# Chinese Gangs-Why Do Chinese Immigrants and Chinese Americans Join Them


(credit to An Rong Xu of The New York Times)

## Introduction

The research question for this project is why Chinese Americans and Chinese immigrants choose to join a gang when empirical evidence from media and social narratives indicates that gang members can only end up in prison or dead on the street. Everyone has their own answer to this question. In this project, I aimed to answer this question from the perspective of several ex-gang members in New York City. Through interviewing them, it became clear that the motives to join a gang are

influenced and consolidated by factors including socioeconomic status, the glorification of gang culture in modern society, and a sense of belonging and identity.

**History of the Chinese Gang**

The secret society has existed in mainland China for centuries, dating back to the early Qing Dynasty. It has always been a symbol of brotherhood, pride, power, mutual appreciation, and reversing the oppression that government places on its citizens. However, as a secret society developed and expanded its competence and influence, its' main goal transformed from all the positive things to self-preservation, degeneration, and corruption, in which monetary resources and power are gained at the cost of law-abiding people in the society. Today, the term secret society has lost its relevance; instead, it has evolved into criminal organizations called gangs and mafia.

The same developmental trajectory is observed in the United States as well. Chinese first set foot in the US in the early 19th century. Many of them were being brought to this country as workers helping to build the railroad. As time went by, some of the Chinese workers decided to relocate their lives to America, opening up restaurants and laundry businesses mainly in states like California, Washington, and New York. However, life in this new country was far from peaceful for these first-generation Chinese immigrants. Not only did they work for wages that were substantially lower than those of their white counterparts, but they also experienced racism and discrimination on a daily basis. It is obvious that racism and discrimination were common both on an individual and a national level. The Chinese

Exclusion Act signed by Chester A. Arthur is a major manifestation of how Chinese people were viewed and treated in the United States at the time. In response, some of the Chinese men in the United States formed their own organizations, which are called 'Tong', in an effort to help first-generation Chinese immigrants prosper in the US and to protect Chinese immigrants from violence and injustice committed towards them. Tongs quickly turned into criminal organizations in the 20th century with a large influx of Chinese immigrants into the US.

On the surface, tongs, also known as Chinese benevolent associations, are community centers with the goal of helping Chinese immigrants, but essentially they were just fronts of criminal organizations that terrorized Chinatown across the United States. Some of the well-known gangs in the 20th century are Ghost Shadows, a gang that was active in the late 20th century in New York City, Flying Dragon, a rival gang of the Ghost Shadows, and Wah Ching, a street gang that operates mainly in the state of California. Gangs like these three did everything they could to make quick money. Racketeering, burglary, money laundering, robbery, narcotics dealing, prostitution, gambling, extortion, loan sharking, and human smuggling—you name it.

China has always been a country that is isolated and reserved. Chinese immigrants carried these traits to the US as well by residing in areas where there were a lot of Chinese. This is how Chinatown came about in the 19th and 20th centuries. Back then, Chinatown was a goldmine. Most Chinese people kept cash at home because they did not trust banks. Besides, victims of certain crimes chose to keep to themselves out of fear of retaliation and distrust towards the police. These traits

provided the perfect soil for tongs and gangs to develop and expand in the 20th century. “When I joined Ghost Shadow in 1994, I was excited. I liked the idea of putting a tattoo on my arm and making easy money with my fists and strap,” Peter chuckled. “But I wouldn’t choose the same path if given one more chance. It just isn’t worth the price you pay.” There was no response; it was a moment of rumination and relief mixed with regret.

**How Peter Became the Gatekeeper For This Project**

The first time that I saw Peter (the pseudonym of the gatekeeper of this project) was at JFK airport. A long-distance flight took a toll on my circadian rhythm, but seeing a new land, new people of various races and ethnicities, and a new language everywhere undoubtedly gave me a sense of refreshment and thrill. Getting off a long flight from China to the USA, I rushed outside to light up a cigarette once I got my suitcase from the conveyor belt of JFK airport. Peter was just standing outside of the terminal that I exited a moment ago, and he quickly approached me with a hospitable smile, asking, “Can I bum a boug?”. Not knowing what the words bum and boug meant, I asked him, “What?” with confusion. Peter then said, “Well, I mean do you have an extra cigarette?” Without any hesitation, I said yes, and handed him a cigarette. After taking a long drag, Peter asked me, “Where are you from bro? By the way thanks for the cigarette.” I responded, “I’m from China.” Peter nodded. “That’s what I thought; there are Chinese on the cigarette.” Peter then introduced himself. With race being one of our only commonalities, we exchanged phone numbers. “It’s hard to come by Chinese cigarettes in New York, but I’ve got the connection; text me

if you need any Chinese cigarettes." Peter said. I responded, “Okay, will definitely text you when I need any. I only brought a carton with me, and with my pace of smoking I’ll run out in about two weeks.” Peter proposed to me that we should hang out sometime in the future before taking the last drag of the cigarette and disappearing in the crowd.

