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Securitizing the Colour Revolution: Assessing the Political Role of Triads in Hong Kong's Umbrella Movement

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In Hong Kong's Umbrella Movement, the use of Chinese triads to attack protestors has attracted international attention, forcing the regime to constrain further acts of grand illegitimate violence. Research suggests that triads were used as 'thugs-for-hire' by the regime to achieve political ends. The present study aims to examine why the triads were hired and what their specific roles and motivations were. It concludes that triads acted as non-state securitization actors, agent provocateurs or extralegal protectors depending on several factors, such as financial incentives, being stakeholders in occupied sites, business interests in mainland China and individuals' political ideology. It suggests that triads were used as vigilantes against the threats of Western-instigated Color Revolution and hybrid warfare targeting China.

Key Words: triad society, Umbrella Movement, securitization, thugs-for-hire, extralegal protection, Hong Kong

INTRODUCTION

Before the British colony's handover to China in 1997, the Hong Kong Basic Law (mini-constitution) promulgated by China promised Hongkongers that the Hong Kong way of life would remain unchanged under 'one country, two systems' and that the socialist system would not be introduced in the city for 50 years following the transfer of sovereignty. Article 45 of the Basic Law stipulated that the Chief Executive would be a 'Hongkonger' elected by universal suffrage following nomination by a broadly representative nominating committee. However, China did not provide genuine universal suffrage to Hongkongers as originally promised. This sparked a non-violent pro-democracy movement, Occupy Central with Love and Peace or the Umbrella Movement (UM) in 2014, leading to a 79-day occupation in three urban sites.

In a clear reference to Occupy Central, China's State Council issued the first White Paper on the practice of 'one country, two systems' (1C2S) in Hong Kong in June 2014, stating that the fundamental objective of 1C2S was to maintain China's sovereignty, security and development interests and that continuation of the policy for Hongkongers was contingent on the full and ac-

curate implementation of 1C2S to that end. The Paper warned that it was necessary to stay alert to the attempt of outside forces and their associates to use Hong Kong to interfere in China's domestic affairs and the implementation of 1C2S in Hong Kong.

At the Mongkok occupied site, where triad-run illicit and legitimate businesses, such as mahjong parlors, entertainment clubs and drug dealing, took place, there was constant conflict between occupiers and government supporters. Mass media reported that triads were involved (Apple Daily 2014a; 2014b). On some occasions, groups of suspected triads marched into sites, damaging tents and supplies and attacking occupiers. Varese and Wong (2018) contended that triads were used as thugs-for-hire in UM by the authorities to achieve political ends. Ong (2018) echoes the Party-state's use of real and threatened violence by thugs-for-hire as a form of privatized coercion that helps the authorities to subjugate a dissident group.

To further develop the perspectives on thugs-for-hire, the objectives of this paper are not about whether triads have been hired but why they were hired and what services they provided. It will address the following research questions: If triads were thugs-for-hire, what was their specific role in UM? How did they view UM and their relationship to it? Through interviews with triads, it explores triads' relationship with UM and their motivations for their actions. To follow closely China's recent emphasis on national security, the present study adopts the perspective of securitization to examine triads' role as securitization actors in addition to their traditional role of extralegal protectors (Gambetta 1993; Chu 2000). It is expected that the findings will empirically contribute to current knowledge of thugs-for-hire.

LITERATURE REVIEW

State–mafia relations

States have long utilized non-state actors, including legitimate elements of civil society and criminal actors, to help implement government policy (Grabosky 2019). In discussing the relationship between the state and organized crime, Lupsha (1996) proposed three conceptual categories: predatory, parasitic and symbiotic. Predatory criminal groups, while separate from the state, expand illegal operations and dominate territories with force. Parasitic criminal groups work with legitimate actors, such as politicians, to acquire state resources through bribery. Symbiotic criminal groups work in partnership with the state, where the latter depends on the former's networks to survive.

In similar logic, Barnes (2017) proposed a typology of four crime–state relations: confrontation (high competition), enforcement–evasion (low competition), alliance (low collaboration) and integration (high collaboration). The first type, confrontational crime–state relation, which is rare, describes a situation where criminal organizations continue to influence government policy and expand local dominance and access to illicit market resources rather than taking over or breaking away from the state. The second type, enforcement–evasion, is characterized by the criminal organizations' use of a hide and bribe approach to evade law enforcement. However, since most of them are not able to bribe federal judges or influence government policy formulation, they are barred from penetrating state institutions. Alliance, the third type, signifies collaboration between the state and criminal organizations that remain entirely separate entities from the former. Through the alliance, the state uses the criminals to strengthen their own power and authority. Integration, the fourth type, denotes that criminal organizations and state actors are intertwined, especially in relation to criminals and public security apparatus and political parties. Through high levels of collaboration, criminals can gain political influence and access to useful information and social capital to sustain their illegal ventures, while state actors gain political, electoral and financial resources accumulated by the criminal groups to sustain their political power (Barnes 2017).

Another form of state–crime relation is thugs-for-hire (Ong 2018; Varese and Wong 2018). It describes privatized state violence that extends a state's coercive capacity to subjugate particular rebellious or opposition groups, petitioners and complainants of official malfeasance, mostly when the state is weak, lacks the capacity to implement government policies, or its actions are regarded as undesirable or immoral, with the advantage of denying or evading state responsibility. However, thugs can also be hired by the opposition or any individuals who can pay for their service (Ong 2018). Specifically, thugs-for-hire, state security forces and the military are integral part of China's coercive apparatus (Ong 2018).

Ong (2018) also made a distinction between thugs-for-hire and mafia. The term 'thugs-for-hire' refers to non-state actors, such as ruffians, hooligans, unorganized stragglers and legalized professionals, who provide services for a principal, such as the state, in exchange for benefits. However, their relationship with the principal is informal and kept hidden. Unlike paramilitaries and militias, their organizational structure is temporary and they do not control a territory (Varese and Wong 2018). Mafias are complex criminal organizations that monopolize protection in a given territory (Gambetta 1993). Their members have to observe specific codes of conduct and rules and follow rituals. Varese and Wong (2018: 26) added that mafias are 'entities autonomous from the State and in principle opposed to it: they can side with opposition parties and even with individuals attempting a *coup d'etat* …. Mafias do not merely act as the State's hired hands'.

