

East Asian Island Migration and Macau's Underworld in Decline through the Lens of a Female Director

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Introduction

In 2021, as COVID-19 continued to spread worldwide, cinemas were closed or subjected to restrictions, economies contracted, social distancing became routine, and public concern centered on health and safety. *Madalena*,¹ a film about migrants in Macau, opened in Hong Kong under these conditions. Its commercial fate was almost inevitably bleak: according to Hong Kong media reports, it earned less than HKD 600,000 during its first week of release.²

I was living in Macau that year and witnessed the city sink into a state of near-stagnation. As a tourism-dependent city, Macau received almost no visitors; casinos stood nearly empty, and room rates at luxury hotels fell to unprecedented lows. According to the Statistics and Census Service of the Macao Special Administrative Region, the operating revenue of the hotel industry in 2021 was 49.5 percent below its pre-pandemic level in 2019, while hotels recorded an annual loss of MOP 3.43 billion.³

A taxi driver whom I shall call Zhonghua was once a genuine member of Macau's underworld. He took me to the New Century Hotel, repeatedly reported in the press because of gang conflicts, and pointed out traces of gunfire that remained on its exterior wall. On July 30, 1997, gunmen armed with automatic rifles opened fire outside the casino, an incident that shocked Macau. Today, little about this taxi driver recalls the intimidating figure who once fired a weapon in the streets.

The once-formidable 14K has long since receded from public view. The formerly bustling New Century Hotel remained closed for years because of ownership disputes; after competing with the Lisboa, it was renamed the Beijing Imperial Palace Hotel. Unlike Hong Kong's triads, whose stories became widely known through the popularity of Hong Kong gangster cinema, Macau's turbulent underworld history has received comparatively little attention. Yet Macau's gangs were closely connected with criminal organizations in Hong Kong and Southeast Asia, and, like their Hong Kong counterparts, they gradually declined after the handover as public-security enforcement intensified.

An examination of migration in Macau reveals not only the life-and-death struggles that individuals inevitably faced during the social transformations of the postcolonial era, but also the intricate geopolitical ties between islands and the mainland. Equally neglected is the rise of women within Macau's underworld, an exceptionally rare form of gender rebellion. Recovering this history, placing women within it, and analyzing the strategies and forms of intelligence

1 Emily Chan, dir., *Madalena* (Macau/Hong Kong: Local Production, 2021), 97 min.; “*Madalena*,” IMDb, <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt14898796/>.

2 Hong Kong Movies Never Die (港唔斷戲), “《馬達·蓮娜》公映一週票房只有唔夠60萬” [*Madalena* Earns Less Than HKD 600,000 after One Week in Theaters], Facebook, November 4, 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/hkmoviesneverdie/posts/3119662824989861>.

3 Statistics and Census Service, Macao SAR, “2021 Hotel Industry Survey Results,” October 28, 2022, <https://www.gov.mo/zh-hans/news/652189/>. The official release distinguishes the overall hotel-industry loss (MOP 3.46 billion) from the loss recorded by hotels alone (MOP 3.43 billion); the sentence in the text refers to hotels.

through which they survived extreme conditions can make a significant contribution to the study of contemporary social problems.

I. The Social Conditions That Produced the Madalena Phenomenon

Macau was originally known as Xiangshan'ao. As an early gazetteer put it, “Xiangshan is a country of water.”⁴ It was an island in the ancient Lingding Sea. It became a trading port in the 1530s; Portuguese settlers began to establish themselves there in the 1550s; and in the nineteenth century it formally became a colony. During the twentieth century, China and Portugal both underwent major transformations, and sovereignty over Macau was gradually and peacefully transferred in an orderly process.

As an important East Asian trading port, Macau attracted large numbers of merchants, gamblers, and adventurers, introducing endless uncertainty into island life. Human trafficking, narcotics, prostitution, smuggling, and gambling became major pillars of the local economy and inevitably facilitated the infiltration of underworld forces. After the handover, the reconstruction of a new social order gradually pushed Macau's underworld toward extinction. Yet this island, once inhabited by only four hundred people, has become one of the world's most densely populated, economically prosperous, and internationally connected territories. The phenomena it embodies are not isolated; the pain of its transformation necessarily reverberates beyond the city itself.

For those unable to visit Macau in person, cinema is undoubtedly one of the most immediate ways to experience the city.

Madalena is set in the early twenty-first century, when Macau's underworld had already entered decline. Codes of loyalty and violent courage had been displaced by the supremacy of money, and new migrants came to the city chiefly to extract value before leaving.

Lena, the female protagonist, represents this new migrant generation. Socially insignificant and precariously situated, she is outspoken and decisive, makes no attempt to conceal her intense desire for money, yet still maintains certain limits. A “hard case” of this kind might have carved out a domain for herself ten years earlier. In contemporary Macau, however, the age in which heroes arose from disorder has ended; her struggle is arduous and materially constrained, like that of countless ants.

It was ten years earlier that Mada, the male protagonist, arrived in Macau. As a representative of an older migrant generation, he is an anomaly: a man of modest material desire and deep emotional attachment. He symbolizes the city's declining, sunset aspect. Lena's arrival is, for Mada, like spring returning to a withered tree. The vitality of this attractive young woman rekindles a hope that he had long lost. He supports and accommodates her with old-fashioned sincerity, just as Macau, no longer a newly ascendant city, continues to use its remaining strength to receive successive waves of opportunists.

Director Emily Chan, born in 1988, graduated from the School of Journalism and Communication at Renmin University of China with a specialization in radio and television communication. A prominent young Macau director and screenwriter, she has directed fiction and documentary works including *Love Is a Squirrel*, *Our Seventeen*, and *Blade of Ten Years*. Her most recent work, *Madalena*, was selected as an opening film of the 2021 Hong Kong Asian Film Festival.

4 Huang Zuo, *Xiangshan xianzhi* (Jiajing) [Gazetteer of Xiangshan County, Jiajing Edition], juan 1, “Fengtu zhi: Chaoxi” [Local Customs: Tides] (1548), 30.

The principal creative team behind *Madalena* brought together film professionals from Hong Kong and Macau. The male and female leads and the production designer all came from Hong Kong, and this cultural proximity enabled the film to handle Macau's local atmosphere with considerable precision. Outsiders often imagine Macau as a glittering city of gold, but Chan's camera captures a little-known side of it. These spaces differ sharply from the Macau familiar from tourist guides: scene after scene appears at once recognizable and unfamiliar, saturated with the texture of everyday life.

