

Yuen-fong Woon

Social Organization in South China, 1911-1949



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The Case of the Kuan Lineage
in K'ài-p'ing County

by
Yuen-fong Woon

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PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS*

Bridging the collapse of the Confucian state and the establishment of the People's Republic of China, the period 1911-49 is particularly fascinating to historians, anthropologists, sociologists and political scientists. Unfortunately, it is also a very confusing period, full of shifts and changes in economic, social, and political organizations. The social implications of these changes, and the relationships between officials on the subdistrict level, the unofficial leaders, and the bulk of the peasantry remain inadequately known. South China, which nurtured the Communist Party in its formative years, is a particularly interesting case. In this study I use the Kuan lineage of K'ai-p'ing as a case study to show the effects of demographic, economic, administrative, and educational changes after the Treaty of Nanking (1842) on patrilineal kinship as a principle of social organization in South China.

Since Freedman (1958, 1966) published his two monographs on lineage and society in South China, there has been a growing body of literature on localized lineages. However, most of the fieldwork was done either in the New Territories of Hong Kong (Baker, 1968; Brim, 1969; Hayes, 1964; Johnson, 1971; Nelson, 1969; Potter, 1968; Pratt, 1960; Watson, 1975) or in Taiwan (Gallin, 1966; Pasternak, 1968). Studies done on South Chinese villages on the mainland (e.g., H. S. Ch'en, 1936; T. Ch'en, 1940; Kulp, 1925; H. T. Liu, 1936; Makino, 1948; Ssu-t'u, 1951; C. K. Yang, 1959) lack historical depth. None of them set village life in a wider social or political context, nor have they dealt in great detail with the effect on lineages of social change during the critical period from 1911 to 1949. Information on the lineage during this period is now available only through interviews with informants who were alive at the time. In this book I shall try to reconstruct a segment of prerevolutionary Chinese society, to map out the ethnographic profile and historical development of the Kuan lineage under the impact of rapid social change, and to construct, as systematically as my data allow, some generalizations about social organization and change in this part of China.

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In recent years there has appeared a growing body of literature that attempts to explain the causes of "development of underdevelopment" in Third World countries. Scholars have provided conflicting theories to account for rural impoverishment and class conflict in China between 1911 and 1949 in an attempt to understand (and sometimes consciously or unconsciously to blame or justify) the rise of the People's Republic of China. It is hoped that the case of the Kuan lineage of K'ai-p'ing County can throw light on the validity of these theories as they apply to South China in general and to emigrant communities in particular.

The Kuan lineage was one of the most important emigrant communities in K'ai-p'ing County, one that sent thousands of sons to North America between the 1860s and 1923. This ethnography also examines the relationship between Overseas Chinese in North America and their home communities in South China and the implications of North American public policies such as the Oriental Exclusion Act for that relationship. For example, immigration policies resulted in certain donation and investment patterns among the Overseas Chinese, patterns which, in turn, contributed to the economic modernization of market towns in China and the preservation of the Confucian mode of social organization in the form of lineages in rural areas. It is hoped that this study will make a contribution not only to the study of emigrant communities in South China but to ethnic studies in North America.

In a study based mainly on the limited power of informants' memories, extraordinary care had to be taken to ensure validity and reliability. A detailed description of the methodology employed is found in appendix 5. This book is a revised and updated version of a Ph.D. dissertation of the same title, submitted to the Department of Anthropology/Sociology, University of British Columbia, in the summer of 1975. It is the result of a nine-month period of in-depth interviews with sixteen people who had direct knowledge of the Kuan lineage. In the course of this study I have been assisted by many people whose contributions have been invaluable. Only a few names can be mentioned here.

