

The Evolution and Future Direction of Southeast Asian Criminal Organizations¹

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Introduction

With the collapse of South Vietnam in 1975, a large number of Southeast Asians immigrated to the United States. The first wave of refugees consisted of the merchant and professional classes and included military and political figures. They were not accepted by most Americans and had difficulty fitting into Western society. Most refugees, however, overcame these adversities and founded businesses in the communities where they settled. Unfortunately, organized crime has been a component of these newly developed and prosperous ethnic communities from the outset. This has been due largely to the fact that a significant number of those airlifted from Vietnam were associated with the old Saigon regime and/or the South Vietnamese Army, both of which had long legacy of brutality and corruption. These military and political leaders, who had long taken advantage of their countrymen, saw little reason to change their ways upon arrival in this country. Beginning with various extortion schemes, from which the proceeds were ostensibly directed toward patriotic causes to fund and arm Vietnamese rebels, they progressed to more traditional crimes such as robberies and burglaries. These crimes were likewise justified as securing funds for patriotic reasons.

In the 1980's, a second wave of immigrants emerged. They were referred to as the "boat people," because they left their country on anything that would float in order to flee the repressive conditions of Communist Vietnam. More desperate and impoverished than their predecessors, they often spent years in "squalid resettlement camps where crowding and boredom bred mental illness, juvenile delinquency and riots" (Kleinknecht, 1996, p.183). Many were ethnic Chinese who had long been repressed by the North Vietnamese Communists and were forced to flee their country because of a military clash between China and Vietnam in 1979. Also present were Amerasian children who had been outcasts in their home country. More than half of these refugees were under 16 and alone, having been put on boats by their parents who wanted better lives for their children. With little to do, many of these youths joined together in gangs which terrorized their already tormented countrymen.

When these youths arrived in the United States, they had already experienced the ravages of war and had been separated from their families and treated like "human garbage" in the Hong Kong refugee camps (Kleinknecht, 1996, p.185). They needed help to deal with the heavy emotional baggage they brought with them.

but were instead greeted with hostility by Americans to whom they represented an ugly reminder of a lost war. Even within their own communities they failed to receive any assistance. Many were placed with foster families, friends or relatives who could barely provide for the survival of their own families. Most had little time to nurture another parent's troubled child. Lacking emotional support and experiencing ridicule in school, it is not surprising that many dropped out and left their foster homes (Kleinknecht, 1996). Facing a depressed job market, unable to speak the language and unwilling to work the grueling hours required by the fishing industry, most were unable to find employment. On the street, the gang became their family and source of income. Their rough appearance and lack of skill in committing crime often drew the attention of local patrol officers. These officers were, however, unaware of the threat posed by such gangs. Police were content to ignore the petty criminal activity of the gangs, justifying their inaction on the grounds that only other Asians were being victimized.

Location of Vietnamese Communities

Originally, the Ford Administration's plan for resettlement of the South Vietnamese involved a strategy of spreading the refugees across the country. In this way, no single community would be unduly burdened. This plan, however, failed to consider the role of climate, locale and a desire to live within homogeneous ethnic enclaves. This combination of factors initially resulted in the migration of Vietnamese to several communities in California and later to communities in Texas and Florida. Other communities in which they settled were close to the sea and included areas such as New Orleans, Portland and New York City. Eventually, large Southeast Asian enclaves developed in interior states such as Colorado, Illinois, Missouri and Oklahoma.

Initially, many refugees lived in government assisted housing. They later moved to low income housing and then to the suburbs during the mid 1980's. This reduced cloistered housing syndrome and concomitantly the size of inner city "Little Saigon's."

Characteristics of Vietnamese Criminal Enterprises

The nature of Vietnamese criminal activity typically takes three forms. Two additional characteristics worthy of note are recruitment patterns and the role of females.

Casual Gangs

These gangs are composed of neighborhood youths, bound together by a common ethnic and cultural background and past experiences including shared refugee camp stays and negative experiences as newly arrived immigrants. Their relationships are further cemented by rejection, joblessness and lack of family ties. For such youths, the gang becomes their family unit. Found principally in

government assisted housing and inner-city neighborhoods, these groups are characteristically leaderless and have fluctuating membership. In contrast to the mobile gangs discussed later, their criminal acts are limited to their home communities. These typically include sporadic, unsophisticated criminal endeavors such as petty burglaries, shoplifting and "snatch and grab" retail thefts. Further, as a result of exposure to violence and rejection and the lack of appropriate socialization, these youths engage in indiscriminate acts of violence during the commission of crimes.

