

# THE SHANGHAI GREEN GANG

Politics and Organized Crime,  
1919–1937



BRIAN G. MARTIN

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*Politics and Organized Crime, 1919-1937*

BRIAN G. MARTIN

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## *The Shanghai Green Gang*

*For Arja*

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# Introduction

The early twentieth century was for China an era of transition, which witnessed the final disintegration of the traditional Chinese polity and the urgent search for viable alternatives. This process involved wrenching and revolutionary changes that touched all aspects of the nation's political, economic and social structures. The forcing grounds for these changes were the major cities of China, and among these none was more important than Shanghai. It was here that new social classes emerged, new forms of economic and political organization were developed, and new types of mass media (mass circulation newspapers and radio) were first established.

The process of change in urban China, however, was complex and uncertain and did not follow a linear progression. It not only encouraged the emergence of new social forces but also witnessed the reconstitution in new forms of certain traditional social organizations. These elements of the traditional society were not merely vestigial remnants of a dying social system. On the contrary, they were, in many cases, flourishing organizations that interacted dynamically with the new social, economic and political structures and, in so doing, helped to influence the type of "modern" society that emerged in China's cities. Good examples of this phenomenon were the Chinese secret societies, traditional social organizations par excellence, which, nevertheless, successfully adapted to the new socioeconomic and political orders of the treaty ports to become an integral element of China's emerging modern urban society in the early twentieth century.

Despite the intriguing role played by secret societies in the urban environment of early twentieth century China, Western historical

research on secret societies has paid little attention to this phenomenon. Strongly influenced initially by the work of Jean Chesneaux and Fei-Ling Davis in the late 1960s, this research, in broad terms, concentrated on two main themes: the interaction between secret societies and rural society and their political function as a focus for popular opposition to an exploitative state system prior to the 1911 Revolution.<sup>1</sup> The approach taken by these works reflected the tenor of the times in the China of the Cultural Revolution and, in particular, the Maoist emphasis on secret societies as catalysts of popular revolt against the feudal state, and hence their official designation as “progressive” organizations with protosocialist and protonationalist characteristics. For other historians the importance of secret societies derived from the contribution that an analysis of their activities made toward an explanation of the larger question of why peasants rebel.<sup>2</sup>

A few scholars have discussed certain aspects of secret societies in urban China in the context of investigations of other issues, such as the formation of the working class in Shanghai and Tianjin, the Guomindang's relations with the Shanghai bourgeoisie, and the Communist seizure of power in Tianjin.<sup>3</sup> That key areas of the modern history of urban China cannot be written without some discussion of secret societies only serves to underline the importance and complexity of their economic and political roles in Chinese urban society.

In the absence of scholarly studies of urban secret societies, those works that have addressed the issue directly, such as the books by Sterling Seagrave and Pan Ling on the Shanghai Green Gang, have been of a distinctly popular kind.<sup>4</sup> Both these works provide extremely vivid and entertaining accounts of the activities of the Green Gang and its leaders, notably Du Yuesheng, in Shanghai of the 1920s and 1930s, but neither is (nor claims to be) a work of historical scholarship. Seagrave's account, in particular, with its conspiratorial view of Chinese history in the 1920s and 1930s and of Jiang Jieshi's rise to power (which, he argues, was due to the machinations of Du Yuesheng), sacrifices historical fact for sensationalist effect. Pan Ling's work, by contrast, is more solidly anchored in the secondary Chinese literature, especially the biographies of Du Yuesheng by Zhang Jungu and Xu Zhucheng, and it presents a much more balanced account of Du Yuesheng's career than that provided by Seagrave. Her approach, nevertheless, remains closer to that of a

novelist than of a historian, and her work has many of the characteristics of the traditional Chinese genre of *yanyi*, that is, a fictionalized reconstruction of historical events.<sup>5</sup>

By means of a study of the activities of the Shanghai Green Gang, one of the most powerful of these societies in early-twentieth-century China, the present work addresses the issues of the role of secret societies in urban China and their relationship to the state systems of the Republican period. It focuses in particular on one major group within the Shanghai Green Gang, that controlled by the French Concession Green Gang bosses, and it devotes much of its attention to the career of the most powerful of these bosses, Du Yuesheng. Through a detailed study of the Shanghai Green Gang, this work seeks to demonstrate the proposition that secret societies were resilient social organizations that not only could adapt successfully to the complex environment of a modernizing urban society but could emerge as powerful forces within that society.

