

# Kabuki-chō Gangsters: Ethnic Succession in Japanese Organised Crime?

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**I**N April 2000 Tokyo Governor Ishihara Shintarō told members of Japan's Self Defence Force that the criminal activities of Koreans and Chinese were so widespread that in the event of an earthquake they would riot. In response to the outcry his remarks caused, Ishihara observed that 'Japanese people can no longer walk the streets of Ikebukuro and Shinjuku at night. These places are like foreign countries. Even the *Yakuza* don't go in.'

Although Ishihara is more outspoken than many of his compatriots, this perception of foreign criminals running amok is by no means rare; during my PhD fieldwork in 1998 I frequently encountered similar views. In

the intervening years the spectre of 'bad foreigners' (*furyō gaikokujin*) has loomed ever larger in press and police portrayals of Japan's worsening crime situation. In this depiction, the totem of foreign criminality is the 'Chinese Mafia', centred on the Kabuki-chō entertainment area of Shinjuku, which, as Ishihara implies, has supposedly displaced the indigenous organised crime syndicates the *yakuza*.

If such Chinese groups have indeed managed to oust the *yakuza* from Kabuki-chō it is an interesting finding; theoretically there are many barriers to entry for aspiring mafias. Before we explore the idea of ethnic succession in Japanese organised crime we should put it in context by, firstly, examining

the available police statistics to see what light they shed on the exact state of foreigner-perpetrated crime and, secondly, making clear what is meant here by the term 'mafia'.

## The Statistics

Between 1990 and 2002 the number of known criminal law violations in Japan increased by 74%. Over the same period, the number of foreigners arrested for criminal law violations increased by 158% whilst the number of crimes attributed to them by the police rose by a whisker under 500%. To the Japanese, whose notions of national identity have been predicated on both a love of harmony and a sense of ethnic homogeneity,

Night time in Kabuki-chō, Tokyo. By courtesy of the Japan National Tourist Organization, web site [www.seejapan.co.uk](http://www.seejapan.co.uk)

such figures seem not unconnected. As a senior police officer, lamenting Japan's growing crime rate, told me, 'the thing is, there are so many foreigners.'

Such statistics taken out of context mean very little. Even at best, criminal statistics are ridden with dark figures and must be treated with caution. With this caveat, what do the quantitative data tell us? I confine my analysis to Tokyo (in which Kabuki-chō is situated) and to the three categories of crime which generate most public anxiety: felonious offences (murder, robbery, arson and rape), violent offences (such as GBH, extortion and intimidation) and larceny. Adding these three categories together, we get 251,187 offences known to the Metropolitan Police Department (MPD) in 2002 of which 49,720 were cleared up (and 22,829 individuals arrested). Of these crimes, 3,988 cases (8%) were attributed to 1,183 foreigners of whom 773 were Chinese criminals and these Chinese accounted for 2,683 (5%) of cases.

There is no space here to go into a detailed breakdown of the various populations and perpetration rates but (according to the police statistics<sup>1</sup>) Chinese in Tokyo are twice as likely to be arrested for felonious, violent and larcenous crimes as Japanese Tokyoites. Furthermore, Chinese arrestees account for six times as many cases per capita as do Japanese arrestees. Collectively, non-Chinese foreigners are disproportionately less criminal than either Chinese or Japanese<sup>2</sup>.

Although the Tokyo Chinese population (amounting to less than one percent of the total Tokyo population) contains a disproportionately high number of criminals, it is clearly not the case that they are responsible for all of the city's rise in crime.

### The Theory: Mafias, *Yakuza* and Protection

My research is theoretically grounded on the work of Diego Gambetta who argues that 'the



Sicilian Mafia is a specific economic enterprise, an industry which produces, promotes and sells private protection.<sup>3</sup> The *yakuza* may similarly be seen as a set of firms which provide protection to consumers in both illegal and legitimate market sectors. We may therefore label them a mafia. For a Chinese organised crime group to qualify as such it too would have to specialise in the provision of protection. It might be considered unfair to impose stricter definitional criteria than imagined by those moral entrepreneurs who bandy the phrase 'Chinese Mafia'. However, given Ishihara's implication that Chinese gangs are competitors to the *yakuza*, and that the *yakuza* are providers of protection, this usage is appropriate.

