

## **No evidence of absence**

### *Successful criminals and secret societies*

Mohd Kassim Noor-Mohamed, *Birmingham City University*  
and

Jayne Noor-Mohamed, *Nottingham Trent University*

#### **Abstract**

Much criminological research is based upon incarcerated offenders, those unsuccessful criminals who get caught and are unable to extricate themselves from the legal consequences. The problem is, of course, that clever criminals will take steps to evade capture and talking to researchers is not likely to figure highly on any wish-list. When the opportunity arose to conduct a series of interviews with an active gang-leader who specialised in and profited from kidnap-for-ransom, it was a chance too good to miss. There is a concern, too, about the number of scholarly articles that talk about the dwindling influence of Chinese secret societies on organised crime which appear to have fallen foul of the *ad ignorantiam* fallacy - argument from a position of ignorance or lack of evidence. This paper makes use of the insights gained from a serious, successful criminal and his associates to demonstrate that, in their world, absence of evidence is the common reality but this may all too often be misconstrued as evidence of absence.

**Key Words:** Triads, successful criminals; kidnap for ransom; diaspora; secret societies

#### **Introduction**

Nearly 40 years have passed by since Klockars (1974) advised his readers that criminology needed more information about successful criminals. However, access to criminals who are successful can be problematic, as Mack (1972, p50) points out that “[s]uccessful criminals are by definition inaccessible”. The sad fact is that much criminological research is based upon incarcerated offenders, those unsuccessful criminals who get caught

and are unable to extricate themselves from the legal consequences. The problem is, of course, that clever criminals can be expected to take steps to evade capture and talking to researchers is not likely to figure highly on any wish-list. So, when the opportunity arose to conduct a series of interviews with a Malaysian Chinese active gang-leader who specialises in and profits from kidnap for ransom, it was a chance too good to miss. What the research participant had to tell me of his pathway into crime, his gang leadership, criminal and legitimate enterprises and his wider network, including ties to Chinese secret societies, became the basis for my doctoral thesis.

During the research, concerns began to arise about the problems of investigating successful criminals and their networks, especially about the problems of validity and trustworthiness when assessing evidence that is, by its nature, scarce and fugitive. The picture presented by fellow academics was confusing with many contradictory statements about the role played so-called Triads in Chinese organised crime. Peers were also frequently critical about a research project with a single main respondent and were concerned with issues of reliability, especially as there are some very good practical and psychological reasons why the respondent in question might heavily edit or spin his account. This paper sets out to explore the academic risks and rewards of conducting a piece of criminological research with a serious criminal using narrative interviews, especially where these are 'revelatory' cases. One of the main arguments is that, in the area of serious and successful criminality, while it is difficult for this - and indeed, any other type of research design - to provide evidence of absence, rather than just absence of evidence, one reliable case is at least sufficient to provide evidence of presence.

## **Alohan**

Alohan (pseudonym used by the research participant) kidnaps people for ransom; he and his gang have been doing it successfully for quite a long time. He is Malaysian, ethnic Chinese, a secret society member, businessman, philanthropist and is, in my experience, charming and likeable. I am a former intelligence officer of the Royal Malaysian Customs, too old for the field, embarking upon a second, more sedate career as a criminologist. Over 20 years ago, a close police friend introduced Alohan to me as someone with useful information about local smuggling syndicates and he proved to be a highly reliable source of intelligence on illegal cigarette and alcohol markets. Only much later did I become aware of the extent of Alohan's involvement in organised crime and, in particular, his kidnapping business.

Alohan operates according to strict victim selection criteria, in that his targets are always involved in some form of criminal enterprise themselves, such as drug dealing or illegal loan sharking. Although Alohan served time in prison in his younger days and is one of the 'usual suspects'

brought in for questioning whenever a his type of kidnapping for ransom is brought to the attention of police, he has never been charged with kidnapping, has made a considerable amount of money from this criminal enterprise and has been able to use this to finance further legitimate and semi-legitimate businesses, including a haulage company and several restaurants.

### **Justifying the methodology**

Klockars (1974:198) confesses to graduate school hubris for telling people 'that there had never been a single sociological study of the fence' and in his assumption that finding a suitable subject would be a simple matter. It took him over 14 months to find a fence who was willing to talk to him on the record. In the end, he produced an extraordinary account of a successful career criminal. I have to admit that I was not immune to my own feelings of hubris. When my research project was first mooted, it was met with some excitement within my institution because academic access to people like Alohan outside of a prison setting, is remarkable. The starting point for this project was that access to the main participant already existed.

