

Village leadership in an emigrant community

Abstract

This paper considers the recent evolution of local power structures in Chinese villages where emigration abroad and lineage organizations were important features during the first decades of the century. It is argued that various institutions and individuals have gained some legitimacy to shape local decisions. Different groups, but also different moral principles support them, which makes it necessary for them to reach a consensus through discussions and negotiations.

Introduction

The study of local power structures in villages of Guangdong province where emigration abroad has a long history is the main topic of this paper. Various structures play a part today in the decision-making process carried on to solve common affairs at the village level. In other words, multiple channels coexist through which various individuals gain legitimacy to intervene in local affairs. To highlight this point, we will focus on the mode of designation and on the identity of these village leaders or privileged actors rather than on the functions they perform.

The recent changes can be better understood by stressing the similarities and dissimilarities observed with the pre-1949 situation and by showing the influence of Overseas Chinese. Therefore, the analysis made of the locality under study, namely

Conglou in Taishan county, will be compared with the village leadership structures that existed before the Communist Party came to power, as well as with the power structures that can be observed today in another Guangdong county, Nanhai, where Overseas Chinese play a much less important role.¹

Conglou *zhen*, whose total population is almost 40,000, administers today 250 natural villages. As in other areas of Taishan county, most of the inhabitants of the same village share a common surname.² Localized lineages as defined by J. Watson (1982) organized society before 1949. However, while some neighboring *zhen* were under the influence of one or two localized lineages, ten main lineages and a few minor ones shared Conglou territory and none could be said to dominate the area.³ The focus of this study is the Mai community (Mak in local dialect), which is comprised of eleven single-surname villages totalling in 1994 some 3,000 persons.

¹ Fieldwork in Conglou began in 1985, in order to write a book to be published in France in 1996, and concerning the social relationships in that locality between 1911 and 1949. Interviews were carried out, from 1985 to 1992, in Taishan but also in Hong Kong and in the United States with members of the Mai community who migrated abroad. Local archives, Overseas Chinese newspapers, and genealogies, linked to the locality where the native village of Mak Kong is located, have been collected. Mak Kong spent five years in this village, from 1969 to 1974. A few articles have been already published (see references). Since 1993, fieldwork has been conducted in Taishan to gather data on the same topics stressed in the first part of the research, but regarding the present situation.

² According to a document published in 1963, 94 per cent of the 4,253 villages existing then in Taishan were single-surname villages or villages dominated by inhabitants sharing a common surname (ACCS, 1963).

³ In 1986, according to *Conglou Zazhi*, N°3, 123 surnames could be found in Conglou, but ten surnames dominated: the Wu (10,233 persons), the Li (4,382), the Chen (4,304), the Mai (3,302), the Liu (2,549), the Deng (2,464), the Liang (1,844), the Liao (1,650) the Xu (1,474) and the Yuan (1,069). It should be added that the inhabitants sharing the surname Wu were divided into two localized lineages before 1949 (CHW, nr. 3: 1986).

Nine of these villages represent today a whole *guanli* or former production brigade, and two others are members of such an administrative unit where the Mai are confronted with members of different surnames.

The community formed by the Mai in the past can be characterized as a localized lineage of intermediary type, according to both M. Freedman's (1966) and J. Goody's (1990) classifications. Its features are therefore quite different from those of the dominant lineages studied for instance by Woon Yuen-fong (1984), R. Watson (1985) and J. Watson (1977).

The lineage was not very wealthy: the temple of the founding ancestor possessed only some fifty *mu* before 1949, and the corporate land controlled by the different lineage branches and **fang* represented about 25 per cent of the total amount of land cultivated by the eleven villages. Moreover, this rather low percentage of corporate land cannot be considered as belonging to one and the same landowner, the localized lineage, since it was controlled by different internal units which sometimes had conflicting interests. Such a situation partly explains the relatively weak power of the lineage Mai and its leaders, if compared with other lineage units of Guangdong province. The peasants' economic independence from the collective property accounts for the rather high degree of social autonomy enjoyed before 1949 by the three main fundamental sub-units inside the lineage: the family, the inferior *fang* which often grouped part of the inhabitants of a given village, and the village. It can be illustrated for instance by the fact that the council of lineage affairs, the highest power structure of the Mai, while having an extended power, had actually little direct influence on its members' affairs. The organization of society in descent groups and the ideology which supported it, played nonetheless a very important role. The fact that individuals belonged to given lineages and lineage segments contributed widely to shape their identity as well as their social and economic opportunities.

