When Crime Meets Pandemic: Organized Crimes and Triad Societies' Activities during COVID-19 Pandemic in Hong Kong

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Abstract: Recent studies suggest that the pandemic has impacted criminal activities and organized crime groups. This article provides a qualitative review of changes in crime rates, patterns, and activities of organized crime groups (specifically, Triads) in Hong Kong. Three specific types of organized crimes with high Triad involvement were selected: serious violent crimes, serious drug-related crimes, and smuggling. After analyzing both official and non-official sources, the results showed that despite the government's stringent control measures that significantly suppressed socio-economic activities during the COVID-19 pandemic, the figures for these selected crimes rose tremendously. Triads' organized criminal activities became more frequent, dangerous, and aggressive, posing a severe threat to Hong Kong's law and order.

Keywords: Organized Crimes, COVID-19 Pandemic, Triad Societies, Hong Kong.

INTRODUCTION

In the past three years, the world has been confronted with the COVID-19 pandemic that has never been seen in generations**.** The impact is unprecedented, indiscriminative, and universal – it has brought threats to every aspect of human security (health, economic, food, environmental, personal, community, and political) (Caparini, 2020). According to the World Health Organization's COVID-19 dashboard, as of 27 September 2022, there have been 610 million confirmed cases with 6.5 million deaths (World Health Organization, 2022). The medical and public health system was the first and foremost emergency caused by the outbreak; following the economic, social, and political realms. The pandemic and the resultant restrictive measures (such as lockdowns, border closures, etc.) dealt a heavy blow to domestic and international socio-economic activities deprived the standard of living quality, worsened global poverty, and widened income disparity (Committee for the Coordination of Statistical Activities, 2021). Aside from all these impacts, one major human security threat echoed with the pandemic that has gained policymakers' and academia's attention is a *crime.*

From a human security perspective, crime is one of the greatest threats to personal security, and civilians view it as the primary source of anxiety (UN Development Program, 1994). Crime endangers lives, human well-being, and, thus, human security in general. It can manifest in many forms, including threats from individuals or gangs against other individuals or gangs (crime, street violence); threats directed against women (rape, domestic violence); threats directed at children based on their vulnerability and dependence (child abuse); threats to self (suicide, drug use).

Apart from personal security, it can pose a threat to environmental security (environmental crimes, illegal wildlife trade, waste trafficking), community security (group clashes and conflicts, genocide), political security (crimes against humanity; political suppression), etc. Especially when a crime is associated with violence, it helps to shape citizens' perceptions of insecurity and is often widely reported and influences their attitudes toward law enforcement and government authority. Moreover, it can discourage rule of law and social governance, erode public confidence in society's law and order, significantly escalate criminal justice costs and cause more social issues (UN Development Program, 1994).

It is commonly known that crime has been amplified by the novel pandemic, and criminological scholars have been actively reviewing the *de facto* effect on crime rate and pattern (Stickle and Felson, 2020; UN, 2021, June 24; UNODC, 2021). For example, Boman and Mowen (2021) suggested that the global crime rate decreased by 37% worldwide after investigating how stay-at-home orders impact crime across 27 cities in 23 countries worldwide; Meyer *et al*. (2022) reviewed the crime rate data from 28 of the 70 largest cities in the United States from January 2018 to December 2020 and found that larceny and robbery were lower during the pandemic lockdown period, but meanwhile, no effect on homicide, burglary, and auto theft; another

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study conducted by the Council on Criminal Justice's National Commission on COVID-19 and Criminal Justice also indicates the similar result (Rosenfeld and Lopez, 2021). Chen *et al*. (2021) also examined how the pandemic control measure affected the crime rate and pattern in a medium-sized city in China, and the result showed that the violent crime category had increased whereas acquisitive crimes dropped.

In Hong Kong, the number of overall crimes has increased significantly over the past three years. Specifically, the number of crimes increased from 54,225 cases in 2018 to 59,225 cases in 2019 (an increase of 5,000 cases), further increased to 63,232 cases in 2020, and finally reached 64,428 cases in 2021 with an increase of 1,196 cases. This represents a cumulative numerical increase of 10,203 cases (Legislative Council of HKSAR, 2022; 2021a; 2020). Despite the government's strict anti-pandemic measures that minimized the city's social and economic activities, the number of crimes continued to rise significantly over the past three years.

Regarding the organized criminal groups' aspect, prior studies have suggested that they had employed strategies to cope with the challenges brought about by the pandemic. They used the disruption as an opportunity to scale up their activities, such as organized crimes, corruption, and criminal exploitations (Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, 2020; Aziani *et al*., 2021). Therefore, the academic world is urging a comprehensive review of how organized criminal groups have been affected by the pandemic and the broad spectrum of radical human activities-control measures, and how they mitigate the burdens or even increase their profits and power (Stickle and Felson, 2020).

