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***Virtual Kinship, Real Estate, and Diaspora Formation:
The Man Lineage Revisited***

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□□□□□□□□ Unlike our historian friends, anthropologists do not have the luxury of drawing a line in the sands of time and declaring a closure date for our research. □ Ethnography never ends. □ Even the demise of the original fieldworker does not conclude the enterprise, given the inevitability of restudies (usually conducted by younger scholars eager to overthrow past paradigms). □ This essay is a product of contemporary ethnography; it describes a project that has a beginning but no clear end. □ At some point during the 1990s the research took on a life of its own and, if anyone is in charge, it is certainly not the ethnographer. □ In many respects, therefore, the project parallels the digital revolution: □ decentered, unpredictable, and out of control. [1]

My address focuses on the long-term consequences of international migration and the historical dynamics of diaspora formation. □ The research is longitudinal in the sense that it tracks a single, tightly bounded kinship group during 35 years of field research. [2] From its inception, this has been what anthropologists now refer to as a multi-sited ethnography, even though that term had not been invented when the research began (see Marcus 1995). □ The project started in 1969 as a “typical” (for that era) village study, focusing on a Cantonese community of 2000 people.

The village, known as San Tin, lies smack on what was – in the 1960s – the front line of the Cold War, 400 yards south of the border between British Hong Kong and Mao’s Cultural Revolution China. □ San Tin is the home of the Man lineage, one of the five major surname groups that dominated political life in the Hong Kong New Territories until the 1960s (Baker 1966). □ After a year and a half in this village, I moved to London and conducted a follow-up study of restaurant workers who had emigrated from San Tin (J. Watson 1974; 1975b: 103-131). Since that initial engagement, I have tracked San Tin people all over the world – to Holland, Belgium, Germany, and Scandinavia during the 1970s; from there to Canada in the 1980s; and then back to Hong Kong in the late 1990s and early 2000s, as part of a “return” migration of patriotic entrepreneurs eager to participate in post-repatriation politics. [3] □ The problems presented by this type of globe-hopping ethnography are manifold. □ Diasporics are moving targets. □ What they are today, they will not be tomorrow. □ How can one possibly write an adequate ethnography of a group that is always and inevitably in the process of transformation?

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Background: The Man Lineage

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Members of the San Tin diaspora began their migratory trek in the late 1950s with little but the shirts on their back. □ Under unimaginably difficult circumstances, they managed to establish a chain of Chinese restaurants in Europe by the mid-1970s (J. Watson 1977). □ Today most of the grandchildren of these original pioneers are affluent professionals. □ There are at least 20 multi-millionaires, in US\$ term, among them. □ Many in the current generation speak only rudimentary Cantonese (if at all) and read little, if any, Chinese. □ They are more comfortable speaking English, Dutch, or German. □ They know almost nothing about the “traditions” of Cantonese rural life or the rituals that preoccupied their grandparents. □

The initial, 1969-1970 engagement with San Tin and the Chinese community in London produced a book entitled, *Emigration and the Chinese Lineage* (1975b). Today this book is read by third and fourth generation diasporics as a record of “their” past. Many now correspond with me via email. Fredric Jameson – the godfather of postmodernism (1991) – might be happy to learn that ethnography has entered cyberspace, the ultimate terrain of collapsed time and space.

The people who originate from San Tin are descendants^[4] of Man Sai-go, their apical ancestor who settled near the village in the fourteenth century. Hence, they are all surnamed *Man* in Cantonese (pronounced *Wen* in Mandarin). There are, today, approximately 4,000 people who claim descent from Man Sai-go, living in over 20 countries. The males of this cohort constitute a strictly defined patrilineage that owns property in common (we return to gender distinctions later). The exact number of recognized lineage members is known only to the lineage master (*zuzhang*) and various elders who manage the ancestral estates.^[5] In the 1960s and 1970s membership was conferred by participation in the annual lantern-raising rite (*kaideng*) in San Tin’s ancestral halls and by inscription of birth names (*ming*) in two texts: the Man genealogy and the “book of new males” (*sandingshu*). By the early 1990s membership had become more difficult to define as an increasing number of offspring were born abroad, often of parents who had spent most of their lives in the diaspora. This is a rapidly changing domain of research that the author continues to monitor.

In the 1960s San Tin residents considered themselves part of a regional elite and took great pride in conforming to what they perceived as Neoconfucian models of “proper” behavior – based roughly on principles outlined by the twelfth century scholar, Zuxi.^[6] In anthropological terms, the Man constitute a classic lineage of the Evans-Pritchard/Maurice Freedman model.^[7] This

implies clear and unambiguous rules of membership, collective rituals to celebrate illustrious ancestors, and the construction of elaborate ancestral halls that hold the carved wooden tablets of individual (male) ancestors. □ Strict rules of membership are necessary because the Man, like their counterparts in the New Territories, enjoy the economic benefits conferred by the collective ownership of property – in San Tin’s case former paddy fields that have enormous development potential (hence the secrecy regarding the exact number of recognized members). □ More will be said about property at the end of this essay. □ Suffice it to note here that land continues to be the glue that holds people together, often in spite of themselves.

One of the subtexts of this essay is that anthropologists would be foolhardy indeed to abandon the study of kinship – dismissing it as an arcane, old-fashioned pursuit of a past era (a common charge made by theory fashionistas). As I hope to demonstrate, even supposedly premodern forms of kinship, such as the Chinese lineage, are very much alive in the postmodern world. □ Kinship groups serve as the organizing platforms for some of today’s most sophisticated transnational diasporas. [8]

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The Sojourner Phase

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Our story begins during the heyday of the Cold War and the early phase of Man emigration. □ Members of the lineage had to navigate a dangerous world defined, on one side, by radical Maoist socialism and, on the other side, by an unsettling combination of British colonialism and bare-knuckled, laissez-faire capitalism (see England and Rear 1975; Wesley-Smith 1980).