In an interview, Chan observed that becoming a mother had made the balance between work and family persistently difficult. During the worst period of the pandemic, her daughter was only a little over one year old, yet work required her to spend two or three months alone in Hong Kong. “When I have work, I devote myself to it completely; when I am not working, I devote myself entirely to my daughter. I want her to understand that life offers a hundred possibilities. One must first become oneself before becoming someone else's wife and mother. I hope I can set an example for her.” The conviction behind these words derives from Chan's own mother, a woman who worked hard at life and showed her that women could live with confidence and accomplish what they wished to do. Chan hopes that her daughter, too, will grow up able to realize her dreams.

Chan believes that image-makers have an obligation to record the transformation of a city. “What appears in the film is also Macau. We simply choose a different Macau for audiences to see; everything depends on the perspective from which the creator presents it,” she explained.⁵

Trained in journalism, Chan is highly sensitive to social problems. Although the film takes a love story as its principal narrative line, it also uses metaphor and symbolism to address important contemporary issues and unresolved historical legacies: migration, economic inequality, conflicts over identity politics, and the multiple dimensions of rights and oppression.

One concrete example is Mada's occupation as a taxi driver, which resonates with the Japanese film about a declining yakuza milieu, *Under the Open Sky*.⁶ That film was adapted from Ryūzō Saki's novel *Mibunchō*.⁷ Saki, who was born in what is now North Korea, became known for unusually intimate interviews with real criminal offenders. Japanese director Miwa Nishikawa adapted the book for the screen in 2020. The film follows a former yakuza member imprisoned for murder who returns to society after serving thirteen years. Yet once he is projected into this supposedly wonderful new world, his deeply rooted gangland mentality and his inability to comprehend the grammar of an orderly social system render him increasingly out of place. Based on a real person, the protagonist spends the last years of his life trying to become a taxi driver. In Macau, countless former gang members, including Zhonghua, similarly transformed themselves into drivers in order to survive within the new social order.

Lena provides another example. As a new migrant, her connection to organized crime in Northeast China is not entirely without historical referent. In the 2012 violent assault at the New Century Hotel, “Market Wai,” whose legs were broken, reportedly offered a reward of as much

⁵ Deng Yingzhuang, “Chen Yali: Dianying lushang ersanshi” [Emily Chan: Episodes from a Life in Film], *Macau Magazine*, no. 152 (March 28, 2023), <https://www.macauzine.net/viewnews?itemid=2330>. The source manuscript dated this item 2024; the publication record gives 2023.

⁶ Miwa Nishikawa, dir., *Under the Open Sky* (*Subarashiki sekai*) (Japan, 2020), 126 min., <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt12801374/>.

⁷ Ryūzō Saki, *Mibunchō* (Tokyo: Kōdansha, 1990), 359 pp., ISBN 978-4-06-204956-6.

as MOP 100 million and stated that all six assailants came from Northeast China. Each had allegedly been paid RMB 50,000; they knew little about Macau's local power struggles before the attack and subsequently fled to mainland China.⁸

Although Chan does not directly cite these cases, her design of the characters and their social environment appears to draw on important news events and public issues of this kind. Her professional training and acute powers of observation give the film greater depth. *Madalena* is therefore not merely a feminist love story, but a postcolonial work that examines political, migratory, economic, and cultural conflict in contemporary society.

II. Historical Transformations of Macau's Underworld

As a city in which Chinese and Western cultures have long intersected, Macau possesses a distinctive historical background for the formation and development of underworld power. That history is both long and complex, involving political instability and power vacuums, social injustice and class division, weak legal institutions, and social disintegration.

The origins of Macau's underworld may be traced from the opening of the port in 1535 to the eve of the Opium War in 1840. As a major hub connecting maritime trade between East and West, Macau handled not only legitimate commerce but also large-scale human trafficking. One estimate holds that, during the three centuries before the Opium War, the Portuguese exported at least 300,000 Chinese people through Macau. To sustain this trade, Portuguese operators established facilities in Macau for purchasing, confining, and transshipping indentured laborers; these later developed into the notorious “piglet barracoons” (*zhuzai guan*). Large numbers of thugs, enforcers, and bandits were employed across the Pearl River Delta and in Jiangsu, Zhejiang, Fujian, and Guangdong, sometimes penetrating as far inland as Hunan and Hubei. They deceived villagers into traveling to Macau, abducted them through extortion or fabricated debts, and even seized people directly from Macau's streets. These traffickers formed groups whose criminal power effectively constituted organized underworld associations, although detailed written records of such organizations appeared only in the nineteenth century. On this account, Macau's underworld originated in human trafficking rather than in the opium trade.⁹

After the Opium War, Britain occupied Hong Kong and declared it a free port. Benefiting from its natural harbor, Hong Kong rapidly absorbed Macau's legitimate entrepôt trade, making Macau still more dependent on illicit activity.

During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Macau experienced repeated social upheaval, including the Opium Wars, the 1911 Revolution, and the Chinese Civil War. These disruptions intensified social instability. Larger numbers of impoverished residents were compelled to join or depend on underworld organizations, which provided protection, resolved disputes, and offered illegal means of subsistence.

The distant Portuguese colonial administration damaged indigenous political and social structures without establishing a comprehensive new order, thereby creating fertile ground for

8 “Haojiang fengyun renwu—‘Jieshi Wei’” [A Figure in Macau’s Underworld—“Market Wai”], Sohu, April 29, 2021, https://www.sohu.com/a/463702909_120758139. This is a secondary media account and does not independently establish the alleged payment, origin, or subsequent movements of the assailants.

9 He Bingsong, *Zhongguo you zuzhi fanzui yanjiu*, vol. 2, *Tai Gang Ao heishehui fanzui yanjiu* [Studies of Organized Crime in China, vol. 2: Underworld Crime in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macau] (Beijing: Qunzhong Chubanshe, 2009), 498. The edition and pagination are retained from the source manuscript; available catalog records are inconsistent and require inspection of the cited volume’s title page.

underworld power. The weakening of authority eroded social norms, while rulers concentrated on extracting resources through privileged strata. High unemployment and limited economic opportunity made it difficult for ordinary people to survive through legal means, driving more of them toward gangs and criminal activity either for subsistence or rapid enrichment. Large-scale immigration sharpened racial and ethnic tensions. Colonial rulers exploited these divisions as a means of divide-and-rule, while criminal organizations used the resulting tensions as instruments in their own struggles for control.

