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- 1 “Black Gold” (*heijin*), the iron triangle of organised crime, business and politics is a major topic in the Taiwanese media and subject of many valuable studies, nearly all of them in Chinese. Despite its societal relevance and the ample information available on the subject, the topic was not accorded much attention outside Taiwan. This has changed with the publication of Ko-lin Chin’s book. “Heijin” not only summarises existing primary and secondary sources in an English-language publication, but also contributes many new and important insights. Chin conducted interviews with 117 informants, among which government officials, police officers, elected deputies from all levels of administration and 32 figures in organised crime, some major.
- 2 The book is divided into three parts, each of which consists of three chapters. The first part outlines the relevance of “Black Gold” for Taiwanese society and politics, provides a typology of Taiwan’s crime groups, defines important terms and describes the evolution of major groups and their leaders as well as the geographical distribution of loosely knit local crime groups. The latter, as the author points out, are not to be confused with the much better-organised, island-wide operating gangs such as “Bamboo United”, “Four Seas” or “Celestial Alliance”. He goes on to describe in detail the activities these groups are engaged in, ranging from extortion to gambling, commercial sex, debt collection, settling disputes and violence.
- 3 The second part explains how “big brothers”, the leaders of organised crime groups, became major figures in Taiwan’s economic and political realms. It shows how gangsters have made their way into big business by first offering services such as dispute resolution and protection and later becoming involved in legitimate and illegitimate business deals themselves, most of all in the construction sector. Economically powerful, they were still politically vulnerable, and so needed protection. Thus, the door was opened for collusion between politicians and “Black Gold” elements, the latter finally running for office themselves. Well-known crime bosses such as Wu

Tse-yuan, Lin Ming-yi and Lo Fu-chu were thus able to become national legislators despite their criminal background. This model sounds familiar, and indeed Chin does not propose his own theory, but refines and fills with empirical substance models put forward by Taiwanese political scientists and sociologists such as Chao Yung-mao, Chen Ming-tong and Chen Dung-sheng. Finally, the author assesses the development of Black Gold politics, the role of the two major political parties in it and explains what makes the election of gangsters attractive to the voters. He connects the latter issue to the evils brought about by Black Gold politics such as vote-buying, corruption, speculation and violence, resulting in the “degeneration of Taiwanese politics” (p. 147).

- 4 The third part describes and analyses the government’s reactions against organised crime, shows the influence of Taiwan’s major crime groups in the international arena and offers policy suggestions for the fight against “Black Gold”. Here, Chin plausibly argues that the KMT administration’s strategy of selective crackdowns instead of institutional reforms had a self-serving purpose and the adverse consequence of worsening the problem instead of solving it. “Operation Cleansweep” serves as a case in point, marking a watershed in the development of organised crime in Taiwan. One direct result of the crackdown was the formation of the “Celestial Alliance” by several Taiwanese gangsters who were imprisoned in the course of the crackdown. Also, as many gangsters fled the island, so Taiwanese organised crime entered the international arena. An entire chapter is devoted to the internationalisation of Taiwanese organised crime. Further, when the former gang leaders were released a few years after the crackdown, they wanted their positions back, resulting in bloody gang warfare and the deterioration of gang ethics.
- 5 Although the merits of the book lie more in its superb descriptions and useful typologies than in theory-building, it does provides convincing explanations for the resilience of “Black Gold”. According to Chin, organised crime, business and politics have become so intricately locked together that “the line between legitimacy and illegitimacy is blurred, and many people move back and forth across the line” (p. 19). At the same time, as Chin’s study shows, “Black Gold” is not something confined to the Nationalist Party (KMT), but involves local-level DPP-politicians as well. This might explain the phenomenon’s staying-power.
- 6 I especially enjoyed reading the lengthy passages from the interviews Chin conducted with crime bosses, politicians of all colours and law enforcement officers. Politicians accuse each other of collusion with “Black Gold” and downplay their own role in the aforementioned triangle, law enforcement officers find themselves utterly powerless to break into these structures, and crime bosses brag about how much they serve society by settling disputes and even bid-rigging !
- 7 In this way, Chin offers an insight into the mindset of the actors that are part of the *heijin*- game, how they legitimise their actions and how they view each other. But these interviews also show that there is no consensus as to how deep “Black Gold” penetrates Taiwanese society. Chin does his best to present pre-existing quantitative data on politicians’ and big enterprise involvement with organised crime, but the widely deviating numbers he presents (p. 15) show that such “indicators” are far from objective, being all based on biased estimations. Unsatisfying as this might be, it demonstrates another of Chin’s scholarly strengths: he does not try to force an argument, but lays open the restrictions of his research. This also becomes clear from

the appendix on his research methods, part of which is devoted to the problems he encountered (pp. 230-232).

- 8 Despite these limitations, however, Chin seems to take a stand in the question of how serious the problem is in Taiwan. Quoting a major gang leader and several legislators, Chin suggests that “most politicians were willing to have close relationships with organised crime” (*heidao*); because—figures the author—the latter can help them win votes (p. 217). Gangsters, as Chin explains, are good vote-getters (for others and themselves) especially in rural areas because of their “grassroots personality”, their “influence”, the “services” they offer their constituents, their “generosity”, their ability to obtain construction funds for their constituency and because voters want to protest against the “establishment” (pp. 128-133). On the other hand, Chin suggests that people in Taiwan were “outraged by the deterioration of law and order in their society” (p. 8) and that “Black Gold” “might have ended KMT rule in Taiwan” (p. 5). However, he does not substantiate the latter hypothesis, neither does he explain the paradox that voters let themselves be wooed by the very people that are responsible for their “outrage”. The root of the paradox might lie in the simplistic equation of “vote captains” or “pillars” (*zhuangjiao*) with “organised criminals” (*heidao*) (p. 217). Given the diverse backgrounds of the vote captains, this equation overstretches the concept of “organised crime”, produces the misleading assumption that every Taiwanese politician is somehow related to gangsters and underestimates the complexity of social relations in Taiwan.
- 9 I would consider this only a minor dent in Chin’s otherwise very informed work, which is the most comprehensive and detailed study on the subject that has so far been published. The reader gains a deep and structured insight into the nature of the organised crime-business-politics triangle in Taiwan and learns much about the methods used by either of the parties in this triangle to sustain the relationship. Its empirical depth makes it a must-read for anyone interested in contemporary Taiwanese politics, economics and sociology.