A SHORT HISTORY OF ASIAN GANGS IN SAN FRANCISCO

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This paper documents the development of Asian gangs in San Francisco. Data for this paper were collected from 73 face to face interviews. Findings indicate that Asian gangs first emerged when a large pool of Chinese immigrant youths who arrived in San Francisco in the late 1960's were forced into self reliance by the city's failure to recognize the needs of its newcomers. The integration of Asian gangs into criminal subculture in the Chinese community, lack of legitimate opportunities available to youths, and hostility from other ethnic and Asian groups fueled subsequent generations of Asian gangs.

INTRODUCTION

On September 4, 1977, the worst mass murder in San Francisco's history occurred at the Golden Dragon restaurant in the heart of San Francisco's Chinatown. After five were killed and eleven wounded, all of whom were innocent bystanders, Chinese gangs were recognized as a public threat. The San Francisco Police Gang Task Force was created and funding for social service agencies in the Chinese community increased. However, little has been written or is known about Chinese gangs in San Francisco prior to this event. After the initial concern, which lasted only a few years, attention once again flowed away from these gangs. As a result, there have been few documentations of the formation and development of Chinese gangs in San Francisco.

Today, gangs in San Francisco's Chinese community are no longer exclusively ethnic Chinese. During the past ten years, there has been an enormous increase of Chinese-Vietnamese and Vietnamese gang members. More recently, Cambodian gangs are
appearing in various parts of San Francisco. Although some literature (Montero 1979; Haines 1981; Henkin and Nguyen 1981) concerning the migration of Southeast Asians into the United States' urban centers exists, how these groups became integrated into the structure of the Chinese community is a topic that has been virtually ignored. Recent developments among San Francisco's Asian gangs have once again attracted public attention and concern. Knowledge of the development of these gangs is necessary in understanding current events. The purpose of this paper is, therefore, to briefly describe the historical events which took place in San Francisco's Asian communities over the past three decades and the development of its Asian gangs.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Compared to the large body of literature on African American and Hispanic gangs, work on Asian gangs is scarce. Early on, sociologists and psychologists, such as Sollenberger (1968), studied Chinese child-rearing practices for clues to their remarkable socialization capacities. With the dawning of Chinese gangs, however, focus shifted to gang delinquency and organized crimes of Asian origin.

In 1972, the Attorney General of California held a hearing in which many issues concerning the emergence of Chinese gangs were discussed and documented. It was not until after the Golden Dragon Massacre in 1977 that the issue of Chinese gangs in San Francisco was again studied. Takagi and Platt (1977) found that the exploitation of immigrant workers in Chinatown led to a breakdown in traditional family ties and crime. Rice (1977) found that the excitement and financial rewards discovered through Chinese gangs often outweighed legitimate opportunities available to youths, causing an increased likelihood for gang participation. Three years later, Joe and Robinson (1980) found adjustment problems and culture conflict to be the main cause of gang participation (see also Sung 1987).

Throughout the 1980s many authors were fascinated with organized crime of Asian origin. Many sought to link Asian gangs with what they refer to as the "Chinese Mafia." In 1986, the Attorney General of California conducted another hearing on organized crime, predicting that future influxes of Asian immigrants would exacerbate the Asian gang problem in California. Authors, such as Bresler (1981) and Posner (1988), explored in depth the international organization of the Chinese criminal syndicate and its relation to the heroin trade. Recently, Ko Lin Chin (1990) elaborately discussed the tradition of secret societies in China which are
believed to be critical to the development of Asian street gangs in the United States. Today, the thrust of much literature on Asian gangs focuses on organized crime.

**RESEARCH METHODS AND SOURCES OF DATA**

Data for this paper were obtained from face to face interviews from an ongoing study of gangs in San Francisco, California. Interviews consisted of two parts: an in-depth tape recorded section used to obtain qualitative data and a pre-coded schedule of questions used for quantitative purposes. A field observation guide was also used to record information obtained from first hand observations of gang activities.

Respondents were located by means of snowball sampling techniques (Biernacki and Waldorf 1981). Gang members were initially recruited through personnel of neighborhood-based, social service agencies which provide counselling and psychiatric evaluations for gang members and troubled youths. After each completed interview, gang members were asked to refer others within the gang or friends in other Asian gangs. Concurrently, intermediaries from social service agencies were recruiting gang members for interviews. Respondents were paid a stipend of $50 for each completed interview, and individuals were paid $40 for each successful referral. The snowball strategy took effect as respondents and social workers recruited gang members for interviews.