First, I would like to thank Dr. Graham E. Johnson, chair of the dissertation committee, whose continued interest and intellectual stimulation have carried me through the research project, the writing of the dissertation, and subsequent revisions of the work. I am greatly indebted to Dr. E. Wickberg whose comments on the dissertation widened my intellectual horizons. Profound gratitude must be expressed to Professor W. E. Willmott, my former teacher at U.B.C., who, as a visiting scholar to the Centre for Pacific and Oriental Studies in the spring of 1980, re-read my manuscript and suggested invaluable modifications to the structure of the first draft of this present version. Dr. J. L. Watson, the external examiner, made detailed comments on the dissertation and provided encouragement and important guidelines that allowed the thesis to be revised into publishable form. Dr. Y. T. Lai read the

first draft of the revised version in great detail and provided valuable insights and the perspective of an intelligent outside reader. To her and to Dr. Watson, I express my heartfelt thanks.

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Thanks also go to all the Kuan in Victoria and Vancouver, especially Mr. F. F. Kuan and Mr. Y. F. Kuan, without whose cooperation and patience this book would not exist. I must thank Mr. T. H. Lee, Mr. C. Chen, Mr. S. Y. Lau, and Dr. Charles Sedgewick for introducing these members of the Kuan lineage to me.

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Y. F. W.

Victoria, December 1983

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CHAPTER 1

Social Organization in South China

Scholarship on pre-1949 South China has delineated three major principles of social organization in that area, namely, patrilineal kinship, particularly in the form of lineages; ethnicity; and socioeconomic class.¹ There have been debates over the relative significance of these three principles after 1840. It is the aim of this chapter to outline the positions taken on this question so as to set the stage for the case study that follows: the Kuan lineage of K'ai-p'ing County in Kwangtung Province.

There is little argument that before 1840, patrilineal kinship was the major principle of social organization in South China, as it was in the rest of the country. The major reason for this was that both the national and local bureaucracy actively promoted patrilineal kinship legally and ideologically. The Confucian state and the Confucian minds that ran it believed that patrilineal kinship was the fundamental principle of society and the only sound way to train submissive subjects.

In addition to their active promotion by the state, lineages were important in China because they filled the power vacuum in the local administrative system. Many scholars have pointed out that there was a correspondence in traditional China between a weak local government and strong lineage organizations.² A relatively large administrative unit made up of hundreds of villages, the *hsien* (county) was controlled by the magistrate and a small staff of less than ten officials who were responsible mainly for the collection of taxes and the prevention of rebellion. Except for a few minor posts such as private secretaries, clerks, and runners, none of the magistrate's staff was a native of the place or had any local roots, since it was the policy to transfer such personnel every three years.³

Apart from a few futile attempts to establish the *pao-chia* (mutual responsibility) system, the *hsien* government usually dealt with the individual through unofficial village elites.⁴ It did not interfere with village affairs or with the judicial decisions of these leaders. The latter, for their part, often discouraged villagers from any form of contact with the bureaucracy.

The lineage elites were often elders or gentry members of the local community. The gentry were products of the traditional examination system, scholars or retired officials who lived in their native districts.⁵ They spoke the

same official language as the magistrate and often served as a bridge between the people and the government. While it is true that the prestige of local scholars and retired officials derived primarily from their successful performance on the examinations, lineage channels were also used to enhance power and influence before official status was achieved or after retirement.

Because of the potential influence of these gentry members, a lineage often directed its resources toward producing scholars and officials and toward assuring their allegiance to the interests of the lineage. Gentry members were given distinguished parts in the conduct of ancestral rites; they were offered extra shares of the ritual pork; their ancestral tablets were placed in more distinguished positions in the ancestral halls; and they were entitled to collect benefits from the lineage's education landholdings.⁶

In order to enhance his power and prestige, a scholar-official could donate some property, build an ancestral hall, and become the founder of a new branch (*fang*) of the lineage. He might also set aside property as education land to encourage his descendants to become scholars for the glory of the branch. In turn, the direct descendants of a powerful lineage branch not only controlled corporate property of that branch, but were often selected as managers of lineage property due to their illustrious ancestry. It was for the sake of such prestige and benefits that scholars and officials in traditional China were willing to stay in the countryside or nearby market towns and serve as champions of their more humble lineage members.