Besides the importance of localized

lineages as a fundamental form of social organization before 1949, emigration abroad was and still is one of the main social and economic characteristic of Conglou.⁴ The importance of past emigration is such that in 1992, about half of the Taishan population had relatives in foreign countries other than Hong Kong and Macau.⁵ Conglou in its turn ranks high in the hierarchy of Taishan localities which send part of their inhabitants abroad: more than 40,000 former Conglou inhabitants and their descendants were estimated to be living outside China in 1987, and departures have been continuing ever since. Among the Mai, locally famous since the end of the 19th century for the high number of 'paths to Overseas' detained, estimations show that the emigrated community represents more than twice the size of the local population. The lines of descent of numerous Mai resemble indeed that of Zongxin, a member of the Mai lineage born around 1850, and who has two out of his five sons, sixteen out of his twenty-four grand-sons, and fourteen out of his twenty-eight grand grand-sons, who emigrated.

Emigration altered the socioeconomic hierarchy of the villages before 1949: whereas very deprived peasants without enough land to cultivate should have formed the largest group, a middle stratum turned out to be the largest, composed of households that tilled

⁴ The Mai were late-bloomers in Conglou which explains the rather small amount of land possessed. Actually, no big landlord could be found inside this community, the wealthiest peasants possessing some thirty *mu* of land.

⁵ Existing data indicate that non-commercial remittances and contributions of the Taishan communities overseas amounted to US\$ 7,210,000 in 1992; the total value of commercial investments done by emigrants amounted to US\$ 47,630,000 (ZTTR, 1993: 215). As to non-commercial remittances and donations, larger sums of money were actually sent home during the previous years. In 1982, the amount of the overseas remittances reached its peak, exceeding US\$ 35 million, the official figure for 1986 is US\$ 13,487,882 with the smallest amount being sent in 1989, 2,921,387 *yuan* (TQB, 1992: 248).

some land and had a relative abroad helping to ensure a basic level of subsistence.

The development of the emigrated community who provided during the first decades of the present century for most of the lineage and *fang* collective expenses through the regular launching of collections, supported also peasants' autonomy from the corporate bodies. As a matter of fact, not only were those bodies unable to provide their members with large economic opportunities to find a living, but they were dependent on Overseas Chinese contributions for the performance of collective social and religious activities.

Local leaders at the eve of 1949⁶

The generic term used in Conglou to designate a local leader was *fluxiong* or 'father-older brother', whether this individual's authority extended only to his smallest *fang*, to his village, to his lineage branch and eventually to the whole community.⁷ The village, most often a territorial unit comprised of various *fang*, was headed by a group com-

posed of the *fluxiong* of these various kinship sub-units.⁸

No formal procedure existed to assign someone the title of *fluxiong*. Rather, it was a gradual process which came to an end when one realized that he was considered as such by his group's members. A new *fluxiong* had emerged when the repeated initiatives developed by a man to speak out and gain authority were given a positive social response. As explained by a former *fluxiong* of the lineage Mai:

'It took me more than ten years to be recognized as a *fluxiong*. But one day, I noticed that people turned to me as soon as there was a problem, that they were waiting for me to offer a solution, and then I knew I had become a *fluxiong*.'⁹

The absence of a formal process of designation added actually to the prestige of local *fluxiong* whose positions were quite different from those obtained by peasants who had been clearly assigned specific functions in the village, like the head of the security team who was chosen by auction or the responsible of the *bao* once the *baojia* system was reestablished during the thirties, and who was chosen by the *fluxiong*. An individual formally designated by a group was considered to be at its service, while the power of a *fluxiong* rested on the authority he had gradually acquired over the group.

Since no one among the Mai possessed enough of a given resource, like scholarly achievement or economic wealth, to impose himself as a leader, *fluxiong* were people who first of all, enjoyed a certain amount of 'face' or local esteem, and second, who had demonstrated their will and their ability to attend

⁶ It is impossible to describe here in a comprehensive way the system of the *fluxiong*. Among other important elements, we will not mention the relationships existing during the thirties and the forties between the informal leaders and the local administration. This brief presentation is focusing merely on a few points which can be useful to understand the main changes which occurred after 1949. For a more detailed account see Hua and Thireau, 1996.

