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## TRIAD

By Gareth-Michael Skarka

### Introduction

Throughout Chinese history there have been various groups of outlaws, rebels and bandits that have formed secret organizations. These organizations have commonly been referred to as Triads.

The Triads have been an integral part of Chinese culture and society, sometimes working with those in power; but most times working against authority. In the modern world, these secret societies are changing the face of organized crime.,

### History

To discuss the origins of the Triads leads to a strange combination of myth and history. While most of the Triad sects in operation today can only trace their actual origins to the eighteenth or nineteenth century, they all claim to be descended from secret societies dating back nearly 2000 years.

What can be proven, however, is that a Triad known as the Hung Society transformed the Triads into a network for organized crime. By the late eighteenth century, the Hung were opium dealers, smuggling opium purchased from Western merchants into China. The Qing dynasty had limited trade with the West

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through a single city, Kwangtung, and licensed merchants in the city (all Imperial appointees) grew rich through their monopoly on this trade.

It was under this system that the Hung Society and other Triads began to flourish with illicit trade, the same way that the Sicilian Mafia in the United States flourished under Prohibition. At the same time, however, the influx of drugs into China at the hands of the Triads slowly transformed the secret societies from religious and nationalist in outlook to almost entirely

profit-driven criminal enterprises.

Today, according to the United States Justice Department, there are more than 80 Triad societies in the world. Of those, the 3 largest are discussed below—but these groups only represent a small fraction of the number of actual Triads in operation.

The Sun Yee On is, by far, the largest and most powerful of the Triads. It is based in Hong Kong but has several offshoots. It is believed to be in control of over 56,000 members worldwide, with sub-organizations located in New York, Miami, San Francisco, and Los Angeles. The Sun Yee On organization in London directs the Triad-controlled drugs trade in the UK and the rest of Europe.

The 14K Triad, based in Hong Kong, has over 20,000 members within thirty subgroups. It is characterized as the principal rival of the Sun Yee On in Hong Kong. It operates throughout Chinatowns in the United States, Canada, Australia, and the Far East. It has been particularly active in heroin trafficking.

The Wo Group, with over 20,000 members is also based in Hong Kong, although major divisions of the Wo Group have bases of operation in San Francisco. Illegal gambling is the major source of cash for the Wo. Triad-related organized crime has risen in many cities in the United States, especially in the states of New York and California. According to a study of New York's Chinatown, 81 percent of the restaurants and 66 percent of other

businesses are victimized by Triads, or Triad-related gangs. New York is recognized as the center of Chinese organized crime in the U.S., while places such as Orange County, California are estimated to have over 80 Indo-Chinese gangs in the region.

European Triad activity is occurring in areas with large, established Chinese communities reside, including Amsterdam, London, Manchester and Glasgow. In London, drug smuggling is primarily controlled by the Triads, in particular the Sun Yee On bringing in heroin and opium from the Golden Triangle.

In the Netherlands a small Triad known as the Tai Huen Tsai, made up of former Red-Guard exiles, military trained men from the People's Republic of China, has a monopoly on Dutch heroin trade, where it was involved in production and supply.

## Triad Organization

Over 2000 years of history, the Triads are still run according to the basic organizational structure that the secret societies followed for millennia.

Even to this day, there are non-criminal Triad organizations throughout China and in Chinese communities worldwide, who run humanitarian, civic or business efforts using similar membership structures as their more infamous counterparts.

## The Grand Council

The basic Triad structure divides the society between two main leaders (essentially a boss and an underboss) who each guide the day-to-day operations of the Triad. The boss of the organization is known as the *Shan Chu* ("Mountain Master"), although he is usually referred to by the nickname *Dai Lo* ("Elder Brother") as a sign of respect. The primary underboss is known as the *Fu Shan Chu* ("Deputy Mountain Master"), known to the membership by the nickname *Yee Lo* ("Second Eldest Brother").

Beneath the *Shan Chu* and the *Fu Shan Chu* are what are referred to as the Ritual Officers. These individuals are highly-respected elder members of the society, who act as trusted advisors to the boss. These Ritual Officers are known as the *Heung Chu* ("Incense Master") and the *Sin Fung* ("Vanguard").

## The Rank and File

Beneath the Ritual Officers in the hierarchy are the divisional chiefs. The *Pak Tze Sin* ("White Paper Fan") is the Triad's primary strategist and advisor, a position similar to the *Consiglieri* of the Mafia. The *Cho Hai* ("Straw Sandal") is the communications officer—the messenger, the diplomat, responsible for all dealings between gangs and negotiations with other Triads.

The most numerous divisional chief position within a Triad is that of the *Hung Kwan* ("Red Pole"), who historically were the fighters of the secret societies, but now are territorial



underbosses, similar to the *Capo* of the Mafia, each of whom run their own crew of approximately 15 active members.