Triads' involvement in criminal and political activities

Triad societies, as a form of mafia, were originally political organizations that attempted to restore the Ming Dynasty by overthrowing the Qing Dynasty in China (Purbrick 2019). After the Second World War, they disintegrated into numerous criminal organizations (Chin 1990). Despite the structural deficiency of triad societies (Zhang and Chin 2003), they continue to be involved in organized crime. The core business of triads is similar to that of mafia-type criminal organizations, and their specialty was the provision of extralegal protection services (Chu 2000). However, not all businesses are victims of extortion but rather beneficiaries of triad protection, ranging from street hawking to interior decoration, wholesale fish markets and minibus routes. This explains how triads are employed by licit business operators to protect their businesses against attacks by other gangs, to manipulate the market by fencing off competitors, to settle business disputes and to reclaim debts (Chu 2000; Broadhurst and Lee 2009).

Triads' involvement in political activities was evident as early as the interwar years. In Shanghai, the leaders of the triad society Green Gang were involved in helping the French authorities to maintain law and order in the French Concession and in helping the Kuomintang to suppress the Communists (Purbrick 2019). During the Second World War, some triads worked with Kuomintang intelligence to fight against the Japanese occupation of Hong Kong, while some were recruited by the Japanese to assist them in maintaining social order under the name of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere (Liu 2001; Purbrick 2019). After the Tiananmen crackdown in 1989, triads smuggled a large number of pro-democracy activists out of China in Operation Yellowbird (Feng 2009; Lo 2010). Based on his experience of being smuggled out by triads, Su Xiaokang, a Chinese intellectual in exile, 'explicitly emphasized the indispensable function of the triad society as a counter-structure to the establishment' (Ma 1994: 189). These examples confirm that like the mafia, triads can work for or against the state as suggested in the literature mentioned above (Ong 2018; Varese and Wong 2018). For this reason, the Chinese government tried to recruit senior triad leaders by means of the United Front policy under the banner of 'Patriotic Triads' (Lo 2010: 857) so that they could align with the Beijing authorities. In specifying the socio-political contexts of UM, Varese and Wong (2018: 35) contended that the 'current authoritarian trajectory in Hong Kong' has become a facilitating factor that might give triads a 'new role' to provide extralegal services for the regime.

Securitization of Hong Kong and triads as securitization actors

The Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) categorization of UM as an existential danger placed them in a special category of politics (security politics) and governance (securitization) that ostensibly legitimates the breaking of norms and use of extralegal measures to defeat a threatening actor (occupiers and protestors), condition, issue or phenomenon (fighting for democracy). This securitization process has been underway since 2012 when Xi Jinping came to power and continues today as revealed in Chinese security discourses surrounding the 2018–19 conviction and sentencing of 'Occupy Nine'—the leaders of UM who were imprisoned for the 2014 occupations and the introduction of the National Security Law in Hong Kong in 2020. China's securitization of Hong Kong equates Hongkongers' anti-Communist sentiments and demands for genuine universal suffrage with the foreign-instigated Color Revolutions, demands for Hong Kong independence and illicit regime change agendas intent on seizing governing power in Hong Kong as a stepping stone for overthrowing the CCP.

National security and securitization have become the predominant lens through which Beijing views the 'Hong Kong threat', in which Hongkongers are 'constructed as not simply opposing Red China but as actively working for, and collaborating with, the West, for China's containment and the overthrowing of the CCP' (Garrett 2017: 9). Even a cursory perusal of Chinese security discourses regarding Hong Kong since the beginning of the Xi Jinping era reveals ever-heightening regime calls for vigilance against the threats of Color Revolution and hybrid warfare targeting China. As regards the putative threat to Hong Kong posed by UM, these contemporary neocolonial security perspectives represent a continuity of earlier Chinese Communist Cold War era securitizations of British Hong Kong that routinely invoked the spectre of the city becoming a base of subversion against the socialist system and today's Xi Jinping New Era securitization of Hong Kong that stridently situates the city's pro-democracy movement as an existential threat to China's sovereignty.

China has embarked on a national security-laden totalitarian change of direction to defend the CCP's interests, a securitization move that labelled dissident Hongkongers as the regime's weakest security link and mortal enemies (Garrett 2017). A retired army general proclaimed that Hong Kong then stood 'at the frontline of Western penetration and overthrow of China as a whole, what's happening there reflects profound problems in the mainland' (Song 2014). Since the occupations, these prolific and virulent security discourses about 'foreign/hostile forces messing up Hong Kong' have become prominent and Hong Kong has been frequently framed by Chinese actors as being on the frontier of a 'New Cold War' waged by the United States against China. Today, Xi Jinping's New Era version of 1C2S is no longer intended to realize 'Hong Kong People Ruling Hong Kong' but 'Patriots Ruling Hong Kong' or 'patriotocracy' (Hui 2020: 113).

Against this backdrop, it is posited that triads' participation in UM can be understood through the lens of securitization (Wæver 1995; Buzan *et al.* 1998) and China's national security outlook, which conspired to mobilize the entire society, including its dark underside, to safeguard the Party-state against UM and its foreign interference. Philipsen (2018) argues broadly that those speaking about security can claim and take authority, thus embodying a performative version of securitization that changes the content and meaning of security. The process of securitization involves invoking 'cases of existential threats that legitimatize the breaking of rules' (Buzan *et al.* 1998: 25). Existential threats are dangers declared by securitization actors, typically state representatives, who claim to an audience, via speech acts, that a valuable referent object is mortally threatened, thereby justifying the application of extraordinary security measures.

Securitization actors can be defined as 'someone, or a group, who performs a security speech act. Common players in this role are political leaders, bureaucracies, governments, lobbyists and pressure groups' (Buzan *et al.* 1998: 40). Lupovici (2019) aptly describes how securitization

can include efforts to deter challengers and threats showing how 'deterrers' (i.e. securitization actors) and deterrence act within an assemblage of security moves. Hence, securitization actors may be in positions of formal (such as policemen) or informal authority (such as triads).