After 18 months of data collection, 73 interviews were completed. Sixty-four of those interviewed were active gang members, and nine interviews were considered historical. Specifically, data were collected and analyzed from the following gangs: various factions of the Wah Ching, the Suey Sing, the Hop Sing, the Asian Invasion, the Eddy Boys, the Chinese Playground Boys (a.k.a. CP boys), and the Ping Boys. The first three gangs are thought to be linked with local tongs, and have been established in San Francisco's Chinatown for over fifteen years. These gangs generally consist of foreign born Chinese and ethnic Chinese from Vietnam.

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1 The author worked closely with the Asian Youth Center, the Chinatown Youth Center, and the Vietnamese Youth Development Center.

2 The English translation of the word "tong" is simply a gathering place or hall. Tongs were first established in the United States in San Francisco by one of the first wave of Chinese immigrants during the mid 1880s. Prior to the emergence of tongs, the Chinese community was controlled by family or district associations. Immigrants who were not accepted by these associations banded together and formed tongs. Due to the secretive nature of the tongs and the strong alliance among them, they soon overpowered the elite family associations (Chin 1990). According to the Attorney General (1972, 1986) and law enforcement officials, tongs are now criminal organizations involved in heroin smuggling, prostitution, opium smoking, gambling, extortion, and blackmail (Chin 1990).
The remaining gangs are neighborhood groups which are involved in delinquent activities as well as some drug distribution. They consist of either American born Chinese, foreign born Chinese, or Chinese Vietnamese. Individuals within these groups are sometimes recruited by the established gangs. All of the preceding gangs reside in San Francisco and often use Chinatown as the focus of many activities.

Ideally, a researcher would prefer to speak to those who originally formed the gangs. However, many of these individuals are either dead, incarcerated, or in hiding. Historical interviews were thus most useful for this paper. These interviews consist of information obtained from former gang members, non-gang members, and social workers, concerning the formation and development of Asian gangs in San Francisco. Only one respondent was actually involved in creating the gangs. Hence, the data sources may be incomplete or biased, and thus the findings should be viewed with some caution. Given these limitations, I have attempted to trace the factors giving rise to contemporary Asian gangs in San Francisco.

Definition of “Gang Member”

Since there is no consensus among researchers, social workers, and law enforcement agencies, as to what constitutes a “gang,” we did not use a specific definition during the preliminary stages of this study. In order to qualify, prospective respondents were asked whether they belonged in a gang and to which specific gang. This strategy of self selection avoided imposing an academic definition of “gang” or “gang member” on respondents. By avoiding the possibility of utilizing an inapplicable definition, this method did not restrict the pool of respondents to what other researchers or law enforcement officials deem to be gangs and gang members. This strategy, however, relied upon the subjective definitions of “gang” by respondents (Fagan 1990: 8).

Self selection during the preliminary stage of the study allowed the author to conceptualize what a “gang” and what being a “gang member” means to respondents. After fifteen interviews, a workable definition, one offered by Malcolm Klein, was applied. According to Klein (1969: 1427), a gang is:

... any denotable adolescent group of youngsters who (a) are generally perceived as a distinct aggregation by others in their neighborhood, (b) recognize themselves as a denotable group (almost invariably with a group name), and
have been involved in a sufficient number of delinquent incidents to call forth a consistent negative response from neighborhood residents and/or enforcement agencies.

Although Klein's definition describes the majority of Asian gangs, it requires some modification to encompass all Asian gangs existing in San Francisco. First, our study has shown that many Chinese gangs cannot be considered "groups of youngsters," since the age range is greater than adolescence (14-34), and many participants are in their twenties and thirties. In addition, we give greater weight to Klein's second requirement than to the other two. Since many Chinese gangs, especially those involved in organized crimes, are discreet with their activities, neither neighborhood residents nor law enforcement officials may always be aware of their existence. However, if a gang considers itself a "denotable group" and, more important, if they have a gang name, we considered the group to be a gang.

HISTORICAL CONTEXTS

The Beginnings

Due to a series of Chinese Exclusion Acts, few Chinese women and children were allowed to immigrate to the United States prior to 1965. The Chinese community thus mainly consisted of adult males, who were primarily bachelors. Consequently, there were only a small number of children, which stifled the development of gangs in San Francisco's Chinatown.

