

1 Introduction

Early on in my research journey, I developed an interest in the paradigm shift from traditional organised crime (TOC) to 'new' criminal entrepreneurs that took place between 1980s and 1990s. During that period, transnational crimes grew rapidly. Asian criminal entrepreneurs, including ethnic-Chinese ones, were reportedly the driving force behind this phenomenon. The Big Circle Boys (BCB) from Guangzhou, China were allegedly at the forefront of an entire new generation of Chinese criminal entrepreneurs.

Yet, apart from disparate anecdotes which were thin on substance, few were able to offer a coherent account as to what qualified one as a BCB individual, a collective as a BCB group, or a criminal scheme as a BCB operation.

During the initial phase of this study, I focused on a conglomerate of BCB factions – the Flaming Eagles. Known as the 'first generation' BCB, they were organised in the form of a criminal group that operated mainly out of Asia, the Americas, and Europe in the 1970s and 1980s. Thanks to my former supervisor Professor Federico Varese's advice at the time, I chose a topic that was in the distant past and as 'dead' as possible in order to mitigate risks to my personal safety.

While I showed that the BCB had been, at one point in time, a single unified organisation with a leader at the top of the hierarchy and a full-fledged membership system, I nonetheless considered the Flaming Eagles an anomaly during the BCB's history. Unconvinced that they were representative of their Canadian counterparts who were collectively referred to as the 'second generation' BCB, I subsequently decided to validate the claim that they operated as a decentralised cellular network.

In my quest to seek information about the BCB, my research brought me to a number of locations, among other places: In Guangzhou, a 24-hour sauna spa and a game-

meat restaurant in the country; in Vancouver, a human smuggling safehouse in Chinatown, a mahjong den tucked away in the back of a seafood restaurant, and a karaoke bar frequented by gangsters; in Toronto, a nondescript hotel room with its curtains drawn, a rundown apartment in the heart of downtown Chinatown, and after-hours private establishments; in Ottawa, a house in the suburb with bulletproof floor-to-ceiling windows; in London, a private eye makeshift undercover station and London's Chinatown.

During my fieldwork, I came across mixed views and materials on the BCB. At the time of writing, the statement below found on the website of British Columbia's Combined Forces Special Enforcement Unit, the provincial integrated anti-gang police agency, exemplifies this:

“While the likes of the Red Scorpions, the Independent Soldiers and the UN are referred to as mid-level players, police consider the Hells Angels a top-echelon criminal organisation, seen in the same light as the Mafia and the Big Circle gang.” (CFSEU 2018)

There is a lot to unpack here from a criminology standpoint. Mafia, a type of traditional organised criminal group found worldwide, is equated with the new generation of criminal entrepreneurs known as the BCB, despite being tagged with the 'gang' descriptor. They are also compared to a biker organisation that has never been designated by the Canadian courts as a criminal organisation.

It underscores longstanding questions facing scholars of organised crime: what qualifies a set of people involved in illicit activities as a criminal entity? Equally important, does criminal collectivity necessarily reflect certain requisite characteristics? Also, what is in a name? This study attempts to shed light on these issues in the context of Asian criminal entrepreneurs.

In Chapter 4 of Volume I, for instance, a number of organisational attributes are listed to inform the discussion. It might be argued that if those attributes must be present for a criminal organisation to be considered as such, then by default any form of criminal associations lacking them cannot qualify as a collective entity.

Although the 'new' breed of Asian criminal entrepreneurs such as the BCB have been heavily implicated in transnational crimes in Western countries since the late 1980s, some noted that law enforcement agencies, on the one hand, tended to focus still on criminal organisations that mirrored the rank structure of hierarchy in policing (Reuter 1986). On the other hand, some were quick to criticise such an outdated law enforcement approach (Zhang and Chin 2003) - all the while claiming that these new Asian criminal entrepreneurs were merely 'otherwise ordinary and legitimate individuals' who only dabbled in crime, despite offering almost no evidence or insight.

This two-volume study challenges this view with first-hand evidence: intelligence from both the police and the criminal communities attest to the presence of a set of career criminals with a common ethnic origin, dialect and language, and cultural ties who have competitively cornered different illicit markets through recurring and continual criminal collaborations. This study also explores the theoretical implications of this evidence from an academic perspective and a law enforcement strategy perspective.

Consequently, a working definition of the BCB based on the data is formulated as follows: *Career criminals who emigrated abroad from Guangzhou, China, and who hold or have held illegal immigrant status.*

In trying to avoid getting caught in the frenzy of, or to avoid, mindlessly promoting the 'conspiratorial fabrication' of overarching criminal organisation images projected by elusive criminal operators who are hard to pin down, commentators can unwittingly go to the other

extreme (Gambetta 1993: 101). One can become overly cynical and fixated on a parochial binary system of viewing criminal entrepreneurs as ultimately either being 'existent' or 'non-existent', the latter of which leads to a dismissive stance. Such perceptions of what are often complex systems of criminal networks, associations, and operations can be grossly misleading.

The field of organised crime has come a long way since the days of over-simplifying questions as to the organisational status of criminal agents and their associations by framing them around 'yes or no' tick boxes. Before the results of a series of empirical studies were published in the past 20 years, even the 'existence' and 'collectivity' of mafias were subjected to more than a century of debate as a mystified topic.¹

Hashimi *et al.* (2016: 11-12) rightly highlighted the need for, and importance of, developing new ways of understanding Canadian organised crime. They recommended introducing a new 'mid-range crime groups' classification in the Canadian legislation along with 'purely non-OC' and 'criminal organisations' categories. The scholars recognised that while the former 'may not be criminal organisations, but they matter considerably because their offences call for more criminal justice resources' in order to 'regularly track the network features of OC and non-OC offenders.' In particular, Hashimi *et al.* (*ibid.*) called for 'the incorporation of intelligence and investigative data to describe in finer (and 'networked') terms the structure and the criminal activities of the small groups and large organisations populating the Canadian crime scene.'