Saliently, Buzan *et al.* (1998: 33) point out that 'certain objects can be referred to that are generally held to be threatening – be they tanks, hostile sentiments or polluted waters', which constitute facilitating conditions for securitization to be successful, i.e., for extraordinary measures to be accepted or simply tolerated. We posit here that regime mobilization of triads against UM constructed, enacted and staged performative securitization frames of violence. In part, this also constructed the facilitating conditions for coercing the majority of Hongkongers (securitization audience) into accepting the extraordinary security measures (use of triads) deployed by the regimes against UM out of fear of even more coercive emergency measures, such as lethal force by the police. It did so because regime recourse to underworld securitization actors arguably tapped existing semantically loaded contemporary and historical imageries and stereotypes of triads as icons of chaos. One example of the chaos is the October 10 (Taiwan National Day) Riot organized by the pro-Taiwan 14K Triad in 1956, in which over 400 people died or were injured (Cheung 1987). Another example is the infamous 721 triad attack on civilians and anti-extradition protestors inside a mass transit railway station and train compartments on 21 July 2019, which was broadcast to the Western world (Needham 2019).

Notably, the sensational entry of triads into anti-UM national security passion play, allegedly (albeit partially) because the triads were protecting their 'interests' impacted by the occupations (Varese and Wong 2018), provided political cover for illicit regime-sponsored violence while simultaneously allowing regime claims that the authorities were intervening to safeguard Hong Kong's stability. In other words, covert employment of triads simultaneously supplied images of chaos and plausible deniability to the Party-state for surreptitious regime security moves involving political violence to evade international censure. Such political cover for episodes of illicit grand state violence and political warfare was necessary due to the CCP's admonishment that there should be 'no blood (caused by the police), no compromise (with the occupiers)' in suppressing UM. Reportedly, the CCP feared a repeat of Western sanctions that had followed the 1989 Tiananmen crackdown. In this sense, the use of non-state securitization actors (triads) against UM can also be understood as a Party-state security move to mitigate the threat of higher-order national security threats (e.g. international sanctions) to the Chinese regime posed by overt, violent, state suppression of Hong Kong's democracy movements. This echoes the contention of Ong (2018: 689) that thugs-for-hire 'offer hiring states the advantage of plausible deniability and of responsibility evasion, irrespective of their state strength'.

Table 1 summarizes the similarities and differences of concepts examined in the above literature review. Lupsha's (1996) concepts of predatory, parasitic and symbiotic criminal groups are similar to the confrontation, enforcement–evasion and integration state–mafia relations, respectively, proposed by Barnes (2017). While mafia and patriotic triads emerge within a state–mafia alliance, this paper further develops the concept of thugs-for-hire (Ong 2018) into securitization actor in line with China's Color Revolution and national security frame.

METHOD

The present study is part of an ethnographic triad research project that was approved by the institutional review board of City University of Hong Kong. Triads are defined as members of organizations classified as triad societies by the Hong Kong Police (see Morgan 1960). The first two authors frequently attended triad dinner gatherings where quotidian information exchanges among the underworld transpired. Through purposive sampling, data from 13 triad members were collected from six dinner gatherings, a couple of face-to-face interviews and nu-

merous telephone conversations between September 2014 and March 2016. Most of the participants were top-level triads, such as Lo Shuk Fu (cabinet member), Cho Kun (CEO), Cho Kun candidate, and senior- and mid-level triads with more than 20 years' experience in a triad society (Table 2). For the purpose of triangulation, two former law enforcement officers and the wife of a Lo Shuk Fu (her son distributed money to triad occupiers) were interviewed to verify the data mentioned by the triad samples.

Information regarding triad involvement in UM was mentioned during dinner gatherings and subsequently counter-checked and verified by interviews with other triads with insider knowledge of the activities. The third author, who studied China's securitization and Hong Kong's protest movements, took photographs in the occupied sites to document the protests and conflicts between the police and the occupiers/triad occupiers. Some of the photos were used to verify the identity of triad participants who frequented the occupied sites.

Access to triad samples was facilitated by key triad informants involved in the broader, ongoing research project (for detailed discussion of issue of access, please refer to Kwok 2020). The triad sample size was expanded via snowball sampling. When introduced to new triad samples, the authors dis-

Table 1. Summary of state–mafia relations

Lupsha (1996)	Barnes (2017)	Ong (2018)	The present paper
Predatory	Confrontation (high competition)	/	/
Parasitic	Enforcement–evasion (low competition)	/	/
/	Alliance (low collaboration)	Mafia	Patriotic triads within the United Front policy
Symbiotic	Integration (high collaboration)	/	/
/	/	Thugs-for-hire	Securitization actors

Table 2. Background of participants ($N = 16$)

Code	Participants
T1	Senior triad
T2	Experienced triad
T3	Cho Kun candidate
T4	Lo Shuk Fu, whose son distributed money to occupiers
T5	Dominator of a territory around Mongkok
T6	Lo Shuk Fu
T7	Lo Shuk Fu
T8	Experienced triad
T9	Senior triad
T10	Middle-rank triad
T11	Triad officer and protector of businesses in Mongkok
T12	Lo Shuk Fu and former Cho Kun
T13	Lo Shuk Fu and former Cho Kun
PO1	Ex-law enforcement officer with close connections with police in operation in occupied sites
O1	Ex-senior law enforcement officer
C1	Wife of T4

closed their identity, explained the purpose of the research and use of the data, and obtained subjects' consent. Data derived from researcher-triad conversations during dinners were written down afterwards instead of being tape-recorded to ensure respondent anonymity. Conversations were unstructured, involving triad and non-triad-related topics including many topics related to UM. For instance, this included discussions on how triads were involved in UM, the reasons for their involvement and their perceptions of UM. Tellingly, triads enthusiastically discussed UM throughout the dinners as the occupations were an extremely hot topic during these time periods. Following meetings, the first two authors verified their separate ethnographic notes to cross-check consistency prior to transcription. The data were first transcribed into Chinese by the second author, and the transcription was counter-validated by the first author. The transcripts were coded separately and statements were categorized into specific themes. Categorized data were translated into English and independently confirmed by both authors to ensure that original meanings remained intact.

