Cantonese Society in a Time of Change

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Preface

The study of human conventions is a field shared by many academic disciplines although the importance and value ascribed to what is conventional may vary between scholars and disciplines. This range of opinion also exists outside the walls of universities. Sometimes the view may be quite negative as evidenced in a report by Vita Sackville-West in her travelogue *Passenger to Teheran*. At a dinner held in Cairo in 1913, hosted by the famous Lord Kitchner, it happened that Egyptian art came up as a topic. The host volunteered that 'I don't think much of a people who drew cats the same way for four thousand years'. In a similar vein, those who have held power in the last century in China have not generally held tradition in great esteem. Custom, convention and institution refer in some way to a notion of tradition as opposed to revolution. However, it is not necessarily true that the citizens of China share this view with their overlords and, in the new post-revolutionary period, the search for old conventions and their attempted revivals are features that are very evident in many parts of the country. It is this basic process of finding links with the past that has supplied the topics and problems of this study.

The work presented here is the result of a co-operation between a social historian and a social anthropologist, both intrigued by what is going on at this time in southern China. In particular, our converging interests focus on issues in the lives of 'ordinary' people who are not part of officialdom. Our plans were originally somewhat different, but the political year of 1989 seemed to require some rethinking and so we opted for the Cantonese-speaking area of Guangdong Province as a suitable arena for our fieldwork. This turned out to be an excellent choice and the region where we have worked proved to be lively, dynamic and forward looking. Its people were friendly and hospitable to the extent that our obvious apartness seemed almost negligible. We made our base in a village in the Pearl River Delta area and, from this vantage point, we explored as best we could this settlement and its surroundings. It is with great pleasure that we acknowledge all our enthusiastic informants

in the village of Gu Tsyn and elsewhere who all contributed so substantially to the successful completion of the fieldwork. We owe a deep debt of gratitude to them. We must mention Mr Mok King-fai and his mother, and the late Mrs Leung Bi-shan, who have been extremely helpful in arranging a number of practical matters. Furthermore, we would like to extend our most sincere thanks to Professor Tan Dihua of the University of Hong Kong for his help and encouragement. The Guangdong Academy of the Social Sciences proved to be a helpful resource, generously providing advice and supplementary materials and we are indebted to their Division of History for their help. We wish to thank the librarians of the Universities Service Centre of the Chinese University of Hong Kong for their help. Professors Lars Ragvald, Lund, and Mark Elvin, Australian National University, have also been supportive and are deserving of our appreciative thanks.

The project was generously financed by the Bank of Sweden Tercentenary Foundation — evidence not only of the world-wide research interests of this organization, but also of their committment to the promotion of qualitative analyses of social processes. We remain most thankful for their unfailing support. We also acknowledge the financial help towards editing costs extended to us by the Division of Humanities in the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology. Dr Virginia Unkefer of the same university, in particular, has to be thanked for her most generous and useful assistance in helping us to polish this manuscript.

Materials from this study have been presented and discussed at seminars arranged by the Ford Foundation and the Institute of Sociology of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in Beijing on The Sociology of China in 1991, at a conference staged by the Instituto Cultural de Macau on the 'Meeting Points of Cultures' in 1993, at the Institute for Chinese Studies at Oxford University in 1995, in the London China Seminar, held at the School of Oriental and African Studies of the University of London in 1996. The text presented here has benefited from these discussions.

The presentation of the ethnography follows the anthropological tradition of using the vernacular language for terms and expressions used, but readers who are more used to official standard Chinese will not suffer as characters are given for all words employed in the text; and when a shift from Cantonese to the *pinyin* romanization is employed, an asterisk (*) precedes the romanization.

It should also be added that place names and personal names have always been changed. Features of the topography have undergone a

transformation before being allowed to be featured as part of this text. This is in line with a general Chinese security demand that geography is an issue of national defence, but also of course to ensure complete anonymity of our informants. This latter point is also the reason why all lineage and personal names have been changed. A few other features which could possibly lead to indentification have also been consciously distorted. However, none of these substitutions affects the substance of what we argue.