For nearly 600 years the Man had survived by growing a specialized crop of red rice on brackish-water paddies along the Shenzhen River, a muddy creek that became the Anglo-Chinese border in 1898. □ This border was closed abruptly in 1949,

following the Communist conquest of China (Vogel 1969: 293-296). □ For reasons that are still not entirely clear, the People's Liberation Army did not march into Hong Kong and the Man were spared the traumas of Maoist socialism. □

Nonetheless, San Tin's farmers faced a serious crisis when their agricultural system collapsed during the early 1950s. □ The markets for their specialized rice were located on the Communist side of the river. □ Unlike other lineages in the New Territories that were based on fresh-water ecosystems, [9] the Man could not convert to vegetables (which, of course, will not grow on saline fields). □ They had two choices: □ (1) work in Hong Kong's booming factories as low-paid industrial workers, or (2) migrate to England and work in Chinese restaurants, as low-paid cooks, waiters, or skivvies. Eighty-five to ninety percent of San Tin's able-bodied males left for Britain between 1955 and 1962, just in time to beat the ban on colonial and post-colonial immigrants that went into effect on July 1st, 1962 – the first Commonwealth Immigrants Act. □ They became part of a great wave of new workers who took jobs in British factories, foundries, railways, buses, hotels, and restaurants (see, e.g., Ballard and Ballard 1977).

In short order, San Tin was transformed into a classic emigrant community, of the type found today in rural districts of South China, Mexico, and the Punjab. □ A remittance economy emerged, with wives, children, and the elderly left behind in the village (cf. Chen 1939). □ This was the sojourner [10] phase of the Man diaspora – the period during which I lived in San Tin. □ Male emigrants returned to the New Territories, if they were lucky, every three to five years and then returned to Europe for another long stint of work; the career of a typical restaurant worker was 22 years. □ Returnees built increasingly elaborate, modern-style retirement homes of the type one now sees in the emigrant communities of rural Guangdong and Fujian (Johnson and Woon 1997: 39-41;

Knapp 1996). In the 1960s and 1970s over three hundred modern-style, three-story houses were built in San Tin; most were then shuttered and left vacant for years at a time, deteriorating rapidly in Hong Kong's semi-tropical climate. Several of these homes had to be renovated or completely rebuilt before anyone could actually live in them. [11]

Emigrants sponsored lavish operas and rebuilt temples, ancestral halls, and schools in San Tin. In 1970, for instance, remittances from Europe paid for a five-day celebration associated with the renovation of the local Tianhou temple; emigrants also covered the US\$50,000 in construction costs, a considerable sum for that era. Man elders hired Hong Kong's most popular (and most expensive) Cantonese opera troupe to entertain villagers and hundreds of invited friends and relatives from other New Territories communities. Emigrants funded a 140-table banquet (10 people per table) to honor their patron goddess, Tianhou. Rather than atrophying, therefore, the ritual life of San Tin boomed during this period as the emigrants found ever more creative ways to exhibit their newfound wealth (cf. Mountz and Wright 1996: 416-421). The Man became famous for maintaining certain rituals and community activities that were rapidly disappearing in other, more "modern" parts of the New Territories. [12]

During this, the sojourner phase, it was obvious by their actions that Man emigrants were still firmly rooted in their home community. They worked long, hard hours abroad, deferring material gratification for decades in anticipation of a triumphant "return" – which was always and inevitably a letdown. Several returned emigrants became the author's close confidants and friends during this period. One in particular captured the ambivalence that returnees felt toward their home village. In September, 1969, while walking past the local teashop I heard someone call out: "Hey buddy, whatchadoin around here?" The

inquisitor turned out to be a returnee who had spent over 30 years in New York City, where he had picked up a startlingly authentic New York accent.□He had left Hong Kong on a Dutch freighter in the late 1930s and jumped ship in New York where he worked at a variety of jobs in and around Chinatown.□He was only one of three local emigrants who had managed to stay in the United States for more than a few weeks.[13]

Once a week in 1969-1970, the author and the “New Yorker,” as he was known locally, drank coffee together in the local teashop (he always made a point of disdaining the dark red tea favored by other villagers).□He took great pleasure in displaying his English and reminiscing about bacon-and-egg breakfasts, American movie stars, and hot showers.□He also confessed that visions of a happy return to San Tin had kept him working during many otherwise depressing and stressful years in the United States.□The reality of his life in Hong Kong did not measure up to his long-deferred expectations:□He ended up eating alone every day in the local teashop and living, alone, in his father’s dilapidated house.□The New Yorker’s poignant story is typical of his generation of pioneer emigrants.[14]

But this returnee did have one distinction that set him apart from his lineage peers: He spoke fluent, unselfconscious English – he was truly bilingual by the time he returned to San Tin.□Several other first-generation returnees spoke a smattering of English, Dutch, or German, but their vocabularies were restricted to greetings and simple expressions.□The New Yorker was the only person in the village (in the late 1960s) who was capable of speaking anything other than Cantonese.□In subsequent decades more emigrants returned from Europe and Canada with linguistic skills they were not hesitant to use.□The author frequently found himself speaking English, with both men and women, during follow-up studies of San Tin in 1978, 1988, 1994, and 1997.□This

expanding linguistic sophistication is a reflection of other social changes that were transforming life in San Tin and in the emerging diaspora.