⁷ This term seems to have replaced at the end of the 19th century the term *fulao* used to designate local leaders. Around the same time, the development of commerce and other new professional activities seem to have supported the rise of younger local leaders than before. In other words, seniority began to play a less important part, a trend that would continue during the first half of the second century. Faure (1986) offers an analysis of the social and economic context at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century.

⁸ When hamlets were comprised of members of one and the same *fang* as it was the case with two out of the eleven villages studied, there was no difference between *fang* and village leaders.

⁹ Interview, Mai Jieshi, New York, May 1985.

local affairs.¹⁰ As far as this problem is concerned, the choice of local leaders among the Mai community shows some similar points with the situation described by P. Duara (1990) for North China villages. 'Face' could stem from material wealth but also from education, experience of life abroad, success in a given activity or obedience to moral standards.

The analysis of the various local leaders of the Mai community during the thirties and the forties shows that one had to prove one's ability in three main fields: knowledge of local common principles or *daoli*, a sense of equity better than others, and the capacity to defend one's group's interests. The collectively acknowledged principles could change along with the definitions of what constituted the group's interests. Nonetheless, knowledge of these principles was illustrated by the capacity to interpret situations and find solutions based upon past experience. The attention paid to the sense of equity highlights the important part played by *fluxiong* as local mediators. One of the most important ways to be recognized as a potential *fluxiong* was indeed to offer solutions considered by the audience to be better and more equitable than others. Equity was an important means to avoid conflict and the resort to violence, although it simply meant very often that the strong could not discriminate too much against the weak. To be fair was also an important quality in a social order where disputes between two groups were first solved by these groups' representatives, without interference of a third party, which means that these representatives had to be able to look beyond particular and private interests in order to find a common solution. Finally,

¹⁰ Education, wealth, life experience abroad, age, privileged social relationships, and moral standards were some of the most important means through which one could acquire wealth. Although economic status was important to gain 'face' and authority, the various *fluxiong* of the lineage Mai were not all members of the more wealthy families. At the eve of 1949, a poor barber, almost illiterate, actually headed the council of lineage affairs.

since the most important dangers were considered to come from the outside, the *fluxiong* had to show their willingness to use their resources in order to defend the group they represented.¹¹

Besides these personal capacities, candidates to the title of *fluxiong* needed to have the support of the young, unmarried peasants of their group who played a dissuasive part and helped these local leaders to implement their decisions which could not 'satisfy everyone every day.'¹² The degree of this support and the extent of the *fluxiong*'s power varied in the same direction. Finally, although rhetoric was not important, although some *fluxiong* would gain a high reputation without being skilled orators, to look after local affairs was called *hua shi*, and the ability to make articulated and convincing arguments was quite important.

Other persons than the *fluxiong* could nonetheless be present during the meetings in the ancestors' temples, called *shang citang*, where decisions were reached. After the beginning of the war against Japan, more persons and younger persons than before were able to attend such events and eventually express their opinions and not only support *fluxiong* decisions.

Some *fluxiong*, said to follow a military path while the others were considered to be of

¹¹ To say that a *fluxiong* was someone who enjoyed 'face' does not mean that *fluxiong* were not capable of abuses nor feared by the members of their community. Actually someone who enjoyed a lot of consideration, was given marks of consideration, which included some degree of cooperation and obedience. Peasants often claimed to fear those *fluxiong* who had a lot of face, because they were so powerful.

Some of the *fluxiong* actually misused their power or were considered too much authoritarian. Not only their latent power but also their actual intervention in family affairs for instance was feared. Nonetheless, as far as the group is concerned, they still could be considered as more able than others, in a group where the choice of potential candidates was quite limited, to fulfill at least one or two of the three basic functions required.

¹² Interview, Mai Dingsu, New York, May 1985.

a civil type, were feared more than estimated because of their frequent resort to force and violence. Negatively perceived unless controlled by civil *fuxiong*, they were considered useful if they could manage to prevent attacks from the outside and eventually react to them. If the first type of *fuxiong* can be said to derive its power from the authority detained, peasants claiming that they 'believed and followed' these leaders, others were listened to because of their resort to violence.¹³

The present cooperation between formal and informal leaders

Since the reforms implemented at the end of the seventies, leadership has undergone a process of splitting in Conglou villages. Different power structures coexist today and cooperate to rule village affairs, some formal and others informal. Four main ways to acquire legitimacy to intervene in village affairs can actually be distinguished which are not mutually exclusive, one person being able to belong to more than one of the groups shaping local decisions.

