

SALTWATER MARGIN: A COMMON-FIELDS SYSTEM IN SOUTH CHINA*

I

INTRODUCTION

In 1969 I began a long-term ethnographic study of a Cantonese village in what was then the rural hinterland of British Hong Kong. The community, known as San Tin, no longer had a productive economy; farming had ceased a few years earlier and villagers depended almost entirely on remittances from emigrants working in Europe. The only men resident in the village were retired farmers and ex-seamen, most of whom had little to do except drink tea, watch grandchildren, and talk about the past, a situation ideally suited for an anthropologist interested in social history.

One topic these men enjoyed discussing was an unusual system of land tenure associated with fields that their ancestors had reclaimed from marshland during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The fields were huge by Chinese standards and were organized into complex networks of narrow, elongated strips; the retired farmers used a highly specialized local vocabulary to discuss the unique mode of production associated with their fields. As the story of San Tin's agrarian history unfolded over the next year, it began to dawn on me that I had seen something like this before, in the accounts of medieval European history that social anthropologists read in the 1960s and 1970s. The impression was further strengthened when a series of Royal Air Force aerial photos turned up in Hong Kong colonial archives: images from the San Tin area revealed, in unmistakable

* This essay is dedicated to Joan Thirsk and Jack Goody, pioneers who tilled the fields of transdisciplinary research. An earlier version was presented at the Food Studies Centre, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. I wish to thank the following people for helpful comments and criticisms: Steve Cohn, Patrick Hase, James Hayes, Elizabeth Johnson, Jakob Klein, Liu Tik-sang, George Steckley, Richard Watson and Rubie Watson. Scott Walker and Stephanie Casey prepared the illustrations and the aerial photo.

detail, the outline of an agrarian system that bore uncanny similarities to medieval European common fields, as outlined in the classic studies of Marc Bloch, George Homans and Joan Thirsk.

Before proceeding with the Chinese case, it might be useful to review the fundamentals of the European system. 'Common fields' is shorthand for a pattern of communally organized farming that dominated grain production in Britain and western Europe from the sixth to the seventeenth centuries. The cornerstone of the system was a proliferation of narrow strips laid out in larger, bounded fields. Historians have debated the origins of the system since Frederic Seebohm published his monumental study of English farming practices in 1896.¹ The nucleated villages that arose in conjunction with common fields were highly cohesive; success depended upon communal action, not just the skills of individual farmers.

Joan Thirsk, who surveyed the literature on common fields in a *Past and Present* essay published in 1964,² isolates four 'essential elements' of common-field systems: (1) Cultivated land was divided into elongated strips 'scattered about the fields'. Villagers farmed at least three and up to twenty non-contiguous strips rather than small, self-contained fields. There were no permanent fences or hedges separating strips within a common field. (2) Farmers established and enforced rules that governed ploughing, crop rotation, fallowing and harvesting. Violators were sanctioned and sometimes excluded from the common fields. (3) Common pasturage of livestock was allowed during the off-season. Farmers had rights to collect fuel and manure anywhere within the boundaries of the common field. (4) The rules of conduct were enforced by an assembly of cultivators held in the manorial court or during village meetings.

Thirsk's essay initiated a torrent of criticism, commentary and case studies that energized the study of British and European social history for decades.³ The storm has dissipated in recent

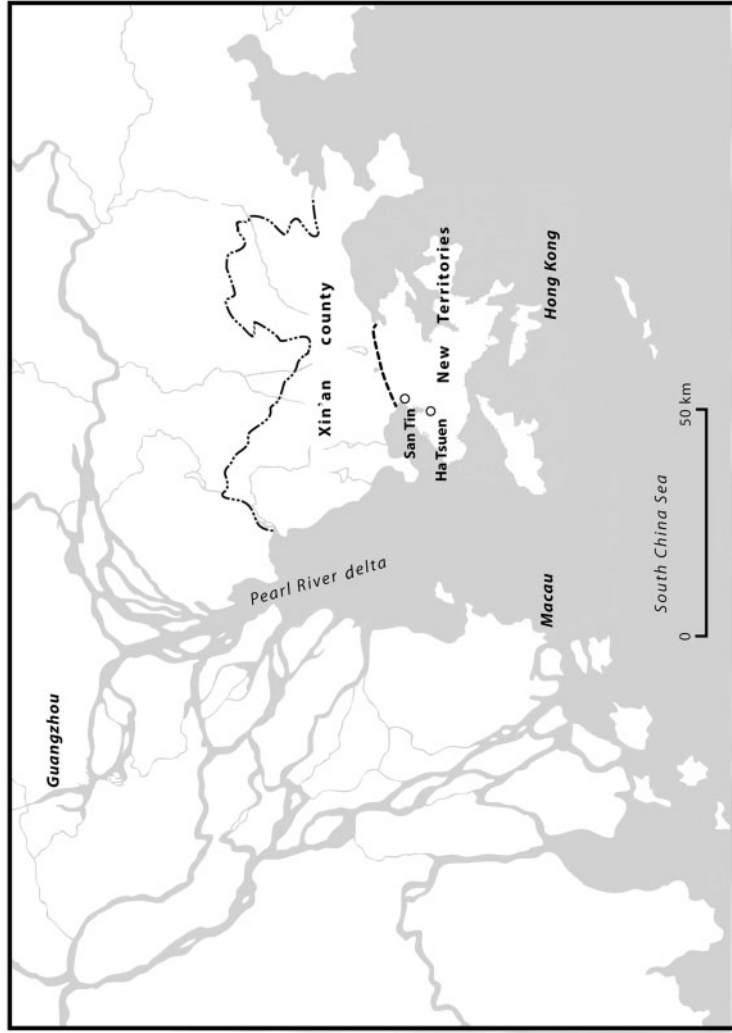
¹ Frederic Seebohm, *The English Village Community Examined in its Relations to the Manorial and Tribal Systems and to the Common or Open Field System of Husbandry: An Essay in Economic History*, 4th edn (London, 1896).

² Joan Thirsk, 'The Common Fields', *Past and Present*, no. 29 (Dec. 1964), 3.

³ See, for example, Alan R. H. Baker, 'Discourses on British Field Systems', *Agricultural History Review*, xxxi (1983); Robert A. Dodgshon, 'The Landholding Foundations of the Open-Field System', *Past and Present*, no. 67 (May 1975); Carl Dahlman, *The Open Field System and Beyond: A Property Rights Analysis of an Economic*

(cont. on p. 246)

PEARL RIVER DELTA



years, but Thirsk's analysis still stands. Common-fields systems have been investigated in England, Wales, Ireland, Germany, France, Sweden, Denmark, Lithuania and the Balkans.⁴

Fields of the type described by Thirsk and her Europeanist colleagues were also established in colonial New England, but soon disappeared as a consequence of frontier expansion and changing inheritance patterns.⁵ Anthropologists have documented a variety of co-operative strip farming systems in the Andes, the Swiss Alps, Malaysia, Sri Lanka and Ghana, leading to the conclusion that the evolution of common fields owes more to ecology than to (European) cultural predilections.⁶

(n. 3 cont.)

Institution (Cambridge, 1980); George C. Homans, 'The Explanation of English Regional Differences', *Past and Present*, no. 42 (Feb. 1969); Donald N. McCloskey, 'The Persistence of English Common Fields', in William Parker and Eric Jones (eds.), *European Peasants and their Markets: Essays in Agrarian Economic History* (Princeton, 1975); Joan Thirsk, 'The Origin of the Common Fields', *Past and Present*, no. 33 (Apr. 1966); J. Z. Titow, 'Medieval England and the Open-Field System', *Past and Present*, no. 32 (Dec. 1965).

⁴ Alan R. H. Baker, 'Open Fields and Partible Inheritance on a Kent Manor', *Economic History Review*, xvii (1964); Marc Bloch, *French Rural History: An Essay on its Basic Characteristics* (Berkeley, 1966); Sture Bolin, 'Medieval Agrarian Society in its Prime: Scandinavia', in M. M. Postan (ed.), *The Cambridge Economic History of Europe*, i, *The Agrarian Life of the Middle Ages*, 2nd edn (Cambridge, 1966); R. A. French, 'The Three-Field System of Sixteenth-Century Lithuania', *Agricultural History Review*, xviii (1970); H. L. Gray, *English Field Systems* (Cambridge, Mass., 1915); Homans, 'Explanation of English Regional Differences'; Dorothy Sylvester, 'The Common Fields of the Coastlands of Gwent', *Agricultural History Review*, vi (1958); Thirsk, 'Common Fields', 7–10; Cecil Woodham-Smith, *The Great Hunger: Ireland, 1845–1849* (New York, 1962).

⁵ Warren O. Ault, 'Open-Field Husbandry and the Village Community: A Study of Agrarian By-Laws in Medieval England', *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society*, lv (1965), 10–11; Brian Donahue, *The Great Meadow: Farmers and the Land in Colonial Concord* (New Haven, 2004), 78–101; Donald S. Pitkin, 'Partible Inheritance and the Open Fields', *Agricultural History*, xxxv (1961).

⁶ Polly Hill, 'Three Types of Southern Ghanaian Coca Farmer', in Daniel Biebuyck (ed.), *African Agrarian Systems: Studies Presented and Discussed at the Second International African Seminar, Lovanium University, Leopoldville, January 1960* (Oxford, 1963), 203–7; Donald H. Lambert, *Swamp Rice Farming: The Indigenous Pahang Malay Agricultural System* (Boulder, 1985); E. R. Leach, *Pul Eliya, a Village in Ceylon: A Study of Land Tenure and Kinship* (Cambridge, 1961), chs. 5–6; Enrique Mayer, *The Articulated Peasant: Household Economies in the Andes* (Boulder, 2002); Robert M. Netting, 'What Alpine Peasants Have in Common: Observations on Communal Tenure in a Swiss Village', *Human Ecology*, iv (1976); Karl S. Zimmerer, 'Overlapping Patchworks of Mountain Agriculture in Peru and Bolivia', *Human Ecology*, xxvii (1999).

II

CHINESE AND EUROPEAN COMMON FIELDS

This essay explores a common-field system that emerged along the saltwater margins of the Pearl River delta, one of south China's major rice basins (see Map).⁷ San Tin was not the only community in this delta region to develop common fields of this type, but, owing to an accident of ethnography (see below), it is perhaps the best-documented case. San Tin's fields differed in critical respects from European systems, which were designed to accommodate a two- or three-year crop rotation cycle, allowing each strip a regular fallow year.⁸ Rice paddies, including those in San Tin's system, thrived on water-borne nutrients and were not dependent on soil conditions, thereby eliminating the need for fallowing.⁹ There were, however, many similarities between the Chinese and European common fields: (1) crops were planted in narrow strips ploughed in straight lines by teams of draught animals (oxen in Europe, water buffalo in south China); (2) collective decisions were enforced by an assemblage of cultivators in Europe, and a council of elders in China; (3) strip farming allowed farmers in both systems to share risk and exploit difficult terrain.

One further qualification needs to be made before proceeding: during their heyday, common fields dominated the European agrarian scene in respect to demography, culture and economic significance. The Chinese case, by contrast, was a decidedly marginal phenomenon; it emerged on the fringe of an enclosed field system that has sustained Chinese rice production for over a thousand years. Only a small minority of farm households in the Pearl River delta engaged in the type of agriculture discussed in this essay. San Tin's common fields constituted a highly specialized

⁷ *Water Margin* (*Shuihu zhuan*) is one of China's most popular classical novels. Attributed to the fourteenth-century writer Shi Naian, it is also known as *Outlaws of the Marsh* and *All Men Are Brothers* (the latter title was used in a popular adaptation by Pearl Buck). The book follows the exploits of itinerant swordsmen who survived as mercenaries and bandits on the margins of civilized society, along the rivers, deltas and backwaters of China. See Shi Naian, *The Water Margin: Outlaws of the Marsh*, trans. J. H. Jackson (New York, 2010); Paul J. Smith, 'Shuihu zhuan and the Military Subculture of the Northern Song, 960–1127', *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, lxxvi (2006).