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The Early Diaspora Phase

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The next step in the saga is what I have chosen to call, for lack of a better term, the early diaspora phase.□ During this period, the 1970s and early 1980s, I had the good fortune of teaching at the University of London (School of Oriental and African Studies), which gave me an opportunity to keep track of developments in the European Chinese community.□ By this time, the Man had expanded throughout Europe and dominated the Chinese restaurant trade in Britain, Holland, Belgium, and southern Germany – opening and operating over 400 restaurants (see also Gutinger 1998; Pang 1998; Pieke and Benton 1998).□ They also moved into Canada during the 1980s (see Johnson 1994).□ Three extended families, in particular, became leading lights in the Toronto and the Vancouver communities.

Most of the older emigrants still clung to a “myth of return” during this period – even as more and more of them began settling permanently in Europe and Canada, where they became effective dependants of their adult children. Male emigrants also began to bring their wives and children with them abroad, and women started playing key roles in Man enterprises – a development that would have profound consequences for the future of the lineage.□ Emigrant families maintained houses in San Tin but treated them as holiday homes rather than primary residences.□ Hard work and the classic strategy of deferring material gratification in anticipation of later reward had paid off for large numbers of the second generation.□ Their high level of success set them apart from other groups of New Territories villagers who were working in Europe.[\[15\]](#)□ Man emigrants had always stood out for two reasons:□

First, they nurtured a collective spirit that did not countenance anything other than success; and, second, they relied almost exclusively on fellow lineage members as workers, partners, and confidants.

By the 1980s the lineage had become an *information network*, linking Man all over Europe and Canada. Information was restricted to the preexisting group – which did *not* include affines (e.g., sons-in-law), matrilineal kin (mothers' brothers, mother's sisters' sons), or other such unreliable “layabouts” – to quote one Man restaurateur. “A Man is a Man,” he said (in English) over tea at a London restaurant, “and there is no place to hide.” By implication, any Man who strayed too far from accepted norms would be sanctioned and could, under extreme circumstances, be formally expelled from the lineage (*chuzu*). This has not happened since 1962 but there is little doubt that the threat continues to act as a curb on antisocial behavior. [16]

During this early phase of diaspora formation, knowledge of the world system – not land – became the glue and the currency of kinship: Which borders were easy to cross on which days? What visa regulations apply in Belgium? Which towns offer good locations for new restaurants? Where do you get a menu printed cheaply? Who, besides the mayor and his family, should I invite to the opening? How do you send money home without drawing attention from tax officials? Answers to these and a hundred other questions were critical for people who were rapidly becoming skilled surfers on the waves of global capitalism.

The Man diaspora was fast becoming an ethnographic realization of Arjun Appadurai's deterritorialized world, wherein kinship groups can operate without a single geographical base (Appadurai 1996). It is also relevant to note that Man emigrants always had excellent timing: They started their restaurant chains just at the

point when the British middle class was beginning to “eat out” – a new, exciting diversion that was not part of British culture until the late 1950s and early 1960s.□The only options prior to this time were fish-and-chips shops, Indian curry “cafes”, and take-out Chinese “chip shops” that offered curry *on* chips or chop-suey *with* chips.[17]□Rice came later.

San Tin entrepreneurs were among the pioneers who branched out into a new category of middle-class, “white-table-cloth” restaurants, complete with waiters and elaborate menus.□At each upturn of the world economy Man emigrants were ready to expand and did so with confidence – first into restaurants, then catering, import-export, and property development.□One set of brothers established a highly successful travel agency based in London and Amsterdam.□They made their fortune in the 1970s and early 1980s by organizing charter flights – the so-called “restaurant workers specials” – between Europe and Hong Kong.□By the late 1980s the cost of global travel was collapsing and it soon became cheaper to fly British Airways or KAL.□In response the brothers, together with several of their *sok-bak hing-dai* (Cantonese for “descendants of common grandfather”), moved into upscale property development in Canada.□

Their story is not atypical of second-generation Man emigrants.□Most were born in San Tin but moved abroad with their parents before they were teenagers.□It is no surprise, therefore, that they were more socially adept than their fathers and moved easily into entrepreneurial activities that demanded cultural literacy as well as fluency in various European languages.□Many leaders of this generation speak Cantonese, English, and Dutch (a handful learned German).□What sets them apart from their children is their ability to read and write Chinese – a skill that has nearly disappeared among Man born in the diaspora.

The Postmodern Phase of Diaspora Formation

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By the 1990s, another generational shift had occurred and a new, postmodern phase of diaspora formation was becoming evident.□ The term postmodern has been used rather loosely in this essay.□ What I have in mind is the social and cultural consequences of the collapse of time and space (cf. Harvey 1989: 201-259).□ Man emigrants and their offspring have experienced this implosion in a very vivid, direct, and personal manner.□ Air travel, electronic communications, and the “porousness” of state borders in the 1990s changed their worldviews.[18]

When this study began in the late 1960s, a telephone call between Hong Kong and London cost approximately U.S.\$10 per minute, assuming one could find a telephone that worked in the New Territories.□ Emigrant families communicated primarily by word of mouth (via returning workers), or by letter – two or three each year – usually written by professional scribes at both ends of the migration chain.[19]□ Airfares have declined many fold since the 1960s and 1970s.□ The trans-Pacific tickets my students buy today cost one-tenth of what I paid for my first trip to Hong Kong in 1969 (allowing for inflation).