The Chinese term *heishehui* functions as a general designation for organized crime. The British missionary William Milne was among the first English-language writers to describe a Chinese secret society as the “Triad Society.” After missionary work in southern China and Malacca, Milne wrote an account of Chinese secret associations entitled “Some Account of a Secret Association in China, Entitled the Triad Society.”¹⁰ Published in 1826 in the *Transactions of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*, the essay was among the earliest English-language studies of the Triads. John Francis Davis, later the second governor of Hong Kong, was one of the founders of the Royal Asiatic Society's Hong Kong branch. Milne rendered *sanhehui* as “Triad” and explained the threefold union as that of Heaven, Earth, and Humanity.

Chinese secret associations are sometimes traced to the period following invasions by northern peoples and to the Peach Garden oath of Liu Bei, Guan Yu, and Zhang Fei, who became sworn brothers and vowed: “Although we were not born on the same day of the same month in the same year, we wish to die on the same day of the same month in the same year.” This oath became a model for later secret associations. In the thirteenth year of the Kangxi reign, the Triad Society was established; it retained religious ritual but no longer depended on religion, so that “its purpose became purely political, and it became a fully secret association.”¹¹ The Triads were composed chiefly of activists committed to overthrowing the Qing and restoring the Ming. To evade official pursuit they adopted numerous names, while “Hongmen” and the “Heaven and Earth Society” became alternate names or branches. Sun Yat-sen drew upon the power of secret associations and, according to the cited account, “founded the Revive China Society in Macau in the twentieth year before the Republic (the *renchen* year).”¹² With the program “Expel the Manchus, restore China, establish a republic, and equalize land rights,” he mobilized revolutionary action.

After the fall of the Qing dynasty and the outbreak of civil war in China, many Triad members fled to Hong Kong and Macau. With the cause of overthrowing the Qing and restoring the Ming no longer relevant, the organizations reoriented their objectives. Some Triad societies became—or in practice had already become—wholly devoted to criminal activity.

In Macau, Triad organizations gradually penetrated gambling, drug trafficking, human trafficking, and other illegal activities. These enterprises brought them immense wealth and power and gave them substantial influence within local society.

10 William Milne, “Some Account of a Secret Association in China, Entitled the Triad Society,” *Transactions of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* 1, no. 2 (1826): 240–50, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25581707>.

11 Hirayama Shū, *Zhongguo mimi shehui shi* [A History of Chinese Secret Societies] (Shanghai: Commercial Press, edition cited in the source manuscript as 1912), 14. Catalogs record multiple early editions and reprints, including 1927, 1934, and later editions; the exact edition used by the author remains to be confirmed.

12 Zou Lu, *Zhongguo Guomindang shigao* [Draft History of the Chinese Nationalist Party] (Shanghai: Minzhi Shuju, 1929), 2. The ISBN supplied in the source manuscript belongs to a 1989 reprint, not the 1929 first edition, and has therefore been omitted from this note.

Macau's underworld expanded rapidly during the twentieth century, particularly after the Second World War. Postwar economic depression and disorder in public security created opportunities for criminal organizations to enlarge their spheres of influence. During this period, Macau groups began forming alliances with Chinese criminal organizations in Hong Kong and Southeast Asia in order to conduct illegal activity on a larger scale.

Over time, these groups developed increasingly complex and organized criminal networks. Following the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950, for example, the United Nations imposed an embargo on mainland China. The Hong Kong businessman Henry Fok not only undertook a major role in smuggling military supplies among Hong Kong, Macau, and mainland China, but also organized a sophisticated reconnaissance network to monitor the movements of the British colonial government's anti-smuggling vessels. This activity reportedly earned the confidence of the Beijing government. Fok later served as a vice-chairman of the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference and became known as a “red-capped tycoon.”¹³

In the early 1960s, the Macau government promulgated regulations governing concessions for casino entertainment and for shan and pu lottery tickets. On July 6, 1961, it published a tender notice in the Official Gazette permitting gambling to operate as a form of “special entertainment.” From that point onward, Macau increasingly replaced the term “gambling” (dubo) with “gaming” (bocai), marking an important turning point in the history of the local underworld. In August, the Indonesian Chinese entrepreneur Cheng Kwan-pao signed an exclusive greyhound-racing concession with the Portuguese Macau authorities. In September, the Macau (Yat Yuen) Canidrome Company was registered in Hong Kong and received official approval. In October, Sociedade de Turismo e Diversões de Macau (STDM)—a Hong Kong-backed consortium formed by Henry Fok, Stanley Ho, Yip Hon, and Teddy Yip—defeated the Tai Hing Entertainment Corporation and won Macau's casino monopoly by promising an annual premium of MOP 3.167 million and undertaking to promote Macau's prosperity. The consortium subsequently obtained exclusive concessions for baige, shan, and pu lotteries, and the gaming industry thereafter became public and legal.¹⁴

The legalization of gaming provided cover for underworld activity. As Macau became a center of Asian gambling, criminal organizations obtained enormous profits by controlling casinos and engaging in loan-sharking, money laundering, and related businesses. Macau's casinos consequently became central arenas in struggles among underworld forces, sometimes producing severe violent conflict.

Stanley Ho, widely known as the “King of Gambling,” obtained Macau's gaming monopoly in 1962. Although Ho himself was not generally regarded as a member of the underworld, his relations with Macau's criminal organizations were complex. His casinos employed large numbers of underworld figures as security personnel to protect order and

13 Li Minsheng, *Huo Yingdong yu Kangmei Yuanchao zhanzheng* [Henry Fok and the War to Resist U.S. Aggression and Aid Korea] (Beijing: PLA Press, 2011), 3–4, ISBN 978-7-5065-6134-1.

