

## **POLICING MINORITY STREET CORNER GANGS IN SINGAPORE: A VIEW FROM THE STREET**

N. GANAPATHY\* and LIAN KWEN FEE†

*Department of Sociology, National University of Singapore, ASI, 03-31,  
11 Arts Link, Singapore 119260*

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This article examines the evolution and manifestation of the Social Disciplinary model of policing in Singapore, a model which eschews concern for both legal and factual guilt, concentrating instead on the task of subjugating sections of society who are viewed as 'anti-police'. We argue that understanding the experiences of minority gang members as recipients of such policing has to be set in the context of the symbiotic relationship that exists between the police and *institutionalized* secret societies, which has been responsible for the reproduction of social order in the criminal underworld. Street corner gangs comprising lower class ethnic minority Indians are considered by the police as a 'problem population' because of their potential to upset the symbiotic relationship. A consequence of this form of policing is that minority gangs occupy a marginal status in the illegitimate society and exhibit characteristics akin to a 'retreatist' gang.

*Keywords:* Policing; Minority gangs; Secret societies; Social order; Illegitimate society; Singapore

### **FRAMING THE PROBLEM**

Academics researching the police have traditionally concentrated on the role of the police in the repression of crime, public disorder and popular political movements. Some have studied from an administrative point of view (Storch, 1976). The roles and functions of the police, and the extent to which they are legitimated in contemporary modern societies, have historically been evaluated in terms of Packer's crime control and due process models of justice (Packer, 1968; Bunyan and Bridges, 1983; Baldwin, 1985; Dixon *et al.*, 1990; Dixon, 1992; Irving and McKenzie, 1989; McBarnet, 1981; McConville *et al.*, 1991). These models of justice while representing two contrasting 'complexes of values', reveal how they tend to compete for priority in the operation of the criminal justice process. The crime control model operates on the assumption that the primary purpose of a criminal process is to repress crime, and therefore it endorses procedures that *efficiently* screen suspects, determine guilt and secure appropriate punishment for those convicted of crime. In contrast to this, the organizing matrix of the due process model is the proposition that the state has to prove guilt beyond

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\*Corresponding author. E-mail: socng@nus.edu.sg

†soclkf@nus.edu.sg

reasonable doubt to a judicial tribunal by overcoming evidential and procedural obstacles. While the crime control model favours extra-judicial and administrative procedures that will expedite the securing of conviction of a suspect, the due process model is concerned to minimize the possibility of investigative powers such as arrest, detention and questioning being misused, or used in an oppressive fashion.

Although Packer's models describe two very different methods of determining the issue of guilt and innocence, both models involve a dialogue with legal rules (Choongh, 1998). In other words, adherents of both models accept that the processes advocated are to be activated solely for the purpose of enforcing substantive criminal law – each police procedure is but part of a process to legal adjudication. This means that the police, regardless of which of the two models are in operation must be able to account for and justify their actions by reference to the objectives of that model. Increasingly however, the concept of legal rationality which underlies both of Packer's models, fails to explain the experiences of a significant minority of individuals where policing is not geared towards enforcement of the criminal law but towards the achievement of police-defined objectives. In such cases, the police do not invoke the criminal justice process because they never intend to charge the individuals who were found to have breached substantive law. From the outset, these cases are defined as *police* rather than *criminal* cases since the police view the police station as the end rather than the beginning of a criminal process leading to adjudication. This form of policing practice is better explained by reference to the Social Disciplinary model of policing which eschews concern for both legal and factual guilt, concentrating instead on the task of subjugating sections of society who are viewed as anti-police (Choongh, 1988: 623) and can pose a potential threat to public order.

This police system of justice was first documented by McConville and Mirsky (1995) when they observed how a New York City court extracted guilty pleas from defendants. Basically it involved "a highly coercive drama in which defendants are first shown (by being made to watch others) that they will suffer greatly increased penalties if they refuse to plead guilty, and in which they are given their fifteen seconds to accept or reject the pleas and sentences offered to them by 'calendar judges'" (McConville and Mirsky, 1995). The researchers noted that the facts of the case were of little consequence to judges and lawyers, witnesses were not called to testify, and the propriety of policing and reliability of police evidence routinely went unquestioned by presiding judges. In a later study conducted by Choongh (1998), the Social Disciplinary model of policing was also seen to be relevant to documenting the experiences of non-whites in the south of England where they were routinely subjected to police surveillance and subjugation, short of any form of criminal investigation. Choongh's study has been instrumental to exposing an alternative 'communicative' feature of the criminal justice system, one that is designed to communicate police contempt for a particular community and to demonstrate that the police have absolute control over those who challenge the right of the police to define and enforce 'normality' (Choongh, 1988: 626). This 'communicative' feature, he argues, stands in contrast to those advocated by the crime control and due process models that are concerned with the suppression of crime and protection of individual's rights respectively.

