

CHINESE CRIMINAL GROUPS

By Deputy William G. Howell

When analyzing the birth and life of Chinese criminal groups in the United States, the formation of triads (secret political societies first formed in the 17th century to fight a foreign dynasty) needs to be considered. As time evolved, some of these groups began to engage in criminal activity and victimized the very people who they pledged to fight for. By the mid 19th century, rebellions in mainland China forced many triad members to flee the country and settle in Formosa (present-day Taiwan) or head further east to the western world.



This triad induction ceremony in 1993 involved four major Asian criminal groups in Los Angeles.

In California, the Chinese were used as a means of cheap labor in the mines and railroad lines that were being built. The harsh treatment of these new immigrants in part caused the formation of

benevolent associations known as tongs. These tongs served as a means of protection and self-government for the Chinese. They still exist today. The restrictions on Chinese immigrants entering into the United States were harsh, especially for Chinese females. Tongs provided several different forms of entertainment for the Chinese male immigrant. Brothels, opium dens and gambling operations were often run by these associations.

During this same period of time, triad members were able to infiltrate some of these tong societies and seize control. The result was the formation of criminal tongs. As these tongs began to compete with each other, gangs were formed to protect the interest of the tong. These youthful offenders called "look-see boys" became the foundation of today's gang member. By the mid 1960s, these youthful gangs realized the value of self-control rather than being controlled by the criminal tong. At this point, an independent Chinese criminal group began to form and contract out for services.

As Chinese immigrants began to pour into the western world, their communi-



These Asian criminals are part of the growing number being incarcerated.

ties began to flourish. Little was done, however, to assimilate into their new land and the Chinese community remained a closed society. Western society also did little to penetrate the veil of secrecy in these communities. Over the decades, the tong associations grew in power and control over their communities and became a center where all matters involving each community were settled. The tongs also gained power and control in the criminal aspects of the community and used the gangs as their eyes, ears and muscle. Over time, the new immigrants who came into the community began to form their own groups of protection against the established gangs victimizing them.

The influx of Asian immigrants, including the Chinese, began to increase



The influence of prison gangs is also seen in these Asian criminals now incarcerated.

during the mid 1960s and exploded with the end of the Vietnam War. This veil, which enveloped the community, began to tear, and this resulted in the overflow into the nontraditional Asian communities. To a certain extent, this forced the assimilation of the Chinese into western society and resulted in a breakaway from the old traditions. This sparked the westernization of the Asian communities, including Chinese criminal groups.

Chinese Criminal Groups Undergo Changes

Within the past few years, dramatic changes have been seen in the makeup of Chinese criminal groups here in

Southern California. While law enforcement continues to lag behind in its efforts to combat these groups, the westernization of Chinese criminals has influenced the evolution of these groups in the United States. The secrecy and organizational ways of these criminal groups, although still paramount, have begun to dwindle as the younger and more westernized members take over command. Their sophistication over traditional criminal groups is apparent. The change, however, in these groups has come with the type of violence that has been normally associ-

ated with traditional street gangs. This change has also been seen in other ethnic Asian criminal groups. Turf wars unlike any ever seen before in Southern California are beginning to be commonplace. These wars parallel

the Golden Dragon Restaurant massacre in San Francisco, Calif. in the late 1970s.

In May of 1993, law enforcement in the Los Angeles area launched a massive

effort to combat the establishment of a known criminal triad group. The group's objectives were to establish its presence and then control and coordinate the criminal activities of several other Chinese and Southeast Asian criminal groups that already established their presence in Southern California. During the course of this investigation, law enforcement observed for the first time the recruitment of a triad organization outside its ethnic group. A video tape seized during the series of search war-



The westernization of Asian criminal groups is now more commonly seen in photos seized during search warrants.

rants not only captured a triad ceremony on tape but showed the induction of both Chinese (Mandarin and Cantonese speaking) and Vietnamese into a triad. While it was believed that law enforcement was able to disrupt this goal, the criminal justice system's failure to back up this effort with continuous proactive investigations caused these criminal groups to go underground for only a short time. Upon their re-emergence, these groups were able to rebound and then recruit from non-traditional pools. This recruitment effort went outside their respective ethnic pools more so than before and created alliances never before witnessed to this extent.

