

Mak Lau Fong

The Sociology of Secret Societies

A Study of Chinese Secret Societies in
Singapore and Peninsular Malaysia



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THE SOCIOLOGY OF SECRET SOCIETIES

(**A Study of Chinese Secret Societies in
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MAK LAU FONG

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1 Introduction

IN the study of underworld¹ organizations, there are certain distinctly inherent methodological difficulties which are largely the consequence of the clandestine nature of those organizations. The most distinct problem is that members of underworld organizations, e.g., Chinese secret society members, are extremely difficult to locate. It is equally difficult to attempt to estimate the size of the membership of these societies.² Thus, probability sampling methods designed to achieve a high degree of external validity are not applicable to studies of underworld organizations.

Another problem encountered in studying underworld organizations is the nature of the documents. Roberts (1972: 11–13) points out that there are three inherent difficulties in using secret society documents: availability, reliability and validity, and familiarity. First, no secret society ever keeps a good and complete set of records. Even those seized and produced by legal control agencies are minimal and fragmentary. As such, it is expected that a good deal of effort of various kinds will have to be spent piecing together the scraps of evidence from scattered sources before one can use such information. Second, documents produced by both legal control agencies and the secret societies may be biased. The former may tend to exaggerate the mysticism of secret societies, while the latter may tend to produce records which will reflect these exaggerated beliefs. Finally, records, such as diplomas and passwords, produced by the secret societies are usually rich in irrational elements and unfamiliar idioms so that historians often find them difficult to interpret.

These two major methodological difficulties certainly explain why most studies of secret organizations have been historical and descriptive. To overcome these difficulties is in a way to ask for a methodological breakthrough.

In spite of the fact that testable theories about secret organizations have yet to be formulated, fine research methods have already been successfully attempted. The 'bugging' method used by Cressey (1969) and the intensive interviewing method by Ianni (1972) are indeed a great leap forward in underworld research methods.

In the present study, both the interviewing and documentary methods were employed to collect data for elaborating some sociological hy-

potheses about secret societies in general, and local Chinese secret societies in particular.

Three kinds of data were collected in this study. The first kind was gathered from interviews with 149 members of Chinese secret societies, of whom 100 were imprisoned. Published documents provided a second source of information. Since documentary evidence on secret societies is generally fragmentary and unreliable, this material was supplemented by a third source of information. This consists of what Merton (1957: 108) termed 'neglected facts', such as the Chinese names of streets in towns, and the inscriptions found in Chinese temples and dialect associations.

The first kind of data constitutes the principal source in unravelling the organization and structure of Chinese secret societies in the twentieth century, particularly in contemporary Singapore and Peninsular Malaysia. The second and third kinds of material are used to examine these societies in the nineteenth-century Straits Settlements, which consisted of Singapore, Malacca and Penang.

The earliest observations of the existence of Chinese secret societies in the Straits Settlements were made by T. J. Newbold from Penang in 1799, in his *Political and Statistical Account of the British Settlements in the Straits of Malacca* (2 volumes, 1839); the second earliest record was made by a German missionary, Dr. W. Milne, who had described in the *Transactions of the Royal Asiatic Society* (1827), a murder case involving a suspected headman of a secret society in Malacca in 1818. No account of the existence of Chinese secret societies in Singapore was made until 1823 when a protégé of Raffles, Munshi Abdullah bin Abdul Kadir, witnessed an initiation ceremony held in the forest at Tangling (now Tanglin) Tuah in Singapore. An account of this observation later appeared in the *Hikayat Abdullah*, published in the 1840s. This account was later translated by A. H. Hill and was published in 1955 in volume 28, part 3, of the *Journal of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*. Unfortunately, these accounts are either too brief or too impressionistic for a proper understanding of the true nature of the Chinese secret societies in the Straits Settlements.

Gustave Schlegel's *Thian Ti Hwui*, published in 1866, is the first book which dealt with the origin of the Triad, and the connection between the secret societies in the Dutch Indies and the Triad in China. It is a painstaking work containing much information on the Triad's insignias, diplomas, passwords, rituals, etc., which had not, until then, been known to the Dutch, the British colonial officers or the public.

Later, in the years 1876, 1878 and 1879, the then Chinese Protector, W. A. Pickering, published two separate articles on the Chinese secret societies in Singapore and Malaya. These articles also contained a good deal of information on the passwords, rituals, and oaths of the early Chinese secret societies. Pickering obtained this material by joining the

Ghee Hin³ society in Singapore where he served as Chinese Protector. In these articles there was considerable discussion of the history of sects in China, and the connection between local societies and the Triad in China. Pickering may be the only early government officer to have actually participated in a local secret society initiation ceremony.