Despite the absence of gangs, a tradition of organized criminal activities, which utilized able young men, developed in the late 1800s. Gambling and the use of opium were popular respite from work among the men who lived in Chinatown. Since there were few Chinese women in the United States, prostitution rings formed to serve the needs of bachelors. Many of these activities were run by members of tongs, who sought to ease some of the difficulties recent immigrants faced. Since these activities are considered illegal in the United States, young men were often used as lookouts (a.k.a. "looksees"), guards and enforcers (a.k.a. "hatchetmen") of house rules to assure smooth operations.3 The

3 The primary purpose for the formation of tongs was the help recent immigrant with the difficulties of adjusting to a new country and foreign culture. Activities which were considered illegal in the United States were not thought of as being illegal to the Chinese. It should also be noted that tongs do not exist solely for organized crimes; they are considered by many to be social clubs. Not all tongs are involved with illegal activities, and for those that are, only certain individuals are heavily involved. The FBI terms these tongs as "criminally influenced tongs."
predominantly male population, the nature of their preferred activities, and the organization of the community, gave birth to a tradition of organized crime in San Francisco's Chinatown, a subculture having profound impacts on the development of modern Asian gangs.

Groups of youths, which can be considered delinquent youth gangs under certain definitions (Miller 1958; Yablonsky 1958; Cloward and Ohlin 1960), arose in the late 1950s and early 1960s with the subtle increase in youths in Chinatown. Gangs, such as the Raiders, the Continentals, and 880's, can be paralleled with the American gangs that existed during that time. Much like the gangs portrayed in movies such as "The Wild One" and "West Side Story," these groups were preoccupied with committing minor delinquent acts and the thrill of the "rumble." According to one former gang member of that era:

(R) The gangs were just social groups, like any other group of boys that hung out together and got into fights and stuff. We never even did much drugs. That was considered bad. We never carried any handguns or shot at people. Because we all hung out together in large groups, the police called us a gang.

These gangs were not unique entities uncommon to American culture. Lacking any connections with organized criminal networks, these gangs generally resembled Cloward and Ohlin's (1960) "conflict gang." They often consisted of a few rebellious adolescents who used the gang as a means to release frustration. These gangs can also be paralleled with what Yablonsky (1959) terms as "near-groups." According to Yablonsky (1959: 109), near-groups are characterized by the following factors: (1) diffuse role definitions, (2) limited cohesion, (3) impermanence, (4) minimal consensus of norms, (5) shifting membership, (6) disturbed leadership, and (7) limited definitions of membership expectations. In short, there was a lack of organization and utilitarian purpose within these early gangs.

When members became adults, they usually abandoned the gang since it had little to offer adult life. Like other youths in America at that time, many went to college while others were drafted for the conflict in Vietnam. As members quit, no new generations replenished the gangs, and by the late 1960s, these gangs became virtually extinct.

*Formation of Chinese Gangs in the 1960s*

Modern Chinese gangs possess distinct behavior patterns and unique organizational structures radically different from earlier Chinese gangs. In comparison to the gangs previously discussed,
the modern Chinese gang has "violated all of the so-called traditional norms" (Sung, 1977: 5). Unlike the gangs of the past, who were mainly involved with petty crimes and gang fights, this new wave of gangs were involved with extortion, strong-armed robberies, other violent crimes, and organized crime. Since many more illegal opportunities were open to this group of newcomers, many remain active in the gang as adults. Modern Asian gangs consist of both adult and teenage members, thus, they can no longer be considered "youth gangs." In addition, the gangs of the 50s and early 60s only consisted of ten to twenty members per gang, while contemporary Chinese gangs may have memberships ranging up to three hundred members (President's Commission on Organized Crime 1984). Therefore, they can be considered an entirely different type of gang, with different sets of norms and values.

Several factors sparked and fueled a collaborative effort among immigrant youths leading to the development of modern Chinese gangs. First, the rescission of immigration quotas during the Kennedy and Johnson administrations provided an influx of Chinese immigrant families from Hong Kong and mainland China into San Francisco. A large pool of immigrant youths in San Francisco provided the individuals needed to create gangs.

Second, new immigrants faced several social problems upon arriving in San Francisco. Neither the Chinese community nor the city of San Francisco generally was prepared to accommodate and provide for needs of its new immigrants. Job opportunities and adequate housing were severely lacking. As a result, many immigrant families lived in extreme poverty.