By the 1990s members of the Man lineage were flying regularly between Europe, Canada, and Hong Kong – often in business class.□ Lineage “cousins”[20] managed to keep in close touch with each other, first by telephone, then FAX, then email, and most recently by satellite cell phone.□ In this latest phase, many descendants of Man Sai-go participate in a “wired” diaspora based on instant, real-time communications.□ It was becoming possible, in other words, to own and operate businesses in three or four countries during the 1990s – and many Man did just that.

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Generational Succession and the Gender Wars

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Meanwhile, two new generations have emerged in the diaspora – the third and fourth generations, counting from the original sojourner emigrants the author first encountered in San Tin.□The current leaders of the Man lineage are predominantly professionals: doctors, lawyers, accountants, teachers, brokers, investors, entrepreneurs, and (much to the consternation of their grandfathers) professors.□Major concentrations of Man Sai-go’s descendants (men and women) currently reside in Hong Kong, Toronto, Amsterdam, London, Brussels, Bonn, Dusseldorf, Stockholm, Leiden, Leeds, Manchester, Birmingham, and Liverpool.□The author’s field site, if that term still has any meaning at all, has become the globe.

Women, the daughters of Man immigrants, now play important roles in lineage business affairs and in the management of various Man clan associations (more on this later).□Until the 1980s, the social category *Man* was male specific; women were not defined as members of the lineage. New Territories Cantonese have practiced surname exogamy for centuries, a practice that put San Tin’s daughters in a decidedly ambiguous position: As residents of a single-surname village, they had no option but to marry out and become the wives of rival lineages.□Surname exogamy also meant that all Man wives were, by definition, outsiders who had grown up in other villages.□The marginality of women was also reinforced by the marriage payment system, studied at length by Rubie Watson (1985:118-136; 1991).□At marriage, daughters usually received (and still to this day receive) a substantial dowry provided by their parents, often in the form of gold jewelry.□Male siblings viewed this endowment as a form of pre-mortem inheritance, thereby compensating their sisters who did not receive shares of their father’s estate upon his death (see also McCreery 1976).

The increasing visibility and political/economic significance of Man daughters is a revolutionary development. □ Daughters now demand an equal share, along with their brothers, of their father's personal (i.e., household) estate. □ Even more disruptive from a male elders' point of view, daughters in some New Territories lineages are claiming shares (*fen*) of the estates of long-dead paternal ancestors. Not surprisingly, this is a dispute that strains relationships within families and lineages; at this writing the "inheritance wars," as they are known locally, are still smoldering. [21]

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"Return" of the Man

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My most recent fieldwork has focused on a "return" migration of wealthy investors to Hong Kong – people who hold British, Dutch, German, and Canadian citizenship. □ While many Hong Kong residents fled the territory during the run up to 1997 reversion to Chinese rule (see e.g., Skeldon 1994), Man diasporics treated the repatriation as an opportunity. Key entrepreneurs, several of whom were millionaires, moved back to Hong Kong and re-established themselves as certified, Hong Kong identity-card-carrying residents. [22]

Although most of these men were born in San Tin, they did not take up residence in their ancestral village. □ Instead, they bought luxury flats in Kowloon or in the exclusive Mid-Levels District on Hong Kong Island. □ They did, however, force their English, German, and Dutch-speaking children to spend weekends in the mosquito-infested homes of their grandmothers or great-grandmothers in San Tin – "to teach them our ways," said one Dusseldorf millionaire.

During the run-up to the 1997 repatriation Man from the diaspora also took over the Hong Kong Clan Association, formerly a rather stodgy organization run by refugees from Mao's China. □ The

businessmen who originally founded this association all shared the surname Man (or Wen if they were Mandarin speakers) but were not linked by lineage affiliation or ties to localized kinship groups in China. [23] The majority of clan members were from Shanghai and Ningbo. As typical urbanites of that era (1950s to 1980s), they had nothing but contempt for New Territories people; until the late 1990s, only three San Tin Man were (inactive) members.

In short order, Man diasporics took over the leadership of the organization and voted the elderly anti-Communists out of office. The new chairman, a German-speaking entrepreneur originally from San Tin, transformed this surname association into a channel for investments to China. But where in China? Of the hundreds of possible venues, they chose Ji'an Xian, the home district of their putative ancestor, Wen Tianxiang (or, as he is known in Cantonese, Man Tin-cheung). Ji'an is located in the mountains of eastern Jiangxi Province, 800 miles north of Hong Kong.

Wen Tianxiang is one of China's most illustrious historical figures. As a Song Dynasty patriot he led the southern resistance to the Mongols and was executed on the direct order of Kublai Khan in 1283. Wen is revered by educated Chinese for his poetry, his statesmanship, and his patriotism (see Brown 1986). The people of San Tin claim descent from this hero and, starting in the early 1990s, Man diasporics began to visit Wen Tianxiang's home village, his tomb, and his ancestral shrines in Jiangxi. They built an alliance with local communist party officials who were eager to cooperate in the creation of a major cult center dedicated to Wen Tianxiang. [24]

Not surprisingly, given the economic stakes involved, party leaders have gone out of their way to help Man visitors rediscover their "roots" in the Ji'an countryside – a spectacularly beautiful region. Members of the Hong Kong clan association have reciprocated by

investing in local industries and joint ventures, taking advantage of cheap labor in Jiangxi.

