

# **TRIADS: THE CHINESE CONNECTION**

*The purpose of this article is to afford the reader pertinent historical information regarding these ancient, secret Chinese societies which, in the decade to come, will undoubtedly begin to play an ever-increasing role in the criminal world of the United States. Triads are firmly entrenched in Hong Kong and other countries and are currently preparing for the Chinese takeover of Hong Kong in 1997. The direction these Triads will move, if they decide to relocate, is the subject of much conjecture within the international law-enforcement community.*

In 1644, the Chinese Ming dynasty was overthrown by the Ching conquerors of Manchuria who ruled until the Republic of China was formed in 1912. Most Chinese considered the Manchu Ching rulers as foreigners with no right to rule China. The distrust between the Ching rulers and their subjects encouraged growth of the rebellious Triad movement during the following centuries.

The beginnings of the Triads can be traced as far back as 1674. In that year the second Manchu emperor enlisted the aid of Shaolin monks to fight with his forces to repel an invasion. The monks aided a successful rout of the invaders and returned to their monastery refusing any reward. The emperor became distrustful of the monks because of their popularity and renowned skill in the martial arts and



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ordered a raid on the monastery. Only five of the more than one 100 monks survived. Survivors swore revenge on the Manchu Ching dynasty and established five lodges, each dedicated to restoring the Ming dynasty with the help of their secret armies. Years later, Europeans began calling these secret societies "Triads" because of their sacred triangular symbol representing heaven, earth and man.

Membership in these secret lodges grew rapidly, fed by the vagrants, former soldiers, thieves and political exiles who were displaced by disrupted Chinese life following the Manchu conquest. The Triads attracted adventurers who found upward mobility blocked in normal society. Through these groups, ag-



**Leader of the Society**



**Official**



**Official (Ordinary)**



**Member**

## **Identification Signs of Triad Officials & Members**

**Official: Used by an official of this rank who has committed some serious crime on behalf of the society or who has been imprisoned for triad activities.**

gressive and ambitious men could control secret funds and manpower, gaining incredible social and political influence. The oppressive nature of the Manchu government encouraged the Triad goal of overthrowing the Ching dynasty. Members protected themselves by taking vows of secrecy, using secret signs to identify each other and by participating in secret initiation rites.

After 1840, political goals were a secondary issue to the criminal objectives of the Triads. Non-Triad groups also were formed in Hong Kong during this time. Although they did not share the early political goals of the Triads, they found it beneficial to adopt Triad secret rituals and procedures to protect themselves and make money in their increasingly illegal activities.

The British assumed control of the colony in 1842. At that time at least four active Triad groups were located there. The Triads initially resisted British rule. But eventually they realized Hong Kong's potential as a new source for revenue for their illegal opium, gam-

bling and prostitution operations. The Triad's situation continued to deteriorate until 1845 when the British passed laws that made membership in any Triad a criminal offense.

In 1912, Sun Yat Sen, himself a Triad member, became the first president of the Republic of China. One of his initial orders was to call for dissolution of all Triads — an order which proved impossible. Triads gradually increased their control of criminal activities, including drug trafficking and the black market, particularly during times of war.

In the following decades, Triads maintained their power and influence during various periods of national uprisings and political upheaval, spreading their organizations throughout the world as members fled Communist rule. In addition, the Triads attempted to disguise their labor and other racketeering activities as various guilds, societies or associations. Routine law enforcement during this period was virtually non-existent due to

military priorities. Triad activities flourished.

In later years several of China's military leaders attempted to organize Triad members into a military militia. Nationalist General Chiang Kai Shek used them for political dirty work. After the Nationalists were defeated by the Communists in 1949, many Triad members who could not or would not flee were rounded up and executed in Shanghai. Thereafter, Triads began violent power struggles among themselves that lasted into the mid-1950s. Today, many of the strongest Triad groups are still solidly established in Hong Kong. Some are well organized with ambitious global plans. It is estimated there are more than 100,000 Triad members presently active in the Hong Kong area alone. Concern is growing over the possibility that Triad members will relocate when 150 years of British rule ends and Hong Kong reverts to the People's Republic of China. ★