14 Zhou Jinquan, “Chanye zhengce dui Aomen bocai chanye shengming zhouqi yanhua de yingxiang” [The Impact of Industrial Policy on the Life-Cycle Evolution of Macau's Gaming Industry], *World Gaming and Tourism Research* 1, no. 1 (2020): 32, https://www.mpu.edu.mo/cntfiles/upload/docs/activity/cjt/Globalgaming_Vol.1_2020_1.pdf. The locally specific lottery terms baige piao, shan piao, and pu piao are retained in transliteration because the cited passage does not define their rules.

commercial interests, and this cooperation further expanded the influence of criminal organizations in Macau.

From the 1970s through the 1990s, conflict among Macau's underworld organizations reached its height. Major groups frequently engaged in violence while competing for territory and profit. The conflicts caused substantial casualties and seriously damaged public security. During these decades the organizations repeatedly regrouped and consolidated, eventually forming several principal forces:

1. 14K. Formally known as the Hongmen Loyalty and Righteousness Association, 14K became one of the most powerful Triad organizations internationally. It originated in the struggle between the Nationalists and Communists, when Chiang Kai-shek ordered the formation of an alliance composed of members of the Heaven and Earth Society. After the Nationalist government retreated to Taiwan in 1949, Nationalist intelligence agencies continued to support 14K for “anti-Communist” activities. With political and financial assistance, military personnel, and plainclothes operatives, 14K rose rapidly. One account derives the name “14K” from the organization's original headquarters at 14 Po Wah Road in Xiguan, Guangzhou, with “K” referring to Kwangchow. Its best-known representative in Macau was Wan Kuok-koi, nicknamed “Broken Tooth Koi.”

2. Shui Fong. Also known as Wo On Lok, Shui Fong is a long-established Hong Kong criminal society. In 1934, workers at the On Lok soft-drink factory in To Kwa Wan formed Wo On Lok to defend their interests. The group was consequently also known as the “soft-drink room,” abbreviated Shui Fong (“Water Room”). In Macau, casinos managed by Shui Fong reportedly hired only fellow members, leading people in the underworld to regard it as one of the most financially stable societies. Its representative figure was Lai Tung-sang, known as “Shui Fong Lai.”

3. Wo Shing Wo. Its predecessor was the Shing Wo Native-place Association, associated in the source with what is now Shing Wo Village in Nancheng District, Dongguan. In 1973, Wo Shing Wo held a traditional initiation ceremony at Macau's San San Hotel. All participants were arrested, and police reportedly stated that the organization's membership already exceeded 200,000 across Hong Kong and Macau. Its prominent representative in Macau was Kwok Wing-hung, nicknamed “Shanghai Boy.”

4. Smaller groups and individual powers. In addition to the larger organizations above, small-scale underworld groups and individual operators remained active in Macau's underground society. They were generally local or cooperated with larger organizations. The Big Circle Gang and Shing Yee, for example, reportedly reached an agreement with 14K and Shui Fong and in 1995 established an organization referred to as the “Associação Macau Quatro Pacíficos,” or the “Four Alliances.”

Through both conflict and cooperation, these organizations collectively shaped Macau's social, economic, and public-security conditions from the 1970s through the 1990s. Their competition for profits in gambling, drug trafficking, and other illegal activities had a profound effect on the city's development and image. In remarks delivered on October 30, 2007, at the First Symposium on Law and Sociology at the University of Macau, Assistant Prosecutor-General Wang Weihua stated that in 1997—when Macau's population was only about 400,000—the Public Security Police handled 6,746 criminal cases, approximately 1,300 of which involved serious offenses such as homicide, intimidation, unlawful confinement, or assault with

weapons.¹⁵ As the August 2012 cover story of *Inside Asian Gaming*, “Crime Scene: The Shadow of a Violent History,” recounted, pre-handover Macau was a city enveloped in Triad violence. Criminal organizations mounted open challenges as they competed for the wealth awaiting winners in the high-rolling rooms of Stanley Ho's STDM, which then monopolized Macau's gaming market. The report stated that twenty-one gang-related killings occurred in 1996, followed by twenty in 1997; by 1999, the year of the handover, the number of homicides in Macau had reportedly risen to forty-two.¹⁶

António Marques Baptista, then director of Macau's Judiciary Police, attributed this development largely to Hong Kong's 1997 transfer of sovereignty. Authorities sought to maintain social stability during the transition so that Chinese policies could succeed after the handover. Powerful Hong Kong criminal organizations, fearing intensified suppression of organized crime, moved into Macau and sought space for activity in its casinos. To prevent Hong Kong groups from competing for Macau's profits, the “Associação Macau Quatro Pacíficos,” or “Four Alliances,” was established in 1995. Its purpose was to coordinate the interests of different groups and create a superstructure for finance and operations, thereby resisting threats from Hong Kong Triads while preserving Macau groups' dominant position after the handover. Specialists in serious organized crime have argued that Chinese Triads exercise more comprehensive operational control than Russian and other criminal organizations because they maintain strict internal and external discipline, making it almost impossible for members or their families to sever ties with the society. Some leaders, particularly those associated with 14K, also used the media to proclaim their status within Macau's underworld and to project influence through extensive networks, almost completely controlling criminal operations—an unprecedented development in Triad history.¹⁷

As Macau's criminal societies grew increasingly powerful, Chinese leaders paid close attention and repeatedly urged the Portuguese Macau authorities to intensify action against organized crime. On July 24, 1997, Macau's Legislative Assembly passed the Organized Crime Law by a large majority. Commonly called the anti-Triad law, it defined criminal associations and related offenses, including extortion conducted in the name of protection, international human trafficking, the organization of prostitution, and the transfer or concealment of illicit assets or goods. On November 23, 1999—less than thirty days before the handover—a Macau court convicted underworld leader Wan Kuok-koi (“Broken Tooth Koi”) on several charges and sentenced him to fifteen years' imprisonment; his associates received various prison terms. One day earlier, a court in neighboring Zhuhai had sentenced cross-border gang leader Yip Shing-kin, nicknamed “Cunning Kin,” to death and carried out the execution immediately.

15 “Zui'an mingxian xiajiang, zhi'an xunsu haozhuang” [Crime Declines Markedly and Public Security Improves Rapidly], *Macau Times*, March 8, 2020, <http://journalsisi.com/news-cd.asp?id=45940>.

16 “Ten Years Ago: Crime Scene,” *Inside Asian Gaming*, July 28, 2022, <https://zh.asgam.com/index.php/2022/07/28/10-years-ago-crime-scene-zh/>.