Third, the general population of San Francisco failed to accept the arrival of new immigrants. Due to overcrowded housing, many immigrants were forced to move into the outskirts of Chinatown. Many of these individuals encroached upon predominantly white neighborhoods, particularly Italian areas, in which individuals greeted the Chinese with hostility and violence. Immigrants youths encountered verbal and physical abuse within Chinatown. The already existing American born Chinese (referred to as A.B.C.'s) gangs resented the idea of this new group of recent immigrants (often referred to as F.O.B.'s, meaning "fresh off the boat") coming into Chinatown demanding jobs and territory. Due to cultural differences, the immigrants were perceived by the A.B.C.'s as an embarrassment to the Chinese community. Abuse and assaults from existing Chinese gangs and other ethnic groups encouraged the new immigrant youths to band together and defend themselves.
Finally, the political attitude among youth in America played a part in influencing young Chinese immigrants. The 1960s were a time of rebellion and demand for social change, especially in the area of civil rights. Groups of Chinese college students, who advocated community empowerment, prompted immigrant youths to organize and demand help from wealthy family associations and tongs. In an attempt to improve conditions, immigrant youths banded together to form an official boy's club called the "Yow Yee," which translates to "Have Righteousness."

Within a short period of time, the Yow Yee's popularity grew among immigrant youths since it was perceived to be their only viable outlet in fulfilling their dreams in a foreign society. The Yow Yee had the crucial elements needed to transform into a small army. At that time, the membership had grown so large (over 100 active members), they overshadowed any other organized youth group within San Francisco. Furthermore, they were backed by funding provided through donations collected from Chinatown stores which sympathized with the group.

By the late 1960s, the Yow Yee converted from an assertive position to an offensive, aggressive standing. The group grew impatient with the lack of positive responses from the city and the community. In 1968, the Yow Yee flexed its arms, challenging the "Six Company," the voice and sole power source of the Chinese community since the 1800s, by demanding they take effective measures to influence changes within City Hall. Neither community leaders nor local politicians appreciated such an advancement. After the president of the Yow Yee was threatened by "elders" in the community and forced to resign (Takagi and Platt 1972), the group understood that they had to rely on illegal sources of money.

Members realized they had power in numbers, yet they still lacked sufficient resources to instill social and economic change. Disillusioned with conventional means and left with few other choices for survival, the group turned the collection of donations into a form of extortion—stores and restaurants were coerced into paying "protection money." Refusal to comply resulted in the destruction of property. This change in the Yow Yee's behavior and attitude propelled them to the status of a criminal street gang.

Certain tongs grew intolerant of the Yow Yee's advancements and feared that violent youths would threaten the tourist industry in Chinatown. The Bing Kung Tong issued a public notice that stated if the gang interfered with any of its member's stores or restaurants, they would be dealt with severely. The Suey Sing Tong took under its aegis a group comprised of other immigrant youths
with no allegiance to the Yow Yee in order to combat these aspiring youths. While this gang adopted the name Suey Sing, which is a tong name, it did not necessarily mean that gang members were tong members. A small war took place between the Yow Yee and the Suey Sing in which several Suey Sing gang members were killed. After suffering defeat, the Suey Sing moved its illegal operations across the bay to Oakland’s own growing “Chinatown.” This victory increased the Yow Yee’s power in San Francisco, while certain individuals in the gang believed the primary goal of the gang had not yet been achieved. They neither had a respectable position within the community nor did they have adequate resources to continue.

A crucial turning point occurred when some members of the Yow Yee and the Hop Sing Tong came to an agreement. The Hop Sing witnessed the rise of the Yow Yee and seized the opportunity to influence and use the group to carry out its illegal activities. Certain tongs needed youths to ensure the smooth operation of the gambling houses—they needed guards, escorts for gamblers with large sums of money, lookouts for police raids, and especially people to collect gambling debts (Sung 1987: 138).

Traditionally, the tongs hired “hatchetmen,” who gained their title from splitting heads with hatchets (Posner 1988), but the Hop Sing realized that the youths would be more efficient in dealing with the growing number of other youth gangs. Members of the Yow Yee were proven to be quick-tempered, street smart, and willing to kill. Moreover, many were under the age of 18 so that, if caught, they received leniency from the juvenile justice court. In turn, the tong provided gang members with housing, food, and money. When asked if gangs were necessary in the Chinese community, a person who works closely with gang members replied:

(R) Without a doubt. You have to have them.
(I) For?
(R) What do you do, hire the cops to protect your gambling parlor? If you find Chinese people, you find gambling. There’s no fucking doubt. What are they going to do, go to the police and say, ‘Can you check my gambling joint after 2:00 in the morning?’ There’s no way. And when they gamble, they don’t gamble like the old people with $2 or $5. The real gamblers, they gamble big stakes, so you need protection. Along with gambling, there’s always the drinking. You don’t find gambling without Hennessy or Courvoisier. You would never survive. So along with the drinking, you always find the quaaludes, the downers, and on and on. Cause where there’s gambling there’s drinking, where there’s drinking there’s drugs, where there’s drugs there’s women, where there’s women, there’s prostitution, and it goes on and on, and there’s a
business. So you can't believe that there will never be gangs in Chinatown.