Finally the authors thank one another for a wonderful collaboration.

The Authors
Gothenburg and Hong Kong, 2000

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Southern China in Change

This essay is an attempt at a cultural analysis of contemporary life in the countryside in Southern China. It is a work that reflects the combined efforts of a social anthropologist and a social historian to come to grips with cultural processes in Gwongdung 廣東 Province, the southernmost stretch in the Chinese dominion. Our aim has been to explore data collected in three periods of fieldwork in the delta land of the Pearl River, an exploration which has also benefited from what can be gleaned from other printed sources.

In our view, a study of social phenomena has three dimensions, each providing different starting points for an exploration of human acts. One of these dimensions implies a pragmatic approach in which informants' information, combined with contextual ethnographic observation, takes the lead. Dialogue and conversation with people who live the social life under examination is then crucial, their reminiscences from times past essential for the understanding of the present, and a knowledge of their plans and ambitions a prerequisite for understanding in what directions they may strive and thereby set their social course. Interaction, reflection and introspective accounting are as important as gossiping, quarrelling and speculation. To be able to move around informally among local people is the basic condition for the gathering of this kind of ethnographic data. To solicit information that is not tainted by dominant official views, it is absolutely essential to the procedure to establish a basic mutual trust and to be able to talk in a degree of privacy. While finding our way into the local communities through the local networks, we have everywhere in the delta land met with a response of interest and candid openness. Discussions with informants and observations of what they do have led to a number of explorative suggestions, which will be presented in the coming chapters. In terms of a more specialized

jargon, it could be said that one aim of this study is reflected in its use of particularistic data in an attempt to construct a more synthetic view of the cultural process; empirical data have been formed contextually and should be understood in terms of social discourse. The formation of discursive data has taken its starting point in individual perceptions, understandings and memories.

The other dimension of our enquiry is concerned with society as a set of symbolic manifestations that inform people directly without any mediation of language, linguistic thought and linguistically structured cognition. The methodological perspective that has informed this line of enquiry depends on the outside view, the deconstruction of observed symbolism and the exposition of the messages conveyed through the imagery of the symbolically constructed world. The cultural semantics of social life are at the heart of this kind of enquiry and their main theoretical underpinning is systems analysis — the notion of a system being the best available tool for the analysis of cultural imagery. This outside, or 'etic', exploration of symbolism is deemed to be consonant with the intuitions concerning the world that people actually have.

A third dimension of a 'realistic' accounting of group formation in a texture of interlinked tasks, the operational order (cf. Verdon 1993), is also part of this investigation, but our emphasis has been on the symbolic construction of communities rather than the formation of practically orientated groups.

The three analytical dimensions of social life — the pragmatical involvement in process and meaning-making, the encompassment of patterns of significance and the combining of people to achieve particular goals — will in this study be allowed to interact and combine in a unitary exploration of social life in South China.

What evolves today on the social scene in Southern China has been seen as part of a continuous process linking present-day social actors with their past while holding up the promise of a future. Janus-faced, the Chinese countryman processes information pertaining to the past to construct a present and to envisage times to come, and it is precisely this construction of a lived-in world, in which past and future converge, that is the focus of this study. Employing a contradiction in words we shall call this construct a 'neo-tradition'. The addition of the prefix 'neo' is intended as an indicator that tradition rests on somewhat shaky ground, with symbolic elements being recovered from social oblivion and their modern use characterized by a great deal of uncertainty.

Sources of ethnographic information, whether primary or secondary, are not abundant and accounts of detailed and direct observations made

in the countryside of Southern China are rare. While this work aims at a 'recycling' of such data that does exist on record, it also has the further ambition to present a new ethnographical foundation for arguments by drawing on our body of new field material. As mentioned, the investigations have been conducted in areas in the Pearl River Delta land, a region that in recent history has taken the lead in the capitalist transformation of China's once harsh socialist system.