In line with the lack of attention given to urban secret societies, there has been no major scholarly study of the Green Gang in the twentieth century by Western historians. The only partial exceptions to this observation are the two important journal articles written by Y. C. Wang and Jonathan Marshall in 1967 and 1976, respectively, and which together represent the point of departure for the present study.<sup>6</sup>

In China, by contrast, there has been a noticeable increase in interest in the history of Shanghai secret societies among Chinese historians in recent years. This reflects the progressive liberalization of historical scholarship in the 1980s: a more relaxed approach to the types of topics that could be the subject of genuine historical inquiry, and the opening up of archives and libraries to historians. An important development for the study of secret societies in Shanghai (indeed for urban secret societies generally) was the publication in 1986 of *Jiu Shanghai de Banghui* (The Gangs of Old Shanghai), a compilation of memoir literature by former secret society members and Guomindang political and labor leaders with secret society affiliations. This work constitutes a basic and easily accessible first source for the study of Shanghai's secret societies, and one that has been drawn on extensively by Chinese historians.

Among the more important recent Chinese secondary works dealing with Shanghai secret societies are three that were published in 1991. The first, *Jindai Shanghai Heishehui Yanjiu* (A Study of

Secret Societies in Modern Shanghai) by Su Zhiliang and Chen Lifei, provides a comprehensive study of the organization and activities of Shanghai secret societies in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; the second, *Shanghai Banghui Jianshi* (A Brief History of Shanghai Secret Societies) by Hu Xunmin and He Jian, is a straightforward narrative of the evolution of the Triad and Green Gang systems in Shanghai from the mid-nineteenth century to 1949; and the third, *Jiu Shanghai Heishehui Mishi* (The Secret History of Secret Societies in Old Shanghai), edited by Guo Xuyin, is a detailed study of Shanghai secret societies in the Republican period, with a major focus on the activities of the Green Gang boss Du Yuesheng. Another important work, published in 1993, that has much to say about Shanghai secret societies is Zhou Yumin and Shao Yong's *Zhongguo Banghui Shi* (A History of Chinese Secret Societies). This rich and well-documented study of secret societies from the Qing Dynasty to the People's Republic will undoubtedly become a standard text on the subject.

The present study has also benefited from the "opening up" of Chinese scholarly institutions over the past decade. The research on which it is based would have been much the poorer without access to materials held in Chinese archives and libraries, notably the Shanghai Municipal Archives and the Shanghai Municipal Library. Equally essential for this study are both the Green Gang manuals (known as *tongcao*) published in the 1930s and 1940s, which provide much information on Green Gang ritual, historical traditions, organizational structure and even membership lists, and the Shanghai Municipal Police Special Branch files, an infinitely rich source for any work on the political, social and economic history of Shanghai. Other important sources were the French, United States and British diplomatic correspondence, Chinese and Western-language newspapers, and memoir literature, notably that produced in the *Wenshi Ziliao* series, and especially the *Jiu Shanghai de Banghui*.

The analysis of the Shanghai Green Gang in the 1920s and 1930s presented here revolves around five main themes. The first of these is what might be called the "contemporaneity" of secret societies in the Republican period. Secret societies were malleable organizations with a great capacity to adapt to different social and political environments. A major contention of this study, in fact, is that secret societies, such as the Green Gang, far from being feudal anachronisms were an integral part of the society and politics of twentieth-

century China, and that they were capable of adapting positively to the challenges of social and political change.

A second theme is that the hybrid Sino-foreign character of Shanghai, together with the colonial structure of power in the foreign settlements, was particularly encouraging of secret society activities. In the early twentieth century, indeed, Shanghai was composed of three separate jurisdictions—the Chinese city, the International Settlement and the French Concession. The existence of these exclusive and competing national jurisdictions greatly facilitated both the expansion of Green Gang organization and the proliferation of the rackets controlled by various Green Gang groups. At the same time the security needs of the foreign settlements, particularly the need to control rapidly increasing Chinese populations, dictated a degree of cooperation between the foreign authorities and certain powerful Green Gang bosses, with the latter co-opted into the foreign police forces as members of their respective Chinese detective squads. In other words certain favored Green Gang bosses gained tacit official recognition of their rackets in return for contributing to the effectiveness of the coercive power of the foreign settlements. Some bosses, in fact, were able to parley the security functions they performed for the foreign authorities into real political power, as occurred in the French Concession. This relationship raises larger questions concerning the nature of the imperialist system as it operated in Shanghai.

The opium traffic was the key to financial success and power for the Green Gang groups: they competed ruthlessly with one other and with other secret society groups for a share in this lucrative racket; and it was the ability of the French Concession bosses to gain control of the opium traffic that laid the basis for the emergence of the phenomenon of organized crime in Shanghai in the mid-1920s. The security of the opium traffic, furthermore, was an important factor in determining the French Concession group's attitude to Chinese and foreign authorities in Shanghai.

