

A Better Yesterday

Codes of (dis)honor in Hong Kong gangster films

For centuries, an integral underbelly of Chinese society has propelled the nation's history. The Triads, or as popularly labeled in Hong Kong, 黑社會 (*hei she hui*, literally: “black society”), have long been a part of the cinematic mythos as the cool criminals, roaming amidst the blinding neon lights of sauna parlors, pirated DVD vendor stalls, cha chaan teng's (Hong Kong tea restaurants), and pool dens of Wanchai or Mongkok. However, their past in fact stretches far beyond this modern condition, rooted in events 2,000 years prior.

This paper will attempt to outline a brief history from which the Triads of today seemingly draw their social structure, philosophy, and activity. Next, we will discuss a 20-year chronology of the triad film genre (namely, *A Better Tomorrow*, *The Mission*, and the *Election* films), as it traces the evolution of the Hong Kong gangster within this historical context: initially as romantic hero, drawing from quasi-religious ideals of ancient triad brotherhood to vanquish the evil, self-obsessed antagonist, before becoming the modern pragmatist, faced with the fears of self-preservation in the yawning shadow of post-handover Hong Kong.

As closely detailed by Martin Booth in *The Dragon Syndicates: The Global Phenomenon of the Triads*, the first semblance of triad-like groups dates back to the militant Zhou dynasty (1027-221 BC), during which underground societies formed, setting a “long tradition of self-preservation through unity and patriotism” (4). This unusual contradiction of self-interest and group solidarity was integral to the Chinese cultural fabric, evident in how the largely agrarian population “were quick to grasp anything which brought stability or security to their lives. One means of security lay in uniting with others” (5). Guilds, work unions, and private associations offered financial profit and physical protection in return for membership dues, subscription fees, political tributes and ritual initiations (a mishmash of Confucian, Taoist, Buddhist, and pagan ideology); furthermore, these groups offered secret venues of “quasi-political and

dissident” (6) discourse, which would manifest itself at various times: anti-Mongol rebellions during the Yuan dynasty (1271-1368 AD), the San He Hui supporting rebels against the Tianqi Emperor (1620-1627), Tian Di Hui raids on local government buildings in 1767, triad-organized revolts in Guangdong during the Taiping Rebellion (1850-1864).

Thus, in this time, the varied proto-triad groups unwittingly developed the basic ideology and social structures that inform modern Chinese criminal organization. From San He Hui (literally: “Triad Society”) we derive the popular Western term; the “triad” refers to the unified tripartite of nature: heaven, earth, and man. This concept is reflected in the triad groups’ historical sense of rebellion and political duty—according to the traditional Chinese ideal, an incompetent ruler meant that he had lost the Mandate of Heaven and therefore, upset the harmony between the earthly and divine elements. Another group, Tian Di Hui (literally: “Heaven and Earth Society”), began as a nationalistic “mutual-benefit society...[and] an important agent of social intergration... [offering] a means of identity for migrants and, in turn, protected them, setting up a social-security network” (13). The historical concern of having a *hui guan*, defined by Encyclopedia Britannica as the “series of guildhalls established by regional organizations (*tongxiang hui*)...as places where merchants and officials from the same locale or same dialect groups could obtain food, shelter, and assistance while away from home.” The concept of identity, especially for the displaced immigrant sundered from home and potentially, his nation, are important to consider once framed in the context of consumerist Hong Kong—what film critic Martha Nochimson visualizes as a disordered, materialist “sleek paradise of wonders” which the Hong Kong gangster must “face down” (148).