No simple model could do justice to the variety of the social landscape of the past, not even within one limited region. A vast country with a vast population living in varying climates and under differing social and political pressures, China has little we can point to as being obviously uniformly Chinese. The plains in the north and the river valleys in the south offer very different ecological frameworks for production and, consequently, social morphology within the operational order of Chinese society has shifted with the morphology of the landscape. If it were not for some fairly recurrent features of the expressive Chinese imaginary order, which seem to appear with some constancy, and a unifying political structure, it would be very hard indeed to speak of 'Chinese society'. Already the variation of conditions within a province like that of Gwongdung are tremendous. The landscape contains both riverine plains and remote mountain areas of great altitude. People here speak a multitude of languages — Cantonese (in its many variations), Hakka, Min, Hainanese, apart from the official use of standard Chinese. Certain areas have non-Han populations who speak their own languages. We have been working in a predominantly Cantonese-speaking environment, and following an anthropological tradition of employing the local vernacular, Cantonese will, by and large, be the language used in the presentation.[1] Whenever standard Chinese is employed, an asterisk (*) will be added to mark such a shift.

Rural production in the South was never limited to agriculture but may be seen as a network of effort and enterprises that linked together a diversified economy. Economic life resulted from a mixture of urban work, handicrafts and cottage industries, fishing, transportation, trade and marketing, banking and entrepreneurship, land speculation, crime and banditry, together with the plowing and planting of the land. Accordingly, we should not be lured into theoretical stereotypes, developed in anthropology and sociology, of a Chinese peasant mentality, because it seems clear from such evidence that we have from 'traditional' situations that the rural population was always open to opportunity. Whether a peasant ethos exists at all is another question; it stands to reason that such generalizations should not only be tested empirically

but also scrutinized as examples of hegemonic Western thought. In any case, Southern China does not provide the data to support the psychologizing mode of reasoning so clearly cherished in peasant and rural studies (cf. Aijmer 1986: 15–18).

Agriculture and other forms of rural production in South China were usually organized on a 'supra-domestic'[2] level — but the kind of organization and institutional frameworks seem to have varied considerably in different parts of the region. In our examination of the South, we must note that all through history, as it can be recovered, this part of China has been relatively wealthy[3] with cultivation of rice on irrigated fields as a predominant basis for the economy. It seems true to say that there has been a constant improvement in food production here; it has been suggested that such changes which led to greater agricultural output in Imperial times were, by and large, the result of local peasant experimentation and experiences rather than owing to the endeavours of the State or provincial management.

In South-eastern China, kinship organizations of the 'lineage' kind (cf. Freedman 1958; 1966; 1970; Aijmer 1967; Potter 1968; 1970a; Baker 1968; J. Watson 1975; R. Watson 1985; Potter & Potter 1990) were a dominating force in the social landscape. They were often important collective landlords that managed rice production on irrigated fields. The lineages resided in compact and well-delimited villages, or segment of villages, often within impressive defence works and moated walls. But in some areas, such as the Pearl River Delta in Gwongdung, single farmsteads were common and in the regions where this occurred — where silk production was of great importance — inter-dependencies between chains of producers, commercial networks linking producers with urban enterprises and export businesses, constituted the organizational presupposition. Silkworm raisers, mulberry leaf growers, cocoon vendors, reeling workshops, weavers and merchants formed important networks of social and political consequence (Trewartha 1939; Stockard 1989: *passim*).

Southern Chinese villages also harboured social organizations that were not essentially based on kinship. Some of these were fairly loose, while others, like certain types of religious organizations, may have been as effective in the fields of economic management and political control as were the large-scale kinship organizations. Neighbourhoods, within or around villages, were important in local territorial organizations everywhere in Gwongdung; often based indirectly on, and drawing from, the integrative force of lineage segments, they were well consolidated and almost permanent; they also kept temples and shrines.

