

The Pattern of Life in the New Territories in 1898

This article launched James's writing career, and it remains an excellent introduction to the history of the Hong Kong area, broad in coverage and interesting in content. The New Territories became part of the British Crown Colony of Hong Kong in 1898 on a temporary and finite lease, but this is not an introduction to the area's colonial history—it barely mentions Britain—James sets out to describe and explain the workings of Chinese society and culture upon which British rule was imposed. As the bibliography of James's many writings (at the end of this book) shows, the majority of his oeuvre has this Sino-centric focus, and this piece was as much a sample of his own future interests as it was a crafted exercise to enlighten the innocent foreigner.

In 1898, Great Britain signed the Peking Convention which established the lease of the New Territories for 99 years. The world has made such material progress since that time, and urban Hong Kong has itself seen so many changes that it is difficult for us today to imagine the rural part of the colony

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as it then was, without roads or wheeled transport other than the wheel-barrow, with inhabitants who knew nothing of cars, aeroplanes, or weapons of mass destruction. Having made this effort, we must think back further still if we wish to obtain a proper appreciation of the situation, as James Stewart Lockhart¹ told the Hong Kong government in 1898. At the end of his report on the “New Territory”, as he styled it, he said: “Under Chinese rule enterprise has been at a discount, and progress has been at a standstill for centuries. The Xin’an District of today must be much the same as it was four or five hundred years ago.”²

The report is a valuable first-hand account of the area as it was in the year of its acquisition and covers the points in which the government would be most interested such as topography, communications, trade and natural products, population, industries, and the existing civil government. It also gave its author’s recommendations as to how the New Territories should be governed and looked after in the future. This article, whilst making use of Lockhart’s report, tries to give the background which he, of course, would take for granted. It does not pretend to deal with every part of the backcloth but only touches on those parts which seem worth mentioning for their share in fixing life in its accustomed mould: the village, the people themselves and their history, the clan system, ancestral worship, education, the district government, the background of affairs elsewhere in the province, the prevalence of disturbance and epidemic, popular religion. All of these were factors which made for integration or disruption in a life that could never have been easy.

The New Territories comprised an estimated 376 square miles of hill and plain situated on the mainland of China and a number of offshore islands, large and small, some of which were inhabited and some were not. For the purpose of this article it is sufficient to say here that in 1898 it was primarily an agricultural district consisting of a few broad valleys and many pockets of farm land among the hills or at their foot, both on the mainland and on

some of the larger islands. There were a few market towns here and there—namely, Tai Po, Yuen Long, Tai O, Cheung Chau, Sai Kung, and Tsuen Wan. In 1905, Governor Sir Mathew Nathan reported that Yuen Long had “seventy-four shops of which twenty-five are large and deal in rice, oil, samshu, etc. The remainder belong to barbers, doctors, jewellers, vegetable sellers, piece goods dealers etc.” Tai Po Market consisted of twenty-three large shops and fifteen smaller ones. Tsuen Wan had “a few shops supplying the local needs”.³ The present New Territories towns were not the largest in the Xin’an District. Pride of place went to Shenzhen, now on the Chinese side of the border, with sixty-one large shops and three hundred and twenty-three medium sized shops.

The emphasis was on farming, though there were a few small industries in operation. Village life was bounded by the two rice crops in summer and autumn and the winter season, when most land lay fallow; and by the occasional visit to the market town, often two or three hours away and over the hills, always on foot, and frequently laden with produce and livestock to sell or exchange.

It goes almost without saying that this small slice of territory, only half the size of the district of Xin’an, which was one of the smaller administrative districts of Guangdong Province, and 1,500 miles from Beijing, was an insignificant part of the Chinese Empire. However, despite its minute size and remoteness from the central provinces and the seat of government, it was fundamentally Chinese and essentially Confucian in its component parts, two features which are worth noting. One of its former district magistrates made an observation covering both these points in a Confucian discourse which he contributed to mark the restoration of a school at Kam Tin in 1744 when he wrote: “In this era of prosperity, culture has spread to even this remote place near the sea. Here the Book of Poetry is read as early as sunrise.”⁴

The integrated life in which everything under Heaven has its place and plan is a recognisable feature of the Confucian code

which was evolved and formulated in an agricultural society over 2,500 years ago. A study of the daily life and background of New Territories people in 1898, which was also placed in an agricultural setting, though one based on the cultivation of rice and not of wheat, leaves me with the impression that the high degree of mental and environmental integration attainable within a Confucian framework had certainly been attained here. Life was lived generation after generation according to a set pattern. The disciplined life imposed upon an agricultural community by the seasons was reinforced and coloured by the Confucian system of ethical behaviour which included filial piety and ancestor worship, two fundamentals that were re-expressed every New Year and at the two annual grave festivals. Both operated through the closely knit organisation of the clan, a group of families of the same name linked by descent from a common ancestor. This internal bond was further tightened by the restrictions of thought and movement imposed by poverty and poor communications.

