AFTERTHOUGHTS ON
SOUTH CHINA VILLAGE CULTURE

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After completing a book, there are bound to be after-thoughts! Whether one likes it or not, the mind continues to work away in the sub-conscious, reviewing the end result. This has certainly been the case with my South China Village Culture.

The Oxford University Press Images of Asia series, to which it belongs, has been a considerable success, but perhaps because it is a tall order to compress big subjects into a small book format, does render its authors more prone to having such after-thoughts. I now consider there have been certain omissions, and would like to make at least some amends.

Some precedents for supplying further information after publishing come to mind. When reviewing Dr. Hugh Baker’s three volumes in his Ancestral Images series (Hong Kong, SCMP Ltd., 1979-81), I had regretted the lack of full references for so many interesting quotations from older books, whereupon Dr. Baker had supplied a complete set, prefaced by an interesting bibliographic note. These were printed in a subsequent issue of the Journal (Vol. 23, 1983, pp.221-232, to our enduring benefit.

My first omission was to completely overlook, in the ‘Heritage and Preservation’ chapter, the former Hong Kong Government’s policy for the reinstatement of old village communities in the New Territories. Although a large number of villages were demolished to allow New Town development, the indigenous communities themselves were preserved intact through reprovisioning on new sites at public expense. This applied - and as far as I know the policy is still being followed by the SAR Government - not only to houses, but also to ancestral halls, shrines, and temples. Over a hundred old villages have been reprovisioned in this way in the last forty and more years.

However, a greater omission was the absence of any reference to
food in village culture. Early last century, the meals in most village families were basic for most of the year: consisting of rice with salt fish or preserved vegetables, with meat once or twice a month. During my initial researches into Hong Kong's rural history, a local leader impressed upon me how people so looked forward to the major festivals of the year, for it was only then, most notably at the lunar new year, that they could have a greater variety of food, and more of it. Major family events, like the marriages of sons and the celebration of old age, were welcomed for the same reason. Anticipation was heightened by the confident expectation that even if they could not afford the expense and had to borrow cash or mortgage land, families would provide the proper feasts on these occasions, or else "lose face" in the community.

Like much else in Chinese culture, the dishes prepared at such times were named so as to have auspicious meanings. For instance, at the lunar New Year, oysters, in Cantonese pronunciation named *ho si* conveyed the sense of good luck, whilst a dish of green vegetables, *faat choi*, expressed the wish that all those attending the feast would get rich. There were, and are, many such examples - see, pp.46-7 of T. C. Lai's book, *At the Chinese Table* (Hong Kong, Oxford University Press, 1984), also in the *Images of Asia* series. Even more focused on this topic is another interesting book, recently reprinted (2001) from the original edition of 1991 by Graham Brash, Singapore: namely Koh-Hwang I-Ling's *Symbolism in Chinese Food*. This is recommended reading, albeit it relates to Singapore Chinese of Hokkien descent, rather than the Cantonese and Hakka who are the subject of my book.

A certain type of food eaten at village feasts had (and still has) a distinct social function. This was the "basin food" provided for, and often by, the whole village on celebratory occasions. Consisting of very fat pork, with bits of turnip, dried mushrooms, bean curd and the like, cooked and mixed together, it was meant to indicate the equality and solidarity or brotherhood of participants. It was - and is - not confined to men but includes women and children. It is communal in every sense of the word, and is intended to be such. Its preparation involved persons from each family in one or other of the many tasks involved, from providing or marketing for the ingredients, the building of an outdoor stove and its covering, the collection of dried grass and firewood to feed the stove for the cooking, fetching water, washing crockery before and after, bringing tables and benches to the site, and
so on. I owe this information to our President, Dr. Patrick Hase, who has also referred me to an article on the subject by Professor James L. Watson, *Eating from the Common Pot: Feasting with Equals in Chinese Society*, published in *Anthropos*, Vol. 82, 1987, pp. 389-401.

In the course of enquiries (1970s) into foods made at festival time, I came across some interesting facts about the preparation process. This was often laborious. The “cakes” made at the lunar new year are a case in point. The materials comprised pounded glutinous rice and cane sugar. According to men from two of the former Tsuen Wan villages, sixteen hours were needed to cook the mixture in a very large, deep wok (the Chinese frying pan) in effect for a whole day, from dawn till dusk or later. Cooking in an old-fashioned village stove, fuelled by dried grass or firewood, was essential; since the taste would be different were charcoal or gas to be used. Some of the Sham Tseng elders (also Tsuen Wan District) said that each “cake” might require between 30 to 50 catties of glutinous rice, resulting in very large “cakes.” In one household of my acquaintance (originally from Shek Pik on Lantau Island, resited to Tsuen Wan in 1960), it had been usual for them to make four large “cakes” every lunar New Year. These were distributed as goodwill gifts to shops in the market towns of Tai O and Cheung Chau, and the boat people’s families in the Shek Pik anchorage - indicative of this household’s economic and social ties. People also gave and received portions of such cakes during the customary visiting to mark the arrival of the New Year.

The Sham Tseng men had also mentioned a rather curious requirement involved in the preparation of the dumplings made for the fifth day of the fifth lunar month festival, commonly known as the Dragon Boat Festival. The dumplings had to be made with a preparation of wood ash, placed between bamboo leaves, and filtered with water. This watery ash, known as kan shui [the character I was given for ‘kan’ is that for ‘root,’ but though this sits oddly with the context, I have not been able to find anything more suitable in a dictionary search] had to come from “new” wood, though not necessarily of any particular kind. It was no use trying to filter ash from anything that came to hand, like old boards or drift-wood.