In traditional China, landownership and scholarship were the two most important channels to power and prestige. Merchants, however rich, had little political or social status and were not allowed a voice in government policies. To bridge the gap between wealth, on the one hand, and prestige and power on the other, merchants often purchased degrees to join the ranks of the scholar-gentry class. They donated some of their profits to the building or restoration of ancestral halls. They were also eager to pay to have their ancestral tablets placed in distinguished positions in the ancestral halls. Hence, for them, as for the scholar-officials, the lineage provided an important channel for both the acquisition and recognition of prestige, status, and power.

Lineage organizations also benefited the poor. The official defense system was weak. Garrison soldiers were never numerous in any particular *hsien*. Their presence was more to prevent antigovernment uprisings than to protect the lives and property of the individual. Thus, at times when official protection from lawlessness in the countryside was inadequate, poorer members often had to rely upon the lineage as a means for the organization of defense.

Local government officials usually followed the principle of *laissez-faire* with respect to lineage functions, since official policy was designed to discourage direct contact between the population and government bureaucracy. A lineage which could govern its own members facilitated this type of policy.

Moreover, as the law courts were often brutal and runners and clerks merciless in blackmailing and exploiting the villagers, and the burdens of taxation and labor services were heavy, poor members of a lineage, on their part, were eager to have their differences settled by the lineage elites. They depended upon elite members to keep the bureaucracy at arm's length. It was not unusual for powerful lineage elites to protect their own members or smaller lineages in the neighborhood or to soften the government's tax demands on their protégés. It was also common practice for gentry members of powerful lineages to act as mediators in quarrels among villagers of less powerful lineages.

Besides obtaining protection from both bandit attacks and government exploitation, the poor found it economically expedient to maintain close ties with their lineages. For example, they were often given preference in renting corporate land from their lineages, rental deposits were sometimes waived for lineage members, and the penalties for rental default might be less severe. In some lineages, proceeds from corporate property were shared among the members; in others, the proceeds were used to finance low-interest lineage loans, lineage granaries, and other charity and relief measures.⁷ In addition, patrilineal kinship ties were often used to advantage by those seeking jobs in market towns.

Freedman believes that localized lineages in China ranged along a continuum, from an undifferentiated lineage, which he terms type "A," to an extremely differentiated one, which he terms type "Z."⁸ An A-type lineage was numerically small and had no written genealogy. Its members were primarily peasants among whom there was little socioeconomic difference. Village elders usually served as both ritual and political leaders. The A-type lineage had little or no ancestral property and was not rich enough to provide for a vigorous ritual life.⁹ A differentiated lineage, or Z-type, usually had a large amount of corporate property. Its members varied greatly in terms of socioeconomic class. There were two types of leaders in a differentiated lineage: ritual and political. The elders, typically resident farmer-owners, usually served in the former capacity. The political leaders were rich and powerful landlords and/or scholar-officials. This type of lineage usually persisted longer than A-type lineages for three reasons: (1) the elites brought connections, prestige, political status, and protection to the ordinary members; (2) elites donated land to the lineage, which allowed the poor members to improve their living standards; and (3) sheer force of numbers.

Because of these initial advantages, a large lineage was generally able to defeat a small one in litigation or actual conflict. Moreover, it was often able to dominate the market town in its vicinity or to find another one to suit its own interests. It would become richer through the collection of levies and dues from minor lineages attending the same market town.