Although Choongh's analytical framework documents a police practice that departs from traditional assessments of the ethical role of the police in contemporary liberal societies, it falls short of contextualizing it. The problem with Choongh's analytical

framework – one that stems from an intellectual and philosophical standpoint – is that the question of *sufficiency* remains. Is it enough, in other words, to identify the social disciplinary practices of the police as yet *another* form of policing method and/or to conclude that it is discriminatory (or otherwise)? If orthodox sociologists have tended not to problematize this aspect, Marxists have insisted on doing so (Jefferson, 1988). As Baton succinctly puts it, once Marxism had issued a challenge to orthodox sociology in this aspect, this meant that “it [Social Disciplinary model of policing] had become the *explanandum* (that which is to be explained) instead of being part of an *explanans* (that which explains)” (Banton, 1987: 148). The reason why the simple identification of the Social Disciplinary model of policing as a form of policing contingency is insufficient as an explanation is, because it fails to address the question of transformation: how does such a method arise? What induces it? What function does it serve? Who benefits from it? Under what circumstances does it take place? How is it organized around the structural variables of class and race? In other words, the analysis lacks the “broader picture” which requires that the social disciplinary model be situated both historically and structurally.

It is against this conceptual framework that this article examines the use of the Social Disciplinary model of policing by the Singapore police. It describes the kind of policing practice used by officers from the Secret Societies Suppression Branch (SSB) of the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) to subject members of a minority street corner gang comprising South Indian Tamils to surveillance and control. The objective of such a policing method is to prevent these street corner gangs from gaining a foothold in the criminal underworld so that the police are able to preserve and protect the symbiotic relationship that they have historically established with the more institutionalized Chinese secret societies. The concern is with the police objective of reproducing social control over the criminal underworld by way of maintaining authority over lower class ethnic minorities who disproportionately tend to form and become part of these street corner gangs. Street corner gangs are considered by the police as a ‘problem population’ in the criminal underworld because of their potential to upset the symbiotic relationship and therefore merit particular attention. This ‘attention’ can assume the form of stop and search practices, detention without trial, detention in police stations, ‘questionings’, ‘status degradation ceremonies’, extracting deference and inflicting summary punishment. A consequence of this form of policing is that the minority street corner gangs continue to occupy a marginal status in the illegitimate society and exhibit characteristics akin to a ‘retreatist’ gang (Cloward and Ohlin, 1960). Before we deal with the dynamics of the social disciplinary model of policing in understanding the experiences of the street corner gang members, a history of these marginalized gangs and the symbiotic relationship which the police have with the Chinese secret societies is relevant.

## UNDERSTANDING MINORITY GANGS

There is a dearth of literature on the phenomenon of gangs in Singapore and the few that deal with it are limited to the study of Chinese secret societies. There is still relatively little empirical knowledge about street corner gangs, their structures or organization, or about the processes by which they facilitate crime (if indeed they did so). Our fieldwork indicated that street corner gangs in Singapore consist disproportionately

of lower class ethnic Tamil minorities. Although historically it has been documented that gangs began as local groups arising from the social and defensive needs of particular ethnic and migrant communities in the U.S. and Britain (Campbell and Muncer, 1989) there is no evidence to suggest that early South Asian migrants in Singapore had formed *organizations*, formal or informal comparable to that of Chinese immigrants, to protect their interests (Mani, 1993).<sup>1</sup> Several factors may have contributed to this. The vast majority of Indian immigrants in Malaya were employed as plantation labour. They contributed to 75 per cent of the total plantation labour workforce in the pre-War years (Arasaratnam, 1979: 38). The rest were recruited as labourers in the public works and in mid-range positions in the colonial administration such as clerks, interpreters, overseers, and teachers. Recruitment was carried out by British companies with the help of the colonial authorities in Malaya and India. In contrast, Chinese labour was organized by independent Chinese commercial interests that relied on clan associations and secret societies to recruit and control the large numbers of cheap indentured labourers from southern China (Elson, 1992: 147–48). Furthermore, the *kangany* system practiced in the recruitment and employment of Indian labour created a situation in which independence of action was discouraged; repatriation could always be relied on in case of difficulties (Arasaratnam, 1979: 136). The *kangany* was an immigrant labourer holding a senior position in the plantation, and was sent by his employer to recruit workers from his village or district (*ibid*: 16). Such a method encouraged families to migrate and reinforced a personal relationship between the workers and the *kangany*, to whom the former could seek security and advice, at the same time retaining strong ties with the village of origin. As a consequence, Indian migrants were dependent on the authorities and the companies for security and protection of their interests, bypassing channels that could be extra-legal. The other reason for the absence of community organization in local Indian society was that the Indian migrant population till the late 1950s had been largely transient. It was easier, quicker and less expensive for Indians to return to their homeland than for the Chinese (Smith, 1964: 176). Moreover, political conditions in India and China encouraged the Indians to return but deterred the Chinese respectively. The Depression of the 1930s drove more Indians back to India than Chinese to China. Independence in India in 1947 precipitated another exodus of Indians from Malaya (*ibid*: 182). The communist victory in the civil war in China in 1949 effectively closed the option for those Chinese, particularly the China-born, to return. There was no incentive nor was it feasible for the South Indians to evolve local organizations to cater to their long-term interests.

