

## Introduction

The author has been fascinated by local history for all his adult life. The history of ordinary men and women, the villages in which they lived, the land they farmed, the houses they brought their families up in, the market towns at which they bought what they needed, the religious places where they worshipped, their hardships and successes—these live for him in a way that Kings and Emperors cannot. These people are our ancestors. Their history is our history. Indeed, he feels that such history is the real heart of history.

Ever since the author came to Hong Kong, more than 50 years ago, he has researched the local history of Hong Kong, and especially of the New Territories villages and market towns. This history he found to be perpetually fascinating, and an entirely satisfying field of study. A good deal of work on the history of a number of these village communities has been published over the last 50 years.<sup>1</sup> What has been published to date comprises a number of individual case studies, studies of the histories of traditional village and market town communities, but more of the same kind is ideally needed before we can achieve a truly comprehensive local history of the area. What has been done is the making of bricks; one day, those bricks will be used to build a larger-scale history, but we do not, in the author's opinion, have enough material to do this yet.

The current volume, therefore, consists of six case studies: five essays on five separate traditional communities, and one on two squatter area communities.

These are each standalone studies. It is emphatically not a history of the New Territories, still less of Hong Kong as a whole. The book is not a monograph, but a collection of essays. It does not advance a thesis. It is, very simply, an attempt to sketch out the history of the six studied areas, to the best of the author's capacity. It will be for others, at some date in the future, to use these studies to take the history of the area further.

There is an unfortunate lack of written documentation for the study of traditional village and market town communities in Hong Kong. Much of the research for this volume was conducted by way of oral interviews with village elders, conducted 30 or 40 years ago, seeking their memories of what the villages were like in their youth, a century and more ago, and what they remembered of what their grandparents had told them of the history of the community, their memories, that is, at first or second hand, of the communities before modernisation, urbanisation, and high-technology changed those communities forever. Sadly, the number of elders with memories going back to before the great changes of their communities is getting fewer and fewer. How many more studies of the kind included here will be able to be undertaken hereafter is questionable, alas.

It is, perhaps, desirable to clarify the meaning of some expressions used in the text, well-known to students of the area, but probably less immediately clear to the general reader, and some of these clarifications are given here.

Traditionally, the local villagers occupied their land under a dual landholding system, the topsoil 地被 ("Skin of the Land") and subsoil 地骨 ("Bones of the Land") system. Under this system, the topsoil landholder alone had the right to till the soil and take the produce of the tillage. A topsoil landholder held a perpetual and hereditary tenancy from the subsoil landholder. The subsoil landholder paid the Land Tax due on the land (if any was paid), and received a rent-charge from the topsoil landholder. This rent-charge could not be raised by the subsoil landholder. So long as the rent-charge was duly paid, the subsoil landholder usually had no other rights over the land.

The subsoil landholder could not, usually, interfere if the topsoil landholder divided, mortgaged, or sold his rights, so long as the rent-charge continued to be paid. Usually, the subsoil landholder could not stop the topsoil landholder from reclaiming new arable land within his tenancy area, and, usually, the subsoil landholder could not take any further rent-charge from such newly reclaimed land (where the subsoil landholder claimed the right to take additional rent from newly reclaimed land, this often gave rise to major disputes with the topsoil tenants). If the descent-line of the topsoil tenant failed, then the tenancy fell in and the subsoil landholder would take the land back and re-let it. However, the subsoil landholder was the only one that was recognised by the Imperial authorities. Men from the family of a topsoil tenant could thus not usually sit the Imperial examinations since these were, in most circumstances, only open to members of Land Tax-paying families (in some places, subsoil landholders sold off the subsoil rights to a small plot of land to a topsoil tenant-family to enable men from that family to sit the examinations). Normally, the topsoil tenancy was held by an Ancestral Trust in the name of the first tenant, and the subsoil landholding was almost always held by an Ancestral Trust as well (the individual farming families usually held their land by way of a topsoil sub-tenancy, almost always oral, from their own Ancestral Trust).

