

## *Book Reviews*

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*The Triads: The Chinese Criminal Fraternity* by Martyn Booth, Grafton Books, London, 1990.

*Chinese Subculture and Criminality: Non Traditional Crime Groups in America* by Ko-lin Chin, Greenwood Press, New York, 1990.

The analysis of “organised crime”, both in popular fiction and through academic speculation is all too often characterised by representations of complex social phenomena which are racist and anti-historical. This is no more obviously the case than with writings on Chinese criminal societies.

The misinformation and “scare mongering” which has created the Godfather versions of criminal enterprise are not accidental. Neither are they products of some Philistine political past. As recently as last year, the US Department of Justice in their national strategy for attacking organised crime identified “strong cultural differences from traditional American societal values, and severe language problems” as “complicating factors” leading towards the proliferation of Asian organised crime in the USA. The political agenda behind the stereotyping of Chinese, Italian, and Japanese crime syndicates in North America has been clear ever since the waves of migration in the early part of this century.

Martyn Booth adopts the triad mythology as a cavalier device to avoid the necessity to establish the assertion made on the front cover of his book that he exposes the “most powerful illegal organisation in the world”. Ironically in the preface of the book, he observes “we can never hope to understand the triad mentality or effectively counter the triad threat until (its) ancient and historical context is understood.” Booth produces nothing to advance the reader further towards that understanding. In fact his potted confluence of fairy tale and folk law serves to further confuse Chinese Imperial history as well as present day Hong Kong social structure.

The book possesses no logical thread. It jumps annoyingly from Chinese folk tales, to recent biographies of pre-revolutionary gangsters. Its analysis of the connection between international drug syndicates is naive and unsourced. Even his identification of what makes a society triad is superficial and inconsistent, (for example, he suggests that New York’s Chinese criminals cannot be regarded as authentic triads because it is not clear how much emphasis is placed by them on the traditional initiation ceremonies and lodge ritual). However, later in the book, he speculates on the rejuvenation of triad political insurrection in mainland China on the evidence that pro-democracy protesters in Peking in 1989 wore red headbands.

*The Triads* is a pot boiler which might make its publishers wealthy on its cover alone. The book, however, confirms my suspicion of literary criticism when the *Times Literary Supplement* is quoted as commending the book for being “wide ranging and interesting”

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and the *Weekend Telegraph* says "his case is persuasive ... this book may be an essential and salutary warning". For the creditability of these newspapers, I can only hope that they have been quoted out of context.

*Chinese Subculture and Criminality* is at least an attempt to apply some systematic social theory to the understanding of Chinese criminal societies in the United States. Like Booth however, Ko-lin Chin builds his argument on a somewhat apolitical representation of Chinese migration. Under the heading "Is the Chinese Mafia a Myth?" for example, Chin says: "In order to evaluate the reaction and viewpoint of the Chinese community, it's necessary to understand that this is a time of enormous opportunity for Chinese business and interest groups in the US. For them, more Chinese immigrants means more business, more money and more power ... the current Chinese crime problem has thus created enormous tension for Chinese businessmen and interest groups; they know that they have much to lose if the issue continues to be prominent."

The merit of *Chinese Subculture and Criminality* is its attempt to locate triad societal structure within wider issues of culture and criminality. However, essential to this form of analysis is a subtle understanding of triad secret societies. Chin fails to present this in any sufficient level of detail, or with any suggested analytical model which would allow for an understanding of such organisations as they might transfer into any particular cultural setting. In addition, the importance of enterprise crime for the continuation of Chinese secret societies is to some extent dealt with as a given.

Chin is unable to explain the relationship between specific political structures and the diffusion of societies for enterprise crime. When dealing with Hong Kong politics in particular, part of this inability might be understood by the limitation of the sources used for his analysis. By adopting an almost singular connection to newspaper reporting, Chin becomes as much a slave of gossip as Booth is a victim of fairy tale.

Both books fall foul of the dangers of extrapolating on limited case study analysis. Chin however at least attempts to locate his case study approach to a detailed comparison of the spatial distribution of Chinese gangs within New York city. The utility of this technique is enhanced by a recognition (if only longitudinal) of the significance of history.

Of the two books *Chinese Subculture and Criminality* is definitely the superior. However, to use Martyn Booth's book as a benchmark for comparison is in fact no great compliment to Ko-lin Chin. By ignoring the commercial, cultural, and politico-structural reality of enterprise crime, irrespective of the racial origins of its participants, the unique significance of Chinese gangs in the promotion of organised crime within particular cultural settings fails to be revealed in either work.

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