The research project was conducted in several stages. First a series of narrative history interviews was undertaken with Alohan himself, where he talked about his criminal career. A more ethnological approach, where Alohan could have been observed in his 'natural' environment, was vetoed by a concerned research committee on safety grounds even though this would have improved the ecological validity. Next, supplementary interviews were conducted with fellow gang members, with officers from Royal Malaysian Customs (who were likely to encounter people like Alohan both as adversaries and as allies, in the shape of confidential informants), and with officers from the anti-kidnap unit of the Royal Malaysian Police. Finally, an additional interview was sought with a former, now retired, head of the anti-kidnap unit, who spoke with remarkable frankness about his dealings with Alohan and his group.

One of the objectives of the research was to address the issue of sub-cultural tolerance of crime or, in other words, the ability of people like Alohan to use their contacts, social position and understanding of stress-lines within their communities and spheres of operation to reduce risk and facilitate offending. The interviews with law enforcement officers helped to confirm many aspects of Alohan's account, especially where his status as a criminal and details of his *modus operandi* were concerned. The value of my close and longstanding acquaintanceship with Alohan must also not be underestimated as I was able to compare the data provided in his interviews with all the conversations we had held and observations I had made over the many years previously.

Although a retelling of one professional kidnapper's story through narrative accounts cannot claim to provide a definitive template that explains all such criminal careers, an in-depth case study of this offender

could be of significant benefit not only to criminology but also to policy-making and policing in this topical and important area (see Flyvbjerg, 2006; Stake, 1995; Yin, 1981). People like Alohan appear to have multiple interfaces with the legitimate and illegitimate business worlds and with the criminal justice system, as suspect, offender and informant. This is not a picture that comes across in standard accounts of criminality. Hence, the opportunity to conduct this case study was very significant.

Even though narrative accounts are often seen as problematic because they may not contain strictly accurate representation of events, they have long been recognised as valuable by criminologists, (e.g. Sutherland's (1937) 'professional thief' to Steffensmeier and Ulmer's (2005) 'dying thief'). There are three main ways in which narrative might be employed within criminology. The first is as a 'factual' record of what happened, but this is most often criticised because the narrator might understandably be motivated to present a selective and distorted account. The second use is more interpretive, where researchers attempt to understand the subjective view of an offender and his or her reaction to events. The third use has been termed a 'constitutive view of narrative' (Presser, 2009:184), where a narrative incorporates accounts of experience, acts of symbolic interpretation on the part of the narrator and also patterns of behaviour. These latter can be built from a variety of sources but, in Alohan's case, the role of myth and legend is highly apparent as a model for his conduct. As McAdams (1993:13) maintains: 'We do not discover ourselves in myths; we make ourselves through myth'. It was this constitutive approach that proved most illuminating in the analysis undertaken.

The question that needs to be answered for every piece of research is 'how do we know it is true?' (Pole and Lampard, 2002:206). This refers to the ever thorny issues of validity and reliability. Qualitative projects, like my doctoral thesis, cannot and probably should not aspire to the same measures of quality that are applied to quantitative data collection and analysis (Kirk and Miller, 1986). It is very unlikely that this particular piece of research will ever be replicated and, even if it were possible, no two researchers will interpret and analyse the data the same way. However, that does not mean that what is contained is unreliable or untrue. Some researchers feel that narrative interviews are particularly strong with regard to internal validity (Elliott, 2005; Polkinghorne, 2007). They give rich and authentic detail and a coherent storyline is especially effective in transmitting as nearly as possible the meaning and emotional content that the individual has attached to the happenings described.

For thematic narrative analysis, it is important to remember that facts are, if anything, subordinate to the sense that has been made of them. Lindhe (1993, cited in Elliott, 2005:24) makes the point that, although stories might have been produced for the interview, many of them will already have been told to another person or group of people, for a completely different purpose: '... in the case of the life-story, interview data can be used because the life-story, as a major means of self presentation,

occurs naturally in a wide variety of different contexts (including interviews) and is therefore quite robust’.

It is worth reiterating that, despite all the above, the narrative interview method was not the first choice and is still not my preferred method, which would have been more ethnographic. However, this design did provide answers for important research questions when the arguably more dangerous approach was disallowed.

Following up on Mack’s (1972) comment about inaccessibility of successful criminals - an observation endorsed by organized crime expert, Von Lampe (2008) - when such access is offered, it is an offer too good to refuse. However, it would be naïve to assume that there were no ulterior motives. Alohan participated in my research, even though he did not have to: firstly, because we have known each other for many years and, while we most certainly do not always approve of each other’s morals and behaviour, we consider ourselves to be friends; secondly, because we come from a culture that prizes reciprocity - I am now deep in his debt and this is just where he likes me; and thirdly, because he wanted to get his side of the story on record.

