Chapter 14

From “Little Flowers of the Motherland” into “Carnivorous Plants”: The Changing Face of Youth Gang Crime in Contemporary China

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ABSTRACT

This chapter considers youth offending and youth justice in contemporary China noting significant changes due to the rapid economic transformation. Once famous for its low crime rates, the apparent rapid rise in Chinese juvenile delinquency has left the media ‘wondering what transformed these little “flowers of the motherland” into “carnivorous plants”’. The chapter charts changes from the yanda (hard strikes) crackdown in 1983 to the highly publicised anti-crime crackdown in Chongqing. Despite limited data, a picture is emerging of changing influence of triads and altered relationships between organised crime and street gangs, noting street gangs are increasing due to an influx of rural migrants to the mega-cities. The chapter touches upon the risk factors and emergent arguments of this contemporary phenomenon, noting that Zhang et al (1997:299) has suggested that ‘China is in an early stage of gang development’ possibly equivalent to the USA from 1930s to the 1960s.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter considers aspects of youth offending and youth justice in contemporary China which has been changing over the past two decades. In many ways youth offending is similar to that in the West, however recent rapid economic transformation has initiated rapid changes in the nature and presentation of youth offending. Once famous for its low rates of crime and juvenile delinquency, the apparent rapid rise in Chinese juvenile delinquency has left the media ‘wondering what transformed these little “flowers of the motherland” into “carnivorous plants”’ in a country striving for a harmonious society,

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Box 1. From ‘little flowers of the motherland’ into ‘carnivorous plants’: the changing face of youth gang crime in contemporary China: Case study

It’s 11 pm and it’s plain, something is going on down that 50-meter-long alley in Shek Wu Hui. A dozen kids, maybe 14-16, shifting around in an agitated manner, can be going nowhere. The orange light from the street lamp above catches odd highlights revealing the dye jobs on some of the kids’ hair. Some have their arms tattooed and black T-shirts can be seen on more than a few. There is an air of nervous apprehension as if something is going to happen. Loud music blares from the game arcades across the street, where inside, young guys are focused on games like Warcraft and King of Fighters.

A couple of older kids, maybe 17-or-19-year-old, seem to be watching for something, standing like sentinels at the entrance to the alley that leads to the back of the games arcade. About 10 meters away is the entrance to still another alley - this one narrower and much, much darker. A few 20-somethings are hanging out there. They smoke. Some stand. Some squat. Some are on cell phones. A couple of cars are cruising around the streets, windows rolled down. Between the two they carry ten young adults. The conventional wisdom down here is that if they have to “get away”, they can do it faster with the air conditioner turned off.

There’s going to be a fight, says an insider, who knows the scene. The scenario has become pretty common over the last few months. Two branches of the local Wo Shing Wo triad are having a feud. The battles play out in Shek Wu Hui, the district hub surrounded by scores of public housing estates in Sheung Shui. The stage seems set for a bloody battle. Only the timely arrival of the Police Department’s Emergency Unit is able to defuse the situation and prevent violence.


(China Daily 23rd February 2013). The chapter charts changes over the past thirty years from the yanda (hard strikes) crackdown in 1983 to the contemporary and highly publicised anti-crime crackdowns in Chongqing. Despite some obscure Chinese data a picture is now emerging of changing influence of triads and altering relationships between organised crime and street gangs. After reviewing a typology of Asian gangs the chapter considers how street gangs appear to be on the rise in China largely due to the large influx of migrants from rural China to the rapidly urbanised mega cities. These issues are currently the centre of public debate in China and the chapter touches upon the risk factors and emergent arguments in relation to this contemporary phenomenon. Zhang et al (1997:299) has suggested that ‘China is in an early stage of gang development’ possibly equivalent to the USA from 1930s to the 1960s.

Youth Offending and Youth Justice in China

The above scenario in Hong Kong has become a noticeable and regular feature, particularly on many of the large public housing projects surrounding the city, notably the New Towns like Sheung Shui, Fanling, Tuen Mun, Tai Po, and Tseung Kwan O. Whilst generating much press and publicity they are indicators of changes taking place in the level, type and activity of youth street gangs in China. Lam Kin-keung, a retired detective station sergeant who spent eight years with the Organized Crime and Triad Bureau has noted that youth street gangs appear to flourish in such public housing neighbourhoods. Many affiliates of these groups are said to be instantly recognisable from their speech, their dress and their posture. Whilst some have direct, definitive links with triads, for others such links are obscured or more ambiguous. Regardless of this the consequence is often the same, young people coming together to fight with steak knives, clubs, and bottles or iron pipes.

Increasingly the participants are getting younger:

They are lost, suffer low self-esteem, come from poverty and abusive backgrounds. They are youngsters who can’t find respect - with nowhere else to turn but to the triad societies who give them a sense of belonging they’ve never known before. Experts note a disturbing trend that recruits entering the triads are increasingly becoming younger. (Deng, 2011)

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