Control of the secret societies was not publicly discussed until 1879 when it was proposed by J. D. Vaughan, the then Colonial Resident in Penang. A complete section of his book entitled *The Manners and Customs of the Chinese* was devoted to Chinese secret societies. Based on his observations of the situation in the Dutch Indies, the Spanish colonies, and in Hong Kong, he suggested that the Government in the Straits Settlements should admit only Chinese immigrants who belonged to the same speech origin. His examination of the question was much more substantial than his discussion of the general conditions, and of the feuds of the Chinese contained in his earlier article published in volume 3 of the *Logan's Journal*⁴ in 1854.

In the first quarter of the present century two books were published containing some sketches on Chinese secret societies. These books were C. B. Buckley's *An Anecdotal History of Old Times in Singapore, 1819–1867* (1902) and Song Ong-siang's *One Hundred Years' History of the Chinese in Singapore* (1923).

Since the 1920s, three excellent original if documentary studies of Chinese secret societies have appeared. The first, *The Hung Society*, written jointly by J. S. M. Ward and W. S. Stirling, was published in 1925 in three volumes. The book contains a good deal of first-hand information including data on seized insignias and diplomas. Like the previous publications it also devoted considerable space to a discussion of the philosophical or ideological background of the Triad. However, unlike other previous publications, it devoted more than one volume to the origin of Freemasonry, and to the similarities between these two secret organizations. The information on Chinese secret societies was collected when Stirling was an assistant to W. A. Pickering.

In *Triad and Tabut* (1941), M. L. Wynne classified local societies into antagonistic camps according to their differences in ideology. The author was then a police superintendent in Malaya. For many years after its publication (by the Colonial Government in Singapore), this book's circulation was restricted only to senior police officers. It is more than a mere compilation of historical events, and in addition to classifying and discussing Chinese secret societies, it also covers Malay secret societies.

Mention should also be made of the interest of both Maurice Freedman and Victor Purcell in local Chinese secret societies. Freedman is the only researcher in this field who has not served as a British colonial officer in either Malaya or Singapore. In his writings he seldom attempts to prove any hypothesis, but his specialization in Chinese social organization has

provided some theoretical frameworks giving an insight into the study of Chinese secret societies. For instance, he observed (1967): 'Through most of the nineteenth century Singapore Chinese were dominated by the secret societies. Why did the internal control of the Chinese community take this form?' (pp. 44-5). Victor Purcell's works on Chinese secret societies also reflect similar merits and demerits. Purcell's writing in this field is mainly contained in his book *The Chinese in Malaya* (1948); Freedman's work is found in *Lineage Organization in Southeastern China* (1958), in the *Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 21, no. 1 (1961), and also in *Immigrants and Associations* (Freedman, 1967).

The latest and the most comprehensive record of Chinese secret societies is W. L. Blythe's *The Impact of Chinese Secret Societies in Malaya: A Historical Study* (1969). This is a compilation of Chinese secret society activities from their origin until early 1969. As the subtitle of this book implies, it is a historical study. The first part of the book (pre-twentieth century) greatly resembles the contents of Wynne's book, while the second part (post-twentieth century) covers the information contained in the *Straits Settlements Annual Report* on crime and secret societies compiled by Blythe himself. The author also made extensive use of the official documents which were accessible to him when he was police superintendent.

The review⁵ given above is not complete without some remarks on works written in Chinese. It is indeed surprising that so few Chinese scholars have shown any strong interest in this field. Of the Chinese writings on local Chinese secret societies which the present author has reviewed, all have been confined to journalistic reports, which are too numerous to mention, or to the reproduction of English works, e.g., the works by Wen (1929) and Hsu (1971).

The major task of this study is to elaborate on three proposed conditions for the emergence and persistence of Chinese secret societies in Singapore and Peninsular Malaysia. These conditions are (a) the inadequacy of legal protection given to the general population, (b) the adaptability of secret societies to change, and (c) the strength of conflict-reduction mechanisms.

The inadequacy of legal protection is determined by the extent of the power of legal control agencies employed for non-institutional purposes, or by the extent to which the legal control agencies failed to employ their services for institutional purposes. Our findings suggest that the emergence of local Chinese secret societies is not related to the political deprivation of Chinese immigrants, but to the inadequacy of legal protection given to them. The operation of the *kapitan* system of rule and the heterogeneity of Chinese speech groups reflect the inadequate protection given to the Chinese immigrants in the early Straits Settlements. It was also found that when legal protection in the larger society was substantial-

ly improved, local Chinese secret societies would become less active.