These lower-tier members are referred to within the organization by the numerical code of “49”. A 49 is the equivalent of a “made man” in the Mafia. Each 49 usually has lesser criminals, officially unaffiliated with the Triad, who follow their orders. These criminals, often street gang members and other young, low-level thugs, are referred to as *Lam Tang Lung* (“Blue Lanterns”),

and are considered provisional members, ready to be made into 49s once they’ve proven themselves.

## **Triad Operations**

The Triads utilize many different crimes as their primary income sources. Not all of a Triad's income comes from illegal operations, though. The Triads have their fingers in many legitimate business all over the world, making it hard to separate their illicit income from profits made through legal sources.

### **Drugs**

The Triads traditionally control the production and shipment of opium, and its more potent form, heroin, by controlling the Golden Triangle, consisting of Thailand, Laos and Myanmar. The Golden Triangle is the point of origin for

more than half of the world's heroin.

A unit of heroin (1 kilogram) currently costs between \$120,000 and \$180,000 wholesale. Comparatively, a kilogram of cocaine has dropped in price over recent years, to \$25,000. Golden Triangle heroin, which is also known as “China White,” is the primary source of income for the Triads.

### **Gambling**

Although gambling may not be as lucrative as

trafficking in narcotics, it has always been a major source of revenue and a core criminal activity of the Triads.

Casinos are often run with Triad involvement, where they can combine other criminal enterprises at the location, such as prostitution, drugs and especially money laundering (the conversion of illegal profits into untraceable cash income). Illegal gambling operations can be run anywhere, but it is in their involvement with legal casinos that the Triads stand to make the most money. Macao, which has been called “the Las Vegas of the Orient,” has become a major center of Triad gambling activities in Asia.

### **Prostitution**

Triad-run prostitution dates back 150 years, when expatriate Chinese communities were predominantly male. Triads would import girls for Chinese men who either did not wish to mix with local women or were barred from doing so. The girls, usually teenagers and sometimes as young as twelve, were often purchased from families who sold them to avoid loss of face because of an inability to provide a marriage dowry.

Prostitutes today are not usually sold, but are enticed abroad with promises of a better life—but they are shipped, often illegally, to a foreign country, unable to speak the local language and virtually trapped.

### **Immigrant Smuggling**

Immigrant smuggling is a very big business

with a high profit margin. It can be run in combination with other activities such as narcotics trafficking, or especially prostitution (as many Triad prostitutes are illegal immigrants). Illegal immigrants are charged for passage to the United States, which ranges from \$10,000 to \$40,000 per person. Usually the people being smuggled do not pay the entire charge before departure—the immigrant, or his relatives, become indebted to the smuggling organization, and most work off this debt, often in other illegal operations.

In 1993, a ship called the Golden Venture ran aground in New York Harbor. Onboard were 281 illegal immigrants, six of whom drowned trying to swim to shore. Each passenger had paid between \$15,000 and \$35,000 for the journey—half to two-thirds of which was profit for the smugglers. That adds up to at least \$4 million for a boatload of illegal immigrants. It is estimated that there are up to 100,000 illegal aliens smuggled by the Triads into the United States every year, representing a profit of billions of dollars. It also is relatively risk-free for the Triads—as opposed to the harsh sentences (and violent competition) associated with narcotics trafficking, the penalties for immigrant smuggling are practically nonexistent—a conviction is punishable by a maximum sentence of five years in jail.

### IP Theft

Over recent decades, the Triads have begun to engage in the theft of intellectual property, producing and selling knock-offs of everything ranging from CDs and DVDs to designer

clothing. High-tech crimes, especially computer chip theft, are also on the rise, and may become one of the most profitable crimes committed by Triads. Once chips are stolen, they are practically untraceable because the chips have no registration numbers. While stolen jewelry is sold for 20 percent of its value, computer chips can be resold for as much as 80 percent.

## Against The Triads

The Triads form an excellent backdrop for adventures in many different eras of d20 play. Their long history makes them suitable for many different campaign settings:

### Kung Fu Tales

Early secret societies, the progenitors of the Triads (such as the Red Eyebrows or the Hung Fa, for example) make excellent adversaries for d20 campaigns emulating the fast and furious action of Martial Arts films.

You could even take a page from the *Once Upon A Time in China* series of films, and set the adventures during the turmoil of the 19th century—in which case the Hung Society might serve as the villains of the piece...or perhaps the PCs are members of the Hung themselves, defending China against unscrupulous men bent on robbing Her treasures!

### Pulp

Nothing says “inscrutable menace” quite like a Triad gang operating in the Chinatown of the PC’s campaign city. Look to films like *Big Trouble in Little China* for inspiration on using

the Triads with magic and monsters for an extra kick!

