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Some Preliminary Findings

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Suggested citation:

Wong, Shau-lam. 1975. *A Chinese Village in Transition: Some Preliminary Findings*. Hong Kong: Occasional Paper No. 56, Social Research Centre, The Chinese University of Hong Kong.

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by

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November, 1975.

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I. INTRODUCTION: THE FRAME OF REFERENCE

The present paper is an overview of some basic findings of a case study which attempts to explore the impact of industrial urbanism upon the social life of a Chinese rural community in Hong Kong. The community under study is Tai Po Tau Village, located about a mile northwest of a market town called Tai Po Hui in the New Territories. The field work took place during the years 1964-70.

The state of affairs within the community under study is conceptualized in terms of the "social systems" frame of reference.¹ In other words, the entire village is viewed as a social system. The units of study include individuals, groups, organizations, institutions, and the village community as-a-whole.

A social system is a goal-seeking and self-regulating complex entity, which is composed of elements or components directly or indirectly interrelated on the

* The study was directed by the author in collaboration with the sociology staff and students of Chung Chi College during the years 1964-70, mainly as an instructional programme in field work training. The research expenses were subsidized by the Asia Foundation and The Chinese University. The author wishes to acknowledge the assistance of the Social Research Centre of The Chinese University in preparing this paper.

¹ Walter Buckley, Sociology & Modern Systems Theory.
N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1967.

basis of information flow and resource allocation. It is generated and altered by the on-going process of interaction among normatively and purposively oriented individuals and social groups in an ecological setting. Hence, the essential features of the social system approach to community study are: (1) to concentrate upon the social relationships, upon the interdependence and the dynamic process of interaction among component subsystems; (2) to identify those sets of activities prerequisite to the existence and persistence of the community as a social system; (3) to relate the components and prerequisites of the system to the defined locality; and (4) to study the ways in which the community adapts to internal and external forces that modify both the system components and prerequisites.

II. THE RESEARCH PROCEDURES

This project was set up in the fall of 1964 for the purpose of adapting sociological instruction to the reality of Hong Kong Chinese society, and of training students in sociological theory and empirical research. Although the emphasis of the initial planning was placed upon the instructional function, serious research work was developed in a later stage so as to enhance the development of a more universally valid body of sociological knowledge of the complex process of community change.

The project was begun by making contacts with village community leaders and by collecting preliminary information from major informants. All Sociology majors at Chung Chi College in the second and third years were required to do field work under the supervision of the faculty members, and to spend at least one day and one night in the village every week. Two village houses were rented, and were used as the research office as well as the dormitories for students.

In order to reduce resistance and to promote cooperation from the villagers, we occasionally showed movies to all villagers, provided private tutoring to the children, and sent gifts to village families on festival days. By the end of 1965, the project had become systematically organized. The students were able to adapt to the village environment, and acquired observation and interview techniques to meet the basic requirements for village study. Furthermore, the students were fully accepted by the villagers.

At this preliminary stage of development, the students were mainly concerned with getting acquainted with individual families and collecting basic information through participant observation and informal interview. They were also required to write field reports after each field visit. Seminar discussions were then held among faculty members and student field workers so as to exchange

ideas and field experiences, to identify significant problems and phenomena, and to plan for the next task.

By the summer of 1966, we collected a complete set of demographic information. These data were then analyzed. Furthermore, a "family file" and a "subject file" were built, where information on each family and on each topic were kept in separate folders so that inflow of new data could be systematically classified.

On the basis of the above general and basic procedures, several significant research areas were identified in the fall of 1966. The students were then organized into several groups, and each group took a special area for intensive study. Under the supervision of teachers, different student groups might follow their research emphasis and develop their research design, such as content analysis of historical documents, depth interview of major informants, field observation, and sample surveys with structured or unstructured questionnaires.

By the summer of 1969, we have had a number of project reports written by the field groups. In view of the fact that the village has undergone a rapid growth of population over the past years, we decided to mobilize all the Sociology sophomores and juniors to conduct a second census survey. The data were then analyzed and compared with the demographic information collected in the summer of 1966.

In the year 1969-70, the present project was in its final stage. The major purposes were to follow up the special studies done by previous groups in the preceding years and to supplement our existing data. Students were then organized into four groups, and each group was responsible for collecting needed information from a particular district of the village which they knew best. Hence, whenever a particular piece of information was needed, it could be quickly obtained. Some students were also responsible for data processing and analysis.