Marketing processes created other frames of reference and politics, which, through a system of hierarchically related market towns, integrated the Gwongdung countryside (cf. Skinner 1964–65). There was also the political and military control of the country, organized in terms of prefectures, districts and subdistricts, and their military counterparts. Military garrisons dotted the countryside and the villages were supposed to have — but most probably never had — a village constable system, a sort of liaison between the peasants and the authorities (cf. Hsiao 1967: Ch. 3).

These brief notes are only to outline in the crudest way a few prominent features of the traditional social landscape of Southern China. The picture given will require many further qualifications and modifications, but what is said here is only in the nature of a very brief reminder of an order of the past — an order of tremendous variation. When revolutionary change culminated around 1950, the drama was not set in a monolithically uniform social landscape.

Drastic change and reorganization of production are no novelties to the Cantonese peasant. War and revolution have for centuries been part of his experience. If we turn to a more recent past, it will be recalled that Communist victory on the Chinese mainland — in the South accomplished by conquest of regular armies — was followed by a land reform in 1950–53 aimed at the elimination of wealthy peasants, collectivization of property, and the creation of an integrated village economy. The Great Leap Forward in 1958 brought about large-scale communes, mobilization of the poor peasantry and renewal of work organizations along military lines.

The zest for social reform had organizational consequences that were detrimental to the local economies and caused much suffering. It is difficult to substantiate what really went on in the countryside during this period up to 1961. Attempts at tearing apart old social structures in favour of collective organizations introduced mess-hall cooking and eating for members of 'Production Brigades' — organized neighbourhoods and sections of villages — and expressed the new radical freedom from old habits. In line with this was the introduction of new rituals of production. The peasants were marched off to the fields in the morning parading Mao Zedong portraits and red banners, which were planted around the fields.[4] The work process itself, however, was much less well planned. It has often been said that the new peasants swarmed over the fields without always having much idea of what they were supposed to be doing.

Elderly countrymen of Soendek 順德 in the Pearl River Delta have

vivid recollections of their response to the revolutionary drama in the early years of Communist rule. In the radical period of rural revolution, social control was extremely tight. It is said that people responded to the bizarre events by developing various new strategies. It is recalled that they were glad to dine in the collective 'rice hall', because the meals there were free. After this public meal, those who still had an appetite for more would cook clandestinely an 'after meal' at home. At the time and given the circumstances, informants say that they were quite happy with the arrangement. While suffering from the pressure of the reformed style of life, they took as much advantage as they could of the new situation.

In response to the unrealistic bureaucratic efforts to increase the productivity of the land, the local peasants were doubtful. Already at the outset of the campaign, people were deeply concerned and worried by the blindness of the plans. Most of them, being very experienced tillers, were fully aware of the dangers of this self-destructive agricultural policy. Still, in order to avoid being publicly criticized by the local officials and party men, they all kept quiet and just did what they were told to do — fully aware of the calamities that would be brought about the coming years.

There is general agreement that this failure of the radical socialist economic experiments weakened the local official zest for socialist reform and fostered strategies for self-embetterment. Party cadres at brigade and commune levels were commonly found to be involved in cases of corruption; they proved inefficient, suffered from political inertia, and were even found to be leading in the revival of 'feudalistic superstitious activities' (*Shunde xian yijiuliusan nian* 1963).

Central decision making was of paramount importance during the period of collectivism. Mao's dictum of 'grain first' resulted in many places where commune officials tore up melon patches or cut down fruit trees cultivated by the peasants to earn a little extra income to make room for new fields of basic cereal production. The agricultural landscape was also affected. Lakes and dams were reclaimed, whereby fish production fell steeply. The radical incentive structure was thus strengthened, but agricultural output did not generally match the expectations of the radicals.

The results of the Great Leap Forward campaign (1958–1960) were in most respects disastrous. In fact, the impact of the early radical reforms was of much greater consequence to China even than the upheavals during the Cultural Revolution. In the South, famine and disorder were the results.

