



Royal Asiatic Society **Hong Kong Studies Series**

# Cantonese Society in Hong Kong and Singapore

Gender, Religion, Medicine and Money

Essays by Marjorie Topley  
edited and introduced by Jean DeBernardi



Cantonese Society in Hong Kong and Singapore

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*Edited and Introduced by Jean DeBernardi*



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## **Cantonese Society in Hong Kong and Singapore**

## Royal Asiatic Society Hong Kong Studies Series

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## Foreword

Many anthologies of academic and intellectual study can appear quite dry to the uninitiated. Sometimes the very title prompts the casual reader to reach for his or her dictionary in order to get an idea of what the book or article is about, or to select another book altogether. Not so in the case of this large and informative collection of essays. The topics of gender, religion, medicine and money were the main areas of focus for Marjorie Topley during her many years of research, and remain undisputedly four of the main pillars of society today.

Arriving in Singapore as a young and enthusiastic twenty-something lady in 1951, Topley was a classic case of being the right person in the right place at the right time. It is to our lasting benefit she did not pursue her initial interests of geography and sociology. Instead, her hard-won academic training in anthropology was put to immediate use in the very foreign society that was post-war Singapore. Very often it is the case that it takes an outsider to study and record what has been general knowledge and standard practice for generations for an indigenous population. And this is Topley's lasting achievement. Topics such as "The Buddhist view of nature and the cosmos" are so much a part of the make-up of Chinese people that they would probably be hard pushed to explain it themselves.

What is the relevance of Topley's writing today, given that much of it first appeared 40 and 50 years ago? I would suggest that it is of tremendous relevance. Much of the "hardware" that she describes in both Singapore and Hong Kong has long gone – the temples, vegetarian halls and other institutions. However, scratch the surface of any Chinese society and the "software" is usually there, alive and well – the attitudes and beliefs of the people, and other aspects of what is often referred to as "collective memory". Chinese society is to be envied by much of the so-called developed world, in that not only is much of the old traditional way of life still visible in people's behaviour but it is also so deeply instilled from parent to child that it is difficult to see it totally disappearing. This collection of essays therefore needs to be read whilst at the same time raising the veil of our modern surroundings. In this way, Topley's writing is as meaningful and insightful today as it was when it first appeared.

It is a particular pleasure to welcome this volume as the latest in the Royal Asiatic Society Hong Kong Studies Series. Marjorie Topley played

a pivotal role in the resuscitation of the Society's Hong Kong Branch in 1959 and came to be a Vice-President and later President. She shaped the organization that still flourishes, over 50 years later, and lives up to the standards that she and her co-founders set for us back then.

The Royal Asiatic Society Hong Kong Branch and Hong Kong University Press are very proud of what they have achieved so far with the Studies Series. More and more people, both here and abroad, are finding that Hong Kong and its unique history and culture provides a rich and fascinating field of study. An increasing number of schools are including the history of our city and its surroundings in their curricula, for which we should be able to take some credit. We will continue to bring to the public original works that will enhance this area even further.

The publications in the Studies Series have been made possible initially by the very generous donation of seeding capital by the Trustees of the Clague Trust Fund, representing the estate of the late Sir Douglas Clague. This donation enabled us to establish a trust fund in the name of Sir Lindsay and Lady Ride, in memory of our first Vice President and his wife. The Society itself added to this fund, as have a number of other generous donors.

The result is that we now have funding to bring to students of Hong Kong's history, culture and society a number of books that might otherwise not have seen the light of day. Furthermore, we continue to be delighted with the agreement established with Hong Kong University Press, which sets out the basis on which the Press will partner our efforts.

Robert Nield  
President  
Royal Asiatic Society, Hong Kong Branch

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## *Introduction*

# **Cantonese Society in Hong Kong and Singapore: Gender, Religion, Medicine and Money**

**Essays by Marjorie Topley**

Jean DeBernardi<sup>1</sup>

This book collects the published articles of Dr. Marjorie Topley, who was a pioneer in the field of social anthropology in the postwar period. Her ethnographic research in Singapore and Hong Kong sets a high standard for urban anthropology, focusing on topics that remain current and important in the discipline.