III. THE VILLAGE AND ITS POPULATION

The Tai Po Tau Village is located about a mile northwest of a market town called Tai Po Hui in the New Territories of Hong Kong. It is a valley village with thirty acres of adjacent farm land. The Tai Po Road and the Kowloon railway are along the west side of the village. A bus stop is right in front of the village and the railway station is only a mile away.

Tai Po Tau is basically a single clan village of the Tang families. According to historical records, the Tangs were originally the natives of Chi-Shui Hsien, of the Kiangsi Province. Because of political unrest during the reign of Tai Tsu (960-976), an emperor of the Northern Sung Dynasty (960-1127), a prominent member of the Tang Clan moved southward and settled at Kuei Chneh Shan, which is now called Kam Tin in the New Territories

of Hong Kong, in the year 973 A.D. Since then, the Tangs have established several villages in other nearby areas mainly because of population growth. Tai Po Tau Village was founded by the Tang Clan about 400 years ago. In comparison with other early settlers, the Tang Clan has been the largest and the most influential local group in the New Territories throughout the last nine hundred years.

Like other villages in traditional China, the social structure of Tai Po Tau village before the modern era had the following characteristics: farm economy, high degree of self-sufficiency, dominance of the kinship system with heavy emphasis on lineage and high respect for the ancestors' obligation, differential sex roles, age and generational seniority, immobile population, high illiteracy, and conservatism. The situation has been drastically changed in the course of last twenty-five years because of the rapid change of the immediate surroundings.

Since World War II, the village had a phenomenal growth in population. Merely natural increase does not explain its rapid growth. It was estimated that there were 95 people in 1946, 265 in 1956. We conducted census surveys in 1966 and in 1969, and found that the numbers were 557 and 596 respectively. It is worth noting that the population size in 1969 is six times that of 1946.

Our 1969 census shows that the crude birth rate was 23.5, while the crude death rate was 3.36; therefore the natural increase was only 20.15 per thousand population. The primary reason for the population growth was the influx of immigrants. Since the Communists took over mainland China in 1949, there has been a continued inflow of outsiders to the village both from Mainland China and from the urban sectors of the Colony. From our 1969 census data, it was found that 450 out of the total population of 596 were immigrants, and 105 out of the total number of 123 households belonged to the immigrant group. These immigrants moved to the village, mainly because of (1) lower cost of living, (2) having some relatives or friends residing in the village, and (3) easy communication between the village and their place of work. Most of those who moved in before 1956 have kinship relation with the natives and most of the other late comers have no such connection. On the other side of the migration picture, a considerable number of the Tang clan members emigrated to the city areas and to other countries, such as England, The Netherlands and the United States of America. One significant aspect of urbanization is high mobility which has been clearly revealed in the present study. However, the general tendency in other countries has been a one-way traffic with more village people being attracted to the city. Not only do villagers move out to

the city but also urban residents move into the village in a greater numbers.

The Tai Po Tau Village was for centuries a single clan entity which was extremely ethnocentric. With the exception of its village school teacher, no outsider was permitted to live in the village before the Second World War, they preferred to leave the house vacant instead of renting it out to someone who did not belong to the Tang lineage. The breaking down of this time honoured practice by admitting a large number of outsiders reveals significant changes in the value system and power structure. It also turned a closely knit homogeneous group into a heterogeneous one.

IV. SOCIAL, POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC CHANGES

Since the 1950s, the political situation in Hong Kong became more complicated with the impact of urbanization, and industrialization increased in the New Territories. The Government found it necessary to strengthen the administrative control in the rural sector. Instead of leaving the governing of the village to the people, who possessed a high degree of autonomy in handling their own affairs, the Government set up district officers in order to have a closer supervision. One of the major steps taken by the Government was to reorganize the village power structure by creating a new generation of

leadership in the rural communities. In the old days decision making in the village was in the hands of senior members who enjoyed the respect of the community. In dealing with the outside world, they were the recognized representatives. Under the innovation introduced by the Government, the village representatives, elected by the village folks, must be approved by the Governmental authority. As a result, the village representative may not necessarily be a man senior in age nor in generation. He does not necessarily enjoy the popular respect of his own community. Notwithstanding the fact that the two representatives of Tai Po Tau had been elected to the office for over five years, seventy-four per cent of the residents were unable to identify their names and faces. In case something had happened, such as theft or dispute which required official attention, over 50% of the village residents indicated that they would directly contact the appropriate governmental body instead of the village representatives. Ninety-two per cent of the residents reported that they had not made any effort, or felt the need, to call on the village representatives in the past two years. All this seems to indicate that there is a considerable social distance between the formal leaders and their people which in the past was not so in a traditional Chinese rural village of comparable size. However, the leadership of the chief representative is

effective in many respects. Because of his wide social contacts with the outside world, and particularly with his smooth dealing with the local government offices, he has been an active agent in promoting changes in this conservative village, such as: the relaxation of the exclusion ruling by permitting outsiders to live in and to set up small industries in the village, installation of electricity and water supplies, and the establishment of a modern primary school with government subvention.

