industry was inevitable, as early Chinese immigrants were isolated from the mainstream society and sought comfort and companionship amongst their own. These early immigrants engaged in the same vice activities that were common in their home country. However, for such illicit enterprises to survive in a hostile foreign environment, it was only natural for tongs to organize, coordinate, and protect these activities so their members could access with minimal safety concerns. It should be noted that many of these so-called vice activities were not only legal but also common in their home country at the time. However, these vice activities further isolated the

[5] Figures obtained from the U.S. Census Bureau at http://factfinder.census.gov/.

[6] Survey statistics can be retrieved at http://www.census.gov/acs/www/.

Chinese community as they were viewed with either disdain or open hostility by the American mainstream society, thus further reinforcing the dominant role of tongs among Chinese immigrants.

So long as the Chinese immigrants kept quiet to themselves within their ethnic enclave, few noticed or cared about their existence. As the number of tongs expanded, the Chinese community became fragmentized along these powerful associations. Disputes started to emerge that often escalated into fights between tongs. Many disputes originated from attempts to assert one's control over vice activities in the neighborhood. Members of rival tongs often claimed to be abused or bullied by the other, resulting in demands for "compensations" or "face-saving offers." Soon tongs were drawn into street battles known as the 'tong wars' (Dillon 1962). For instance, Huston (2001) explained that because the vast majority of early immigrants from China were male laborers, tongs were involved in importing women from China to serve as prostitutes. Disputes soon arose from control over brothel activities. During the tong wars, hired killers, the "hatchet men", were used to carry out bloody turf wars for the protection of vice businesses (Dillon 1962). Once violence caught the outside attention, police quickly learned that most "trouble makers" belonged to one tong or another, and that they banded together in their attack against their enemies. Because tongs were long considered the controlling forces behind otherwise faceless Chinese immigrants, they soon came to symbolize Chinese organized crime.

Tongs, either as community gathering places or criminal organizations, have generally kept a low key in their operations, legal or illegal. The same tradition continues today. The low-key style of operations, however, is punctuated by occasional flare-ups that have attracted much attention from both the Chinese community and the authorities. In one recent case, Allen Leung, a well-known power of two fraternal organizations in San Francisco's Chinatown, was gunned down when a masked man entered his store in an attempted robbery (Van Derbeken and Hua 2006a). A long time member of Hop Sing Tong and the Chinese Freemasons, Leung played a very public role in the community. He opened a martial arts studio, operated an import/export business, and was named to a city task force by two San Francisco majors (Van Derbeken and Hua 2006b). The case remains unsolved, but police strongly suspect that it was the work of a criminal organization because the robber did not leave the store with any valuables, and the victim reportedly refused to pay extortion fees to a criminal gang (Van Derbeken and Hua 2006b). By and large, criminal organizations in Chinatown have learned over time that any such flares attract unwanted attention from the authorities and everybody would lose.

Another aspect of Chinese organized crime in North America is the street gangs. Unlike tongs that are typically quiet in their operations, street gangs tend to be raucous in the community and thus draw much attention from the authorities. Youth gangs in the Chinese community are often thought to maintain an ambiguous relationship with the tongs. Mostly made up of teenagers and men in their twenties, they typically claim territories and are thought to be under some protection of legitimate social, benevolent, and commercial groups called tongs

(Curtis et al. 2002). It would be naïve to assume that these youth gangs can simply trample neighborhood businesses. They are often paid to carry out the dirty work of the tongs, such as guarding gambling dens, disrupt businesses that refuse to submit to the tongs' control, and collecting debts from delinquent clients. The relationship between youth gangs and the tongs is hierarchical but membership and group structure are fluid and change over time (Chin et al. 1998).

According to Chin (1996), the first Chinese street gang, the Continentals, was formed in 1961 by native-born Chinese high school students; their primary objective was self-protection. Subsequently, new gangs such as the White Eagles, Black Eagles, Ghost Shadows, and Flying Dragons, began to emerge. During the early stage, Chinese gangs were, in essence, martial art clubs headed by *kung fu* masters who were also tong members. Overtime, these self-help groups transformed into predatory gangs and preyed on their own people for financial gains. According to Chin's fieldwork (1996), these gangsters terrorized the community by demanding food and money from businesses and robbed illegal gambling establishments. The elders in the tongs, whose businesses were affected, decided to hire these youths as needed to protect their businesses from troubles caused by these gangs (Chin 1996).