I, too, advocate for a more nuanced approach to understanding organised crime. Instead of posing lousy questions such as 'do they really exist?', better inquisitiveness is

¹ See Gambetta (1993: 100-102).

needed when researching into criminal 'entities' or 'non-entities' that do not fit neatly into the official discourse. One ought to be asking, for example, 'do they exist in an as yet to be identified or classified organisational form or type of network?' Only in this way could one inspire the creation of novel concepts to capture the varied forms of mono-ethnic criminal entrepreneurs that are observed in the grey areas of the organisational spectrum – based on how they operate rather than what they are called (either by themselves or others).

Organised crime is a constant global challenge that requires international efforts to tackle. Academics can significantly contribute to this undertaking by providing the much-needed building blocks of theories, frameworks, and concepts which policymakers and practitioners can draw upon and use as evidence. This study endeavours to offer fresh perspectives to advance some of the fundamental issues in these debates.

This research is unique in that it combines five levels of analysis into one single study, two volumes: the country-level; the market level (Volume II); the network level; the cellular level; and the individual level. Wrapped within this is an unprecedented attempt in organised crime research to show that the first three levels can, in fact, be treated as being one and the same – in so far as one is receptive to the arguments and sets of evidence presented here. This study posits that the heroin market was dominated by the BCB competitively, rather than coercively, for at least a decade; the key to their success at all collective levels is mainly attributed to the value of their ethnic sameness and network closure.

In addition to providing a rare glimpse into the underbelly of the drugs trade operated by Asian criminal entrepreneurs, the case studies used in this research, despite being relatively dated, can also provide an alternative lens through which to view ongoing migration issues around the world. The circumstances surrounding the BCB's criminal

community formation phases are not unique to the BCB. Socio-political issues, socio-economic conditions, and socio-cultural challenges that migrants encounter and diasporas experience are still very much alive today as it has been throughout history. Political instability, push and pull factors, genuine and bogus asylum-status seeking, lax immigration law and policy, lack of social mobility, cultural conflict, and resistance to integration are all part and parcel of the wider set of issues facing illegal immigration.

Given the refugee crises in recent years, some commentators have observed an increase in the number of criminal gangs and linked them to newly arrived migrants. Certainly, this in no way implies that the majority of migrants are prone to criminal associations and illicit activities. Indeed, to the contrary, this study points to a certain set of historical and migratory prerequisites for sophisticated crimes to become feasible options to a subset of migrants. It draws attention to the underlying mechanisms and the conditions that favour the fostering of a criminal community. It explains what enables migrants to capitalise on criminality by coalescing around emerging opportunities through trial-and-error. It also reminds us the kinds of perennial challenges that have been recurring for at least three decades, such as how Europe is currently ill-equipped to deal with illegal migrants who commit crime. Akin to the legal quandaries Canada faced in the 1980s when the Government struggled with BCB illegal immigration issues, Europe is experiencing a societal déjà vu over their inadequate legal procedures and provisions to ascertain the identity and travel documents of asylum-seekers, along with a lack of public administrative capacity to enforce deportation orders.² Although no attempt is made to provide policy recommendations for such a complex area that spans into governance and regulatory

2 For details on Germany's refugee crisis, see news reportings by Southworth (2018) and Knight (2018).

arenas beyond the ambit of this study, what Volume I offers is a critical appraisal of the processes and conditions that enabled smuggled Chinese migrants to become a collection of leaders in transnational crime.

1.1 From traditional organised crime to new criminal entrepreneurs – who are they?

In the field of organised crime, many hierarchically structured organisations such as mafia-type criminal groups have been thoroughly studied.³ Their characteristics have been identified and criteria for classification defined. The conditions required for their emergence and mobility have been hypothesised and tested based on analytical frameworks to support enduring theories. The traditional form of organised crime particular to the Chinese context is known as the Triads (Chu 2000). The subject of Asian organised crime is often associated with this conventional type of criminal organisation.⁴ Overemphasis is largely placed on the Triads by the media, which leads one to confused them with other types of Chinese criminals in the public perception. Although this is still a commonly held view of Chinese organised crime in the public domain, progress has been made by academics to dispel the inaccuracies.⁵ Prominent scholars in the area of Chinese organised crime argued that law enforcement agencies and policy-makers continue to promote such misconceptions of Chinese organised

3 For a few examples, see Chu (2000), Gambetta (1993), Hill (2003), or Varese (2001).

4 The UK is an exception, where the term 'Asian' is widely taken to mean peoples of South Asian descent – for instance, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka. Therefore, when the term 'Asian' is used in reference to organised crime in the UK, the ethnic connotation differs to other Western countries where it implies Asian peoples of the Far East and South East descent: Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Vietnam, Cambodia, Myanmar, and others.

5 See Leiva and Bright (2015) for the 'Mafia myth', where they examined whether there exists an emphasis on 'mono-ethnic criminal organisations' by the Australian media in the representation of ethnicity in organised crime (including Chinese criminal organisations).

crime, which contribute to the creation of strategies and legislation that may be deemed off-target and ineffective (Chin *et al.* 1998, Zhang and Chin 2002).

Meanwhile, researchers suggested that in the decade following the late 1980s, the presence of such TOC as the mafia declined in illegitimate markets in western countries (Chu 2000: 110; Paoli 2002; Reuter 1995). Many reported observing a relatively new breed of criminals that emerged as main players in place of TOC.⁶ As Finckenauer (2005) notes, most instances of contemporary organised crime are 'loosely affiliated networks of criminals who coalesce around certain criminal opportunities. The structure of these groups is much more amorphous, free-floating and flatter, and thus lacking in a rigid hierarchy.' Such transformation of players and organisations from the 'old' to the 'new' was reportedly most evident in the sphere of Asian organised crime. According to the literature, there appears to be a dichotomy of growth of Chinese organised crime. (Lo and Kwok 2016; Paoli 2001; Zhang and Chin 2008). On the one hand, there are hierarchical, territorial criminal organisations that dominate Chinese regions domestically who specialise in the business of protection and dispute settlement (Chu 2000; Finckenauer and Chin 2006; Varese 2011; Zhang and Chin 2008). On the other hand, Zhang and Chin (2002; 2003; 2008) contend that networks of Chinese diaspora which comprise of *non-professional criminals* thrive in a myriad of transnational crimes. For instance, Paoli (2001) notes below that the development is projected along two separate tracks which do not cross paths:

6 Reuter (1995) argues that one of the reasons for the mafia's decline lies in their incompetence. The practice of recruitment from among the uneducated, hard-core felons only attracts those that are capable of committing violence, thus producing less criminally-brilliant minds out of a shrinking pool of candidates. At the same time, older leaders are losing their edge due to the need to keep up with technological advancement in order to carry out operations that involve such sophistication. Compared to their Asian criminal counterparts, they are out-competed in the drug business due to their inability to obtain high quality drugs at a low price, to monitor and territorialise ports of entry, and to be the sole proprietor of the use of violence.