Marginalized and poorly connected, the ordinary Chinese worker’s desire for a support system and familial anchor in a nation as vast and regionalized as China was overwhelming. In the Qing dynasty (1644-1912 AD), the authorities struggled greatly to quell issues of overpopulation, rural discord, and warmongering. Groups like Tian Di Hui offered protection during such socio-economic circumstances. Moreover, the concept of blood brotherhood seemingly mimicked the Confucian value system of a traditional Chinese family. Quoted in *City on Fire*, director Stanley Tong elaborates this noble

philosophy of 情 (*qing*, feeling) as it informs social relationships: we find 忠 (*zhong*, loyalty), 孝 (*xiao*, filial piety), 仁 (*ren*, benevolence), and 義 (*yi*, brotherhood) (40). The traditional Chinese “code of honor” (40) thus ostensibly manifested itself in this “underworld hierarchy” (Nochimson 174). Most certainly, in its historical roots, there was some sense of religious and social responsibility “to help the underprivileged,” (Booth 13) especially to ensure financial stability during the unrest of the nineteenth century and onwards.

Beyond the tensions brewing between triad societies and the foreign government, there was also much social struggle between the *huiguan* themselves, manifested through *xie dou*, vendettas which often ended in blood. Thus was established the historical thread for violence and robbery—veiled under the concept of righteous *xie dou*, in the name of loyalty to the society.

Booth contends that the “true historical beginnings” (10) of the Triads—also briefly mentioned in Johnnie To’s *Election*—are derived from the Qing dynasty, specifically during the reign of the Yongzheng Emperor (1722-1735). The government enlisted Shaolin monks, described as “superb strategists and martial-arts experts,” to help defeat either a Mongolian uprising from the northwest or a rebellion in Fukien (sources vary in their accounts). However, after outliving its usefulness, Shaolin political power and military talent—multiplied manifold by the granted reward of imperial power—was considered a threat, which ultimately led to the burning of the temple. The event feeds into a popular mythos, which the Triads themselves would later pride themselves upon. As the legend goes, the five surviving monks—Tsoi Tak-chung, Fong Tai-hung, Ma Chiu-hing, Wu Tak-tai and Lee Shik-hoi (later referred to as the First Five Ancestors)—embittered by the Yongzheng Emperor’s betrayal, cooperated with former Ming officials to found secret societies throughout various provinces, all espousing the motto, *Fan Qing Fu Ming*, meaning “Overthrow the Qing, Restore the Ming.” The Ming, whom had been ethnically Han Chinese rulers, had overseen a dynasty of relative cultural flourishing and economic expansion that foreshadowed a capitalistic market (Li 950). Conversely, the Qing, who were of Manchurian origin, were characterized by an unstable economy and continuous military conflict. Moreover, the foreign authorities subjugated the Han majority—forcing the Chinese to wear pigtailed to indicate their ethnic inferiority (Booth

12). The Triads, then, come from a lineage that is simultaneously vengeful and patriotic, anticipating the contradiction of criminal self-interest and traditional Chinese brotherhood present in the triad structure. The Ming family name, originally “Hung,” and their color of red were adapted by the triad societies, as well as secret handshakes and codes to avoid detection by the authorities. (Mallory 134-135)

Ultimately, the anti-Qing sentiment would come to fruition in the political cause of Sun Yat-sen nearly two hundred years later. Sun, a revolutionary and himself an affiliate of the San He Hui, was intent on modernizing the backwardness of Qing-ruled China, resistant to Western technological influence. In 1912, with triad support and finance—what Booth describes as an “extension of *guanxi*” (social relations)—Sun’s Revolutionary Alliance took Nanjing, ending the Qing dynasty and establishing the Republic of China. With the new government instated, however, the “historical mission of the Chinese secret societies, which had in any case become increasingly less important to them, had come to an end” (Booth 63). The Triads would always remain criminalized, shifting from “pragmatic patriots” to “criminals running sophisticated syndicates,” riding on the backs of a new China’s economic progress.

In Hong Kong, the Triads established a presence following British occupation in 1842. The reasons for migrating were varied: political refuge, labor opportunities, smuggling opium, and contact with overseas triads to discuss deposal of the Qing government (Chu 14). Membership grew considerably; in the case of the Fuk Yee Hing Society, the Chiu Chow and Hoklo population paid HK \$1 subscription in return for assistance with employment, welfare, and funeral organizing problems. In a 1993 Hong Kong police interview, a triad expert explained:

By that time, many Chiu Chow people came down to Hong Kong to earn a living because life was very hard in their native villages. It usually took them a few days to walk to Hong Kong. On the way, the Chiu Chow people were often robbed by bandit gangs in the mountain areas in the Waichow district [the middle part of the Guangdong province]. Some clansmen found that the bandits would let them go if they were triad members. Thus, many Chiu Chow people joined triad societies for protection before going to Hong Kong.