METHODOLOGY AND LIMITATIONS

The purpose of this article is to comprehensively review the changing crime patterns and activities of the Triads, which are organized crime groups in Hong Kong, through qualitative research methods. As Hosford *et al*. (2021) noted, organized crime research faces a significant phenomenon of challenges due to the difficulties of data collection, funding availability, and structural factors. The nature of these crimes, their secrecy, confidentiality, and potential risks to researchers and institutions make their resource- and time-intensive (Cressey, 1967; Hobbs, 2000; Windle and Silke, 2019; Hosford *et al.,* 2021). Therefore, most OC studies are mainly conducted through secondary data analysis of open-access documents, such as news reports, government documents, court cases, NGO reports, etc. (Windle and Silke, 2019).

In this article, research methods are (1) historical research that employed the technique of discourse and content data analysis that are mainly collected from government documents and scholarly research; and (2) naturalistic observation the researcher only observes and recorded the evolution of criminal activities' ecology.

ORGANIZED CRIMES AND TRIAD SOCIETIES IN HONG KONG

The definition of *organized crime* can vary due to the nature of crimes themselves (criminal sophistication), the characteristic of the criminal groups (such as structure, self-identification, and authority of reputation), and the socio-political and legal background of the jurisdiction (Finckenauer, 2005). Hong Kong legislation's Cap. 445 *Organized and Serious Crimes Ordinance* specifically lists the legal definition of *organized crime*.

> *"[it] means a Schedule 1 offence that —*
>
> *(a) is connected with the activities of a particular triad society;*
>
> *(b) is related to the activities of 2 or more persons associated together solely or partly to commit 2 or more acts, each of which is a Schedule 1 offence and involves substantial planning and organization; or*
>
> *(c) is committed by 2 or more persons, involves substantial planning and organization, and involves— (i)loss of the life of any person, or a substantial risk of such a loss; (ii)serious bodily or psychological harm to any person, or a substantial risk of such harm; or (iii)serious loss of liberty of any person;"*

According to this definition, organized crime does not necessarily legally associate with Triads. A criminal case will be classified as organized as long as the case involves 2 or more persons associated together to commit some specific serious crime together. But, in the Hong Kong context, it should be noted that Triad societies are closely associated with organized crime and *vice versa* (Lo, 2010; Traver, 2009). The

Organized and Serious Crimes Ordinance *de facto and de pure* is being enacted for directly suppressing the activities of organized crime rather than membership in criminal organizations (Traver, 2009).

Another important legislation that specifically targets unlawful societies is the Cap. 151 Societies Ordinance. The Societies Ordinance was first promulgated in 1887 and was progressively amended in 1911, 1920, 1949, and 1964. It is a centuries-old law that has been used by law enforcement in Hong Kong to *suppress* the triad societies by criminalizing any participation, support, and operation that are associated with them (Kwok and Lo, 2013; Traver, 2009; Broadhust and Lee, 2009). Section 18(3) Societies Ordinance specifically lists the legal definition of a *Triad society*:

> *"Unlawful society means a triad society, whether or not such society is a registered society or an exempted society and whether or not such society is a local society; and every society which uses any triad ritual or which adopts or makes use of any triad title or nomenclature shall be deemed to be a triad society".*

Triad societies are Hong Kong-based secret organized criminal groups that have a definable organizational cohesive structure and characteristics that are rooted in a strong patriotic doctrine and Chinese criminal subculture (Lo, 2010; Kwok and Lo, 2013; Morgan, 1960). There are four main triad consortiums operating in Hong Kong, which are respectively 14K, The Wo Group, The Chiu Chau Group, and the Luen (Chu, 2000). They often involve in organized crimes at a local and international level, like street crimes, illegal gambling, operating sex industries, dangerous drugs, trafficking, etc. Their networks have extended to mainland China, and far to other jurisdictions like European countries and the United States (Curtis *et al*., 2002; Wang, 2013). The four main triad consortiums are divided as follows (Table **1**) (Chu, 2000; Wikipedia contributors, 2022, August 20):

It is noteworthy that Hong Kong's illicit market is not monopolized by a single triad (Kong, 2007). On the contrary, they are disorganized and fragmented, and each Triad consortium consisted of many small-size informal hierarchical pyramids and complex interpersonal social capitals led by area leaders at the district or regional level (Table **2**) (Kong, 2007;

Table 1: The Four Main Triad Consortiums and their Sub-Groups (Lo and Kwok, 2014)