Prior to any further discussion of the events which followed, it is necessary at this point to clarify the organization of the Asian criminal structure which exists in San Francisco. Chin (1990) outlined four components which made up Asian organized crime: secret societies, triads, tongs, and gangs. Only the two latter elements, however, played any essential part in the history and development of Asian gangs in San Francisco. As described earlier, Asian gangs first appeared when Chinese youths were forced into self reliance when faced with a lack of legitimate opportunities combined with hostility and violence from local youths. This birth occurred with no assistance from any type of organized crime.

However, criminally influenced tong members did play an essential part in changing the activities of gangs by offering them avenues toward different types of illegal activities. This connection between the two entities has been purely financial. Contrary to popular belief, tongs do not have direct control of gangs nor are the arrangements permanent. Tongs members often use certain respectable gang leaders as liaisons between the tong and the gangs in order to carry out specific criminal activities. More often than not, the average gang member is not aware of the particulars of this connection. Tongs have had little to do with the actual recruitment of gang members; they only play a part in financing the gang. In doing so, they enable selected gangs to become recognized and powerful.

In certain instances, tongs have played a pivotal role in the survival of certain gangs. Older gang members who advise less experienced members are essential in the perpetuation of a gang. Often, though, elder gang members are tempted to quit the gang in order to pursue conventional lives. However, tongs offer opportunities to young men that are almost irresistible. Hence, gang leaders will continue the recruitment process in order to further their own interest and thus the gang will survive.

**Warfare in the 1970s**

Some members of the Yow Yee refused to be associated with the Hop Sing. Receiving financial backings from a tong meant that the group was under the indirect leadership and control of the

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4 Triads are secret societies formed in the seventeenth century by ousted Chinese officials and the alienated poor in China (See Chin 1990, for a detailed discussion). Although triads were founded for political and revolutionary purposes, they are thought to have evolved into intricate criminal organizations which focus on the production and distribution of heroin and opium.
tong concerning illegal activities. According to one member of the opposing party:

(R) Some of us wanted the action, the backings from the associations. That was where all the money was at. But if you have the backing of the associations, you had to do everything that they said or they can cut you off. We were Yow Yee. We wanted to do what’s right, to have the guts to do what’s right. Many of us didn’t believe that working for the tong was what’s right.

The group broke into two factions after serious disputes. The faction which opposed any ties with the tongs renamed the group “Chung Yee,” which stands for “Guts and Righteousness,” or “to have the guts to do what’s right.” The police and the media referred to the gang as the “Joe Fong Gang” or the “Joe Boys” after Joe Fong, one of the “elders” in the group. Members of the Chung Yee refused to acknowledge any name other than Chung Yee. The other faction, which decided to join forces with the Hop Sing Tong, called themselves “Wah Ching,” which simply means “Chinese Youth.” This split was followed by a decade of war between the two groups.

Since the Wah Ching had the backing of the Hop Sing Tong, the Wah Ching was able to take control of the illegal businesses in Chinatown, such as extortion and the protection of gambling houses. The Wah Ching had their establishments and places of business well protected with foot soldiers. The Chung Yee was no longer able to benefit from the extortion of businesses in Chinatown, and thus, they had little choice but to leave Chinatown. However, these new areas were not lucrative for this gang since they were generally residential neighborhoods without illegal opportunities; therefore, the group had severe financial difficulties.

Gang warfare became a way of life for gang members. For about ten years, the Chung Yee attempted to regain control of Chinatown to reap its financial rewards. Wars were fought in the public high schools, on the streets, and at local nightclubs. By the mid-1970s, the battles reached enormous proportions. By this time, many gang members carried weapons with them twenty-four hours a day, and were ordered to shoot any opponent they encountered regardless of consequences. A member of the Wah Ching during this time describes the situation:

(R) Well, to tell you the truth, we were on ludes most of the time. We were luded out. We would get up and go out and try to shoot these people. We didn’t even know them. Never spoke to them, they never done nothing to us . . . We didn’t have much of a choice. We were supposed to take care of them, and the thing that we did then was, it was called Joe Boy hunting. We woke up and
dropped a few ludes, take off in a car, and we would hunt for these guys.