There are a number of resources necessary for the successful supply of private protection: the ability to deploy violence; an acknowledged reputation for this; accurate information concerning, *inter alia*, the territory or market sector over which protection is afforded, potential rivals, free-riders and those who might threaten protectees; diplomatic links with law-enforcement authorities and other sources of power. All but the first of these factors present significant obstacles to an aspiring protector.

If we also bear in mind that Kabuki-chō contains well-established incumbents with lucrative interests to defend, the emergence of a 'Chinese Mafia' is by no means given.

### The Site

Kabuki-chō, packed with snack bars, restaurants, clubs, hostess bars, short-stay 'love hotels', and establishments offering various sexual services, is the most important entertainment area in Tokyo. Situated by the key transport node of Shinjuku station, it is ideally placed for homeward-bound commuters to stop off for post-work entertainment.

As home to the euphemistically termed 'water-trades', Kabuki-chō supports a high density of *yakuza* gangs. One source suggests that Kabukicho contains more than 1,000 gang offices.<sup>4</sup> This is not credible, but the number comfortably exceeds one hundred in an area of a few hectares. Whilst these groups are engaged in a broad range of activities, Gambetta's model is a very powerful conceptual tool for making sense of the overarching role of the *yakuza* in Kabuki-chō.

Many of the commercial transactions in Kabuki-chō are outside the law. Much of the remainder are informal and difficult to

<sup>1</sup> It is not impossible that a number of crimes are improperly attributed to arrested Chinese in order to improve police clearance rates.

<sup>2</sup> These figures have been derived from the following official sources: Keisatsu Hakusho (passim); Keishichō Tōkei (2003); Nihon Tōkei Nenkan (passim); Nyū koku Kanri Kyoku. I have spared the reader my working but am happy to

provide this on request.

<sup>3</sup> Gambetta, D. (1996) *The Sicilian Mafia: the Business of Private Protection* Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press p. 1.

<sup>4</sup> Natsuhara, T., Kamada, K. & Ogawa, T. (2001) *Za Kabuki-chō* Tokyo: Takarajimasha Shinsho p. 31.

regulate using official channels. There is therefore a demand for extra-legal mechanisms for arbitrating disputes, enforcing contracts and protecting property rights. In short, a role for a mafia.

Organised crime protection is usually portrayed as a spurious commodity imposed on unwilling customers. However, many of my Kabuki-chō informants portrayed their relationship more positively. A typical comment was 'I don't have any trouble with the *yakuza* – because I have a friend.' This is an interesting statement: it accepts a general tendency to predatory behaviour amongst *yakuza*; implies the need for protection from them; but elevates the protectee from the status of victim. In many cases such friendships are strategically sought and fostered through gifts, discounts and favours. The actual end costs of protection may be as high as they would have been on a straightforward market transaction but they are psychologically more palatable.

Whilst consumers often actively seek out protection, protectors may obliquely advertise their services. Li Xiao Mu, who worked the streets of Kabuki-chō guiding Chinese tourists to appropriate places of entertainment for a tip (from the tourists) and a cut (from the premises) recalls how he came to acquire *yakuza* protection shortly after he started working the streets. A large gangster approached him and inquired as to his status. When it transpired that Li was unprotected, the *yakuza* laughed and took him off for a hearty meal. After the meal, the gangster slipped over his name card with the friendly offer that Li should give him a call if he has any trouble. A few days later Li is beaten for working in someone else's pitch.<sup>5</sup>

In what ways do *yakuza* provide protection? Within the Kabuki-chō entertainment businesses, a key determinant of an establishment's success or failure is the popularity of its female employees. One consequence of the talent-centred nature of these businesses is that clubs are constantly trying to poach women from competitors.

Strong *yakuza* protection can deter poaching, assist the victim of poaching to get talent back or enable successful poaching. A club owner illustrates it this way:

*one of my popular girls was lured away by another club. At the time they [my protection] got on the back of that club. Ultimately they resigned themselves to my girl coming back to me ... the other place also had protection but this side was stronger.*

Another important business in Kabuki-chō is loan-sharking. In order to deter default, negotiate with intimidating or recalcitrant debtors (who may be *yakuza* or *yakuza*-protected), protection is crucial.