After they took the New Territories over, the British refused to recognise this dual landholding system, and only accepted those with the right to till the soil (usually the topsoil sub-tenants) as Crown Lessees of land in the New Territories, dispossessing the subsoil landholders, usually without compensation. In order to identify who the men were with the right to till the soil, the British conducted a field-by-field survey of the whole of the New Territories, and then issued leases to those found to have this right (the Block Crown Lease and the Block Crown Lease Survey). The whole New Territories was divided into Demarcation Districts ("D.D."), usually one to each village, with one Lease issued for each D.D.,<sup>2</sup> with every field or house given a one-line entry into the Lease.

The New Territories fell within the area of San On 新安 (Xin'an) County. As with all Chinese Counties, San On was managed by an officer appointed by the Imperial authorities: the Magistrate 知縣. The Magistrate was responsible for collecting the Land Tax and some other smaller taxes, running the County Gaol, hearing all criminal and civil cases arising in the County, managing the County Archives, running the social control systems (the corvée 徭役, and the Baojia 保甲 mutual guarantee system), running the Imperial Post system, ensuring the County had good schools, and, finally, ensuring that the people were socially harmonious and peaceful. The Magistrate was assisted by a small number of Official Assistants, clerks, guards, and other minor staff; he worked from the Magistracy (yamen 衙門), in the centre of the walled County City (for San On, this was at Nam Tau 南頭 [Nantou], some miles to the west of the New Territories).<sup>3</sup> The yamen comprised numbers of single-storeyed brick-and-tile buildings, arranged around a series of courtyards and gardens, and surrounded by a strong wall entered through a gatehouse.<sup>4</sup> The San On Magistrate was supervised by the Prefect 知府 of Canton.

The New Territories was unfortunately very exposed to attack by pirates and bandits. The Imperial Army was, at most dates, unable to eradicate, or even, at many dates, to control these pests, despite the County having a significant garrison of soldiers, a large number of coastal defence forts and fortlets, and a half-dozen or so war-junks.<sup>5</sup> The villages, therefore, had to have a system of self-defence. Rich villages might wall themselves, dig wide moats, and invest in cannon and gunpowder. All villages encouraged their young men to train in martial arts, and most would own jingals (black-powder guns firing small round-shot, very similar to European arquebuses). Very widely over the New Territories area the villagers formed self-defence alliances. Villages united in oath-sworn groupings, or Yeuk 約 (which means "oath-sworn" in this context), and Yeuk would often combine in a district-wide inter-Yeuk alliance. When bandits or pirates came, their oath-sworn village allies would turn out to support the village attacked; if necessary, the manpower of the entire district would turn

out. Any villager would treat all the villagers of their Yeuk as “brothers” 同約兄弟; often village marriages would be within the Yeuk.<sup>6</sup> Usually Yeuk and inter-Yeuk alliances would have some common religious focus.

The New Territories was not an ethnically homogenous area. About half the villages spoke Punti 本地 (Cantonese-speaking; in one of the New Territories dialects, of which there were at least two, the Yuen Long dialect 元朗話 and the Kowloon dialect 九龍話, spoken respectively in the west and east of the New Territories), and the rest Hakka 客家. Punti and Hakka were not mutually intelligible. The two dialects of Punti spoken were mutually comprehensible, but the speakers of the two dialects were very conscious of the speech differences between the two. In addition, the boat-people 水上人 (usually called Tanka 蛋家 in the New Territories) spoke yet another dialect of Cantonese. In the port-towns along the southern coast, there were significant communities of Hoklo 福佬<sup>7</sup> speakers, another language not mutually intelligible to Punti or Hakka speakers. While Punti and Hakka villages were socially not dissimilar, the Punti and Hakka people were always very conscious of the social and customary differences between the two groups. Many districts in the New Territories comprised a mixture of Punti and Hakka villages; the Yeuk alliances in these areas were also sometimes mixed, and inter-Yeuk alliance areas very often were. Marriages were usually within the one ethnic group, but Hakka-Punti marriages were not unknown.