Hence, for example, the role of the American La Cosa Nostra families in illegal markets in the USA has been sharply reduced by the rise of a myriad of more risk-prone, inventive entrepreneurs with better contacts either in the communities of the final consumers or with wholesale distributors... Likewise, at least in the USA, the Triads are today excluded by many profitable businesses, most notably smuggling in drugs and human beings, that are instead run by more flexible, aggressive entrepreneurs.

Moreover, Zhang and Chin (2002; 2003; 2008; Chin 2014) claimed that the subculture to which these new criminal entrepreneurs belong is a demographic mixture of businessmen, community leaders, small business owner, workers, housewives, and the unemployed. As *otherwise ordinary and legitimate individuals*, they are supposedly adept at using their social and familial networks to exploit opportunities for profit. Those with businesses, be they restaurants, trading companies, or retail stores, use them as 'fronts' for the trade to conceal their illicit activities and launder the illicit profits (*ibid.*). Since these criminal entrepreneurs are generally regarded as having no turfs to claim, no leaders to obey, and no sworn members to initiate, the authorities find it very difficult to identify their criminal associations, understand their organisational structure, and effectively disrupt their illicit activities (*ibid.*).

Who, then, are these curious and elusive Asian entrepreneurial actors so often heard of yet largely unexplored? Do they really belong to a category of criminals that are non-professional – that is, that they do not make a career out of profitable crimes – as claimed affirmatively time and again?⁷⁸ How do they differ to TOC in the degree to which they are

⁷ Many studies that make the assertion that ethnic-Chinese drug trafficking networks are comprised of non-professional criminals rather than career criminals for the following reasons: they rely on data from Asian countries rather than Western countries (for example, Chin and Zhang 2015; Huang et al. 2010); the observations are based on individual media reportings rather than longitudinal insights over several years; or the claims have little empirical basis.

⁸ For a detailed discussion on the analytical criteria that can be used to differentiate between career and non-career criminals, see Blumstein et al. (1986).

organised, the activities they undertake, and the way they are structured? Are they maintaining their presence, declining in numbers, or gaining prominence in criminal markets? This two-volume publication seeks to fill this knowledge gap in the field of organised crime by examining the BCB, who have been, for the past few decades, regarded by some as the archetypal representation of the new generation of Asian criminal entrepreneurs.

1.2 The Big Circle Boys

For three decades up until the early 2010s, the BCB have caused major concerns to the authorities in Canada and the US (CISC 1996-2002; Criminal Intelligence Directorate 1999; CSIS 2000; Berry *et al.* 2003; Helfand and Osborne 2003).⁹ According to reports on Asian organised crime from the US Library of Congress (Berry *et al.* 2003: 62, 65-67), the BCB were identified as *the* most active among eight Chinese criminal groups, including various triads, that operated in both Canada and the US. By comparison to other Asian criminal groups in Canada, the BCB reportedly exhibited the greatest expansion in its criminal cells throughout North America since it was first detected in the 1980s. The mainstay of their activities was reportedly drug trafficking. They were also very active in the credit card counterfeiting business during the 1990s, where they produced virtually all of the bogus credit cards in circulation. In addition, the BCB were involved in an array of other types of criminalities, such as extortion, prostitution, gaming offences, automobile theft, counterfeit documents, among others (CISC 2001: 24). Despite the significance and the priority status the BCB occupied on the agenda of North American investigations, most academic studies on Asian criminal

⁹ The CISC Annual Report ceased to address the BCB as well as a number of other criminal organisations by name after 2002 due to provisions on discriminatory ethnic-profiling.

organisations focus on traditional triads and street gangs, while no scholarly research has been undertaken to investigate the BCB.

There is much debate among the authorities and the experts as to who the BCB really are and how they are organised, mainly due to their uncertain history, secretive way of operating, and organisational changes that have occurred over the years. For instance, the BCB has been regarded as a newer black society (Broadhurst 2017), an organised criminal group (OCG; CISC 2001; Criminal Intelligence Directorate 1999; CSIS 2000; Helfand and Osborne 2003: 21), a mafia group (Hudson 2003: 41), a gang (Gordon 1994), and a criminal enterprise (FBI 2007). Other sources indicated that the BCB have not been one unified organisation, but rather a collection of BCB groupings of which some were connected whilst others were not (Chu 2008; Dubro 2008; R3). Further still, Professor Ko-Lin Chin, a pre-eminent scholar in Asian organised crime studies, holds the view that the BCB never existed anywhere in the world as a criminal group and that to study the BCB would be to examine 'something that does not exist' (Chin 2008: pers. comm.). Below, Schneider (2009: 493) summarises the lack of understanding about the BCB even though many regarded them as the most dominant Chinese criminal network that supposedly replaced the traditional triads in western countries:

Numerous questions still abound concerning the Chinese triads and Big Circle Boys, the two most dominant Asian organised crime genres in Canada and the world. Their exact origins, the size of their active membership, their organisational structure, and whether traditional rituals and ceremonies still apply are all subjects that continue to be shrouded in uncertainty and controversy... The Phoenix of Asian organised crime that has arisen from the ashes of the once-powerful triads is the Big Circle Boys, a title that is now just a vague umbrella term applied to a loose network of gangs, primarily made up of Chinese nationals from the mainland. This criminal network constitutes the most widespread, diverse, and sophisticated criminal conspiracy in Canada and perhaps the world. While the Italian mafia may have set the standard for

organised crime in the twentieth century, the Big Circle Boys are setting the standard and raising the bar for transnational organised crime in the new millennium.