17 António Marques Baptista, “Aomen heishehui fanzui ji qi duice” [Organized Crime in Macau and Countermeasures], paper presented at the Symposium on Organized Crime, China University of Political Science and Law, June 12, 1999, <https://www.macaudata.mo/macabook/book102/html/01401.htm>.

Chinese media coverage has tended to emphasize the stability and prosperity achieved after Macau's return. Data from the Statistics and Census Service nevertheless show that the annual number of recorded crimes rose from 9,269 in 1999 to 13,487 in 2023.¹⁸

On December 20, 1999, Macau returned to Chinese sovereignty and became a Special Administrative Region of China. Although traditional underworld activity was suppressed, new forms of crime gradually emerged in the twenty-first century. The development of the internet and digital technology, for example, facilitated cybercrime, financial fraud, cryptocurrency schemes, and other new criminal practices in Macau.

Wan Kuok-koi was formally released from prison on December 1, 2012. On May 20, 2018, he presided over the 2018 Hongmen Conference in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, announced the establishment of the headquarters of the World Hongmen History and Culture Association, and launched a cryptocurrency called the “Hong Coin” in the name of the Hongmen, with a stated total issuance of one billion coins. The cryptocurrency platform CoinCarp carried the following promotional description: “The World Hongmen History and Culture Association seeks to promote Hongmen history and culture, transmit the Hongmen spirit of loyalty and righteousness, unite Chinese communities throughout the world, love the country and the people, contribute to national and ethnic development, and advance peaceful reunification across the Taiwan Strait. In the online gaming operations conducted by Hongmen, account systems will employ blockchain technology and Hong Coin will be used as an online gaming chip. Hong Coin may also be used in Hongmen-affiliated gaming and esports businesses, hotels, shops, schools, medical services, tourism, and other industries. Discounts on services provided by Hongmen enterprises will be available when Hong Coin is used in these affiliated industries, enhancing its liquidity. By meeting global users' needs for investment, financing, payment, and exchange in digital assets, Hong Coin can better promote Hongmen history and culture and advance the application of Chinese blockchain technology in international trade, international settlement, international financing, and other scenarios. This process can both improve the global liquidity of Hong Coin and support a more diversified and balanced relationship between digital-asset investment and consumption.”

Deutsche Welle's Chinese-language service, however, reported that the World Hongmen History and Culture Association cooperated with elites in Malaysia and Cambodia and framed its activities as part of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and other major Chinese Communist Party initiatives in order to conceal illegal criminal operations.¹⁹

The criminal network associated with KK Park, a vast scam compound in Myanmar, has ultimately been linked in reporting to Wan Kuok-koi. The region in which KK Park is located was targeted for Belt and Road investment. Chinese government reports had praised development projects near the compound as part of Belt and Road ambitions, but later distanced themselves after extensive fraud allegations emerged. KK Park itself was not mentioned in official Chinese publicity and, unlike other development projects in the region, did not hold a

18 Statistics and Census Service, Macao SAR, “Migration Statistics and Crime Statistics,” Time Series Database, updated August 8, 2024, <https://www.dsec.gov.mo/ts/>. The figures are counts of recorded cases and are not adjusted here for population growth, legal changes, or reporting practices.

19 “Kao ‘Yidai Yilu’ yangai fanzui: Zhongguo heibang zao Meiguo zhicai” [Using the Belt and Road to Conceal Crime: Chinese Gang Sanctioned by the United States], Deutsche Welle Chinese, December 10, 2020, <https://www.dw.com/zh/a-55890103>.

groundbreaking ceremony. The compound was purpose-built for fraud, and its network expanded continuously from Southeast Asia into Africa, Europe, and North America.

Jason Tower, country director for Myanmar at the United States Institute of Peace, told *Deutsche Welle*: “Wan Kuok-koi repeatedly says that he once risked his life for drug-trafficking syndicates and now risks his life for the Chinese Communist Party.”

“What we are indeed seeing is that these criminal networks are becoming increasingly powerful, increasingly influential, and increasingly deeply embedded in countries around the world.”

“Law-enforcement efforts have touched only the tip of the iceberg.”²⁰

III. Survival Strategies of Women in Macau's Underworld under Extreme Conditions

Traditional East Asian culture imposed exceptionally rigid divisions of gender roles. Women were disciplined within the domestic sphere and rarely occupied a place in official histories. In the history of Macau's underworld, however, some women emerged with remarkable prominence, overturning these gender prescriptions and competing with men on equal terms. This phenomenon not only challenged conventional allocations of gender roles but also demonstrated women's intelligence and strategic capacity for survival under extreme conditions. Their rise within Macau's underworld was more than an expression of individual ability; it constituted a forceful rebellion against traditional gender roles.

The legendary pirate Zheng Yi Sao, also known as “Widow Zheng” (born Shi Yang and said to have borne the childhood name Shi Xianggu), is a figure omitted from virtually no general history of piracy. Her dramatic passage from prostitute to imperially titled lady²¹ produced a classic example of the emergence of female subjectivity through the very “notoriety” that made her feared. She established a system of rule that did not merely reproduce patriarchal society. She possessed her own administrative order and remained independent of both the central government and local elites. She commanded hundreds of vessels and, according to some accounts, a confederation of as many as one hundred thousand people, while negotiating with considerable skill against the strongly patriarchal Qing state.

Although historical records devote only a few lines to Shi Yang, she effectively created an underground culture parallel to the world's dominant civilizations. A fuller examination of her life could have shown how women used intelligence, courage, and strategy to break gender prescriptions while pursuing self-realization and social recognition. What we encounter instead is a striking asymmetry. Her first husband, Zheng Yi, is commonly described as a descendant of Zheng Chenggong (Koxinga); tourist sites named for her second husband, Cheung Po Tsai, remain in existence; and both men generated extensive legends and records. The woman who ruled the pirate confederation, by contrast, attracted little sustained interest from historians. Even her personal name remained obscure, and she appeared more often under appellations subordinating her to a husband's surname: “Zheng Yi Sao” and “Widow Zheng.” After Cheung Po Tsai's death, Lin Zexu immediately memorialized the Daoguang emperor, arguing that she

20 Lewis Sanders IV, Julia Bayer, Julett Pineda, and Yuchen Li, “KK yuanqu: Zhongguo heibang de canku zhapian gongchang” [KK Park: The Brutal Scam Factory of a Chinese Criminal Network], *Deutsche Welle Chinese*, January 30, 2024, <https://www.dw.com/zh/a-68121753>. The source manuscript incorrectly gave the year as 2014.