Between 1947 and 1957 the Indian population in Singapore, two thirds of whom were migrants from Malaya in search of better opportunities, increased rapidly (Hill and Lian, 1995: 49). The drift to the towns had begun since the Depression, when the Indians realized the uncertainty of employment in the plantations, and accelerated as a consequence of economic disruption in the War years (Arasaratnam, 1979: 42). In the 1950s, British companies divested their investments resulting in the sub-division of large estates and the displacement of plantation labour. By then, the younger

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<sup>1</sup>The first organization to be formed was the Tamil Representative Council in 1952 comprising about 52 Tamil social organizations. This movement consisted largely of middle-class and working class Tamils, and it pursued efforts to have the monogamy in marriage for all Indians, Tamil linguistic purity, blossoming of Tamil literature, social reform and promotion of the Tamil language.

generation no longer perceived plantation work as an attractive future and went in search of better educational and economic opportunities in the urban centers. Members of the street corner gang that we observed were children of the second generation of Tamil labourers in Singapore. These gang members have experienced little upward social mobility, engaging mainly in menial or manual labour. They work in lowly or daily paid jobs like storekeepers, assistants to drivers, construction workers, cleaners, stall assistants and shipyard workers. A few of the members were unemployed. In effect, they have been economically marginalized. Having been structurally excluded from legitimate opportunities for status and success (Cohen, 1955), these members often reacted by banding together to develop their own distinctive goals, values and rules of conduct. These ‘subcultures’ provided a framework within which these members could achieve status of a different kind: for example exhibiting ‘toughness’ through excessive consumption of alcohol, having women beside them while engaging in ‘masculine’ pursuits or using violence as means of problem-solving. They also took on a life of their own, acting as repository for these alternative values and transmitting them to the younger generation. Though proponents of the subcultural theory like Albert Cohen (1955) have viewed these subcultural values as literally ‘anti-social’ – directly opposed to dominant middle class culture – there is evidence to suggest that the gang members in our study had not abandoned conventional values altogether. Issues which are of importance to the middle-class such as having a good education, career and family were still considered desirable by the members despite the pessimism they expressed about the chances of achieving them. A sustained period of economic growth on the island since the mid-1970s, the stress on educational performance, and comparisons with peers in the Tamil community who had done well contributed to these aspirations. As a member recollected his experience:

There was a time when I wanted to study hard, join the police or the army and earn enough...but no my father, mother and my five brothers all will tell me not to study but instead to work in the hawker centers as a cleaner and rubbish collector. They say that the family needs the money and that I must also contribute. They will tell me that family comes first then only education and personal things. I wish I want to give the education I missed to my daughter who is two years old now. Whether I can afford is a different thing as I earn only five hundred dollars a month as a cleaning supervisor

The term ‘subculture’ is often used in a fairly abstract sense in the academic literature, and it is usually associated with that of the ‘*gang*’ (Maguire, 1996: xvi). Whether this group of members whose ages range between fifteen and thirty-five constitute a ‘gang’ begs further scrutiny. Miller (1975) in a major national survey of gangs put forward a set of definitional criteria which was derived from police and youth agency personnel as follows:

A gang is a group of recurrently associating individuals with identifiable leadership and internal organization, identifying with or claiming control over territory in the community, and engaging either individually, or collectively in violent or other forms of illegal behaviour

The ‘*Satu Hati*’ gang – which means “one heart” in the Malay Language – (the focus of our study) meets the criteria established by Miller although it must be emphasized that the gang was more diffuse in membership and structure than Miller’s definition would suggest. More importantly, members saw themselves as *belonging* to a gang and in the process maintained a level of *ethnic* cohesion amongst them. Taking into account how gang members define ‘gangs’ and ‘gang memberships’ has been

instrumental to developing alternative theoretical perspectives on the gang phenomenon (Peterson, 2000) and in particular, the methodological utility of such an approach has been evident in contemporary gang research (Miller, 1998; Decker and Van Winkle, 1996). Following such an approach, our fieldwork data suggest that ethnic affiliation is the defining feature of the Satu Hati gang as a member recounted what it means to be part of the gang:

... I will give up my life to be here, to support my brothers in times of trouble. We are brothers because we are all Indians and nobody can take that away from us. You know, I follow the saying very solidly... born as an Indian, die as an Indian... I am willing to die to keep my [skin]colour. We are all one...