Villagers from the New Territories were very conscious of the life-forces of the natural world as they affected their villages. They attempted to build their villages, and to place their tombs, to maximise the benefits the life-forces could bring them and their descendants. These life-forces, and the placement of villages and tombs to maximise their beneficial influence, were called Fung Shui 風水 (*fengshui*, “Wind and Water”). Skilled Fung Shui masters were greatly honoured, and were constantly in demand for identifying the most beneficial sites and directions of buildings or tombs.

For the thousand years before the late Northern Song (mid-11th century), the broader New Territories area was under military occupation and control.

Civilian settlement seems only to have been countenanced by the Imperial authorities from this late Northern Song date. From then until the mid-17th century, the area developed as an area of rice-subsistence villages, with a highly stratified social structure. However, in 1662, the incoming Qing Dynasty, finding itself unable to clear the area from the depredations of Koxinga 國姓爺<sup>8</sup> and his Ming remnants on Taiwan, decided to drive all the residents of the area along the coast inland, to deprive Koxinga from any support from the coastal people. Nothing was done to feed or house those thus displaced, and vast numbers died as a result. Eventually, in 1668, the Decree of Clearance was rescinded, and the survivors returned. In many cases only one man returned, or two or three, to a village, and, in many areas, no-one survived to return at all. This clearance was called the Coastal Evacuation 遷界.<sup>9</sup> This episode was exceedingly traumatic for the New Territories, and led to many major social changes. It was thus in the aftermath of the Coastal Evacuation that the Hakka people first started to move into the area, and probably in the same period that the topsoil/subsoil landholding system became the norm for the area.

This volume contains three chapters on communities of rice-subsistence villages: on the north shore of Lantau Island 大嶼山, in West Kowloon 九龍, and in Central Sai Kung 西貢. Each has some special features.

The north shore of Lantau was a poor area. Tung Chung 東涌 was far from wealthy, and the Pak Mong-Tai Ho 白芒-大蠔 area was among the poorest of the New Territories. In both areas the villagers were able to live, however, without undue problem, and had enough cash to maintain schools and to conduct religious rituals, but their margins were tight. Pak Mong-Tai Ho was dependent on the sale of firewood and cattle to Cheung Chau 長洲 despite the harsh mountain pass and sea-passage that lay between the area and Cheung Chau, and was, before 1898, exposed to attack by pirates. Its houses were small, and lacking in comfort, but most adult males there were functionally literate, and the villagers had enough to eat, if without much to spare. Tung Chung area had a large coastal-defence fort, which led to some special features in the area.

Despite the area's lack of wealth, the Tung Chung villagers were able to mount a 70-year-long legal battle with their subsoil landholder, lasting most of the 18th century, eventually being ended by the agreement of a compromise which gave both the villagers and the subsoil landholder most of what they wanted. Tung Chung was resettled after the Coastal Evacuation (no-one from the families settled there before the Evacuation returned), and the Pak Mong-Tai Ho area only from the mid-18th century.

West Kowloon<sup>10</sup> suffers from even poorer written sources than the rest of the New Territories, but this area, so close to the City of Hong Kong, founded in 1841, and so heavily influenced by that closeness, seemed to the author to demand attention, despite the slenderness of the written information. What can be seen very clearly is the growth of market-gardening in the area to support the new City, and the consequent changes to the society of the villages there. The area was probably only settled from the post-Evacuation period, mostly by Hakka incomers.

Central Sai Kung was a mountainous and generally rather infertile area. There were only three areas of reasonably flat and fertile land, and the early history of the area centres on the establishment, in the late Ming (second half of the 16th century), of three Punti villages, one in the centre of each of these three areas. The relationship between these three villages was initially close and cordial until, in the early 19th century, attempts to jockey for local dominance between them blew up into venomous disputes involving kidnapping of opponents and long-drawn-out legal disputes before the Magistrate, threatening the parties with bankruptcy, and leaving a legacy of distrust that soured district politics for much of the rest of that century. The late 18th and 19th centuries saw a massive influx into the area of Hakka incomers, who established a large number of mostly very small and poor villages on tiny patches of tillable land on the mountainsides.