14K	The Wo Group	The Chiu Chau Group	Luen
Yee	Wo On Lok	King Yee	Luen Ying Sh'e
Hau	Wo Shing Wo	Sun Yee On	Luen Yee Sh'e
Yan	Wo Shing Tong	Fuk Yee Hing	Luen Lok Tong
Yung	Wo Yee Tong	Yee Kwan	Luen Fei Ying
Ngai		Tai Ho Choi	
Chung			
Mui			
Tak			
14k Tai Huen			
Baai Lo			

Table 2: The Distribution of Triad Factions in Hong Kong's Core Geographical Urban Area

Hong Kong Island	Kowloon	New Territories	Islands District
Wo Hop To	14K	14K,	Sun Yee On
14K	Wo Shing Wo	Wo Shing Wo,	
Sun Yi On	Sun Yi On	Wo On Ok,	
Dan Yee	Luen Ying	Sun Yi On	
Lo Wing	Wo On Ok	Tai Huen	
Fuk Yee Hing	Wu Nan	Hwok Lo	
Kwan Lok	Chuen Yai Chi	Wo Shing Yee	
Chuen Yat Chi	Wo Shing yee	Luen Ying	
Luen Ying		Lo Tung	

Broadhurst and Lee, 2009; Chu, 2000). Although there is no open source of official statistics, the estimated number is around 50 Triad factions, with at least 160,000 members in Hong Kong (Zhang, 1991).

Referencing the above table, shows Triads are present in three main regions in Hong Kong. The illicit market was operated by hundreds of different sizes of Triads factions, whose finances are self-funded and are involved in both legitimate and illegal business. Thus, to maintain or expand their branches, their leaders must establish their own business operations and enterprises, covering both legitimate and illegal business realms. Their income comes from two major sources – ownership and extra-legal protection (Chu, 2000).

Legitimate businesses earn a significant portion of their income from the night economy, including karaoke bars, nightclubs, and restaurants. Their businesses serve a variety of purposes, such as selling alcohol and other legal products, but they are also associated with illegal activities such as drug trafficking, prostitution, and money laundering. In addition to owning these businesses, individuals also pay protection fees to the district's triad leaders, who act as overseers to maintain order within their territory and protect the businesses from disruption by unfriendly individuals or members of other triads.

Regarding the illegal business sector such as prostitution, illegal gambling, loan sharking, and extortion rackets, the situation was similar to that of legitimate business as well. Before the pandemic, triads themselves owned different illegal establishments and also offered protection services to other owners who ran illegal businesses. This is how triad members could gain a large sum of hidden profits. The reason why those underground business needed their protection services is that operators of these illegal establishments were hesitant to report to law enforcement when they had trouble for concealing their illegal practices. In addition, their businesses usually involve a large cash flow that could be hard to seek any kind of formal protection. Therefore, hiring triad members was one of their major security measures to protect illegal business operations and premises.

However, during the pandemic period, every business was heavily disrupted. On one hand, citizens hesitated to participate in social activities; on the other hand, the government promulgated an *ad hoc* emergency public health law – Cap. 599G *Prevention and Control of Disease (Prohibition on Gathering) Regulation*, providing a legal basis for the authorities to interfere with the economy by imposing business suspension orders and issuing heavy fixed-fine penalties to rulebreakers. For example, the government banned all dining in restaurants between 6:00 pm and 5:00 am; all bars, pubs, mahjong, and Tin Kau parlors, party rooms, and other relevant venues were forced to close. These strict COVID-19 restrictions had been in effect for months and were on and off throughout the pandemic. The President of the Hong Kong Federation of Restaurants and Related Trades estimated that more than 2,500 of the city's 17,000 restaurants had closed over the past two years. Most had seen their earnings shrink by 90% for months (Yau, 2022).

In addition, several news reports have shown that the police force has used the *ad hoc* law as a common tactic to curb the triad's activities. For illustration: in February 2022, a 14K Triad faction leader hosted a dinner gathering in a restaurant located in Causeway Bay for the Lunar New Year celebration. The police force raided the dinner gathering in response; and fined 29 diners with a fixed-fine HKD 5,000 each (with a sum of HKD 145,000) for breaching social distancing regulation (Lo, 2022 February 9). Another piece of news is that a birthday dinner of a Sun Yee On triad senior member was raided by the Police's anti-triad unit in May 2022. As a result, 219 diners were fined a total of about HKD 1.1 million for breaching the *ad hoc* law and social distancing regulations (Lo, 2022 May 16).

Overall, like other businesses and people, Triads also suffered from heavy financial loss. Then now the central question is – how do they mitigate the burdens? As mentioned above, there is a demand for studies on criminal groups' activities during the pandemic. This is because changes in their crime pattern could bring a substantial impact on the local crime rate accordingly. Therefore, three specific types of crimes are being selected, which are respectively serious violent crimes, serious drug-related crimes, and smuggling. They are being marked with a high level of Triads' involvement.