Because the members of Satu Hati are from a visible ethnic minority who occupy an economically disadvantaged position, ethnic self-identification became a central criterion in gang affiliation and solidarity. Gang members recruited predominantly Tamils from their own area with an average ten-block perimeter but this was not overly emphasized. There were occasions when individuals from other precincts were recruited. Gang members congregated at a local coffee shop in a Housing and Development Board (HDB) township<sup>2</sup> everyday in the evenings and they claimed “rights” to the tables placed at the fringes of the coffee shop. At least fifteen to twenty members congregated at any one time and the number could rise to thirty during weekends. Each member contributed a certain amount of money to the senior member of the gang in advance toward the payment of food and beer. Typically, singing and clapping of hands accompanied their drinking sessions, though the carnival like mood could potentially turn riotous, triggered especially by stares from members of the Chinese secret society who ‘controlled’ the coffee shop.

The coffee shop was indeed a site of conflict between the Indian gang and Chinese secret society members as each group fought over what Cloward and Ohlin (1960) had termed as the illegitimate opportunity structure which the coffee shop represents: the Indian gang sought to gain access to and control of the illegitimate opportunity structure while the Chinese secret society defended it as it provides the key access to participation in an established criminal subculture – the secret society. Participation in a criminal subculture, in addition to being a source of revenue in exchange for offering “protection” to coffee shop stall owners, has been a symbol of power and prestige secret society members enjoyed in the criminal underworld. Furthermore, the availability of the illegitimate opportunity and learning structure provided an “integrated” stable environment in which younger Chinese teenagers may realistically recognize the potentiality for personal progress in the (illegitimate) community through participation in the illegitimate network. In this way, Chinese secret society activities constituted “a training ground for acquisition of skill in the use of violence, concealment of offense, evasion of detection and arrest, and the purchase of immunity from punishment” (Cloward, 1959: 172).

A senior police officer’s comment captures this succinctly:

... in my view the people who are most fucked are the Indians and Malays if you take into consideration their lives in Singapore. Why I say this because the Chinese good or bad somehow can and seem to survive. If they study hard, go to good school, have nice families, they can get a good job and be stable. But for some Chinese they do not have all these but they *still* seem to survive because they have all the connections to take them through. In my experience, I’ve come across Chinaman who do

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<sup>2</sup>These are state-subsidized housing projects.

not know even how to spell or write their names but they still can drive around in Mercedes Benzes and Jaguars. . . just imagine what these people's occupation are and what are they up to? For Indians and Malays, if they don't study hard, they are fucked for life!

Importantly, our data suggest that while *class* as a variable has been instrumental to understanding the marginalization of South Indians in the legitimate society, *ethnicity* seems relevant to understanding the marginalization of *Indian* gang members in the illegitimate society because of the monopolization of access to (illegal) opportunity and learning structures by the *Chinese* secret societies. In this respect, Indian gangs come to exhibit the characteristics of a 'retreatist gang' (Cloward and Ohlin, 1962) – a term that aptly describes the "double-failure" situation of the Indian gang members in both the legitimate and illegitimate society.

What at first appeared to be latent in the dynamics of control and distribution of opportunity and learning structures in the illegitimate society, however, surfaced rather dramatically in the course of our fieldwork – that of the role of the police. As mentioned earlier in the article, the police have a vested interest in maintaining a symbiotic relationship with the Chinese secret societies because it allows the police to maintain and reproduce *order* in the criminal underworld. A historical appreciation of the nature and manifestation of the symbiotic relationship between the two entities is necessary before contextualizing the experiences of the minority gang members with reference to what we have termed as the social disciplinary practices of the police.

