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The Chinese triads in South-East Asia: from a “total social phenomenon” to a transnational criminal organisation?

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The criminal activities of the Chinese triads have long been known to stimulate the imagination of and provide themes for film producers, fiction writers, and sometimes even the authors of serious journalistic studies. However, attempting a more systematic approach has, until now, barely aroused interest among researchers. The triads have been talked about with renewed interest once again in South-East Asia for almost two decades now, as they were at the end of the 19th century and during the first few decades of the 20th century, when the violence caused by these secret organisations resurfaced and attracted much media coverage in China and other countries of South-East Asia.

The researcher who, nevertheless, has been working on the nature of these secret Chinese organisations for a long time, examining the specific case study of Siam (which definitively became Thailand after the Second World War), is struck by all the changes that have occurred.

In the 19th century, the secret organisations worked as multi-functional systems. Marcel Mauss would have referred to them as complete total social phenomena. They operated as recruitment agencies as well as unions, mutual aid or welfare societies, political organisations, economic groups, religious structures, etc.

Chinese groups, which had recently immigrated were probably not sophisticated enough (there were not many potential leaders), nor sufficiently rich to be able to maintain numerous organisations within their communities. The secret society was a simple answer and functioned economically (*tua-hia* later *ang-yi* in Thai texts, two expressions taken from *teochiu*, meaning “big brother” and “text written in red”).

These secret associations, often controlled by important traders or business owners, operated as labour unions. Anyone refusing to become a member had little hope of finding a job in the tin mines located in southern Thailand or, for that matter, in the rice mills in Bangkok. However, sometimes these organisations trained and supervised rioting workers with a fair amount of success so that they could have better working conditions. This was the case in the Ranong and Phuket provinces in 1876.

The *ang-yi* or the *tua-hia* also served as both an insurance company and a welfare society to its members. It settled costs incurred during legal proceedings in court, ensured that proper treatment was given to any of its members who were imprisoned, took care of members in case of sickness, and dealt with their remains upon death.

The secret organisations also included a religious aspect. It seems that they originated from Buddhism and Chinese Taoism. They have always preserved a ritual, which might seem incomprehensible to an outsider. In Thailand, the secret societies considered themselves as rivals of the Catholic missionaries who traditionally recruited members from the Chinese community.

As expected, the secret societies acquired a political dimension very early on. It is well known that Doctor Sun Yat-sen himself became a member of one of these organisations (in 1904 in Honolulu) and his objective was to transform them into revolutionary organisations. Between 1903 and 1908 he made four trips to Siam during which he contacted the leaders of various secret organisations. This dimension changed after the 1911 revolution that overthrew the Manchu dynasty. The triads had managed to achieve their political objective. In Siam, most of the triad leaders were to become *protégés* of the European governments and would thus be seen as a political threat of a different nature for the Siamese rulers.

The economic scope of these secret societies was highly important and took on different forms. The triad leaders were often at the head of organisations, not always legal and which transferred money to China. They also provided for the other needs of Chinese immigrant workers such as gambling, alcohol, opium, and prostitutes. At this time, such businesses were legal (up to 1959 and 1960 for the latter two), but they were heavily taxed. When the farmers raised the taxes on these consumer products and “services”, they themselves were leaders of secret societies. However, if they were not leaders, they had to find an agreement with those who were in order to operate in unsafe areas, such as the tin mines and Chinese dominated areas of cities.

As years went by, however, most of the activities that had previously been undertaken by the secret societies were disassociated from the core organization; they became independent, and functioned as separate entities.

An in-depth study of the history of several institutions (support organisations, hospitals, clubs, political parties, sects, etc) would undoubtedly reveal the names of certain famous leaders of the secret societies. The best known case today of a triad leader – as explained in two articles in Thai that appeared in 2004 – is that of Mr. Yi Ko Hong, (Hong Techawanit is his name in Thai) who was given the title of “Phraya Anuwat Rachaniyom”. A gaming tax farmer at the beginning of the 20th century, he received Dr. Sun Yat-sen during his 1908 Siamese tour and became, in the same year, one of the founders of Po Tek Tung, a charitable foundation (which today runs one of the best hospitals in the country). He was at the helm of the Chinese secret society, Hong Moen Thian Ti Hui.

Since the beginning of the 1980s, the triads have been returning. Newly re-imported from China and Taiwan, they appear to be nothing more than groups of petty criminals, and are sometimes extremely violent. Far from helping the Chinese immigrants, who are once again disembarking in relatively large numbers in Bangkok and in the northern provinces, they doubly exploit them. Firstly by asking for outrageous sums of money to help them enter the country illegally, and secondly by taking advantage of their precarious status.

The researcher should, however, be aware that most of the information to which he or she has access originates from police records, and also that newspapers, especially Thai newspapers, exaggerate their headlines and groundbreaking news. We will undoubtedly have to wait a few years before being able to form a correct opinion on the social role of these “new triads”.

For the time being, however, if we want to attempt to go beyond the basic understanding of a transnational criminal organisation, we need to accept that these Chinese societies can be, at least up to a certain point, considered as spearheads of the new Chinese Diaspora. They are right in the centre of human trafficking (workers, prostitutes) not only within Asian countries but also European and American countries, with South-East Asian countries now being considered as the first step. Amongst these victims, nicknamed *luk mu* in the Thai press and *piglet* in the English press, perhaps we will find the leaders of the 21st century Chinese diaspora.