### **Of subculture, secret societies, social capital and successful crime**

During the course of the research and analysis, secret society or Triad membership became an important issue. This was not necessarily because it was useful to categorise Alohan as ‘Triad’ but rather because elements of subculture became very important when attempting to understand the role played by such affiliations or identifications in risk reduction and successful career criminality. From the very start, with the alias that he chooses, Alohan anchors himself firmly within a specific cultural setting. He might be a member of a despised or distrusted ethnic sub-group, but he is also a diasporic descendant of one of the planet’s most ancient civilisations, with its rich tradition of folktale, symbolism, motif and archetype. Alohan has aligned himself with the mythic history of the Shaolin monks in the same way that Jamaica’s Christopher ‘Dudus’ Coke has courted the Robin Hood tag (McLaughlin, 2010). So, while we seek more pragmatic and direct answers about Alohan’s descent into the criminal underworld - related perhaps to his childhood poverty, his early education, his association and offending patterns and journey into crime - narrative analysis also helps us to uncover a deeper on-going reality for the career adult offender. This fits particularly well within the area of cultural criminology and with what Young has to say about the importance of placing crime and its control in the context of culture, where crime and control are both viewed as ‘creative constructs’ (Young and Brotherton, 2004).

In the quest to understand crime as meaningful activity, cultural criminology has evolved from a combination of sociological criminology

and cultural studies, via symbolic interactionism and post-modernism. Unlike the more positivist branches engaged in the study of crime, the 'doing' of cultural criminology encourages the consideration of identity formation, sense-making and representation. Ferrell (2010) believes that illicit subcultures should be seen as sites of 'stylized resistance and alternative meaning', and Alohan's account provides us with a significant example against which to examine such concepts.

Alohan is a serious career criminal who specialises, along with his gang, in kidnap for ransom. He predated upon other organised crime figures and has chosen this victim pool for a what appear to be a variety of reasons; probably because their friends and family are less likely to involve the police when a ransom demand is received, partly because they tend to have quick and ready access to untraceable cash and, possibly, because it is easier to quash guilty feelings over victimising people who have, themselves, left a trail of victims (Noor Mohamed, 2011). Of course, Alohan does not put his selection criteria into those exact words. What he actually said was: 'In the end we decided to do a scorpion [kidnap] project and search for an evil businessman ... why? Because, if he was evil, there would be no worries if we hit him'.

Although Alohan is considered to be a dangerous criminal, he is not dangerous to everyone and his money-making activities are not always criminal enterprises. In his own words:

I am not only involved in illegal activities. One of my businesses is a transport company, which I share with a friend. This started quite some time ago - 1995 until now - so roughly about twelve years. There are other businesses, too - a restaurant, a coffee shop and a food court. I also deal in a scrap iron with another business partner. It is an export company but my partner takes care of the management. These businesses are quite profitable and we have never run at a loss. We run them very efficiently and there was no problem with incoming payments whatsoever. The restaurant and food court are doing very well. I don't like opening up businesses and closing them down after one or two years. Just like my scorpion [kidnapping] activity, I make sure that I target and analyse the businesses I open and only get involved in those I think I can do. Otherwise, why should we waste our time; time is very precious. Just like scorpion, I am the one doing the planning, market surveying and analysis of every aspect. If I decide on something, there is no such thing as failure.

As I was conducting research with someone who classified himself as a gangster, it was not long before the issue of Chinese organised crime arose. I was dimly aware that Alohan had developed an extensive network that included family and clan members, other gangsters from different groups, businessmen and law enforcement officers but had not given much prior thought to whether or not he was 'Triad'. However, during the series

of interviews Alohan mentioned oaths taken and rituals conducted. The alias that he chose for himself, Alohan, was rich with secret society symbolism and tradition. After the interviews were completed, he introduced me to someone he referred to as his incense master and mentioned that, in addition to his kidnapping gang, he belonged to a *Hung* group known as the “21 Gang”. A gang with the same name is referred by Daye (1997) as a Malaysian Triad gang. Alohan definitely belonged to and identified with something that was alive and active and which appeared to have deep cultural significance and practical utility but it was still debateable whether he was what could be termed a Triad member, especially as he does not apply that label to himself. However, the Triad label can be seen as a useful shorthand for secret society membership or being part of a brotherhood network and, if it can be applied at all, then all the indications are that Alohan qualifies.