CRIMES AND PUBLIC ORDER

Serious Violent Crimes and Turf Wars over Territorial and Business Disputes

The first organized crime that posed the most direct threat to public safety and was most visible to the public is the serious violent crimes and turf wars at the street level. According to the Legislative Council's

Table 3: Triad-Related Crimes, 2014-2021

Year	Triad-related	Wounding	Unlawful societies
2014	1,643	478	366
2015	1,812	446	365
2016	1,872	432	303
2017	1,798	308	238
2018	1,715	393	232
2019	1,353	302	157
2020	1,761	353	180
2021	1,888	324	167

report on law and order in Hong Kong, during the COVID-19 pandemic, Triad-related crime, which is identified as the "*proportion of crimes attributable to triad activity*" (Fight Crime Committee, 2020), recorded a significant rise, from 1,353 cases in 2019 to 1,888 cases in 2021 (Legislative Council of HKSAR, 2022a; 2021a; 2020). Despite the crime statistics for 2022 not being published yet, the number from Jan-Jun 2022 has already reached 851 cases while comparing the 810 cases of Jan-Jun 2021, reflecting that Triad crimes this year is worse than the previous year (Table **3**) (Legislative Council of HKSAR, 2022a; 2021a; 2020a; 2019; 2018b; 2017b; 2015b; 2014).

Most offenses committed by the Triads were violent crimes such as wounding and serious assault, and unlawful society offenses. The number of these crimes, in general, has increased – wounding and serious assault from 302 cases in 2019 to 353 cases in 2020, and then reduced back to 324 cases in 2021; the unlawful societies also had a similar trend, first increased from 157 cases in 2019 to 180 cases in 2020, and then dropped back to 167 cases in 2021.

As mentioned above, Hong Kong's core geographical urban area was occupied by several different Triads. Turf battles over illegal business operations among different Triads were already common previously, but the pandemic made it worse. The pandemic and the government's social distancing policies had disrupted their businesses and strangled their illicit cash flow. They thus were forced to expand or move their business into another area to maintain their scale of operation. However, the expansion comes with a cost. Those moves inevitably led to more turf wars because of the territorial conflicts and clashes erupting over businesses or a change in henchmen within factions. To maintain their power, the Triad factions actively recruited fresh youths and southeast Asia ethnicity as junior members and frontline fighters (also known as an *affiliated member* who is obligated to follow any order from their senior member) to reinforce their territory, influence, and illegal business operations.

Recently news showed signs of the escalating violence of turf war among Triads due to territorial and business disputes. A case involving gunfire was particularly rare in Hong Kong, particularly a city that had very strict laws controlling any matter relating to firearms. But the city witnessed several triad-related gunfire cases during the pandemic.

On 8th September 2020, a high-ranking enforcer of Wo Shing Wo and the leader of the Tsuen Wan faction nicknamed "Crazy Yung" was shot by a Triad hitman in Tsim Sha Tsui (another tourist spot in Hong Kong) at close range (Photo **1**). He was targeted over what police believe is rivalry within the gang over protection money that was potentially linked to a row over HKD 200,000 in protection fees collected at the Kwai Tsing container terminals (Chan, 2022 September 9).

Another gunfire case occurred on 10th June 2022. A Triad fight among three factions with around 10 suspects (Sun Yi On, Wo Shing Wo, and an unknown gang formed by Southeast Asians) occurred in the Central, a central business district of Hong Kong. The fight involved a shooting, car-hitting, and machete attack (Photo **2**). As a result, three injured men were at the scene, where one suspect was a gunshot wound, another suspect suffered from head injuries and the third one was a leg injury. The police force believed that the fight was triggered by business disputes regarding the profits sharing from illegal enterprises and territorial fights (Ling, 2022 June 10; Lo and Leung, 2022 June 10)

Photo 1: "Crazy Yung", a high-ranking enforcer of Wo Shing Wo and the leader of the Tsuen Wan faction, was being shot by the hitman with a pistol when he was stopped at a traffic light in Tsim Sha Tsui.#

#Photo captured by online video.

Photo 2: (Li, 2022 June 10) another firearm case occurred in Central. The Triad attackers' vehicle was being shot by the opposite Triad's members.