In order to survive, local Chinese secret societies have had to adjust their activity patterns and rearrange their organizational structure. The shift in the direction of activity from occupational monopolization in the early Straits Settlements to one of territorial demarcation in contemporary society, plus the reduction in hierarchical positions, reflect the adaptability of local Chinese secret societies to change taking place in their environments.

The third condition of persistence—the strength of conflict-reduction mechanisms—is seen as an exchange relationship between local Chinese secret societies and the larger society. The data reveal that a symbiotic relationship of this nature was an effective means of reducing conflict. Symbiotic relationships are mainly promoted and maintained by people who play vital roles in both the underworld and the larger society.

The overall implication of the present study is that Chinese secret societies will continue to survive if these three conditions for persistence prevail.

1. The term 'underworld' is used in both a broad and narrow sense. In the broad sense it refers to a world where all secret collectivities exist. In the narrow sense it refers only to the environment where a particular kind of secret collectivity, e.g., local Chinese secret societies, is located. The context shall determine the meaning of the term.

2. Regarding the size of membership of local Chinese secret societies, the following estimates are available: in mid-1960, about 15,000 members were in Peninsular Malaysia (Blythe, 1969: 48); about 12,000 members in 1969 in the same country (Abdul Hamid, 1970); about 10,000 members in 1971, in Singapore, according to Police sources.

3. In the present study, for the sake of continuity, conventionally transliterated terms like 'Hokkien', 'Hakka', 'Teochiu', 'Cantonese', 'Ghee Hin', 'Hai San', 'Toa Peh Kong' and official names of some streets will be retained. However, to ensure that continuity does not sacrifice clarity, the Wade-Giles system of romanization of names and Chinese characters will be provided in the Appendix. (See Appendix V.) Names that have not had conventional transliteration will be transliterated according to the Wade-Giles system in the text.

4. This journal is also known as *The Journal of the Indian Archipelago*.

5. The number of writings and publications on local Chinese secret societies is actually much more extensive than those cited above. However, only writings that satisfy at least one of the following condition were selected for discussion: (a) independent study, (b) innovative perspective, (c) first-hand data, and (d) penetrative interpretation. Among others, W. Staton's *The Triad Society* (1900) and Leon Comber's *Chinese Secret Societies in Malaya* (1959) do not meet the criteria in question.

2 Secret Organizations and Chinese Secret Societies

THE major task of the present study is to specify as well as elaborate the relationships that exist between Chinese secret societies in the Straits Settlements and/or Singapore and Peninsular Malaysia,¹ and a set of proposed conditions for their persistence. The discussion will be organized in the following way: first, the problem of the persistence of Chinese secret societies in Singapore and the Peninsula will be discussed. Second, the term 'secret society', as it is used here, will be defined. Third, a typology of secret societies will be presented, and finally, the sources of the emergence and persistence of secret societies will be examined.

THE PROBLEM

'Chinese secret societies' is both a general and a specific term. As a general term it represents all secret societies organized by the Chinese in China and elsewhere. As a specific term it refers only to the Chinese secret societies which are operated in a specific political area. In the present study, Chinese secret societies are those which are composed of and operated by people of Chinese origin in the Straits Settlements and/or Singapore and Peninsular Malaysia. In order to make a conceptual distinction between the Chinese secret societies in China, and those in Singapore and Peninsular Malaysia, the former will be referred to as the Triad, and the latter as local Chinese secret societies, or simply, local societies.

There is no general agreement as to when the Triad was first instituted in China,² although evidence indicates that it was founded some time during the early Ch'ing dynasty in the province of Fukien (Hsiao, 1966; Lo, 1948; Wen, 1929). The initial goal of the Triad was political—to overthrow the Ch'ing dynasty (1644–1911) and to restore the Ming dynasty (1386–1644). The Triad took on different names at different locations, though it was more often known as T'ien Ti Hui, San Ho Hui and Hung Men Hui (Tai, 1968). The Triad was unquestionably brought overseas by the early Chinese immigrants. The first trace of Chinese secret societies in the Straits Settlements was observed and recorded in

Penang in 1799 (Newbold, 1839, vol. 2: 57). Since then, local Chinese secret societies have attracted the interest of both British colonial officers and scholars. At the same time, the activities of local societies were brought under closer surveillance by various governments. Several suppressive measures were attempted in order to eradicate local societies, but local societies persist to this day. One might ask: what are the factors that have contributed to the persistence of local Chinese secret societies?