The fourth chapter attempts to sketch the history and development of the port-towns of Hong Kong: Tai O 大澳, Cheung Chau, Peng Chau 坪洲,<sup>11</sup>

Aberdeen 香港仔, and Stanley 赤柱. These fishing-ports were, by the 19th century, large and vigorous towns, which had grown up on the back of a major export trade in dried and salted fish, sent inland to provide a cheap source of protein for the up-country rural people. These towns were dominated by merchants from outside the area, and their history is very much separate from the rice-subsistence villages around them, although numbers of those villages did their marketing there.

The fifth chapter is a study of the stonecutting industry of the Four Stone Hills 四石山 area in East Kowloon, and, in particular of the stonecutting village of Lei Yue Mun, and the stone-port at Shau Kei Wan. This industry seems to have begun in the early 18th century, and flourished during the 19th century in particular.

Finally, one chapter looks at the history of two squatter areas, Hau Wong San Tsuen 侯王新村 at Kowloon City, and Kwu Tung 古洞 in the North of the New Territories. For a whole generation, from the early 1950s to the late 1970s, squatter areas were central to the life of Hong Kong and its people, but their history has been scandalously understudied. This essay attempts to cast a little light on this interesting and important aspect of Hong Kong's recent history.

The port-towns are not the only towns whose history is discussed in this volume. In the Sai Kung chapter, there is a discussion of the history of Sai Kung Market 西貢墟. In the West Kowloon chapter, the foundation and growth of Yau Ma Tei 油麻地 and of Sham Shui Po 深水埗 are discussed. In the Lei Yue Mun chapter, the development of the stone-port at Shau Kei Wan is covered. The chapter on the squatter villages includes a sketch of the history of Kowloon City. The traditional local society comprised its market towns as well as its villages, and the history of these market towns and ports is as endlessly fascinating as that of the villages which surrounded them.



## Notes

- 1 See, for instance, James Hayes, in a substantial number of essays gathered together in *The Hong Kong Region, 1850–1911: Institutions and Leadership in Town and Countryside* (Archon Books, 1977), including essays on Cheung Chau, Tai O, Shek Pik, Pui O, Ngau Tau Kok, and Kowloon City; and *The Rural Communities of Hong Kong: Studies and Themes* (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1983), including essays on Peng Chau, Old British Kowloon, Tai Tam Tuk, Cheung Sha Wan, and Tsuen Wan. He has also written at length on Tsuen Wan in his *Growth of a New Town: Tsuen Wan and Its People* (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1993). Hugh Baker has written on Sheung Shui, in his *Sheung Shui: A Chinese Lineage Village* (Frank Cass & Co., 1968). A good deal has been written on Cheung Chau, by James Hayes, in “Notes and Impressions of the Cheung Chau Community”, in *Down to Earth: The Territorial Bond in South China*, ed. D. Faure and H. Siu (Stanford University Press, 1995), pp. 89–103, as well as the essay in *The Hong Kong Region, 1850–1911*; and Choi Chi-cheung, “Reinforcing Ethnicity: The Jiao Festival in Cheung Chau”, also in *Down to Earth*, pp. 104–122; and David Faure in his *The Structure of Chinese Rural Society: Lineage and Village in the Eastern New Territories, Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1986). David Faure has also written on Kam Tin, and in *The Structure of Chinese Rural Society*, and in his “The Tangs of Kam Tin: A Hypothesis on the Rise of a Gentry Family”, in *From Village to City: Studies in the Traditional Roots of Hong Kong Society* (Hong Kong: Centre of Asian Studies, University of Hong Kong, 1984); see also in particular Chan Wing-hoi, “The Dangs of Kam Tin and their Jiu Festival”, *Journal of the Hong Kong Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Vol. 29 (1979), pp. 302–375. The late Carl T. Smith wrote “Shamshuipo: From Proprietary Village to Urban Complex”, in *From Village to City: Studies in the Traditional Roots of Hong Kong Society* (Hong Kong: Centre of Asian Studies, University of Hong Kong, 1984), and, with James W. Hayes, “Hung Hom: An Early Industrial Village in Old British Hong Kong”, *Journal of the Hong Kong Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Vol. 15 (1975), both reprinted in his *A Sense of History: Studies in the Social and Urban History of Hong Kong* (Hong Kong, 1995). The author has written “Beside the Yamen: Nga Tsin Wai Village”, *Journal of the Hong Kong Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Vol. 39 (1989), pp. 1–78; “The Alliance of Ten: Settlement and Politics in the Sha Tau Kok Area”, in *Down to Earth*, pp. 123–160; “Eastern Peace: Sha Tau Kok Market in 1925”, *Journal of the Hong Kong Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Vol. 33 (1983), pp. 147–202; “Sheung Wo Hang Village, Hong Kong: A Village Shaped by Fung Shui” (with Lee Man-yip), in *Chinese Landscapes: The Village as Place*, ed. Ronald G. Knapp (University of Hawai‘i Press, 1992); as well as the six essays in his *Settlement, Life, and Politics: Understanding the Traditional New Territories* (Hong Kong: City University of Hong Kong Press with the Royal Asiatic Society, Hong Kong Branch, 2020), covering Ha Tsuen, the Hung Shui Kiu area, Sha Tin, Lamma Island, Ma Wan, and Tung Ping Chau.