(qtd in Chu 16)

Triad societies' close relationship with the labor market led to what Chu terms as "triadization," in which labor associations were "forced to organize fighting sections of their own in order to oppose Triad infiltration into their particular spheres" (19), even turning to similar oath and rituals to create a stronger sense of unity. Furthermore, coolie groups were divided by dialect and region, intensifying conflict further. The Societies Ordinance established in 1845 illegalized Triad membership, a law still in effect today (though having evolved through the years). But the need for protection had already filtered into every avenue of commercial life—hawkers, prostitutes, gambling racketeers, restaurant managers, bar owners, and shopkeepers all paid for triad society's services, their strength made reputable through violence. The ever-growing Triads, many founded between 1914 and 1939 (Chu 22), had birthed a characteristic ambiguity that clouds the distinction between business and crime—a quality that still exists today in Hong Kong, with the supposed criminal influences in film, hospitality, and other industries.

Following the Communist takeover of China in 1949, Mao Zedong, fearful of Triad influence, ordered a crackdown on crime—especially regarding opium smuggling. Consequently, many triad members immigrated en masse to Hong Kong. Reputed as the Triad "spiritual home" (Booth 145), the Frangant Harbor was desirable in its judicial freedom separate from the mainland, efficient colonial governance and booming entrepreneurial opportunities. Moreover, Japanese occupation meant that commodities were in short supply, and the Triads were quick to fill the void with black market products (156). Though the police force would successfully quell the rampant crime by taking various anti-triad measures and establishing an Independent Commission Against Corruption in the 1970s, Triad culture had already fully become an integral part of Hong Kong society. Thus solidifies the Triad saga as a nostalgic immigrant story, pursuing dreams of a better life in Hong Kong.

As we shall see, the Triad Dream is a common thematic concern exhibited in the Hong Kong gangster film. Indeed, *A Better Tomorrow* even begins with a dream sequence. Though Triad characters had appeared in movies prior, Nochimson considers John Woo's 1986 film to be the first in which a director "who had been born and/or raised within the postwar migration came of age to speak with a sympathetic, complex voice in the form of the gangster genre" (14). First and foremost, *A Better Tomorrow* is a romantic

action ballad, but it also is an examination of morality within a world of crime, money, and power. The gangster blood brothers of Ho (Lung Ti) and Mark (Chow Yun-fat), relics of a past characterized by thief's honor, are juxtaposed with the villainous Shing (Waise Lee), the young opportunist who assumes Triad leadership after betraying his mentors. The theme itself fittingly parallels Triad history, in the evolution of these societies from secret brotherhoods formed to promote harmonious stability and the Ming cause, to criminal organizations with no apparent goal but self-serving profit—its modern conception merely an empty shell, distorted of its historical purpose. Thus, Woo sets up *A Better Tomorrow* to represent “the loss of chivalric values in a mercenary world” (Stokes 40), colored by the morally debilitating impulses of modern Hong Kong capitalism.