That the BCB does not belong to TOC is one of the strongly-held views voiced by some experts. However, almost no credible data or critical research have been forthcoming, apart from the news and anecdotes available in the public domain, to either confirm this or to provide insight on the nature of the BCB's criminality that sets them apart from TOC.¹⁰ To explore this further, a number of questions need to be answered. For example, have they competed in transnational markets as entrepreneurs on a freelance basis, or have they cohesively run territorially-based rackets using violent means of control? To what extent have they been organised in their operations, and which individual or collective features enabled them to carry out these activities? Should they be categorised as a criminal collective or a non-entity in the conventional sense? If it is the latter, then are there other suitable typologies according to the organisational form they exhibited? How have they been structured and did form follow function and market or vice versa? From where did their name and identity originate? Does the name reflect their socio-cultural background? How has the meaning of their name changed over the years? Finally, what does the future hold for the BCB? These questions set the general directions of this study. Specific sets of related research themes, theories, and objectives are discussed in Chapter 2.

1.3 Sources and Methodology

¹⁰ With the exception of an unpublished MPhil Thesis (Chung 2007) and a published Global Crime journal article (Chung 2008), no academic research has been conducted to examine the BCB or ethnic-Chinese criminal entrepreneurs in Western countries in general.

Organised crime literature is often plagued with inaccuracy and distortion. The secondary nature of most data sources in this field is one contributing factor (Hill 2003: 2). For example, as mentioned earlier, in-depth research based high quality and first-hand data is virtually non-existent on ethnic-Chinese criminal entrepreneurs that operate in Western countries. Field research is used by some scholars to overcome this limitation. However, to observe and/or legitimately participate in criminal groups in an ethnographic way, many scenes are deemed too dangerous for a researcher. Nonetheless, successful field observations are accumulating in numbers, which include those carried out by Ianni and Reuss-Ianni (1972) on an Italian-American mafia family in New York; Adler (1985) on upper level drug dealers and smugglers in the US; Sanchez-Jankowski (1991) on street gangs in American cities; Hobbs (1995) on tracking the career trajectories of professional criminals in the UK; and Chin (1996) on youth gangs in New York's Chinatown.

Conducting interview is a relatively safer option, especially in a controlled environment such as a corrective facility setting or being introduced through a trusted intermediary. However, access to illicit sector participants still remains highly restricted as they have an interest in concealing the true extent of their activities and their presence (Chu 2000: 142). Similarly, law enforcement participants have a stake in preserving knowledge and information which they deem as against their organisational mandate (Hill 2003: 2-3). Other options include acquiring official files such as judicial documents, police reports, or files from governmental and non-governmental organisations, all of which help to minimise personal safety concerns, though they pose a different set of accessibility issues (Fijnaut *et al.* 1998: 38; Varese 2001: 10). The state actors and agencies that work with organised crime issues often are reluctant to share their data and information with researchers due to complex and lengthy information request and application procedures as well as restrictive policies in place

to safeguard against the release of potentially sensitive, classified, and publication-banned materials to the general public. This is particularly evident during cross-border visits by the researcher or in situations where such trips in person are not possible (Hobbs and Antonopoulos 2014). Nevertheless, this type of data collection methodology is far from unworkable (*ibid.*). In fact, a growing body of studies based on high-quality field research can positively attest to its feasibility (Antonopoulos *et al.* 2011; Chin and Zhang 2015; Decker and Townsend Chapman 2008; Desroches 2005; Dorn *et al.* 1992; Pearson and Hobbs 2011; Reuter and Haaga 1989; Ruggiero and Khan 2006; Siegel and Yesilgoz 2003; Staring 2003; Zhang and Chin 2004).

The next section explains how fieldwork was carried out in this study. It includes some of the preparatory work and considerations prior to conducting fieldwork, justifications for the choice of data sources, challenges encountered and improvised strategies, and methods used for data collection and data analysis.

The bulk of the first-hand data used throughout the books consist of two types: official documents and personal interviews. A list of the official documents can be found in the Bibliography under the section 'Judicial Documents.' A total of 24 formal and informal meetings and discussions were held, and the contents from 17 of those are included in Volumes I and II. Formal interviews were conducted with nine respondents, some of which involved meetings on more than one occasion (see List of Respondents before Bibliography). Some of the informal discussions with the other 15 respondents on the BCB topic produced a moderate impact on the study's trajectory in the early fieldwork stages. Some of these discussions also involved important and sensitive information that was deemed unsuitable for the books (explained later in this section) and thus not included here. Two of the formal interviews were conducted in Cantonese and translated during transcription by the author

(Chu and R2 (former BCB)). With the exception of Chu (academic scholar) and Dubro (journalist and author), all other respondents' names are pseudonymised to protect their identities. Moreover, this also applies to the witnesses and participants in the criminal justice system named and discussed in the official documents and court transcripts. For example, police officer and police informants are pseudonymised with O and I followed by a number after that in their order of appearance in Volume I and Volume II: O1, O2, I1, I2, and so on.

Volumes I and II also draw from two testimonies provided to hearings that took place at the Canadian Immigration and Refugee Board (IRB). These were given by two of the most senior and knowledgeable police investigators of BCB cases and Asian organised crime. They were extracted from IRB (2008) documents in relation to the Wu Yi Feng docket (under the 'Judicial Documents' section in the Bibliography). The officers' names are pseudonymised with the designations of O1 and O2.

The acquisition for the two types of data described above involved different processes. Before turning to those processes, the content distinctions between the two types of data are addressed below.

1.3.1 *Interview and documentation*

Some of the BCB police investigations and court proceedings were still ongoing during the fieldwork period. In some cases, the completion of a court trial does not imply an end to the police investigation, especially where no conviction is secured. Even when a trial ends with guilty verdicts and custodial sentences, the accused has the option to appeal the court decision. Further, the offender could serve the prison term partially before applying for parole. Therefore, one needs to assume that details of any case that has the prospect of being prolonged by way of subsequent investigations or court appeals could be brought under

scrutiny in the future. As such, any discussion on-the-record during an interview could potentially jeopardise their case if previously unknown details were accidentally disclosed.