It is the contention here that a functional inadequacy in the larger social system is conducive to the emergence of a functionally equivalent alternative system. As long as this inadequacy prevails, the functionally equivalent alternative system will continue to survive. Furthermore, the persistence of the alternative system is contingent upon three major conditions, of which this functional inadequacy is only one: (a) functional inadequacy in the larger social system, (b) adaptive change on the part of the alternative system, and (c) specific mechanisms for reducing conflicts between the larger social system and the alternative system. Before discussing each of these conditions of persistence it is necessary to define a secret society, and the kinds of secret societies that exist in the underworld.

THE DEFINITION

According to Simmel ([1908] 1950: 345), a secret society is a group whose existence is concealed from the public. This definition is highly restrictive in that it is applicable only to secret groups at the initial stages of their growth. However, since secret societies must recruit their members from the larger society, it is a myth to believe that their existence will never be known to the legal control agencies, or to the public. In light of the restrictive nature of the above definition, a second definition of a secret society is proposed.

Again, Simmel has supplied an alternative definition which states that a secret society is a group whose existence may be open, but its goals, rituals and structure are concealed from the public (*ibid.*, p. 346). This definition is also restrictive. It fails to recognize the fact that when a secret society is known to the police, its goals, rituals and structure will also, sooner or later, be uncovered by the police and made known to the public. But many secret societies are still 'secret' despite the fact that their goal, rituals and structure are known to the public (Daraul, 1961). Thus, another definition is required.

The static aspect of the goals, rituals and the structure of any secret society may be known to the police, yet it is highly probable that the dynamic aspect of the society remains unknown. The dynamic aspect refers to the activities that are related directly to the organizational goals, the particular time and place for performing the rituals, and the occu-

pants of the various hierarchical positions. Following Blythe (1969: 3) we may define a secret society as a group whose existence may be open, but whose activities, and the identities of its leaders and members remain unknown to the public. When the term 'secret society' is defined in the objective perspective, the third definition is the least restrictive.

Apparently, the three definitions are based entirely on the public's knowledge about the secret nature of a group, and are independent of the organizational rationale of the group. When considering only the subjective organizational rationale regarding secrecy protection, a secret society may be defined as *a group which has a set of well-defined norms, secret rituals and an oath that are intended subjectively to bind the members to secrecy regarding the group's affairs.*³ Similarly, a local Chinese secret society is a group which is composed of and operated by people of Chinese origin in the Straits Settlements and/or Singapore and Peninsular Malaysia, and which has a set of well-defined norms, secret rituals, and an oath that are intended subjectively to bind the members not to reveal the group's affairs. Thus, insofar as the group is organized by its initial members around the principle of protecting the secrecy of the group, notwithstanding the extent to which the public learns of its existence, it remains a secret society.

The last definition underlines another important aspect of a secret society. In order to keep a secret permanently within a collectivity of individuals an organized effort is required. Collective behaviour in the protection of secrecy practically presupposes that the secret-sharers are highly organized, and that their behaviour is normatively patterned. Initiation ceremonies and periodic ritual performances which encompass a wide range of behavioural regulatory mechanisms are intended for such a purpose. As defined, the concept of a secret society is not applicable to collectivities which do not possess such a well-defined set of norms, rituals and oaths.

In accordance with the subjective definition, which will be used throughout the present study, the Board of Directors of a commercial firm is not a secret society. It is, according to MacKenzie (1967: 5-6), only a 'private' group in the sense that such a group is organized only to avoid publicity, and it does not have any secret ritual and oath for secrecy protection. Furthermore, the Board is not a total organization, but a part of the larger organization to which it belongs. Delinquent subcultures (Cohen, 1955), city gangs (Thrasher, 1927), criminal gangs like the dacoits in India (Rao, 1962: 42-53) and pickpocket gangs in nineteenth-century England (Tobias, 1967: 97-111) are also not secret societies. These collectivities are either unorganized, ephemeral, or do not provide any well-defined set of norms, secret rituals and oaths to help safeguard any leakage of secrecy. In contrast, a nineteenth-century Chinese *kongsi* in the Straits Settlements is a secret society. While the *kongsi*'s existence,

and even some of its officers, were then known to the public and to the Government as well, the *kongsi* had an organized set of norms, secret rituals and oaths for regulating its members' behaviour, and for subjectively protecting group secrecy. By the same token, the Ku Klux Klan is a secret society although its membership and even many of its plans are at present known to the United States Government (Chalmers, 1965).