Gang members from both groups were being killed, and others were being incarcerated. In addition, many of the original gang members were now in their mid to late twenties and soon realized the cost of gang participation was becoming too great. Thus, they decided to abandon the gangs and lead conventional lives. However, some hard core members, who were successful with the gang lifestyle and saw that legitimate work had little to offer, continued participation in the gang. Some of these individuals escalated in the hierarchy of the organized criminal network in Chinatown, became tong members, and may be the leaders of gangs today.

As the gangs decreased in number, especially among the Chung Yee, new recruits were needed to replenish the groups. Gang membership became fashionable in the mid 1970s so many youths were eager to belong to one gang or another. The Chung Yee recruited from Washington and Lincoln high schools while the Wah Ching selected youths primarily from Galileo High. Since mostly America born Chinese lived in the Richmond and the Sunset Districts, the areas surrounding Washington and Lincoln High, the Chung Yee started recruiting America born Chinese. Many of these youths were the children of immigrants who had migrated to the United States in the mid-1960s. Concurrently, the Wah Ching were recruiting mostly foreign born Chinese and some American born Chinese from Galileo High. As we will see later, some individuals from this younger generation became active in the 1980s.

The situation came to climax with the Golden Dragon Massacre in 1977. By this time, the Wah Ching had switched allegiance to the Hip Sing Tong, who had given the gang a better financial offer, while the Hop Sing financed yet another group which now went under the tongs name. On July 4, 1977, the Chung Yee attempted to extort groups of youth selling fireworks in Chinatown. The Wah Ching had already established control over the extortion of fireworks dealers, and thus conflict resulted when the Chung Yee attempted to invade Wah Ching territory. A shootout occurred on Pacific Avenue in which one Chung Yee was killed and another was injured.

As a result of the killing, the Chung Yee conspired to kill as many Hop Sing and Wah Ching as possible at one time. An opportunity arose when a group of Wah Ching and Hop Sing boys were seen eating at a local restaurant, the Golden Dragon. The Chung Yee went into the restaurant and haphazardly opened gunfire, killing five and injuring eleven, none of whom were gang members. This incident proved to be the turning point for both gangs.
The shooting brought swift attention from the police, the mayor, and local Chinatown leaders. The risk of remaining in the gangs soon outweighed the benefits. The chances of getting killed were great, and indeed the death rate was high. Hence, more and more gang members decided to become inactive. In addition, the San Francisco Gang Task Force was formed to specifically deal with the situation in Chinatown. As a result of increased police patrol and surveillance, hard-core gang members as well as criminally influenced Tongs were forced to decrease the visibility of many of their activities. This included the elimination of visible street gangs. At the same time, foot soldiers were constantly harassed by the police, and once arrested, many were banned by the police from returning to Chinatown. Therefore, some members of the Wah Ching and the Hop Sing went underground while others disappeared entirely.

The atmosphere immediately after the Golden Dragon massacre was relatively quiet. The Chung Yee, who lacked financial support from any associations, dispersed entirely, and the Wah Ching decreased in numbers. While some remained active in the Wah Ching, many who fought during the power struggle dropped out of the gang. However, some who were recruited during the end of the war remained in the gang. In the late 1970s, the Wah Ching had a group of foreign born youths and a group of American born Chinese who were eager to be trained and to participate in gang activities. These two groups matured and flourished in the early 1980s.

New Waves of Gangs in the 1980s

Many American born Chinese who were recruited by the Wah Ching several years earlier as youths were ripe for certain gang activities in 1980's. Since they spoke English fluently, the gangs and the associations found certain activities which suited their talents. Some of these jobs included counterfeiting, smuggling, and especially drug dealing. The bulk of the monies to the gang soon came through the distribution of cocaine and quaaludes. The efficiency of drug distribution drew little police attention and therefore allowed this faction of the Wah Ching to exist and prosper in the early 1980s.

Since there was no opposing gang during this time, this group ran amuck in the mid-1980s. These individuals were unfamiliar with the rules and norms of respect and honor that were expected by the older generations of gang leaders and tong members, and many started using the drugs they sold. Consequently, they lost
According to an influential member of the Wah Ching at the time:

(R) Yeah, you know we didn't know any better. We just turned adults. Here we are running loose and there is no one to control us. And everything is just there for the picking. We had all these younger guys that looked up to us. If we told them to do something, they would do it. So all of a sudden, life became one big party.