The issue of informant anonymity requires extra due care during the trial. Revenge plot by former associates against an informant is always a risk. Therefore, it is important to steer clear of sensitive topics specific to court cases during interviews so as to minimise the risk of identity exposure, especially if the information provided can be cross-checked to identify the case or interviewee in question.

Compared to conducting interview, the use of information from official documents present a lower risk of unintentional exposure of one's identity. Some examples of such sources include the transcript of court proceedings, case briefing and bail hearing material, and record of the case presented by the police. First, the procedure of acquiring such document is quite rigorous. The Access to Information Act of Canada sets out guidelines on the public's right to obtain certain information held by governmental organisations. In the case of court material, after a trial proceeding has ended, the public can request for information including court transcripts. Prior to approving such requests, the respective justice departments within each jurisdiction would review the bona fides of the request. Upon approval and pending payment for reproduction and administrative fees, further review of the material would be conducted prior to its release so as to ensure that sensitive and classified information contained is withheld from release or that the relevant texts are redacted, especially for files that are subject to a court-ordered publication ban.

With the above in mind, the data collection objectives were broken down into two main categories: to understand how the BCB operated using case-specific data from official documents, including the background of the actors, their *modus operandi*, and relationships and business associations between actors; to seek the meaning of the BCB name and the

presence of collective attributes based on non-case-specific historical accounts revealed through interviews. The latter included their mass illegal immigration to Canada, BCB organisational structure and membership system, and their involvement in illicit markets.

There were validity concerns regarding the use of these kinds of data, which stemmed from potential biases inherent to the background and experience of the respondents (for interviews) and court witnesses (for official documents), as well as the jobs and positions of law enforcement officials and judicial personnel who provided testimonial evidence. For instance, a criminal who gives interview or testimony may be incentivised to enhance their reputation by embellishing their connections and glorifying their conducts, while the authorities are usually prone to overstating the structure and prevalence of criminal associations and activities. Moreover, since a significant portion of the police evidence was based on wire-tapped telephone conversations, it may have been the case that those who were being intercepted were aware of being listened to, and in an attempt to deceive the police they would talk strategically (Campana and Varese 2012; Varese 2011). In addition, the intercepted conversations were often summarised by the police before being presented in the courts. When the 'codes' and strategic conversations were analysed to produce summaries, interpretation of the content was necessary which depended largely on the expertise and discretion of the police. These are some of the reasons for designing two separate sets of themed research questions, as mentioned above, according to the two different types of data, so that the information gathered can be used in a complementary way. All risk and validity issues and efforts to mitigate them aside, there nonetheless are still limitations with regards to the data as is always the case with organised crime research. For instance, reliability issues concerning the representativeness of the sample and the generalisability of the results is almost always present in research that involves interviewing

subjects associated with organised crime (Hobbs and Antonopoulos 2014). The reason is simply due to the scarcity of experts and willing participants. Notwithstanding this, the information presented in the study was treated critically by verifying impartial personal accounts using different sources where possible, and care was taken to omit claims that were regarded as unsubstantiated, exaggerated, or unbalanced.

1.3.2 The data collection process

The process of acquisition for the two types of data started in the UK but diverged once the fieldwork took me to Canada. The first step involved several concurrent strands of sourcing effort to identify past or present cases in which BCB have been involved, and to determine the existence of the BCB in different jurisdictions from knowledgeable sources.

The BCB cases were identified via a comprehensive search of the academic literature, non-academic publications and media outlets (newspapers, magazines, personal websites) and online legal databases. In relation to the latter databases, keyword and name searches on Factiva, LexisNexis, and Westlaw were carried out using a number of BCB name-related combinations and wildcards (big circle boys, big circle gang, *dai huen jai*, *tai huen zai*) in both Mandarin and Cantonese spellings.¹¹¹² Although there were a large number of variations in the possible combinations of search keywords, such as when the spelling, order of names (last name first, first name last, Chinese middle name with two parts, single Chinese middle name,

11 A number of BCB cases were noted to have taken place in Australia since the 1990s. However, those cases appeared to carry an overtone of youth-gang sporadic violence, which were significantly different to the more 'calculated' and business-oriented way the Canadian BCB conducted themselves. For practical reasons, Australian cases were not considered due to the infeasibility of obtaining usable, first-hand data without visiting in-person.

12 Natarajan and Belanger 1998 used a similar method to search and build their sample using Westlaw database where they extracted from the database convicted federal cases involving multi-kilo trafficking in New York City.

anglicised first names with last names), and language factors were all taken into account, there were also numerous repetitions of any given case by different news outlets. Moreover, follow-up reporting on the court appeal of high-profile BCB cases were also prevalent. Therefore, the focus at the early stage was to sift through the large number of cases from the search results and their variants (N = approximately 850 to 900), dismiss irrelevant cases where insufficient information on individual names were provided, extract the names of all those involved and implicated in relevant cases, and classify those cases by the year, location, offences, project codename, and judicial status (where possible) for the purpose of making official request for information subsequently.

In parallel to the search and identification of cases was an attempt to determine the presence of the BCB in different jurisdictions, since at the initial stage, the scope of the study was not limited to Canada. Various knowledgeable sources were contacted via 'cold calls' or through personal referrals in the hope of opening doors. Channels through which connections were established varied widely, ranging anywhere from first degree contacts associated with academia and law enforcement agencies, to second or third-degree acquaintances through networking, to unacquainted referrals. In the UK, current and former officers from law enforcement agencies including the Metropolitan Police, Thames Valley Police, and Serious and Organised Crime Agency, among others, were consulted; this line of enquiry produced negative results on the question of whether the BCB existed in the UK (R9 2008; R10 2008; R22 2008).¹³

13 A similar effort was made to ascertain their existence in San Francisco, US. This was initiated after coming across a news article in relation to a local BCB case, and a personal referral to an officer of the San Francisco Police Department. The result, however, turned out to be negative (R11 2008).