- 2 In New Kowloon, the Demarcation Districts were called “Survey Districts” (“S.D.”).
- 3 See P. H. Hase, *Forgotten Heroes: San On County and Its Magistrates in the late Ming and Early Qing* (Hong Kong: City University of Hong Kong Press with the Royal Asiatic Society, Hong Kong Branch, 2017), for the Magistrates of San On and their duties.
- 4 See Hase, *Forgotten Heroes*, op. cit., for greater detail on the San On County yamen.
- 5 See Hase, *Forgotten Heroes*, op. cit.
- 6 See P. H. Hase, “The Mutual Defence Alliance of the New Territories”, *Journal of the Hong Kong Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Vol. 29 (1989), pp. 384–388; “Bandits in the Siu Lek Yuen Yeuk”, *Journal of the Hong Kong Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Vol. 32 (1992), pp. 214–215; “A Village War in Sham Chun”, *Journal of the Hong Kong Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Vol. 30 (1990), pp. 265–281; and “Ta Kwu Ling, Wong Pui Ling and the Kim Hau Bridges”, *Journal of the Hong Kong Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Vol. 30 (1990), pp. 257–265. See also D. Faure, *The Structure of Chinese Rural Society: Lineage and Village in the Eastern New Territories, Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1986), pp. 100–127.
- 7 This would normally be pronounced “Fuk Lo” in Cantonese, but, in this dialect the characters are pronounced “Hok Lo”, and the New Territories people always use this pronunciation when referring to this language group. The term means “Man from Fukien”, but was used to refer to people from all over eastern Guangdong as well, Chiu Chow 潮州, Swabue 汕尾 (Shantou), and Hoi Luk Fung 海陸豐 people especially.
- 8 Koxinga’s actual name was Cheng Shing-kung 鄭成功 (Zheng Chenggong). “Koxinga” 國姓爺 (Kwok Sing Ye, “Lord of the Imperial Surname”) is the Dutch transliteration of a title of honour granted to him by the Ming Emperor, since he had been permitted to use the surname of the Ming Imperial House, Chu 朱 (Zhu).
- 9 The Coastal Evacuation was only lifted for the offshore islands in 1682, and the seas were only opened for fishermen and others to use in 1687.
- 10 The author does not wish to suggest in any way that the area was called “West Kowloon” before the coming of the British; the use of this name for the area here is merely geographical convenience.
- 11 Peng Chau would normally be transliterated “Ping Chau”, but the transliteration “Peng Chau” is used in the Gazetteer to distinguish it from Tung Ping Chau in Mirs Bay.