(I) You became a big fish in a little pond?

(R) Yeah, they opened up the vault in the bank and left the doors open, and we walked around and helped ourselves. But our problem was we didn't get along with the "old men." And we never got into position where we got any kind of funding. So that is why, most of the, realize most of the gangs, talking about Chinese, the F.O.B.'s, they usually make their money in gambling and extortion and kickbacks from the older people, whereas the A.B.C.'s are mainly involved in drugs, selling drugs. I mean if you can't communicate, you can see all these old men right, they have a lot of power, and they would fund your group. They would kick back money to you just to keep you in line.

Nevertheless, the financial gains from drug dealing allowed some from this group to venture into more profitable, legitimate businesses while others became independent drug dealers. This faction of the Wah Ching disappeared by the mid 1980s.

Another group of foreign born Wah Ching, mostly from Hong Kong, co-existed with the American born gang. These individuals, who were recruited earlier from Galileo High School, reached their early twenties by this time. Because they spoke Chinese fluently and were more reliable, they were given other tasks by the Hip Sing Tong which suited their unique abilities. This included much of the extortion of Chinatown stores and the guarding and protection of gambling houses. Since the American born group and the foreign born group had different jobs, there was little conflict of interest. The Hip Sing found these youths to be more cooperative and familiar with Chinese codes of behavior than the American born gang members so they received continued support. The foreign born group, with the guidance of the Hip Sing, realized that they needed new recruits in order to replenish the gang and continue its existence.

With the guidance of certain gang leaders, new generations of gangs were born in the early 1980s, and the Wah Ching began to splinter off once again. In the mid-1970s, there was an enormous influx of ethnic Chinese refugees from Vietnam into San Francisco's Tenderloin district. Many children who immigrated at this time reached their teens in the 1980s. These refugees often felt as
though they were social outcasts amongst Anglo-Americans as well as with the Chinese community. This group of youths were eager to please and sought a sense of belonging. Many in the Chinese community thought of these youths as fearless and “ruthless” individuals. Certain gang leaders realized their attributes and took the opportunity to recruit and train certain Chinese Vietnamese youths for gang activities.

In the early 1980s, the Wah Gay, a Chinese Vietnamese group, was created as a splinter group of the Wah Ching to expand certain illegal activities. By the mid 80s, this group matured and prospered. Many oriental massage parlors and gambling houses were opened in the Tenderloin by this group. They were also efficient in committing executions due to their willingness to kill and relocate in other states immediately after the task. Like the Chinese youths in the late 1960s, many Chinese Vietnamese youths saw the gangs as a way to improve their own living conditions and to find a place in American society. By the late 1980s, most of the foot soldiers for the Wah Ching were primarily made up of these new immigrants. They were allowed by gang leaders to come into Chinatown to help collect extortion money and guard gambling houses. Certain competent individuals started to deal cocaine for the gang.

As more and more Chinese Vietnamese youths joined gangs, the situation became very disorganized. The Wah Ching splintered off into many different groups with different leaders. With many power struggles taking place, the groups started to fight amongst each other. As members of the Wah Ching recruited youths independently for their own interest, the name Wah Ching (Chinese Youth) no longer had any meaning, since so many opposing groups were once considered Wah Ching. Today, these groups are often identified by the name of their leader.

The early 1980s also saw the rebirth of the Suey Sing gang in San Francisco. Following the lead of the Wah Ching, the Suey Sing Tong began to utilize groups of youths from the same pool of immigrants. Since there was little tension and conflict in the Chinatown during the early 1980s, the Suey Sing saw the opportunity to support a group which frequented local playgrounds in Chinatown. The Suey Sing’s intent was to re-establish its illegal gambling operations in Chinatown. In order to do so, they needed a gang to deter opposition from the proprietors of other gambling halls.

Since the Suey Sing gang was a small and tight knit group, they soon grew in strength and power. By the late 1980s, the Suey Sing Tong had opened several gambling houses in Chinatown and
was intent on taking over all the illegitimate businesses in Chinatown.

The 90s

More recently, the Suey Sing gang is a power to be reckoned with since taking over the extortion and protection of several other gambling houses, which were run by Wah Ching. The Suey Sing, under the direction of young gang leaders aspiring for powerful positions, began its reign in 1990 by brutally executing several influential Wah Ching leaders and threatening the lives of any opposing groups. Although several incidences of retaliation were attempted, none of the array of “Wah Ching” groups were able to organize its forces to prevent the advances of the Suey Sing. Today, this group dominates virtually all the gambling and protection operations in the San Francisco Bay Area.

