

# **“Golden Parachutes” and Gangbanging: Taiwanese Gangs in Suburban Southern California**

by

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## ***Abstract***

*In criminology and sociology, Asian youth gangs and gang related delinquency has been largely regarded as the result of structural disadvantage and adjustment problems in old ethnic enclaves. In other words, Asian gangs, particularly Asian immigrant gangs were frequently contextualized as a problem limited to old ethnic enclaves in inner city areas. Contrary to this perception, gang activity is observed in Southern California suburban cities with economically affluent residents. This ongoing research focuses on Taiwanese immigrant gang youths in several upper-middle class suburban Taiwanese communities in Southern California. Unlike the typical gang member, the vast majority of our respondents are privileged in their economic and social standings. They are also successful in their academic pursuits. The preliminary results of the study contradict significantly with the mainstream structure-based gang theories.*

## **Introduction**

This ongoing study examines a new breed of Chinese gangs in immigrant Taiwanese communities in Southern California. These Taiwanese immigrant youth gang members do not experience any observable economic deprivation, alienation from family and school, negative employment prospects, and disadvantaged neighborhood environment. In fact, their social, economic, and familial backgrounds are not those of the typical Chinese immigrant youth gang member (Chin, 1990, 1996; Wang, 2002).

The majority of these gang members come from wealthy families and upper-middle class suburban neighborhoods. Most parents of these gang members have either professional or entrepreneurial backgrounds. These gang members maintain close relationships with their parents, with most of them even living at home with their parents. They are also exceptional in that they maintain high academic standings in high school and normally receive higher education. Therefore, these youth gang members present a unique and challenging theoretical and conceptual problem for gang researchers. This ongoing study is designed to investigate our respondents' unique social environment and its relationship to gang membership. We are interested in exploring how their privileged backgrounds fail to prevent gang involvement.

### **Major Studies on Asian Gangs**

Traditionally in criminology and sociology ethnic youth gangs are viewed as a social problem generated by structural disadvantaged and chaotic social conditions in old ethnic enclaves (Cohen, 1955, Shaw and McKay, 1942, Thrasher, 1927). Several scholars have conducted fascinating research on Chinese and other Asian gangs. However, their studies often focus only on the old immigrant enclaves such as Chinatowns in Los Angeles, San Francisco, and New York (Chin, 1990, 1996; Joe, 1994; Kwong, 1996; Vigil and Yun, 1990, 1998, Wang, 2002) Chin Ko-lin's ground-breaking work (1990) provides the initial sociological and criminological insight on Chinese criminal organizations in New York's Chinatown. In demystifying Chinese criminal organizations, Chin suggests the primary reasons for youth gang membership in these communities range from economic strain, acculturation stress, alienation from the mainstream American society and authority, cultural conflict, isolation from families, and opportunity for economic gain (Chin, 1990, 1996). Chin argues vibrant gang activity and the illegitimate economy in these areas must be considered in conjunction with the level of isolation from the mainstream American society and culture. In another study, Vigil and Yun (1990, 1998) examined Vietnamese gang members in Southern California. Their results also suggest gang members also experience a similar set social conditions referred as multiple marginalization. Among these youth, disadvantaged socioeconomic conditions, acculturation stress, poor academic performance, rejections from teachers and school officials, and estrangement from their families push these youth into a peripheral position in their social environment. At the same time, economic gains from gang activities functions as drawing factors for gang membership.

(See Tsunokai and Kposowa, 2002, for a review of literature on Asian Gangs research).

Therefore, in old ethnic enclaves, there exists a multitude of pro-gang membership conditions. Disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds, marginalization of the individual in multiple settings, isolation from the family, and low socioeconomic prospects are thought to favor gang participation among immigrant Asian youths.

### **Migration of the Chinese Population in Southern California**

The new suburban Chinese communities in Rowland Heights, Hacienda Heights, Diamond Bar and Walnut are the result of historical and macro changes in migration and settlement pattern of Chinese immigrants in Southern California (Fong, 2002).