21 Gaoming furen (誥命夫人) was an imperially conferred title or rank granted to the wives or mothers of qualifying officials. It denoted status within the imperial honor system rather than a personal office held independently by the recipient.

was a remarried woman: “The Zhang-Shi²² petitioned for an honorific title after remarriage; this was an especially presumptuous misrepresentation.” He requested that her imperially conferred title be revoked and that she be deprived of inheritance rights and that her son's eligibility for military office be questioned: “Her patent of rank should therefore be withdrawn and delivered to the ministry for examination. Furthermore, Cheung Po's son, Zhang Yulin, who inherited the rank of battalion officer, has been accused in a case involving organized gambling. . . .”²³

Marginalized by the authorities, Shi Yang spent her later years in Macau. Although she no longer dominated the seas, she reportedly transferred pirates' attachment to gambling onto land; one local account even treats this as an origin of Macau's later gaming prosperity.²⁴

The legacy of so extraordinary a figure should amount to more than a fleeting historical glimpse. The central question is how, more than two centuries ago, a sex worker without social status secured leadership of the Red Flag Fleet and developed its operations so successfully. What exceptional capacities made this possible? Reflection on this question has value not only for the study of her own society but also as a source of philosophical insight for contemporary gender studies.

Yu Baozhu was born in Zhongshan, Guangdong, in 1924. She was the fictive godmother of Kwok Wing-hung (“Shanghai Boy”), one of the leading figures of Wo Shing Wo, and was therefore herself described as a figure of the jianghu underworld. It has been reported that, after Kwok offended entertainment magnate Albert Yeung, he asked Yu to mediate. Yu met and married her husband, Lim Por-yen, in Macau. Because legal polygyny had not yet been abolished, she became the second wife in the Lim household. After marriage, Yu established herself in business and expanded the family's enterprises; it was widely said that the Lim business could not have prospered without her. When Lim died in 2005, the household included a principal wife as well as third and fourth wives, yet Yu, through commercial acumen and strategic skill, ultimately secured control of the family assets.

Born in 1947, Szeto Yuk-lin became one of the most important figures in Macau's gaming industry. Known in underworld circles as Dajia Jie (“Elder Sister”), she has been described as an inspiration for the fictional “Thirteenth Sister of Hung Hing.” At eighteen, she opened a casino and married into a wealthy family, but soon divorced and returned to the jianghu with three children. In the early 1980s, she entered the Philippine gaming industry. Her success attracted the attention of Macau gaming interests and won the confidence of Stanley Ho. During the same period, she cooperated with Ng Man-sun (“Market Wai”) in casinos and real estate and established the Diamond VIP Room, helping to pioneer the casino-junket and rolling-chip

22 Zhang-Shi (張石氏) is a conventional historical designation meaning “a woman née Shi of the Zhang household,” here referring to Shi Yang after her marriage to Cheung Po Tsai (Zhang Bao). The construction does not mean that Chinese women universally lost their personal names after marriage, although official documents often omitted those names.

23 Lin Zexu, “Zhuidao Zhang Bao jishi Shi shi gaofeng zhe” [Memorial Requesting the Posthumous Revocation of the Honorific Rank of Shi, Successor Wife of Zhang Bao], in Lin Zexu quanji [Complete Works of Lin Zexu], vol. 3 (Fuzhou: Haixia Wenyi Chubanshe, 2002), 1507–8. The ISBN supplied in the source manuscript is duplicated from another entry and has not been retained.

24 Wang Wenda, Aomen zhanggu [Anecdotes of Macau], “Aomen Shalitou cun zhong you Zhang Baozai dawu” [The Cheung Po Tsai House in Patane Village, Macau] (Macau: Macau Educational Publishing House, 1999), 155. The ISBN supplied in the source manuscript could not be matched to this edition and has been omitted pending title-page verification.

systems. In the early 1990s, she began investing in mainland China and was later imprisoned for operating an illegal gambling venture at Baiyangdian. Although she dealt with secret societies throughout her life, she maintained that she never belonged to any one of them. In recent years, she was invited to serve as a founding figure in an international Hongmen organization. Her 2020 autobiography, Szeto Yuk-lin's *Missteps in the Mortal World—Awakening to the Mortal World*,²⁵ recounts in oral-history form a life of “unceasing rises and falls in the mortal world.” In public memory she is known for intelligence and forceful methods. She rose within a gaming industry controlled by underworld groups and ultimately became an influential leader. Her success lay not only in her methods but also in her acute reading of political circumstances and her decisiveness. Her story demonstrates how a woman could use intelligence and courage to secure a position within a male-dominated criminal world. Her survival strategy rested on decision-making and organizational ability, which enabled her to retain an advantage in an environment saturated with competition and danger.

Chen Meihuan is another prominent woman in narratives of Macau's underworld history. She is described as having risen rapidly through a combination of personal charisma and tactical ingenuity. Accounts emphasize her composure, decisiveness, capacity to plan and execute complex social maneuvers, and skill in using information and resources to neutralize crises and maximize advantage. Born in 1965 and later a Chinese American, she left little publicly available biographical information. She became a widely discussed figure through her romantic and business relationship with Ng Man-sun (“Market Wai”) and their joint acquisition of the New Century Hotel. Their relationship collapsed in 2012, followed by the event described at the beginning of this article: while dining at his own New Century Hotel, Ng was attacked by six men and both legs were broken. Because the assailants used no knives and showed no apparent intention to kill him, the attack bore the classic signs of an underworld warning. “Such an attack may have been intended to send him a warning and to damage his reputation,” Roderic Broadhurst, a criminologist and professor at the Australian National University, told the *New York Times*. “The fact that the attack took place in his own hotel is itself highly symbolic.”²⁶ Rumors alleged that Chen had commissioned the assault, but no evidence established this claim. At the same time, Chen faced accusations involving multiple financial matters and became entangled in prolonged litigation. An announcement by the Printing Bureau of the Macao Special Administrative Region records that, in bankruptcy case CV2-20-0001-CFI, Chen Meihuan was declared bankrupt on March 10, 2021; the notice listed only her last known address.²⁷

In sum, the history of Macau's underworld is complex and multidimensional. From its sixteenth-century origins, through rapid twentieth-century expansion, to twenty-first-century transformation, underworld activity in Macau underwent repeated change. Although the post-handover government intensified its suppression of traditional criminal organizations, the legacies of earlier activity and new forms of crime have persisted.