Given the political sensitivity of the data, a vigorous verification procedure was adopted. Following data collection from each triad, the data were counter-checked for accuracy with other triads, especially those who were directly involved in UM. Only verified data were reported in this paper. For example, in one dinner gathering, several senior triads mentioned that a senior triad (T12) had been re-educated in mainland China for his role in protecting occupiers. The first author approached T12 in a different gathering and verified the data with him. Furthermore, the authors presented news videos reporting triad involvement in UM and asked respondents (e.g. T3 and T4) whether it was an accurate representation of triad involvement. This method facilitated verification of media reporting content and the triangulation of information collected from different triads.

FINDINGS

Research results demonstrate how triads were used primarily as anti-UM securitization actors for the regime and, to a smaller degree, as pro-UM extralegal protectors for occupiers.

Triads' involvement in UM

Triads were found to be involved in UM in opposing and supportive roles. Some triads attacked occupiers, while others defended them, and their actions were organized:

> [1] The triads were paid to perform these tasks: sitting in Mongkok in the morning, then Causeway Bay in the afternoon, then Mongkok again at night. Sometimes they just sat there, sometimes they hit people. They were two sides of the same coin, supporting and opposing UM. (T1)
>
> [2] We stationed our followers in a garage in Tak Kok Tsui (a neighborhood adjacent to Mongkok) that provided one third of the triad manpower for the Mongkok occupied site. We waited in our territory every day for phone calls from the 'boss.' Whether we acted as occupiers to provoke the police or whether we attacked the occupiers depended on the command from the 'boss.' I didn't know who the patrons were. I only executed their orders. (T3)
>
> [3] Actually, the police were well informed regarding the involvement of triad members in both pro-UM and anti-UM camps. (P01)

The data suggest that both anti- and pro-UM groups existed, mirroring the split in Hong Kong society. As noted by one experienced triad:

> [4] Inside the same triad society, there are two opposing camps – agree or disagree – with UM. The situation is getting more complicated, because my Ah Kung (faction head) is gath-

ering troops to protect the occupiers, while another Ah Kung wants to attack the occupiers. Both camps are assembling more members; a violent clash is inevitable. (T2)

Ultimately, respondent T2 joined the protection camp. On the other hand, we verified from respondents C1, T3, T4 and T6 that a Lo Shuk Fu of the same triad society organized his young followers to attack occupiers. The data suggest that each triad faction's role and position can be very different, depending on the instructions of the 'boss' or 'patron' who paid for them. Occupiers were well aware of the two camps. Recent research found that occupiers were less tolerant of triad *weiwen* (maintaining political stability for the regime) but more tolerant of triad protecting protesters (Lo *et al.* 2019) when compared with non-occupiers.

Triads as extralegal protectors (Pro-UM)

Triad protective services provided to occupiers were not static and evolved throughout UM. Data revealed two stages.

Stage one: organized paid protection

Stage one started with the beginning of UM and lasted for two weeks during which we found organized paid triad protection of occupiers. This included the time frame of the infamous triad attacks on Mongkok occupiers (Apple Daily 2014a; 2014b). Different roles of triad involvement were revealed:

> [5] I joined the meeting with other triad brothers following a call from my Ah Kung. There were four middle-ranked triads joining the meeting. When the money reached us, it was already at the third tier of beneficiaries. Triads in the top two tiers got the largest share of the money. That's why I didn't know who paid for it. What I knew is that each of those who participated in protecting occupiers would receive HK$1,000 [US$125] a day. The attendees in Mongkok were provided with free lunch and dinner at designated Chinese tea restaurants. Our Ah Kung would pay for them … What we did at the site was security, just as a security guard would normally perform: sitting there, standing there and patrolling around the occupied site. We were required to fight back if someone attacked the occupiers. However, we were not the people who threw bottles at the police. They were from another gang. We were not paid to do anything to provoke the police. (T2)

Commissioned protective services and financial rewards were verified by another triad and a former police officer:

> [6] Those who were involved in protecting the occupiers in Mongkok received HKD$1,000 if they stayed overnight in the site. (T11)
> [7] I learned from my former police colleagues that it was the triads from the Wo Shing Wo triad society. Its 'dominator' at YYY [name of territory removed] received money and instructed his followers to be there to protect occupiers. (P01)

Notably, the data confirm that the 'security guard' role of triads is separate and distinct from the 'agent provocateur' role.

Stage 2: unorganized, voluntary protective services

Stage 2 encompasses the end of October through the end of UM in December 2014. This stage was characterized by unorganized, individual-based involvement. Such protection was self-initiated rather than paid according to two triad respondents:

[8] We stopped providing protection to occupiers because money was running out. There was no provision of free meals and no money was given to protect the occupiers. Moreover, the occupiers had become more complicated – it was not only the students who were there. Instead, it encompassed different kinds of people, such as young triad members, who were self-motivated and proactive in taking part in UM, like ordinary young people … Therefore, we stopped allocating people to protect occupiers. (T2)

[9] UM has really got me [a Cho Kun candidate] into trouble with the Chinese authorities because some of my junior followers participated in the occupation … They were not instructed by me; it was their own personal choice. (T3)

The shift of triad involvement from Stage 1 to Stage 2 was significant in that protective services became voluntary and self-motivated rather than financially compensated or compelled by triad superiors. Accordingly, hitherto organized protective security services became un/disorganized. This shift was driven by a cessation of funding for triad protection of occupiers.

Triads as securitization actors (Anti-UM)

Anti-UM underworld involvement was consistently organized throughout the occupations. More diverse and complex, the roles of anti-UM triads included attacking and discrediting occupiers.