*Well, even for a registered operator, you are charging 50% or 70% every ten days so you get all sorts of unhappiness ... The way in which I came to get a gang behind me was of course because I was intimidated by *yakuza*...illegal dealers like me that can't make use of the law make a good target. I was introduced to someone via contacts ... Won't say the name but it is a branch of a well-known group. He said he could become my protector if I paid ¥300,000/month [roughly US\$ 3,000]. Because that amount of money didn't matter, I agreed. That 300,000 is the lowest amount I pay; whenever I make a request, I pay them money. Even so, it is much better than being eaten away. The other lenders I know, nearly are all attached to someone or other.<sup>6</sup>*

This loan-shark identifies the predatory aspect of *yakuza* groups as the main rationale for gaining *yakuza* protection but at the same time does not consider the monthly retainer to be extortionate. Note also that he did not pay off the predatory *yakuza* targeting him but is introduced to someone through his existing network of contacts suggesting he actively sought out personal recommendations as to who could best protect his business interests.

Where do the 'Chinese Mafia' fit into this picture? Whenever I asked my Kabuki-chō informants (including gang members and

those involved in various entertainment businesses) who were the strong groups in Kabuki-chō, the answers gravitated around half a dozen groups from the Sumiyoshi-kai and Yamaguchi-gumi syndicates. Nobody mentioned Chinese or other foreign groups in this respect. Given that a crucial aspect of the protection market is for protectors to have a credible and well-known reputation, it is extremely unlikely that my informants are missing a trick here. *Yakuza* interviewees might be expected to accentuate their own importance (reputation is everything), but non-*yakuza* informants would have no such agenda.

This is not to say that there are no Chinese or other foreigners active in Kabuki-chō. Rather, as we have seen in the case of Li, they are generally consumers of *yakuza* protection. Those who are engaged in businesses requiring a visible presence, such as touts, stall-holders and sex workers, are overwhelmingly in this category. Foreigners involved in more surreptitious activities, such as theft and crimes involving fake/stolen credit cards, might be expected to get away without protection. However, these criminals find it advantageous to have a partnership with *yakuza* to facilitate an efficient interface with local criminal markets. These partnerships are by no means unproblematic. On at least one occasion, the headquarters of the Yamaguchi-gumi (Japan's largest *yakuza* syndicate) has instructed its sub-groups not to engage in business with foreign criminals.



<sup>5</sup> Li, X. (2002) *Kabuki-chō Annaijin* Tokyo: Kadokawa Shoten pp. 51-5

<sup>6</sup> Natsuhara, T. (2003) *Yamikin wa Nemuranai* in Natsuhara, T. ed. (2003), *Kabuki-chō Autorō Sensō*, Tokyo: Bessatsu Takarajima p. 56.

One of my Sumiyoshi-kai informants has dealings with Chinese criminals but finds them hard to trust; should they be arrested they have less to lose than a *yakuza* by cooperating with the authorities. He therefore insists on a 50:50 split of all revenues regardless of the extent of his involvement.<sup>7</sup>

For foreign criminals, Kabuki-chō is a natural magnet for a number of reasons. Firstly, it is where the action is; as Tokyo's main entertainment centre, it is the interface of the legitimate and dark economies. Secondly, the demand for foreign sex-workers in Kabuki-chō means that a foreign criminal coming to Japan frequently knows women from his home town already in Kabuki-chō and therefore has places he can stay whilst finding his feet. Finally, the absence of a clear territorial monopoly by any one *yakuza* group, and continuous inter-group rivalry, facilitates the entry of foreign groups:

*In Shinjuku there are many yakuza but there is no single strong group putting its stamp on things. If we turn up, [group] A may oppose us but at the same time [group] B, which is opposing A, will try and join up with us. There is nowhere else so easy to enter.*<sup>8</sup>

Is this the start of a process whereby *yakuza* groups subcontract violent services out to foreign groups in much the same way that Italian American organised crime groups imported Sicilian 'zips' when the local supply of suitably tough employees dried up? What little evidence there is on *yakuza* shootings suggests this is not the case. The Chinese criminal cited above does, however, imply a degree of reciprocity in the supply of protection.