I smoked the whole carton in less than two weeks. So I texted Peter, asking if I could pick up some Chinese cigarettes from him. He responded quickly and delivered the cigarette to me. The price was a little bit expensive, but considering smuggling cigarettes involves risk, I did not make any bargains. After that, I started to see Peter once every two weeks, and strangely, we developed a bond. Peter is a Chinese American. His parents are first-generation Chinese who came from Hong Kong in the 70s. He was curious about my college life, and I was curious about his lifestyle. As an international student, one of the objectives of studying in the US is to meet more Americans, which in turn can improve my English and cultural competence towards this country. With this goal in mind, I often try to go out of my way to speak with locals as much as possible. Peter seemed like a perfect figure to whom I could talk.

It was not until later in the year that Peter texted me, inviting me to his place in NYC. It was a large, three-bedroom apartment in Manhattan, just two blocks away from Canal Street. When I arrived at the location Peter had texted me, Peter was outside smoking a cigarette. Same as before, he approached me with a genuine smile. “What’s up bro, how you holding up.” I gave him a big smile and a what’s up. Peter then led me upstairs into his apartment. Inside the living room was a bunch of

paraphernalia placed on the table. A grinder, two water pipes, some cigar wraps, several one-dollar bills, credit cards, syringes, needles, and a plate. I looked at my watch; it was thirty minutes past 5 p.m. Okay, so the earliest time to finish my observation and interview would be ten thirty that night. In the next hour, Peter and I had a back-and-forth conversation. I expressed that I was interested in his experience and lifestyle as a former gang member of the Ghost Shadow and wanted to interview him and his friends for my final project. Peter agreed and told me that I should go to a safe house with him so that I could interview both him and his friends, who were almost all former gang members.

It took me and Peter about 30 minutes to drive from his place to this so-called 'safehouse'. The safe house was located in a suburban area. The outlook of it resembles a warehouse, but inside it looked like a house with a number of bedrooms, bathrooms, a kitchen, a living room, and a small area for exercising. Peter told me that it could accommodate about thirty to forty guys at a time. Upon entering the room, I saw several guys lifting weights and working on a punching bag, and there were about five or six people watching movies in the living room. They were all Chinese. Peter introduced me to the crowd, and everyone waved to me or nodded their head at me. I was relieved to know that they acknowledged and accepted my arrival and presence. When Peter explained that I am a college student who is trying to gather information on a project, several people started to laugh. A bald guy in his thirties shouted, "Why would you want anything to do with us degenerates?" This was the question that hit me hard because it seems like some of them have internalized that sense of inferiority

as gang members who are posing a threat to the well-being of law-abiding citizens and society at large. But it could just be his unique way of making a joke.

Another thirty minutes passed, and Peter and his friends started to feel the munchies from all the weed they had consumed that evening. While I tried to learn the names of everyone in the safe house, Peter went to the kitchen and returned with God knows how many packs of ramen noodles and a big jar of protein powder. The guys working out in the exercise area finished their routine and came to the living room after taking a quick shower. Ramen noodles are basically cash in prison. Everyone in the safe house loved ramen noodles because it was what some of them ate on a regular basis in prison. The guys who just worked out also took protein powder to help themselves recover and build more muscle. “You gotta be prepared for war; this is our tradition," one of Peter's friends told me later when I asked about their lifestyle.

**Low Socioeconomic Status As a Reason to Joining a Gang**

Low socioeconomic status and poverty are associated with joining a gang, committing crimes, and getting incarcerated (Kyriacou et al., 1999). Joining a gang and making easy money are far more tempting than getting a blue-collar job and climbing the socioeconomic ladder step by step because narcotics dealing, gunrunning, gambling, prostitution, and other crimes have far higher profit margins compared to getting a nine-to-five job and working your way through the social hierarchy. Gangs see money and power as their only objectives. The young wannabes also share this vision with gang members. While it is not essentially ‘wrong’ for anyone to set

earning money as his sole goal, gang members tend to earn their income at the cost of innocent people's safety, well-being, and sometimes even death.