Serious Drugs-Related Crimes

Crimes related to dangerous drugs have been a long-term social issue in Hong Kong. The Cap. 134 *Dangerous Drugs Ordinance* banned any drugs that are stimulants, hypnotics, tranquilizers, and sedatives. A list of dangerous drugs is stipulated under Part 1 of the first Schedule of the Ordinance, such as opium, morphine, heroin, cannabis, cocaine, and amphetamines. The law states that any person who transports manufactures, possesses (drugs and equipment), and cultivates dangerous drugs, can be sentenced to 3 years or up to imprisonment for life. Prior Triads' studies have already shown that the illegal drug market was already a mainstay for Triads due to the large profit margin; hence, their footprint was widely spread across both domestic and international illegal drug trading (Traver, 2009; Tracy, 1993; Chan *et al*., 2020). Under the blessing of the government's anti-dangerous drug efforts, the crime figure of serious drug offenses (mainly trafficking and manufacturing) dropped from 2,045 cases in 2011 to 740 cases in 2019; and 5,639 arrests to 2,399 arrests during the same period.

Table 4: Serious Drugs Offenses, 2011 - 2021 and 2022 (January – June)

Years	No. of Cases	Triad-related	No. of arrestees	No. of arrestee (Aged 10 -15)	No. of arrestee (Aged 16-20)
2011	2,045	184	5,639	81	612
2012	2,141	170	5,825	77	540
2013	2,269	177	6,026	120	505
2014	1,855	175	4,915	78	367
2015	1,891	231	4,717	64	335
2016	1,712	331	4,734	41	284
2017	1,553	299	4,798	25	213
2018	1,399	237	4,240	20	182
2019	740	132	2,399	20	124
2020	1,149	143	3,849	42	276
2021	1,570	232	4,634	89	341
2022	683	175	--	--	--

Table 5: Drug Seizures Per Year, 2016 – 2021

Drug Seizures (kg)	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Heroin	75	30	49	47	368	554
Cannabis	242	1,376	515	374	1,071	2,088
Methamphetamine	359	144	172	163	1,499	1,794
Ketamine	282	94	119	274	471	3,296
Cocaine	471	220	538	1,678	1,269	2,895
Ecstasy-type (tablet)	5,861	9,828	57,275	57,366	5,994	62,955

However, after the pandemic hit Hong Kong in 2020, the *prima facie* information showed that Triad's engagement in the illegal drug business was more active and aggressive. Referring to the figures of (Tables **4** and **5**), all listed drug-related figures recorded a rebound and an obvious upswing (Hong Kong Police Force, 2022 October; Legislative Council of HKSAR, 2022b; 2022a; 2021a; 2021c; 2020a; 2020b; 2019; 2018a; 2018b; 2017a; 2017b; 2016; 2015a; 2015b; 2014; 2013)

The number of serious drug offenses cases and arrestees recorded a profound increase after the hit of the pandemic in 2020, from 740 cases in 2019 to 1,570 cases in 2021; and 2,399 arrestees to 4,634 arrestees. In addition, the seizure of dangerous drugs increased dangerously – heroin from 47 kg to 554 kg; cannabis from 374 kg to 2,088 kg; methamphetamine from 163 kg to 1,794 kg; ketamine from 274 kg to 3,296 kg; cocaine from 1,678 kg to 2,895 kg; and finally, the ecstasy-type from 57,366 tablets to 62,955 tablets.

Apart from the offenses, the figure of drug abusers also marked with increase. The Central Registry of Drug Abuse's report revealed that the total number of reported drug abusers in 2021 increased by 4 % (from 5,776 to 6,019) compared with that in 2020. The rising number of reported drug abusers aged under 21 (from 607 in 2020 to 873 in 2021 with a 44% increase) has contributed to the increase and accounted for 15% of the total figure of reported drug abusers in 2021 (Legislative Council of HKSAR, 2022b). It is believed that the pandemic has disrupted the lives of people. Both psychological and physical stress and strains such as economic hardship, social isolation, and threat against physical and psychological health, can potentially lead to a high chance of drug abuse and addictions. It becomes a trendy way for people who suffered from the high magnitude of strains to use drug abuse as a way to mitigate their stress (Drapela, 2006; Lawn and Skumlien, 2020).

The increasing figure of drug abusers and trafficking could be an indicator reflecting a situation where the

demand and supply of illegal drugs were both increasing accordingly. Due to the increasing market demand and market expansion, dangerous drug trading became one of Triad's business expansion focuses during the pandemic. Prior Triads' studies have already shown that the illegal drug market was already a mainstay for Triads due to the significantly large profit margin; hence their footprint was widely spread across both domestic and international illegal drug trading (Traver, 2009; Tracy, 1993; Chan *et al*. 2020).