As mentioned previously, the film begins with a dream. Ho envisions Kit, his younger police brother, being shot fatally in an industrial landscape. He then wakes up, drenched in sweat, revealing a menacing gangster tattoo through his shirt's fabric. Though Ho unconsciously fears the death of Kit (Leslie Cheung)—symbolically, the destruction of family and morality—he cannot escape his ingrained Triad identity. The close-up of the protagonist's eye, face dotted with sweat, reflects an existential fear. Ho closes his eye and the screen fades to black as a figurative blindness—just as his dream world was obscured by ominous fog, so is his reality characterized by a criminality that he struggles to reconcile. As for Mark, Martha Nochimson identifies him as giving a “facetious performance of commerce,” combining “the incompatible fragments of Hong Kong materialism with the integrity of the Triad codes” (79). The gangster carries himself with self-awareness and whimsicality—gleefully eating street-sold *cheung fun* (rice noodle rolls) before fleeing from a policeman and comically grinning as he dances through his “office” (a money counterfeiting factory). His nonchalant performance effectively dismisses his criminal activity as petty and even likeable; the iconic image of Mark coolly lighting his cigarette from a burning hundred-dollar bill—itsself merely a counterfeit—reflects his recognition of materialism's void, of its ultimate irrelevance. Thus, Woo attributes the character with layered complexity, Mark affecting a façade of the gangster without sacrificing his moral core.

In truth, Ho and Mark most value their gangster brotherhood. The relationship between the two criminals derives a similar familial intimacy and moral code as

represented in Ho and Kit (tempering Ho both as a brother and as a policeman); indeed, for the isolated immigrant in ancient China, the triad societies were a cultural refuge and offered some semblance of togetherness in a world away from home. When Shing threatens to harm Kit and calls Mark “a dead fish” during a business proposal, Ho angrily responds that “one is my friend, one is my brother,” the parallelism of his statement indicating the equal importance of Triad and familial brotherhood.

The main loci of morality become Mark and Ho themselves, the duo articulating the traditional Triad ideal of mutual co-dependence and utmost loyalty. When Ho is attacked during a business deal in Taiwan by men offered double pay by Shing, such disloyalty and materialist ambition offers a negative standard which Ho and Mark must counter. Symbolically, Shing’s planned murder of his own Triad brother and superior is betrayal of the highest grievance. His crime, compared to the lighthearted tone of Mark’s, anticipates an inevitable conflict of ideologies. The next time we see the villain, he has embraced his materialist obsession—donning sunglasses and a glamorous white coat. Mark, conversely, has been relegated to the lowly role of a windshield wiper—wearing scraggly workman clothing and a metal leg brace as the result of a gun injury he suffered when attempting to enact revenge on the Taiwanese traitor Xiao Wang. Here, the underworld hierarchy discussed earlier is revealed as farce, determined not by any forms of piety or allegiance, but only by money and political backstabbing. The morally deficient characters upset the Triad notion of brotherhood with their selfish individualism—not only by Shing, but also by Kit in his loathing for his brother’s criminal affiliation, which keeps him from promotion.

Accordingly, redemption becomes the heroic quest of the protagonists; the film’s literal Chinese title, “A Hero’s True Colors,” speaks to this utmost aspiration to righteous value. In a quiet scene before they decide to confront Shing, Mark and Ho look over the electric cityscape at night, and Mark says: “I never realized Hong Kong looked so good at night. Like most things, it won’t last. That’s for sure...I’m still alive. I don’t want to lose my whole life. I want to take back the thing I lost. Did you fight for a chance?” We get the feeling that “the thing [Mark] lost” is not simply a life of riches, but a more transcendent system of value that has been forgotten in the face of a quickly modernizing Hong Kong. He desires wholesomeness, a recapturing of moral substance which has been

lost in a modern criminal existence distorted by money. Such is nostalgically allergorized by the city itself, historically an open trading settlement and a haven for the original Triad refugees in search of a better life, now turned to a commercial city of towering skyscrapers, facing an impending and uncertain future as part of China in 1997. Woo himself in an interview contends: “Hong Kong people work together to make Hong Kong successful. I just didn’t want to see it change...No matter what happens, human dignity should not change” (qtd in Fang 118).