The Great Leap Forward and the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) were both ritualistic mass movements of a millenarian kind. Whereas the former was strongly geared to symbolic production in which old things made of steel were melted down in primitive home-constructed furnaces to be recast as new things made of steel, the Cultural Revolution was more expressively ideological in nature. In both cases, Socialist Society was just around the bend and could be conquered and maintained by the right rituals. Both campaigns were, in a typical millenarian fashion, hostile and destructive to tradition. The Cultural Revolution mobilized the young into martial organizations called Red Guards, who campaigned around in the country destroying and rampaging the cities, towns and countryside. Ritual symbolic expressions included such public fury as the destruction of temples, the holding of aggressive mass meetings and parades, and public violent struggle meetings humiliating officialdom. There was a major reshuffle in the Communist Party structure.[5]

The winds changed. In the early 1980s it became fashionable to hold up the peasant as a model of enlightened self-interest for the rest of the nation. The post-Mao leadership watched with increasing satisfaction how agricultural production rose with the demolition of politically controlled work processes, and how better supplies of food and raw materials now reached the growing urban areas. This growth was recorded despite the fact that these years saw spells of bad weather, which no doubt had serious effects in many areas of the country. It is well known that these steps to increase agricultural output were dependent on a new policy line that favoured individual effort rather than collective enterprise, and the acceptance of a surplus market operating on principles of supply and demand. It seems more or less officially recognized that the commune system, by and large, led to low production, although it may have been initially successful to a limited degree. This was in contrast to a much cherished view, the leftist maxim that the larger the accounting unit for production and wages, the greater the production. Above all, the system has been seen as failing to accumulate such funds as would allow modern inputs. Along with other economic sectors, agriculture and rural production have had their share of accusations of inefficiency and corruption among cadres.

The peasant population has experienced unemployment — to some degree hidden in nature — and in comparison to industry, low levels of income. The commune system is also said to have shown a remarkable inability to stimulate growth in all but major crops. This was due to the planning system that set acreage quotas for all major crops and more or

less prohibited family sidelines and rural markets, which could enable and encourage the production and marketing of other foods.

The reforms that were carried out were in many ways no less than a complete dismantling of the commune system. The reforms were, however, still informed by ideas of collective ownership and they did not imply a straightforward reintroduction of such forms of land control as had been predominant before 'Liberation'.

The retreat had in fact already begun in the early 1960s when ownership was transferred from communes to brigades, and later in the 1970s when smaller sub-brigades and teams were emphasized. The re-establishment of a more traditional structure was to be found in a new consonance between village and brigade or sub-brigade.

While it is true to say that in the early 1980s there was in China a return to more pre-socialist forms of agricultural production, this must not be read as a conscious return to tradition. The land remained owned by collective production brigades and what was new was that a peasant family could be assigned different patches of land to farm in different years. Still it must have presented the Chinese Communist Party ideologues with some problems to do away with several decades of collective striving and to turn their backs on large-scale organizations, which, for a long time, had been praised by all and sundry and even made a model for rural development in other countries. Essentially the new reform activities were to separate labour from ownership.

From the province of Gwongdung we have access to some material that may well have given potential reformists food for thought. The description comes from Wansing 環城 in the west delta area. One of many projects which were designed by the County Government was the construction of a highway dike in 1975, and orders were forwarded to the Commune to create a set of canals — which later turned out to be an ecological disaster. We learn that the commune drained its treasury of funds accumulated over ten years. Several brigades in the commune found their valuable farm land reduced in size, and team members lost their fruit trees on the dikes. The County Government never delivered the water pumps and the electricity that it had promised. Local cadres felt they had no choice but to follow the directives of the county working in the spirit of *Dazhai — the then national model brigade held up by Mao Zedong and his radical followers (Siu 1989a: xviii).

In the late 1970s, when the new plans for the distribution of land and resources were well under way, it was stressed that this new vision of rural reform did not imply a return to private ownership or forms of mutual exploitation. It was a question of voluntary participation and

mutual benefit within a system of collective ownership. But it was intended that the peasant should have a 'sense of ownership' by seeing that there is stable tenure, even if the land was theoretically owned by all. This should promote the peasants' long-term interest in husbanding available resources.