Mobile Gangs

These unaffiliated and less organized Vietnamese gangs typically vary in size from 10 to 20 members, but at times number as few as three. Members generally range in age from 12 to 25. Changing in structure and membership as they travel, these transitory groups have few rules, no rites of initiation or penalties for leaving. Further, leaders may change from town to town and/or from one criminal venture to another.

Members often view themselves as social outcasts and flaunt an "outlaw" image as an indication of their rebellion. They frequently adopt a mental attitude characterized as "my crazy life." This attitude is typical of many other ethnic gangs and serves as means to instill fear in their Asian victims of the possible consequences of cooperating with law enforcement authorities. With no family or jobs to tie them to any single community, they generally commit crimes in one city and then quickly relocate to another. Here, "brothers" assist them by providing safe houses or "crash pads" which allow them an opportunity to "cool off" and select new targets. These "brothers" not only supply intelligence on local conditions and potential targets, but also train younger gang members in criminal endeavors. Additionally they provide tools and equipment and supplement the capabilities of the gang by providing "local talent."

These gangs have a preference for criminal acts which include extortion of legitimate Asian businesses, protection scams, drug trafficking, home and auto burglaries, auto theft and home invasion robberies. Moreover, while all gangs exhibit varying degrees of violence in the commission of crimes, mobile gangs are more likely to engage in extreme acts of violence. Murders and serious assaults, which often occur during home invasions and acts of extortion, do not correlate with the degree of victim resistance. This phenomenon has been explained by some experts as a normal reaction of people who have witnessed brutality over an extended period of time.

Intelligence officers tracking these groups indicate that they follow a fairly distinctive itinerary. Their trek usually begins in British Columbia or Seattle and continues on into southern California or Texas. The gangs then move east to Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama and into Florida. From there, some continue northward, traveling through Georgia, the Carolinas, and on to Virginia, New Jersey and New York. The gangs then routinely travel back to the west coast by the same routes as they came. The gangs often stop in favored cities along the way to peddle

contraband, recruit new members and perpetrate new crimes. In the early 1990's, the gangs expanded their target areas, traveling via major highway routes to Colorado, Kansas, Indiana and Illinois.

Senior Criminals

These individuals were initially older, displaced arrivals, who lacked family ties, skills, education and jobs. Forming groups with changing leadership and members, they committed random, opportunistic crimes in their home neighborhoods and other communities. Their criminal activities typically lacked sophistication and included crimes such as street level prostitution, small scale gambling parlors, protection schemes, petty larceny, burglary, fencing and street level drug trafficking.

By the 1990's, the role of older offenders in criminal endeavors had changed. Many youths who had previously participated in either causal or mobile gangs had grown older. This life style no longer appealed to them since they were now married, had children, owned their own homes and often had at least part-time jobs. At this point, they also appeared to be respectable members of community. These individuals continued to maintain ties with younger gang members, but were no longer apt to "hang out" with their younger counterparts on the street corner or in the pool halls. Thus, their role in the traditional criminal endeavors of the gang has changed from direct participation to oversight. They choose the targets, plan the crimes and dispose of stolen property, but leave the operational aspects of such endeavors to the causal or mobile gang members. They also provide safe houses for traveling groups. They continue to be involved in crimes in which they develop expertise or control or exclusively dominate the market. Such crimes include the operation of Asian gaming parlors; counterfeiting of identification and business documents such as checks, making or selling clothing and watches; or running houses of prostitution. The operation of massage parlors and the control of street "hookers" are also popular criminal endeavors. Moreover, they occasionally form "entrepreneurial task forces"² which are organizations developed specifically for more sophisticated criminal ventures.

Other Features

One unique feature of Vietnamese criminal activity is the role of females. In the 1980's, female gangs emerged on the west coast in a pattern similar to that of their male counterparts. A second and more widespread feature is the involvement of females with mobile gangs. These females attach themselves to the groups because they are disenchanted with their former traditional lifestyle or are attempting to escape an untenable home situation. Their functions include acting as sex partners for male gang members and playing minor roles in criminal ventures, such as "lookouts" in retail diversion thefts and commercial or home invasion robberies. They may also serve as prostitutes and gambling house hostesses. In addition, they frequently hold contraband and weapons, knowing the reluctance of police to pad-down a young, non-threatening, "China doll" female. Following a traditional gang pattern, these females may also "hang" with local neighborhood gangs and

occasionally provide them with the same services as those provided to the mobile gangs.