Performative securitization actors: violent attacks on occupiers

Occupiers were first attacked at the Mongkok site on 3 and 4 October 2014 (Apple Daily 2014b). According to a police press release, on 4 October, a total of 19 persons were arrested at Mongkok, with 8 having triad society backgrounds. A series of systematic, sometimes large-scale, attacks against occupiers also occurred later that month. In another nod towards the military-like scale and nature of the securitization of UM, at least one of the political violence operations involved hundreds of masked attackers (CBS News 2014). Interview data confirmed triad involvement in proactively and systematically attacking occupiers:

[10] I know XXX (a triad faction leader) was involved in attacking protesters in Mongkok last month. XXX asked his follower (T3) to send his troops to cause a nuisance in Mongkok. He received someone's money and was instructed to do so. The attack tasks were distributed to different triad gangs located in different districts, such as the New Territories. That's why many triad gangs were involved. (T6) [These data triangulate with T3's self-admission regarding his involvement in attacking occupiers. See Verbatim 2.]

[11] I heard conversations between my husband [i.e., T4, a triad cabinet member] and his followers on the night before the triad attack in Mongkok. Some of his followers were paid and instructed by someone to arrange for junior triads to attack occupiers. Finally, many occupiers were injured the next night. I felt pity for those innocent students. (C1)

[12] There was the presence of different triad gangs whose territories were outside Mongkok. They arranged for cars to deliver their members to the site in a systematic manner. They were paid and instructed to hit the occupiers, but we didn't know their identities. Even if the police knew of their presence, there was nothing that they could do because it was hard to tell who were triads or not in such chaotic situations. So the police would just let them fight against each other without interference. (P01)

As the data reveal, the triads' attack on occupiers was highly organized, coordinated and paid for by faction leaders and executed by frontline followers in a similar fashion to how the protective services (pro-UM) were procured and supplied.

Notably, P01's claim that the police would not intervene to stop anti-UM attacks because they could not distinguish between triads and occupiers supports media contentions that the police failed to protect occupiers. At the very least, it provides some credence to the police appearing to condone anti-UM violence and collude with triads. Failing to intervene also allowed regime performative securitization frames of violence to be acted out by the triads without police intervention. Furthermore, normally the police would arrest supporters of both camps in any physical altercation as they normally would when policing pro-democracy marches. That said, there are numerous anecdotal and media accounts of the police simply escorting away and freeing violent pro-establishment actors (Staff Reporters 2014) while detaining pro-democracy subjects. The third author, while photographically documenting protests, has witnessed several such episodes himself.

Performative securitization actors: masquerading as occupiers to discredit and deter UM

Discrediting UM can be understood as targeting local and international media and overseas governments who were perceived as UM sympathizers. Infiltrating triads performing as agents provocateurs served this purpose, as illustrated in the following cases:

Case 1

On the afternoon of 28 September, author B received a call from triad informant T2. He asked whether author B had friends or students present at the Mongkok site. He stated that he had insider information from T4 that triad leaders had distributed money to frontline triads that evening, requesting them to provoke the police. The resulting chaos would facilitate the clearance of Mongkok by the police. On 29 September, at approximately 5:00 a.m., *Apple Daily Instant News* reported that a group of youngsters had suddenly rushed from street corners and thrown water bottles at police in the Mongkok site (Apple Daily 2014a). The news report confirmed that T2's information was accurate.

This incident revealed that triad leaders paid and instructed junior triads to act as occupiers to provoke the police, aiming to create chaos at the site. The rationale behind the action was to provide justification for the police to clear the occupied site under the pretext that the police were being attacked. Moreover, the fake occupiers' securitization performance was also an attempt to demonstrate to the public that UM was not as peaceful as the movement claimed.

Case 2

A video report by Next Plus (2014) depicted an experienced triad, T8, paying and instructing his followers to arrange for some triad youths to pretend to be occupiers living in a tent in the Admiralty site. After a week, T8 visited and gave support to the youths. Subsequently, a reporter appeared and questioned T8 about triad involvement in UM and inquired how much he was being paid. Angered, T8 attempted to assault the reporter, who secretly video-recorded the incident. Said video was widely circulated on Facebook. We questioned the triad respondents, including T4, regarding the accuracy of the video content. T4 was the Ah Kung of T8. T4 responded:

> [13] Yes, the story is real. My son was the one who distributed the money to those triad occupiers. My son was actively involved in gathering his triad brothers to pretend to be occupiers. He was almost photographed by the reporter. They were asked to live in the Admiralty site for a few days. During the stay, they had to smoke, swear and show off their tattoos so as to give the impression that they were not students. Those who received money to occupy the site had to be photographed as evidence to get payment. (T4)

T3, who belonged to the same triad society as T4 and T8, watched the video and responded:

> [14] The video on Facebook was real. But it was a plot. The recruitment, the payment, the youth, the tent, the visit and the intended assault were all real. But they were planned. The triads deliberately let the reporter video it and place it on Facebook. T8 received money to organize all this. He tried to create an image that triads were paid to sit in the occupied sites, so as to discredit UM. (T3)

This performative securitization move was to construct a discrediting image that triads were allies of the occupiers and that UM organizers had paid triads to occupy the sites. It denotes a covert regime-sanctioned intelligence or military-like national security operation where the goal is to discredit, disrupt or sabotage an adversary and/or sow chaos behind 'enemy lines' and within 'enemy forces' and whose visible security effects were intended for media and public consumption.