The above took place in the UK between January and April 2008. Following this initial data gathering phase, a decision was made to focus exclusively on the Canadian BCB cases because according to official reports, the BCB exhibited the most dominating presence in two of the largest Canadian cities – Toronto and Vancouver (CISC 1998, 2000; Berry *et al.* 2003: 23). Therefore, I spent my time between May 2008 and January 2009 in Toronto, Vancouver, Surrey, Richmond, and Victoria Island to collect official documents and conduct interviews.¹⁴ A list of names were extracted from the BCB cases and categorised into the following groups: academic scholar, non-academic author and journalist, social and business communities, law enforcement officer, judicial personnel (defence counsel, prosecutor, judge), and the accused (or the convicted).

During early stages of the fieldwork, no boundaries were drawn in terms of the number of cases to examine or potential BCB subjects to locate and approach. It was necessary to remain open to all potential sources of data to see what was actually available and accessible before narrowing down the resource pool based on purposive sampling. More importantly, there were early indications from official sources that the BCB were highly secretive, which gave rise to only 10 to 15 major BCB drug trafficking cases that were recorded in Canada. Their criminal domain that lied exclusively in the upper-levels of drug trafficking was the main reason for the paucity of cases and data available. As Reuter (2014: 360) notes, despite the large and growing literature on drug markets, most researchers focus on retail trade which is 'much easier to study' rather than on the upper levels which are 'less visible

¹⁴ Between April and May 2008, I took a trip to HK and Guangzhou. In HK, I conducted an interview with Dr Chu Yiu Kong, the author of *The Triads as Business* (2000), an in-depth study of the Triads in HK. He recommended and referred other experts on organised crime and the BCB topic, as well as shared his views and recollections on how the BCB had impacted the underworld and the law enforcement agencies in HK throughout the 1970s and 1980s. While in Guangzhou, I visited the Zhong Shan Library (now known as the Municipal Guangzhou Library) to locate materials related to the BCB, organised crime, and the Guangzhou factions of the 'Red Guard' during the Chinese Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (GPCR).

outside producer countries.' According to a literature review by Desroches (2007) on upper-level drug distribution from around the world, he only found less than a dozen relevant studies from the US, Canada, Australia, and the Netherlands. The shortage, according to Desroches (2007) is partly due to the 'covert and elusive nature' of, and the small number of traffickers at, the higher levels of trafficking.¹⁵ Just how few top traffickers are there in numbers proportionally? Using an hour-glass shape analogy to describe the global distribution of participants in the cocaine and heroin trades, Reuter (2014: 361-362) provided a rough estimate on the number of traffickers involved in different sectors of these two markets as being: millions of producers (growing, harvesting, and early stage refinement); a few tens of thousands of smugglers and high-level dealers; many hundreds of thousands of retailers.

Moreover, part of the research agenda, as noted above, entailed investigating what defined the BCB that was based not only on their own admissions but also the perception of outsiders. For this reason, all groups in other categories apart from the accused (or the convicted) needed to be consulted for their views. Only then could more precise criteria be developed to define the BCB, which were then fed back into the sorting process *to omit non-qualifying individuals and cases from the data*. During data analysis, it was decided that a working definition of the BCB was required in its basic form as a point of reference when addressing the individuals under study while the manuscripts took shape.

A tentative definition was thusly devised after having provisionally consulted various types of information from secondary sources, including reports on the ethnic composition, structure, and organisation of their groupings, background and history, and types of criminal

¹⁵ Desroches (2007) alludes to the uncooperative nature of law enforcement and intelligence agencies as another reason.

activities. Having eliminated superfluous and unverifiable information, it was determined that the only confirmed common denominators that could positively be applied across all alleged BCB individuals, regardless of temporal and geographical distinctions, were that they had been: identified as criminals and as BCB through self-admission and/or by the authorities; illegally emigrated abroad from Guangzhou city, China, and/or have held refugee-claimant status; persistently involved in crimes since arriving abroad, where they relied on criminality as a profession to make a living.¹⁶ The question of whether all types of criminality should be given the same weight, along with other considerations such as personal history, attributes, and associations were, as mentioned above, to be sought as evidence throughout the study to better understand and assess the above definitional criteria. All those identified as BCB had their background (criminal career, immigration status, and Guangzhou as their place of origin) verified via court documents, police files, and/or interviews with law enforcement officers. For those whose BCB identifiers were derived from less-than-credible sources or hearsay evidence (the media, for instance), these will be specified throughout Volumes I and II.¹⁷¹⁸

Therefore, for the purpose of this study, the working definition of the BCB is as follows:
career criminals who emigrated abroad from Guangzhou, China, and who hold or have held

16 Incidentally in some cases their criminality started back in Guangzhou, but this is not a defining criterion as such information is not always available.

17 The BCB speak the Cantonese dialect. Cantonese as spoken by people from Guangzhou is phonetically similar to the same dialect spoken by people from HK, yet distinguishable by slight differences in accent. This is to be discussed in Chapter 3. The author's ability to speak fluent Cantonese was instrumental to carrying out the fieldwork. This includes both the ability to identify, correct, and translate Cantonese names from official documents, as well as liaising with Cantonese-speaking individuals and conducting formal interviews.

18 An example of such exclusion is the case of a Fujian 'BCB' worker from the mid-1990s, one of the most sensationalised 'BCB-related' murders (of his BCB boss's infant child) which caused a media frenzy. Although labelled as a BCB himself, as his boss Wong Yuk Ming was a known BCB heroin importer from Guangzhou, the Fujian BCB worker was actually a lower level worker from Fujian, China (IRB 2004: Fujian BCB worker).

illegal immigrant status. See Appendix B for a list of individuals whose BCB status have been identified in court documents through informant information and police testimonies, as well as by police respondents through interviews.