I became ever more perplexed as I tried to pin down, by wading through the literature, some sort of consensus about the links between Chinese self-help associations, secret societies, gangs, Tongs and Triads. The picture is confusing to say the least. One author declares that ‘...Chinese Triads are presently the largest and oldest criminal organizations in the world...’ (Daye, 1997:10). Others believe, in Hong Kong at least, Triad societies appear to be in decline, in terms of scope of activity and visibility (Broadhurst and Lee, 2008). Zhang and Chin (2003:469) write with benefit of ‘their years of field observations and empirical data gatherings’ that ‘a different breed of organized Chinese criminals has come of age in transnational activities ... not affiliated with Triad societies or any other traditional Chinese organized crime group’. The question remains, of how the authors can possibly know, for sure, that such a different breed now exists, even with years of field observation and empirical data gathering. In Alohan’s case, secret society membership is, first of all, secret. Secondly, his attachment to the more ritual elements is deeply embedded and ingrained as a part of his cultural identity, and not so easily jettisoned.

Wing Lo (2010) appears to agree that Triads are on the decline, suggesting in one article that ‘[s]ince the 1990s, Triad societies have been undergoing a gradual process of disorganization’; but this article is followed quickly by another that concludes ‘Triadization of youth gangs provides new blood to Triad societies that continue to survive across different generations over time’ (Wing Lo, 2012). This uncertainty about the nature and trajectory of the Triads as a coherent criminal organization is not a new feature. Morgan (1960), although he believed that the Triad society was formerly a co-ordinated political and patriotic movement, dedicated to overthrowing the Manchu Qing dynasty in order to restore the deposed Chinese Ming dynasty, was sure that by his time they no longer existed as a co-ordinated body. According to Morgan (1960:xiii), the ‘modern society consists of a great number of independent units responsible only to themselves’ and that this ‘abandonment of a central authority has been the main factor in dissipating the strength of the Society’.

Triads have become synonymous with Chinese organised crime in the popular imagination (Chin and Godson 2006; Chu 2000). However, the term should be treated with great caution as it is acknowledged to be a *xenonym*, or a name given to a particular social group by external agencies, rather than an *autonym*, which is the name that members of the group use to refer to themselves. Among the autonyms frequently cited are the *Tiandihui* (or Heaven and Earth Society), the Hong or Hung Men (Murray and Baoqi, 1994; Ter Haar, 1998), and specific gang names such as the *14K* or *Sun Yee On*. As Triad scholar Ter Haar (1998:15) comments: 'It is important to distinguish autonyms from names that are appended by outside observers, since in the latter case otherwise unrelated groups are often lumped together and all kinds of preconceptions and prejudices may be attached to them'. The term 'Triad' is over 150 years old and its origin is not entirely clear but it is usually attributed to British officials of the colonial Hong Kong government who noted a recurrence of the number three in secret society names and symbols (Chin, 1990; Huston, 1995; Morgan, 1960; Murray and Baoqi, 1994; Ter Haar, 1998). Hong Kong was ceded to Britain in 1842 and a mere three years later, in 1845, the new Governor enacted Ordinance 1, aimed at 'Suppression of the Triad and other Secret Societies'<sup>1</sup>. These secret societies were considered to be 'incompatible with the maintenance of good order and constituted authority' because they 'increased facilities for the commission of crime and for the escape of offenders'. Thus, the Triad label is first encountered as a convenient hook upon which to hang the many types of groupings, gangs or associations that might, in mid-eighteenth century South and South-East Asia, be engaged either in criminal activity or, equally likely, in resistance to the new colonial order in Hong Kong (see Chu, 2000; Huang, 2006).

The notion of a 'successful' organised crime group is as problematic as that of a successful criminal. There are many reasons why the groups referred to as the Triads might appear to be in decline or on the retreat, where they once appeared to be in the ascendant. From the understanding gained by Alohan's example, I suggest that this is a problem with the way that, in this instance, Chinese secret societies are conceptualised. The emphasis still appears to be upon their structural characteristics rather than their function as a vehicle for conveying cultural and social capital. For Alohan, secret society membership is not the same as gang membership, although he might borrow some of the techniques, such as initiation ceremonies and oath-taking, to bond his gang together. In his case, his Scorpion gang is not a Triad or *Hong Men* (Murray and Baoqi, 1994; Ter Haar, 1998) gang, although it probably benefits from their leader's secret society affiliations. Alohan spends considerable time and effort building and maintaining his *guanxi* or network of reciprocity – put simply, this is the web of connections he has formed with people through giving gifts or performing favours and from whom he expects benefits or favours in