Foreign news reports indicate that the economic hardship and weaker moral constraints among youth groups caused by the pandemic have made them vulnerable to recruitment by criminal groups (Comolli, 2021; Swann and Symonds, 2020 June 2; BBC, 2022 March 9). This situation has also occurred in Hong Kong. Triads specifically target vulnerable youths to commit serious dangerous drug offenses. Recruiting young people as foot soldiers for transporting illegal drugs was a common practice before the pandemic. They were relatively easy to recruit by offering monetary rewards and Triad membership. They could also serve as scapegoats when the business was exposed. Senior Triad members often acted as masterminds, exercising remote control over the operation of organized crime ambiguously. The young and fresh foot soldiers were responsible for frontline illegal drug trading, manufacturing, and trafficking.

Reviewing the statistic, the figure of the number of arrestees in juveniles and young persons in serious drug offenses both recorded a dramatic rise (Table **3**) – for the juvenile, the number increased from 20 persons in 2019 to 89 persons in 2021 (nearly four times increase); and 124 persons to 341 persons in the same period for the young persons (nearly a triple increase). Some news reports are useful to illustrate the situation.

In November 2021, the police force arrested a 14-year-old student, who had Triad links, on suspicion of trafficking HKD 27 million of drugs; another news report in May 2022, when two teenagers aged 16 and 18-year-old were arrested by police on suspicion of dangerous drug trafficking and manufacturing following the seizure of HKD 1.8 million worth of narcotics. These news reports reflect an uncomfortable message that vulnerable youths were being exploited by lawbreakers to commit serious dangerous drug offenses.

Goods Smuggling

Another profound organized crime that shocked the city is *Smuggling*. By the Hong Kong law Cap. 60 *Import and Export Ordinance,* Hong Kong Customs and Exercise Department is the main enforcer of anti-smuggling. The legal definition is as follows:

> *"[it] means importing, exporting, unshipping, shipping, landing, loading, carrying, conveying or otherwise dealing with any article contrary to the provisions of this Ordinance or any other law controlling the import or export of any article"*

Before the pandemic lockdown, Hong Kong was once the most visited place in the world with 65 million visiting in 2018 (Hong Kong Tourism Board, 2019). Due to the loose border control policy and geographic advantage between Hong Kong and mainland China, visitors from mainland China amounted to 51 million time. While the Hong Kong border was open, smuggling between the two lands was mainly conducted through the practice of parallel trading. Hong Kong and Chinese smugglers exploited the Multiple-entry Endorsement policy to smuggle legal and illegal goods between the two places. Although there are no official statistics regarding the number of visitors involved in smuggling, its scale has caused extreme disruption and public nuisance in various districts in Hong Kong, especially in places that are geographically close to mainland China's border (Photo **3**) (Luk, 2020). News reports reflected that those smugglers were organized; hence it was a pillar for the Triads as they could make substantial profits by taking advantage of those visitors to smuggle illicit goods to overseas countries and mostly to mainland China (Sing Pao Daily News, 2017 June 16; Liang, 2015 March 6; Siu, 2016 May 4).

Nevertheless, after the strict anti-pandemic immigration policy was enacted, the overall annual visitor arrival to Hong Kong only reached 3,569,000 persons in 2020 – a 93.6% drop from 2019 (Hong Kong Tourism Board, 2021 January 15); and around 91,400 in 2021 – a 97.4% drop from 2020 (Hong Kong Tourism Board, 2022, January 17). In other words, the Triad societies lost one of their major incomes from the smuggling business. Therefore, they changed their *modus operandi* from land and passenger channel to sea-and-air cargo channels, which could be reflected by the following statistic (Table **6**) (Legislative Council

Photo 3: (North District Parallel Imports Concern Group, 2019) Before the pandemic, smuggling between mainland China and Hong Kong through passengers are mainly conducted through the so-called parallel trading.

Table 6: Number of All Smuggling Cases Detected by Hong Kong Customs and Excise Department, 2016 - 2021

	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Detected cases	21,021	21,175	27,951	31,122	6,774	8,327
Seizure value in HKD million	$ 1,227m	$ 1,126m	$ 927m	$ 1,726m	$ 3,629m	$ 6,384m
Detected cases (Cargo)	3,114	3,379	4,342	4,125	4,165	Pending
Seizure value in HKD million (Cargo)	$ 1,038m	$ 1,020m	$ 791m	$ 1,435m	$ 3,146m	$ 6,270m
Detected cases (Passenger)	17,907	17,796	23,609	26,997	2,610	Pending
Seizure value in HKD million (Passenger)	$ 189m	$ 106m	$ 136m	$ 291m	$ 169m	Pending

of HKSAR, 2021b; Hong Kong Customs and Excise Department, 2022).