Beyond the old Chinatowns in major urban centers, Chinese youth gangs have also started to appear in cities such as Los Angeles, Oakland, Dallas, Houston, Falls Church, Arlington, Philadelphia, Chicago, and Boston. It should be noted that the U.S. authorities generally consider Chinese street gangs part of organized crime. In the 1990s, almost all major street gangs in the United States had been indicted as racketeering enterprises (Chin 1999). Although news media and government agencies often lump Chinatown street gangs and tongs together, Ko-lin Chin of Rutgers University, who has done extensive fieldwork in New York City, contends that youth gangs are not under the direct control of any tongs (Chin 1990, 1996).

Wherever there are large Chinese communities, youth gangs are likely to appear. For instance, youth gangs such as the Fuk Ching, White Tigers, Tung On, Green Dragons, Golden Star, and Born-to-Kill have attracted much attention in the peripheries of New York's Chinatown and in the outer boroughs of Queens and Brooklyn, following the growth of Chinese businesses and residents. From time to time, these youth gangs cross one another, fights break out that often end in deaths, and then the police are involved. For instance, since the late 1980s and early 1990s, the infamous Fuk Ching gang in New York City came to dominate the news media with its brutality against rival gangs (Chin 1996; Finckenauer 2007a). The Fuk Ching gang was a splinter from the Association of Fukien Youths, people who migrated from Fujian Province in Southern China. Like many other so-called community organizations, elements of the group became involved in the protection business and debt collection, particularly because the vast majority of illegal migrants in the late 1980 and 1990s came from Fujian. Their familiarity with the regional culture and dialect made them effective in extorting money and collecting debt. Early in 1990s, gun fights broke out in Teaneck, New Jersey, and four were killed reportedly because of disputes over the distribution of the proceeds from the human smuggling operations (Faison 1993). This outbreak of violence attracted

the attention of the federal authority, which also coincided with its increasing effort to crackdown on human smuggling activities in New York City. Later in 1993, the gang leader Guo Liang Qi (also known as Ah Kay) and 14 of his associates were arrested, effectively putting an end to an unusual period of violent gang wars in New York's Chinatown (Liu 1993). According to Finckenauer (2007a), the Fuk Ching gang is not sophisticated in its use of violence. There does not appear to be any clear control by higher ups over its members' violent activities, which sometimes seemed rather random.

On the West Coast, Chinese organized crime has mostly been reported in San Francisco area, although large Chinese communities in Los Angeles are also experiencing youth gang problems. In the mid-1990s, there were quite a few gang fights between rival Asian gangs, the best known of which were probably between the Wah Ching and the Asian Boyz on turf disputes. In one incident, a brawl broke out in a pool hall followed by a shootout that killed one gang member. The event was captured in full by the security camera and later went viral on the internet. The case took another decade for the law enforcement to solve when key members were extradited from overseas (Los Angeles Police Department 2008).

A review of recent cases indicates that these earlier gang rivalries have largely faded away. Instead new criminal organizations have attracted the attention of the authorities. For instance, the federal agency recently broke up two large Chinese criminal organizations, charging 51 individuals for racketeering offenses, attempted murder, extortion, operating large-scale illegal gambling businesses, debt collection, loan sharking, money laundering, and trafficking in counterfeit goods (U.S. Attorney's Office 2004). The government was also seeking tens of millions of dollars in the forfeiture of their criminal proceeds and properties. Not related to any existing tongs or gangs, these two criminal organizations were named after their leaders i.e., the Lim Organization (headed by Mr. Lim Shang) and the Wang Organization (headed by Mr. Wang Shao Fen). Although not tied to any Chinatown tongs, these two organizations modeled after their predecessors, engaging mostly in neighborhood-based enterprising activities. Their criminal networks were vast and illicit enterprises diverse. The Lim Organization, for instance, ran a vast empire and often used force or threats of force to settle disputes or collect debts. Several individuals were beaten and one almost killed in the hands of Lim and his followers. Lim later pleaded guilty on racketeering charges and attempted murder and received a sentence of more than 12 years in prison (U.S. Attorney's Office 2008). Thirty-seven associates of Lim's organization were also convicted and sentenced.