Triads' motivations for UM intervention/incursions
Money talks

The majority of triads' involvement in UM, either for or against, was paid for by patrons and was not necessarily voluntary involvement driven by their own political ideology. Involvement was regarded as a 'paid service' and every task had a price tag:

> [15] They did it when they got paid, and stopped doing it when their bosses stopped paying. Both camps were like that… In anti-UM action, the rate for 'showing up only' to threaten the occupiers was HK$400, and the rate for 'causing some nuisance' in the occupied site was HK$1,000. If their presence was captured by the media and created a negative image of UM, they could be paid more. In pro-UM action, the triads got HK$800 for just sitting there for the whole day. (T5)

In fact, many triads, especially those in the lower strata of the hierarchy, find survival difficult due to the keen competition in the traditional triad businesses and vigorous law enforcement. Therefore, the price for the 'paid service' was attractive to them, especially junior triads:

> [16] You know who benefited most from this prolonged occupation? The triads! Whether they were instructed to protect or attack the occupiers, they would benefit anyway, because they could change sides whenever they wanted. The longer the protesters occupied a site, the more money the triads could make. They could serve any camp so long as someone was willing to pay. They just took it as a job. Of course, junior triads were more than happy to do the task because many of them were broke. (O1)
>
> [17] I begged my husband [T4, a triad cabinet member] if he could use his authority to stop his followers attacking students. My husband said he couldn't do anything to stop them, because the juniors were all poor. If they received money, they would do anything. No one could stop them. (C1)

In this sense, many triads effectively became freelance securitization agents operating as private security contractors or even mercenaries, providing offensive or defensive security services to whoever was willing to pay to attack or defend UM.

Triads as stakeholders

When asked why triads joined the anti-UM camp, several senior triads claimed that their business and profit were under threat due to the prolonged occupation. Triads are direct stakeholders whose interests were affected by UM. As one 'triad dominator' revealed:

[18] First, the turnover of our mahjong parlors is a few million dollars a day because lots of mainland Chinese like to gamble in our parlors. We now play mainland-style mahjong, not Hong Kong style. They like to gamble in Hong Kong because nobody would dare to cheat in our parlors because this is a territory managed by triads. However, the occupation scared off our mainland customers. We've lost thousands of dollars a day. Second, the minibus drivers have paid a substantial amount of entry fees to the triad 'dominator' [who controls the territory] to join the Mongkok minibus line. Now their business is badly affected and the drivers have complained to the triads. It's true that I have a different view about UM from T9 (who is a UM supporter), because most of my businesses are located in Mongkok. The decrease in customers due to the occupation has seriously affected my business. (T5)

[19] I don't particularly hate the students. I am just not happy with their prolonged occupation, because they disturb my mahjong parlor business in Mongkok. I lost a lot of business because mainlanders didn't come. (T3)

From the senior triads' perspective, attacking occupiers was justifiable because the occupiers had trespassed into their territory and disturbed their business operations. Moreover, as a senior triad expressed, the justification for violence also pleased the 'patron' behind the scene:

[20] The trespass gave us justification to attack the occupiers and protect our businesses. It also pleased the 'boss' because we could end UM earlier as instructed. (T6)

The Mongkok site had the most violence when compared to other occupied sites because it has long been regarded as the illicit business hub of Hong Kong and the largest territory controlled by many triad societies. The triads' dependence on mainlanders as a major source of income seriously hampered their profit as news on the series of violent events and reporting of anti-China sentiment scared off mainland customers.

Triads with interests in Mainland China

Due to numerous triad investments in the mainland, many senior triads were apprehensive that they would be prohibited from, or detained while, visiting China to manage their businesses due to involvement in UM. For example, T3 recounted:

[21] Recently, I did not go to mainland China. EEE (a triad leader) was detained in China because his followers were found participating in UM. Some of my young followers also joined the occupation. I am afraid that I would be targeted and arrested if I go to the mainland now. (T3)

EEE is a notorious triad leader who was arrested on the mainland when crossing the border into China. The reason for his arrest was not announced by the Chinese authorities. However, many triads mentioned his arrest for protecting occupiers, as confirmed by another respondent:

[22] Hey, you know EEE was arrested when entering China. His wife called my friend and my friend tried to save him. Those who protected the occupiers or participated in UM were all in trouble now. EEE was detained in China because he received money to protect occupiers. (T2)

When dining with some senior triads on 7 May 2015, we asked them if there were any triads getting into trouble due to their involvement in UM. Respondents T7, T10 and T11 reconfirmed the arrest of EEE and mentioned another triad figure who was also arrested due to his UM involvement:

[23] T12 and EEE (both prominent triad figures) were arrested in mainland China and received two weeks of patriotic education before they were released back to Hong Kong. (T7, T10, T11)

To verify the information provided by the above respondents, the first author contacted T12 for verification. He admitted his involvement in protecting the Mongkok occupiers and mentioned the incident on the mainland:

[24] Yes, we did go to the Mongkok site to protect the occupiers. We were identified and reported by the media. For a while, I had trouble with the Chinese authorities, but now I have settled it. No more trouble now. (T12)

Although some senior triads were detained on the mainland, there was no official confirmation that the detention was a punishment for being involved in UM. However, the threat of mainland patriotic education alarmed other senior triads. Most were reluctant to be involved in any anti-government political activities. On meeting respondent T11 at a triad banquet on 1 March 2016, we asked whether any triads were involved in the Chinese New Year riot in Mongkok on 8 February 2016, in which the police fired two shots. He responded:

[25] The riot was not done by us (triads) for sure. We wouldn't dare to take an 'order' to organize the riot, because we don't want to do anything to offend the Chinese authorities. You know what happened to those triads who supported UM. The CCP is the largest triad society in the world with 90 million members. How can we fight against them? (T11)

The remark revealed the reluctance of senior triads to be involved in any anti-government political activities after UM. T11's remark regarding the CCP implies that the CCP would respond to any opposition as a triad society would do—'an eye for an eye'.

Triads with anti-UM perceptions

Most of the triads interviewed were anti-UM and disliked the occupiers. UM affected their businesses, hence they lost profit. They doubted the occupiers' motivations and believed occupiers were paid by Western powers:

[26] I believe UM is supported by Western powers. I learned that XXX (a famous Hong Kong businessman) had sponsored lots of materials, like water and food, to support UM. He even paid a group within my triad society to protect occupiers. If the Western powers didn't give him financial support, do you think he would use his own money to support UM? (T5)

[27] Those so-called 'democrats' and 'occupiers' are not good people. They are supported by the US to create chaos in China. Occupiers were paid to sit there. At least I know some triads were paid to sit there and protect occupiers. (T1)

[28] Occupiers are being 'used' by others. In fact, many people were paid to participate in UM, with money from the US. The occupiers are no different from us (triads). We were both paid and instructed to do the task requested. (T3)

From these triads' perspectives, UM was not a simple democratic movement initiated by Hongkongers, but a 'plot' by Western powers. They saw the occupiers as involuntary participants ('pawns' in CCP securitization speak) who were being paid to do a job. Notably, the respondents' views tapped elements of the CCP's securitizing Color Revolution frames.