25 Szeto Yuk-lin, oral history, with Miu Yin-king and Man Kin, *Situ Yulian de hongchen wu—wu hongchen* [Szeto Yuk-lin's *Missteps in the Mortal World—Awakening to the Mortal World*] (Hong Kong: Cosmos Books, 2020), 228 pp., ISBN 978-988-854933-7.

26 “Aomen yi duchang gudong zai zijia duchang zao ouda” [Macau Casino Investor Beaten at His Own Casino], *New York Times Chinese*, June 28, 2012, <https://cn.nytimes.com/china/20120628/c28macau/zh-hant/>.

27 Macao SAR Official Gazette, “Bankruptcy Case No. CV2-20-0001-CFI,” March 10, 2021, https://bo.dsaj.gov.mo/bo/ii/2021/10/avisosoficiais_cn.asp. The notice confirms the bankruptcy proceeding and gives Chen Meihuan's last known address; it does not independently establish her present whereabouts.

Underworld activity also exerted a profound influence on local culture. Because criminal organizations long controlled parts of the entertainment and service sectors, they colored Macau's social atmosphere. Representations of underworld culture in literature, film, and television have likewise fascinated audiences and shaped public perceptions of the city.

Reviewing and analyzing this history therefore allows us to understand more fully the social structure and cultural characteristics of Macau as a distinctive city.

Women in Macau's underworld used intelligence, courage, and strategy to occupy important positions in a male-dominated environment. They crossed traditional gender boundaries and played consequential roles in illegal economic activity, information exchange, resistance and survival, and the balancing of family obligations. Studying them can produce a more comprehensive account of the operating mechanisms and social influence of Macau's underworld, as well as the distinctive sociological and philosophical value of women's contributions to this field.

These women may never have explicitly proclaimed a feminist position, yet their actions and achievements unquestionably pressed against the limits of gender inequality. Their lives invite reconsideration of traditional ethical concepts and challenge fixed boundaries of gender roles. A philosophical examination of their biographies reveals how women seeking self-realization and social recognition used intelligence, courage, and strategy to resist discrimination and pursue equality of personhood and freedom in the exercise of power.

Their experiences are not merely individual legends; they constitute a sustained inquiry into women's survival strategies within structures of power. By overturning traditional gender roles, reshaping power relations, and deploying intelligence and strategy, these women demonstrate the emergence of female subjectivity under extreme conditions. Their lives disclose a philosophy of survival and provide an important perspective from which to understand gender, power, and subjectivity.

IV. Identity and Globalization beyond the Unfinished Story of Casino

Haojiang is described as one of Macau's most important waterways. Because of its proximity to the sea, tidal influence can force seawater upstream and create a distinctive hydrological system. Within Macau's historical and cultural imagination, Haojiang also functions as a symbol that has witnessed the city's transformation from an early fishing settlement into an international metropolis. It is therefore frequently used in literary and cinematic works as a metonym for Macau, lending them local color and historical depth.

Casino (Haojiang Fengyun), released in 1998,²⁸ is a gangster film that directly depicts criminal life in Macau during the 1990s. Assessments of its artistic quality have been mixed. Its particular historical importance, however, derives from the fact that the celebrated gang leader Wan Kuok-koi ("Broken Tooth Koi") financed the film himself and modeled it on his own life, giving the work an unusual claim to authenticity and substantial documentary value.

Through Casino, audiences witness struggles among the principal underworld forces. More importantly, the film makes it possible to reconsider Macau's urban society and culture from the perspective of a gang leader.

The film departs from convention through its extensive use of close-ups and rapid editing. Such techniques were difficult to reconcile with prevailing expectations for big-screen cinema at the time, yet from a contemporary perspective they closely resemble the language of today's

28 Billy Tang Hin-shing, dir., Casino (Haojiang fengyun) (Hong Kong, 1998), 92 min., <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0155588/>.

short-form video. Medical commentary often argues that short videos repeatedly activate the brain's reward system and stimulate the release of dopamine, an excitatory neurotransmitter associated with pleasurable experience, which can make continuous viewing addictive. Ni Duanyu, deputy chief physician in functional neurosurgery at Xuanwu Hospital, Capital Medical University, has explained that this pleasure circuit developed over the long course of human evolution as a reward for adaptive behavior conducive to survival.²⁹ The psychological pattern resembles the intense stimulation long associated with gambling, killing, and other criminal acts in gang life; these experiences likewise tend to be rapid, direct, and fragmented. From an evolutionary perspective, this provides one possible explanation for the persistence of criminal behavior. Successful hunting in early human societies could stimulate dopamine release and encourage repetition of behaviors that increased the probability of survival. In modern society, this mechanism may be “hijacked”: short-form video, gambling, and violence exploit the operation of the brain's reward circuitry and can become addictive. Although such behaviors no longer promote survival and may be harmful, they can still produce intense pleasure and thereby consolidate pathological patterns of conduct.