Turning to other topics, I had earmarked but subsequently overlooked two interesting items in the course of shaping the chapters.
In Chapter 3, 'The Confucian Imprint,' I omitted to mention Rev. Joseph Edkins' statement of the enormous influence of Confucius on education, and the reason for its universal pervasiveness. The second such omission relates to Chapter 4, 'Non-Confucian Belief and Practice,' when, in describing the depopulation experienced at Shek Pik, Lantau Island, between around 1870-1930, I had forgotten to add that a similar depopulation had featured in the memories of old men in the nearby village of Tong Fuk. Some details are provided here: but first to Edkins:

Joseph Edkins (1823-1905) was a notable missionary-sinologue, translator and philologist. His Views on Confucianism can be found at pp.120-122 of the revised edition of his Religion in China (London, Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner, & Co. Ltd., 1893), partly as follows:

The tendencies of the Confucian morality are seen in the national system of education even if they could not afford the expense and had to borrow cash or mortgage land, in which the moral training of the child's mind is always put forward as the chief element. There is a universal system of self-supporting day-school education in that country. Every parent who has a few pence to spare in the month will educate his child. Teaching is the regular profession of the literati, that is, of the class who study for academical degrees. The highest character known in that country is that of an instructor.

When the boy goes to school, he becomes a disciple of Confucius. If he is not educated, his nature will go wrong, and he will be a lawless subject and a disobedient son. The end of his education is to show him what virtue is, and to lead him to it. The true disciple of Confucius is the filial son, the loyal subject, and the kind and faithful husband.

The Government regards the education of the people as essential to the welfare of the State. But it does not itself educate them by supplying free instruction to the poor. It appoints public examiners to confer degrees and other rewards on successful candidates for such distinctions, and in this way it stimulates and influences voluntary education. The Government decides what books shall form the subject of examination, and what school in philosophy and morals shall be counted orthodox. Its influence on the state of opinion in the country is therefore very great.
The result of the Confucian education is supposed to be the formation of a highly virtuous character. The chief energy of those who have taught it has been expended in the endeavour to give it practical effect on the individual, the family, and the nation.1

In regard to the depopulation at Shek Pik, it is curious how this was repeated at Tong Fuk, another old village four miles to the east, where the 198 persons recorded at the Colony Census of 1911 were survivors of the much larger population of some 700 persons claimed before the onset of disease sometime in the second half of the 19th century. Interviewed in 1971, the elders had been most emphatic about this, on the basis of information handed down by their fathers’ generation... ‘There was not a single empty or ruined house [before the epidemics struck],’ or so they claimed, Later on, in the 1910s, when my oldest informants were then in their teens, the situation worsened again, with two persons dying every day. ‘No sooner had we taken out one body for burial, than we had to start all over again.’ As at Shek Pik, altered, meaning adverse, fung-shui was blamed for these disasters. ‘For we Cantonese, fung-shui is vital,’ stressed one of their number.

The caption to Plate 25, the rebuilt Tianhou Temple at Chiwan, Shenzhen, can be extended here. I omitted to mention the famous well, prominent in the foreground, with adjoining plaque,

As mentioned in the related text, the temple’s long history and cultural importance had not saved it from destruction. By the end of the ten year period of the Cultural Revolution (1966-76) only the foundations survived, and what remained of its historic buildings had been reduced in height and roofed over to provide barrack accommodation for a unit of the People’s Liberation Army, still in occupation at the time of my first visit in 1983. The temple’s fine stone and wood carvings had gone, along with the many donated fittings and repair tablets that would have been kept within its walls. However, one tradition had survived the decades of Communist ideology. There had

1 This was both the theory and the aim. However, Edkins concluded that despite the intention, ‘it has not made them [the Chinese] a moral people. Many of the social virtues are extensively practiced among them, but they exhibit to the observer a lamentable want of moral strength. Commercial integrity and speaking the truth are far less common among them than in Christian countries. The standard of principle among them is kept low by the habits of the people.’
been a famous well in front of the temple, with a reputation for aiding fertility, its water being reputed to guarantee the birth of sons. It was still there, and the soldiers reported that by the 1970s, if not before, many people were again coming to the temple by the bus load from neighbouring counties in the third lunar month. Though the temple had been destroyed and the images of its deities removed, country folk were still believers and they particularly liked to take water back to their homes. During our visit, the soldiers fetched two buckets of water from the well for us to drink. It was very clean and sweet, though the well is neither large nor deep.

Finally, and to remind, a more general but detailed overview of the culture of late imperial times, is provided in Richard J. Smith's excellent China's Cultural Heritage: The Qing Dynasty 1644-1912, 2nd revised edition (Boulder, Colorado, Westview Press, 1990).

POSTSCRIPT

My old friend Mr. Wan On of Pui O, South Lantau, has reminded me of the close analogy between the treatment of present day SARS and of the infectious diseases causing deaths in local village communities of old, which often struck during the late winter and early Spring. The isolation and quarantining of infected persons and their contacts was, in the latter case, extended to whole villages. No one was allowed to come in, and no one was allowed out, usually for around two to three weeks. In addition, a protective ritual (a ta chiu/dajiào) was performed by a Daoist priest, and vegetarian food and sexual abstinence were prescribed.