Emerging Illicit Enterprises

Tongs are historically known for their neighborhood-based and vice-related enterprises. The extent of their criminal empire typically ends at the physical boundaries of the Chinese community. As Zhang and Chin (2003) theorized, this is

probably because the structure and membership of tongs are more suited for neighborhood-based activities than for enterprises that do not rely on specific locations or captive customers. These neighborhood-based illicit enterprises have not changed much for more than a century, but new criminal opportunities have sprung up around the world.

In recent decades, an increasing number of transnational criminal activities involving Chinese nationals have gained much notoriety in America, most notably drug trafficking and human smuggling. Despite repeated claims by news media and official sources, there has been no creditable evidence to suggest any systematic involvement by tongs in these activities. These transnational criminal enterprises appear to have been dominated by a different breed of criminals, well-traveled and well-connected. They typically have the financial resources to find legal channels to migrate in and out of North America. What is more is that they do not forge alliances with any local tongs or Chinese organizations, but rely on their own social networks.

Heroin Trafficking

The Chinese community has had a long history of opium use, dating back to the initial immigrant settlement in San Francisco (U.S. Senate 1877). In the 1980s, law enforcement officials in the U.S. began noticing increased number of heroin trafficking cases involving Chinese nationals, and claimed that Chinese drug traffickers were responsible for about 20% of the heroin imported into this country (President's Commission on Organized Crime 1984). By 1990s, law enforcement authorities in the U.S., Canada, Australia, the Netherlands, and Britain claimed that the Chinese dominated the heroin trade in their respective jurisdictions (Bryant 1990; Dubro 1992; Dobinson 1993; Schalks 1991; Black 1991). Chinese drug traffickers remain one of the most active groups in international heroin trade (Chin et al. 1998).

Authorities long charged that tongs and triads were the main culprits in the heroin trade (President's Commission on Organized Crime 1984; Seper 1986; Powell 1989; Penn 1990). However, this claim was long suspected by the research community. A careful review of the heroin cases reported in the media involving Chinese offenders also suggested that only a small number of Chinese gang leaders and a small number of ordinary gang members were ever involved (Buder 1988; Esposito and McCarthy 1988; Marriott 1989; Treaster 1991). After extensive fieldwork in New York City, Chin (1996) found little evidence to suggest that established tongs in Chinatown were ever involved in the drug business.

For instance, in one recent case involving heroin trafficking, Frank Ma, the leader of a transnational heroin trafficking organization, was sentenced in early 2010 to life in prison in a U.S. federal court for ordering the murder of two individuals in Toronto, Canada (U.S. Attorney's Office 2010). His lieutenant, the one who carried out the hit job, was sentenced to 35 years. According to the FBI

investigation, from 1991 to 1996, the Ma organization imported heroin worth millions of dollars from Asia into the U.S. for distribution in New York City. In the summer of 1994, at the request of his key supplier in Hong Kong, Ma organized a hit job to kill the supplier's partner in Toronto, Canada. Ma brought in his contacts from California and New York, and supplied location information and money for the hit job. Ma's lieutenant and his team stormed the intended target's business and killed two innocent officer workers. It took the next 10 years and some 13 convictions of members of Ma organization for law enforcement agencies of both countries to catch up with Frank Ma himself. No tongs were ever implicated in any of these convictions.

As one researcher put it during the heyday of cross-pacific heroin trafficking, the connection between drug trafficking and Chinese organized crime (gangs, tongs, or triads) is weak at best (Dobinson 1993). One may assume that transporting heroin across vast distances requires significant investment and coordination. Triads and tongs would be ideal partners in this transnational enterprise. However, empirical research seems to suggest that heroin trafficking, at least in the trans-Pacific context, is primarily carried out by groups of daring entrepreneurs from diverse backgrounds including community leaders, business people, restaurant owners, workers, and the unemployed (Chin and Zhang 2007). Heroin traffickers use their legitimate businesses such as restaurants, trading companies, and retail stores as "fronts" and also to launder the illicit profits. Most of them enter the drug trade with short-range objectives, but soon find the immense profits intoxicating and hard to quit. Low-level couriers tend to be heavy gamblers and illegal immigrants who are in debt.