While the foregoing description was true of China as a whole before 1949, empirical evidence shows that lineages were more developed in South China than in the rest of the country. Although type Z lineages existed in the North, they were far more predominant in the South, where as much as 35 percent of the land was corporately owned by lineages and where interlineage feuds and hostilities were common.¹⁰

Several reasons can be given to explain why lineages were most powerful in traditional South China. (1) South China was a region of late settlement by the Han.¹¹ As bearers of Confucian ideology, the pioneers organized themselves into lineages for defense against the aborigines, bandits, and pirates of this area. (2) South China lies within the double-cropping rice area.¹² Although the land is fertile and the climate favorable for growing wet rice, the region is hilly and susceptible to typhoons. Its hydraulic system also requires constant attention. Lacking dependable assistance from the state, lineages often had to pool their resources in order to combat such problems as flood and drought, the silting of rivers and streams, and the salination of coastal strips and delta areas. They had to construct and maintain embankments and irrigation channels (more than 50 percent of the farmland in South China was irrigated) as well as undertake such tasks as terracing hillsides and reclaiming land. Because of the fertility of the area, once land was reclaimed and irrigated it served as an important basis for collective functions such as ancestor worship. (3) South China, with its favorable climatic conditions, is less affected by the natural calamities which forced the migration of peasants in search of food and shelter in North China and resulted in considerable disruption of village organizations there. Moreover, being farther away from the traditional seat of government, South China was less affected by dynastic struggles than North China and hence was more capable of maintaining a stable, semiindependent existence characterized by lineage. (4) Since commerce and overseas emigration were more prevalent in South China, and since merchants and overseas emigrants lacked prestige and influence in traditional China, much of the mercantile capital was reinvested in land.¹³ Merchants commonly donated a portion of their wealth as ancestral land, thereby increasing the wealth and power of the lineage.

Besides patrilineal kinship, there were two other commonly recognized principles of social organization in traditional South China: socioeconomic class and ethnicity. Socioeconomic class was an important principle of social organization, because large differentiated lineages incorporated both rich and poor members. Lineage elites were in a position to exploit poor members economically and politically since they were landlords as well as unofficial representatives to the local government. Moreover, corruption was prevalent in many of these differentiated lineages. As membership grew, lineage property, which was supposed to be everyone's business, became the concern of the lineage managers alone. Wealthy members of the lineage therefore were drawn together by common interest in manipulating lineage property for their benefit.

At the same time, the poor might form ties across lineages to develop support mechanisms not satisfactorily provided by any lineage. One group formed through such connections was the Triad secret society, which became influential in rural South China around the turn of the nineteenth century. The aim of the Triads was political—to restore the nativist Ming dynasty. However, the society also had socioeconomic appeal: membership in the Triads offered a source of mutual aid which cut across lineage boundaries. Hence it had the potential to unite the poor in the differentiated lineages with members of small lineages in the vicinity. It could also unite the rural poor with the urban unemployed. Besides the rural and urban poor, merchants, smugglers, government runners, Taoist priests, and even local literati served as leaders, but members of the upper gentry class shunned such associations.

Depending on the members' degree of geographical mobility, the Triad can be divided into the outer Triads and the inner Triads.¹⁴ The outer Triads were made up of the mobile and marginal sections of the Chinese population—members of disbanded armies, unemployed porters, dock-workers, and coolies, as well as pirates and bandits. Many lived in the wooded and mountainous areas along the section of the border shared by Kwangtung, Kwangsi, and Hunan provinces. They formed brotherhoods and were tightly organized. The inner Triads, on the other hand, were made up of ordinary peasants; they were immobile but discontented. These were local bare-sticks (men without families), unmarried males, and village outcasts. These people were torn between lineage affiliation and secret society allegiance.

Despite the presence of the Triads in South China, and the fact that they sometimes united the poor across lineage lines, secret societies were never successful in replacing lineages as a means of social organization. One of the Triads' weaknesses was that they were broken up into various lodges. These lodges shared common rituals and a sense of brotherhood; they exchanged information and favors, but there was no truly centralized organization. The lodges formed *ad hoc* confederations to attack walled cities and then quarrelled among themselves as to how to divide the booty.

