Shifts of Power in the Hong Kong New Territories

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HONG Kong is now one of Britain’s few remaining colonies. It could conceivably be its last. Doubtless, many anthropologists pray that its life may be long, for, paradoxically enough, it provides them with one of their two remaining opportunities – the other being Taiwan – to study traditional forms of Chinese social organisation on its home ground. In Hong Kong it is possible to study, among other things, the preservative effects of a vanishing empire on a residue of one already long since vanished. In 1842 Britain took full legal possession of the island of Hong Kong. Eighteen years later it acquired similar rights in the tip of the Kowloon Peninsula opposite the island. Up to this point in the Colony’s history British administrators were engaged in fostering and governing a commercial and essentially urban Chinese settlement; they were not in the position of heirs to the government of China. But in 1898, for reasons of western rivalry in China, a treaty was negotiated with the Chinese government which made over to Britain for 99 years some three-fifths of the county of Hsin-an (in the province of Kwangtung), of which Hong Kong island and the Kowloon Peninsula had formerly also been part. This accession of territory carried British rule well into the countryside, and, with a long established rural population of some 100,000 to govern, the administrators of Hong Kong were now forced to step into the shoes of the Chinese mandarins.

The New Territories, as the leased area came to be called, were created to be a buffer to the island colony, and the British administration designed for them was not concerned in the first place with development. The first consideration was to suppress disorder (partly traditional, partly arising from the change of government itself) and ensure a continuing peace. The new subjects of the British Crown were to be governed, as far as was consistent with British principles, by traditional means. But, of course, the fact that the new rulers succeeded fairly quickly in bringing peace to the countryside, that they put up police posts and

1 This paper in its original form was delivered under the title of “Changing Leadership in the Hong Kong New Territories” in Section N of the annual meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science, 1964. It draws on a general survey of the New Territories which I carried out in February to May 1963 under the auspices of the London-Cornell Project for the Study of Chinese and South-East Asian Societies.
began making roads (there had only been paths before), and that they had to modify traditional social arrangements (especially in land tenure) to make them amenable to a new kind of bureaucratic control, meant that the greater part of Hsin-an County was inevitably to undergo a change more substantial than one in name.

Hsin-an was in most respects a typical part of south-eastern China. From a political point of view we may say that its outstanding characteristic was that the governed both resisted government and relied on it for their power to resist. The paradox lies in this. Powerful leaders in the countryside were able to exercise local control and rally local support against government interference because, culturally and socially, they were on a footing with, and were created by the same mechanism as, the governors. The county was administered by a mandarin whose offices were in the county seat, and three subordinate mandarins posted to different points in the county. These men came from provinces other than that in which Hsin-an was situated, and were bureaucrats who had been created through a system of examinations or one combining examinations and purchased ranks. The people of Hsin-an were (except for a small minority of so-called boat people) free to sit the same examinations and so acquire the titles and status hungrily sought by ambitious men. Once suitably qualified, a Hsin-an man could be a mandarin in another province. The population of the county must have been about 200,000 during the nineteenth century, and at any one point in time in the latter part of the century there were probably some 150 men who had qualified in the first important set of examinations (held in the prefectural capital) or had acquired equivalences. (These were the people to whom the western commentators of the period referred as the "Bachelors of Arts"; some of them would move on to become the "M.A.s" and "Ph.D.s" created by the provincial and national examinations respectively.) They were publicly recognised scholars who enjoyed high standing with the government and prestige in the eyes of the populace.

In fact (as one might have expected) the county scholars came from a few local communities. In general terms, these were the largest and the richest in the county; they were situated in the fertile rice plains and had built up both large numbers and great wealth. Like many of the communities in the area, these favoured ones were single patrilineages: groups of men (together with