### Modern Adventure

Of course, the Triads can be used as enemies in any modern law-enforcement, military or espionage campaign. Their involvement with the international drug trade has them involved in conflict with everyone from street-level detectives (tracking down a prostitution ring) to secret Black Ops squads (going after their private army-guarded poppy fields in the Golden Triangle).

To take a John Woo spin on the usual story, have your players portray members of the Triads themselves, playing out epic blood-spattered tales of honor, revenge and redemption in the Hong Kong underworld.

## Triad NPCs

What follows are sample NPCs from the levels of the Triad organization that PCs are most likely to interact with:

### Blue Lantern

*(Lam Tang Lung, Street Level Thug)*

#### Tough Ordinary 1 CR 1;

Medium-size humanoid; HD 1d10+1; HP 7; Mas 13; Init +2; Spd 30 ft; Defense 13, touch 13, flatfooted 11 (+0 size, +2 Dex, +1 class); BAB +0; Grap +2; Atk +2 melee (1d4+2, knife), or +2 ranged (2d6+0, 9mm SMG); FS 5 ft by 5 ft; Reach 5 ft; SQ ; AL Triad; SV Fort +2, Ref +2, Will +0; AP 0; Rep +0; Str 15, Dex 14, Con 13, Int 12, Wis 10, Cha 8.



**Occupation:** Criminal (Gamble, Knowledge [Streetwise])

**Skills:** Climb +3, Craft (mechanical)

+2, Drive +3, Gamble

+1, Intimidate

+0, Knowledge (Current Events)

+2, Knowledge

(Popular Culture)

+2, Knowledge

(Streetwise) +4, Read/Write

Language +2 (Cantonese, Mandarin), Speak

Language +2 (Cantonese, Mandarin), Spot +2, Survival +1

**Feats:** Brawl, Personal Firearms Proficiency

**Possessions:** knife, 9mm Pistol; Wealth +6

“49”

(Made Men)

**Strong Hero 2 CR 2;**

Medium-size humanoid; HD 2d8+2; HP 7; Mas 9; Init +1; Spd 30 ft; Defense 13, touch 13, flatfooted 12 (+0 size, +1 Dex, +2 class); BAB +2; Grap +5; Atk +5 melee (1d4+4, knife), or +3 ranged (2d6+0, 9mm SMG); FS 5 ft by 5 ft; Reach 5 ft; SQ ; AL Triad; SV Fort +1, Ref +1, Will -1; AP 1; Rep +0; Str 16, Dex 12, Con 9, Int 14, Wis 9, Cha 12.

**Occupation:** Criminal (Gamble, Knowledge [Streetwise])

**Skills:** Climb +5, Gamble +1, Jump +5, Knowledge (Current Events) +3, Knowledge (Popular Culture) +3, Knowledge (Streetwise) +6, Knowledge (Tactics) +4, Profession +1, Read/Write Language +3 (Cantonese, Mandarin, English), Repair +3, Speak Language +3 (Cantonese, Mandarin, English), Swim +6



+3; Str 14, Dex 13, Con 17, Int 12, Wis 10, Cha 16.

**Occupation:** Criminal (Forgery, Knowledge [Streetwise])

**Skills:** Bluff +8, Climb +4, Concentration +4, Disguise +5, Drive +6, Forgery +3, Gather Information +5, Intimidate +7, Knowledge (Current Events) +2, Knowledge (Streetwise) +8, Profession +6, Read/Write Language +3 (Cantonese, Mandarin, English), Speak Language +3 (Cantonese, Mandarin, English), Spot +1, Survival +1

**Feats:** Brawl, Deceptive, Double Tap, Personal Firearms Proficiency, Point Blank Shot, Streetfighting

**Talents (Tough Hero):** Robust, Second Wind

**Talents (Charismatic Hero):** Coordinate

**Possessions:** knife, 9mm Pistol; Wealth +10

**Feats:** Brawl, Combat Martial Arts, Personal Firearms Proficiency, Streetfighting

**Talents (Strong Hero):** Melee Smash

**Possessions:** knife, 9mm Pistol; Wealth +8

**Red Pole**

(Hung Kwan, Capo)

**Tough Hero 3/Charismatic Hero 2 CR 5;**

Medium-size humanoid; HD 3d10+9 plus 2d6+6 plus 3; HP 42; Mas 17; Init +1; Spd 30 ft; Defense 14, touch 14, flatfooted 13 (+0 size, +1 Dex, +3 class); BAB +3; Grap +5; Atk +5 melee (1d4+2, knife), or +4 ranged (2d6+0, 9mm Pistol); FS 5 ft by 5 ft; Reach 5 ft; SQ ; AL Triad; SV Fort +7, Ref +4, Will +1; AP 2; Rep

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