### **CHINESE SECRET SOCIETIES AND THE POLICE: A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW**

Traditionally, the reality of Chinese secret societies has been operationally defined in the official documents of the colonial government. The criterion, upon which such an operational definition of secret societies is based, is legalistic. Chinese secret societies, for the greater part of the nineteenth century, were therefore seen as a kind of legitimate institution. In other words, no Chinese organization in the British colony before 1890 was regarded as "secret" or "criminal". The violent nature of some of these Chinese associations were taken cognizance of when the Societies Ordinance came into effect in 1890, when all forms of Chinese secret organizations were outlawed. Chinese secret societies, which were based on the Triad organizational strategy, had played an instrumental role in maintaining control over Chinese immigrants to Malaya in the nineteenth century. The Triad was a political secret society in the southern provinces of China, the origin of most of the immigrants to Malaya, and was dedicated to the overthrow of Manchu imperial rule (Turnbull, 1996: 52–3). The colonial authorities did not outlaw the Chinese secret societies until 1880 because they were not considered a political threat in Singapore. They performed many useful social functions in the colony. These societies replaced to some degree the roles played by family, village, and clan organizations, which were operative in both China and Singapore. In this way the Triad secret societies became the governing bodies of their members. In some places, especially Singapore, separate dialect groups organized their own societies, while in others membership was open to men of various dialects (Blythe, 1969: 2). At times, place of residence or type of employment was the criterion of eligibility, or there might be a combination of several of these factors. But whatever its composition and membership criteria, secret societies with a secret ritual and binding

blood-oath of loyalty provided the individual with a “social background, a body politic in miniature, in and through which he found authority, protection, assistance, a sense of kinship, and through the ritual bond possibly some measure of spiritual content, in a foreign land where the ruling power was completely alien in race, language, religion, manners and customs” (Blythe, 1969: 1). In these circumstances, reliance by the immigrant on the society was inevitable even if it was to mean that participation in paid labour invariably carried with it the inescapable implication of belonging to the secret society in control at the place of employment. As such, this system of domination of the rapidly increasing immigrant community by such societies or associations meant that many of the powers and functions of government, normally in the hands of the colonial authorities, were wielded by them. Furthermore, a floating population of young and single male immigrants provided opportunities to the secret societies to organize prostitution, gambling, and opium consumption.

Not surprisingly, Chinese secret societies for the most part of the eighteenth and nineteenth century existed as an intermediate layer of extra-legal jurisdiction in regulating the social, economic and political life of the Chinese immigrants (Trocki, 1979). In this regard, the *Kapitan* system, first introduced by the Portuguese in 1511 and later modified by the British colonial authorities, deserves special mention here. The *Kapitan* was a communal leader appointed by the colonial ruler to impose indirect rule over the Chinese population because of the problem of language and other difficulties such as cultural and religious differences (Mak, 1981: 26). The *Kapita* was officially vested with certain executive, administrative, and to some extent, judicial powers over his own people, and invariably acted as the ‘channel between the government and the community’ (Wong, 1963: 1). Under the British *Kapita* system, the *Kapitans* also held court to adjudicate petty quarrels, fighting, and religious, and family disputes (Mak, 1981). Invariably, the *Kapitan* maintained close connections with the secret society headmen who helped him enforce order. The *Kapitan* system, as an administrative network, was adopted as the best possible answer to urgent problems of administration and the lack of it at that time. The British colonial administrators were of the view that the best way to rule the Chinese was through the Chinese (Lee, 1981: 64).

The Chinese secret societies played an important political and economic role in mobilizing and controlling the Chinese immigrant population for commercial purposes. The British colonial authorities were soon forced to rethink their policy toward these societies as they began to emerge as economic rivals over lucrative resources in a frontier society. The basis of the conflict among the secret societies was the economic factor of occupational monopolization and demonopolization. For example, the abortive war in Jung Ceylon in 1825, riots in Sungei Ujong in 1834, 1848 and 1860, and the Larut Wars (1862–1873) pointed to the struggle for the monopolization of tin mining especially between the Hakka Hai San and the Cantonese Ghee Hin secret societies (Wynne, 1941: 72; Blythe, 1969: 74). These conflicts provided the justification for the colonial authorities to adopt a policy of suppression and eventual criminalization of secret societies as these societies were perceived to be a threat to the social and political order. More importantly, they disrupted the legitimate economy established by the British. The Chinese Post Office Riots of 1867 was an excellent example of the Chinese challenge to the attempt of the colonial authority to institutionalize economic transactions in Malaya (Comber, 1959). What the British government wanted to do was to abolish the time-honoured practice of the Chinese of forwarding letters and money remittances to China through their own agencies. In its place, the

British government proposed that this system of forwarding money remittances should come under the direction of the Government Post Office, and that agents pay a license fee to the government. As headmen of secret societies monopolized the private agencies, the riots that marked the opposition to the colonial attempts were fermented by secret societies. Symbolically these riots represented a political challenge to the colonial power. To have the power and influence of the secret societies unchecked would have been contrary to both British imperial policy in the Malay Peninsula and their interest in gaining monopoly over the trade and markets in Malaya. The British had no alternative but to introduce legislative measures that were to gradually delegitimize these once functional organizations.