Human Smuggling

Illegal Chinese immigration in organized manners to North America has been going on for more than two decades, although it only catches public attention occasionally when some daring operations ended in disasters, such as the death of 58 illegal Chinese immigrants inside a refrigerator truck while attempting to cross into England in Dover (Woods 2000). Tragic incidents only illustrate the aggressiveness of the smuggling organizations, their extensive global network, and the resolve of those yearning to reach the foreign shores.

Economic growth, greater exchanges of commerce, easier travel between countries, and the proliferation of telecommunications have expanded the range of criminal activities (Zhang and Gaylord 1996; Zhang 2008). Because of the limited immigration quota for Chinese nationals, few have the legitimate opportunity to immigrate to the United States. Consequently, entrepreneurs are providing essentially an underground travel service.

Human smugglers are called "snakeheads" both in China and overseas Chinese communities. There are several methods used by the smugglers to transport Chinese nationals into the U.S. One strategy is to travel to Mexico or Canada "by

some means" and then illegally cross into the United States (Asimov and Burdman 1993). A second strategy is to fly into the United States via several transit points outside China. These by-air illegal immigrants have travel documents that enable them to enter the country (Lorch 1992). As a third strategy was by fishing trawlers or freighters (Zhang 1997). American officials claim that Chinese smuggling organizations are globally connected and their web of transportation practically covers the whole world (Freedman 1991; Mydans 1992).

Organized Chinese illegal immigration is considered lucrative enough to rival heroin trafficking and aggressive enough to threaten the integrity of the legal immigration system in the United States (Myers 1994). Most U.S. law enforcement sources believe that organized crime groups are behind the smuggling activities (Zhang 1997). After all, moving human beings in large numbers across vast distances require an extensive network of committed and organized individuals. In other words, human smuggling is an organizational behavior rather than an individual's effort. However, years of empirical research seem to suggest that human smuggling should not be viewed as a traditional organized crime, as defined in criminological literature (Maltz 1994), but, a crime that is organized (Finckenauer 2007b). Individual members of tongs and street gangs may be involved in the smuggling business; but their participation is hardly ever sanctioned by, or even known to, their respective fraternal organizations. Empirical research thus far suggests that tongs do not play any significant roles in the smuggling trade. Rather, it is a "business" controlled by numerous groups of entrepreneurs (Zhang 2007). These groups rely on their own resources and develop their own routes.

Tongs and Emerging Criminal Entities

In light of the immense profits, one must wonder why tongs or triads have not marched into these emerging transnational territories. After all, any transportation of illicit goods and humans across multiple nations requires planning and coordination that only organizations seem capable of, not individuals. However, this is obvious and even logical assumption has not received much empirical support. Instead, research thus far has consistently found quite the opposite—tongs and triads are rarely implicated in any such cases.

Although different in their commodities, heroin trafficking and human smuggling are similar in many aspects. Both enterprises have been dominated by loosely associated risk-takers that are well traveled, possess international links, and are familiar with either the source or transit countries. These enterprises depend on flexible international networks, entrenched in the infrastructure of the opium growing and immigrant-sending communities as well as the transit countries. Their alliance is a business arrangement involving only those with valuable resources to contribute.

Organizationally, they are best described as *ad hoc* groups or task forces. The ever-changing market constraints and operational uncertainties seem to determine

the organizational characteristics of both criminal enterprises. For instance, in human smuggling, the clandestine nature and the limited pool of eligible clients seem to allow only entrepreneurs or small groups to survive in this business. There is little vertical structure within smuggling organizations, even though their operations may involve highly specialized tasks. Operationally, heroin traffickers and human smugglers mostly engage in one-on-one transactions. The task force orientation is the principal feature of these criminal organizations. Because of the illicit nature of their business, and permanent fear of arrests and asset forfeiture, people involved in heroin trafficking and human trafficking stay low and seek as little attention as possible.