In the early years of the 1980s, the implementation of reform was still quite experimental and the household principle was often extended to areas other than the agricultural sphere. Different applications were tried out in various parts of the country. So were common tasks and special work assignments such as the mending and construction of roads or the building of small irrigation projects, intermittently contracted on a household basis where this was found appropriate. Work was then paid for according to the work-point system.

It has often been said that the reforms were carried out to increase the incentive of farmers to produce more. Personal benefits were seen as an essential component in household production, benefits that would involve the producer differently in that his personal interests would be directly consonant with the long-term interests of an expanding agricultural sector. In an article in the leading Party newspaper *Renmin ribao* in 1978, Deng Xiaoping, the then General Secretary of the Party, accepted income differentiation and the accumulation of wealth in the rural sector. Riches were all right as long as they originated from legitimate labour.

The new order marks in principle the end of Maoist reform with regard to organization of work. The new system revolves around household-by-household contracts that guarantee that, in exchange for the right to farm a particular stretch of land, the household will supply a specified amount of grain and other products to the State, keeping the rest for itself.[6]

It may also be noted that the reforms have introduced new ways of forming co-operatives on a voluntary basis beyond State control and the work organization designed by the State. A new feature is reported to be the number of specialized groups that contract with the production team or brigade to supply specified amounts of sideline products, such as fish or handicrafts. The system may even have encouraged such new forms of co-operation between willing partners, for instance, the buying of a new tractor or other useful equipment by a group of households.

In 1983 there were official claims that rural reforms had proceeded to a second stage. Farming families were now allowed to exchange labour and hire seasonal or casual labour, thereby giving rise to a rural labour market. Families were allowed to purchase agricultural machinery,

tractors, boats and motor vehicles. 'Specialized households' were encouraged to engage in services such as transport, marketing, and mechanized ploughing and harvesting with their own equipment. This could mean anything from chicken rearing to mechanical repairs. In such features we can see the possible reintroduction of open entrepreneurship and the elements of commercial forms of integration of rural society. All Maoist ideas of self-sufficiency seemed to have been buried by this time.

Also, in terms of administration, the communes were replaced by the *zhen* 鎮 (Township or District) local governments, and brigades by *xiang* 鄉 (Administrative Villages). The relations between *xiang* and lower units has developed in accordance with the general policy of allowing the former to contract with village-level (*cun* 村) organs for their annual output; villagers could, after meeting the requirements of their respective contracts, devote their surplus energies to private production for the free market.[7]

In the rice producing areas of Southern China, most of the farming is now done on a household basis and individual or small group tenants have established themselves on collectively owned land. In a way, this resembles, at least superficially, traditional forms of land tenure in Gwongdung and *Fujian, where it was common that lineages owned and controlled up to some ninety per cent of the arable land of a village domain and the members of the owning kinship communities farmed that land as tenants. Kinship gave people a share in the collective trust under lineage management. Today wider spans of kinship may not be the openly recognized criteria for membership in a local — rather than kinship — community; still, tenants work on land in which they have a share as collective owners. These structural similarities invite us to examine the links between ownership, management, and production in present-day Southern China in the light of what we know from pre-revolutionary days. However, after a long lapse of time, it proves difficult to reconstruct from recollections how the Imperial-Republican systems actually worked. What can be said is that, to date, wider spans of kinship have not been allowed to emerge in a formal way as foundations for politics and economic decision-making. Still, in some discrete ways, this is what happens in many villages in the Pearl River Delta today.

The last phase in this long chain of reform and changes is the abandonment in certain areas of Gwongdung Province, notably in the Delta, of the responsibility system — no State deliveries are enforced. The producer is assigned land in land distributions and can do whatever he likes with his fields, unless he leaves them uncultivated, in which case he has to pay a fine. This last phase has been introduced in an