However, such a relationship is highly asymmetrical; foreign groups are less securely rooted in their environment than the *yakuza*. In particular, foreigners who are staying in Japan illegally are in a vulnerable position vis-à-vis the authorities as the following episode illustrates.

On 27 September 2002, two Sumiyoshi-kai gangsters were shot in a Kabuki-chō coffee shop well-known as a *yakuza* hang-out. The

perpetrators were members of a group originating in north-eastern China. In response, an acquaintance of this gang was tortured to death in an attempt to discover the whereabouts of the leader and a number of Chinese clubs were attacked. These events were widely reported in the media adding fuel to the moral panic concerning Kabuki-chō's Chinese mafia.

Reacting to these events, the authorities adopted a considerably more proactive approach against illegal foreigners. In April 2003, a joint police/immigration service office was established in Kabuki-chō. On 22 April, accompanied by a media circus, this new group engaged in its first high profile raid: 1,200 officers arrested 94 foreigners. However, from the breakdown of arrests by type (illegal immigration, prostitution and public morals offences), the arrestees were not necessarily hardened mafia figures. Although this does not seem a major haul, it is an improvement on efforts prior to the new joint office; advance warnings of raids would often leak out to the likely targets.<sup>9</sup>

Since then, there have been repeated searches of Kabuki-chō sites. Over the summer of 2003 these typically numbered two to three per week. These have definitely had an effect. The number of Chinese on the streets of Kabuki-chō declined. However, rather than putting an end to a perceived problem, it merely displaced it. Many of these individuals relocated to outlying areas. Local politicians in these areas have started grumbling at the increasing number of 'bad' Chinese in their patch.

However, due to its status as an entertainment Mecca, Kabuki-chō remains a cosmopolitan place in which many Chinese continue to live and work. Although I have no quantitative evidence to support my supposition, it is probable that the Chinese now operating openly in Kabuki-chō have some sort of legal status in the country. Shu, a young Chinese tout of my acquaintance, is one example: by day he is a student at a respected university; by night he lures punters to an establishment offering various sexual services.

If we consider the case of Shu, and the arrest statistics for the big raid of 22 April, it seems a big mistake to conflate all Chinese criminals with some 'Chinese mafia'. Many of the individuals concerned are criminals by virtue of the fact that they are staying in Japan illegally. Some of these migrants are of course engaged in other illegal activities such as low-level participation in the sex industry and therefore subject to *yakuza*/mafia jurisdiction rather than themselves being mafia figures. Others, as we see from police statistics, are heavily involved in property crimes in which case they may well be relying on *yakuza* contacts to fence or export stolen property.



Chinese criminal groups have not established a mafia role for themselves in Kabuki-chō. Given the considerable barriers to entry in the business of private protection, this should not surprise us. Nor does it appear that they are active in property crimes within Kabuki-chō itself. Given that this would be directly contrary to the interests of *yakuza* and police alike, this is not surprising either. However, Chinese criminals are active in organised theft elsewhere and, given the low structural barriers to entry to this type of crime (not to be confused with the physical barriers to entry inherent in such enterprise), this too is unsurprising.

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Peter Hill's research in Japan was supported by a British Academy research grant. His book, *The Japanese Mafia: Yakuza, Law and the State*, is published by Oxford University Press. Dr Hill is currently researching a novel.

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<sup>7</sup> Interview *yakuza* executive, Kabuki-chō 2003.

<sup>8</sup> Natsuhara, T. (2003) *Chainiizu Mafia Yami Tōshi* in Natsuhara, T. ed. (2003), *Kabuki-chō Autorō Sensō*, Tokyo: Bessatsu Takarajima p. 81.

<sup>9</sup> Ko, K. (2003) *Kabuki-chō 'Kajō Sakusen' no Fukai Yami* in Natsuhara, T. ed. (2003), *Kabuki-chō Autorō Sensō*, Tokyo: Bessatsu Takarajima pp. 109–114.