

Project Title:

Property and Chinese Lineage Villages in the New Territories of Hong Kong, 1905-2012.

Single-surname lineages are commonly found in Hong Kong's New Territories. They largely share the following features: members tracing their descent from a common ancestor, bearing an identical surname, and occupying a common residence in a walled village or territorially well-defined settlement; sons instead of daughters holding descent status; practicing the patrilineal rule of property inheritance; and owning corporate holdings (at the family and lineage levels) which serve to protect the welfare and interests of members and to maintain the tradition of collective worship and its associated identity. Thus, it is essential to maintain the patrilineal inheritance of land and village houses to perpetuate the existence of such localized corporate lineages.

The New Territories have undergone a major process of rapid transformation since the 1970s, mainly due to the trends of urbanization and modernization and to the impacts of colonial administration and policy related to the customary and statutory rights of lineage villagers. Under these changing circumstances, to what extent has the rule of patrilineal inheritance been strictly observed or occasionally violated in such localized corporate lineages? What changes have taken place in the meanings and forms of ownership, management, and transfer (sale and succession) of land and village houses, both individually owned and corporately owned, in colonial and post-colonial regimes? How have the complicated and symbiotic relationships between gender (in)equality in property rights, lineage customs, and communal identity been (re)defined in response to changing circumstances?

The proposed study will seek to answer the above under-researched questions by embarking on a pioneering examination of land and house title deeds giving a complete record of ownership, mortgages and transactions from 1905 onwards. By investigating deeds owned by three selected major corporate lineages in the New Territories—the Tang lineage of Ha Tsuen, the Liu lineage of Sheung Shui and the Man lineage of San Tin—a large set of cases will be collected and analyzed systematically. This archival study, which will be coupled with in-depth interviews of lineage villagers, will reveal a substantial variety of forms and patterns of property rights, property management practices, ownership, and property transfers over the last 100 years, and their associated hegemonic or contested meanings. The findings will complement existing lineage studies that demonstrate only a single pattern of patrilineal inheritance, thereby shedding new light on the continuity of and changes in New Territories lineages in the colonial and post-colonial regimes from a property rights perspective.