Peter's parents came to the United States from Hong Kong illegally in the 1970s, when Hong Kong was still under the reign of the British government. The normal route that most of the illegal Chinese immigrants went through at the time was to find a smuggler, also known as'snakehead', pay half of the fee of smuggling, and get on a boat that would take them to either Canada or Mexico. From there, they would cross the border, making their way to Chinatown in New York or California. The other half of the smuggling fee will be paid after they successfully arrive in Chinatown. Ironically, the snakeheads usually accepted monthly payments because they knew how hard it was for illegal Chinese immigrants to make 15,000 dollars, which is half the amount of the smuggling fee.

Peter's family was living on the edge of poverty, and being unable to find jobs that paid above the minimum wage forced Peter's parents to work as many as three jobs in the Chinese restaurant, laundry business, and warehouse below the minimum wage. However, they did not regret their decision of coming to the United States. The worst condition in the US was still better than the best condition in China back then. After paying off the smuggling fee and establishing their own business in Chinatown, they produced Peter. Peter was a rebellious child. "My parents were rarely home. I had a lot of free time hanging out with my friends. That's how I got into Ghost Shadows." In the 80s and 90s, the Ghost Shadows had a constant war with the Flying Dragon. The Ghost Shadows needed manpower because they were heavily

outnumbered by the Flying Dragons. As a result, the Ghost Shadows started to hire Chinese teenagers from middle school and high school in NYC. Peter was only 15 years old when he joined the Ghost Shadows. “I stopped asking for money from my parents, and sometimes I would even help them to pay the utilities.” Peter recalled. “There is a major difference between Asian gangs and gangs of other ethnic backgrounds. For Latinos and Blacks, they usually gangbang during the day and go home at night. But if you join an Asian gang, you are gone, you go live with them," said Peter. In the beginning, it seemed like joining the Ghost Shadows was a decision that brought Peter money and many other pleasurable things, such as drugs and sex, but Peter’s criminal career soon came to a halt.

Just two months after the initiation ceremony, Peter caught his first case by taking a gun to the school and shooting a kid in the leg. “All I remember is that Dai Lo (Chinese name for leader) gave me a gun and told me to make a statement at my school by shooting a Flying Dragon member who was in the same class with me.” Peter did what Dai Lo told him to do. This action landed him in juvenile hall. After getting out of the juvenile hall, Peter got promoted from a street soldier to the enforcer of the Ghost Shadows. Within a year, Peter was knee-deep into drug trafficking, prostitution, and gambling.

**Sense of Belonging and Identity**

The sense of belonging and identity is a rudimentary human motivation that humans seek to find and maintain on a regular basis (Baumeister& Leary, 1995). Being socially rejected elicits a neurological response that resembles physical pain

(Eisenberger et al., 2004). Throughout American history, rejection has been a central theme in which people of certain racial and ethnic backgrounds are constantly being rejected and denied certain legal rights and access to social services. Some of the quintessential examples of rejection in America include but are not limited to school segregation, healthcare access denial, and police brutality. Race, class, nationality, and gender are the primary factors influencing the dynamics and power balance within which society functions and operates. In the context of this ethnography, it is important for anyone to know that first-generation Chinese immigrants had to seek a sense of belonging and identity to offset the rejection they faced in the US. It is a basic and biological drive for people to seek to belong. Some Chinese chose to put up with the racism, discrimination, and violence committed by other races in the US, while others chose to solve it by taking matters into their own hands. It is basically how tongs and gangs started.

In the 20th century, Chinese immigrant communities largely remained an isolated racial group that was marginalized by mainstream American culture. Terms like 'Yellow peril' and 'Yellow fever' represent how Americans of European descent viewed Chinese immigrants at the time. Not only Chinese immigrants and Chinese Americans were looked down upon by many Americans of European descent, but discrimination also existed within the Chinese community, where American-born Chinese held prejudice against newly-arrived Chinese immigrants, whom American-born Chinese called 'Fobs' (Fresh off the boat).