Unfortunately, violence is the only way these criminals know—and the only way by which Mark and Ho can restore lost honor. Here, John Woo’s showmanship of kinetic action comes to bear. When Mark exacts *xie dou* against Xiao Wang, his whimsical, self-mocking expression quickly transforms to one of somber determination as he fires his dual guns around him, the film cutting between his quick shooting and the slow-motion deaths of his victims. This cinematic trope, characteristic of Woo’s so-called “heroic bloodshed” style captures Mark’s emotional intensity and visually softens the physical brutality of bloodshed. His action sequences often referred to as “balletic,” Woo choreographs an almost-romantic dance of death which glorifies not the violence itself, but the noble intention of his hero: in this case, Mark’s duty to redeem his imprisoned and nearly-murdered friend (Vincent, “Flesh”). Indeed, Woo describes his spiritual intentions behind the final shootout between Shing’s cronies and Ho, Mark, and Kit, relating the scene to *Bonnie and Clyde*:

In the end, the killing of Bonnie and Clyde [from the American 1967 crime film *Bonnie and Clyde*], he builds it up with serenity...It seems like something is going to happen but he did not foreshadow anything. You see all the beauty of life...They feel the end but they also feel eternity. The duality of knowing they are going to die but also knowing that their love will live on afterward. That is the romance that makes me hold my breath. Then suddenly they get shot. It really contrasts the ugliness of the killing with the beauty that preceded it...[creating] a spiritual tableau...The end scene in *A Better Tomorrow*—Chow Yun-fat’s death scene—I used the same feeling. Before he gets shot he is screaming at Leslie Cheung. Then he gets shot in the head and he is so still. He looks back with fear and regret. Then Chow Yun-fat pushes Leslie away and takes all the bullets.

(qtd in Fang 115-116)

In such an elegantly visualized sacrifice, simultaneously beautiful and brutal, Woo perfectly embodies the historical paradox of the noble Triad—characterized by murder and death, but also by an undying loyalty to those he loves. Mark’s death stuns the embittered Kit into realizing his brotherly obligation; once Kit offers his pistol to Ho for Shing’s murder, he symbolically purges the familial distance that had entered their lives, restoring brotherhood and truly entering his role as a figure of justice. “The road you are walking is the right one,” Ho tells his brother, as he willingly handcuffs himself to his arm, realizing morality cannot truly co-exist with criminality.

Ultimately in *A Better Tomorrow*, Mark and Ho’s criminal past—which leads to the death of Ho’s father and Mark himself—implies that the modern incarnation of Triad society cannot support a moral center. Both family and figurative “brother” are casualties of criminality. Only the self-preserving individual reigns supreme in today’s dog-eat-dog world. Any notion of Triad brotherhood has been sundered. However, there also exists an overwhelming romantic impulse in the gangster’s battle to regain lost ideals—a heroic homage to the original Triad creed. When Mark dies in the final shootout, according to the optimistic Woo, “it served his code of honor. That is what we are here for” (qtd in Fang 118).

Following *A Better Tomorrow*’s immense box-office success, such emotionally stirring depictions of gangster brotherhood in Hong Kong film became common recipe. Johnnie To’s 1999 film, *The Mission*, uniquely twists what had become genre convention, tracking how a group of gangsters come to form a brotherhood, instead of assuming its coherence from the very beginning. Five skilled but disparate ex-gangsters—hairdresser Curtis (Anthony Wong), bar-owner Roy (Francis Ng) and his underling Shin (Jackie Lui), pimp Mike (Roy Cheung), and loiterer James (Lam Suet)—are called upon to protect the Triad boss, Lung (Ko Hung). The men hardly see eye-to-eye, nor are they in any sense a coordinated unit. Following in Woo’s footsteps, To examines the romantic notion of *yi* through this film, though he reminds his audience that in such an underworld of life and death, such brotherhood is earned, and not automatically assumed.