Of all the legislative measures introduced to eradicate the problem of secret societies in Singapore, the Criminal Law (Temporary Provision) Ordinance of 1958 was the most effective. This law allows for the detention of a secret society member without trial and its deterrent effect on secret society activities was witnessed in the drastic decline of secret society-related incidents from 416 in 1959 to 36 in 1973. By 1977, there were only 13 recorded secret society-related incidents (Police Life, 1977). From the records of the Secret Societies Branch of the CID, Singapore, it is evident that between 1958 and 1993, more than 50 000 secret society members had been placed under police supervision, and it has been estimated that about ninety percent of the members were either moribund or made inactive under this Ordinance (personal communication). Presently there are 523 persons detained under this Act.

A fact not commonly known however is the existence of a symbiotic relationship between the police and Chinese secret societies, which has evolved to address the problem of policing areas and activities that attract criminal elements. This is particularly relevant to certain groups – prostitutes, illegal moneylenders (also known as ‘loan sharks’ locally), coffee shop owners, hawkers, mobile newspaper vendors, contractors, owners of massage parlours and karaokes – by virtue of their occupation are either not rendered full protection of the law, or require round the clock protection that the police are unable to provide. It is here that the Chinese secret societies play a functional role in offering protection to the vulnerable and marginalized population (subscribers) in return for gaining territorial monopolization and control of (both illegal and legal) economic activity generated within these territorial, extra-political entities. Our data revealed that headmen of these societies have to be ‘registered’ with the specialized branch of the CID and have to adhere to the ‘rules’ laid by the police. This form of policing practice and the police relationship with other components (secret societies and subscribers) is diagrammatically illustrated in Fig. 1.

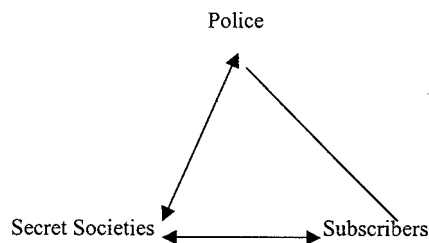


FIGURE 1 Organization of a symbiotic relationship among the police, secret societies and subscribers. The arrow refers to a reciprocal relationship while the absence of it signifies the absence of such a relationship.

The importance of the symbiotic relationship is three-fold. First, it denotes the acceptance of the triad and secret societies as an integral component of Chinese communal life. Notwithstanding the several functions these societies had historically played in the lives of early Chinese immigrants, contemporary secret societies tend to provide a criminal subculture which is stable and integrative, and provides the socio-structural mechanisms by which younger Chinese – by virtue of ethnicity – could gain access to the illegitimate opportunity and learning structures should conventional means fail. Second, it marks the reversal of police policy towards secret societies from one of ‘zero-tolerance’ (from the period 1890 to 1969) to ‘accommodation’ (from the period 1970 to present) with the aim of exerting control and exercising surveillance over their clandestine activities through retaining the criminal intelligence structure. Total suppression of secret society activities would only drive these societies underground, a situation witnessed in 1890 when the Societies Ordinance came into effect. Third, the exclusiveness of the symbiotic relationship that exists between the police and *institutionalized* secret societies ensures the reproduction of social order in the criminal underworld. It does so by evicting headman of secret societies who are not compliant with the police from the symbiotic participation, and/or by preventing new gangs i.e. street corner or secret societies from gaining a foothold in the criminal underworld and upsetting the *institutional* symbiotic relationship. In this regard, Indian minority gang members arguably experience a ‘double-crises’: first, the absence of an ‘ethnic’ adult criminal network in which they could gain membership, and second, the organization of policing practices that contributes to their marginalization in the illegitimate society. It is to the latter issue, which have been referred to as the social disciplinary model of policing, we now turn our attention to.

### CONTEXTUALISING THE EXPERIENCES OF MINORITY GANG MEMBERS

As mentioned earlier, Indian street corner gangs comprising mostly of Tamils of lower working class are considered a ‘problem population’ by the police as they are perceived to be a threat to the institutional symbiotic relationship that exists between the Chinese secret societies and police. The site in which the various actors – Tamil gang members, secret society members and police officers – come into contact and conflict is the coffee shop. Once minority gang members are identified in this way, it precipitates a series of police actions that are designed to subject them to surveillance and subjugation, regardless of whether the individuals singled out for this treatment have violated any criminal law. As argued by Choongh (1998) the social disciplinary model is the “product of a policing system which rejects the contention that police work should seek to identify specified individuals who commit specified offences. It posits instead the contention that an acceptable and efficient way to police society is to identify classes of people who in various ways reject *prevailing* norms. . .and therefore merit particular attention” (Choongh, 1989: 627) (emphasis ours). An Indian gang members describes how policing was experienced by members of his group at the coffee shop:

You see, we don’t have to do anything. . .anyway we don’t do much anywhere except this drinking and playing of music. We do all these among ourselves without disturbing anyone. We see a lot of pretty girls here but we don’t even disturb them. Most of the time, we keep to ourselves. We want to

be recognized here. This is our neighbourhood. Of course, I am not saying that we are all innocent, some of us if not all have done 'something' (referring to illegal/criminal activities) but the question is we don't do anything here. Yet every time we have a big session, we see these fuckers (referring to the plainclothes officer) parking their cars and coming straight to us, and then ask a lot of fucking questions like "why are we seated here"? Why making so much noise? Where we work? Where are we staying? You say one wrong thing or show a face, they will take you in for no reason. . . just like that. But we all know why, the CID does not want us around here in this coffee shop because we all know the chinamen [Chinese people] don't want us here. . .

The result of this targeting is that the police has effectively generated a vicious cycle: police targeting of this group is often followed by the group's resistance to what they perceive as unjust police practice, in turn leading to stronger police response, often via paramilitaristic methods, as a reaction to what the police see as a rejection of their authority by these gang members. McConville and Shepherd (1992) have documented that differential and, at times discriminatory, stop and search practices, stereotyping and the amplification of the apparent deviance of certain groups lead to resentment on their part and encourage the very type of challenge that annoys the police (Foster, 1989). The net effect of the cycle is that almost all of them interviewed had at least once been stopped and searched, arrested, and subjected to police violence whilst serving their 48 h detention in the police cell before they were released without any formal charge being laid against them. The law in Singapore allows for a suspect to be detained in police custody regardless of whether a caution statement has been extracted from the suspect in respect of a formal charge. But it is not, as the thesis of this paper suggests, about the adherence to legal formal rationality. Policing in the social disciplinary model of justice is symbolic: the police do not stop and search these Indian gang members, harass those with previous criminal convictions and conduct swoops to weed the neighbourhood of 'undesirable' elements in order to combat crime and disorder, but to reassure themselves that their authority to do so will and should not be resisted in their endeavour to maintaining the 'power equilibrium' at the coffee shop. At times, officers from the special branch of the CID were quite explicit in communicating their agenda to the gang members as this exchange between six officers and gang members would show:

- PO: Can I know what you all are doing here?  
 Member: What do you think we are doing?  
 PO: I just want you to answer my question?  
 Member: Well, we are having a drink? Is that an offence, officer?  
 PO: Are you trying to be funny here? . . . You watch what you say here to a police officer? I have a complaint that you all are running a gang? I have also information that a few of you all have been involved in criminal incidents before. . .  
 Member: I don't think we are running a gang, officer. We meet everyday to sit and chat. We don't cause any problems here. But of course, if trouble comes to us, we will not sit and see ourselves being beaten up. We have to defend ourselves.  
 PO: Well do you know that more than five people sitting together is an offence in Singapore?  
 Member: The group of guys seated there (pointing towards a group of Chinese men) are part of a secret society. Why not you arrest them? They are the ones you should be looking for. But you know, every time you people are asking us the same question over and over again? Say something wrong, then you take us in? I think it is not fair. . .  
 PO: Don't talk to me about being fair. You may think that you are not as problem but people around you think that you all are a problem. I am acting on such a complaint. Now I am on a routine check and I want you to take out your identity cards now. . .

As much as policing strategies appear to revolve around efforts to neutralize what the police perceive as anti-authority by forcing them to accept the 'authority of the cloth', they are equally designed to maintaining *order* in the criminal underworld.

It is interesting to know that the ‘raid’ of six officers that led to the ensuing conversation between the officer and gang member cited above took place a day after one of the gang members had a confrontation with a member of the Chinese secret society over the “right” to use the toilet in the coffee shop first.

We all were waiting for the CID to come today. . .if not latest by tomorrow. That’s why we all came down with our ICs (identity cards). . .no IC the police can arrest you. But there are many times the police had arrested me even when I produce my IC! Anyway, we expect these fellows to come because this is how these fellows (referring to the secret society members) work. They call the police when they have no guards to fight us. We can take them on in any one-to-one fight but you see the Chinese will never fight one-to-one. Even when they agree to fight, they will usually stand by hundreds of them and if he loses the fight the whole lot will interfere. . .Many times this had happened here. Even that day there was one incident like that. . .these people are not gentleman. . .yet the police still support them. Today is nothing compared to sometimes when they don’t even talk to us. At least three police vans will come and drag everyone inside. Once inside you know what will happen to us! Next day, we all will be released. Just imagine how worried our family members will be when we don’t go back home that night. . .these fucking CID officers will one day going to get from me. . .