Meanwhile, on another front, San Tin diasporics began to reconnect with their agnatic (i.e., patrilineal) kin who live on the socialist side of the old Anglo-Chinese border. Five single-lineage villages (of the Man surname) have thrived for centuries in what is, today, the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone – one of China’s most advanced centers of technology, banking, and industry. The Man of San Tin share an ancestor (the great-grandfather of Man Sai-go) with residents of the five Man settlements across the Shenzhen River. Joint rituals and cooperative activities among the six lineages ceased in 1949 and were nearly forgotten for 40 years – until ties were revived in the 1990s by San Tin Man who were seeking business partners in the Special Economic Zone. The key players in this reconnection were millionaire diasporics on the Hong Kong side and communist party cadres on the Shenzhen side – all of whom were born in Man lineage villages. Prior to the communist revolution, these communities constituted a higher-order-lineage – a loose political alliance that could be mobilized for defense purposes whenever necessary (see Freedman 1966: 20-21).

Today, this regional kinship organization has been revived as a framework for trans-border business. Man elders are busy rediscovering “lost” tombs, rebuilding and/or reclaiming dilapidated ancestral halls, updating genealogies, and reinventing higher-order-lineage rituals. San Tin’s many retired emigrants act as ritual instructors for their agnates across the river, where 30 years of Maoist anti-superstition campaigns all but obliterated knowledge of the ancestral rites. How do you offer incense? How do you divide a sacrificial pig? How do you address the ancestors? How do you kowtow, and not make a fool of yourself?

Orthopraxy, the correct *practice* of ritual, is an issue that unites members of this revived higher-order-lineage.[\[26\]](#)

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Pursuit of “Roots” and the Imagination of Kinship

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Meanwhile, after approximately 40 years of movement out and away, Man diasporics are re-embracing their home village and seeking their cultural “roots” in the New Territories and in Jiangxi (cf. Louie 2000).□ Competition has arisen among certain descent lines as representatives claim to be better versed in the conduct of ancestral rituals and more knowledgeable regarding lineage history.□ Culture, in its sense of *heritage*, is a fiercely contentious issue in today’s New Territories.□ Indigenous residents are publishing local histories and creating village museums to reinforce their claims to privileges granted by former colonial administrators.[\[27\]](#)□

In the course of this roots-seeking activity, *Emigration and the Chinese Lineage* has been discovered by a large number of Man diasporics.□ It is, I must confess, disconcerting to see one’s decades-old writings picked over and minutely deconstructed by people who treat the anthropologist as just one of many resources that they locate on the internet.□ It brings a whole new meaning to debates about the nature of ethnographic authority.[\[28\]](#)

For some who bear the Man surname, kinship is a *construct of the imagination* – a virtual universe.□ All notions of kinship are, of course, exercises of the imagination (in one form or another) but the emerging, diasporic construct is a radical departure from earlier conceptions of the lineage.□ This imagined collectivity consists of cousins, uncles (and aunts), grandparents, and distant kin who are linked by common origins to a near-mythical village – a place that bears little resemblance to the San Tin of their grandparents.□ Only a handful of European/Canadian-born diasporics have actually

visited San Tin.□When they do make the pilgrimage, they do so with deeply mixed feelings.□Like their grandfathers of the sojourner generation, the San Tin of the young diasporics' dreams is never the San Tin they encounter in the sober light of day.□This new mental terrain leads us into the realm of nostalgia and identity politics – imaginaries of a lost and never-experienced past (see e.g., Herzfeld 1991: 66-68; Lowenthal 1985: 4-13).

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What's in a Name?

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Given these recent developments, what does it mean – today – to be a *Man*?□Does it make sense to speak of “the Man” as a coherent, meaningful collectivity?□Until the early 1960s there is no question that the Man *did* constitute a social category of both ascription and description.□*Man* was a label of self-identification used by descendants of Man Sai-go in everyday discourse.□Lineage affiliation set the people of San Tin apart, as a group, from neighbors who bore other surnames and were members of rival lineages (notably the Teng, the Liu, the Pang, and the Ho).□To be a Man in the New Territories gave the individual social status, physical protection, and economic advantages (see J. Watson 1982).□In the 1960s and 1970s the phrase, “I am a Man,” was always delivered with gravity and pride; it was obviously a core feature of personal identity.

Today, by contrast, third and fourth generation Man do not think of themselves as, first and foremost, members of a lineage.□The personal identities of young people in the diaspora are complex in the extreme and reflect their varying experiences – some good, some bad – in Europe and Canada (Parker 1995; 1998).□Many I have encountered declare that they consider themselves to be British (or Dutch, or Canadian) of Chinese origin, but do not feel that they are unambiguously “Chinese,” as they imagine their grandparents to have been.□Language ability is central to their

notions of identity and those who speak better Cantonese (or, in a few cases, Mandarin learned at university) claim to be in closer touch with their ancestors than their cousins who speak only English, Dutch, or German (see also Ang 1994; Song 1997). □ Parental origin is another complicating factor: Many who claim descent from Man Sai-go have mothers or grandmothers of non-Chinese origin. □ A handful of first-generation emigrants took European wives (see J. Watson 1975b: 178-181) and the pace of intermarriage increased in the 1980s and 1990s. □ Male offspring of these unions theoretically have rights to share in the Man ancestral estates, but this is a matter that has yet to be put to the test.

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But Is It a Diaspora?

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Before concluding, another issue begs clarification: In what sense, if any, do descendants of Man Sai-go constitute a *diaspora*? □ There is, at this writing, no generally agreed definition of diaspora. □ The subject has attracted a great deal of scholarly attention in recent years and has become intertwined with the study of globalization – another problematic concept. □ Originally Diaspora (with an upper-case D) was reserved for Jewish groups that lived outside their putative, ancestral homeland (see e.g., Ho 2004: 213-214; Tambiah 2000: 169-170). □ As Roger Sanjek notes – with obvious disapproval – anthropologists now use the term indiscriminately as a label for “people who leave their home area for distant regions ... and continue to remain in contact ... with their point of origin” (Sanjek 2003: 323). □ Most research on diasporas highlights groups that often have no other characteristic in common other than ethnic or national origin – Irish, Greek, Cuban, Cape Verdean, Dominican diasporas (see, e.g., Cohen 1977).