There are a total of thirty acres of farm land in the village of which 34 per cent belongs to the category of ancestral property. This type of land is non-transferrable and any income deriving from it is used for the general welfare of the clan members. The lineage families own forty per cent and the remaining twenty-six per cent is owned by non lineage families.

The change of land ownership is a significant phenomenon. When the village folks become less earthbound in their economic pursuits, they will be less reluctant to sell their land inherited from their forefathers. According to our statistics only thirteen per cent of the village population remain as farmers, while 87 per cent have changed to other occupations. The pressure of population growth and the demand for commercial property have boosted up the land value in the urban and industrial sectors of the Colony and it has its corresponding effect

on the rural scene. Being close to the market town and with easy communication with the business centres, the land value in the village has gone up about twenty times in the last twenty years. This mere fact would be a strong stimulant encouraging the village people to sell their land and invest the money in other economic enterprises. Even the ancestral land may not remain intact in the foreseeable future. Although the ancestral property is meant for the welfare of the lineage group, it often becomes the source of conflict among its members mainly due to management problems, particularly the suspicion of exploitation and corruption. The overwhelming majority would like to convert the land into ready cash and get their own shares. This type of attitude was considered unthinkable as it worked against the traditional values of filial piety and kinship solidarity as a result of the influence of urban culture which has been highly characterized by the spirit of individualism, with people tending to think more of their immediate monetary gain and less in terms of kinship ties. The ancestral hall is supposed to be the symbol of group integration and a most sacred place in the village. The village hall we found at Tai Po Tau was practically deserted and covered with dust and dirt. The ill-attended and depleted conditions of the ancestral hall unmistakably reflect the weakening of the time-honoured

familial value. This is further substantiated by the fact that there is a wide discrepancy between the older and the younger generations pertaining to ancestral worship behaviors within one's own family. Without exception members of the parental generation feel that it is their life obligation to commemorate the deceased parents and grand-parents on their birthday, death day and other ceremonial occasions. When the same question was given to the members of the younger generation, only 41.2 per cent of them report their willingness to follow the practice. As far as ritual is concerned, 55.6 per cent only bow before the ancestral tablet which is a deviation from the traditional kneeling performance. This outward manifestation is another indication of their changing attitudes toward ancestors.

There are many important changes in the economic structure. As far as basic food supply is concerned, the village under study is no longer a self-sufficient one. The dominant types of agricultural products are seasonal flowers and vegetables. Before the arrival of the refugee group from China a few years after the Second World War farmers of the village were mainly rice growers. Because of small farm size, primitive implements, a poor irrigation system, insect and sparrow damage, the income of farmers remained low year after year. Those who had to pay land rent were on the subsistence level of living

even in a good harvest year. The yearly income of the farmers has been substantially increased in recent years under the influence of the more sophisticated immigrant group. From the new settlers the local farmers learned to grow many varieties of seasonal vegetables and flowers to replace rice cultivation. On the average the net monetary gain from the same piece of land has gone up five to six times. One native farmer gets his major income in the last two weeks of the Chinese calendar year by selling peach blossom trees which are used for new year indoor decoration. Before the collapse of the stock market in 1973 Hong Kong enjoyed many prosperous years and people with means did not mind paying a high price for a sizable blossoming peach tree which is not only a status symbol but also an omen for a coming good year. This tree grower has changed his self image from a humble farmer to a self-gratifying wealthy man of the village by spending 250,000 dollars (US\$50,000) to build a new home. This kind of upward mobility was utterly impossible in the old days. The livelihood of other farmers has also generally improved as evidenced by their consuming pattern. A refrigerator, radio and television are commonly found in every farmer's home. The village store sells more expensive imported cigarets than the cheaper local brand. An increasing number of families own cars.