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<sup>1</sup> Ordinance No 1 of 1845 *Triad and Secret Societies*, Available at: <http://oelawhk.lib.hku.hk/archive/files/d1921aae0ac089755b8c2f05754fc776.pdf>



return. Many academics have noted the similarity between the concepts of *guanxi* and social capital, both of which might not give an immediate economic payoff, but which have symbolic, relational or cultural value that can be converted to meet specific needs (Gold et al., 2002; Huang and Wang, 2011; Smart, 1993). Secret society membership appears to be just another of his overlapping *guanxi* networks, which help him to become a successful gang leader, rather than a model that guides the shape his gang should take. The following extract from Alohan's narrative interview gives an insight into how this might work:

I try to make friends with everyone. Because of this, the members of the other gangs all know me. For example, when businessmen come to Bandar Baru to set up their businesses, like Singaporeans opening up factories, they will definitely come and see me if there are any problems. If other gangsters disturb them or extort money for protection, like asking for tens of thousands per year or twenty thousand, or eighteen thousand, the owners will come and see me because they know that I don't like people who create trouble in the area. I will arrange a table talk with all the gangsters in the area. I will ask the gangsters not to disturb the businessmen. These businessmen are here to open factories for the benefit of this village and area, providing jobs for local people. We like this too. We do not want to create trouble. They come here to open factories for the benefit of everyone.

We are all nice people. We don't go and disturb others. So I suggest to the businessmen, once they set up their factories here, whatever the profits and when it is OK, please support us if any of us are not well or ask for help. Whatever the amount, it is entirely up to them, no problem. During festivals they should treat us to food and drinks. Within three years time my name became very famous. I am not the type who searches for a fight. This is my attitude and my preferred way.

As a young gang member, Alohan was approached to collect a payoff on behalf of an older, more mature gang. The police were waiting for him and he spent the night in police custody, eventually managing to bluff his way out:

So the *Taiko* [gang boss] knew that I was arrested and had not given anyone away. Then he took me straight to Johor Bahru. He introduced me to all the other *Taikos* and said that I was a steady guy. I was very proud, I was very young and I was very pleased that people trusted me. It is not easy to gain people's trust.

This was not only one gang. All in all there were leaders of five or six gangs who all seemed to like me a lot. But I was a member of only

one gang. They asked me why I did not lead the police to arrest the gang. I said why should I? I was interviewed by them. They asked if something like this were to happen again, what I would do. I said that if I was alone, I would take sole responsibility. I will never put a friend in trouble. When we join a gang, we have a common prayer, or ritual and oath.

This account paints a picture of gangster society, with bosses who govern their own groups but who are prepared to network and skill-share, negotiate and build relationships. This is a flexible, cell-like structure, which is very adaptable and responsive to changing conditions and environments.

In Malaysia and Singapore, Chinese secret societies can also be traced back to the waves of immigration during the nineteenth century that followed the Taiping Rebellion, encouraged also by the need for labour in the British colonies (Blythe, 1969; Ter Haar, 1998). Secret society membership always appears to surge during times of hardship and when the need for mutual assistance is greatest or where the opportunities for exploitation are highest. Arguably, the Chinese suffered the harshest treatment during the Japanese occupation of Malaya during World War II. Many joined the communist-backed Malayan People's Anti-Japanese Party, becoming skilled at guerrilla-style resistance. After the war ended, the Communist Party of Malaya (CPM) took advantage of this training and mounted an armed struggle against the British (Soong, 2007). The British responded with a double-edged strategy of mass internment and economic concession. They also promoted a political alternative to the CPM by sponsoring the formation of the Malayan Chinese Association amongst the largely pro-British business community (Soong, 2007).

Alohan grew up in a New Village. These were created during the Malayan Emergency (1948-60) under the Briggs Plan to starve the communist insurgency of support and supplies. The Malayan Emergency was a period where a guerrilla war was fought between British Commonwealth armed forces and the Malayan National Liberation Army (MNLA), the military arm of the Malayan Communist Party, from 1948 to 1960 (Comber, 2008; Soong, 2007; Tong, 2010). Approximately 500,000 people were forced to relocate to these purpose built settlements, the vast majority of whom were Chinese and characterised as squatters - people who hold no title to the land they occupy. 'Squatter' is a word that still rankles today. To begin with, the villages were under strict curfew, partially fortified and deliberately located near military encampments.

In Malaya, many Chinese, who were not necessarily communist supporters, referred to the New Villages established under the Briggs Plan as 'concentration camps', because the liberty of movement of the New Villagers was severely restricted and New Villages were enclosed behind barbed wire fences that were under constant armed police guard and kept under surveillance by the Special Branch (Comber, 2008:152).

