Professor John K. Fairbank of the Harvard-Yenching Institute in an address to the Society during his visit to Hong Kong in 1976, referred to the importance of the study of what he termed “China Coast Culture”, meaning thereby the type of social groups, values, institutions, etc., that emerged from the commingling of diverse traditions in the port cities of China. He suggested that an understanding of the forces that created this social milieu and an analysis of its structure and operation might provide models for life as it is developing in an age of rapid cultural interchange.*

This study of one family which was a part of the China Coast culture illustrates some strands in its creation and emergence as a distinct way of life, with its own values and manners. This new life style is seen in such features in the family of Chan Lai-sun as the intermingling of Chinese and foreign home decoration; changed attitudes toward certain Chinese practices, such as the social mingling of sexes, foot binding, dress and the wearing of the queue; the employment in a Chinese setting of language, educational and scientific skills acquired by a Western-style training; and marriage across racial boundaries.

Mr. Tin-yuk Char has provided interesting information on the career of Chan Lai-sun. In the light of his suggestion that more information might be forthcoming, I can add a few more facts from material I have collected on the family.

The careers of Chan Lai-sun and his children are examples of the role marginal Chinese played in the Westernization of China. Chan’s mother was probably Malay. His wife Ruth A-tik was born in Indonesia and was not of pure Chinese ancestry. In a list of members of the Presbyterian Mission Church at Ningpo for 1850, she is described as “Indo-Chinese”. Both as children came under the patronage of foreigners and both received an English language education. Miss Aldersey, the patron of Ruth A-tik, first in Batavia

* This is my interpretation of his remarks and may not be an altogether accurate assessment.
and then in Ningpo, mentions Ruth and her friend Christiana A-kit in the *Annual Report of the London Tract Society for 1847*:

I have two young women Indo-Chinese converts, who, fleeing from persecution, joined me in this country [Batavia]. They have applied themselves to the study of the English language since their arrival in the north, and one of them in particular is thirsty for the intelligence which that language opens out to her. Her desire for information has reference especially to religious subjects.

As we shall note A-tik’s home after her marriage to Lai-sun was what nineteenth century missionaries called “pious”, but piety was connected with a concern for a modern education for Chinese girls and for some years she taught in the missionary school in Shanghai.

A missionary educator visited their home at Shanghai, and her account published in 1857 in the American Episcopal Church journal, *Spirit of Missions* (v. 22, p. 350), gives evidence of the manner in which they combined their western type education and connections with the Chinese community in which they lived.

At the time of the visit Yung Wing, later the initiator of the Chinese Educational Mission in which Lai-sun participated, was a guest in the home. The missionary visitor noted that Yung Wing greeted her “with quite an American air”, though he had to admit he had forgotten her name. When Yung Wing, even then interested in education, asked if he could visit the girls’ school under the missionary’s charge, she politely turned him down as she felt that since the girls were so modest and unaccustomed to a male presence at the school, it would unduly upset them, but she turned to Mrs. Chan and her friend Christiana A-Kit, wife of Kew Teen-shang, and asked their opinion on the matter. They said they never objected to associating on social and friendly terms with Christian gentlemen. “But”, said Kit, “when merchants or other heathen men call to see Attee’s husband, she always retires.”

Yung Wing remarked, “When I was in the United States as a student, I often visited young ladies’ seminaries and they never objected, in fact, I think they rather liked it.”

The missionary lady took the occasion to probe a little deeper into the attitudes of American educated Chinese, posing the question.
"And you liked the manners and customs of the women in the United States?"

"Oh, yes."

"And having returned to China, how is it? Are you diligently seeking for a young lady with bound feet for a wife? — one who must stay at home because she can't walk?"

"No, indeed", Yung Wing said adding with a touch of humour that he wished for a wife who would be able to run with him should ever the need arise.

The conversation had struck a sensitive issue for these Chinese who had been trained in values different from their contemporaries. With some feeling Lai-sun's wife spoke out.

"How can this cruel custom be abolished, when Christian women, by binding their own and their children's feet, are handing it down to future generations?"

"Aside from religion", remarked Yung Wing, "the practice is barbarous, cruel and atrocious."

Their changed attitudes toward certain aspects of Chinese life was not only reflected in their conversation but also in the furnishing of their home. The missionary lady comments on the Chan's "nice parlor" fitted out with both foreign and Chinese furniture. "Most conspicuous was a very nice organ, with which the good man accompanies himself in singing the songs of Zion."