This essay surveys a group that obviously does not fit this broad, “ethnic” definition of diaspora. □ The Chinese diaspora is not at issue here, nor a Cantonese or even a New Territories diaspora (cf.

McKeown 1999; Ong 1999; Pieke, et al. 2004; Skeldon 2003).[□] Rather, the focus is on a specific, seven-centuries-old *kinship* group that is grounded, quite literally, in a recognized home village (*laojia* or *xiangxia*, Cantonese *heung-hah*).[□] Furthermore, those who identify themselves as participants in this specialized diaspora share a common surname and trace descent to a single founding ancestor.[□] One is tempted to invent a new term (microdiaspora?) for this kind of transnational collectivity, but neologisms are no substitute for analysis.

At a critical point in their recent history (some time between 1980 and 1990) third and fourth generation descendants of Man Sai-go started behaving like members of an organized diaspora.[□] Although they live in nearly a dozen countries, these people (not all of whom were male) not only maintain contact with each other, they go out of their way to track down “cousins” who had dropped out of the network.[□] They organized or revived Overseas Man Clan Associations,^[29] they updated genealogies, and they formed an international committee for the compilation of a history of the Man lineage – including recent developments in the diaspora.^[30][□] The ancestral rites at Man Sai-go’s tomb are still performed each year and descendants from Europe and Canada are always prominent among the participants (they are easy to spot with their video cameras).[□] News of these rites and other joint activities is disseminated by email and cell phone, constituting a global network that reaches nearly 4000 people.[□] Of course, some are more interested and committed than others; few participate in all of the joint activities but at least one member of most diasporic families retains an active link to the net.

It is clear that the descendants of Man Sai-go are different from hundreds of other Chinese diasporic groups, some of which are also defined by kinship networks.^[31][□] Why has the Man diaspora not unraveled like so many other such collectivities that survive

only as memories? To answer this puzzle we must return to the first principles of lineage organization: Land – or, more precisely – *real estate*.

□

Property, Again

□

From the 1950s until the early 1990s colonial authorities would not allow land development in the San Tin area. The paddy fields that once produced red rice fell fallow and became (in all but name) a free-fire zone, with British troops dug in on one side of the Shenzhen River and People's Liberation Army units on the other. Red Guard incursions occurred during the 1967 anti-colonial riots, frightening older villagers half to death, and Cultural Revolution violence spilled across the border. At one point during this chaotic period the San Tin Rural Committee Office was bombed.

Today, the Man paddy fields (approximately 1000 acres) constitute one of the last remaining open spaces in Hong Kong – and they sit, quite literally, in the shadow of Shenzhen's high-rise office buildings. There are, of course, major plans for the development of this land, involving Man entrepreneurial capital and diaspora investors. Some of Hong Kong's most prominent billionaire property developers have also expressed keen interest in the land. At this writing, development plans have been held up the new Hong Kong government *and* by disagreements among Man investors themselves – who have differing interpretations of lineage rules and rights to the ancestral estates. These disputes are having the paradoxical effect of holding branches of the lineage together, as they squabble among themselves and hire high-priced lawyers to represent their respective interests.[\[32\]](#)

Man Sai-go may have been dead for six centuries, but he is very much alive – sociologically, at least – as the owner of the largest and most strategically placed estate. Not surprisingly, Man

everywhere have been keen to demonstrate that they are legitimate, ritually recognized descendants of their founding ancestor.□ For centuries the Man have divided the annual dividends from their estates on a *per stirpes* basis, meaning that money is passed not to individuals but to branches of the lineage – with the consequence that single sons of single sons inherit more (often much more) than cousins who belong to prolific branches.□ Not surprisingly, those from the largest (and traditionally least affluent) branches have argued for a *per capita* division of estate proceeds among living members. Fortunes stand to be made, or lost, depending upon which inheritance system is followed when Man Sai-go's land, and the estates of other Man ancestors, are sold or developed.

As long as the land is held in common, the Man lineage – as a social institution – will surely survive in one form or another.□ The lure of the home village and the exploits of illustrious ancestors will continue to add ideological fuel to diasporic imaginations.□ But, once the ancestral estates are eventually (and no doubt inevitably) dispersed, can the kinship group survive?□ Will the memory of San Tin and the entire corpus of Man lineage history dissolve with the land?□ Only time will tell.

Anthropologists sometimes make claims to privileged knowledge, or special insights.□ But, in this case at least, the role of the ethnographer has been a humbling one – as the chronicler of a kinship group that never stops changing.□ The Man – like most contemporary diasporics – defy all attempts to pack them into the confines of a single lecture, or the pages of a single book, or the lifespan of a single ethnographer.□ In the end, I am completely confident in drawing only one conclusion: Man Sai-go would be exceedingly proud of his far-flung descendants.

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Footnotes

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□

[1] Apologies to Kevin Kelly, author of *Out of Control* (1994).

[2] On longitudinal (long-term) field projects, see Kemper and Royce 2002.

[3] The 99-year lease on the New Territories expired at midnight on June 30th, 1997. At that moment (as witnessed by a worldwide television audience), political control of Hong Kong shifted from Britain to China. Hong Kong became a Special Administrative Region and retained a measure of (much debated) independence from central authorities in Beijing. A large number of Man from Europe and Canada flew back to Hong Kong to be present during the many repatriation celebrations in the New Territories. The San Tin Rural Committee, supported by overseas Man contributors, invested heavily in the *huigui* (“return to the motherland”) festivities.