Undoubtedly individual secret societies are highly autonomous systems; they are nevertheless not completely self-sufficient. They are dependent on the larger society which provides them with necessary human resources. Furthermore, they capitalize on certain institutions in the larger society. Thus, changes in the attitudes of the members and in certain institutions in the larger society pose a problem of adaptation for the secret societies.

The larger society is not the only environment to which individual secret societies must adapt. The underworld environment also poses a problem of adaptation for secret societies. While the complexity of the larger society is so well-documented and scarcely needs any illustration, the underworld environment requires some detailed discussion. We shall begin with a typology of secret societies.

A TYPOLOGY OF SECRET SOCIETIES

Any general criterion used for the purpose of classification should ideally satisfy two basic conditions: exhaustiveness and mutual exclusiveness. Exhaustiveness refers to the condition that the classifying scheme must be able to exhaust all the possible existing phenomena, while mutual exclusiveness requires that all of the categories so constructed be mutually exclusive from one another. However, the complexity of social phenomena always renders these rigid requirements difficult to fulfil. Thus it is possible to accept typologies which fulfil such requirements at a reasonably high level. Besides, the typology to be adopted must best suit its designated purpose: to indicate the location of the secret organization under study, and the heterogeneity of the underworld.

Many criteria may be used for classifying secret groups, but only four will be discussed here. These four criteria are the function of the group, the group's means for attaining goals, the social orientation of the group, and the modes of adaptation of the group. Of the four, only the last scheme satisfactorily fulfils the conditions set out above.

The more fundamental classificatory scheme of the four is one that is based on the function of the secret societies (Heckethorn, [1896] 1965, vol. 1: 3-6; MacKenzie, 1967: 8). Using this classificatory scheme, secret societies may be classified as patriotic, like the Loyal Order of Orange in Ulster; as racialistic, like the Ku Klux Klan in the United States, and the Mau Mau in Kenya; as political, like the Triad in China, the Carbonari in

France, and the Mafia in Sicily; as economic, like the Cosa Nostra in the United States; as moralist, civic, or occupational like the Freemasonry in England; as magico-religious, like the Assassins of Persia, and the early White Lotus Society in northern China; as military, like the Knights Templar in Burgundy in France and Malta; as scientific, like the Alchymists in Italy; and as judiciary, like the Holy Vehm in Germany. Unfortunately, this classifying scheme fails to satisfy the principle of exclusiveness in that a racialistic group is usually a political group, e.g., the Ku Klux Klan. A second typology is therefore necessary.

The second criterion is one which is based on the means of goal attainment and its relation to the larger society. It categorizes secret societies as reformist and revolutionary. In this case, the Mafia is said to be reformist while many of the millenarian movement organizations (e.g., the Lazarettists of Southern Tuscany, the Anarchists of the Andalusian villages, and the Sicilian peasant movements) can be regarded as revolutionary (Hobsbawn, 1959: 30–107). The former type of organization denies the validity of employing certain existing means for goal attainment with the aim of improving the means; the latter type denies the validity of all existing means, with the intention of replacing them.

However, this typology does not satisfy reasonably the prescribed condition of exhaustiveness. Other secret societies which reject the means, e.g., the early White Lotus Society in northern China, will find no place in this scheme. Furthermore, this typology considers the means only, and leaves unanalysed the group's goal which is a conceptually meaningful element in any means-end scheme.

A more sophisticated typology of secret societies is constructed by Lyman (1970: 37). He cross-classifies secret societies along the dimensions of conformative-alienative and instrumental-expressive. A conformative secret society is one whose attitudes are in accord with prevailing social values, while an instrumental secret society is one whose existence serves primarily to effect some change or to actively resist change in the larger society. The John Birch Society may be classified as conformative-instrumental; the Triad, alienative-instrumental; the present Freemasonry, conformative-expressive; and the African Mani, alienative-expressive. The Lyman typology fulfils satisfactorily the conditions of mutual exclusiveness and exhaustiveness at a general level. But it conceals exhaustiveness at a specific level in that its conformative and alienative categories, as two extremes of a continuum, do not specify internal variations. For the purpose of indicating the degree of heterogeneity of the underworld, we need a typology that can incorporate this variety. Merton's (1957: 131–60) scheme of five modes of role adaptation comes very close to being suitable.

Unlike those considered so far, Merton's scheme was not devised for secret societies specifically, and, as such, it might offer a wider range of