Chan Lai-sun died 2 June 1895 in Tientsin. His obituary published in the North China Daily News, on which his son Spencer was a reporter, was republished in the Hong Kong Daily Press (12 June 1895). In addition to the biographical data given by Mr. Char, there is an account of his early business connections in Shanghai. He first entered the firm of Messrs. Bower, Hanbury and Company, where he became a close friend of Mr. Thomas Hanbury, one of the partners. He then set up his own business in partnership with Mr. H. E. Clapp of the firm Clapp and Company, but the venture was not a success, so Lai-sun joined the staff of Viceroy Tso Tsung-t'ang at Foochow, where he was appointed instructor and subsequently superintendent of the Foochow Naval School. He left the school to become a member of the Chinese Educational Mission in 1872. Returning to China in 1874 he then joined the staff of Viceroy Li Hung-chang.
He served as chief secretary at the Chefoo Convention in 1876, and until the time of his death assisted at the many transactions Viceroy Li had with foreign powers. He was to have joined Li in his mission to Japan after the Sino-Japanese War, but Li excused him saying, "You are old and so am I; but I have to go because there is no help for it."

At the time of his death Chan Lai-sun was survived by his widow, two sons and two daughters. He was predeceased by his son William and a daughter. The death notice of his widow, who died at the age of 92 on 17 Jan. 1917, was published in the Chinese Recorder (v. 58, p. 258). Her son Spencer T. Lai-sun had died only thirteen days before.

Spencer had been educated at Queen's College, Hong Kong, before being taken to the United States by his father at the inauguration of the Chinese Educational Mission in 1872. He and his elder brother, Elijah, attended Yale. According to his obituary (South China Morning Post, 23 Jan. 1917), Spencer had an "extraordinary command of English" and was remarkably well informed on Chinese affairs, being one of the first to forecast the gravity of the Boxer Uprising. He was simultaneously on the staff of a Chinese language newspaper, the Hu Pao, and of an English language paper, the North China Daily News, both published at Shanghai. In 1911 he abandoned his newspaper career and as an expectant Taotai joined the staff of Viceroy Tuan Fang at Nanking. Early in his career in 1885 he undertook a special mission to India. When a reporter of the Times of India interviewed him, he was impressed with Spencer's European style clothing and the absence of a queue, for the latter he was said to have been given special permission by the Chinese authorities.

During his school days in Hong Kong, Spencer had become acquainted with the family of the Reverend Ho Fuk-tong, being most likely a regular attendant of the Chinese congregation which met in the afternoons at Union Church. He married Ho Man-kwai, the daughter of the pastor. She died in Shanghai in 1894 at the young age of twenty-eight, leaving a young daughter, Daisy.

The other two daughters of Chan Lai-sun married Europeans. The husband of the eldest daughter was a Danish ship captain, N. P. Andersen. He had seen service in the Taiping Revolution and had a long career in the Coast Staff of the Chinese Customs. He was somewhat older than his wife and married in middle age.
Mrs. Andersen was one of the founders of the Chinese Red Cross Society, serving as its first Vice President. In recognition, the Chinese Emperor granted her a large honorary board. Their only daughter, K. Ruth Andersen, married in 1905, Donald R. McEuen, son of a former Captain superintendent of Police at Shanghai.

A younger daughter of Chan Lai-sun married a businessman, Mr. W. Buchanan, presumably the same as listed in the 1884 Chronicle and Directory of China as a land agent and broker with J. P. Bisset and Co. of Shanghai.

This, then, is a record of a Chinese family living in a marginal situation. Both Lai-sun and his wife were born in Southeast Asian overseas Chinese communities. Both in childhood became caught up in English language missionary education, which served to further alienate them from Chinese tradition. Lai-sun started his career as a missionary assistant, but to make better provision for his growing family turned to business, associating himself with foreign businessmen, not as compradore but as assistant and partner. However, the very fact of his marginal background qualified him, as a member of Li Hung-chang's staff, to make a particular contribution to China's developing relations with foreign powers. His children received a solid western-style education. Of the two sons who grew to maturity, one was an engineer the other a journalist, and both for a part of their career served the Chinese government. The daughters left the Chinese community, but the eldest took her place in public life as a founder of the Chinese Red Cross.

This partial reconstruction of the life history of one China Coast family is perhaps more than a mere historical exercise in reconstructing a family history from scattered sources. It can also be viewed as an illustration of the social processes at work in creating a distinctive culture in the port cities of China, including Hong Kong.