

Cannibalism and Gang Involved in the Cinematic Lives of Asian Gangsters

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ABSTRACT

Previous works focusing on Asian organized crime groups have examined the history, structure, function, and the extent of their legal and illegal business enterprises. While credible, such a line of inquiry omits crucial information on the source and reasoning behind membership and affiliation for members in Asian organized crime groups, such as the “Jok-Pok”, Triads, and Yakuza. Due to the secretive nature of those organized crime groups, such an omission leaves a major gap in the understanding as to why Asian youths join gangs. This paper examines the prevailing characteristics of membership and affiliation within Asian gangs by analysing Asian gangsters in Asian (Chinese, Japanese, Korean) cinema. Results indicate that the lure of economic benefits, exposure to gang life from within one’s family and lack of opportunities to achieve legitimate goals constitute the three most pervasive themes that define membership within Asian gangs as represented in popular cinema.

Keywords: Asian gangs; Asian criminology; Desistance; Asian cinema

INTRODUCTION

Research has revealed several reasons why individuals join organized crime syndicates and gangs. The findings from this body of research indicate that the determinants of organized crime group/gang membership can be collated into several categories: access to social and economic capital; loyalty and camaraderie; sense of protection; increase in social status; higher income and wages; involvement in drug subculture (i.e., use and trafficking) and; the influence of women and family. Despite such knowledge, a question remains as to why youths in Asia join gangs. That is, little is known about the characteristics and motivation of Asian youths who join gangs. It behoves us to rectify this gap in the literature by exploring the causes of gang membership in Asian countries. This paper attempts to understand why Asian youths join gangs by examining one of the most accessible and pervasive source of exposure to gangs in Asia: films.

The popularity and influence of Hong Kong and Japanese cinema across the world is nothing new. One of the leading figures in the Hong Kong film industry, John Woo, successfully brought his technique and style to Hollywood, creating several blockbuster hits. While classic Hong Kong films such as *Hardboiled*, *The Killer*, and *A Better Tomorrow I, II, III* are well known by film critics and aficionados alike, much less is known about the recent wave of films in this genre in the three major film producing Asian countries such as China, Japan, and South Korea.

Some scholars have argued that the proliferation of gangster films in countries such as China (Hong Kong), South Korea and Japan has perpetuated fear and facilitated the tolerance for organized crime groups by empowering organized crime groups to thrive on this fear. As a result, this fear mongering has allowed crime groups to expand and conduct their activities without disruption. Some have also lamented that Asian organized crime groups are exceedingly secretive and difficult to infiltrate, and have had to rely on journalistic accounts and government sources to study gangs in Asia. Such a perspective, while accurate, overlooks a major source of data about gangs in Asia: films. Consequently, this paper utilizes Asian gangster films as data to discern how public attitudes toward and about gangs may be shaped by the consumption of such films. Although the present study concentrates on a biased sample of Asian gangster films, the overall findings provide valuable insight into the reasons why adolescents may decide to become gangsters.

For the purposes of this paper, an “organized crime group” is defined as “a structured group of three or more persons existing for a period of time acting in concert with the aim of committing one or more serious crimes or offenses...in order to obtain, directly or indirectly, a financial or other material benefit”. We also use the broad term “Asian gangsters” to refer to organized crime groups and their members who engage in offenses for financial, material, and other gains from the respective countries of China (Hong Kong) Japan, and South Korea.

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There are several reasons why an examination of Asian gangsters in cinema is warranted. First, there is an absence of primary research that examines the multitude of intervening factors that compel an individual to join Asian gangs. By utilizing Asian gangster films as data, we explore one potential source of allure for youths to join gangs, as some journalistic accounts have implied. Second, there is a paucity of methodological diversity in the gang literature, particularly for Asian gangs. Previous studies have primarily relied on interviews, surveys, and official documents to establish correlational factors associated with gang membership. Popular representations of crime and “criminals” are overlooked as a potentially rich source of data about the social and emotional contexts behind why adolescents may join gangs. The use of films constitutes one way that the methodological inertia can be remedied in the gang literature, particularly in the study of Asian gangs.

Third, assessing the accuracy of the determinants of gang membership in cinema is a topic that has not been addressed by previous research. Determining the veracity of why youths may join gangs in Asia, as represented in popular culture, may allow policymakers and social service professionals to critically intervene in the lives of at-risk youths who may be contemplating joining gangs. As some have noted, the growing number of films about

Asian gangsters may promulgate fear amongst the viewing public by sensationalizing their dangerousness and threat to society.

Studying Asian gangs in the context of Asian films may be important for another reason. Representations of Asians in Western (i.e., Hollywood) films are imbued with racist and sexist undertones, portraying Asian men as asexual creatures, as undesirable objects of female sexual desire, unworthy and incapable of sexual and emotional intimacy by virtue of their race and their race alone. Or when Asian men have appeared in “masculine” roles, they have still been relegated as nonsexual martial artists who speak with a comedic Asian accent, or perverts and criminals. Asian women have usually been cast as the exotic, enigmatic, and sexualized “dragon lady” of the Orient, constructed as the object of European males’ desire, as well the desiring beings of European men. Through a critical examination of Asian gangsters in cinema, we wanted to understand why Asian youths might want to join gangs, as told by the Chinese, Japanese, and Korean–Asian–screenwriters and directors, through films that were intended for those respective audiences. For such reasons, it behooves us to examine why youths join gangs in Asian gangster cinema. Through a critical examination of portrayals of Asian gangsters in cinema, we attempt to contribute to the literature in the following areas: (1) Asian criminology (2) Asian gang studies (3) Asian cinema studies.