Because both transnational enterprises involve vast distances and a series of dyadic transactions, the success of the entire operation hinges heavily upon the success of each and every stage. Any mishap along this chain of events will spell the end of the operation or even the entire group, such as the Dover incident (Woods 2000). Therefore, in circumstances where contingent transactions are the norm and sequential operations are hazardous, small groups (or task forces) are well fitted for expanding and contracting in response to market uncertainties. Faced with risky market conditions, small-group exchange relations (with minimal organizational structure and limited hierarchies) serve to maximize profits for each involved individual since hierarchical structure creates redundancy and reduces efficiency. Furthermore, shared expectations and commitment are easily promoted in small groups, which further reduce uncertainty and improve the transactional atmosphere. The dyadic exchange relations serve to reduce internal tension, increase personal accountability, simplify transactions as well as safeguard against unscrupulous partners. Exposure to law enforcement activities is reduced and personal safety maximized with limited contacts with other members of the network. Clearly in illicit enterprises such as human smuggling and heroin trafficking, small-group exchange can offer transaction terms far superior to those of any traditional crime groups.

In contrast, traditional neighborhood-based tongs have a different set of organizational imperatives, such as continuity, group identity, and preservation of secure and stable income. Transnational illegal commerce cannot guarantee any of the benefits that the neighborhood-based enterprises enjoy. Furthermore, the transnational marketplace is open to any risk-takers with or without the backing of any organization.

It appears that Chinese organized crime is evolving along two separate tracks. More specifically, one is on a stable track tied to an ethnic enclave while the other changes with time with no tendency to settle. The traditional tongs (or whatever one chooses to call them) remain entrenched in the community that gave rise to their status and dominance, enabling them to continue their influence over territorially based criminal enterprises. These organizations have been playing an influential role in the community for as long as there are Chinatowns in North America. But another group of Chinese enterprising agents follow emerging opportunities where they may be.

Zhang and Chin (2003) presented a structural deficiency perspective as a way to explain how criminal organizations specialized in running traditional neighborhood-based enterprises are ill-fit for emerging transnational operations. The market conditions of transnational illicit enterprises differ significantly from those of local racketeering activities, thus requiring different set of skills and resources. One easy way to differentiate the two groups is to examine the socio-economic backgrounds of those involved in different types of illicit enterprises. The emerging transnational criminal enterprises require connections and contacts that are not easily accessible to the average Chinese immigrants. If people arrive in the U.S. illegally or seek assistance from the local tongs, mostly likely they have few resources. Even when these new immigrants follow the tongs into criminal enterprises, they are mostly only capable of handling neighborhood-based activities, watching over a gambling den or safeguarding drop houses for human smugglers.

Discussion

Tongs in North America, whether in their original or contemporary form, are unique community-based organizations. They have historically provided much needed services that offer comfort and insulation for the newly arrived. At the same time, they are also the gathering place where criminal elements congregate. With any sizeable population, demand for fringe services is bound to emerge. Most neighborhood-based criminal enterprises such as prostitution, gambling and drug distribution are in need of protection and coordination so that disputes or conflicts can be effectively managed or controlled.

It should be noted that tongs as community organizations are rarely implicated in criminal investigations. However, members of tongs have (Chin 1996). One explanation for this peculiar development is that tongs themselves are mere physical spaces occupied by criminal as well as law abiding members of the Chinese community. Therefore tongs may provide covers but are not directly functional in any criminal activities. Crime bosses have been successful in using tongs toward their advantage, such as recruiting new members, negotiating with rival tongs, and buying influence and favor from the government. However, criminal investigations are typically launched against individual deeds, not organizations. This situation is not much different from that of the Japanese Yakuza, where crime bosses have long been watched and investigated by the authorities but the criminal organizations continue to exist (see Hill 2006; Adelstein 2009). Whether they are called “tongs” or some other names (such as Fuk Ching or Fukien Youth Association), the presence of organized crime in Chinese communities should be a given, because of the rampant vice activities. As long as there are illegal prostitution and gambling operations, business owners must procure protection or insurance against unscrupulous customers as well as predatory youth gangs. In other words, without established underworld power structure, common vice activities such as gambling and prostitution will not survive.

At the same time, with the rapid changes in the composition of Chinese immigrants, these community organizations (or tongs) are not static either. The rising waves of new immigrants from overseas have greatly altered the socio-demographic landscape of traditional Chinatowns in North America. New criminal opportunities are emerging. Based on the author's field work in the past decade that involved interviews with community informants and review of court cases and media reports, the most likely scenario would be that while individual members of tongs may participate in transnational criminal activities. Tongs, as community organizations, are not playing any direct roles in these emerging enterprises, particularly those of transnational nature. Instead, organized by their ancestral and linguistic lineage for ease of operations as well as protection, the new criminal organizations have the financial wherewithal and connections to take advantage of the increasingly globalized environment.