While in Canada, attempts were made to locate and establish contact with the individuals whose names were extracted from the BCB cases. This part of the process utilised official channels through which contacts were established, requests were made, and networking was conducted, similar to the UK approach described above. By contrast, and as anticipated, the results were significantly more positive. With reference to the two different types of data, law enforcement officers proved to be most helpful in providing first-hand accounts from their personal experience, whereas judicial personnel were most apt at directing information requests through the appropriate departments to assist with locating official documents.¹⁹²⁰ In particular, the officers were mostly veterans with more than 20 years of experience on the job individually, if they had not retired by the time of the meeting. Their seniority and experience in dealing with the BCB even before their appearance in the late 1980s adds much credibility to their views on not just individual cases, but on how the BCB developed throughout the years as a criminal phenomenon. Informal meetings in-person and discussions over the telephone were also productive, which were the communication methods preferred by most of the academic scholars and non-academic writers. The least formal types of gatherings were the norm for meetings arranged with individuals from the Asian business and social communities. Meetings commonly took place in such venues as

19 One of the most probable ways of meeting an offender for the purpose of academic research is through the penal system. However, despite several requests made to Correctional Service Canada to gain access to a list of named BCB offenders in prisons throughout the Ontario region (includes Toronto) and Pacific Region (includes Vancouver), access was unfortunately denied.

20 One of the most positive catalysts which helped initiate the fieldwork momentum was when a list of named BCB and investigative projects was provided by a senior law enforcement officer in British Columbia.

Chinese restaurants and karaoke bars, where the friendly and relaxed ambiance was meant to ease the bonding process. Although it could be said that the Chinese concept of *guanxi* (further elaborated upon in Volume II) played an important role in the bonding process with those of Chinese descent,²¹ it would be preferable for the purpose of this study to use 'relationship building' and 'contact referral' as demystified and plain terms to describe this aspect of the fieldwork process. This includes how relationships were managed with prior contacts to advance the research agenda, and the building of rapport and trust with newly-established contacts.²²

So, informal gatherings often required a certain level of trust prior to the first meeting through introductions by a trusted intermediary. Information attained from such encounters called for reliance on memory rather than physical or electronic recording devices. Field research notes were taken from recollection as soon as possible after the event. Where the conversation was deemed sufficiently relevant to be cited in here, the respondents would have been asked to consent to being interviewed and provided the semi-structured question prepared prior to the meeting. For this reason, quick judgement and improvisation were required in situations where open discussions regarding detailed research background and purposes were deemed inappropriate. In these scenarios, the conversations that took place would not be used in the study.²³ Normally, this involved an unexpected turn of events, such

²¹ In relation to academic research, Antonopoulos (2013) states that topics related to the Eastern culture often rely on the ability to understand and use *guanxi* in addition to one's linguistic skills. This applies to research on both legitimate and illicit aspects, and it is true for studies undertaken both in China and within overseas Chinese communities. The utility of *guanxi* – or simply *relationship* and *contacts* – in this study cannot be considered unique by any means. For examples, see the fieldwork process of two studies on corruption and *guanxi* by Wang (2013) and Wang C et al. (2014).

²² As a prominent concept among the Chinese people, the practice of *guanxi* can be found within all facets of social interactions. However, this study takes the position that distinctions between different settings in which *guanxi* is used should be made, which is detailed in Volume II. In particular, the relationship aspect of *guanxi*, despite being only one strand of subset notions within the broader concept of *guanxi*, has many cross-cultural analogues – and should, therefore, be unpacked and specified as *relationship* wherever possible rather than to shroud it under the umbrella of *guanxi*.

²³ Although meetings arranged through primary intermediaries included providing participants with all relevant

as hearing a subject matter that was unrelated to the study or directly related to ongoing cases; when persons beside the intended participant were present, or; intuition that led to the belief that a potential participant or secondary intermediary was unsuitable for the study. These scenarios only occurred during the trust-building phase of meeting new contacts before decisions were made to terminate further pursuit of information. In a sense, the integrity of the data was preserved because of such decisions in weighing and balancing the appropriateness of making use of certain types of information.²⁴

Known as the 'snow-ball' sampling method of identifying participants and building contacts (Biernacki and Waldorf 1981; see Zhang and Chin 2004 for example), cyclical efforts were made in the Provinces of Ontario and British Columbia on a rolling basis to try to establish communication with relevant parties in order to secure meetings and obtain documents. Relying on a few of the established contacts who were kind enough and willing to provide further assistance in addition to their own participation, subsequent doors were opened by way of referral to reach more parties of interest. Therefore, any attempt to present the entire data collection procedure in an organised and well-planned fashion would be nothing short of disingenuous. Indeed, an honest assessment of the process, as with most organised crime empirical fieldwork, would be along the lines of what Morselli (2009: 23) described as 'scrambling to obtain data.' As explained, there certainly was a general scheme

information regarding the study, participants still often go 'off script' to discuss topics or introduce others who may not add value to the study.

24 Notwithstanding the exclusion of the many anecdotes and personal experiences or opinions regarding the BCB from interviews with anonymous participants, these meetings have proved fruitful in at least two ways. They provided invaluable introductions to individuals who would otherwise not have been accessible, such as a number of former and current law enforcement officers who were willing to discuss the BCB off-the-record. In the formative stages of the fieldwork in Canada, informal meetings of the kind were extremely useful for the purpose of corroborating on-going findings from both court material and formal interviews. This applies to informal discussions with both law enforcement circles and the Asian business or social community. So, even when the information is deemed inappropriate to be incorporated into the books, the totality of the varying sources and angles of information helped greatly at the time to ensure that the research was embarking upon the right path.

of prioritised tasks in which the order of making calls, networking, arranging to meet, setting up interviews, waiting for document retrieval, buying and copying files, following up, and repeating partial steps where necessary, was planned. However, there were more factors which dictated the timing of the tasks that were beyond my control than could be mapped out strategically beforehand. Thus, improvisation was required in many cases immediately after successful meetings and access-to-document approvals, with examples provided below. Patience, politeness, and persistence were the second-most important pieces of advice taken on-board before commencing fieldwork; personal safety was the first.