Unlike other Asian gangs, Chinese gangs like Ghost Shadows are steeped in Chinese tradition. Initiates must perform ritual acts in which they become blood brothers, swear 36 oaths of loyalty and secrecy, and pass through a symbolic gateway to be reborn as a Ghost Shadows gang member. Steven, one of Peter's friends, said, "Ghost Shadows was my second home. Dai Lo gave me food to eat, a place to live, money, drugs, and brothers. I couldn't ask for more. It was like living in a dream, at least that's what it meant to my younger self when I first joined." Steven continued: "Imagine this, you come to this country, and you barely speak any English. You dress differently, you talk differently, and you act differently than the mass majority in this country. What in the world could make you feel that you belong to this country?"

Gangs like Ghost Shadows provided a sense of belonging and identity for Chinese immigrants and Chinese Americans. Interestingly, Chinese gangs have their own hierarchical structure, just like many criminal organizations around the world. The leader of the gang is 'Dai Lo' (Cantonese for the word 'big brother'), and under Dai Lo are the left-hand, who is responsible for the operation of the whole gang, and the right-hand, the enforcer as well as the recruiter. Under the left-hand and right-hand men are street soldiers and money managers. Ghost Shadows was disciplined as well. Many gang members have experienced incarceration while being gang members. They took what they learned in prison and applied it to the gang. Working out every day was a must for everyone in the gang, and Ghost Shadows also had to follow a set of rules (36 oaths of loyalty and secrecy). Crimes against children are prohibited; betraying the gang means you are a dead man walking; cooperating

with the police automatically puts you on a hit list, etc. All of these rules and disciplines gave gang members a sense of belonging and identity. And most of all, joining a gang means that you have people supporting you and protecting you, and if you get bullied or picked on by outsiders of the gang, your fellow gang members will do whatever is necessary to free you from getting bullied and picked on.

**Glorification of Violence and Gang Culture**

Since the 20th century, gang culture and violence have been glorified to a great extent. Movies like 'The Godfather' and gangster rap insofar contribute to this phenomenon of gang culture glorification. When asked about his early contact with gangster rap, Steven said: "When I first listened to the songs by N.W.A., I thought it was so cool. I wanted that lifestyle, I wanted to be the best gangster and fighter. I wanted to be feared and respected."

Research findings have been constantly suggesting that gang membership is associated with a wide range of negative health and social outcomes. Those who join a gang in adolescence, compared to those who do not, have poorer outcomes in terms of higher rates of self-reported crime, receipt of illegal income, incarceration, drug abuse or dependence, poor general health, welfare receipt, and lower rates of high school graduation (Gilman et al., 2014). Such poor outcomes have virtually never been brought up in gangster raps.

The gangster mentality worships risk-taking behaviors, drugs, violence, fame, and power. Gangs provide an opportunity for young men to be recruited into an organization where they can rise through the ranks by submitting loyalty and

commitment to the leader of the gang. However, very few of these young men understood the consequences of joining a gang. As a Chinese saying goes, 'one never sheds a tear until one sees the coffin'. When asked if they regret joining the Ghost Shadows, everyone in the safe house said yes. "This life isn't for nobody. You can only end up in prison or dead on the street." Steven signed.

**Significance**

The foregoing reasons why Chinese immigrants and Chinese Americans choose to join gangs are not exclusive to the Chinese community; these reasons apply to other minorities in the US as well. Knowing the reasons why people choose to join gangs is important for policymakers, social work professionals, community leaders, and scientists, because only after getting to know these reasons can they start to carry out corresponding legal and social interventions to solve gang-related issues. Interventions aiming to solve gang-related social issues can only go so far if they ignore the motives that propel adolescents and young adults to choose to join a gang. Addressing the reasons is to focus on the source of the problem instead of merely taking measures to respond to the manifestation of the problem.

For example, if people are joining gangs because of low socioeconomic status and poverty, then it is the government's responsibility to improve the overall condition of the national economy and create more jobs for people living in poverty. If people are joining gangs because they lack a sense of belonging and identity in this country, then policymakers, social work professionals, and community leaders can design certain social programs and policies to help people feel more like they belong

and are recognized. If the glorification of violence and gang culture are propelling adolescents and young adults to join a gang, then we can probably consider the options we have and regulate the publication and dissemination of materials involving the glorification of violence and gang culture.

To date, we have come a long way toward combating gang-related crimes. One of the examples is the Gang Enhancement Policy in California, which rules that gang association and affiliation can add additional punishment to the initial crime committed by the perpetrator. However, there is still a long way to go, as gang-related crimes are continuing to happen throughout the country.

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