Another added source of income of the native group is the renting of land and houses to the immigrant group. This aspect of ecological succession enables the hitherto soil-tilling farmers to join the rank of the rent-collecting class and also frees them to find other gainful non-agricultural employment outside the village.

Our economic survey of 1970 showed that among the 567 villagers under study, 202 persons were economically active, showing a high dependency ratio. In examining the occupational distribution of the economically active group, we found that only twelve men and six women were engaged in farming and poultry raising. The remaining 184 persons' occupations were widely scattered in various sectors of the economic world, such as seaman, small business proprietor, industrial worker, worker in the service trades. Among them, forty-five persons mostly women found full-time or part-time employment inside the village as workers in the three newly established small factories, as attendants in the village school, and as store keepers, while the great majority of 139 persons of the 184 worked in the urban sectors of the Colony. With the exception of ten persons, those working in the city needed to commute everyday. This highly mobile portion of the population has rendered the village into a dormitory thus radically changing the immobile characteristic of the traditional Chinese village.

Regarding their incomes deriving from primary production or employment each family on the average earned \$693 per month, with \$145 per capita. In addition twenty-two per cent of the clan group and twenty-one per cent of the immigrant group had other income in form of remittances from relatives residing in The Netherlands, England or urban areas of Hong Kong. On the average each of these clan families received \$275 per month, while each immigrant family received \$148 per month.

On the household expenditures, the major items were food, children's education and rent, in descending order, being \$287, (41% of the total income), \$64 (9.2%) and \$47 (7.2%) respectively per month. Taking other expenditure into account, each household on the average spent approximately \$480 per month. The monthly balance for each lineage family was calculated to be \$273; and for each immigrant family it was \$150. Compared with urban dwellers of similar socio-economic status, the Tai Po Tau people were in a more favourable financial situation because the city people have to pay higher rent, around 20 to 22%, and the cost of food, education and other general expenses are also higher. This explains why there is hardly a vacant house for rent in the village.

The aforementioned economic statistics of the village inhabitants of Tai Po Tau clearly reveal that the economic structure of this traditional village has

changed from a character of high self-sufficiency to high dependency. Under the impact of industrialization and urbanization, the overwhelming majority of the workers have shifted their occupational endeavours from farming production to manufacturing and services. The employment opportunity becomes greatly dependent upon the supply and demand of the job market in the greater society. Those remaining in farming have changed their emphasis from the production of primary food to commercial crops which are highly sensitive to price fluctuation in the urban market. In the meantime, their livelihood has been improved and the stability of their community has been gradually shaken, which will ultimately give rise to many new problems which are found in the city, and which do not have any effective solution. Change is inevitable but the price of change is also inevitable.

Education is a major factor fostering the process of social change. It is responsible for shaping and reshaping the people's value system and consequently has a tremendous impact on the existing structure of a community.

A modern primary school, financially supported by the government, was instituted in the village in 1958 to replace the old one-room, one teacher school adjacent to the ancestral hall. The new curriculum, devised by the Education Department of the Hong Kong Government, is

primarily designed for children in the urban setting. As far as the practical utilities in meeting the needs of the young villagers are concerned, the nature of the curriculum together with the middle-class and urban-trained teachers tend to produce an effect which encourages the younger people to move away from village life. The people of the parental generation including the farming group also indicated that they do not want their educated sons to engage in farming, which in their opinion does not represent progress, upward mobility or achievement. They also show their willingness to go to the limit of their ability to support their sons to continue their education in high school or even the university. Without exception, all parents sent their male and female children to school. No illiteracy was found among those under 40 years of age which is a significant progress in a Chinese traditional village. Owing to the low standard of the village school and to the inadequate supervision on the part of the parents, only a relatively few youngsters could make the grades enabling them to move on to high school. Over the years, only two girls from the village were able to get a university degree. As far as educational goals are concerned, there exists a discrepancy between aspiration and actual achievement as found in this village community.

Our finding shows that education is a factor pulling people away from the village. In former times when there were few people who had an opportunity for formal education, the resulting adverse effects on the manpower problem in the rural area were hardly felt. With the progress of universal education, it will become a challenging issue which requires the serious thinking of educator as well as rural reformer.

The average size of the village house is approximately 400 square feet. The nuclear family is the predominant type. The number of persons living under the same roof ranges from one to seven. Statistically, the average family size is 4.9 persons. This figure, which is somewhat similar to the findings of all other known rural surveys done in China, dispels the common misconception that the Chinese always have a large family. In terms of land ownership and house size, ninety per cent of the population just cannot afford to support a "large" family.