I have always felt that this essential unity of life and thought is reflected in the traditional village scene, whose component parts are laid out in accordance with a general pattern whose essential beauty and simplicity leave an impression on the mind. Most of the present villages in the New Territory existed in 1898 and it is only mainly in the last ten or fifteen years that their original outline has been cluttered up with additional buildings in a semi-European style and their surrounding fields covered with wooden shacks put up by immigrant vegetable farmers. Clear all this away and in a good many cases you can still see what Stewart Lockhart and the gentlemen of his party saw as they travelled through the Territory in the month of August some sixty years ago. You will see a village whose houses are laid out in close rows on the higher ground. Behind them will be a thick grove of *feng shui* trees and to their front will extend terrace after terrace of rice fields, the one sliding almost imperceptibly into the other, the whole layout shaped for the purpose of seeing that a water supply can be led

to each field for the planting periods of the year. On the slopes of the hills there may be pine trees and, occasionally, crops like pineapples and peanuts. You will also notice a few prominent horseshoe-shaped graves, some green or brown burial urns glistening in the sun, and areas on the higher slopes which look as though they have been shaved recently; as they virtually have by the women of the village who cut grass to sell for boat breaming and brushwood to burn in their own stoves. Entering one of these larger villages you will still see what Lockhart had to report:

The houses in these villages are, as a rule, well and solidly built. The foundations and lower courses of their walls are, in many cases, of granite masonry, the upper courses being made of blue or sun-dried bricks. The door posts and lintels are of dressed granite slabs with tiled roofs on rafters made of China fir. The floors are generally concreted, and frequently paved with red brick or with granite. Well-built and handsomely decorated temples exist in all the important villages, and in many places large and expensively constructed buildings, in which the ancestral tablets are kept, were seen. As usual in China the streets are narrow and paved with large slabs of stone. Such drainage as exists is on the surface, underground drains never being used in Chinese villages.

In their surroundings and the generally peaceful life they led, everything conspired to make the people of the New Territories a conservative minded and generally amenable body, and Lockhart said of them: "Taken as a whole the inhabitants may be regarded as an industrious, frugal and well-behaved people." It may be appropriate at this stage to mention who they were. He found 161 Punti (Cantonese) villages with a population of some 64,000 persons and 255 Hakka villages, most of them smaller and more remote than the Cantonese ones, with a population of 36,000 people. He also mentions the boat people of whose numbers he was unable to obtain an estimate. He does say, however, that

they formed a class by themselves and were looked down upon by the land population. Neither Punti nor Hakka are native to the district or to the province. The former, says Lockhart, are supposed to have come from the provinces bordering on the south of the Yangtse River and made their way to South China during the early periods of Chinese history. They were firmly established in the south during the time of the Southern Song dynasty (1127–1278) and, as he observes, it is a fact that most of the Punti inhabitants easily trace their descent from ancestors who were settled in the Xin'an District in that period, or elsewhere in Guangdong Province. The Hakka, or "strangers" as the term signifies, are, he says, supposed to be descended from the Mongols and to have reached the southern provinces when the Mongol dynasty was overthrown about the middle of the fourteenth century. They are regarded by the Punti as aliens, and speak a dialect quite distinct from the Cantonese. They are a hardy and frugal race and are generally found in the hill districts. As a rule, Cantonese and Hakka kept themselves to themselves in different villages and there has been a general antipathy between them until recent times.

Whether Punti or Hakka, the villages were inhabited by clans: either in groupings in which there were only persons of one clan descended from a common ancestor; or in villages in which lived several groups of families of different name, that is, several clans, having come there together or at different times. Examples of both kinds of villages, large and small, can be found all over the New Territories. Both Punti and Hakka clans have a history of wandering from the north throughout the last ten centuries at least, and it is clear that for all the families who came to what is now the leased territory it was the end of the line, the end of a chapter of wandering that was often interrupted for centuries in some location elsewhere in the province.

At Fan Pui, for instance, a small village on Lantau Island, lived the Fung clan who arrived there in the eleventh generation

after the first ancestor had entered Guangdong Province. The twenty-second generation are living there still in an adjoining bay, having had to make way for the Shek Pik reservoir scheme. The family came from Ma Tau Wai in Kowloon and had made their way there from the Nam Hung District in the extreme north of the province after spending some time in the district of Hok Shan on the way south. Their neighbours, the Tsui clan of Shek Pik, claim twenty-seven generations in Guangdong and fifteen in Lantau: that is, nearly four hundred years. The first ancestor came from a village in the Nam Cheung District of Jiangxi Province and settled in the Dongguan District. Eventually, following the example of other members of the main branch who gradually moved southwards, a Tsui of the thirteenth generation came to Shek Pik and was buried there. Their clan history mentions that members of successive generations before the move to Lantau were officials and military officers who won the imperial favour in the Ming dynasty, whereas the Fung genealogy makes no such claims to fame for its progenitors. Both these clans are Cantonese. The condition of the peasantry impressed Lockhart favourably on the whole,

The inhabitants, though by no means wealthy, seem to be, as a rule, comfortably well off and able to earn an honest livelihood without difficulty. Few signs of anything approaching destitution were seen, and only a few beggars were met.