⁸ See Thirsk, 'Common Fields', 18–20.

⁹ See, for example, Clifford Geertz, *Agricultural Involution: The Process of Ecological Change in Indonesia* (Berkeley, 1963), 29–31.

form of production in an ecozone that fostered many other marginal systems, including fishing, oyster tending, duck herding, salt production and lime smelting, to mention only the most obvious.¹⁰

III

METHODOLOGY: HISTORICAL ETHNOGRAPHY

As noted in the introduction, this essay has a long and complex genealogy: the research began in 1969 as a general ethnographic study, the main focus of which was emigration and diaspora formation (topics discussed in more detail below). San Tin's unique form of agriculture was treated as a sideline project in the first round of research (1969–70); the collapse of the system was highlighted as a primary push factor that led to a high rate of emigration from the village.¹¹ The essay represents my first attempt to explore the internal organization of San Tin's common-field system, drawing on four decades of research.

Given that local farmers had ceased farming before the initial round of fieldwork began, it was not possible to observe the common fields in action. What follows, therefore, is an exercise in historical ethnography: sources include interviews with retired farmers, field observations, British colonial land records, Chinese imperial land deeds, cadastral surveys, tax records, paddy maps (drawn by villagers), Royal Air Force aerial photographs and linguistic detective work.

The analysis relies heavily on conversations, group discussions, one-to-one interviews and return interviews with knowledgeable local residents. Retired farmers were the only villagers who understood the internal operation of the common fields. In-depth interviews with these men occurred in 1969–70 and in 1977–8, during which time I lived in San Tin and in a neighbouring village.¹² Well-informed farmers who had worked in

¹⁰ Tik-sang Liu, 'Becoming Marginal: A Fluid Community and Shamanism in the Pearl River Delta of South China' (Univ. of Pittsburgh Ph.D. thesis, 1995). See also n. 72 below.

¹¹ James L. Watson, *Emigration and the Chinese Lineage: The Mans in Hong Kong and London* (Berkeley, 1975), 31–42.

¹² Rubie Watson and I lived and worked in San Tin for seventeen months (1969–70) and in Ha Tsuen (another Cantonese village seven miles from San Tin) for fifteen months (1977–8).

the common fields were then in their mid to late sixties and seventies (it was rare for San Tin men of that era to survive beyond the age of 80). By the time I returned to conduct further research in the 1980s, most of these men had become ancestors, to use the polite local euphemism. The living memory of San Tin's common-fields system died with them; later generations know almost nothing about farming.

Several villagers were particularly helpful and obviously enjoyed recounting their experiences in the common fields.¹³ They all lamented the fact that their children and grandchildren showed no interest in the topic (at least during the 1960s and 1970s). In return for their testimony, I promised to publish, some day, an account of their farming system: this essay repays, in small part, that debt.

Historians have written a great deal about rice cultivation in south China, but their studies are necessarily light on the micro-details of tenancy, cultivation and decision-making (that is, the messy fabric of everyday life). Documentary sources on Pearl River delta agriculture were produced by highly educated elites and corporation accountants who did not concern themselves with the everyday minutiae of farming. To gather this kind of information one needs to talk, endlessly and for months at a time, with villagers who actually worked in the fields. In the absence of direct observation, the results are necessarily fragmentary and I do not claim that this essay is the final word on the subject of Pearl River delta common fields.

IV

THE SETTING: SAN TIN AND THE MAN LINEAGE

The setting for this study is a 365-square-mile parcel of Xin'an county (Guangdong province) that the British government acquired in 1898; the land was attached to the British Crown Colony of Hong Kong (established in 1842) and was promptly renamed the 'New Territories'. For the next century it served as the agricultural hinterland for the colony's rapidly expanding urban centres.

¹³ I should like to thank, in particular, Man Ying-chuen, Man Sui-chuen, Man Gan-puih, Man Sat-wan, Man Tso-chuen and Chan Sau (San Tin's rice merchant). Wong Sheung-yan and Teng Tim-sing helped with the research in 1969–70 and 1977–8 respectively.

The village of San Tin (新田) sits half a mile south of the small river that marked the border between Hong Kong and China (see Map); this boundary survived the reversion to Chinese sovereignty in 1997 and separates the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region from the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone. San Tin, a community of approximately two thousand in 1970, is an excellent example of a lineage village, meaning that the vast majority of male residents trace descent from a common founding ancestor. San Tin is dominated by descendants of a pioneer named Man Sai-go and, hence, share the Cantonese surname Man (文, Mandarin *Wén*). The Man, like all Cantonese in this region, observe a strict rule of surname exogamy, which caused daughters to marry out of their natal village and ensured that all brides married in from other lineages.¹⁴ Communities of this type maintained high levels of internal cohesion and tended to be suspicious of outsiders. Lineage villages in the New Territories have survived into the twenty-first century, albeit in somewhat truncated and less cohesive form.¹⁵

When the founders of the Man lineage settled in the San Tin area during the fifteenth century,¹⁶ the region was in a late phase of agricultural development and sinification; it was, as David Faure points out, a decidedly post-frontier environment.¹⁷ The original inhabitants — non-Han shifting cultivators and coastal

¹⁴ Rubie S. Watson, *Inequality among Brothers: Class and Kinship in South China* (Cambridge, 1985), 117–27.

¹⁵ See, for example, Kwok-shing Chan, 'Women's Property Rights in a Chinese Lineage Village', *Modern China*, xxxix (2013); Selina Ching Chan, 'Negotiating Tradition: Customary Succession in the New Territories of Hong Kong', in Grant Evans and Maria Tam (eds.), *Hong Kong: The Anthropology of a Chinese Metropolis* (London, 1997).

¹⁶ Most genealogical records support a fifteenth-century date for the settlement of Man lineage founders in the San Tin area. The common fields, in the form discussed in this essay, no doubt began in the aftermath of the coastal evacuation (which incorporated the region later known as the New Territories) ordered by the Manchu government, 1662–9; see Kuo-ching Hsieh, 'Removal of Coastal Population in Early Tsing Period', *Chinese Social and Political Science Review*, xv (1931); Rubie S. Watson, 'The Creation of a Chinese Lineage: The T'eng of Ha Tsuen, 1669–1751', *Modern Asian Studies*, xvi (1982), 79–83.

¹⁷ David Faure, *The Structure of Chinese Rural Society: Lineage and Village in the Eastern New Territories, Hong Kong* (Hong Kong, 1986), 172–5, differs from earlier studies by the anthropologists Burton Pasternak — 'The Role of the Frontier in Chinese Lineage Development', *Journal of Asian Studies*, xxvii (1969); and Jack Potter — 'Land and Lineage in Traditional China', in Maurice Freedman (ed.), *Family and Kinship in Chinese Society* (Stanford, 1970). Pasternak and Potter link lineage development to frontier expansion.

farmers — had been eliminated or absorbed into the dominant Han Chinese ethnic group. Four other lineages (with the Cantonese surnames Teng, Hau, Pang and Liu) controlled the best paddy lands in the region; as latecomers to the region, the Man had no choice but to settle near an expanse of saltwater marshes, an ecozone that earlier arrivals had rejected.¹⁸

For the next four centuries Man farmers reclaimed nearly a thousand acres of mudflats and constructed large enclosures that were converted into paddy fields.¹⁹ The reclamations gave the community its name: *san tin* (新田), a Cantonese term that means ‘new fields’. Given the primitive technology involved, it was impossible to exclude all salt water from the low-lying fields. Earthen dykes functioned to retain fresh rainwater and only secondarily to protect crops from coastal flooding during the growing season. Excess water was discharged through sluice-gates that were opened at low tide. These gates were manipulated to minimize the salt content of the water, thus creating a brackish ecosystem that was suitable for shrimp, crabs and a unique variety of paddy rice.

V

TWO KINDS OF RICE: RED VERSUS WHITE

Man fields were limited to a single annual crop of highly specialized rice developed by farmers in the delta region. Known as *hung-mai* (紅米, literally ‘red rice’), the grain has a red hue that penetrates to its core. Red rice is usually treated as a weed that grows on the fringes of freshwater paddy systems; most of the literature on this plant is devoted to its eradication.²⁰ At least

¹⁸ On earlier settlers in what was to become the New Territories, see Hugh D. R. Baker, ‘The Five Great Clans of the New Territories’, *Journal of the Hong Kong Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, vi (1966), 25–30.

¹⁹ Based on an analysis of land records held at the Yuen Long District Office, New Territories. San Tin district had 1,187 acres of brackish-water paddy in the late 1950s: Hong Kong Government, *Agricultural, Fishing, and Forestry Annual Report, 1959–1960* (Hong Kong, 1960), 5.

²⁰ On red rice as a pest, see Andy Kendig, Bill Williams and C. Wayne Smith, ‘Rice Weed Control’, in C. Wayne Smith and Robert H. Dilday (eds.), *Rice: Origin, History, Technology, and Production* (New York, 2003). The variety grown in San Tin was a variation of Asian rice (*Oryza sativa*); there are also varieties of red rice native to Africa (*O. glaberrima*) that are reported to have been ‘good-tasting’: see Bruce Mouser *et al.*, ‘Red and White Rice in the Vicinity of Sierra Leone: Linked Histories of Slavery, Emancipation and Seed Selection’, in Francesca Bray *et al.* (eds.), *Rice: Global* (cont. on p. 252)

two varieties of red rice were domesticated in China, one for dry land and another for brackish-water paddy.²¹ The red rice grown in San Tin was an industrial crop suitable only for wine making; the bran and pulp was fed to pigs and poultry.²² The local variety was essentially inedible for humans; to make it palatable the endosperm had to be milled to a tiny nub, and even then it was bitter-tasting.²³

The grain produced in neighbouring villages was, by contrast, an exceptionally fine, long-grained variety of white rice prized by wealthy consumers and exported to overseas Chinese communities, including San Francisco, where it commanded a high price.²⁴ Lineages that controlled this market were prosperous and politically connected; one such lineage, the Teng (鄧), built impressive ancestral halls, beautiful schools and libraries. They also produced a handful of scholars who passed imperial examinations and became imperial officials. The Man managed to build four ancestral halls, one of which doubled as a school, but they could never compete with the Teng in respect to wealth and influence.

There was, however, one advantage inherent in a reclamation technology: as the Man lineage expanded, the dykes were extended farther into the saline marshes, step by step, over the centuries. San Tin grew to be one of the largest lineage villages in the Pearl River delta. Rival lineages (such as the Teng) were caught in a demographic trap: they could expand only at the expense of neighbouring lineages, a reality that set off bouts of

(n. 20 cont.)

Networks and New Histories, Cambridge Univ. Press, forthcoming. This was not the case for San Tin's red rice: see n. 23 below.

²¹ Hsiao-t'ung Fei and Chih-i Chang, *Earthbound China: A Study of Rural Economy in Yunnan* (London, 1948), 208; Evelyn S. Rawski, *Agricultural Change and the Peasant Economy of South China* (Cambridge, Mass., 1972), 42.

²² Red rice was the main ingredient in a variety of medicinal wines that were believed to counteract gout and beriberi, among other ailments: see Shengxiang Tang and Songnan Xuan, 'Domestication of Rice in China and its Cultural Heritage', in S. D. Sharma (ed.), *Rice: Origin, Antiquity and History* (Enfield, NH, 2010).

²³ San Tin villagers who were forced to eat red rice during food shortages (for example, the Japanese occupation, 1941–5) reported that it gave them stomach-ache. The variety of red rice grown in San Tin was different from the dark-hued rice fashionable among today's vegetarian advocates.