Over the following years and up to the present, alliances at the Chinese organized-crime level with groups such as the United Bamboo gang, Four Seas, Wah-Ching, Big Circle Boys, and other Vietnamese criminal groups have been seen in part and all together. These criminal alliances have been profitable, resulting in the generation of millions of



Street gang graffiti once only seen with traditional gangs have influenced Asian criminal groups. Black Dragons, a Vietnamese gang, crosses out Wah-Ching, a Chinese gang.



The dress and hand signs of traditional street gangs can be seen in today's Asian gang member.

dollars from these criminal activities. At the street level, the alliance among these groups has worked only with certain gangs and has resulted in violent gang wars with others.

It was not until the late 1980s that law enforcement in Southern California began to realize the existence of Asian criminal groups, even though California has the largest Asian population in the United States with Los Angeles County being second only to the state of California in Asian population. Upon this realization, the training of the law enforcement officer in this area became secondary due to the "catch 22 syndrome." The numbers in criminal statistics in the all-Asian communities, including the Chinese community, did not justify the need for specially trained street officers or investigators in this field. The term "community-oriented policing" did not exist. On the other side of the coin, the community lacked trust in the judicial system due to their experiences with law enforcement in their country of origin. Furthermore, those who did experience the U.S. judicial system soon learned concepts such as due process, bail, probation, parole and rehabilitation. The one concept that victims and witnesses never forgot was retaliation. It became the driving force in the Chinese community's cooperative effort to deal with law enforcement. With few specially trained officers to deal with this new phenomenon, Chinese criminal groups, along with the more vicious Southeast Asian criminal gangs, flourished.

By the early 1990s, Southern California law enforcement, still years behind the evolution of these criminal groups, began to make some strides in combating this new challenge. The Chinese and other Asian communities became better educated in the opportunities that the United States had to offer and the need to cooperate with law enforcement. Since the vast majority of Chinese coming into this country for opportunity

are law-abiding citizens, law enforcement had only to concentrate on the so-called "one percent." That one percent used this fear in the community, however, to not only influence but terrorize them into creating another veil of secrecy. As the Chinese organized criminal groups began to recruit outside their normal pools, law enforcement began to see a change in not only the structure of these groups but the methods of operation and types of crimes that they expanded into. While illegal gambling, extortion and home invasion robberies remain the norm, drive-by shootings and public executions are the order of the day. The westernization of these young Chinese gang members and their assimilation of the traditional gang ways have become of major concern to law enforcement types who specialize in these groups. The younger and more violent gang member is being seen at the junior high school level and even in some elementary levels of school.

Few Traditional Gangs Are Asian

While the number of traditional gangs in Los Angeles County is estimated at well over 150,000, this figure includes

very few Chinese or Southeast Asian gangs. While the number of these groups is estimated to be somewhere around 50,000 statewide, an accurate number is far from reality. One reason is the dividing line between the street gang and organized criminal groups. Society's vision of a traditional gang member has usually been the pendleton and khaki-clad Hispanic gang member wearing a bandanna and spray painting his placard on some wall or the blue or red-clad African-American gang member selling some drugs on a street corner. While some of this may be true, most of society's image of a traditional gang member has been what the media perceive and want us to see.

Today's Chinese gang member may be clad in either dress or a combination of both. He or she (yes, females too) are more likely to be dressed like your child, with a grade point average that would allow entry into any college in the United States. Many of them are from middle to upper-middle class environments driving vehicles that would shame most POVs owned by police officers. The family structure of many of these young offenders, while not ideal by western standards, is solid by eastern culture. In short, socioeconomic conditions have very little to do with gang involvement. As law enforcement continues to struggle with budgetary concerns and the cutbacks keep on cutting back, these gang members continue to drive the stolen cars that they just car jacked, fill them up with gas that they just purchased with stolen or counterfeit credit cards, call other members of their team on cloned cellular telephone to plan other crimes, and eat at restaurants that they continue to extort. Oh yes! They probably do their school homework and document all their crimes on state-of-the-art lap top computers that were stolen in computer store takeover robberies and operate them with pirated software. ■

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