[4] Not all members of the lineage were born into the group. Male adoptees (taken as infants from parents who not part of the preexisting patriline) constituted no more than one percent of lineage membership. All other members were born into documented lines of descent traced directly from the founding ancestor. Both categories of membership are clearly delineated in the lineage’s written genealogies. Adoptees held full rights to the corporate property of the lineage (see J. Watson 1975a: 302).

[5] These estates were named in honor of the person who endowed the land (or had land endowed for him by his immediate

descendants). Each estate is administered by a manager (or team of managers) who rents out the land and divides the proceeds among documented descendants of the ancestor in question. San Tin had 126 ancestral estates in 1905; many, including the largest, are still active today. Some Man were wealthy by virtue of membership in relatively under-populated, but well endowed, branches of the lineage – that is, branches that owned several large estates (see J. Watson 1975b: 31-36).

[6] Only a handful of the most literate elders (including my landlord and patron, Mr. Man Tso-chuen) had actually heard of Zuxi, but the Man as a group conformed closely to Neoconfucian practices of marriage, funerals, and ancestral rites (see Ebrey 1991; J. Watson 1994).

[7] Maurice Freedman (1958) borrowed heavily from the work of E. E. Evans-Pritchard (1940) and other Africanists to establish what is often called the “lineage paradigm,” a model that puts primary weight on patriliney as the motivating force in Chinese society. For a summary of this approach, see J. Watson 1982. The lineage paradigm has been heavily criticized by many anthropologists, including Myron Cohen (1990), Allen Chun (1996), Steven Sangren (1984), and Rubie Watson (1982, 1985).

[8] See, e.g., Alarcon 2000; Ho 2004; Levitt 2001.

[9] See the lineage studies by Hugh Baker (1968), Jack Potter (1968), and Rubie Watson (1985). These three lineages were based on double-crop, fresh-water paddy systems that produced excellent varieties of white rice – in addition to a winter catch crop of sweet potatoes and vegetables. The Man were severely restricted by comparison, primarily because they could not eat their own rice (which was used primarily for wine making and poultry feed) and were completely dependent upon the market for survival.

[10] A good definition of sojourner is the one used by Rose Hum Lee in her classic study of early Chinese emigration to the United States: “[A] Sojourner is a person whose mental orientation is towards the home country ... [The] sojourner spends a major portion of his lifetime striving ... for economic betterment and higher social status, but the full enjoyment and final achievement of his objective is to be in his place of origin” (Lee 1960: 69).

[11] By the mid-1980s many retired emigrants began to treat their village houses (many of which had central air conditioning and other modern conveniences) as vacation homes, occupied only during Christmas and/or the lunar New Year festival.□The meaning of “home” was beginning to change as more and more descendants of Man Sai-go decided to retire in the diaspora and become part of their children’s families.

[12]□Perhaps the best example is the free-for-all that accompanied the annual *huapaohui* (“flower cannon society”) rituals.□Young men fought among themselves for lucky coins shot from a small cannon; local merchants then bought the coins and exhibited *huapai* (“flower altars”) in their shops.□The rituals, and the altars, were dedicated to the goddess Tianhou.□In the early 1960s the Royal Hong Kong Police banned the free-for-alls as threats to the social order in the New Territories.□Man elders ignored this regulation and continued to hold the ritual battle for several more years.□In 1970 the author witnessed, and photographed, the last of these flower-cannon scrums: Of the 40 young men who assembled for the event (including a dozen returnees from Europe), one suffered a broken leg, several lost teeth, and none escaped without bruises or a black eye (J. Watson 1996; see also Liu 2003: 381).□For a similar example of the maintenance and revival of ritual in a Chinese emigrant community, see Kuah 1999.

[13] The majority of San Tin's emigrants of this era ended up in London, Liverpool, and Amsterdam. □ United States immigration restrictions made it almost impossible for Hong Kong Chinese to enter, let alone stay in the country. □ The New Yorker was an illegal immigrant who dared not leave the U.S.A. during his entire sojourn because he knew he could not return. □ In contrast, first and second generation Man emigrants to Europe made periodic return visits to San Tin, usually to marry and to expand their families. □ The New Yorker never married (at least in Hong Kong) and ended up living alone.

[14] The majority of these first generation returnees lived difficult and lonely lives in San Tin. □ Their sons had emigrated to Europe or Canada, often taking their wives and children with them (and their daughters had long since married out of the village – see later discussion of gender distinctions). □ Many returnees were bachelors and those who were married found themselves estranged from their wives, who had constructed independent lives in their husbands' absence. □ In 1969-1970 many returnees spent long hours in San Tin's largest ancestral hall, in the company of other elderly men who shared tea, brandy, and companionship. □ In contrast, second generation emigrants enjoyed a higher degree of economic success and retired to life in extended families – usually abroad.

[15] For instance, 32 percent of households in the nearby lineage community of Ha Tsuen had someone working in Europe during the 1970s – but these people did not dominate social life in their home village, as emigrants did in San Tin (see R. Watson 1985: 150-151).

[16] Formal expulsion from the lineage requires a unanimous decision by members of San Tin's elder council – all Man males, age 61 or older, who answer the lineage master's (*zuzhang*) call to assemble in the main ancestral hall. □ The last known case occurred

in 1962 and involved an intra-community sexual liaison (see J. Watson 1975b: 183-184).□The male offender, a prospective emigrant, was nearly killed and his name was struck from the Man genealogy.□No one has spoken his name, or inquired about his existence, since the day of expulsion.□Today the economic consequences of such an action would be profound, in the sense that the expellee would be removed from the roster of recipients who receive annual stipends from Man ancestral estates and a share in any future land sale.