Historically, law enforcement agencies have found the clannish social networks inside the tongs and the myriad dialects impossible to penetrate because of the cultural and linguistic barriers (Liu 1993). The situation remains largely unchanged today. Mandarin speaking officers are difficult to find in any law enforcement agencies in the U.S., those who speak southern Chinese dialects, such as the Fujianese, are almost nonexistent, thus hampering any effective surveillance and investigations. As long as there are no serious cases that warrant the mobilization of significant resources and procurement of special language skills, local, and federal authorities typically ignore what is going on inside the Chinese community.

Because "tongs" as a terminology has been ingrained into the vernacular of law enforcement and research community alike, it can be treated as a shorthand reference to Chinese organized crime in North America. Viewed from this angle, it is perhaps still convenient to use the terminology. But there is always the risk of conjuring up imagined connection between the old Chinatown-based organizations and the newly formed criminal alliances. Chinese organized crime in North America appears to be evolving along two dichotomous paths, with one rarely intersecting with the other. The neighborhood-based tongs are good at profiting from local vice activities. As Gambetta (1993) argues, their most profitable service is not so much in running any of these illicit enterprises, but in providing protection and insurance policy against predatory business practices or dishonest transactions. The emerging criminal alliances, on the other hand, are not attached to any specific neighborhoods and thrive on their transnational mobility to cash in on the ever-growing globalized underground economy. Human smuggling and drug trafficking are just a few such examples. Other activities that have seen a rise in the prominence of Chinese organized criminals include counterfeit goods, identity theft, credit card frauds, and intellectual property violations. For the same reasons that law enforcement agencies have found it difficult to investigate cases involving Chinese criminal organizations, there is a severe shortage of empirical research on this topic due to cultural and linguistic barriers. The last time anyone

who has conducted fieldwork in North America to examine tongs and their roles in the illicit economy was two decades ago. Much empirical research is needed to investigate and explore the changes in the underground economy inside Chinatowns.

A new conceptual framework of Chinese organized crime is also needed to account for the changing landscape of the Chinese community and the emergence of these new groups of transnational organized criminals. Such research need to cast its focus beyond criminality per se, but on the various functions of community organizations in Chinatowns. Important questions include how these organizations are formed, how membership is developed and where new members are recruited, any differentiation between core and peripheral members in their activities and compensations, and whether an organization ever disbands. It is not important whether these organizations are called "tongs" or some other names, what is important is to understand what their organizational imperatives are—the latent functions other than what their official charters say.

To summarize the earlier discussion, there are two main reasons that new conceptual tools are needed to explain these diverging trends in Chinese organized crime: the changing Chinese population in the U.S., and the emerging transnational opportunities. First, Chinese community is not static but changes over time. New immigrants from different parts of China bring along increasing cultural and linguistic diversities. Chinatown was once a primary Cantonese speaking territory, but newcomers speak multiple dialects from Fujian or Zhejiang. They have also brought along their own cultural habits that trace back to different areas in mainland China, Taiwan, and Southeast Asia. In addition, newcomers have their own problems, ranging from low employment skills, illiteracy, and illegal immigration status that must seek assistance from community organizations. Second, while the old-fashioned racketeering activities continue in the Chinese community, there are many more new transnational opportunities, nonterritorial and transient. They each need a specific kind of entrepreneurs. One type is entrenched in the neighborhood (i.e., tongs and street gangs), while the other is a global businessman.

This paper argues for the continued use of the term "tongs" as shorthand reference so that different criminal organizations can be explored and compared. This is similar to the fact that all Hong Kong's criminal organizations are lumped together as "triads" even though there are many well-known organizations such as the Wo group and 14 group, and scores of splinter groups. The multitude of criminal organizations in Japan are broadly called the "Yakuza" or "Boryokudan" as if they were all the same when in fact the majority of their daily activities were rather mundane and non-criminal (Adelstein 2009). By using a specific terminology, law enforcement agencies and researchers alike can quickly differentiate a broad category of criminal enterprises from other types of criminal activities. Barring the use of such a convenient terminology, one may find it a clumsy exercise to describe Chinese organized crime in North America.

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