The number of detected passenger-related smuggling cases (including air, land, and sea) dramatically dropped 90% from 26,997 cases to 2,610 cases, and the number of land cargo-related smuggling cases dropped by nearly 40% from 2,004 cases to 1,233 cases (Legislative Council of HKSAR, 2021b). As a result, the total number of detected cases experienced a sharp drop from 31,122 cases in 2019 to 8,323 cases in 2021. Yet, the seizure value, in contrast, marked a substantial rise, from HKD 1,726 million (2019) to HKD 3,329 million (2020) and then HKD 6,384 million (2021). The increased number is mainly contributed to the smuggling by cargo channels, which jumped from HKD 791m in 2018 to HKD 6,270m in 2021, with a nearly 800% increase within 3 years.

As mentioned by the latest annual review, 87% of cargo-smuggling cases were smuggling between Hong Kong and mainland China. There was a wide range of illicit goods being smuggled, which were respectively, but not limited to, endangered species, animals and plants, dangerous drugs, food, cigarette, dutiable commodities, firearms, and high-value general merchandise.

Regarding smuggling on the sea, it is now more common for smugglers to use *Dai-Fei*, an ultra-high-speedboat powered by a maximum of 8 engines with around a total of 2,500 horsepower, to pick up goods on the seashore or from barges moored near Hong Kong's sea boundary, and head to Mainland waters at high speed. News reports showed that the sea-smuggling activities became so aggressive that a hundred smugglers flocked to mainland China's seashore *en masse*, outnumbering the law enforcers (Photo **4**).

In response to smuggling activities, law enforcement agencies have been conducting anti-

Photo 4: The moment when a hundred of *Dai-Fei* traveled *en masse* for cross-border smuggling.

smuggling operations by deploying patrols in relevant waters. However, these efforts have not been sufficient to stop smuggling. The situation became intense and violent when those smugglers challenged law enforcement. A smuggler's Dai-Fei slammed into a police marine interceptor, causing it to capsize in the northwest waters of Hong Kong during an anti-smuggling operation. Three marine police officers were injured, and a female officer was killed. The attack against police resulted in an *ad hoc* Hong Kong and Guangdong Police cooperation, cracking down on the smuggling business (Leung, 2021 October 11).

Interestingly enough, geopolitics also played a critical role in shaping the smuggling patterns in Hong Kong. The Sino-US rivalry had led to a low point in China-and-US-allies relations since the start of the 2018 Trade War. In the Asia Pacific region, the deterioration with China-Australia was identical (Walker, 2020 December 8). Both countries implemented various national security policies to counter each other. Since May 2020, Chinese authorities imposed an 80% punitive tariff on Australian imports and suspended beef imports from four of Australia's largest meat processors. It was later escalated to a quasi-sanction, where Australian food products were being held up in Chinese ports in the name of food security inspections in November 2020 (Tan, 2020 November 2). Afterward, the bilateral trade between the two countries dropped significantly (Ferguson, Waldron, and Lim, 2021). In that situation, Australian exporters needed to seek an alternative to replace the volume of Chinese trade via reallocation and adjustment; hence Hong Kong (also Japan) became their target importer.

While comparing the data on monthly lobster imports from Australia to Hong Kong from August 2020 to August 2021, the number rose dramatically from around 1,300 kg to 122,000 kg, an increase of 9,200% (Lau, 2021 September 26). Bloomberg news report found out that Hong Kong has become the world's largest importer of Australian lobsters with monthly trade growth of more than 2000% (Xu, 2021). Since the Hong Kong market is nearly impossible to absorb that instant rise in quantity, it is believed a significant proportion of the increase in imports was deflected or re-exported to the mainland China market through grey trade.

Under this situation, smuggling illicit goods into mainland China became a particularly profitable business for Triads during the COVID-19 pandemic. And this is how sea smuggling became so aggressive. Recent news reflected that the Triads were highly involved in sea smuggling, transferring Australian food products (mainly lobsters, and beef) back to mainland Chin (Lo, 2021 November 16). For instance: in October 2021, a two-weeks police anti-smuggling operation crackdown smuggling organized crime groups, where 365 persons with 35 triad members were arrested in suspected of operating sea smuggling (Agence, 2021 October 11). More than 50 speedboats were being captured along with 1,700 tons of preserved meat and food. Another arrest also reflected that the Triads played a major role in operating the sea-smuggling. In November 2021, the police, led by the regional anti-triad unit, seized five modified speedboats worth HKD 4 million on Lantau Island and arrested a senior member of 14K who was the mastermind behind the smuggling syndicate (The Standard, 2021 November 3).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The topic of the pandemic's impacts on crime is currently a hot discussion among academia, civic

societies as well as governments. We should bear in mind that crime and organized crime are ubiquitous, and criminals are opportunists. Therefore, criminologists and public policy scholars are actively studying how organized crime groups adapt to maintain their business enterprise during the pandemic, or, *against all odds*, to grow even further beyond their original scales.