Although security was relaxed after the Emergency was declared over, this would have been a deeply traumatic passage in the lives of Alohan's parents. Food shortages were common and employment opportunities were scarce. Lim and Fong (2005:36) remark that: 'To protect their lives and solve daily socio-economic problems, some New Villagers became associated with secret societies, which were activated again after the squatters settled down in the New Villages'. Carstens (2005:69), in her study of rural Malaysian Chinese villagers, adds that because of the powerlessness experienced during the Emergency, they exhibited a pronounced degree of alienation from the state: 'a well-nurtured distrust of government intentions, leading to a preferred avoidance of any involvement with government plans or issues'. Tensions finally erupted in the May 1969 race riots. An observer based in Singapore commented that:

Ever since the Malay-Chinese riots which wreaked havoc in Kuala Lumpur and have caused what could be the gravest political and social crisis in Malaysia's history, Singapore has been preparing for the inevitable reverberations across the Causeway which links the two countries ... The troubled situation is ready-made for secret societies, criminal gangs, hooligans, bad elements, not to mention the leftist agitators who are now undoubtedly at work capitalising on a condition not of their making (but to their liking). After all, Chinese secret societies were originally designed for, among other things, self-defence (Polsky, 1969, cited in Soong, 2007:75).

Parliament was suspended and a state of emergency was declared. The official number of fatalities was given as 137 with 300 injured, but the actual figure was probably much higher, with many more Chinese dead or wounded than Malays (Soong, 2007:42).

Alohan was only a small child at the time, but it is likely that his father was amongst those who turned to secret societies for support. When viewed against the backdrop of this kind of history, secret societies can be seen as an important cultural resource and a form of cultural transmission, rather than a fixed organisation. The rituals, symbols, rules of brotherhood and reciprocity might also provide a clue to Alohan's apparent success.

### **Successful criminal?**

Alohan was not always successful. His early criminal career would be classed, by most observers, as unsuccessful, with costs incurred high in comparison with rewards received. He has been arrested and detained several times and sent to jail at least twice. On the first occasion, he was sentenced to two years imprisonment and two years banishment for a bus hijack. The second sentence was six years (reduced to four) for armed robbery. This picture appears to change after Alohan starts to specialise in

kidnap for ransom. Although he has been arrested and detained several times since, on suspicion of involvement in kidnapping cases, he has never been tried or convicted in relation to these nor, as far as I am aware, for any other offence. He has also managed to evade retaliation from victims and their associates. This is no mean feat if Alohan is telling the truth, that his kidnap targets are crooked businessmen and 'mafias'. Furthermore, he has been able to use the ransom money to finance the start-up of several apparently legitimate business ventures, maintain a comfortable lifestyle for himself and his five wives and numerous children, and donate substantial amounts of money to charity.

Ishikawa (2001) uses a fairly simple measure of success in her study on 'successful' versus 'unsuccessful' criminal psychopaths – she designates the former as those who are still at large in the community, having escaped conviction for any crimes committed, while the latter are institutionalised in prisons or special hospitals. This could be described as a 'snapshot' approach, as she gives no indication of whether her subjects were institutionalised and released at any point in the past and only seems interested in their status for the period of her research. We are given no information about the circumstances that led to institutionalisation for her unsuccessful subjects, nor are we told much about the quality of life experienced by the supposedly successful subjects still in the community. The more nuanced definition of the successful criminal career offered by Kazemian and Le Blanc (2007), who focus on 'differential cost avoidance', seems more satisfactory:

... a successful criminal career is defined as the longitudinal sequence of offenses characterized by a relatively high ratio of self-reported offending (measure integrating career length, offending gravity, and 'time free') to officially recorded crime. Therefore, the focus ... is not exclusively on individuals who manage to avoid detection by the criminal justice system but rather on those who display low detection rates relative to the degree of involvement in self-reported crime (Kazemian and Blanc, 2007:39).

But such a definition does not take into account the level of rewards that might accrue from successful engagement in crime. McCarthy and Hagan (2001) talk about criminal success in terms of income and cite a respectable number of research studies and articles that report the variability that exists, with some criminals earning substantially more than others (see Fagan and Freeman, 1999; Levitt and Venkatesh, 2000; Tremblay and Morselli, 2000; Wilson and Abrahamse, 1992). It is interesting to note the differential factors that are linked with success, depending upon whether the cost-avoidance or income-based definition is adopted. For instance, Kazemian and Le Blanc (2007) emphasize cognitive and social traits that might help offenders to avoid the cost of detection and imprisonment, such as self-control or familial bonds, whereas McCarthy and Hagan (2001:1039) stress elements that ought to maximise income,

such as competence, personal capital or other 'potential resources for securing desired outcomes'.

There are problems in reconciling these two views of criminal success. For instance, Kazemian and Le Blanc (2007) report that the use of violence is connected to higher earnings but less successful cost-avoidance, possibly because of the police attention that violent crime attracts. McCarthy and Hagan (2001) detail a similar discrepancy, where the tendency towards risk-taking behaviour appears to favour higher earnings at the expense of cost-avoidance.