²⁴ S. G. Davis, *Hong Kong in its Geographical Setting* (Hong Kong, 1949), 171. This was also true during the first decade of the twentieth century: see G. N. Orme, 'Report on the New Territories, 1899–1912', *Hong Kong Sessional Papers*, 1912, ii, 51.

feuding and interlineage warfare.²⁵ From the seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries, the irrigation-based lineages of the delta reached a demographic equilibrium, with their populations stabilizing between seven hundred and eight hundred males.²⁶ By the 1850s, the heyday of lineage organization in south China, the Man lineage had grown to twice this size.²⁷ The Man played a leading role in the politics of the region, not through wealth but by sheer weight of numbers and, as outlined below, by the power of its local security force.

VI

ORIGINS OF THE SAN TIN RECLAMATIONS

Cantonese farmers and entrepreneurs developed two distinct systems of land reclamation along the shores of the Pearl River delta. The dominant form is what might be called a sequential reclamation, in the sense that the land is gradually transformed from a brackish-water to a freshwater ecosystem. This type of reclamation produces a sequence of ever more lucrative crops, starting with reeds (for mat making), then red rice, lotus root, sugar cane, banana trees, white rice, vegetables and finally (if conditions are suitable) soft-skinned mandarin oranges that sell for king's-ransom prices in the markets of Hong Kong and Guangzhou.²⁸ Helen Siu has explored this type of reclamation in detail; she demonstrates that the driving forces behind these projects were consortia of merchants, many of whom represented long-established urban kinship groups. Transient labourers were hired to do the initial reclamation work, and tenants, who lived in shacks along the dykes, produced crops under the guidance of company overseers.²⁹

²⁵ On interlineage warfare, see Maurice Freedman, *Lineage Organization in Southeastern China* (London, 1958), 105–13.

²⁶ John C. H. Fei and Ts'ui-jung Liu, 'The Growth and Decline of Chinese Family Clans', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, xii (1982), 399–400.

²⁷ A survey conducted in 1898 cited San Tin as the largest of six lineage villages in the New Territories: see Stewart Lockhart, 'Extracts from a Report by Mr Stewart Lockhart on the Extension of the Colony of Hong Kong', *Hong Kong Government Gazette*, xlv (1899), 557–61.

²⁸ Author's interviews with Zhongshan county (Guangdong) Agricultural and Water Conservancy officials, 10 May 1986. On delta oranges, see Helen F. Siu, *Agents and Victims in South China: Accomplices in Rural Revolution* (New Haven, 1989), 29–30.

²⁹ Siu, *Agents and Victims in South China*, 24–9; Helen F. Siu and Liu Zhiwei, 'Lineage, Market, Pirate, and Dam: Ethnicity in the Pearl River Delta of South

(cont. on p. 254)

Depending on water sources, the progression from reeds to white rice (or oranges) could take up to a century.³⁰ A popular ditty sung by delta fisherwomen captures the early stages in this long reclamation process: 'Fish swim; boats paddle; cranes stand; crabs crawl; reeds grow'.³¹ Sequential reclamations were situated on marshland or beaches backed by steep, well-watered hills; spring rains were captured by dams that released fresh water into the saline fields throughout the year. The most famous of these reclamations were protected from salt water by high stone walls, some of which have stood for three centuries. Many were situated near military outposts built by the imperial government to guard delta waterways.³²

Another, hitherto undocumented adaptation is non-sequential reclamation, a system that did not evolve beyond the initial, brackish-water stage. Reclamations of this type were located in

(n. 29 cont.)

China', in Pamela Kyle Crossley, Helen F. Siu and Donald S. Sutton (eds.), *Empire at the Margins: Culture, Ethnicity, and Frontier in Early Modern China* (Berkeley, 2006); Robert Y. Eng, 'Rural Commercialization, Polder Reclamation, and Social Transformation in the Pearl River Delta', in Joseph W. Escherick, Wen-hsin Yeh and Madeleine Zelin (eds.), *Empire, Nation, and Beyond: Chinese History in Late Imperial and Modern Times. A Festschrift in Honor of Frederic Wakeman* (Berkeley, 2006), 134. Bark and bamboo shacks for transient workers still lined the dykes of Wanqingsha, Guangdong, when I visited this historic reclamation site in 1986.

³⁰ In the Tin Shui Wai reclamation zone (north-west New Territories) it took forty-seven years to convert brackish-water paddies to double-crop freshwater paddies: Richard Irving, 'Land Use and Land Use Change in the Reclaimed Coastal Areas of Deep Bay', in Elizabeth Sinn (ed.), *Between East and West: Aspects of Social and Political Development in Hong Kong* (Hong Kong, 1990), 103. Patrick Hase describes a set of large reclamations in the north-east New Territories that made the transition from marsh to 'first-class' paddy land; the process took several generations: see Patrick Hase, 'The Alliance of Ten: Settlement and Politics in the Sha Tau Kok Area', in David Faure and Helen F. Siu (eds.), *Down to Earth: The Territorial Bond in South China* (Stanford, 2011). On reclaimed land, see also Eng, 'Rural Commercialization, Polder Reclamation, and Social Transformation in the Pearl River Delta', 129; David Faure, *Emperor and Ancestor: State and Lineage in South China* (Stanford, 2007), 274–7; Michael Szonyi, *Practicing Kinship: Lineage and Descent in Late Imperial China* (Stanford, 2002), 244 n. 55; Jianxin Wu, 'Zhujiang sanjiaozhou shatian shi ruogan kaocha' [Historical Investigations of the Pearl River Delta], *Nongye kaogu*, i (1987), 204–6.

³¹ Author's interview with Xinhui county (Guangdong) Agricultural Committee officials, 15 May 1986: see James L. Watson, 'The Social Consequences of Land Reclamation in Chinese Coastal Ecosystems', *China Exchange News*, xiv (1986).

³² See, for example, Foshan diqu geming weiyuanhui [Foshan District Revolutionary Committee], *Zhujiang sanjiaozhou nongye zhi*, ii, *Diwei he weiken* [Pearl River Delta Agricultural Record, ii, Polders and Reclamation Dykes] (Foshan, 1976), 1–141.

low-lying tidal marshlands that were not backed by well-watered hills. The uplands in San Tin's immediate vicinity were drained by a single intermittent stream that was dry most of the year, which means that the Man could not have constructed sequential reclamations anywhere in their lineage territory. Fresh water was severely limited in San Tin: there were only two wells in the community, necessitating long queues for local women, who had to wait up to an hour to fill two buckets of water (carried on shoulder poles) for household use. The situation did not change until the late 1950s, when the Hong Kong government installed stand-pipes in the village.³³

The Man reclamations faced a muddy creek, the Shenzhen River, that flowed into Deep Bay, a saltwater estuary subject to tidal surges. In 1898 this river became the border between British Hong Kong and China. The water in this stream was lower than the reclamations and did little to reduce the salinity of the enclosed paddies: for that the Man relied on rainwater. San Tin's biggest problem was controlling spring floods and storm surges of salt water from nearby Deep Bay. A long earthen dyke 2 metres high and 3.6 kilometres long was constructed to protect the reclamations from salt infiltration. The dyke was built by hand and was faced with flat stones on the outer bank. Wooden gates set in granite foundations were opened at low tide to expel saline water and closed at high tide to retain fresh water.³⁴ San Tin elders maintained that the original dam and the first sluice-gates were built by pioneer ancestors who did the work themselves; their names were inscribed on a stone tablet placed on one of the gates.³⁵

Non-sequential reclamations of this type were common along Deep Bay. A large brackish-water paddy system was owned and

³³ Socializing in the well and stand-pipe queues was a central feature of San Tin's women's culture prior to the 1980s, when homes began to have piped water; local women spoke nostalgically about this aspect of their lives. Older villagers still preferred to gather tea water from local wells for years after the installation of piped water. They claimed that the slightly brackish water made better tea (they were right).

³⁴ Each of the sluice-gates in the Man reclamations had eight close-fitting wooden boards that were inserted or removed to regulate water flow: see Elizabeth L. Johnson, 'Households and Lineages in a Chinese Urban Village' (Cornell Univ. Ph.D. thesis, 1976), 114; Peabody Museum, Harvard University, Watson New Territories Archives, photo set, Tin Shui Wai (1978).

³⁵ Retired farmers recalled seeing a stone of this nature during the 1950s. Unfortunately, this relic had disappeared by the time my fieldwork began in 1969.

operated by another branch of the Man lineage settled in the village of Wong Gong Tsuen.³⁶ San Tin elders recalled four nearby communities that produced red rice on small half-moon-shaped fields. Two other, much larger reclamation systems were built as commercial ventures in the New Territories by consortia of overseas Chinese investors. Tenants produced red rice on these fields from approximately 1912 to 1935; the land was eventually redeveloped as housing estates and industrial sites.³⁷

VII

STRIP FARMING: ORGANIZATION OF THE COMMON FIELDS

My first glimpse of San Tin's common fields took my breath away: the biggest was 155 acres,³⁸ large enough to be a respectable cornfield in Iowa. Freshwater paddies in this part of China (prior to collectivization in the 1950s) were seldom larger than 2 or 3 acres; most were far smaller.³⁹ San Tin's common-field system was divided into eight large enclosures that the villagers called *wai* (圍), a Cantonese term that is usually translated as 'fortress' or 'enclosure'.⁴⁰ San Tin's common fields, or enclosures, varied between 32 and 155 acres. Villagers measured fields not by area but by the weight of dry seed required to plant the entire enclosure. The unit of measurement was a

³⁶ The San Tin Man constituted a branch of the much larger Man higher-order lineage; two Man villages were located on the Hong Kong side of the Shenzhen River and five were north of the river, in Chinese territory. On higher-order lineages, see James L. Watson, 'Chinese Kinship Reconsidered: Anthropological Perspectives on Historical Research', *China Quarterly*, xcii (1982), 608–9.

³⁷ One of these sites, Tin Shui Wai (天水圍), became a New Town development, with nearly three hundred thousand residents in the late twentieth century: see Irving, 'Land Use and Land Use Change in the Reclaimed Coastal Areas of Deep Bay', 101–3. Another reclamation site was managed by the Canadian Development Corporation: see Hong Kong Government, *Report on the New Territories: Hong Kong Administrative Report, 1921* (Hong Kong, 1922), 52. The Corporation transformed the land into a modern housing estate in the 1980s.

³⁸ Confirmed in a survey of British land records, dating from 1905, held at the Yuen Long District Office, New Territories.

³⁹ In the 1930s the average size of double-crop rice fields in the rice region of China was 0.57 acres: see John L. Buck, *Land Utilization in China: A Study of 16,786 Farms in 168 Localities, and 38,256 Farm Families in Twenty-Two Provinces in China, 1929–1933*, 2 vols. (Nanking, 1937), i, 183.

⁴⁰ *Wai* (圍) is also used to designate walled villages (for example, Yan Sau Wai (仁壽圍), San Tin's oldest hamlet) that were built with high walls and watch-towers to protect against bandits.

daam (石 Mandarin *dan*, also known as a *picul*).⁴¹ When speaking of the common fields, villagers used the possessive verb ‘to have’ (*you* 有) to designate the amount of seed required to plant a field: ‘Sui Tong Wai has sixty-four *daam*; Yun Uk Wai has thirty-two’. The enclosures had descriptive names (Water Tank Wai, Deep Rising Wai) that were chosen for geomantic purposes: Cantonese farmers believed that a good name helped to ensure steady production.⁴² Each enclosure was set off from neighbouring enclosures by elevated bunds; sluice-gates discharged water into low excavated channels leading to larger gates set in the dyke that encircled the entire reclamation system.

Each enclosure was divided into four subsections, called *hou* (號), a Cantonese term that normally means number, name or size. These subsections were, depending upon topography, as close to square as possible; boundaries between them were marked by lines of bamboo stakes, often with cloth flags attached.