Finally, the recruitment of new members is essential to the perpetuation of gang activities. As seasoned offenders become less willing to directly involve themselves in certain high risk criminal endeavors, the need for young recruits increases. "New blood" is recruited from the ranks of newly arrived immigrants, neighborhood gang youths and school grounds. These new recruits are immediately used as "muscle", while being trained by experienced gang members for more complex criminal endeavors.

The Evolution of Vietnamese Criminal Activity

Over the past 20 years, there has been a slow but noticeable change in Vietnamese criminal activity. This has been related, in part, to the youthfulness and basic needs of gang members. More importantly, it is rooted in Asian culture, which is steeped in tradition and slow to change. Change was only slight during the first 15 years; however, as the gang members became "westernized," a more sophisticated criminal emerged. Figure 1 shows the evolution of Vietnamese criminal endeavors from low level street crime to less risky and more sophisticated and profitable activities. The movement to increasingly sophisticated criminality has been greatly influenced by the assimilation of gang members into western culture. Other contributing factors include increased knowledge and understanding of the demands for goods and services and the identification of vulnerable targets in their neighborhoods. An additional factor is the tolerance level for such activities within the Asian community. A better grasp of the dynamics of the American criminal justice system and its greater tolerance of certain crimes must also be factored into this equation. In this regard, there has been a shift away from drug trafficking toward the establishment of gambling parlors and neighborhood and commercial businesses. Increased involvement in all levels of prostitution has also been observed. Likewise, there has been a shift from extortion assaults, commercial robberies and home invasions to counterfeiting and fraud, including the production of identification papers, business licenses and checks and money. Continued involvement in certain activities has increased their level of skill, expertise and sophistication. For example, a shift from random car thefts to the theft of cars "to order" greatly reduces the risk associated with holding stolen property while a buyer/fence or retail outlet is found.

EVOLUTION OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN CRIME 1976-1996

1976 - Early '80s	Mid 80's - Early 90's	1992 - 1996
1) Burglary of homes	B&E commercial	B&E's by order - Commercial targets
2) Auto Burglary	Auto burglaries -	Auto burglaries - air bags, stereo's & C.D.'s computer electronics
3) Auto theft - joy rides	Theft of auto parts	Theft of autos by order
4) Pool hall gambling	Gambling houses	Sports bookmaking operations/loansharking
5) Street level prostitution	Houses of porstitution	Massage parlors, lingerie shops, escort services
6) Shoplifting	Diversion thefts	Diversion theft teams, theft by order
7) Counterfeit ID &INS documents	Counterfeit food stamps commercial checks, cassette tapes	Counterfeit occupational licenses, C.D.'s, videos, credit cards, clothing, cellular telephones, money orders and computer software
8) Stong arm robberies	Home invasions & commercial robberes	Protection and extortion schemes
9) Aid to illegal immigrants	Finance illegal immigration schemes	"Operate" illegal immigration operations
10) Minor drug usage	Minor drug trafficking	"Mules" for larger drug operations

Gambling operations have also grown. Lottery operations have expanded as salesmen develop regular clientele. Parlor gambling has expanded to houses and commercial establishments, including warehouses and storefronts. These new establishments now offer complete opportunities for all types of gambling such as sports betting, cards, dice and lottery sales. There has also been greater involvement in joint ventures or, what we have termed "entrepreneurial task force" related activity, as senior criminals have recognized the benefits of such ventures. These advantages include expanded markets, reduced conflict and higher profits. Finally, the move to more sophisticated criminal endeavors has required the recruitment of "specialists" for certain ventures such as counterfeiting.

What Can We Expect In The Future?

Cultural Factors

Several major factors have enabled Asian crime groups to pursue their criminal activities with fewer restrictions than do more traditional criminal groups. These include a lack of awareness by the law enforcement community due to language and cultural barriers and the fact that few police agencies employ Asian officers. Consequently, infiltration of these groups has proven extremely difficult. Added to this is a prevailing lack of concern for Asian victims and the known reluctance of Vietnamese to report crime to the police. This reluctance stems from a fear of reprisal and a general distrust of government officials.

Factors That Can Influence "Near" Future

A number of trends provide some indication of the nature and direction of future Asian and Vietnamese criminal endeavors. These trends are further defined as follows:

Economic Trends:

In the past two decades, Communist countries throughout Asia and the Pacific rim have moved toward a more capitalistic economic system. The business communities in these countries have embraced capitalism because it provides more opportunities for entrepreneurs to achieve greater independence and a better life style. This economic shift has received support and impetus from foreign investors. Moreover, the general public in these countries has embraced the capitalist system because it provides new goods and services. The movement toward capitalism is consistent with occurrences in other undeveloped countries, and in those previously under Soviet domination. Such changes bring us closer to a global economy which will open new markets and expand opportunities for both legitimate and criminal entrepreneurs.