The relationship of the Green Gang to the major social classes, the industrial workers and the bourgeoisie, is important to an understanding of its role in urban society. Its relations with the working class were shaped by the fact that Shanghai was an immigrant society with no highly developed sense of social cohesion; and the defining characteristic of its relations with the workers was its control of labor rackets associated with the labor-contract system. The relations of the various Green Gang groups with the Chinese bour-

geoisie was at first merely a function of the former's criminal activities, notably their extortion and kidnapping rackets. Although this negative aspect of the relationship continued to be significant, it was overshadowed progressively by other, more positive factors that reflected the emergence of a more complex relationship. The new relationship, initially, owed much to the dynamics of the contraband opium traffic once it had come under the effective control of the French Concession Green Gang in the mid-1920s, and to the competition between this gangster group and certain leading members of the Chinese bourgeoisie for power and influence in the French Concession. A second phase of this new relationship began with the crisis of 1932 and the participation of certain Green Gang bosses in the political organizations that the bourgeoisie created in this period, notably the Shanghai Civic Association. In the course of the 1930s this relationship was subsumed under the corporatist state system constructed by the Guomindang.

Control of the opium traffic and its dealings with the workers and the bourgeoisie inevitably involved the Green Gang leadership in the politics of the Chinese city. Not only did the Green Gang leaders maintain close relations with a succession of warlord regimes, but they also became caught up in the revolutionary politics of the 1920s through their contacts with the two revolutionary parties of the time, the Guomindang (Nationalist Party) and the Chinese Communist Party. An important focus for this latter relationship was their involvement in Jiang Jieshi's anti-Communist coup of April 1927. The support that the Green Gang bosses gave to Jiang at this time was a necessary but not, in itself, a sufficient condition for the creation of a stable relationship between themselves and the new state system established by the Guomindang after 1927–28. This was a complex relationship shaped by a number of factors and going through a number of phases during the Nanjing Decade. The turning point came with the crisis provoked by the Shanghai Incident in 1932. In the wake of this crisis Du Yuesheng emerged clearly as the most powerful Green Gang boss in Shanghai. He participated fully in the new corporatist state system created by the Nanjing government, and through this participation enhanced significantly his political and economic power. In the 1930s, in fact, Du had become a leading political figure in his own right.

Through a discussion of these themes the study analyses the role of the Green Gang as an important element in social and political

history of Shanghai in the early twentieth century. The Shanghai Green Gang, in fact, provides a useful case study of the ways in which secret societies, usually regarded as quintessential elements of the traditional society, could respond positively to the challenges and opportunities provided by China's modern urban society. Through its creation of a system of syndicate crime in the 1920s, moreover, the Green Gang provides an example of how such organizations could transform themselves successfully into one of the diverse elements that served to define the modern age for the Chinese populations of the treaty ports. In this way this study of the Shanghai Green Gang might also contribute to an understanding of the complex processes of social and political change in twentieth-century China.





# I Origins of the Green Gang

In the first half of the twentieth century the Green Gang was one of the best known of China's secret societies among foreigners and Chinese alike. The fact that treaty ports such as Tianjin and Shanghai were major centers of Green Gang activity kept it constantly in the eye of the foreign community, while the Chinese population could not escape from its ubiquitous presence. Despite the general popular and official awareness of the Green Gang, however, knowledge of its origins and evolution was very confused because of the cloak of mythology and deliberate obfuscation that enveloped it.

This confusion has been shared by later historians and has given rise to considerable debate among them concerning the origins of the Green Gang. One leading historian of the Green Gang, Hu Zhu-sheng, for example, has observed that among the histories of modern Chinese secret societies, that of the Green Gang is the one replete with the most complex problems; while another, Jerome Ch'en, has remarked that the history of the Green Gang "is a blend of facts and fiction, often more fiction than facts."<sup>1</sup>

In recent years, however, archive-based research by Chinese scholars has begun to clarify the origins of the Green Gang.<sup>2</sup> Briefly, these studies show that the Green Gang emerged in its modern form at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries from the Anqing Daoyou ("Friends of the Way of Tranquility and Purity," or the Anqing League), a secret society active in the Subei region of Jiangsu.<sup>3</sup> The Anqing Daoyou drew on the traditions of the Grand Canal grain transport boatmen's associations, which were affiliated with the Patriarch Luo Sect (*Luo Zu Jiao*), a popular Buddhist sect. At the same time it also formed a very close relationship with those