A legitimacy stemming from the ties established with higher administrative units

It was only after the Communist Party came to power that the governmental administration reached the village level. Since 1949, and more pointedly since the creation of the People's Communes, the main function of the village leadership structure, codesignated by

¹³ It is not the topic of this paper to present a detailed discussion of the nature of the power detained by local leaders before 1949. The main point we want to stress here is the fact that to be recognized as a *fuxiong* in Conglou (and we believe in other localities where the level of internal differentiation was low), some personal abilities or resources, beneficial to society, needed to be recognized by the group. This does not mean that group members would not suffer from *fuxiongs'* eventual abuses. For a more detailed discussion of the *fuxiong* system, see Thireau and Mak, 1994.

the broader administrative units and the villagers, but under extended influence of the first, has been to represent the administration and transmit various political measures, rather than to represent the villagers. The 'village affairs committees' (*cunmin weiyuanhui*) which exist today in Conglou are the descendants of such a tradition implemented after 1949, although the nature of the power detained by this official village leadership has widely changed since the reforms. Composed of three to five persons according to the village population, the size of these committees is decided by the administration while their members are elected by villagers once a list of candidates, slightly larger than the exact number required, is presented by the *guanli*.

Considered as dealing mainly with problems administered by the *xiang*, like the collection of taxes or the writing of needed authorization letters, the persons chosen today are often characterized by the good ties they have established with the members of the higher administrative units. Most of the members of these committees were in 1994 actually men between forty and fifty years old who had joined the militia (*minbing*) before the People's Communes disappeared. The low percentage of village enterprises in this area accounts for the fact that these leaders are not required to have special economic skills. If these are the most official local leaders, if they possess the title of head or member of the village affairs committee, they generally enjoy little social consideration or 'face' among local inhabitants, and their power is limited.

As a matter of fact, they are considered to be passive representatives of the administration rather than actual leaders. Local inhabitants show no particular esteem when commenting on these responsables. It is not rare to find Conglou inhabitants who are even unable to state the exact number and identity of the persons belonging to their village committee. Most of them mention only two individuals: the person they call the *cuntou* or village head, actually the main responsible of

the village affairs committee, and an accountant.

The role played by these official leaders is not disregarded by local inhabitants, since their main function is, as some informants put it 'to reach the brigade' or *tong dadui*, which enables the village to have access to important information. This resource possessed by some, that is to enjoy the confidence of the cadres of the *xiang*, is beneficial to all and local inhabitants complain about those who do not use this resource properly. For instance, in March 1995, the members of one village Mai criticized the head of their village committee who had just resigned. He had been accused during the past weeks of having installed in his own house four fans offered by Overseas Chinese to the local 'house of culture'. The power of these official leaders is often limited to this area: to gain information from the higher administrative units that will help the village and its inhabitants to understand the political climate as well as the economic trends and eventually, in return, transmit to the above structures the village reactions. The members of the village affairs committee do not decide, in most cases, about local internal affairs or, at least, they do not do it alone.

Besides the fact that the members of the committee are chosen to perform limited functions in Conglou and that these functions do not require nor assign an extended social consideration today, the fact that they are nominated by their village members and the *xiang*, and paid for the services they provide, account also for the lack of social esteem they enjoy. The origin of their power is compared by local inhabitants to that of the heads of the former groups of self-defense, called *gengtou* before 1949, a comparison not heard about in the villages of Nanhai county for instance. If the functions performed are quite different, the *cuntou* of today and the *gengtou* of yesterday have in common to have obtained their title through a clear procedure of designation. In other words, the present heads of the village affairs committees have not gained authority like

the previous *fluxiong*: they have been assigned a duty and are paid to fulfill it.

The title and the 'face' enjoyed are therefore quite distinct today in Conglou. This was not the case before 1949, where people enjoying the title of *fluxiong* were given 'face' out of consideration or fear. The present distinction between title and 'face' can be illustrated by the following examples. First, none of the persons we interviewed and who were considered locally to enjoy a lot of 'face' were members of any of the eleven village affairs committees of the Mai community. Most of all, none of them were willing to participate in such structures although they often claimed that it would be easy for them to obtain such a title if they wished to. Second, the functions actually performed by the village head and his colleagues are often linked to the execution of decisions taken at the village level through various means other than a committee meeting. For instance, the responsibility to transmit to every household the hour and place of a meeting that may have been decided by a few peasants, to plant pickets showing the laying out of a new road decided by the villagers, to prepare the collective meal shared by those who are going to participate in a collective activity, are automatically assigned to the village head and his first assistant.