Moreover, the united front of the inner and outer Triads was *tenuous*. The outer Triads would not participate in attacks on cities unless they were sure of potential allies among the peasants; and the inner Triads could not hope to challenge the hegemony of the gentry without outside help. Ordinarily, peasants did not join the Triads. They preferred to pay "protection fees" or "harvest taxes" to the outer Triads to keep them away. When they did become members, it was usually because they were coerced into doing so by, for example, having their land taken away or their children kidnapped by the outer Triads. Only during times of widespread disaster would they willingly join the society, in order to obtain assistance through Triad membership, and even when they joined of their own accord, their participation generally lasted only as long

as extremely poor economic conditions or excessive official and landlord exploitation endured.

In addition to these internal differences, secret societies faced constant persecution from without. The Confucian state was more anxious about secret societies than about lineages, as lineages were based on the officially most approved form of human associations—kinship. Therefore, although it occasionally took action against a lineage claiming that it had members dispersed over a wide territory or that it had descended from high ancestry, the state often vigorously suppressed secret societies and religious sects. The peasants, in their quest for security, refrained from joining the Triads as long as the gentry and lineage leaders could represent their interests effectively to official circles.

Finally, the Triads did not always represent the interests of the peasantry. Although the targets of Triad activities were sometimes the rich and powerful, they would also, if the need arose, live off the peasants in settled villages. Some Triad lodges were in fact connected with or manipulated by rich landlords and peasant exploiters. Instead of helping the poor lineages or poor members of rich lineages, they became an arm of powerful lineage elites who aspired to control the marketing community or to settle their scores with neighboring lineages.¹⁵

Hence, unlike the peasant movements of twentieth-century China, secret societies were both chronic and sporadic. On the one hand, it was impossible to completely wipe out the outer Triads or to remove the periodic crises faced by the peasants in settled villages so long as the traditional socioeconomic system remained unchanged. On the other hand, secret society uprisings were difficult to sustain because secret society membership never amounted to more than an active minority dissociated from the rest of the rural population. A crisis might temporarily swell their numbers, but membership generally dissipated afterwards. Hence, secret society leaders had to rebuild their strength after each isolated (and usually very brief) crisis had passed.

The decade after the Opium War marked the climax of Triad activities in South China. The Opium War itself and the subsequent opening of Shanghai as a treaty port led to a crisis situation for the inhabitants of the Pearl River delta. The porters, dock-workers, and boatmen were driven out of their jobs as a result of the shifting of the tea and silk trade from Canton to Shanghai. Militiamen who were disbanded after the Opium War became increasingly unruly; pirates in the Pearl River delta were driven upstream by the British navy. These men increased the membership of Triad brotherhoods in the wooded interior of western Kwangtung, where an active opium smuggling business had already been in place for quite some time. By 1843, the outer Triads were actively recruiting members in the settled villages around Canton. In some cases, entire villages joined voluntarily because their

inhabitants were faced with an economic crisis: the cottage weaving industry had declined, taxes had increased dramatically, and 1848-50 and 1852 were years of poor harvests. The Red Turbans (a Triad lodge) attacked several cities in the vicinity of Canton in 1854 and then set to quarrelling among themselves later in the same year.¹⁶

In spite of the problems and suppression encountered by secret societies, they were considered a threat by lineage organizations because they developed ties across lineage groups. To counter secret society activities, lineages joined together to form leagues, bureaus, and central bureaus which trained and paid militiamen.¹⁷ The Triads were defeated. The outer Triads marched back to the mountains, the pirates went downstream, and the inner Triads dissociated themselves from the outer Triads. "White terror" followed—many villagers suspected of Red Turban affiliation were arrested in 1855.¹⁸

From the 1860s to the beginning of the twentieth century, secret society activities waned. After many years of trying to curb the Taiping Rebellion (1851-64), the state was particularly vigilant against religious sects and secret societies. The Triads shifted their center to Southeast Asia.¹⁹ Until the early twentieth century, there were no large-scale uprisings led by Triad members in South China.²⁰ The core of the outer Triad members still remained, but these isolated brotherhoods were incapable of replacing lineages as a principle of social organization in South China.

