

Abstract

This thesis seeks the factors that help the yakuza, Japanese organized criminal groups, continue to exist in Japan until today. Examining the yakuza's activities which reflect their functions within the Japanese society, this study also investigates how yakuza transform themselves and their functions in accordance to economic, political and social changes, especially after World War II.

The research discovered that the yakuza can be traced its origin back to the Tokugawa Period, during which social contexts and state power had an impact on the formation of the yakuza's ancestors. The reasons of becoming gangsters are not only economic ones, but also the aim to protect each other and later extended to other groups of society. Moreover, the yakuza have their own structure, rules and activities that remain until today. These characteristics represent the yakuza's continuous and organized traditions which constitute a social institution.

The yakuza's activities, meanwhile, are variable and changeable. These activities are not exclusively providing goods to the consumers in the illegal markets (e.g. drugs, gambling, prostitution), but the yakuza also deal with providing the services the state is unwilling or unable to provide to citizens. Having some functions within the society clearly shows the characteristics of a social institution which is the main factor maintaining the yakuza's existence. Apart from their functions, the yakuza also adapt and transform their activities in accordance to changes in the country. For illegal activities, the yakuza find ways to conceal their businesses to avoid state power, as well as continually seek new business activities, both legal and illegal, in accordance to social conditions and consumers' need. However, though the yakuza's activities have some functions within the society, but it does not mean all of those functions are desirable.

To survive the economic crisis and to avoid state's suppression, the yakuza also change their structure. Small groups were absorbed into the well-established large groups. Member status within the yakuza groups also changes; over half of the yakuza

members have semi-member status. Some are not yakuza members but use the connection with the group to do business. Furthermore, the yakuza try to conceal their appearance and appeal a good image through media, especially through yakuza movies and yakuza magazines which are sold in general book stores. Portraying the yakuza's images, these media show Japanese people's acceptance of the yakuza.

Relations with state power are another factor retaining the yakuza's existence. The relationships between the yakuza and the police are institutionalized as seen through the fact that the police delegate the yakuza the control of problematic groups (e.g. juvenile delinquent groups, social outcasts, misfits, dropouts) and illegal groups (e.g. illegal workers, prostitutes). Moreover, the yakuza develop the connections with the politicians through personal relationships that yield mutual benefits. Yet, such relationships can be seen as structural and institutionalized ones. Such roles show how the yakuza coordinate with other social institutions.

Theoretically, the presence of the yakuza is not desirable for the society, but it has been around for almost 400 years. This condition does not mean that the state fails to eradicate the yakuza. The yakuza's functions and roles within the Japanese society and the transformation in accordance to changes are most important factors that maintain the continued existence of the yakuza.