The situation looks quite different today in the locality of Jiujiang, in Nanhai county.¹⁴

¹⁴ Jiujiang and Conglou present quite different patterns of development. Lineages were less prominent in Jiujiang than in Conglou before 1949. In Jiujiang, which had a population of 729,290 persons and about 100,000 Overseas Chinese, Hong Kong and Macau compatriots, these two last categories are much more important, numerically speaking, than in Conglou (GNW, 1990: 357, 381). Jiujiang has achieved a higher level of industrialization than Conglou, which is true also of Nanhai and Taishan counties they belong to respectively. For instance, in 1989, 42,000 persons were working for the industrial sector in Taishan whose total population reached 847,000 inhabitants, while 124,000 persons were hired by local industries in Nanhai which had a population of 753,000 inhabitants (GTND, 1989: 142).

The election of the various village affairs committees are important events, since the industrialization process assigns extended duties to these official village leaders. The amount of the village land that should be rented out or sold for instance, as well as the way the important collective funds should be used are decisions taken by the village committees who did not share their power with other bodies until the end of 1994. Once elected, these committees tend to act rather independently without asking other inhabitants' advise. A member of a village committee, head of a production team before 1978 even complains:

'Actually, I disagree with the head of our village committee and his assistant. They often come and see my shop in the end of the afternoon, and we sit in front of the door to discuss village matters. Sometimes we take small decisions, sometimes we take important ones. I would like us to hold more village meetings, to hear others' opinions, but they do not want to. They were elected partly because they were young, had not participated in political struggles, and were obviously reluctant to interfere in families affairs. But at the same time, they are afraid of public debates. 'They are afraid of trouble' as they say, and do not encourage larger discussions'.¹⁵

If some kind of consultancy process may still exist in other villages of Jiujiang, no formal procedure seems to have been established as is the case in Conglou. Local people will therefore often address criticism to their leaders once the decision has already been taken.

However, if most village affairs are decided by the village committee, two power structures coexist today in the villages of Jiujiang locality although they have different functions. They should be integrated into a single body around 1997. As a matter of fact, in order to provide for a more unified and coherent management of land as a resource, a

¹⁵ Interview, Gao Meimen, Huilong village, Jiujiang, December 1994.

reform has been experimented with in Nanhai since the beginning of 1994 and implemented throughout the county since a meeting held in October 1994 assessed the value of this experience: land cooperatives have been created at the level of the former brigade or current *guanliqu*, with all village members belonging to this unit being considered as shareholders.¹⁶ The power to decide about the use of land and about eventual changes of property rights has been assigned to the *guanliqu*, which are encouraged to divide the local land into three parts: one dedicated to industrial production, another one to commercial activities and a last one to agriculture. Local inhabitants were therefore asked to elect in Jiujiang, in December 1994, a *dongshi weiyuanhui* or 'Board of Directors', headed by a *dongshi zhang* or Director, whose main task is to represent the village interests at the former brigade level. This body has been elected through a new procedure, unknown during all previous decades: no list of candidates have been elaborated by the higher administrative units which have only decided about the committee size, villagers being able to cast a vote for any adult member of their community. These bodies do not replace the village affairs committee, which will continue to run all other village affairs until its present mandate expires. The two structures should then be integrated into a single one. Actually, none of the villagers nor local leaders we interviewed mentioned the cooperative project. Most of them would agree that such a move would improve the use of land, but worried about some consequences they fostered such as the decrease of the power enjoyed by the village and the growing corruption of the cadres of the *guanliqu* who would directly control greater resources. Since conflicts between the village and the *guanliqu* were bound to develop, most villagers thought the new *dongshi weiyuanhui* should be composed of individuals who had proved their willingness to

¹⁶ Regarding this new policy, see for instance articles published in *Yangcheng wanbao* (GZX: 25 October 1994).

defend the village interests, who were articulated and dared to speak out. Such considerations obviously influenced the choices made in the three Jiujiang villages surveyed. The villagers' tendency to choose inhabitants of their own kinship group or surname appear also to have influenced the final composition of these bodies. Other qualities like technical skills or mediation ability, sometimes considered to elect the members of the village affairs committee in Jiujiang, do not seem to have played an important part here.