The relationships between husband and wife and between parents and children seem to be on the smooth side. There is no known divorce. As may be expected, disagreements and conflicts are found in every family. However, they will not be considered problems if they do not threaten the normal functioning of the family. Our study revealed that between eighteen per cent of the

parents entered into quarrels on children's recreational activities and thirteen per cent on children's spending money. There were no serious disagreements on the spending behavior or social activities of the spouse. On major spending, they reported that they always discussed matters and reached a joint decision. As a matter of fact, the male spouse generally remains the one to have the last word. Generational conflicts also seemed to be minimal. On the matter of finding a job, seventy-five per cent of the children obtained the consent of the parents first, while twenty-five per cent took the job and then informed their parents. On the whole, only six per cent did not approve of the kind of job being held by their children. Concerning the important issue of marriage, parents in general hold surprisingly permissive attitudes. Ninety-one per cent of the parents subscribed to the idea that this should be left to the freedom of the children. It appeared that arranged marriages have become a thing of the past even in a traditional village setting. In disciplinary measures, forty-six per cent of the parents used physical punishment, forty per cent preferred strong and serious advice, and eight per cent hold an extremely permissive point of view. Although punishment was administered by both parents, the male parent was still being recognized by the children as the disciplinary figure.

The status of women has also been greatly improved in recent years. In addition to the success of finding employment in urban industrial areas, the industrial establishment in the village which were owned and managed by the non-lineage group offered part-time and full-time job opportunities for many of the house-wives and unmarried daughters who have made substantial contributions to household expenditures and to family saving. Their new venture in the industrial production line has a positive feedback in improving their social status in the family as well as in the village community. This has been indicated by their more active role in the decision making of the family. Because of her newly acquired earning ability, a new element has been added to the traditional mother-companion role of a village housewife, which is the sharing of rights and privileges of a bread-winner. The admission of lineage women to attend the ceremonial feast served at the ancestral hall since the year 1969 is the most concrete evidence of their improving status. Having the same educational opportunity, woman is no longer being treated as an ignorant and a second-class citizen. Through the media of mass communication women are equally well informed. Through their contacts with the outside world, some young girls of the village have a better knowledge of the latest fashions than our university students and wear more up-to-date clothes. A few of our

university students had actually asked to buy dresses from the garment factory in which the village girls worked. Nowadays we can no longer readily identify a village girl merely from her outward appearance.

V. CONCLUDING REMARK

The tempo of industrialization and urbanization of the greater society of Hong Kong has its pervasive effects on the institutional patterns of the village. With the expanding economy, the pressure of population growth, the popularization of education, the non-farming job opportunities for both men and women, and the unprecedented advancement in mass communication technology as well as in transportation facilities, industrial urbanism can no longer be confined to the urban sectors of the Colony. It becomes virtually impossible for the rural villages, especially those like Tai Po Tau, strategically located along the major transportation routes and right at the edge of a market town, to escape from the invading force of industrial urbanism.

Having a large heterogeneous group living in the village and a great majority of the economically active inhabitants, both the natives and the immigrants, entering into various kinds of occupational undertakings in different parts of the Colony, the earthbound characteristics and its accompaniments of this traditional

village are fading rapidly as no conservative community being caught in the midst of change can resist the incessant impact brought in daily by a huge number of mobile persons who are found in almost every family. Consequently, the value system, production activities, consuming behavior patterns, goal aspiration, power structure, family relationships and life styles of the village community are all being reshaped by trailing after the prevailing culture of the city folks.

A number of forces are in operation conducive to the disintegration of this rural entity. Governmental intervention in reorganizing the power structure of the village has destroyed the local autonomy. The invasion by industry and the encroachment of urban culture coming from many directions has disrupted the village's traditional earthbound characteristics to an alarming extent. The infiltration of a large heterogenous population has destroyed its homogeneity. The diversity in occupational employment found mostly in the city minimizes the frequency of face-to-face contact even among next door neighbours. Blood relationship also is not sufficient to sustain kinship solidarity in face of the weakening influence of traditional core values, the fading of earthbound compulsion in making a living and the lack of any felt necessity for depending upon other people in the village neither for group security nor for the individual's goal attainment.

In other words, when people fail to perceive their roles in contributing to the functional operation of the social network, or to appreciate the need for interdependence, group integration becomes correspondingly low. Such is the case we found in our study.

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