Alohan seems to do well on both counts. The fact that he is still at large and apparently prospering could be a testament to his competence in committing crime or his skill in covering tracks and evading those with a vested interest in his capture or incapacitation. However, there might be other interesting dynamics or factors at work that protect Alohan within his environment or encourage him to continue offending, related to *guanxi* or social capital.

### **Criminal folk heroes or romantic rebels?**

One interesting question is the possible role played by subcultural tolerance of deviance in the facilitation, by others, of Alohan's serious criminal offending. Cloward and Ohlin (1961) define subcultural tolerance of deviance as the situation where subordinate groups or neighbourhoods share norms that render certain forms of illegality or violence more likely than for more dominant or conventional sectors of society. Classic subcultural theorists like Cohen (1955) propose delinquent subcultures as the means by which pro-crime attitudes, rationalisations for deviant behaviour and techniques for offending are transmitted. This influential idea has been seen as a useful extension to Sutherland's (1947) theory of differential association, which presents criminal conduct as learned behaviour developed through social interaction with others. Von Lampe (2004:109), too, stresses the need to study the social embeddedness of criminal networks in order to develop a 'conceptual framework that permits to measure 'organised crime' in a more meaningful way'. Delinquent subcultures are sites of rebellion against mainstream society and members hold norms and values that reject those of the dominant culture. However, in their seminal article, *Techniques of Neutralisation: A Theory of Delinquency*, Sykes and Matza (1957) disagree that delinquent subcultures are a 'countervailing force directed against the conforming social order' (Sykes and Matza, 1957:664). They argue that individuals who completely identify with a subculture's supposedly oppositional norms should, logically, feel no guilt or shame for breaking society's rules, yet present evidence that delinquents do feel shame or remorse and that respect for honest, law-abiding citizens is not unusual.

Alohan's narrative confirms his belief in some mainstream values and religious belief systems. As he says, he does not 'target good people as

God would be very angry, right?' Alohan appears to accept that 'good' and 'bad' people exist and, as Sykes and Matza (1957:665) suggest, draws a 'sharp line between those 'bad' people who can be victimized and the 'good' ones who cannot'. He believes 'the laws are valid' but that 'some do not work according to the law'. From not liking the police, particularly in the aftermath of his brother's shooting, Alohan eventually arrives at the view that: 'There are some police who really follow the laws and I do admire them'. This very much echoes what Sykes and Matza (1957:65) say about delinquents' respect for 'really honest' people but their keenness to detect hypocrisy in those who claim to be righteous.

There is a fascinating passage in the narrative where Alohan's conscience is bothering him and he goes in search of absolution:

After about being involved in five or six cases, we started praying and went in search of a sifu [religious teacher], because we were worried and we knew what we were doing was wrong. The police were searching for us. The gangsters were also looking for us. We were not worried about our own safety but we were afraid for our families. So we searched for a sifu to advise us on what to do. We didn't actually tell him what we were doing. What we did was to ask him: 'If there is someone who hurts or kills good people, what should we do?' We learned a lot from our sifu, who is a Buddhist. He is quite old, over seventy years old. [Through him] we came to know what Alohan does; we feel that we are Alohan and are doing his work. We feel at ease because we don't target the innocent. I do believe that, all this while, we have been safe because of the way we do things.

After the sifu told us this, we felt a bit relieved and could see that we were helping many people. Once we help people, there is nothing to worry about. We feel that we are doing Alohan's job and according to the religion we are not guilty. We may be guilty according to the law but, according to the religion, we are right.

Alohan and his group deliberately cast around their wider culture in the search for justification and find it in the old battleground of religious morality versus secular law. At first sight, this appears to show that criminal groups can and do look outside their immediate subculture for norms and values, which can be applied retrospectively to morally suspect behaviour. However, Alohan is no stranger to quasi-religious ritual, if accounts of Triad initiation ceremonies are correct, and he seems to know in advance where he will find spiritual comfort. Buddhism plays a prominent role in Triad mythology.

Religion is traditionally thought of as therapeutic and a powerful force for the rehabilitation of offenders (Knudten and Knudten, 1971; Pearce and Haynie, 2004) but empirical research has shown both positive, negative and non-existent links between religiosity and delinquency (Hirschi and Stark, 1969). Stark (1996:164) eventually concludes that

‘what counts is not only whether a particular person is religious, but whether this religiousness is, or is not, ratified by the social environment’.