The Chinatown near downtown Los Angeles is the original Chinese enclave in Southern California since the Nineteenth century. Recently, the Chinese immigrant population in Southern California began suburbanization. During the 1980's the Chinese population migrated eastward into the San Gabriel Valley Cities of Monterey Park, Alhambra, and San Gabriel. They are known as the New Chinatown. In 1990's, the eastward migration of the Chinese population continued into the suburban cities Rowland Heights, Hacienda Heights, Diamond Bar and Walnut. It is noteworthy that even though all these populations are ethnic Chinese, the cultural difference are significant among the subpopulations. In particular, three major subgroups can be distinguished, Mainlanders from the People's Republic of China, Hong Kong Chinese, and Chinese from the Republic of China, Taiwan. These subgroups tend to settle in close vicinities and form their own communities (Kwong, 1996; Zhou, 1992). Our project focuses on immigrants from the Republic of China, hereby referred as Taiwanese, and the Taiwanese populations in Rowland Heights, Hacienda Heights, Diamond Bar and Walnut.

The socioeconomic status of Chinese residents in these cities is distinctly different. According to the 2000 US Census data, in Los Angeles Chinatown the median household income is \$14,179 (US Census, 2003). In San Gabriel Valley cities the median household income is much higher. In Monterey Park, the median household income is \$40,724, San Gabriel, \$41,791, and Alhambra, \$39,213. Yet, Rowland Heights, Hacienda Heights and Walnut, the median household income is drastically higher than all these other cities. In Hacienda Heights, the median household income is \$59,485, in Rowland Heights, \$52,270 and in Walnut, \$81,015. Overall, there is at least a \$38,000 difference between these cities and the old Chinatown, and an

approximately \$20,000 difference compared to cities in the San Gabriel Valley. Thus, these newest Taiwanese populations are economically much superior to the old ethnic enclaves. While the population in old ethnic enclaves is more likely to be recent immigrant with little skills and of low socioeconomic status, the new suburban Taiwanese immigrants are often of upper-middle class backgrounds with professional standings and abundant material affluence (Fong, 1998; Kwong, 1996, 2000; Zhou, 1992, 1998).

### **A Challenge to the Current Knowledge on Asian Gangs**

With their economic abundance, these Taiwanese suburban upper-middle class families often endow their youth with significant material and social capital (Fong, 1998; Zhou, 1998). Such highly affluent Taiwanese youth are labeled as “Golden Parachutes”. Originally the term “Parachute Kids” refers to foreign-born Chinese youth from Mainland China, Hong Kong, or Taiwan who were sent by their parents to the United States to seek an education (Zhou, 1998). “Golden Parachutes” accentuates the wealthy background of specific Chinese immigrant youth in communities away from the old ethnic enclaves. High academic standings and college attendance are frequently observed among these immigrant Taiwanese youth. However, gang involvement and criminality is not uncommon. Perplexingly, these highly advantaged youths are drawn to the hardcore gang lifestyle. Therefore, “Golden Parachute” youth gangs pose a fascinating criminological question. The socioeconomic backgrounds and environment of these individuals are in direct contradictions with the current criminological theories and knowledge on gangs and Asian gangs. Therefore what are the factors contributing to the attraction, membership, and involvement in gangs?

### **Methods**

Limited resources significantly restricted our choice of methodology. Interviews were conducted with respondents who are currently or previously involved with a recognized gang in the cities of Rowland Heights, Hacienda Heights and Walnut. 22 individuals were interviewed so far. 12 of the respondents are members of locally recognized gangs. Two respondents were captains (*Dai Lo*, or Big Brother in Taiwanese) of two different gangs, and one individual was a high level gang elder (*Dai Dai Lo*, or Big Big Brother in Taiwanese). All except one respondents were male, and they were all Taiwanese in ethnicity, and age 18 to 25 with one exception.

The senior gang elder was 52 in age at the time of the interview. We specifically asked our respondents to fabricate their own pseudonyms for anonymity and to increase their confidence in our procedures and credibility. Ethnographic data collection was adopted because of the limited number of respondents willing to be interviewed. The sensitive nature of the topic discouraged many potential respondents to accept interviews. In order to overcome this obstacle, the researchers prepared a small monetary compensation (\$50) to reward the respondents. However, due to our limited economic resource, the small reward was unattractive to our affluent respondents. Initially, respondents were recruited based on personal contacts. Respondents interviewed were either acquaintance of the researchers, or third parties. Most respondents agreed to participate as favors to the researchers or the third parties. Subsequently the snowball sampling method was adopted: later respondents were recruited through personal referrals of previous respondents. Therefore most respondents agreed to partake in the project based on personal favors or curiosity. The recruitment process is ongoing.

Interviews were semi-structured: a set of general questions was prepared prior to the interviews, and the researchers improvised on the order and specifics of the questions based on the direction of the conversation. The interviews took place under informal settings such as teahouses, restaurants, or a mall. The interviews lasted from 45 minutes to several hours.