In the beginning of the film, the five men are depicted performing their present jobs, insignificant cogs of a city characterized by flashing arcade lights, lecherous

businessmen and prostitutes, bar fights and passing cars. The scene introduces the thematic pattern of the loneliness and isolation in which these characters exist, To often employing both foreground and background in distancing the gangsters—together, but also always apart. This is most evident in the scene in which they all first gather for the first time, in Boss Lung's conference room. Shin, the newbie unaware of the Triad hierarchy, enters jovially, greeting both Curtis and James, mentioning that he works for Roy. The two are silent, James eating peanuts with a quiet nonchalance (vastly different to the casual pretense of Mark in *A Better Tomorrow*, in that any overtly emotional depiction of comradeship is eschewed), revealing that piety and alliance in brotherhood is to be earned, not assumed. Though Roy, a more well-regarded gangster, enters the room and is greeted respectfully by Shin, he only exchanges nods with Curtis and James. Even Mike, though friendly in his entrance, offering cigarettes to the other gangsters, assumes a stone-cold gangster cool when he asks Curtis to add weight to his pistol, his face darkly serious and suggestive of his killer abilities. Each character, then, with perhaps the exception of the naïve Shin, exhibits a brooding intensity of guarded self. With this foundation, the film becomes what critics Nochimson and Robert Cashill call “a passionate exploration beneath the surface of mobster appearances” (“One”), in examining the fostering of an invisible Triad pact beneath the reserved individualism of the lonesome gangster.

Initially, this silent professionalism manifests itself in the technical precision in which the men prepare their mission. To spends a scene elaborating its intricacies: Mike equips Boss Lung with a bulletproof vest; Curtis oversees the installation of security cameras; a split-screen follows James, the gun-expert, cleaning and assembling the pistols with ease; Shin practices his driving ability. Despite these obvious qualifications, however, the five bodyguards do not experience the necessary cohesion of a team—Roy, most notably, is repeatedly on the phone dealing with Rat, a seedy character disrupting his bar business. Both symbolically and literally, the lack of brotherhood leads to the consequence of a near-successful assassination, during which Lung is shot after exiting a building and the bodyguards are unsuccessful in chasing down the shooters. There isn't any sense of tactical unity; Roy hesitates at Curtis' order to start the car, then disobeys his command to not pursue an assailant, and Shin dashes out wildly in order to draw out the

sharpshooters.

Thus, the film, first void of relationships between the Triad protagonists, anticipates the gangsters' journey towards brotherhood. As Nochimson remarks in *Dying to Belong*, "To deliberately uses a seemingly chance association among gangsters to reveal more clearly the coherence of the Hong Kong Triad underworld that inheres within even the most disparate seeming conditions" (172). Indeed, in reaching out to his underlings, Lung asks them in the morning if they want coffee or tea, saying, "If I really had died last night, it would be my own bad luck. It's not your fault. If you're in my position, you've prepared yourself for many things." The Triad boss thus simultaneously clarifies the underworld hierarchy in his role as 大佬 (*dai lo*, big brother), and also performs a romantic act of patriarchal kindness, offering the first honest moment of silent connection between the gangsters, whose expressions clearly relay their guilt of failure. Moreover, Curtis arranges for Rat's murder, thereby clearing the group of their distractions and allowing for a true comradeship to be fostered among them. In a symbolic moment at Boss Lung's poolside (the scene previously set here being a fight between Curtis and Roy), Curtis and Roy cheer bottles, and Curtis' cigarette comedically explodes from Shin's prank of placing a match inside. Both the "system of obligation" (Curtis' murder of Rat, in compensation of leaving Roy behind during the first shootout) and the "acts of camaraderie" resolve the psychological isolation of the five Triad members, making solidarity possible (Teo).

Such brotherhood comes to full expression most famously in the mall shootout scene, during which the action—contrary to the lone ranger depictions in *A Better Tomorrow*—assumes a static quality. The Zen stillness with which each gangster stays in their own defensive position, a piece of the "clockwork" (Nochimson 72), is a romantic cinematic echo of the quasi-religious Triad ideals. In a translated interview with Henry Sheehan, To walks through the scene:

First of all, he wanted to present the characters in that scene as dancers, as almost a stage...on a more dramatic level, a thematic level, what he wanted to communicate is really that the five bodyguards, the killers, they each had their position to guard. That's their duty, that's what (sic) they're not moving. That's the story...Because each one, by holding his own ground, made up the whole for the entire team.