Political Developments:

Negotiations between Vietnam and Cambodia and the U.S. and other western countries have resulted in a gradual normalization of relations. The U.S. has

appointed its first Ambassador to Vietnam since the fall of Saigon, and travel restrictions have been eased to the point that travel to Vietnam by Westerners is increasingly common. In addition, movement toward the gradual normalization of trade will be followed by the establishment immigration procedures. While the impact of the 1997 takeover of Hong Kong by China is yet undetermined, there is little doubt that the more relaxed and democratic governments of Vietnam and Southeast Asia will undoubtedly "invite" Chinese and other Asian criminal entrepreneurs to establish new markets within their countries. Concomitant with this will be the corruption of government officials at all levels which will adversely affect the integrity of the political structure.

Technology:

Advancements in transportation have brought Southeast Asia closer to Western markets and provide a quick and relatively safe method of moving contraband. "Global" criminal ventures are now facilitated by the ease of catching a flight and quickly traveling to a country in which one is virtually unknown to the authorities. Faster and more accessible communications systems facilitate contacts between criminal organizations and allow joint criminal ventures to be more easily planned and accomplished. Technological advancements also make it easy to counterfeit nearly anything from currency to clothing to watches. Technology has also made it relatively easy to obtain a new identity. Medical advances have created a growing demand for human organs, while technological growth has created a market for trade secrets and information about new product research. Finally, the break-up of the Soviet Union has resulted in the development of a black market in "high tech" and nuclear grade weapons. Southeast Asia promises to be another emerging market for power brokers seeking the weapons "edge."

The Future of Southeast Asian Crime

Between 1993 and 1995, five separate groups of criminal justice employees from Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana and Florida participated in future research study panels addressing possible changes in Southeast Asian crime. Utilizing a modified Delphi Technique (Limstone, 1975) and the Nominal Group Technique (Delbecq, Van de Ven and Gustafson, 1975), each dealt with the following question: What changes will occur with Southeast Asian criminal groups, both domestically and in Southeast Asia, in the next decade? The consistency of the answers provided by these groups was remarkable.

Drawing from these deliberations and the anticipated developments discussed in the last section, we can hypothesize that the following will occur. We can expect to see cooperative pacts between Southeast Asian criminal groups in Vietnam and those in the U.S. and Europe. These criminal groups will establish pacts with other ethnic criminal groups operating in various parts of the world. The opening up of Southeast Asia will provide new markets for these criminal groups, and an increased flow of contraband between Asia and North America will be observed. This will facilitate the travel of criminals from country to country and contribute to the easy operation of the international slave trade and baby/child adoption industry. Another

lucrative market that is likely to develop as a result of medical advancements in the west is the trafficking of human organs and body parts. Southeast Asia provides a ready source for these biological components due to the abject poverty and generally low regard for the value of human life. In regard to the global "vice" markets, both the Koreans (who currently dominate the international Asian prostitution industry) and the Japanese (who control the manufacture of methamphetamine) will undoubtedly view the more open Vietnam as a new zone of opportunity.

In the United States, Vietnamese groups are expected to develop a more well defined leadership structure (hierarchical); however, membership is likely to be more fluid, with specialists being recruited for certain types of criminal endeavors. These groups will also take over markets controlled by smaller and less powerful groups. They will continue to move away from high risk, street level crimes to less risky and more sophisticated and profitable criminal endeavors. Expansion into newly developed international markets will also occur. More specifically, these criminal ventures will include opium, hashish and heroin trafficking; immigration schemes and the counterfeiting of identification documents, currency, technological components and entertainment items. These ventures will also include international extortion schemes, such as the extortion of money from family members (in the U.S. and other countries) who have relatives in Vietnam. Corporate and business schemes, such as kidnapping and threats of disruption of corporate operation, will also be observed. Such schemes are similar to the Sokaiya activities of the Yakuza.

Endnotes

1. Much of the material for this article is drawn from Sanz, K. and Francisco, P. *Southeast Asian Criminality*, (1995) Tampa, Florida : S.M. & C. Sciences, Inc.
2. "Entrepreneurial task forces" are transitory organizations, composed of non-aligned criminal specialists, who associate for the purpose of achieving a common, usually more sophisticated, criminal objective. This pattern of activity can be found among many of the newly emerging ethnic criminals. These endeavors can include counterfeiting currency, fraudulent diversion of funds by electronic transfer, theft of intellectual material (corporate espionage). This concept was initially proposed by Dr. David L. Carter in an article regarding international organized crime in 1995.

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