

# Counterculture analysis: triads



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Caprian Kan

What are countercultures? Countercultures are groups that reject the major values, norms, and practices of the larger society and replaces them with a new set of cultural patterns (Thomas). A counterculture found primarily in china, but also globally are the Triads. Initially, the purpose of the triad group started off as a patriotic movement, but later turned into a counterculture. Somewhere along their fight for patriotism the lines of justice blurred and the Triad groups turned to crime (Blundy).

Origins of the Triad societies date back to the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Martial artists (Hung Mun's) desired to restore the Ming dynasty so, they sought their solution by attempting to overthrow the Qing dynasty (Blundy). However, their coup ended in vain. According to the Wing Chun Kung-Fu Association this movement started because the Ming's political and economic power began to wane through continuous border warfare. The Qing, former allies of the Ming, had grown so much political power that they controlled most of the provincial territories held by the former Ming Emperor. Remaining survivors of the Ming dynasty either fled or relocated in different provinces, especially for 5 youths: 4 boys and 1 girl that would train at Fukien Si Lum Temple. The five youths would later be known as the " Five Elders of Sil Lum." The " Five Elders" secretly trained loyalists in the art of Kung-Fu, leading to the onset of secret notorious societies, which we now know as the " Triads." During this time the Qing had an increasing awareness of partisan attacks; soon thereafter, in their impatience, the Qing armies burned and destroyed monasteries and temples including the Sil Lum Temple. The Five Elders traveled in disguise after the destruction of the Sil Lum Temple for a year

and a half however, discord grew among the elders and they soon fought each other. As frustration grew Jee Shin challenged Bak Mei to a martial arts duel, but in the end Jee Shin died. Shock rippled amongst the other elders, in fury, Mew Hin also fought with Bak Mei, but met the same fate as Jee Shin. Fung Doe Duk was next to challenge Bak Mei. Despite being closely matched Doe Duk delivered a compound fracture to Bak Mei's foot which would later kill him. After the fighting, Fung Doe Duk and Ng Mui, the last remaining elders, parted on different paths to teach their own forms of martial arts; Ng Mui who would teach the Dragon-Tiger system (Wing Chun Kung-Fu Association). Practice of the crouched Dragon-Tiger system also led to representation of one of the Triad symbols: the red dragon.

Ethnocentrism is characterized by the belief or attitude that one's own group is superior (Mish). Ethnocentricity applies to the Triads because society (the norm) sees this group as a counterculture due to the type of relationship between the members and the type of rituals, rules, etc to make and maintain that relationship between one another. According to Rachel Blundy in the Law and Crime section of the *South China Morning Post* as groups started to form, members were expected to view each other as " blood brothers." Significance of calling each other " blood brothers" led to the thought process that the bond between strangers was just like that of family if not superior because loyalty was both being given and received. This was augmented by the structure of hierarchy in the Triads; which, also led to the enforcement of rules, expectations, and conducts for each member to follow (Blundy). In the *Illuminating Lantern* , Nepstad wrote that a famous rule for new members was an initiation oath known as " 36 oaths. During initiation

each member would recite the “ 36 oaths,” pledging their respect and loyalty only to each other and the Triad group. If, in any way, any of the oaths are broken then that member shall face punishment by 5 thunderbolts or a myriad of swords (Nepstad). Sacrifices are also apart of initiation ceremonies, a chicken is typically slaughtered and its blood is drained into a cup for drinking (Nepstad). If other cultures or people were to look upon this ceremony they would be disgusted, but this is how the Triads display and elicit ethnocentrism; through the strict rules of conduct, which is specifically stated in the oaths and their overwhelming rituals. Although this is not of the norm in in the culture of the larger society it is a practice that helps define the Triads as a counterculture and augments this practice as something that is common only to their culture and behavior.

Cultural relativism is the belief that a culture should be judged by their own standards and not by the standards of other cultures (Thomas). In this case, although the Triads are a subculture they are better known as a counterculture because they *reject* the practices of the larger society and replaces them with a new set of cultural patterns by participating in criminal behavior. Due to an increase of Triad members there has also been a rise in criminal activities; Hong Kong has dedicated a police division specifically for Triads known as the *Organized Crime and Triad Bureau* in order to take care of this problem (Blundy). Three main Triad groups that have the largest amount of followers or influence, especially in Hong Kong, are Sun Yee On, 14K, and Wo Shing Wo (Blundy). In an estimated membership of 20, 000 Triad members about 2000 would actually be “ active” in criminal behavior (Nepstad). According to Blundy from *South China Morning Post* such behavior

includes drug trafficking, which is a major source of income for the groups. Most of the drug being trafficked are opium, heroin, and cocaine. Other criminal activities that the Triad groups engage in are fraud, extortion, gambling, money, laundering, and prostitution (Blundy). In recent years Triad members have turned to credit card fraud, minibus concessions, call-girl rings, and computer software and CD pirating (Hays).

Personally, I do believe that the Triads are a counterculture because cultures in today's society, although they vary, do not participate, in any way, in criminalist behavior like the Triads do. A general or main goal for the culture of the larger society is to have a career job, which helps provides a steady income. However, in the view point of cultural relativism the Triads are a counterculture that displays ethnocentrism because they have no jobs and they spend their free time participating in criminal activities to gain dirty money based on chances and risks while risking their First Amendment rights and liberty. Also, the fact that Triads are willing to risk their rights shows ethnocentrism because they have the belief that they are above the law. Whereas, lawful citizens would not be able to perform such actions because they value their rights and freedom. The Triad groups have been a counterculture since the start of the Qing dynasty to our present date; their actions that defines them as a counterculture do not seem to be getting better if not worse and will continue their reckless, criminal behavior.

## References

Blundy, Rachel. *A Brief History of Hong Kong's Triad Gangs* . 4 February 2017. Website. 5 March 2017.

Hays, Jeffrey. *Facts and Details: Triads and Organized Crime in China* . April 2012. Website. 9 March 2017.

Mish, Frederick C. *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary: Tenth Edition* . Merriam-Webster, Incorporated, 2000. Book.

Nepstad, Peter. *Triads* . 15 March 2015. Website. 5 March 2017.

Thomas, W. LaVerne. *Sociology: The Study of Human Relationships* . Austin: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 2003. Book.

Wing Chun Kung-Fu Association. *History and Lineage: The Five Elders* . 2004. Website. 6 March 2017.