Casino is fragmented in form yet coherent in spirit. Its ambiguity of identity reflects the complexity and contradiction of individual identity in modern society. The characters—especially gang members and police officers—continually struggle between material interest and brotherhood, or move within the gray zone between justice and law. Because real underworld figures participated deeply in the production, each character possesses a distinctive logic of conduct and mode of action, at times displaying a charisma that exceeded the period's ordinary conventions. The relationship between the film's version of “Broken Tooth Koi,” played by Simon Yam, and the police officer “Shi Qidou,” played by Kent Cheng, is simultaneously adversarial and friendly, marked by mutual recognition in a manner difficult for conventional screenwriting to fabricate. When Shi voices anxiety over the return to Chinese sovereignty, Broken Tooth Koi replies with the famous line, “We have no choice but to fight; we will fight all the way to 1999.” The sentence unexpectedly grants a moment of tragic grandeur to a fugitive outlaw. Wan Kuok-koi was at the height of his power when the film was made, yet the arrogance represented on screen already bears a tragic quality, as though he foresaw both his own ending and the impossibility of retreat from the path he had chosen. A feature in *New Macau Daily News* suggested that this autobiographical film may have helped the police follow evidentiary leads and identify aspects of Wan's activities. The underworld era is encapsulated in the poster's slogan: “By the winds and clouds I rise; by them I fall; I make my own destiny.” Portuguese Macau has passed into history; the city has entered another world.³⁰

Madalena moves in the opposite direction. It is slow, complete, and highly mannered, returning through nostalgia to a Macau preserved in memory. Yet its character construction is overly schematic. In making each figure representative, it sacrifices complexity: a false complexity created by excessive emotional ambiguity conceals the poverty of characterization

29 “Ruhe zhengque duidai duanshipin” [How Should We Respond to Short-Form Video?], *Guangming Daily*, March 19, 2022, https://epaper.gmw.cn/gmrb/html/2022-03/19/nw.D110000gmrb_20220319_3-09.htm. The article discusses immediate gratification and media use; the broader evolutionary comparison with criminal behavior is the author's own extrapolation.

30 “‘Hongbi’ beihou de Bengya Ju he Aomen jianghu” [Broken Tooth Koi and Macau's Underworld behind “Hong Coin”], *New Macau Daily News*, July 28, 2022, <https://www.waou.com.mo/2022/07/28/>.

and the absence of convincing motives. The characters in *Madalena* may be described as “newspaper clippings,” assembled so that cinema can present a social problem.

The representation of women in *Casino* and *Madalena* likewise occupies opposite poles.

Casino devotes only a few strokes to its women, but those strokes are decisive and resolute, resembling more closely the personalities attributed to women in media legends of gangland life. One story holds that the notorious Yip Shing-kin was once targeted for assassination in a nightclub. Even as an attacker disguised as a drunk deliberately humiliated her, Yip's girlfriend allegedly remained lucid enough to assess the situation and shout to his subordinates, “Save your boss!”

Although women occupy more than half of *Madalena*'s dramatic space and receive highly detailed treatment, their characterization does not escape the paired conventions of the “innocent white lotus” and the “rescued courtesan” familiar from gangster cinema. Lena is the young and beautiful single mother who once dated a gang leader and was led astray: a traditional victim. At no point does she become a heroic figure who creates or conquers new territory. She exhibits independence only in relation to the more honest Mada. After enduring hardship and extracting resources, she becomes a floating island that drifts back toward the mainland; her personhood finally collapses altogether.

Gangster cinema has long been regarded as one of the genres least progressive in its portrayal of women. The less agency female characters possess within the main narrative, the more strongly they function as instruments of desire. Their independent personalities are often nearly absent, while their bodies serve as vehicles for fantasy. Hence a recurrent paradox: while male bosses require body armor, women in revealing clothes move through a *jianghu* filled with gunfire. Repeated imitation and transmission have turned this aesthetic into a chronic disease of the genre, producing successive “Lenas” who resemble exquisitely executed gongbi paintings whose surfaces contain nothing.

Exceptional works nevertheless emerge. Two decades ago, South Korean cinema produced the female crime narrative *Sympathy for Lady Vengeance*,³¹ which explores women's reproductive choices and modes of life and presents forms of independence and social experimentation involving sexual autonomy, diverse family structures, and intergenerational solidarity.

Circulating accounts of the real-life relationship between Chen Meihuan and “Market Wai” state that Chen gave birth to two children while she was his partner. Ng Man-sun later discovered that the children were not biologically his; by that time, the accounts claim, substantial assets had already been transferred by Chen. This has been presented as the cause of their rupture and, subsequently, of the 2012 assault at the New Century Hotel, in which attackers shattered Ng's legs. Chen disappeared from public view shortly after being released on bail for lack of evidence.

If one looks back two centuries to Shi Yang, the ethics of her relationships with her two husbands—Zheng Yi and Cheung Po Tsai—are even more difficult to categorize. Zheng Yi purchased Shi Yang from a brothel and made her his wife; according to popular accounts, he later acquired the handsome Cheung Po as an adopted son. Unverified anecdotal narratives ascribe unconventional sexual preferences to Zheng Yi and claim that Shi Yang protected Cheung Po from his abuse, possibly participating in sexual relations involving the three of them or larger

31 Park Chan-wook, dir., *Sympathy for Lady Vengeance* (Chinjeolhan Geumjassi) (South Korea: CJ Entertainment, 2005), 115 min., <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0451094/>. The source manuscript listed screenwriter Chung Seo-kyung as the principal entry; the citation has been standardized to the film's director and official title.

groups. After Zheng Yi's death, the de facto marriage between Shi Yang and Cheung Po followed almost immediately. Their relationship could therefore be called a “Schrödinger's” combination of mother and son, elder sister and younger brother, and husband and wife. When Shi Yang surrendered, the emperor formally authorized their marriage, suggesting that even the conservative ethics of the Qing state had to open a narrow exception when confronted by so formidable a woman.

Unlike the dynastic family myths of the Italian Mafia, East Asian gangs developed largely from impoverished people's need for mutual association. East Asian gangster narratives consequently contain extensive representations of lower-class life. Within constricted spaces of survival, women may be forced by poverty into prostitution, while men pursue the chivalric fantasy of roaming the jianghu with swords in hand. This long history of gender prescription helps explain a contradiction within contemporary East Asian societies: feminism has expanded with extraordinary visibility, yet some women remain trapped in an opportunistic logic of exchanging sexuality for resources. As the films suggest, female experience may thus oscillate painfully between social vanguardism and regression.

Overall, the more than twenty years separating *Casino* and *Madalena* coincide with Macau's transfer of sovereignty and its transition into a new era. The underworld moved from its height toward extinction, while individuals drifted like duckweed across the ancient Lingding Sea. In the words of Wen Tianxiang's Song-dynasty poem: “At Panic Beach I speak of panic; in the Lonely Ocean I sigh over loneliness.” Young people grow up, new migrants arrive on the islands, and the past is quickly forgotten. Cinema nevertheless preserves the historical memory of this transformation and opens further questions concerning islands and the mainland, individuals and globalization, and women's subjective existence and nothingness.

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