Three types of organized crime that are full of Triad's footprint are being selected for this study, which is respectively smuggling, illegal drugs, and serious violence. I gathered crime data from a variety of official records (such as administrative crime-related reports to the Legislative Council; reports of and available data provided by the Fight Crime Committee, Customs and Excise Department, Police Force, Central Registry of Drug Abuse, and other relevant institutions) and non-official records (such as local news reports, scholar studies), the result *prima facie* reflects that Hong Kong is facing an uptrend of crimes. Organized crime activities (smuggling, illegal drugs, and serious violence) become more frequent, and Triads become more aggressive and active.

First, the serious violent crime was triggered by illegal and legitimate business hardship among Triads of different factions. When the pandemic hit the economy hard, conflicts among Triads became more usual and regular; invasions against other Triad's territory became more common, leading to a greater number of street fights and a more serious and violent turf war.

But the pandemic is not entirely negative for them. On the contrary, the crisis showed the level of adaptability that criminal groups possess. It seems the pandemic has expanded the drug markets (both demand and supply) by fair means. Triads had taken the opportunity to expand their illegal drug business, which could be reflected by the crime related to illegal drugs and smuggling.

In illegal drug cases, the number of serious dangerous drug cases, arrestees (all-aged, juveniles and young persons) and drug abusers, and amount of drug seizures all marked a dangerous rise. In addition, youth involvement in serious drug crimes raises an alarming signal to Hong Kong and shall receive special attention, as Triads were purposefully targeting the youths to be the *frontline soldiers* for running illegal drug businesses for them.

In smuggling cases, the close border policy had nearly wiped out *parallel trading*. Subsequently, the Triads quickly shifted their operations from passenger to *sea-cargo* channels. Remarkably, the pandemic is not the only factor impacting this shift; geopolitics also played a critical role in shaping smuggling patterns in Hong Kong. The trade conflict between China and Australia forced Australian products (mainly food products) to relocate to Hong Kong. During the pandemic, Hong Kong suddenly became the largest importer of Australian lobsters. However, the sudden rise of imported food products was not for the Hong Kong market. It is believed that they were being deflected to the mainland China market through grey trade. The Triads played a significant role in conducting the trade deflection and increasing their income through sea smuggling.

However, this paper has limitations. Scholars and law enforcement agencies raised concerns that organized crime operations moved to the cyber sector. Since criminals took advantage of the widespread global digital communication, victims of scams and online blackmail increased dramatically correspondingly (INTERPOL General Secretariat, 2020). Hong Kong, as one of the world's most internet-connected cities in the world, demonstrates how the pandemic provides perfect timing and space for criminals to develop their organized crime operations in the cyber world. The deception case jumped from 8216 cases to 15,553 cases comparing 2019 and 2020 and then reached to highest with 19,249 cases in 2021. The rise is mainly contributed to "compensated dating scams, "romance scams", "investment fraud" and "online employment fraud" (Legislative Council of HKSAR, 2022a). The only major obstacle to studying those crimes is that they are generally hard to detect and uncovered. Therefore, currently, there is only limited information available to understand the de facto operations. But it deserves public and government attention and requires more in-depth studies.

All in all, organized crimes are being recognized as a major threat to human security. It does not only directly affect the local crime figures and patterns, but it also helps to shape citizens' perceptions of insecurity and wastes a large number of public resources. A research study conducted by the City University of Hong Kong named *A Report on the Effectiveness of Rehabilitation and Community Education Work of Correctional Services Department* shows that the public crime cost per criminal case was around HKD 239,054 in 2016. The research further elaborates that

the total public crime cost reached HKD 381 billion between 2011 and 2016 (Chui, Cheung and Cheung, 2017). The expenses include the cost of arrest, prosecution, imprisonment, and rehabilitation as well as damage caused to victims. The actual cost is expected to be higher since it does not include indirect expenses for those affected (such as victims' and offenders' families).

In other words, the penalties of getting arrested, the damages brought to victims and their families, the impact on society as a whole, and the cost of criminal justice, combined with the immense sums of money involved in each organized crime case, make it clear that aggressive organized crime activities pose a severe threat to Hong Kong's law and order. In response, community stakeholders and the government must act quickly to protect human security.

This article takes an initial step in documenting some essential changes in Triad-linked crime patterns and organized crime activities during the pandemic period. Hopefully, it will provide useful directions for future studies on the pandemic's impact on organized crime and organized crime groups in Hong Kong, and serve as a reference for advocating anti-organized crime policies.

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