Relying on the institutional symbiotic relationship which the secret society has with the police to ‘neutralize’ elements regarded by them (as well as the police) as posing a threat to the prevailing order, augurs well for the secret society in question. Fundamentally, it ensures (and insures) its continued participation in the symbiotic relationship and monopoly over the ‘moral’ economy generated within the parameters of its control. For the Chinese secret society to do otherwise, for example using organized violence on the Indian gang members, would only risk its accorded status in the institutional symbiotic relationship with the state police and thus themselves be targeted by the police. The net effect of allowing secret societies to exist but within an institutional framework designed by the police is that it achieves the police-defined objective of reproducing order in the illegitimate society: first, by disengaging and marginalizing minority (non-institutionalized) gangs from the ‘market’ of criminal activities, and second, through conflict-reducing mechanisms i.e. symbiotic participation that demands secret societies self-police/restrict their activities to boundaries prescribed by the state police, or risk being evicted from the institutional arrangement. The latter point is succinctly captured by an officer:

We have to allow them to stay. No way our laws can deal or suppress them. Of course, our laws say that we will take action against gangsters. . .but I ask you how to? For one, our prisons will be crowded because it is estimated that Singapore has over hundred thousand active and former secret society members! So alternatively, what we do is to allow them to stay and take charge of a few places, that’s what they want to do anyway. . .you know that I mean. . .If you go to Geylang where most brothels are located they are being taken care of by the Geylang secret society and in return we want them to keep the place safe for the public and play by our rules. Sometimes they also help us by reporting on illegal migrants loitering in the area or girls who come in illegally to work in the sex trade, or licensed prostitutes who don’t turn up for their monthly medical tests. Sometimes, they also report to us of groups who want to control certain places or want to promote their gang number. . .it makes our lives much easier because with this intelligence information we could then move in fast and break-up the group. By this way, we don’t have to deploy manpower and other police resources because they will only be reactive. What we do is to maintain a system where we just need to maintain and monitor them. . . I think has been very useful to us.

## CONCLUSION

The experiences of the Indian gang members are best understood with reference to the Social Disciplinary model of policing, a model which eschews concern for both legal and factual guild, concentrating instead on the task of subordinating certain sections

of the population viewed as 'problematic' by the police. It signifies police decision to arrest individuals but with no intention of charging them. As argued by Choongh (1998), this form of policing practice is designed to communicate police contempt for a particular community and to demonstrate that the police have absolute control over those who challenge the right of the police to define and enforce 'normality' (Choongh, 1998: 626). This 'communicative' feature, he argues, stands in contrast to those advocated by Packer's crime control and due process models. However, any intellectual attempt to investigate and contextualise this 'alternative' communicative feature of the criminal justice system must address the question of *sufficiency* and *transformation*: Is it enough to identify the social disciplinary practices of the police as yet *another* form of policing method and/or to conclude that treatment as discriminatory? How does such a method arise? What function does it serve? How is it organized structurally and historically?

We argue that understanding the experiences of minority gang members as recipients of the Social Disciplinary model of policing has to be set in the context of the symbiotic relationship which the police have traditionally maintained with the Chinese secret societies. The exclusiveness of the symbiotic relationship that exists between the police and *institutionalized* secret societies ensures the reproduction of social order in the criminal underworld. It does so by evicting headmen of secret societies who are not compliant with the police in the symbiotic relationship, and/or by preventing new criminal groupings i.e. street corner or secret societies from gaining a foothold in the criminal underworld that might upset the *institutional* symbiotic relationship. Street corner gangs comprising mainly lower class ethnic minority Tamils are considered by the police as a 'problem population' in the criminal underworld and therefore merit particular attention. This 'attention', as the data suggest, can assume the form of stop and search practices, detention without trial, detention in police stations, 'questionings', 'status degradation ceremonies', extracting deference and inflicting summary punishment.

A consequence of this form of policing, which we have termed as the social disciplinary model of justice, is that minority street corner gangs occupy a marginal status in the illegitimate society and exhibit characteristics akin to a 'retreatist' gang though we suspect that minority gangs could transit into a 'conflict' model in response to their predicament. In this regard, Tamil gang members arguably experience a 'double-failure' crisis – a term that aptly explains their disadvantage in both the legitimate and illegitimate society. While *class* as a variable explains the marginalization of these members in the legitimate society, *ethnicity* seems relevant to understanding their marginalization in the illegitimate society in that it reveals the absence of an 'ethnic' adult criminal network in which Tamil members could gain membership or apprenticeship. Compounding this situation is the organization of policing practices which tend to exclude minority gang members from the nexus of control and distribution of opportunity and learning structures in the criminal underworld.

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