Accordingly, as the coordinated bodyguards hide behind the geometric walls and corners of the mall—a blatant symbol of capitalism and its reality—they are ironically transported to an unspoken, invisible realm of unified power. This intimate alliance, a fulfillment of their “duty” as assigned Triads, is in transcendent opposition to the “mechanized modernism” (Nochimson 175) of the world in which they operate. Compare these loyal and finally cooperative bodyguards to Fat Cheung, the revealed traitor, whom borrows money from Lung and gambles it away in Macau, another symbol of capitalism turned reckless.

Ultimately, this wholly developed notion of comradeship, furthered by their lighthearted joking and even a secret game of soccer with a paper ball, is tested in the dramatic twist of Shin’s affair with Lung’s wife. Curtis is assigned to execute the two, and Roy, whom himself had been tempted by the wife’s advances, feels protective of his subordinate. Brotherhood, derived originally for the sake of the mission’s success, is elevated to a true spiritual obligation beyond any professional requirement. The group, during a final meal before the supposed death of Shin, agrees without speaking upon a faked killing. As their guns point at each other in the restaurant, the audience observes that Curtis’ gun is in fact a harmless race starter’s pistol and perhaps may also remember that Shin owns a bulletproof vest. We, too, are implicated in the brotherly understanding, having witnessed their journey to friendship and indulged in their emotional connection. To thereby illustrates the true Triad code as one that manifests itself beneath the surface, an invisible power of *yi* which transcends all else.

The overtly romantic stylization of *The Mission* is turned on its head in To’s 2005 and 2006 realistic political examinations, *Election* and *Triad Election*, in which death arrives from all corners—friend and foe—and the underworld indeed is vacant of any original Triad honor. This paper will examine the films as a whole, as they work as a thematic progression, discussing the corruptive nature of Triad power and the ambiguity of justice.

Inserted in both films are chapters in which the history of the Triads is outlined, visualized in a stage-like setting separate from the realism of the film as to suggest

performance, and thus fantasy and pretense. Black Ren, a Triad officer briefly depicted in the beginning of the second film and, notably, a mainland Chinese character speaking in Mandarin, reminds his invisible audience of fellow Triad members of their history:

We all came to Hong Kong looking for a better life. To succeed and prosper, we must live in harmony. In times of conflict, we must negotiate before resorting to force. We should adopt the rules of the Hung society. United under its philosophy, the brotherhood shall live together peacefully. The Hung brotherhood must cherish unity. Because of this, all societies will add the character *he* (harmony) at the beginning of their names.

(Triad Election)

During this introduction, *To* includes archival images of Chinese men in pigtailed and British officers, reminding us of Han subjugation by the Qing Dynasty up until the early 20th century, and Hong Kong's unique place as a colony offering freedom to such men. Crucially, once Black Ren mentions the word "harmony", the screen begins to fade to red, dually symbolic of the auspicious Ming color and bloodshed. Indeed, it is amidst this historical backdrop of blood-oath-honor that dishonor is brutally displayed. In one poignant moment, Kun, a henchman assigned to recover the dragon baton of the elected Wo Shing Society chairman, beats Big Head, another gangster who has retrieved it for another chairman candidate. As he brutally bashes the man with a large log, Big Head ironically recites the oaths of a Triad initiate, saying: "I shall never betray my sworn brothers...if I break this oath, I will be struck down by five thunderbolts." This crude juxtaposition of intra-society violence with useless statements of loyalty and honor epitomizes the empty promises of Triad history. The characters, often lit in a chiaroscuro suggestive of brooding malevolence, operate in this context.

In the first film, *To* pits Lok (Simon Yam), an apparently calm and fair gangster, against Big D (Tony Leung Ka-fai), a hotheaded moneyman. Whereas Lok earns the praise of his fellow Triad members by treating his brothers with respect, Big D buys votes and attacks those who oppose him, capturing several Society elders and rolling them down a giant hill in wooden crates—an act of great symbolic disrespect. As the elders—the wise electorate of the Society—mention in both films, "If you could obtain the position with money, then there's no need for this." Big D, and the gangster businessman

Jimmy in the sequel, offend the tradition of hierarchy, their money upsetting the order. Thus, the vast difference between the two ostensibly sets up the film as a morality play—a force of moral value as aspired to historically against a force of modern capitalism, looking to overturn such a code of honor. The police, aware of the Triads' stability as a necessity for Hong Kong society's stability, are impotent in their inability to mediate the conflict.