For instance, data from three of the largest police investigative projects that involved the BCB – Eider, E-Congee, and E-Page – were acquired from the courthouses of British Columbia. Although there was no certainty that any of the Provincial and Federal Courts of British Columbia would grant access to these files prior to the fieldwork visit, things changed very quickly once the court clerks agreed to meet and hear about the research in-person. Quite frequently, boxes of files were too voluminous to photocopy indiscriminately, yet access to review the files in-house prior to making requests for specific sections to be copied resided in a grey area. Such situations usually depended upon the discretion of the judicial personnel, and the fine line lies somewhere between pestering them and persuading them that the files could 'make or break' the chance of producing a substantial piece of research. In the end, access to several British Columbia courthouses were granted to consult files for several months (N = 80-100 boxes, 20-35 files per box, 50-400 pages per file) in order to select only the most relevant data.²⁵²⁶

25 Some of the most important BCB cases (police investigative Project Luen Hop, for instance), which could have been valuable to this study, were unavailable through Freedom of Information requests made to the Court of Ontario.

26 The subsequent section expands on how portions of official data were determined to be relevant or irrelevant.

1.3.3 Methods of data analysis

The processes of analysing data from meetings and interviews as compared to those from official documents were vastly different. The former, on the one hand, involved the transcription of interviews where the conversations were electronically recorded. The transcribed content did not require much sorting effort since in situations where a recorder was used, the flow of conversation would have more or less followed a guided questionnaire. Also, as mentioned earlier, this portion of data collection did not intend to target any interpersonal relationships or criminal operational details. Therefore, the use of this type of data was quite straightforward in the sense that the qualitative content followed the themes as set out by the deductive method of categorising evidence according to the main research questions.

The official documents, on the other hand, involved the need to devise a much more complex, robust, and iterative way of extracting and analysing data. It was the opposite of the interview analysis process where a simple plan could be followed once over from the beginning to the end; a largely inductive approach was used to analyse the official documents. There are several reasons for this. Approximately 10,000 pages of potentially useful documents were filtered out for scanning and photocopying by the end of the fieldwork.²⁷ The sheer volume of material by itself was not the main issue. As the majority of the files contained trial transcripts, it was difficult to discern any clear trial proceeding agenda apart

27 This rough estimation excludes a number of files acquired but not used in the book. Among other less useful files, a master's thesis by Jamieson (2002) contains numerous insightful case studies on counterfeit credit card offences (the other dominant BCB activity apart from drugs) committed by various named BCB, including Ze Wai, Kwok Yung, and Kwok Keung. More than 5000 pages (some parts are irrelevant) of material on a number of BCB individuals have also been order-purchased from the IRB.

from a brief summary contained within the front pages of certain documents (if there was one). This is because court proceedings follow a certain logic of argument that was specific to the segment of the case as the prosecution see fit. Thus, unlike academic literature, there is rarely any clear or identifiable order for the purpose of understanding the criminality involved. The trial objective, rather, is to seek and present evidential facts in whichever manner that would secure a conviction (or maintain innocence, for the defence counsel). This resulted in very fragmented and unrelated topics in the form of question and answer sessions that were scattered throughout the documents. Sometimes arguments seemed trivial, whilst at other times the more important answers may be cut short or skipped over altogether. For instance, not many substantial telephone intercepts were made available during the BCB trials. Of those that were mentioned by the prosecution and the defence, many of the calls were often referred to only by their police reference number - without specified dates, did not follow chronological sequence (for instance, call 1, then call 46, and then call 20, and so on), and with only last names used in some cases (but the problem is that many Chinese last names are identical, which made it impossible to identify the caller with certainty).

Therefore, the analysis was divided into multiple repetitions of task-based reading of the files. First, the files were read in detail to obtain an overview of the major themes in the cases. Once familiar with the subject matters of the files, second and third iterations were done to mark the particulars of the individual cases, also known as thematic coding. During the process, coloured sticky tabs with written notes were used to specify important people (based on prominence and repeated mentioning), activity and market attributes, time and places, relations, legitimate personnel, criminal operations, police coordination, organisational structure, criminal affiliations, and so on. Then, a fourth reading was carried out to extract useful excerpts from witness testimonies and, in some cases, paraphrased

quotes to shorten topics and omit irrelevant exchanges during a trial. Not all of the extracted excerpts and paraphrased quotes were identified during the rounds of thematic coding. This is because some sub-topics would have been overlooked compared to major themes as the attention during sorting of data could not be efficiently spared to identify both at the same time. So, a list of keywords was created to arrange the extracted data based on the sub-topics specific to the major themes of the testimonies. For instance, a discussion from the excerpts on the associations between domestic distributors would have required a distinct set of keywords compared to a sub-topic on the importation process coordinated between partners in different countries. It was imperative to go back to the academic literature to consult on areas of organised crime studies which might best apply to what were previously unexpected findings from the case files. After juggling between the files and the literature to find the best angles to tackle the data, a better selection of keywords was generated at the same time to categorise the sub-topics according to the chosen theories.

1.4 Organisation of Volume I

The central issues of this study are introduced in this chapter. The sources, data collection process, and methods of data analysis are discussed. Chapter 2 reviews the relevant organised crime literature, which includes the theories and typologies to be used to examine the empirical evidence. Chapter 3 explores the historical background and migration of the BCB. Chapter 4 discusses Canadian laws with respect to criminal organisations and seeks TOC typology features in the BCB on an organisational level. Chapter 5 examines early crimes committed by the BCB, such as disorganised and localised violence as well as non-drug related crimes. Chapter 6 focuses on drug-related activities by scrutinising the BCB's competitive dominance in the heroin market and their involvement in other drugs. Chapter 7 provides

perspectives from both sides of the law on the BCB's structure at intercellular and intracellular levels and classifies the BCB using a structure typology. Chapter 8 investigates cases of reported violence associated to the BCB to determine whether their collective reputation should be treated as a superficial label. Chapter 9 explains how trust developed among the BCB by looking at the contexts under which it originated and the criminal community that formed as a result. It also seeks evidence of a third generation BCB and assesses whether such is likely to emerge in the future. Finally, Chapter 10 concludes the book by recapitulating the main findings and conclusions.