Triads with pro-UM perceptions

Despite most interviewed triads possessing a negative impression of UM, a few triads openly supported the movement. Shared political views with the occupiers appear to have been the main impetus for support:

> [29] I fully support students and occupiers because I believe the CCP should honor its agreement with Britain on the future of Hong Kong. Hong Kong's democracy is at risk now. The only way to safeguard our democracy is to stand up and fight for it. I also own a café in Mongkok, and my profit dropped 40% (from HK$30,000 to HK$18,000) a day. Did I ever complain to the occupiers? Students are not stupid. They are well educated with civic minds. They didn't receive any money for the occupation. They just want to fight for democracy. (T9)

T9 proffered a photo of himself taken with one of the student leaders at the Admiralty site to indicate his support for UM. Another respondent shared a similar political view to T9:

> [30] China promised to give us democracy and she should be obliged to keep her promise. I think students are doing the right thing. We need to stand up and fight for democracy. That's why I support the students. (T13)

T13 also showed us his personal Facebook page with photographs taken in the occupied sites to demonstrate his support for UM. On the other hand, some triads chose to protect students out of sympathy and for ethical reasons. T12, e.g., commented:

> [31] I think they [occupiers] are doing right. They do nothing wrong. What do you think they are here for? Is it because of personal interest? If you are not happy with them because they disturb you making money, you could ask them to leave. You don't need to beat them (T12, cited from Apple Daily [2014b] video interview).

A follow-up interview with T12 confirmed that the content of the video was accurate. He expressed sympathy towards the occupiers. He believed the triads should stick with the underworld and that using violence against innocent civilians was unrighteous. Overall, while pro-UM triads acted out of agency, triads were found to be predominately pro-establishment, believing that UM was supported by Western powers with the aim of creating political turmoil in Hong Kong to cause trouble for China.

DISCUSSION

Broadly speaking, several factors affected triad interventions in UM. Firstly, financial incentives significantly motivated the securitization actors or extralegal protectors. Triads were commissioned to protect or attack occupiers. They are basically 'violent entrepreneurs' (Ong 2018), taking advantage of the political turmoil to provide violence or coercion to make money. Secondly, the decline in business in triad-run mahjong parlors and minibus routes in the Mongkok site suggests that triads were not thugs-for-hire but genuine stakeholders who suffered financial losses, which motivated them to end the occupation by violent means. Thirdly, triads recognized that their mainland business operations were contingent on the CCP's tolerance of their underworld and gray business activities. Patriotic education served as a securitizing warning to the triads not to challenge or defy the Chinese authorities. Against this backdrop, they were resigned to serve as securitization actors for the regime. As such, they are not simply thugs-for-hire, they are triads who are mainlandized or incorporated into the United Front.

Previous research and the present study reveal that triad societies have been absorbed by the regime in three phases: 1) patriotic triads phase under the United Front state policy in early-1990s (Lo 2010); 2) mainlandization phase since mid-1990s (Lo 2007; 2012) and 3) securitization phase since UM in 2014 (see Fig. 1). The United Front is a state policy that aims to form alliance with different groups to fight against a common enemy, the Western capitalist power, and to defend the basic interests of CCP. Under this policy, CCP unified unaligned triad groups that were associated with the Operation Yellowbird or Taiwan into a front and labelled them as patriotic triads (Lo 2010). In terms of the crime–state relations (see Table 1), the unaligned triads are competitive rather than collaborative (Barnes 2017). The United Front policy absorbs them to form an 'alliance' relations. However, it is not the kind of 'integration' proposed by Barnes (2017) or 'symbiotic' relations by Lupsha (1996) because with one-party dictatorship, the CCP does not share power with any other actor—licit or illicit—to which it only temporarily delegates power. It is the CCP that determines the relationship with organized crime.

Mainlandization is defined by Sonny Lo (2007) as the 'policy of making Hong Kong politically more dependent on Beijing, economically more reliant on the Mainland's support, socially more patriotic toward the motherland, and legally more reliant on the interpretation of the Basic Law by the PRC National People's Congress' (Lo 2007: 186). Backed by huge economic success in Mainland China, mainlandization is a process of acculturation of Hong Kong that attempts to assimilate Hongkongers in the triumph of convergence with the Mainland. In recent years, Hongkongers, including triads, have benefited extensively from China's rapid economic growth. The triads have now become drug addicts because they took so many Chinese sweets they are totally dependent on mainland China (Lo *et al.* 2020).

During the securitization phase, the regime claimed that the occupations posed a deadly threat to Chinese national security and took extraordinary security measures to suppress UM. The employment of triads was designed to aggressively disperse, discredit and intimidate occupiers and their supporters as well as to strategically construct spectacular images of upheaval surrounding UM, thereby giving credence to duplicitous regime security claims and discourses. These exceptional securitization moves performed by non-state securitization actors (triads) strategically enacted an assemblage of securitization frames of violence to avoid higher-level security costs posed by overt violent repression by state securitization actors, the police. As frontline non-state securitization actors, triads acted as agent provocateurs to infiltrate UM and conducted several unsavoury activities, including media manipulation, inciting violence and
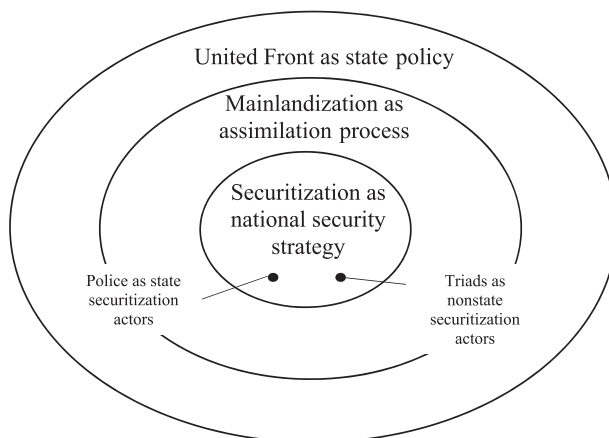

Fig. 1. Relations between United Front, mainlandization and securitization.

provoking the police. They were mobilized by Party-state securitization discourses that called for the Hong Kong masses to safeguard China's interests against the Western-instigated Color Revolution.