Once Lok convinces Big D, who had threatened to split and create a new Society, to defer chairmanship to him and cooperate, we are initially led to believe that the film has symbolically resolved the tension between traditionalism and modernity, morality and pragmatism. The shocking reversal at *Election's* conclusion, in which Lok violently smashes in Big D's head with a rock and strangles his opponent's wife with fishing cord—and all in front of his own son, therefore implies that the familial brotherhood (both represented by his son and Big D) is a farce in the Triads' modern conception. Similarly, Jimmy's (Louis Koo) gruesome murder of Big D's underlings in the second film—hacking off his limbs and processing them through a grinder—completely upset earlier depictions of noble violence. The true human impulse in the gangland is not in fact the sharing and companionship of brothers, but the greed and survival of the individual.

To makes clear that the so-called morality of the Triads is inherently impossible, as their aspirations of harmony will always be linked to financial success, and thus beget violence. In *Triad Election*, Jimmy attempts to distance himself from the underworld, his booming VCD business an attempt to legitimize himself and leave behind criminality. He is wholly a product of the modern times, attending lectures at a university and negotiating with corrupt Chinese officials to obtain a building permit for his plans of erecting a shopping center. In one scene, Uncle Teng, the leading elder, attempts to court him into running for Chairman, Jimmy vehemently refuses: "I only joined for protection... I just want to make money." In response, Teng angrily cries, "You still have a duty to your society." Jimmy's simple rationalization for his own criminal status—though also implied, the Triads' existence as a whole—is an affront to Teng, a member of the old school, and his belief in the honorable duty of a gangster. Symbolically, Teng is murdered by Lok, kicked down a spiraling staircase, his substantive values unable to exist in this contemporary condition.

Once the Chinese Security Bureau intercedes, the static politics of the Wo Shing Society—indeed, the entire condition of the modern Hong Kong gangster—radically change. As mentioned by Kwai-Cheung Lo, the “ethnic front” of a post-handover Hong Kong has evolved, in the influx of mainland immigrants and “Hong Kong Chinese... (un-)consciously positing themselves or being positioned as ‘ethnic minority’ in relation to China.” The cultural threat of the mainland further dilutes the already confused modern Triad culture, void of its historical purpose. Furthermore, Jimmy’s barring by the section chief from conducting business (unless, of course, he has the political advantage of a Triad chairman) represents the loss of control and again, the inevitable Chinese link between crime and success. In a reversal of the infamous ending scene of *The Godfather*, the door is opened on Jimmy, as he is escorted by guards out of the sacred room of true power (the government). The nostalgia of a Han China is ironically replaced by a fear for it; the parallelism in Jimmy’s relationship with the CSB to the Triad monk founders called upon by the Qing rulers for help before being tossed away is clear. Jimmy laments his powerlessness, masked by the false power of chairmanship, in the concluding scene of *Triad Election* as he holds his wife in his new house on the Mainland. She tells him, “I’ll join you in a moment,” and the final shot settles on him, alone and looking out onto the Chinese wilderness, contemplating the uncertain future.

Ultimately, though in diversely romantic and starkly realistic forms, the four Triad films discussed here are vehicles by which filmmakers discuss history—the coming of modern times, and the going of traditional times. As Johnnie To himself voices, “I think Triad society is a thing of the past, outdated.” Whether it’s Mark’s attempt to recapture a lost time of wealth and sincere brotherhood, or the five bodyguards’ spiritual bond within a material world, or Jimmy’s reduction to complete violence, there is a thread of nostalgia in all these films, in examining a morality—or lack of it—that is stifled by the ethnically confused and consumerist world Hong Kong has become. Such is the unforeseen realization of the Triad Dream.

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