[17] The best account of early Chinese restaurants in Europe and Canada is *China to Chinatown: Chinese Food in the West* (Roberts 2002).□See especially chapter 6, “The Globalization of Chinese Food, Early Stages.”□On Chinese take-out shops in Britain, see Song 1999.

[18] This point is made most forcefully in Aihua Ong’s *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality* (1999).

[19] Professional letter writers set up temporary desks in the nearby market town of Yuen Long twice each week.□They had a steady stream of clients, primarily women, from villages such as San Tin.□Return letters from male emigrants (also written with the help of semi-professionals who worked in Chinese restaurants along London’s Gerrard Street) were taken to the Yuen Long scribes where they were quietly read to the recipients.□Villagers did not use literate neighbors for this purpose for fear of gossip.

[20] The English term “cousin” is commonly used by diasporics born in Europe or Canada.□More specific Cantonese kinship terms that highlight fine-grained distinctions among descendants of Man Sai-go are falling out of fashion; in fact, many younger diasporics are unable to understand, let alone use correctly, the linguistic forms that were second nature for their grandparents.

[21] Rubie Watson worked on this issue during her 1997 field research. □ No uniform pattern of response by (male) lineage elders has yet emerged. □ The financial benefits of ancestral estates still devolve to men. □ Women are now legally entitled to a share of their parents' personal, household estate but not all daughters claim this privilege (see also Chan 1998; Jones 1995). □ In many respects, Man emigrants are more willing to incorporate daughters into lineage affairs, perhaps because women have always played key roles in emigrant enterprises – as accountants, managers, translators, and public relations specialists (see Baxter and Raw 1988 on Chinese women in the British catering trade). □ It is quite another matter, however, when daughters demand full shares in the corporate ancestral estates.

[22] This was a difficult and trying time for New Territories people. □ Rubie Watson and I spent the last six months of British rule (January to June, 1997) teaching at Chinese University of Hong Kong and conducting field research in the New Territories. □ Many Man diasporics returned to Hong Kong because they did not know what criteria the new government would use when judging a person's residential status (and hence economic future) after repatriation. □ As returning emigrants who carried foreign passports, they felt vulnerable, even though they were born in the New Territories. □ In their view it was important to be present – in body as well as spirit – when Hong Kong reverted to Chinese control at midnight on June 30th, 1997 (see also note 3 above). □ Subsequent research in the New Territories (1998) showed that local people, including returned diasporics, were no longer preoccupied with this issue.

[23] On the distinction between clans and lineages in Chinese society, see J. Watson 1982: 610-612.

[24] More will be said about these activities in a subsequent publication. □ Man diasporics have been instrumental in supporting the Wen Tianxiang Memorial Hall (*Wen Tianxiang Jinianguan*) and other manifestations of the cult, including a major renovation of Wen's tomb and his ancestral hall in the single-surname, single-lineage village of Wen Jia Cun ("Wen Home Village") in Futian Xiang, Ji'an Xian, Jiangxi. □ The author visited these sites in 1994 with Mr. Man Cheuk-fei, a well-known Hong Kong journalist (and member of the Man higher-order-lineage). There is no evidence that New Territories Man ever made pilgrimages to Jiangxi prior to the 1990s.

[25] The Man ancestral halls in the Shenzhen area were converted to communist party headquarters or factories during the Maoist era. □ Most have now been returned to their pre-revolution owners.

[26] This topic will also be explored in a future publication. □ The author conducted field surveys in three Man villages in the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone during 1991, 1994, and 1997.

[27] Indigenous residents are defined as descendants of people who lived in the New Territories prior to 1898, the starting date of British rule. □ The Chinese terms used for this category are *bendiren* or *yuanjumin*, roughly translated as "local people" or "indigenes." □ They are contrasted to newcomers (*wailairen*, lit. "outcomers") who settled in the New Territories after 1898. □ By the early 1990s people who immigrated to Hong Kong from neighboring provinces far outnumbered the indigenes. □ Under colonial rule indigenes received special privileges, most notably the right to build houses for each male born into local families. □ This right, among others, is the source of great tension in today's New Territories (see Chan 1998; Cheung 2003).

[28] Many diasporics treat me as an elder, a repository of cultural information and heritage: “Did you know my grandfather?” is the most frequently asked question. Others see me as an unwelcome intruder who cannot possibly understand Chinese culture, which, of course, is far too deep for any outsider to appreciate. Some treat me as the chronicler of their exploits and welcome my questions, emails, and cameras. Man diasporics, like all humans, are human. They react in a variety of ways, depending upon circumstances that change with the decades.

[29] Man “clan” organizations exist in Hong Kong, London, Manchester, Amsterdam, and Toronto. Some are well organized and have headquarters buildings of their own (as in London); others are informal and do not have regular meeting places. All are dominated by diasporics who trace their origins to San Tin.

[30] As of summer, 2004, this work is still in progress.

[31] See, especially, the excellent ethnographies by Kuah Khun Eng (1999, 2000) and Woon Yuen-fong (1984, 1989), both of whom concentrate on lineage-based emigrant communities and their diasporas.

[32] Jack Potter (1968: 168) documented a similar dispute in the New Territories lineage village of Ping Shan. That dispute began in the mid-1960s and was still winding its way through Hong Kong courts in 1997.