Under the Color Revolution securitization frame (Garrett 2017) and patriotic triad discourse (Lo 2010; Purbrick 2019) deployed by the Chinese authorities, triads are supposed to have a patriotic obligation to suppress UM, legally or illegally, peacefully or violently. They were covertly tasked to deploy violence on behalf of the Party-state when it was politically problematic for the regime itself to take overt violent coercive action against the occupiers using the police for fear of international sanctions. This is in line with Ong's (2018: 689) contention that thugs-for-hire 'offer the authoritarian state unique advantages in blame avoidance and cost minimization not afforded by the traditional coercive state machinery'.

The framing of UM as a national security threat and in a national security context puts the 'thugs-for-hire' to safeguard China's interests firmly into the securitization framework. This remains the case even if one considers, like Gambetta (1993), that the role of the mafia in providing extralegal protection services to a state institution when the state was ostensibly unwilling or unable to sufficiently or effectively provide itself to secure private property (Wang 2014). In the context of UM, the threatened referents were state prerogatives, such as China's sovereignty, national security and development interests and Hong Kong's apparatchiks, prosperity and stability.

Furthermore, contentions that democracy creates opportunities for criminal organizations to infiltrate politics (Paoli 2003) are not applicable in the case of triad involvement during UM because triads were recruited (and then discarded) by the regime (as opposed to 'stepping in') as non-state securitization actors and were part of the Party-state's broader securitization of the pro-democracy movement. Moreover, Hong Kong is not a democratic society, even though until recently it had broad liberal freedoms and partially free and fair elections. Instead, at the time of UM, Hong Kong was a competitive authoritarian regime (Levitsky and Way 2010). Since then, however, Hong Kong's political system has regressed to almost a fully authoritarian regime as elections have been nullified, opposition members in the legislature purged, protests limited, political parties and candidates banned from political contention and dissidents jailed.

The CCP's United Front system seeks to co-opt, neutralize or destroy all challengers or interlopers. Infiltration by triads is simply not possible, or its threat is much reduced, in the Chinese system and its watered-down implementation in Hong Kong given the tremendous scope and resources of the United Front to co-opt both Hong Kong society and its underworld. China's Hong Kong policies and United Front operations, for instance, are ultimately controlled by the CCP, and the opportunities for criminal organizations to infiltrate and hijack politics are scarce. Therefore, the state and thugs-for-hire relationship is 'functional only if the state is able to maintain the upper hand over the violent agents' (Ong 2018: 680).

That is not to say that triads do not operate within the Hong Kong hegemonic forces (because they do) but rather that Party-state-triad collusion exists as a part of the patriotic triad policy under the United Front. As contended by Lo (2010), patriotic triads have, in effect, received a certificate of patriotism that acts like a passport for accessing licit business opportunities in the mainland. The same phenomenon exists in Hong Kong, albeit differently, with the existence of a 1C2S apartheid-like system that privileges patriots (including patriotic triads) above all others and discriminates against perceived enemies, such as the pro-democracy dissidents. This, too, is a CCP United Front securitization policy to co-opt and control society and the underworld, who, in turn, become—on demand—securitization actors and implement extraordinary security measures for the regime (Garrett 2017). In short, as part of the United Front, patriotic triads become temporary allies or subordinates but not the CCP's equals or partners. Despite this totalitarian-leaning authoritarian turn in Hong Kong, contrary to Varese and Wong's (2018)

contention that an authoritarian drift may provide new opportunities for triads as Party-state enforcers, triads are likely to be left on the outside looking in for money-making opportunities as Hong Kong becomes a police state.

CONCLUSION

This paper presents a unique case of triad participation in China's securitization activities involving the quelling and pacification of political dissent under 1C2S and the CCP's new national security framework. Triads were predominantly pro-establishment and anti-UM. Some of them have 'considered themselves patriotic, but this has … been an accommodation with political powers that could facilitate the underlying criminal businesses of triad societies' (Purbrick 2019: 319). A minority of triads, however, provided extralegal protection (Gambetta 1993; Wang 2014) for the occupiers. Some were genuine supporters of UM and others opportunistic. Even within the same triad society, different groups held different political stances and supported different camps. Yet, their interventions were organized, planned, systematic, well-resourced and orchestrated at a high level, demonstrating that triad societies are *decentralized* but not *disorganized*. Despite the involvement of different triad factions, the thugs-for-hire was *monopolized* by the triads irrespective of their engagement in pro- or anti-UM activities. While the organized power, violence expertise and predatory instincts of triad society equipped triad members to be performative securitization actors in the execution of offensive or defensive security operations, triads are not simply thugs-for-hire with mercenary motives. They have complicated economic and political considerations.

Making a contribution to the field of non-Western securitization studies and organized crime, the present paper provides a practical understanding of on-the-ground securitization practices involving the clandestine or covert use of non-state securitization actors as implementers of extraordinary security measures. Moreover, the greatly broadened notion of Chinese national security under Xi Jinping opens up a wide gamut of potentially lucrative securitization 'markets' where triads could use their underworld expertise and licit business networks to safeguard China's sovereignty, security and political interests, be they related to the Belt and Road Initiative (Lo *et al.* 2020), the Sino–US trade war or the race for the future of innovation. Future research should examine how 'patriotic' triads deploy violence to resolve cross-border and international security challenges.

The major limitation of this paper is that it is more about why triads participate in protest politics in the context of Hong Kong under Xi Jinping's securitization move. Readers are left without knowing more about the mechanisms through which the Chinese Party-state controlled the triads and incentivized them to get involved in politics. These important questions remain very much unanswered, which is understandable given the political sensitivity and difficulties in accessing the research setting.

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