The interviews focused on the following areas: 1) biographical and familial information; 2) socioeconomic background; 3) relationships with family, friends, and school; 4) reasons for joining a gang; 5) social organization of the gang; 6) criminal activities of the gang; 7) noncriminal activities of the gang; 7) reasons for exiting the gang (if applicable); 8) relationships to the mainstream American society.

Validity and reliability presented unique challenges for the researchers. The researchers made extensive effort to increase the respondent's confidence in disclosing sensitive and potentially incriminating information. Several of our respondents maintain personal relationships with one of the researchers; therefore, it is unlikely for them to have any reasons to provide false information. Other respondents were recruited based on personal relationships with previous respondents. They considered the interviews to be personal favors to their friends. During several interviews, third parties were present to ease the tension and distrust the respondents might have had towards the researchers. Hence, the respondents might have felt the obligation to disclose their knowledge of gang activities. Data

gathered from different respondents were then cross-checked to ensure internal validity. The respondents were interviewed separately and without knowledge of other interviews or respondents. In addition, since several of our respondents were no longer involved with gangs or criminal activities, they felt more secured to reveal otherwise incriminating information. However, we recognize our data is limited in its reliability. The reader should note that the current study is an exploratory analysis; future research and increasing number of respondents will no doubt increase the reliability and validity of our data.

### **Findings**

Preliminary findings suggest some contradictions to established structure-dominated gang theories. Traditional gang research points to structural disadvantage as the primary cause of a gang-favored social context (Cohen, 1955; Hagedorn, 1991; Shaw and McKay, 1942; Wilson, 1987). In the Asian gang literature, economic deprivation is often cited as a significant factor for gang involvement (Chin, 1990, 1996; Joe, 1994; Kwong, 1996; Wang, 2002). Similarly, multiple marginality suggests Asian gang youth were marginalized and rejected from school, family, and conventional lifestyle in general (Vigil and Yun, 1990, 1998). Overall our respondents did not fit into any of these models.

All respondents belonged to locally recognized Chinese or Taiwanese gangs in Rowland Heights, Hacienda Heights, Diamond Bar and Walnut. These gangs were typically claimed to be affiliated with Chinese criminal organizations in Taiwan and Hong Kong. In the cities of Rowland Heights, Hacienda Heights, Diamond Bar and Walnut, there are several major Chinese Gangs: Four Seas (4C), Wah Ching T Side (WC T Side), United Bamboo, Red Door and 14K. Wah Ching started as an American Asian gang in San Francisco during the Nineteen Sixties (Valdez, 1996). 4C and United Bamboo originated in Taiwan, while Red Door and 14K stemmed from Hong Kong. All respondents belong to one of these organizations.

### **Gang Involvement**

All interviewed respondents can be classified as regular gang members who were intensely involved in gang activities. They spent much of their leisure time with other gang members, and maintained close ties with other members in the same gang. More importantly, all our respondents claimed to have a high degree of participation in a variety of criminal acts on behalf of their respective gang. They also claimed being a gang member was a significant part of their lives and had no reservations about displaying their

membership and involvement. As mentioned, at least one respondent is a gang elder (*Dai Dai Lo*), and another two were captains (*Dai lo*) of local sides. These *Dai Dai Lo* and *Dai Lo* provided extensive knowledge on the structure, operations, personnel, and other highly sensitive information with regard to their respective organizations.

While respondents were highly involved gang members, we were told the average gang career of low level member was relatively short. Several respondents only spent one year in the gang, and they claimed it was not atypical to leave the gang after one to two years. Once the respondents left high school and entered college, they soon drifted from their gang counterparts and ceased an active membership in the gangs. However, most respondents were not allowed to completely sever their ties with other gang members. One respondent suggested Chinese gangs had followed other ethnic gangs in subscribing to the “blood in, blood out” rule: complete and formal withdrawn was impossible and will result in death. Instead, most gang members simply minimized their active involvement and maintain loose personal friendships with other gang members. Also, several respondents told us that connections and networks made during gang membership served as personal and even legitimate business ties after active gang involvement. Future legitimate business partnerships and opportunities were frequently the results of gang involvement in the past.

### **Socioeconomic Background**

The respondents thus far shared an affluent socioeconomic background. The vast majority of our respondents grew up in families with at least a middle class background. Several respondents enjoyed upper-middle class privileges. Most parents had university or professional education. Several parents work as professionals at private corporations, own their businesses, and even serve as high-ranking officials in Taiwan or China. When asked to describe their family background, several respondents labeled their families as “rich” without hesitation.