Ethnic differences were less significant in the formation of systems of social organization than either lineage or socioeconomic class differences. In South China, ethnic differences were perceived as a matter of cultural rather than racial attributes, for, at least by the eighteenth century, inhabitants of South China were predominantly Han. Native tribes accounted for only 2 percent of the whole population in South China. After the massive migration of the Han into South China, most of the aboriginal groups (such as the Li and the Yao) either went across the border into mainland Southeast Asia, lived in remote areas in southwestern China, or were assimilated by the Han. Nonetheless, South China was culturally more heterogeneous than North China. While the North China plain served as a melting pot, South China was the recipient of successive waves of migration from the north. It is also more hilly and hence conducive to the isolation of one social group from another. Hence, as late as the nineteenth century, the Han people in South China still divided themselves into various subgroups based on such differences as recency of settlement and provincial origin of their ancestors or cultural differences such as customs, habits, and dialects. In Kwangtung Province, for example, the Chinese inhabitants categorized themselves as Punti (*pen-ti*, "locals") which included the Cantonese and the people of Ch'ao-chou; Hakka (*k'o-chia*, "guests"); Hoklo; or Tanka ("boat people").²¹

Ethnicity had been important in South China before the twentieth century. Conflict between ethnic groups, for example, was responsible for at least one major local war in the area—the Hakka-Punti War (1856-67), which affected many *hsien* in western Kwangtung and claimed more than one hundred thousand lives. The origin of the war dates back to the seventeenth century. In 1662, the Ch'ing dynasty was apprehensive about the Ming loyalists who occupied Taiwan as a base for anti-Manchu resistance, so the emperor ordered the evacuation of settlements along the Chinese coast. By 1683, with the remnants of resistance on Taiwan removed, the Ch'ing emperor reopened the coastal areas for farming and settlement. The Hakka were encouraged to develop the land in the Pearl River delta area. But as land in this area had already been claimed by the Punti lineages (even though the property was still uncultivated after the evacuation), the Hakka were forced to live interspersed among the Punti either as farm laborers or as tenant farmers. There were no Hakka villages or ancestral halls.

The symbiotic relationship between the Hakka tenants and farm laborers and the Punti landlords was upset during the mid-nineteenth century. Because of the rapid increase of population, the Hakka peasants made efforts to secure rent-free land to farm. This move united the Punti tenants and the Punti landlords against the Hakka: the Punti tenants were in competition with the Hakka for land, and the Punti landlords were alarmed at Hakka assertiveness. Hence, Punti and Hakka were increasingly divided into two hostile camps. Ethnicity—not socioeconomic class—thus served as the major criterion of social organization in the counties west of the Pearl River delta.²²

In 1854, the Hakka banded together in fortified villages. A number of these fortified villages then formed leagues and bureaus which trained Hakka militiamen to fight first the Red Turbans and the Punti. The Punti did likewise. The conflict soon escalated, ultimately affecting almost all the counties in western Kwangtung. The government tried at first to be neutral but was later persuaded by Punti leaders to side with them. Many Hakka, embittered, began to join the Taiping forces and followed the latter movement into Kwangsi.

The Hakka-Punti War ended in 1867. By government order, Ch'ih-hsi *t'ing* was formed out of a portion of T'ai-shan County. The Punti were to give up land in the Ch'ih-hsi area to the Hakka and, in return, to receive Hakka land in T'ai-shan County. As Ch'ih-hsi *t'ing* was too small to hold all the Hakka, many went on to the extreme southwest, to Hainan Island and the Lei-chou Peninsula. They were instrumental in developing these hitherto underpopulated areas. Many Hakka also emigrated overseas. In 1906, Hakka representatives appealed to the governor of Kwangtung Province to let them come back to their original villages in western Kwangtung, but their request was turned down. The governor was apprehensive about the possibility of further ethnic feuds in that area.²³