The reason for this general standard of well-being was undoubtedly the universal ownership of land which was clearly shown by the land survey made in the first years after 1898. It was carried out by surveyors and staff on loan from the government of India. The survey sheets and the Crown Rent Rolls which form the schedules to them can be found in the District Offices of the New Territories Administration and they are a valuable record of land ownership and land classification at the time of the lease.

For example, at Shek Pik and Fan Pui in 1958, out of sixty-six families, four owned between 3–4 acres, nine between 2–3 acres, nineteen between 1–2 acres, fourteen between 0.5–1 acres, twelve between 0.25–0.5 acres, and eight between 0.10–0.25 acres. Except a few late arrivals, therefore, every family owned land. The position was much the same as it was in 1898.

Punti and Hakka alike, most families in every village owned some fields, and because of the joint succession to ancestral property by all male descendants in the direct line, nearly everyone had a joint and undivided share, a stake, in the land. There was also clan land which could be farmed out to poorer members. In land matters the clan had priority over the individual. This was reflected in Chinese deeds of sale or mortgage which, if the New Territories is anything to go by, appear to follow the same form in Guangdong as in far Shandong.⁵ Where a sale was contemplated, a reason always had to be specified, and the land always had to be offered first to all relatives (which meant practically anyone inside the clan) before being offered to an outsider. Mortgages were more common than sales and were redeemable at any period after the original mortgage so that land need not pass outside the clan forever. There is no doubt that this tight rein on sales assisted the general preservation of the clan and the village and was a powerful factor in the continuance of a static and integrated life. These matters were regulated by the clan elders in conformity with immemorial custom.

To meet clan needs, amongst which was the proper worship of ancestors as well as the needs of the living, such as education of the young and the care of the old, certain fields and houses were set aside in trust, and the trust so created was known as a *tong* or *tso* (see the annex to this chapter). These are commonly found in the New Territories and many were registered at the land settlement which followed the grant of the lease to Great Britain. The *tso* is the more closely connected with the clan. Anyone can form a *tong*,

but a *tso* is definitely a clan affair and of the nature of a serious ancestral trust.⁶ It is set up to ensure that property is not divided or disposed of without due thought and is designed to circumvent the acts of foolish or spendthrift descendants, in the interests of all that the Confucian system holds most dear: the rearing of sons, giving them a proper education, seeing that forebears are duly respected in a fitting manner, assisting with weddings and funerals, repairs to the ancestral temple, and so on. Another and less formal method of securing these aims is the setting aside of “joss and oil fields”, sometimes known by the obscure title of *ching sheung*, whose proceeds, again, are used for the proper observance of ancestral rites and other family needs. One need hardly emphasise the integrating effect of these land measures.

To understand the people and their outlook and background it is necessary to see to what sort of government they were accustomed. The government of the Xin’an District was essentially Confucian, like that of every other administrative division; by which I mean that Confucian principles were ostensibly followed. This was sealed by the state worship of the sage. In every district city there was a temple to Confucius styled a *man miu* in which the district magistrate, his senior staff, and the local gentry paid the customary respects to the sage and his seventy-two disciples on his birthday (the twenty-seventh day of the eighth moon) and at the spring worship, or *chun chai*, in the second moon. The same thing happened at the prefectural and provincial capitals. At the head of the Xin’an District was the district magistrate whose superior was the prefect of the Guangzhou Prefecture, which embraced at least five large districts. The latter was subordinate to the provincial governor and he in turn to the viceroy of the Two Guang provinces of Guangdong and Guangxi. The nature and duties of the provincial officers had been established since the Tang dynasty and for well over a millennium the pattern of government had been cast in an identical mould. The district magistrate was usually

a scholar who had taken one of the metropolitan examinations at Beijing and he was always a native of another province than the one he served in, this being a long-standing rule. He spent three or six years in one post and was then moved elsewhere, and was promoted in due course to be prefect or to higher office through merit, connections, or good fortune. Some persons began and ended their official careers as district magistrates.

The district magistrate's duties were many and his competence was most extensive. He was, in truth, the "father-mother official" or *fu mou kwun*, so called by them and also so styled in official documents because of his authority over all their affairs, criminal or civil. He certainly regarded himself as standing *in loco parentis* to the people of his district. An instance of this outlook is a proclamation issued by the Canton viceroy in April 1899 in which he told the people of the New Territories that the English government had agreed that "the people are to be treated with exceptional kindness". On the reverse side of the medal, the magistrate could use his authority to evil purposes. Such an official might be referred to as being *yu fu* "as (fierce as) a tiger"⁷ or a *kau kwun* "dog-official" whose extortions and venality were a byword in the district. When I asked an old scholar about extortion and venality among magistrates, he replied in distinctly extenuating tones: "Some did; but then they had so many people to look after." He observed that there were some rich districts in Guangdong in which a magistrate had to do nothing to obtain money as it came rolling into the office in the way of presents, inducements, additions to land and other taxes, etc., whilst there were others so poor that the magistrate could squeeze little from them even if he tried very hard.

In his government, the magistrate was usually assisted by an indoor and outdoor staff. The former might consist of personal adherents from his own home district who followed him from post to post, and partly of local personnel of the tribunal or *yamen*, such as a legal adviser, secretaries, and land clerks whose