### **Relationships with Family**

As for the respondents’ relationships with their families, surprisingly most respondents claimed they maintain close relationships with their parents. The vast majority of the respondents came from intact families with both parents present. Most respondents who still live with their families reported having minimal conflicts with their parents. Some respondents even claimed their parents acknowledged their gang involvement; nonetheless they did not have conflicts with their parents. For the respondents with

parents living and working overseas, they claimed they frequently had phone conversations and visits from their parents. All but one respondents expressed family and parents were very important to them and they had regular family gatherings and conversations. For the former gang members, they admitted their parents were a crucial reason for leaving the gang lifestyle. They expressed dire concerns for bringing shame and disgrace to their parents and families, and they did not want to continue to disappoint their parents. The role of familial relationships in the cessation of gang membership will be discussed later in this paper.

### **Academic Standing and Prospects**

All respondents had high academic standings prior to gang membership. Most of our respondents graduated from reputable high schools in the Rowland Heights and Hacienda Heights area. They are seeking higher education in either local community colleges or universities. Several respondents, in fact, are presently attending or attended schools within the University of California system. Others completed their university education, with one individual receiving a Masters degree from the University of Southern California. The respondents currently attending high school are in college-bound classes. None of the respondents experienced significant difficulties in academics. Their academic performance was not interrupted by their gang participation and they were able to maintain good academic standing while being active gang members. Most of our respondents maintained a 3.0 or above grade point average. One respondent, "Little Y", claimed being a gang member "has nothing to do with studying". Other respondents also did not see gang membership as having direct negative effects with being good students. Several respondents claimed they even had good relationships with their teachers. One respondent acknowledged his teachers' help in preventing his expulsion after a violent episode with another student. Prior to joining gangs, most respondents did not feel significantly alienated or rejected by their teachers. While in school the gang members believed they were only normal students with occasional deviance.

### **Reasons for Gang Involvement**

We then asked our respondents their reasons for joining gangs. Most respondents believed economic gain was only part of the reason. One respondent, "Mao Mao", specifically said, "I did not join our side for money. My Family is rich. I do not need money." Other respondents claimed they did not expect to receive any monetary compensation for joining the gang

initially. Only three respondents admitted economic gain was partially a motivating factor. Although all but one respondents came from wealthy families, some respondents felt that their allowance was not enough for their material desire. However, the respondents also disclosed gang leaders often recruit new members by paying for their entertainment expenses. The gang leaders often treat the gang recruits at various entertainment venues and bars as incentives for joining the gang, or as a reward for satisfactory performance of an assignment.

Another critical reason for joining gangs is an initial source of identity and emotional gratification. All but one respondents admitted to an identity dimension to their gang membership. Respondents mentioned righteousness, brotherhood, valor, loyalty, masculinity, coolness, respect, pride, security, and peer pressure as significant attractions to gang membership. Several respondents claimed monetary gain is not even a relevant factor; instead, they believed the power, respect, and pride in being a gang member was the primary motive. Several other respondents also believed they were being loyal to their brothers in joining the gangs. The members of the same gang often defended one another in violent situations. One respondent, "Lawrence", said "You have to be 'down with your homies.'" In maintaining brotherhood and loyalty, members believed they achieved righteousness, which was an extremely important character and a sign of masculinity in traditional Chinese culture.

Security was also mentioned as another motivation. The size of the gang and the invulnerability gained from the gang was extremely desirable for the respondents. By joining a gang, youth from other gangs would not dare to touch you, said another respondent "Alex". Also interesting was that several respondents joined gangs because they wanted to gain attention from females. "Chicks dig it", said "Francis". They believed females were attracted to the power, coolness and the masculine façade of being a gang member. However, most respondents ultimately turned to monetary gain in the long term.

### **Discussion and Preliminary Conclusions**

The identity dimension in our responds suggests initial reasons for gang membership for the respondents is quite similar to that of other Chinese gangs in Chinatown (Chin, 1990, 1996). In fact, the traditional ideals of righteousness and loyalty were commonly found in the rhetoric of Chinese gangs and criminal organizations. However, the identity provided by gang membership was only partial and ephemeral to the respondents. Our respondents soon turned to money as their motive in maintaining