The most intriguing feature of the system, as illustrated in the Figure, was a series of elongated strips (known locally as *fok* 幅)⁴³ that were ploughed into the subsections every spring. Each of the four subsections had from twelve to sixty-four strips, varying with the overall size and shape of the enclosure. The strips were, on average, 5 strides wide (4.5 metres) and up to 400 metres long; most were 200–300 metres.⁴⁴ To forestall conflicts over strip assignments, each subsection was ploughed in a different direction (as shown in the Figure). Shallow drainage ditches were dug between strips but, according to retired farmers, there were no bunds. The carefully ploughed strips are easily distinguishable in a series of aerial photographs taken by the Royal Air Force between 1924 and 1961 (see Plate).⁴⁵

⁴¹ 1 *daam* = 100 catties = 60.48 kilograms (Hong Kong Weights and Measures Ordinance); 1 *daam* of red rice seed will produce transplantation seedlings for 1.7–2.4 acres of brackish-water paddy: estimate based on interviews with retired farmers in San Tin, 1969–78.

⁴² See discussion of reclamation (*wai* 圍) names in Leishi Cao, ‘Qingdai Zhujiang sanjiaozhou tiankao’ [Investigations of Qing Dynasty Era Reclamations in the Pearl River Delta], *Lingnan wenshi Lingnan Culture and History*, i (1985), 17–20.

⁴³ *Fok* (Mandarin *fu* 幅) is a colloquial Cantonese term, also used for strips of cloth.

⁴⁴ The width of a strip (*fok*) varied between 3.5 and 7 strides, depending upon quality of the land; a stride was approximately 0.9 metres. In demonstrating the width of a strip, retired farmers paced the distance with precision and confidence.

⁴⁵ Survey and Mapping Department, Hong Kong Government, Royal Air Force aerial photographs dated 1924 (sortie no. H8/5, 12 Nov. 1924); 1945A (no. 3078, sortie no. 681/4, 6 Nov. 1945); 1945B (no. 3079, sortie no. 681/4, 6 Nov. 1945); 1954

(cont. on p. 258)

In respect to length and appearance, San Tin's strips were strikingly similar to the cultivated strips that were so characteristic of European common fields (compare the Plate with the maps and diagrams in books by Marc Bloch, H. L. Gray and Frederic Seebohm).⁴⁶ The strips in medieval English fields averaged 200 metres and were generally 8 metres wide.⁴⁷ There is a sound ecological explanation for this parallel development: strip systems depend upon deep ploughing over flat terrain by teams of draught animals (oxen or water buffalo).⁴⁸ In both environments, plough teams were difficult to turn and made a mess of the fields when they did so; it was best, therefore, to lead the team in a straight line for the longest possible distance.⁴⁹ Each strip in the San Tin reclamations had two parallel furrows that were spaced approximately a metre apart.

The strips in each subsection were ploughed during the same week, as a set, by farmers who owned water buffalo (those who did not paid a small fee for the service). Depending upon the size of

(n. 45 cont.)

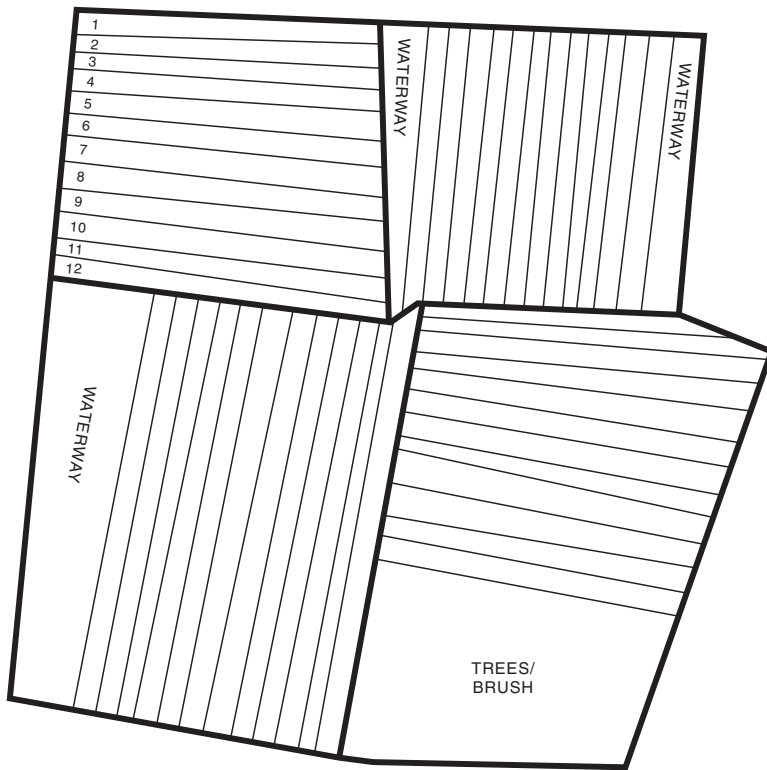
(no. 0049, V.81A. RAF. 550, 17 Nov. 1954); 1961 (no. 0022, F4181A. RAF. 625, 26 Oct. 1961).

⁴⁶ Bloch, *French Rural History*; Gray, *English Field Systems*; Seebohm, *English Village Community Examined in its Relations to the Manorial and Tribal Systems and to the Common or Open Field System of Husbandry*.

⁴⁷ David Avery, *The Irregular Common Fields of Edmonton* (Edmonton Hundred Historical Society, Occasional Papers, new ser., ix, Edmonton, 1964), 8; B. K. Roberts, 'Field Systems of the West Midlands', in Alan R. H. Baker and Robin A. Butlin (eds.), *Studies of Field Systems in the British Isles* (Cambridge, 1973), 197. See also Alan Nash, 'The Size of Open Field Strips: A Reinterpretation', *Agricultural History Review*, xxxiii (1985).

⁴⁸ Water buffalo, like oxen in Europe, were prized possessions that were owned by individual households. Light brown cattle ploughed many of the freshwater paddies in the Pearl River delta region, but the sticky, saline soils of the Man fields demanded powerful water buffalo. See C. S. Liang, *Hong Kong: A Physical, Economic and Human Geography* (Hong Kong, 1965), 53; Thomas R. Tregear, *A Survey of Land Use in Hong Kong and the New Territories* (Hong Kong, 1958), 37. San Tin's water buffalo were yoked to iron-tipped wooden ploughs purchased in nearby market towns. The plough illustrated in Rudolf P. Hommel, *China at Work* (New York, 1937), 41, appears to be identical to the ploughs used in the San Tin common fields. Several were stored in local ancestral halls during the late 1960s; by the mid 1970s they had disappeared.

⁴⁹ On plough teams, see Charles S. Orwin and Christabel S. L. Orwin, *The Open Fields* (Oxford, 1938), 41–3; Thirsk, 'Common Fields', 8. In England a furrow was the maximum length determined by the need for a team of oxen to rest; an acre was the land ploughed by a team in one day: Avery, *Irregular Common Fields of Edmonton*, 8.



SAN TIN ENCLOSURE (WAI)
(76 ACRES)

the enclosure, the ploughing took five days to two weeks.⁵⁰ Red rice seedlings were first grown in freshwater nurseries⁵¹ and later transplanted into the ploughed strips by teams of women who worked in extended family units (more will be said about women's labour below). Red rice has a relatively long growing

⁵⁰ George Caspar Homans, *English Villagers of the Thirteenth Century* (New York, 1975), 75–82, notes that the strips in medieval English common fields were also ploughed together, over several days, by teams of eight oxen.

⁵¹ Seedlings were grown in freshwater nurseries on elevated land near San Tin. Nurseries were owned as small private plots and registered as such in British land records. Transplantation seeds were saved each year from the best strips and could be purchased at a rate of 15:1 (1 *daam* of seeds was worth 15 *daam* of unhusked grain at harvest time).

season of approximately 150 days, much longer than any variety of white rice grown in the Pearl River delta (see Table 1), which means that Man farmers were restricted to a single crop each year. San Tin's neighbours raised hybrid versions of Champa early-ripening rice that allowed plenty of time for two crops.⁵² Brackish-water paddies had a further limitation: they could not support even the most salt-resistant of vegetables, thereby eliminating the possibility of lucrative catch-crops of sweet potatoes or cabbage during the off-season.

VIII

STRIP RIGHTS, RISK AND INHERITANCE IN THE COMMON FIELDS

The term 'ownership' (in respect to land access) is best avoided when discussing San Tin's common fields. The local farming system was governed by a principle of collective usufruct based on access to randomly assigned strips, which means that farmers did not work the same strips every year (see below). Men in San Tin inherited the right to cultivate a specific number (or fraction) of strips, referred to in this essay as strip rights.⁵³ The land regime of the Man lineage was radically different from systems prevailing in neighbouring communities, where freshwater cultivation fostered permanent control of specific parcels of land that could be demarcated on a map.

Strips (*fok*) in the Man common fields were distinguished by ordinal number: 'the third *fok*', 'the fourteenth *fok*', 'the fifty-fifth *fok*'.⁵⁴ For example, Man Sam-leung (a pseudonym) held the

⁵² Champa rice was imported from (what would become) Indonesia during the eleventh century. Its rapid spread opened up new terrain for rice production and sparked a population boom in China. See Ping-ti Ho, 'Early-Ripening Rice in Chinese History', *Economic History Review*, ix (1956), 200–3; Francesca Bray, *Science and Civilization in China*, vi, *Biology and Biological Technology*, 2, *Agriculture* (Cambridge, 1984), 494–5.

⁵³ Widows had the expectation of support as long as they lived, but strip rights passed to (male) heirs upon the death of the head of the household. Daughters did not inherit any form of property rights in San Tin (but see n. 57 below).

⁵⁴ Retired farmers always employed the ordinal prefix (Cantonese *daai*, Mandarin *dì*; 第) when speaking of geographically located strips, as in *daai sah-p-sei fok* (第十四幅, 'the fourteenth strip'). But, when they discussed inheritance rights, they used the general marker for number, as in *Kuih yauh sah-p-sei fok* (他有十四幅, 'He has [holds] fourteen *fok*'). An interesting and revealing linguistic variation separated San Tin farmers from their counterparts in freshwater double-crop paddy environments. Villagers in nearby Ha Tsuen always referred to their 'fields' (Cantonese *tin*, Mandarin *tián*; 田) when discussing agriculture; Man farmers

(cont. on p. 262)



Man lineage reclamations: strip farming, 1945. Amalgamation created by Scott Walker, Harvard Map Library, of Royal Air Force photos, 1945A (no. 3078, sortie no. 681/4, 6 Nov. 1945) and 1945B (no. 3079, sortie no. 681/4, 6 Nov. 1945), Survey and Mapping Department, Hong Kong Government; reframed by Stephanie Casey. Permission to reprint these photos was granted by the Crown Copyright Administration, Defence Intellectual Property Rights (London).

right to cultivate three strips in each of the four subsections inside Sam Fong Wai (that is, a total of twelve strips). But he did not always cultivate the 'third', 'fourteenth' and 'fifty-fifth' strips. Instead, a lottery was held in San Tin's central ancestral hall during the lunar New Year season; farmers shook numbered sticks from a bamboo tube and were assigned strips for that year's crop. The lottery randomized access to the most productive land, thereby equalizing risk. Many villagers who held rights in the largest enclosure claimed that they spent their entire farming careers without tilling the same strip twice.