Social context is, in other words, all important. There are plenty of precedents for sinister links between religion and crime. Gomez (2009) reports the Federal Police Commissioner of Mexico’s concerns about the troubling relationship between the religious cult of *Santa Muerte* and organised crime in his country. Religious elements have been adapted for use by criminal gangs to encourage recruitment and group cohesion, holding out as they do the seductive promise of divine protection and expiation of sins. In the above extract, Alohan seems to be claiming a similarly potent mix of supernatural defence and religious endorsement.

There are obvious parallels between the mythologies of Alohan and Robin Hood. The latter has achieved the status of a syndrome in Western criminology, being used to describe a wide range of criminal behaviours where material resources are redistributed away from the rich towards the poor and where victims are denied on the basis of their disproportionate wealth or power. Eoyang et al. (1997) explain that heroic, yet anti-establishment images often have great significance for gangs and may provide an important adaptive device for bonding groups together under simple sets of rules.

Hobsbawm (2001:20) coins the phrase ‘social banditry’ to describe ‘peasant outlaws whom the lord and state regard as criminals, but who remain within peasant society, and are considered by their people as heroes, as champions, avengers, fighters for justice, perhaps even leaders of liberation, and in any case as men to be admired, helped and supported’. Robin Hood is presented by Hobsbawm (2001:46) as the archetypal ‘noble robber’ who needs, in order to qualify for the designation, to begin his career with some non-criminal dispute which involves an affair of honour, injustice or defence of the poor against the rich and powerful. If a gangster is successful in appropriating such imagery, there are many precedents that suggest, as the people’s champion, he may be able to promise some level of community support to his followers. Some remain sceptical about the validity of romanticised Robin Hood imagery:

The subcultural theorists are in agreement with more orthodox views on crime on one thing. That is that crime is carried out by criminals who positively embrace illegality. For the conservative theorist it is because the person is either wilfully evil or lacks a sense of legality; for the subcultural theorist it is because a culture has emerged which elevates criminality to a virtue. Both of these are - in the vast majority of instances - wrong. (Young, 2001)

This is only a problem if criminologists get carried away with the imagery, too, and begin to believe in their subjects as *bona fide* rebels and folk heroes. It remains perfectly valid, however, to speculate about the utility of hero or anti-hero status for transmitting, via cultural short-hand, the rules and values that bind groups together and garner community

backing. Alohan, himself, seems sure that this message has been successfully conveyed:

Real gangsters are steady and help people, they don't burden them. I see this as my character and my style, and I call upon others to copy me. So I carry on like this and everyone is happy and everything is fine. Even the school teachers, Ustaz and Buddhist monks all like me.

## **Conclusion**

This paper uses my experience of interviewing a successful, serious criminal and his associates to show that in their world, absence of evidence is the common reality, but this may all too often be misconstrued as evidence of absence. To conclude, the problem for many academic researchers who are engaged in the study of successful criminals, including those with affiliations to Chinese organised crime and secret societies, is that they cannot help but fall foul of the *ad ignorantiam* fallacy - argument from a position of ignorance or lack of evidence. Secret societies and successful criminals do not tend to advertise their existence unless there is some distinct advantage to doing so, such as recruitment or intimidation. I knew my research subject for over 20 years and only found out, halfway through and by accident, about his kidnapping activities, and while I might have suspected that he had secret society connections, I did not receive any confirmation of this until I took the opportunity to interview him. While established academics working in the field might spend time with Chinese criminal groups, it is extremely difficult to penetrate the layers of secrecy to obtain a true picture. One answer might be to explore and exploit the extraordinary access possessed by current and ex-law enforcement officers, along with their specialised training, extensive exposure and experience, as a resource that has so far been under-utilised by criminology and could be harnessed for similar projects. As I have alluded to in this article, the foundation for my research was laid over a long, long time and only bore fruit when the time was ripe. It was the closeness and intimacy allowed by an N=1 research design that helped to expose some of the details of my participant's secret life. Of course, he is still keeping many secrets that may, or may not, be revealed in the years to come.

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**MOHD KASSIM NOOR MOHAMED** is a Lecturer in Criminology at Birmingham City University. Principal research interests lie in the areas of serious, organised, specialist, transnational and corporate crime and informant handling. With 20 years professional experience as a Senior Customs Officer in the role of investigator in the Special Squad and field operations, research and intelligence gathering on smuggling and Customs fraud detection. Email: [Kassim.Noor.Mohamed@bcu.ac.uk](mailto:Kassim.Noor.Mohamed@bcu.ac.uk)

**JAYNE NOOR MOHAMED** is Visiting Lecturer at Nottingham Trent International College and PhD candidate with Nottingham Trent University. Research interests is in organised crime, stolen goods markets, cyber-crime and eBay fraud.