involvement. Others simply withdrew from the gangs. We believe the respondents' high socioeconomic status, their prospects in legitimate life, and their close relationships with their families prevented a complete immersion into the gang life. Most respondents claimed their decision to withdraw from gang life was not difficult despite a high level of involvement prior to departure. Our respondents were attending school full time during their gang involvement and never expressed any doubts towards seeking a higher education. They understood a university education was in their future. In other words, these youth were living a double life. On the one hand, they conformed to the conventional life of receiving formal education and maintaining high academic status. On the other hand, they also maintained gang affiliation and committed various criminal acts. Extremely fascinating was that most suburban Chinese gang youth, according to our respondents, are capable and somewhat successful in maintaining this delicate balance between gang life and conventional school life. There appear to be no contradictions in conforming to the normative expectations of academic aspirations and being a gang member. In fact, they viewed their roles as students as an obligation to their family, while being gang members as the exercise of agency and self-assertion. Compared to other youths with disadvantaged backgrounds, our respondents were endowed with options and a distinct outlook to continue with schooling due to their privileged backgrounds. The socioeconomic environment of disadvantaged youth was a restricting one - they did not have many options in the mainstream economy beyond a minimum wage job. For our respondents, a college education was all but an intractable future. Therefore, we suspected for our respondents the excitement, gratification and the identity gained from gang life was quickly ameliorated.

Several respondents who left their gangs expressed family was the primary reason for their withdrawal. Even though there was no apparent conflict and confrontations with their parents, they felt deep regret in bringing shame and sorrow to their parents by being a gang member and getting into trouble with the law. Several respondents explicitly stated that they did not want to disappoint their parents anymore. Being close to their families seemed not to prevent them from joining gangs and being actively involved, yet, it appears that attachments to family did influence the duration and the motivation to cease active gang membership.

In addition, the respondent's high socioeconomic background and prospects in legitimate economy seemed to be a significant motivation to leave the gang. Their high socioeconomic background created additional stake for the respondents to discontinue active gang participation. Several

respondents claimed they wanted to progress onto another stage in life. Specifically, they desired to become legitimate, and they believe legitimate business is more lucrative than the risky illegitimate income. "Little Y" told us compared to working for the *Dai Dai Lo*, eventually when he obtained a bachelor degree he could start his own business with his family's money. He claimed economic gain was not as great as expected even for a *Dai Lo* of WC T Side. When the gang members performed a task or a sale, often the senior members and leaders were entitled to their shares of the profit. What was left for the individual gang member was a relatively small amount, often deemed unworthy for the risk involved. Instead, "Little Y" believed ultimately when he completed his education he could make more money with legitimate investments and businesses. Therefore, it was more logical and safe to "Little Y" to utilize his high socioeconomic status to continue their education for future legitimate economic ventures. The respondents' affluent background also intervened with the duration of their involvement. The risk of illegitimate income from drug sales, racketeering, and other criminal activities were simply too great for them and their families. They understood their gang involvement might bring risks to their parent's legitimate businesses.

In conclusion, as suggested by Vigil (1988b), the intense commitment to the gang lifestyle was often augmented by several factors: poverty, rejection from family and school, effects of racial and cultural discrimination and the social psychological identification process. In examining our respondents' duality in life, Vigil's assertion was partially supported. Most respondents initially found gang life attractive for the thrill and the identity of being a gang member. They quickly displayed a highly level of involvement in the gang and related criminal activities. Meanwhile, the youths were capable of maintaining close relationships with their families and perform well academically. Ultimately the enculturation of the gang identity did not reach the optimal effectiveness among our respondents. It is intervened by economic affluence, close ties to the family, and prospects and potentials in the legitimate economy. The risks associated with gang criminality were high, and most respondents were unwilling to jeopardize their legitimate opportunities and their families. Instead they realized with their connections and socioeconomic status, legitimate opportunities provided greater economic potential for prosperity in the future. Finally, their firm attachment to their families and parents also functioned as an intervening factor. Disappointing and distressing their parents was a powerful factor in their decision to discontinue active gang involvement. Economic affluence, high academic standing, potential for future prosperity,

and their closeness to their families did not prevent the respondents from intense gang involvement, yet these factors had powerful negative influences on the duration of membership.

Despite our limited budget and the difficulty associated with obtaining trust from new respondents, the recruitment and interview process was ongoing. We intended to further investigate the organizational and operational aspects of Taiwanese gangs in Southern California. In particular, we were interested in the command structure and the association of these gangs, their connection with the original criminal organizations in the US or in overseas, and the social organization and extent of their criminal activities. Results will further knowledge on these allegedly elusive and sensational Chinese criminal organizations, and shed light on suburban Chinese immigrant youth.

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