Donald McCloskey argues that the driving force behind European common fields was risk amelioration: 'The object [of the strip system] was to hold a diversified portfolio of locations'. One strip could be hit 'by flooding, fire, insects, birds, rust, rabbits, moles, thieves, hail, and wandering armies — while another close by would go free'.⁵⁵ Much the same could be said for the Man common fields (save for the rabbits, moles and hail): drought, floods and typhoons were constant dangers, especially for portions of the enclosure closest to the exterior dam. Asked to explain the strip allocation lottery, one retired farmer responded: 'It meant that a few people did not get to farm the best strips all the time. Each got some bad strips and each got some good strips'. Strip reallocations were rare in Europe, occurring in the aftermath of field desertions or population declines.⁵⁶

Cultivation rights in the Man fields were further complicated by the partible inheritance system that prevailed in south China. Male heirs received equal shares of their deceased father's property; daughters did not inherit but were often granted dowries when they married out of San Tin.⁵⁷ Rights to San Tin's common fields gradually fragmented into micro-shares that could no longer sustain a family. Many of the Man were, in effect, landless, even though they may have inherited rights to one sixty-fourth of two strips (in many cases, the fractions were even smaller).

(n. 54 cont.)

invariably spoke about their 'strips' (*fok*), reserving the term 'field' (*tin*) for discussions that did not involve the common fields.

⁵⁵ McCloskey, 'Persistence of English Common Fields', 114–15.

⁵⁶ See, for example, Thirsk, 'Common Fields', 9.

⁵⁷ Watson, *Inequality among Brothers*, 106–16, notes that daughters in Cantonese villages often received gold jewellery and other goods as part of their dowries, but not land.

TABLE 1

GROWING SEASONS, RED VERSUS WHITE RICE, PEARL RIVER DELTA*

Type of rice	Crop	No. of varieties	Growing season (days)
White	First	5 named varieties	120
White	Second	6 named varieties	110
Red	Single	1 variety	150

* Source: Lai Chuen-yan, 'Rice Cultivation, Distribution and Production in Hong Kong', in S. G. Davis (ed.), *Land Use Problems in Hong Kong* (Hong Kong, 1964), 81.

The fragmentation of strip rights was a serious problem in San Tin. Villagers who were not active farmers often rented their rights to kinsmen, who returned a share of the crop in kind, or an annual cash payment in compensation. Rental arrangements varied by enclosure: in Shek Chung Wai the rate was 4.8 *daam* of harvested (unhusked) grain for every *daam* of red rice seed required to plant the rented strip or fraction thereof. Strip right holders in Sam Chung Wai, said to be the most productive enclosure, received 10.5 *daam* of rent for every *daam* of seed (1930–40 rates). Farmers needed several full-length strips to cover expenses of production and ensure a profit.⁵⁸ Given these limitations, approximately 350 farmers, each representing a household, tilled most of the strips in San Tin's eight enclosures. They tried to restrict their holdings to one or two enclosures, but this was not always possible.

According to retired farmers, leases extended for three, four or six years, depending upon the quality of land (shorter leases applied to the most productive enclosures). In a good year without typhoons or drought, 1 *daam* of seed could produce up to 29 *daam* of grain; the average harvest was 20–22 *daam* (that is, 1,200–1,330 kilograms).

The Man, like all long-settled Cantonese lineages, had a high percentage of land tied up in ancestral estates, each of which was named in honour of a designated ancestor. Estates were corporations that owned paddy land, ferry piers, mills, grain-drying lots and shops. A three- or four-man committee managed estate

⁵⁸ Retired farmers claimed that the optimal size of strip holdings (combining ownership and tenancy rights) was 10 *daam*, equal to approximately 20 acres. They noted, however, that only a handful of farmers ever attained this level of land access.

affairs and paid annual dividends to shareholders (that is, male descendants of the estate's focal ancestor). San Tin's four multi-chambered ancestral halls and fifteen smaller banquet halls are physical manifestations of estate wealth. Ancestral estates financed hall maintenance, rites at key ancestral tombs, lineage schools, scholarships and an annual allocation of pork for every shareholder.⁵⁹

According to British colonial land records, the Man lineage had 126 ancestral estates in 1905. Approximately 65 per cent of Man-owned land (in that year) was held in trust by these estates. The remaining 35 per cent was registered as privately owned property in the names of (male) individuals.⁶⁰ Retired farmers characterized most of the private land as inferior patches of hilly land and relatively unproductive fields outside the brackish-water reclamation zone. Every three to six years tenants of estate-owned land had to bid against each other for strip rights, thereby ensuring a level of rent high enough to sustain estate activities.⁶¹

IX

LAND SALES: A CLOSED SYSTEM

Holders of strip rights in the San Tin common fields were, without exception, members of the Man lineage. Outsiders were not allowed to buy into the system until the late twentieth century, by which time farming had ceased. Sales of strip rights were strictly controlled by a council of lineage elders, which included all resident males aged 61 or older who could trace descent from the founding ancestor. The ritual leader of the council was the oldest survivor of the most senior generation. In the late 1960s this man was an illiterate retired farmer who was nearly deaf; the real business of the council was managed by a three-man committee

⁵⁹ Shares of freshly butchered pork, weighing between 1 and 6 kilograms, were visible symbols of shareholder status: see James L. Watson, 'Meat: A Cultural Biography (in South China)', in Jakob A. Klein and Anne Murcott (eds.), *Food Consumption in Global Perspective: Essays in the Anthropology of Food in Honour of Jack Goody*, Palgrave Macmillan, forthcoming.

⁶⁰ Based on a survey of San Tin land records held at the Yuen Long District Office, New Territories, conducted in 1969.

⁶¹ Auctions of land leases were common in China: see Chen Han-seng, *Landlord and Peasant in China: A Study of the Agrarian Crisis in South China* (New York, 1936), 44.

consisting of San Tin elders literate enough to keep accounts and capable of running meetings. Every important decision involving lineage affairs, land transactions included, was subject to veto by any elder who might object.⁶² The council of elders also sat in judgement on farmers who had broken the rules of the common fields.⁶³

Villagers who wished to sell strip rights were required to approach first their closest agnatic cousins (descendants of a common grandfather). If none was interested, next in line were members of the seller's lineage branch (*fang* 房), of which there were seven in San Tin. Finally, if a buyer could not be found within these categories of kin, the strip rights were offered to any member of the Man lineage who was willing to buy.

Sales of access rights to the common fields were rare because these assets were often shared by twenty or more people, each controlling a fraction of a strip. In one case, three cousins controlled (together) rights to farm one-sixteenth of one strip: their entire property holdings. In the 1950s two of the cousins wanted to sell but the third (and most affluent) objected; accordingly, these strip rights have not been sold at the time of writing. When asked about selling access to the common fields, retired farmers just shook their heads; one exclaimed: 'It was very troublesome! The strips (*fok*) were scattered all over the four subsections (*hou*) of the enclosure (*wai*) and nobody wanted to buy into that mess. Someone might return after years of working in England and claim that he had not been consulted'. Another San Tin elder said that he held rights to twelve strips but that these assets were, in 1978, 'useless'. 'My sons want to sell but they do not understand [the common-field system] and they are so impatient that I cannot explain it to them. They don't want to hear

⁶² Red envelopes containing cash were frequently distributed to elders during council meetings. The money smoothed the process of decision-making. See James L. Watson, 'Agnates and Outsiders: Adoption in a Chinese Lineage', *Man*, new ser., x (1975), 298–9.

⁶³ The rules of San Tin's common fields do not survive in written form. Retired farmers cited the following during interviews: do not encroach into adjoining strips; keep waterways clear; do not let water buffalo wander in the fields (during the growing season); do not try to influence the strip allocation lottery; harvest when everyone in the enclosure is ready. San Tin's rules and regulations were similar in many respects to the by-laws that governed medieval English common fields: see Ault, 'Open-Field Husbandry and the Village Community'; Sherri Olson, *A Mute Gospel: The People and Culture of the Medieval English Common Fields* (Toronto, 2009), 145–50; Thirsk, 'Common Fields', 8.

about *fok* and *hou* and all the complications of farming'. His twelve strip rights were scattered across several enclosures, making it impossible to construct even a small fishpond. The largest private owner of Man paddy land in a single enclosure held approximately 8 acres.⁶⁴

The two types of rice paddy discussed in this essay, freshwater versus brackish-water, constituted closely related, but nonetheless distinct, categories of property. Strip rights in the San Tin reclamations became increasingly difficult to sell after the fourth or fifth generation.⁶⁵ Freshwater paddies, by contrast, were easier to sell — and frequently were sold — primarily because the fields were separated by bunds or water channels. Freshwater paddies were mapped and registered in British colonial land records as numbered taxable plots; when a field was sold, it was not difficult to demarcate boundaries.

Between 1899 and 1903 a party of Punjabi surveyors on secondment from the Survey of India mapped most of the tillable land in Hong Kong's New Territories.⁶⁶ Freshwater paddies presented no difficulties for the Indian surveyors and the results have been mined by three generations of anthropologists who have worked in the New Territories.⁶⁷ When the survey team reached

⁶⁴ Based on interviews with retired farmers and an analysis of land records held by the Yuen Long District Office, New Territories.

⁶⁵ Sales did occur, as evidenced in land sale deeds translated by Patrick Hase: see Patrick H. Hase, *Custom, Land and Livelihood in Rural South China: The Traditional Land Law of Hong Kong's New Territories, 1750–1950* (Hong Kong, 2013), 32. Six deeds mentioned in Hase's book, dating from 1815 to 1927, record sales of 'saline rice land' among members of the Man lineage. A document from 1815 (*ibid.*, 228–31) refers to the sale of one half-share of an eight-share holding. It does not appear, however, that the deeds discussed in Hase's book concern land within the San Tin enclosure system; the locations are in reclaimed mudflats north of the Shenzhen River.

⁶⁶ 'New Territories: Land Court, Report on Work from 1900–1905', *Hong Kong Sessional Papers*, 1905, x, 143–52. See also James Hayes, *The Great Difference: Hong Kong's New Territories and its People, 1898–2004* (Hong Kong, 2006), 32. The *Annual Report of the Hong Kong Public Works Department, 1903* (Hong Kong, 1904), 179, states that the cadastral survey was completed in May 1903. The team consisted of '1 Inspector, 24 Surveyors, 32 Indian chain-men, and 45 Chinese coolies. On its conclusion . . . the Inspector, 20 Surveyors, and 30 Indian chain-men were sent back to India'.

⁶⁷ See, for example, Allen Chun, *Unstructuring Chinese Society: The Fictions of Colonial Practice and the Changing Realities of 'Land' in the New Territories of Hong Kong* (Amsterdam, 2000); Michael Palmer, 'The Subsurface-Subsoil Form of Divided Ownership in Late Imperial China: Some Examples from the New Territories of Hong Kong', *Modern Asian Studies*, xxi (1987); Jack M. Potter, *Capitalism and the Chinese Peasant: Social and Economic Change in a Hong Kong Village* (Berkeley, 1968); Watson, *Inequality among Brothers*.

San Tin, however, they effectively threw up their hands in despair and settled for large-scale outlines of the enclosure, leaving no hint of the complexities hidden behind the neatly drawn maps accompanying colonial land records.⁶⁸

Following precedents established in other New Territories districts, the British land officer in charge of San Tin's land survey appointed three- or four-man management committees for each of the eight enclosures. To prevent managers from representing themselves as owners of an entire enclosure, five of the enclosures were listed in land records as 'associations' (*hui* 會) and three were labelled 'ancestral estates' (*zu* 祖). 'Association' is a term normally reserved for landowning temples or community organizations funded by donations and/or household levies. The term 'estate', as noted earlier, designates land held in trust by a corporation of descendants who share a common apical ancestor (the estate usually carries the posthumous name of this ancestor).