Dr. Topley's publications reflect her training in British social anthropology, with its focus on fieldwork and detailed empirical observation. She was among the first to refine and extend those methods in the 1950s, adapting them to the study of modernizing urban settings like Singapore and Hong Kong. Her ethnographic research on the Great

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1 For support for this project in its initial stage, thanks are due to Paul Kratoska of National University of Singapore Press and Colin Day of Hong Kong University Press. The Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada provided funding for a short period of research in Hong Kong in 2006 that allowed me to consult archival sources and to interview longtime members of the Hong Kong Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society (HKBRAS). Jenny Day, the Secretary of HKBRAS, assisted me in gaining access to their records at the Hong Kong Public Records Office. Hugh Baker, Colin Day, James Hayes, and Dan Waters shared knowledge and reminiscences that guided me in preparation of the Introduction, as did Prof. Wang Gungwu, whom Dr. Topley first met in Singapore in the 1950s while he was still a student. Thanks are also due to Michael Duckworth and Dennis Cheung for guiding the manuscript through the final publication process. Last but not least, Dr. Marjorie Topley shared reminiscences, reprints, and photographs, and offered advice as the volume was being prepared.

For their assistance in preparing the chapters for publication, special thanks are due to Paul Harms, Cathy Kmita, and Hsu Yu-tsun, all of the Department of Anthropology, University of Alberta. Prof. Hugh Baker generously spent many hours refining Cantonese entries in the Chinese glossary and also scanned original photographs in Marjorie Topley's private collection for inclusion in this publication. For careful work in copyediting the manuscript Yat-kong Fung is due special thanks, as is Moira Calder for preparing the index.

Way of Former Heaven sectarian movement and Cantonese women's vegetarian halls in Singapore in the 1950s is an early contribution to the study of sub-cultural groups in a complex urban society, and she asks insightful questions about the relationship between religion, secularism, and modernity. Because of extensive social change in Singapore and Hong Kong, many of the temples and religious organizations that she describes have disappeared or experienced radical transformation. Consequently, her work on these topics also has added value as historical documentation of the recent past.

Dr. Topley was a pioneer in several areas of scholarship. She conducted important early research on Chinese women's organizations, and her article on "Marriage Resistance in Rural Kwangtung" (1978) is a classic in the fields of Chinese anthropology and women's studies. She also broke new ground in the field of Chinese medical anthropology, exploring the interface between Chinese and Western medicine and medical practitioners in Hong Kong, and also investigating Chinese women's use of traditional and modern remedies especially in the treatment of their children's illnesses. Her 1974 article, "Cosmic Antagonisms: A Mother-Child Syndrome", which appeared in a volume on *Religion and Ritual in Chinese Society* that Arthur Wolf edited, is widely known and cited. A student of Raymond Firth's, she also focused a number of articles on economic issues, including the collective management of property and wealth.

Dr. Topley never held a full-time academic appointment, but until her return to England in 1983 took full advantage of residence in Singapore and Hong Kong to conduct research, teach, and participate in international conferences. In 1959, she helped to revive the Hong Kong Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society, creating a vibrant organization that organizes public lectures and symposia, publishes a journal and monographs, and invites members on popular expert-led field trips and tours.

## Training in England<sup>2</sup>

When I interviewed Dr. Topley in 2005, she recalled her early life and training in anthropology. Marjorie Topley (née Wills) was born in Hendon, London, in 1927. As a girl she attended Church of England schools that she describes as "ordinary". She was fascinated by Egyptology and wanted to become an archaeologist. When she was about

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2 While doing archival research in London in May 2005, I visited Dr. Topley at her home and interviewed her about her life and career. The following account is based on that interview.

12 years old she wrote to Sir Flinders Petrie (1853–1942), one of the founders of modern Egyptology. She got a letter back, “You’ve got to be well-off and a man to be an archaeologist.” She resigned herself “to give that one up”.