Over the past two years, journalists, police officials, and political leaders have speculated that triads, presented as strictly criminal syndicates from Hong Kong, are attempting to move into the San Francisco Bay Area before Hong Kong reverts back to Chinese communist rule in 1997. Law enforcement officials insist that these Hong Kong groups, the Wo Hop To in particular, are currently moving into San Francisco’s and Oakland’s Chinatowns and attempting to take control of illegal activities in Asian communities, and this may be the cause of recent acts of violence. Most observers consider the Suey Sing to be this new organization.

The results of this study, however, indicate that recent reports may be exaggerated. The Suey Sing gang is currently financed by an alleged member of a triad, the Wo Hop To, and some new members who have been recently recruited into the gang may refer to the gang as the Wo Hop To, but there is little evidence to indicate an intricate connection between the entire triad organization in Hong Kong and the gang in San Francisco. The suggestion that a sophisticated network controlled from abroad exists ignores the logistical problems inherent in exercising minute control of the activities of gang members in San Francisco. A far more likely scenario would not preclude the ability of triad membership from having profound influences on general trends among criminal activities in San Francisco.

While there may be some actual Wo Hop To triad members in San Francisco, there are few new players in the Chinese community. Those who are active in the gang today are the same individuals who have been living in San Francisco for at least the past decade. There is no evidence in this investigation to indicate that the Wo Hop To is moving en masse to control street gangs. The
Suey Sing gang was already on the rise while the Wah Ching was in decline before the Suey Sing ever received any support from a triad member.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

With the exception of a few American born Chinese gangs, the history of Asian gangs in San Francisco has been profoundly influenced by patterns of immigration combined with American society's rejection of its new immigrants. In the mid 1960s, San Francisco's inability to accommodate the needs of a new influx of Chinese from Hong Kong spurred a joint effort among immigrant youths to improve living conditions. After several futile attempts to gain funding from the City and the Chinese community, these youths were left with few opportunities. Disillusioned, many turned to utilitarian crime in order to survive. Incidents of violence and harassment from existing Chinese gangs and other ethnic groups also contributed to the perceived necessity amongst certain immigrant youths to band together. Modern Chinese gangs were born from resistant and oppressive forces in San Francisco, which were reluctant to allow recent Chinese immigrants to become a part of the community.

Another factor which has impacted the history of Asian gangs is the intervention of organized crime. Tong members refused to support the gangs until they realized that they could receive a service in return. Certain gangs committed crimes for specific tong members who in turn supported the gang, provided for its needs, and gave gang members many additional illegitimate opportunities. This intervention of organized criminal influence changed the face of Asian gangs. The objective of gang leaders and, in turn, the existence of gangs became mostly financial.

Power struggles between gangs were often the indirect result of a single tong's attempt to dominate illegal operations in the Chinese community. Opposition can come from other tongs who financed another gang or from gangs with no allegiance to tongs. Dominant tongs often chose to financially support gangs which were powerful. However, this relationship is usually tenuous, depending on the reliability of the gang. Gangs which received continued backing from criminally influenced tongs survived while those with no basis of financial support dispersed.

Historically, gangs tend to recruit youths with little to gain from legitimate routes and who were apt to commit crimes. In the early 1980s, Chinese immigrant children from Vietnam immigrated to America bringing with them the experiences of a war torn country. Chinese Vietnamese encountered similar social
problems and blocked opportunities which the Chinese youths from Hong Kong in the 1960s endured. Throughout the 1980s, gang leaders found that ethnic Chinese from Vietnam were most suited for criminal activities. As more and more Chinese Vietnamese youth immigrated to San Francisco in the late 1980s, participation in Asian gangs drastically increased. Hence the face of Asian gangs now includes many Chinese Vietnamese.

Today, a new wave of immigrant children from Southeast Asian countries such as Laos, Thailand, and Cambodia are facing similar, if not worse, adjustment problems in San Francisco. There has been evidence that a Cambodian gang is on the rise in various parts of the Bay Area. Although the data are inconclusive, Cambodian youths may be forming some connections with traditional Chinese groups. If more and more immigrant youths are unable to find a niche in conventional American society, and if we adhere to the cliche that history repeats itself, new generations of Southeast Asian gangs will arise in San Francisco, power struggles will continue, and people will die.

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