British land officials and Indian surveyors did not leave written records of their deliberations made in San Tin district in 1903 — at least none that I can locate (despite an extensive search of colonial archives in Hong Kong, London and Edinburgh). However, land records held by the New Territories administration show that the three San Tin enclosures designated as estate-owned properties were controlled by two of San Tin's major ancestral halls.⁶⁹ The land records of the other five enclosures, however, are much more difficult to decipher. My best guess, based on years of working with New Territories land records, is that colonial officers did not attempt to disentangle the maze of strip rights within the five enclosures that were listed as associations because it would have taken weeks, perhaps months, of painstaking interviews to unravel the details. The strip rights in these five common fields were controlled by individuals and by sets of cousins who were organized into minor estates named in honour of deceased grandfathers or great-grandfathers. Man lineage genealogies show that most of these estates incorporated

⁶⁸ See, for example, Demarcation District map 99, sheet 1, San Tin, 1965 (Yuen Long District Office, New Territories), repr. in Peabody Museum, Harvard University, Watson New Territories Digital Archives, MP013G.

⁶⁹ Land records (dated 1905), examined in 1969 at the Yuen Long District Office, New Territories.

fewer than a dozen men during the period in question (the early twentieth century).⁷⁰

Colonial land taxes were paid by the management committee of each enclosure; individual owners of strip rights were not named in tax records (unlike owners of freshwater paddy fields) and they did not contribute to the tax payment.⁷¹ Operating expenses were underwritten by annual auctions for the right to trap shrimp, crabs and fish that congregated near the many sluice-gates in the brackish-water enclosures. All members of the Man lineage were eligible to bid for these concessions. Given that the Man, like most landed farmers in the delta region, considered aquaculture beneath their dignity, auction winners hired itinerants to operate stake-nets and fish traps positioned along the dykes.⁷² The money raised by the auctions paid for enclosure taxes, dyke maintenance, waterway cleaning and sluice-gate repairs. Man farmers did not, except during typhoon emergencies, do repair work on the common-field dyke system.⁷³

⁷⁰ Man lineage genealogies, Watson New Territories Digital Archives, GN001, GN023, GN027, GN031. By the early twenty-first century, many of these estates had grown to over two hundred shareholders.

⁷¹ There is no evidence, documentary or otherwise, to show that the Man paid land taxes to the Chinese imperial government for the common fields discussed in this essay. Stewart Lockhart, a British colonial officer who toured the New Territories in 1899, noted, 'Most of, if not all, the land reclaimed from the sea [near San Tin] has never been officially registered [with Chinese authorities]': see 'Extracts from a Report by Mr Stewart Lockhart on the Extension of the Colony of Hong Kong', 540. Delta reclamations that were registered with the Chinese authorities paid a low rate for 'salt-marsh tax': see Hase, *Custom, Land and Livelihood in Rural South China*; 'Land at Ma Wan and San Tin', Hong Kong Public Records Office, HKRS 58-1-29 [69], CSO no. 3499/1903 ext., 1 May 1903. British colonial taxes for San Tin's common fields were also pegged at the lowest possible rate for 'third class land' (HK66¢ per acre per year in 1900): see 'Chinese Proclamation Issued by H. E. Sir Henry Blake, Governor', *Hong Kong Sessional Papers, Legislative Council no. 1, 1900*, 22.

⁷² A loosely organized community of itinerants and resident labourers lived in shacks and on beached boats clustered along the outer banks of San Tin's reclamations; a similar community lived on the Tin Shui Wai embankments near the village of Ha Tsuen, five miles south of San Tin: see Liu, 'Becoming Marginal', 49–64. These settlements included reed gatherers (who made sleeping mats), duck raisers, and part-time and full-time fisher people, known colloquially as 'Tanka', a derogatory slur that means 'egg people': see Eugene N. Anderson, *Essays on South China's Boat People* (Taipei, 1972); Siu, *Agents and Victims in South China*, 46–52; Siu and Liu, 'Lineage, Market, Pirate, and Dam'; Barbara E. Ward, 'Varieties of the Conscious Model: The Fishermen of South China', in Michael P. Banton (ed.), *The Relevance of Models for Social Anthropology* (London, 1965). Itinerant households of dam builders, dyke maintainers and sluice-gate operators also lived along the San Tin dykes.

⁷³ By the late 1960s the Man were no longer interested in bidding for the fish-trap concessions. In 1969 the winner was a fisherman who lived in the vicinity of San Tin.

X

BRACKISH-WATER ECOSYSTEMS AND MARKET DEPENDENCE

San Tin's brackish-water ecosystem set the Man apart from other, rival lineages in the delta region. A glaring example of this divergence is diet. Families in the village of Ha Tsuen, a branch of the powerful Teng lineage located seven miles from San Tin, ate rice on a daily basis, usually mixed with sweet potatoes and vegetables to form a hardy gruel. Until the 1970s bowls of steamed white rice constituted banquet fare, consumed at most four or five times a year. Teng farmers ate very little, if any, of their own, high-quality grain; instead, it was sold to rice merchants or exchanged for larger quantities of inferior rice in what was known as the 'catties for catty' system.⁷⁴ One catty of Ha Tsuen's prize white rice could be traded for up to four catties of broken or low-grade rice. Normally the exchange rate in south China was one measure of milled rice in exchange for two measures of unhusked rice,⁷⁵ but high-quality grain of the type grown on Teng land always warranted a premium in Hong Kong markets.

Survey data gathered in the double-crop rice zone of Guangdong province in 1931 shows that the average farm household derived 83.7 per cent of its total calories from rice (see Table 2). Among such households, just under 60 per cent of this rice was supplied from the farmers' own fields.⁷⁶ Ha Tsuen's low rate of consumption for locally produced rice is a special case, tied to the high demand for superior-quality grain.

The Man, as noted above, were excluded from this lucrative exchange market: red rice was not suitable for human consumption, except under famine conditions (and even then it was difficult to digest). Marine products associated with the brackish-water reclamations (shrimp, fish, crabs) were cash commodities, far too valuable for local consumption. San Tin's farmers claimed that there was always a demand for red rice, but the price per *daam*

⁷⁴ 100 catties = 1 *daam* (see n. 41 above). Armando di Silva, *Tai Yu Shan: Traditional Ecological Adaptation in a South Chinese Island* (Taipei, 1972), 43–4, describes this exchange system in detail. See also Seung-joon Lee, *Gourmets in the Land of Famine: The Culture and Politics of Rice in Modern Canton* (Stanford, 2011), 52–4, for a discussion of Cantonese rice preferences.

⁷⁵ Robert B. Marks, 'Rice Prices, Food Supply, and Market Structure in Eighteenth-Century South China', *Late Imperial History*, xii (1991), 78.

⁷⁶ Buck, *Land Utilization in China*, ii, 115–17.

of harvested grain was substantially lower than the rate for white rice.⁷⁷

The average annual rate of consumption of rice in south China during the eighteenth century was, according to Robert Marks, approximately 168 kilograms per person.⁷⁸ Rice consumption in San Tin was never this high, primarily because the local residents fortified their diets with sweet potato and vegetable gruels; furthermore, they were dependent on the market for every kilogram of edible (that is, white) rice that entered their kitchens. Given that red rice was essentially an industrial crop, it was not normally exchanged in the cattles for catty system; most of the crop was sold, at harvest, to rice merchants who shipped it to markets in Shenzhen, Kowloon and Guangzhou for eventual sale to manufacturers of medicinal wine. Cash prices for red rice were always at least 30 per cent lower than the prevailing rate for the least desirable varieties of white rice.⁷⁹

XI

A MATTER OF TIME: LABOUR REQUIREMENTS AND GROWING SEASONS

San Tin's agricultural system was distinguished from those of rival lineages by another crucial factor: Man families had a superabundance of time for non-farming activities. The local variety of red rice, as noted above, had a growing season of 150 days for a single, annual crop (see Table 1). Furthermore, catch-crops such as vegetables or sweet potatoes would not grow on the salt-infused paddies and, because of the limitations of fresh water, hillside fields in the San Tin area were only marginally productive. What, one might ask, did the Man do with the remaining 215 days of the year?

Another way to look at this problem is to focus on off-season, non-agricultural time (the number of months per year that farmers are not active in their fields). John Lossing Buck's survey of Chinese agriculture made in 1931 concluded that the average

⁷⁷ See also Charles J. Grant, 'The Extension of the Arable Area in Hong Kong', in S. G. Davis (ed.), *Land Use Problems in Hong Kong: A Symposium* (Hong Kong, 1964), 57.

⁷⁸ Marks, 'Rice Prices, Food Supply, and Market Structure in Eighteenth-Century South China', 78. See also Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence: China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern World Economy* (Princeton, 2000), 319–20.

⁷⁹ Davis, *Hong Kong in its Geographical Setting*, 57.

TABLE 2

LOCAL RICE CONSUMPTION, SEVEN LOCATIONS IN GUANGDONG,
DOUBLE-CROP RICE ZONE, 1931*

	Average (%)	Range (%)
Total calories derived from rice	83.7	72.3–90.5
Rice supplied from farmer's own farm	59.6	41–80

* Source: John L. Buck, *Land Utilization in China*, 2 vols. (Nanking, 1937), ii, 115–17; see also p. 27 above.

number of off-season months per worker (in China's double-crop rice zone) was 1.7 per year. Rice farmers in the Pearl River delta had even less off-season time: 0.2 months per year.⁸⁰

As Clifford Geertz and others have demonstrated, freshwater rice systems respond to labour intensification with ever increasing levels of production.⁸¹ Brackish-water fields, in stark contrast, were far less responsive: once the strips were ploughed and the seedlings transplanted, further expenditures of labour did not yield a corresponding increase in output. Until harvest, according to retired farmers, there was little fieldwork to do: weeds were suppressed by saline water, and red rice was resistant to many of the pests that plagued white rice.

The off-season factor (time not invested in agriculture) thus reached 7.1 months per year in San Tin (see Table 3). Unlike their counterparts in freshwater systems, Man farmers had few field tasks to perform between crops, and post-harvest ploughing was not necessary in brackish-water paddies: saline water flooded the strips during winter months and rotted left-over plant debris. Fertilizer was not required, and the only preparation for spring planting was the application of lime to reduce soil salinity.⁸² Ploughing the common fields was a complex and difficult task but it was accomplished within a two-week period, and involved only a minority of farmers who owned (or knew how to handle) water buffalo. It is clear, therefore, that even the busiest of Man farmers had far more off-season time than their neighbours who worked in freshwater paddy systems.

⁸⁰ Buck, *Land Utilization in China*, ii, 307–8.

⁸¹ See, for example, Geertz, *Agricultural Involution*, 34–5; Mark Elvin, *The Pattern of the Chinese Past: A Social and Economic Interpretation* (Stanford, 1973), 118–30; Rawski, *Agricultural Change and the Peasant Economy of South China*, 13.

⁸² Di Silva, *Tai Yu Shan*, 51–3.

Alternative forms of work (pig raising, small-scale vegetable production and handicrafts) were, for the most part, performed by women in Cantonese villages.⁸³ Both sexes worked in the common fields, especially during transplantation and harvest seasons. Men did the ploughing and the upkeep of waterways; they also maintained the integrity of strips — a constant battle to keep them from dissolving into the saline mud. Unlike that of their male counterparts, the demands on women's labour did not end in the fields. Women did all the cooking, cleaning, meal preparation, water carrying, washing, poultry rearing, pig feed preparation and — most time-consuming of all — fuel gathering.⁸⁴

XII

SALTWATER MARGIN: LIFE ON THE EDGE

In summing up life in the common fields, a retired (male) farmer observed: 'Our fields never let us starve, but red rice did not produce enough money to keep us all alive'. The men of San Tin thus faced an ever present, always urgent need to find alternative sources of income outside San Tin.⁸⁵ This was especially true of young men who had yet to marry. The partible inheritance system led to extreme fragmentation of strip right holdings; few families could sustain two adult sons, let alone larger sibling sets. Young men were also handicapped by Cantonese marriage customs that required the groom's household to pay a large sum of cash to the household of the bride prior to marriage.⁸⁶ San Tin's (male) youths worked in the common fields during transplantation and harvesting but this left long stretches of time that could be invested in pursuits that took them far from the village.