She was a teenager during World War II:

Of course, you know, I grew up during the war. We were bombed at one point. We used to sleep in an air raid shelter. I was allowed to stay up until 9:30. I stayed up and a German plane dropped two bombs, one behind and one in front. I was calling “Mother, mother”, and she was calling “Mother, mother” too. We were lucky; we weren’t injured.

Because she failed to pass a crucial scholarship examination, for a time she went to a technical college that taught skills like shorthand and typing. She was deeply unhappy there, and the headmaster offered to help her enter the City of London College. She succeeded in winning an award to support her studies, prepared for the London School of Economics (LSE) entrance exam, and passed it.

In her first year she studied geography, but she became bored with it and switched to sociology. But she again lost interest, concluding that sociology was based too much on common sense. Initially anthropology was not an option since Raymond Firth, who was head of department, had concluded that undergraduates should not study anthropology since the subject was morally relative and potentially disturbing. When he changed his mind, she switched her major from sociology to anthropology. Consequently Topley was the first undergraduate student in anthropology at the London School of Economics.

While still an undergraduate Topley attended the famous LSE seminar that Malinowski had initiated during his term as Professor of Anthropology, and which Firth had continued when he assumed the position of Professor. Her fellow students were all postgraduates coming back from the field, and she could only write “little essays from books”. After she read one of these essays out loud to the seminar group, Austrian-born Siegfried Nadel, then a lecturer at the LSE, asked, “Was your journey *really* necessary?” quoting the words on a government war-time poster. She was devastated by his sarcasm. But she also met more congenial anthropology postgraduates, including Barbara Ward, Maurice Freedman, and Judith Djamour Freedman. Before she was 21 years old, she also did a summer course at the University of Chicago. She found the M.A. students at Chicago to be no more advanced than the undergraduate majors at the LSE, who had specialized in their subject earlier in their careers.



At the LSE Marjorie met her husband, Kenneth Wallis Joseph Topley (1922–2007), who had entered the LSE to study political science after leaving the air force at the end of World War II. There he studied government under Harold Laski (Topley 1969: xviii), a controversial political theorist who also was Chairman of the British Labour Party from 1945–46 and contributed to shaping the party's policies.<sup>3</sup>

At that time, anthropology students went directly into the Ph.D. programme without doing an M.A. Marjorie did not think that she could do any further degree since she would have had to do fieldwork. Her formal training in anthropology ended and her work as an ethnographic researcher began when her husband joined the colonial service. In preparation, they studied Chinese at the School of Oriental and African Studies, and in 1951 they went to Singapore.

### Singapore (1951–55)

During World War II, the British lost control of Malaya and the Straits Settlements to Japan. On their return to Singapore after World War II, they faced armed opposition to the restoration of colonial rule. From 1948–60, the Malayan Communist Party's Malayan Races Liberation Army (MRLA) fought a guerrilla war in which they sought to overthrow the British colonial administration. In Malaya, the British forced over 500,000 people — most of them ethnic Chinese — to relocate from isolated areas, seeking to prevent them from providing the insurgents with food. The policy of resettlement, which caused great hardship, only intensified support for the Communists. By the time the Topleys arrived in Singapore in 1951, a number of violent clashes had occurred (see Stubbs 2008). The “Malayan Emergency” was the British colonial government's name for this conflict.

In April 1951 Topley took a post at the Raffles Museum as curator of anthropology since “they couldn't get a man to come out during [the] bandit troubles”, i.e., the Emergency. In 1952, a *Straits Times* reporter interviewed Topley for an article entitled “She Spent a Night in a Death House: Portrait of a Pretty Anthropologist” (Hall 1952). As Topley described it, when she first entered the huge, dusty rooms at the back of the Museum, she found piles of unsorted specimens and exhibits, some of which had been hurriedly stored before the Japanese occupation. Although she would have liked to travel to Malaya to collect items for the museum collection, the “Communist war” made that impractical.

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3 For further details on Harold Laski, see the LSE website: <http://www.lse.ac.uk/resources/LSEHistory/laski.htm> (consulted on 3 August 2008).