Neighbouring communities followed what might be called an orthodox path to lineage development: they invested in double-crop irrigation systems, education and business ventures

⁸³ San Tin's men did not normally engage in these activities, even after red rice production had ceased.

⁸⁴ The Pearl River delta was denuded of trees long before the Man arrived on the scene. Charcoal was expensive and coal was rarely used in delta villages. Cooking required the constant harvesting of grass and brush from the nearby hills.

⁸⁵ Non-agricultural enterprises (shops, construction work, small-scale manufacturing) could not absorb even a fraction of the excess labour generated by San Tin's specialized agriculture.

⁸⁶ On Cantonese bride wealth payments, see Rubie S. Watson, 'Class Differences and Affinal Relations in South China', *Man*, xvi (1981), 604–7.

TABLE 3

AVERAGE NUMBER OF OFF-SEASON MONTHS NOT DEVOTED TO FARMING, GUANGDONG AND SAN TIN, PER WORKER PER YEAR*

Type of paddy	Average months
Freshwater (white rice), Guangdong	1.7
Brackish-water (red rice), San Tin	7.1

* Sources: Guangdong: Buck, *Land Utilization in China*, ii, 36; San Tin: my estimate, based on interviews with retired San Tin farmers.

(rice mills, pawnshops, teahouses and land speculation). The Man, by contrast, pursued a decidedly unorthodox path by specializing in entrepreneurial activities that might best be described, in today's terminology, as 'security services'. The men of San Tin were renowned throughout the delta region for their martial arts skills and their utter fearlessness: they had, quite literally, nothing to lose but their lives and their reputations. The village maintained what was widely agreed (by neighbouring lineages) to be the largest and most professional self-defence corps in the region.⁸⁷ During the early twentieth century this organization had twelve full-time members, plus an auxiliary of twenty to thirty part-time operatives who participated during the long interludes between red rice crops.⁸⁸ The Cantonese term for this organization is *chan-ding* (巡丁), best translated as 'village guard'. Security guards in most communities seldom ventured beyond their own lineage domain and restricted their activities to crop watching and neighbourhood patrols.

Man guards were employed as security specialists throughout the eastern banks of the Pearl River delta, halfway to the city of Guangzhou. They served as bodyguards for merchants and travellers, watchmen in pawnshops and minders for collection agents; San Tin men 'walked shotgun' for money changers who transported cash to and from delta market towns.⁸⁹ Man operatives

⁸⁷ See, for example, Hugh D. R. Baker, *A Chinese Lineage Village: Sheung Shui* (Stanford, 1968), 182–3.

⁸⁸ The San Tin village guard had a high percentage of permanent bachelors who lived short but eventful lives: see James L. Watson, 'Self Defense Corps, Violence, and the Bachelor Sub-Culture in South China: Two Case Studies', in James L. Watson and Rubie S. Watson (eds.), *Village Life in Hong Kong: Politics, Gender, and Ritual in the New Territories* (Hong Kong, 2004).

⁸⁹ Shotguns and other weapons were owned by the estate of the founding ancestor and kept in a locked armoury inside one of San Tin's larger ancestral halls.

also protected businesses from Triad gangs (Cantonese mafiosi), burglars, extortionists and petty thieves. A ten-inch-square red poster bearing the single character *Man* (文) was enough to keep most troublemakers away.

By the early twentieth century, recruiters for European freighter companies began to visit San Tin, where they could always find hard men 'who knew how to eat bitterness', an essential qualification for good seamen. Among New Territories villagers, the Man were disproportionally represented in this new occupation. During the 1920s and 1930s several of these men jumped ship in Amsterdam, London and Liverpool, where they established laundries and small restaurants.⁹⁰ These enterprises played a crucial role in facilitating later waves of emigration from San Tin.

The freelance activities of Man security guards continued until December 1941, when Japanese forces occupied the New Territories. Three leaders of the San Tin village guard were executed during the first month of the occupation and a Japanese army unit took up residence in one of San Tin's banquet halls — the same building that was used by colonial police following the brief resistance to British rule in 1899.⁹¹ The four-year Japanese occupation was brutal and uncompromising: food was confiscated from village homes and shops were ransacked; gold and silver coins that villagers had kept as life savings were looted, and (worthless) paper currency,⁹² issued by the Japanese army, replaced Hong Kong dollars. Many families lost everything during this period. Despite the disruption, red rice production continued on a reduced scale during the war years, primarily because the wine distilleries that bought San Tin's grain were protected by Japanese authorities (and heavily taxed for the privilege).

⁹⁰ On seamen who jumped ship, see Watson, *Emigration and the Chinese Lineage*, 60–6.

⁹¹ In the 1960s and 1970s villagers claimed that this building was haunted by the headless ghosts of Man security guards executed during the Japanese occupation. Villagers refused to enter the hall and it was always locked. The best source on the British takeover of the New Territories is Patrick H. Hase, *The Six-Day War of 1899: Hong Kong in the Age of Imperialism* (Hong Kong, 2008).

⁹² In 1969 San Tin villagers still kept examples of this currency: Watson New Territories Digital Archives, MD002. For more on the Japanese occupation of the New Territories, see Hayes, *Great Difference*, 59–70.

Unlike farmers who could eat their own (white) rice, San Tin parents had no choice but to encourage unmarried sons to leave the village; there was simply not enough food for everyone. Approximately forty young men from San Tin joined guerrilla units affiliated with the East River Brigade, a communist-led organization that operated in the waterways and hills of the Pearl River delta.⁹³ Among those who survived the war, a handful stayed in China, where they joined the Communist Party and later became local government officials. The remainder — fifteen to twenty — returned to San Tin, but did not stay long; most left for Europe, where they became pioneers in the Chinese restaurant trade.

XIII

DEMISE OF THE COMMON FIELDS

In the aftermath of the Japanese occupation (1941–5), Hong Kong rapidly became a centre of light industry focused on the emerging global market. Hong Kong's urban population exploded as tens of thousands of refugees spilled over the Chinese border. The demand for fresh vegetables to feed this growing population started a headlong rush by New Territories farmers to convert paddy fields to vegetable plots, increasing profits up to sevenfold in the process. The Man, with their brackish-water ecosystem, were excluded from this 'vegetable revolution',⁹⁴ and turned even more resolutely to emigration.

In the 1950s a perfect storm of adverse circumstances led to the rapid and final demise of San Tin's common fields (*wai*). Severe drought and increased water salinity in Deep Bay reduced red rice production by up to 80 per cent in 1953 and 1954; following this crisis, Man crops never again reached pre-war highs.⁹⁵

⁹³ San Tin's youth had the advantage of previous experience in the byways of the Pearl River delta: Watson, 'Self Defense Corps, Violence, and the Bachelor Sub-Culture in South China'. For a discussion of the East River Brigade, see Chan Sui-jeung, *East River Column: Hong Kong Guerrillas in the Second World War and After* (Hong Kong, 2009).

⁹⁴ Judith Strauch, 'Middle Peasants and Market Gardeners: The Social Context of the "Vegetable Revolution" in a Small Agricultural Community in the New Territories', in David Faure, James Hayes and Alan Birch (eds.), *From Village to City: Studies in the Traditional Roots of Hong Kong Society* (Hong Kong, 1984), 191–205. See also Watson, *Emigration and the Chinese Lineage*, 42–6.

⁹⁵ See Lai Chuen-yan, 'Rice Cultivation, Distribution and Production in Hong Kong', in Davis (ed.), *Land Use Problems in Hong Kong*, 84–5.

Meanwhile, San Tin's surviving farmers, a handful of men in their mid fifties and early sixties, were facing another ecological disaster. Enclosures nearest the river were infused with too much salt to be productive, and those adjacent to the village were heavily polluted by sewage run-off (which caused the red rice plants to mature too fast). Given these problems, farmers were no longer willing to move to a new set of strips each year; in response, San Tin's strip allocation lottery was suspended between 1950 and 1954, and was never reinstated. Enclosure managers saved face by assigning strips to farmers who had, in effect, already claimed quasi-permanent control over land they were cultivating.

The collapse of the common-field system was a slow, messy process reflected in aerial photographs taken by the Royal Air Force and the Hong Kong government between 1924 and 1972. The image made in 1945 (see Plate) reveals a complete set of enclosures, subsections and elongated strips. Those from 1954 and 1961 reveal an erosion of strip integrity, and by 1972 the common fields had reverted to marsh, with no internal divisions evident.⁹⁶ The final demise was hastened by a small-scale 'tragedy of the commons'⁹⁷ as many farmers simply abandoned the common fields and stopped maintaining the waterways — transgressions that would have brought severe sanctions in the past. By the late 1950s enclosure managers no longer bothered to intervene and the Man council of elders stopped dealing with farming disputes. In the 1970s and 1980s dozens of fishponds were constructed in the fallow enclosures; most were leased to outsiders, who paid enough rent to cover land taxes, thereby maintaining Man lineage control over its long-established territory.

The collapse of San Tin's agricultural system was not entirely a consequence of drought and ecological disaster. On 15 February

⁹⁶ Survey and Mapping Office, Lands Department, Hong Kong Government, aerial photo no. 1193R, UAg. 1044. 152.53 (1972). For details of the 1945, 1954 and 1961 Royal Air Force aerial photos, see n. 45 above; see also the Plate.

⁹⁷ 'The tragedy of the commons has been attributed to the intrinsic difficulty of managing a communal resource when any individual's efforts benefit all users and no means exist to police "cheaters" who use the commons without contributing to their upkeep': Robert Layton, 'Functional and Historical Explanations for Village Social Organization in Northern Europe', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, new ser., i (1995), 718. See also Bonnie J. McCay and James M. Acheson, 'Human Ecology of the Commons', in Bonnie J. McCay and James M. Acheson (eds.), *The Question of the Commons: The Culture and Ecology of Communal Resources* (Tucson, 1987).

1951 the People's Liberation Army abruptly closed the border between Hong Kong and China.⁹⁸ Colonial authorities responded by erecting the first in a series of complex border fences and creating a 'restricted zone' along the south bank of the Shenzhen River. San Tin's common fields and the surrounding marshlands were declared off limits to non-residents; henceforth, Man farmers needed special passes to work in their fields. The disruption of cross-border commercial traffic was the final blow: most of the wine distilleries that purchased San Tin's red rice were in towns north of the river. Facing the inevitable, the last of San Tin's beleaguered farmers gave up after the harvest in 1956.

After nearly four centuries of steady production, the common fields reverted to fishponds, marshland and reed beds inhabited by migratory birds, a sight that attracts birders from all over the world.⁹⁹ The Man were confronted with what was probably the worst crisis in their history. But, resilient as ever, they opted for the best alternative: they became international migrants on a massive scale.

Between 1955 and 1962, 85–90 per cent (approximately eight hundred) of San Tin's able-bodied males left for jobs in the European restaurant trade. On 1 July 1962 the first Commonwealth Immigrants Act went into effect, restricting access to the United Kingdom. Prior to that date Man emigrants, by virtue of their birth in a British Crown Colony, had unlimited rights to enter Britain, which many used as a stepping stone to continental Europe. San Tin residents were well aware of pending immigration restrictions in Britain and moved quickly to 'beat the ban'. Using footholds established by an earlier generation of kinsmen who had jumped ship, the Man established over four hundred Chinese restaurants in England, Wales, Scotland,

⁹⁸ On this date the new government of the People's Republic instituted a system of entry and exit permits on the Chinese side of the border, effectively closing it. Prior to this date Chinese residents of Hong Kong or China could cross the border without restraint. In 1950, for example, 5,769,730 individual crossings (both ways) were recorded by the Hong Kong Police: *Hong Kong Police Annual Report, 1950–1951* (Hong Kong, 1951), 34–5. See also James L. Watson, 'Forty Years on the Border: Hong Kong/China', *ASIANet Exchange*, xviii (2010).

⁹⁹ The San Tin common fields adjoin the famous Mai Po marshes, designated by the World Wide Fund for Nature as a Nature Conservation Area for migratory birds: see Sidney C. H. Cheung, 'Wetland Tourism in Hong Kong: From Birdwatcher to Mass Ecotourist', in Janet Cochrane (ed.), *Asian Tourism: Growth and Change* (Amsterdam, 2008).

Belgium, West Germany and the Netherlands. One sub-branch of the lineage relocated from England to Canada, where they soon dominated the Chinese restaurant trade in the Toronto area.¹⁰⁰

In the course of this headlong rush to Europe and Canada, the lineage was transformed from a corporation based on collective land management to an organizational framework for the co-ordination of large-scale emigration. In effect, the Man lineage became an information network — a kind of emigration agency — with jobs, introductions and travel tips circulated within the pre-existing patrilineal group. Affines (kin by marriage), friends and New Territories neighbours were not part of this network and were systematically excluded from advantages that accrued.

By any measure, members of today's far-flung Man lineage are highly successful. While their grandfathers and great-grandfathers arrived in Europe with little but the shirts on their backs, twenty-first-century Man are property developers, accountants, professors, engineers, government officials, tour operators, travel agents, charter flight operators and owners of up-market Chinese restaurants (the take-aways and chip shops have long since been sold to immigrants from mainland China).

XIV

CONCLUSION: INHERITANCE, RISK AND POPULATION PRESSURE

What does this Chinese case tell us about the nature of common fields in general? The rain-dependent fields of Europe were, of course, fundamentally different from the wet-rice paddy ecosystems in south China. Common pasturage and open-access fuel gathering, two key features of the European systems, played only minor roles in the Chinese fields. Although strips were ploughed and planted every year, there were no interludes for fallowing in south China. This pattern of unrelieved cultivation lasted for over three centuries in San Tin's oldest fields. The Chinese systems were more compact and interconnected than most European common fields, thus presenting fewer transportation problems for tillers (Man strips were located within easy walking distance of San Tin).

¹⁰⁰ James L. Watson, 'Virtual Kinship, Real Estate, and Diaspora Formation: The Man Lineage Revisited', *Journal of Asian Studies*, lxiii (2004).

Joan Thirsk speculates that the persistence of partible inheritance among European peasantries may have been a motivating factor in the proliferation of strips, as tenants occupied land 'in severalty'. Farmers 'provided for their sons by dividing their lands and, when necessary, reclaiming more'.¹⁰¹ Jack Goody, by contrast, concludes that common-field systems were governed by the principles of primogeniture, which ensured that a single son or heir inherited the indivisible strips.¹⁰² A survey of the literature on European common fields and inheritance reveals no general agreement on this point.¹⁰³ One must conclude that inheritance practices changed over the centuries as the common-field system gradually unravelled under pressures of enclosure and commercialization.

In south China, by contrast, farming communities, without exception, adhered to a strict rule of partible inheritance, backed by Chinese imperial law and centuries of customary practice.¹⁰⁴ Male heirs inherited more or less equal shares of their father's property. As outlined above, this practice had serious long-term consequences for San Tin's common fields. During the first two centuries of Man lineage development, the fields could be extended step by step into nearby saline marshes. By the mid to late nineteenth century, however, the limits of land reclamation, restricted by topography and tidal incursions, had been reached. As San Tin's population continued to rise, ownership rights in the common fields fragmented into micro-shares that could no longer sustain a family.

Given the restrictions of their inheritance system, Man families had no choice but to encourage their younger sons to look

¹⁰¹ Thirsk, 'Common Fields', 12–15. See also Thirsk, 'Origin of the Common Fields', 144–6; Joan Thirsk, 'The European Debate on Customs of Inheritance, 1500–1700', in Jack Goody, Joan Thirsk and E. P. Thompson (eds.), *Family and Inheritance: Rural Society in Western Europe, 1200–1800* (Cambridge, 1976).

¹⁰² Jack Goody, *The European Family: An Historico-Anthropological Essay* (Oxford, 2000), 114.

¹⁰³ See, for example, Homans, 'Explanation of English Regional Differences', 23–8; Baker, 'Open Fields and Partible Inheritance on a Kent Manor'; Dodgshon, 'Landholding Foundations of the Open-Field System', 13–16; Pitkin, 'Partible Inheritance and the Open Fields', 65–9; Titow, 'Medieval England and the Open-Field System', 92–6; Rosamond J. Faith, 'Peasant Families and Inheritance Customs in Medieval England', *Agricultural History Review*, xiv (1966); Layton, 'Functional and Historical Explanations for Village Social Organization in Northern Europe', 710–19.

¹⁰⁴ For a survey of sources on Chinese inheritance practices, see Watson, *Inequality among Brothers*, 106–16.

elsewhere for economic survival. San Tin's village guard, originally a crop-watching and village patrol association, was transformed into an employment agency for security operatives. Population pressure, coupled with the inordinate cost of bride-wealth (cash necessary for marriage), led other young men to abandon their homeland and migrate to Europe. Parallels to the Irish historical experience are clear: emigration became a way out of a system that could no longer support all of its youth.¹⁰⁵

Donald McCloskey's view that risk avoidance is the key to understanding the persistence of medieval European strip farming continues to spark controversy among economic historians.¹⁰⁶ Stefano Fenoaltea claims that risk, as such, was a secondary concern and that strip farming constituted a rational adaptation — a form of insurance — among medieval farmers.¹⁰⁷ Other scholars see the proliferation of strips as a divisible savings instrument emerging in a social system that offered few safe havens for investment.¹⁰⁸

The southern Chinese case speaks volumes for the driving force of risk management (as opposed to risk avoidance) in the evolution of a common-field system. San Tin villagers have had to deal with inordinately high levels of risk and the ever present anxieties of social and economic collapse since their founding ancestors first settled on the saltwater margins of the Pearl River delta six centuries ago. Unlike their neighbours, who arrived a century or two earlier and established freshwater paddy systems, the Man were from the outset locked into an unstable market for their single, specialized crop. Furthermore, brackish-water paddies are far more susceptible to weather and environmental risks (typhoon swamping, drought, rising saline content) than inland field systems.

¹⁰⁵ See, for example, Timothy W. Guinnane, *The Vanishing Irish: Households, Migration, and the Rural Economy in Ireland, 1850–1914* (Princeton, 1997).

¹⁰⁶ McCloskey, 'Persistence of English Common Fields', 114–15.

¹⁰⁷ See Stefano Fenoaltea, 'Risk, Transaction Costs, and the Organization of Medieval Agriculture', *Explorations in Economic History*, xiii (1976); Stefano Fenoaltea, 'Transaction Costs, Whig History, and the Common Fields', *Politics and Society*, xvi (1988), 197–200.

¹⁰⁸ Cliff T. Bekar and Clyde G. Reed, 'Open Fields, Risk, and Land Divisibility', *Explorations in Economic History*, xl (2003). Donald McCloskey, 'The Prudent Peasant: New Findings on Open Fields', *Journal of Economic History*, li (1991), re-affirms his conviction that the risk amelioration hypothesis best fits the historical evidence. For a counter view, see Gary Richardson, 'The Prudent Village: Risk Pooling Institutions in Medieval English Agriculture', *Journal of Economic History*, lxxv (2005).

The long-term viability of the Man lineage, therefore, can be attributed to the successful management of a precarious common-field system. Survival in the brackish-water ecosystem was aided by an annual lottery that randomized access to the best strips; in McCloskey's terms, this was a mechanism of risk amelioration. The men of San Tin were not, however, risk-averse 'peasants' of the type described by Richardson¹⁰⁹ and others. They were entrepreneurs whose security activities were considered far too risky and dangerous for their rivals in neighbouring lineages. This propensity to embrace risk continued into the twentieth century, when Man seamen jumped ship in Europe and San Tin's (surviving) anti-Japanese guerrillas migrated to Britain, where they became pioneers in the Chinese restaurant trade. Immigrant labour of this type is lonely, stressful and extremely risky (in economic terms).¹¹⁰ Nonetheless, when their agricultural system collapsed in the late 1950s, the people of San Tin embraced emigration without hesitation.

Having tracked the Man lineage for forty-five years, I am convinced that the high level of success that characterizes this kinship group in the early twenty-first century is due in no small part to their long history of defying the economic odds of survival in a marginal ecosystem. The people who today call themselves Man, and trace descent from San Tin's founding ancestor, are a complex lot. Many are Eurasian and at least half speak little, if any, Cantonese.¹¹¹ Most do not live in Hong Kong and some have never visited San Tin.

One has to ask the obvious question: why has this particular kinship group, unlike thousands of other Chinese patrilineages that also experienced large-scale emigration, not dissolved into fragmented family groups that have dim memories of 'the old home' back in China? The difference is land, or, more precisely, commonly held land that was not confiscated during communist

¹⁰⁹ See n. 108 above.

¹¹⁰ James L. Watson, 'Hong Kong Villagers in the British Catering Trade', in James L. Watson (ed.), *Between Two Cultures: Migrants and Minorities in Britain* (Oxford, 1977).

¹¹¹ English, Dutch and German are the first languages of most second-, third- and fourth-generation Man living in Europe and Canada. Mandarin, learnt in school, is often their second language; many have difficulty communicating with their Cantonese-speaking grandparents. English serves as today's lingua franca for cross-national lineage gatherings, as well as email networks.

land reform campaigns in the 1950s,¹¹² or, in Hong Kong's case, sold to property developers. The long-defunct reclamation system that Man ancestors created is, in large part, still controlled by ancestral estates and descendants of strip right holders. Male descendants of the founding ancestor continue to hold limited, but nonetheless concrete, rights to that property.¹¹³

During the cold war, colonial administrators, concerned about threats of a Chinese invasion, restricted development of San Tin's common fields and nearby marshlands; these restrictions lasted until repatriation in 1997. Today, in the second decade of Hong Kong's post-colonial era, the long-abandoned paddies are being transformed into an industrial park half a mile from Shenzhen, a booming city of twelve million. One of the world's busiest border crossings, Lok Ma Chau, sits on land that cuts across two of San Tin's oldest enclosures. Lorry traffic backs up for miles on both sides of the border, and thousands of commuters pass San Tin every day on their way to and from Hong Kong's urban centres.

Red rice farming may have died in the late 1950s but the idea of the common fields, however blurred and confused that concept might be today, is still alive among Man Sai-go's twenty-first-century descendants. As long as the land, or portions thereof, is held in common, the Man lineage is likely to survive as a distinct, identifiable kinship group that has real and tangible meaning to its members.

Harvard University

James L. Watson

¹¹² The ancestral estates (as well as privately held land) of lineages north of the Shenzhen River, in the People's Republic, were collectivized during land reform campaigns in the early 1950s: see, for example, Anita Chan, Richard Madsen and Jonathan Unger, *Chen Village under Mao and Deng*, 2nd edn (Berkeley, 1992), 19–26.

¹¹³ At the time of writing, daughters born of Man fathers do not have rights to the property controlled by Man ancestral estates, although in 1994 they were granted legal rights to inherit a full share of their fathers' personal properties: see Rubie S. Watson, 'Debating Women's Rights in Hong Kong: Challenges to a Colonial Category', in Everett Zhang (ed.), *Governance of Life in Chinese Moral Experience: The Quest for an Adequate Life* (Abingdon, 2011). In other New Territories lineages, including the Pang of Fan Ling, women who are descended from the Pang apical ancestor are now given annual cash dividends from his estate: Chan, 'Women's Property Rights in a Chinese Lineage Village', 105–25; Chan, 'Negotiating Tradition', 159–60.