Despite the division of local power into two different structures in Jiujiang, both structures are nonetheless formal and have been elaborated by the local government. Moreover, the titles possessed correspond to the functions assigned and the activities performed. Both committees are considered by the higher administrative units and local inhabitants to run village affairs. However, if the part played by local administration in village affairs through the establishment of official bodies, created at the initiative of local government and recognized by it, is a common feature of the two localities under study, and a feature unknown before 1949, in Jiujiang the same bodies run village affairs and transmit official measures while in Conglou a division of labor has been operating between an official structure which appears to be a rather passive interlocutor of the *guanliqiu*, and other formal and informal structures which actually decide about village affairs.

A legitimacy stemming from the management of Overseas Chinese contributions

The emigrants' financial support to their homeland has been increasing since the beginning of the eighties. Apart from the assistance and solidarity expressed towards kin, these contributions support activities of local groups as different as the *fang*, the village, the *guanliqiu* or former brigade, the lineage, the market-town and the county seat. In Conglou, where most often descent groups and territorial groups do not coincide, that is where neither the lineage segment nor the

lineage are distinct territorial units, the contributions addressed to the *fang* and the lineage tend to be linked with religious and social activities, such as the ceremonies performed during Qing-Ming festival, the mobilization of economic and social resources in order to recover full use of an ancestor temple inhabited by some families since the Land Reform, the restoration of local temples or the payment of an indemnity to the local government in order to recover shops which belonged to the lineage segment before 1949 and were used to provide for collective expenses and which are now claimed to be a former Overseas Chinese asset.¹⁷ While at the level of territorial units like the market-town and the village, education, care for the old people, transportation and improvement of daily life facilities are the primary concern of the emigrant community. In Conglou for example, thanks to financial support coming from abroad, an Overseas Chinese secondary school which benefited from the contributions of 253 emigrants for a total amount of 45 million *yuan* welcomes the students of Conglou since the end of 1987, a Cultural Centre was inaugurated in 1989, a hospital has opened its doors in 1992.¹⁸ The 25th November of 1994, an inauguration ceremony was held in Conglou to celebrate the achievement of four projects, all supported by the emigrant community: the Central Primary-School, the Library of the Overseas Chinese Secondary School, the Educational

¹⁷ In the areas where large lineages dominate and are able to organize their own educational and recreational activities, emigrants' contributions are also directed to matters such as the functioning of the existing lineage library, secondary school, lineage review and other lineage based activities.

¹⁸ Money can be sent by the donors in order to increase the funds needed, but it can also be remitted for a more specific use. Emigrants making a contribution to an existing school can stress for instance that the money should be used to build a new building that will bear their father's name or their own, to acquire equipment and teaching materials, to improve the teacher's salary, to distribute grants to the students, etc.

Centre and a bridge (CHW, December 1994: 27). Contributions come mainly from abroad, although some successful local entrepreneurs begin to participate in such 'common activities' or *gongzhong shiye*, and some three million *yuan* were used to achieve these last four projects. Other regular and less expensive activities like the running of the Foundation of the Old People of Conglou (*Conglou laoren jijing hui*), the publication of the local magazine addressed to the emigrant community called *Conglou Zazhi*, or that of books relating the merits of important local figures, are also dependent upon support from abroad. The analysis of the emigrants' contributions reveals however that support to the larger territorial units comes after the support to the smaller unit constituted by the village and eventually the *guanliqu*. The contributions focus indeed primarily on the more intimate and primary groups and then eventually develop to the higher units. In other words, an emigrant contributes first to his lineage segment and his village and then to the lineage, to the market-town or above. The financial support provided to the village unit, characterized by the large number of donors and their personal links with the inhabitants, influences local leadership.

During the eighties, a pattern has emerged in Conglou like in other areas of the Guangdong province. *Cunrong weiyuanhui*, which may be tentatively translated by 'Village Embellishment Committee' have been established in order to attract and run the donations made to the village unit as well as provide a more coherent use of these funds. Such bodies decide about, what may be called, the physical transformations of the village, which encompasses tradition-oriented activities like giving to the village pond the same shape it had before 1949, considered to benefit local geomancy, or building a village god altar, but also activities linked with a modernization process like the installation of electricity and telephone or the building of new roads and bridges. Other smaller bodies may be found nowadays: one, in charge of the 'old people building', is often called *laoren*

xiehui for instance and looks after the place where old people can gather and engage in activities such as playing mah-jong, while a second association may be in charge of the so-called 'House of Culture' or 'House of Young People'. The same building may welcome the activities of both groups, but since the fundings come from different sources and are not of the same amount, two small bodies, often composed of individuals who are already members of the *cunrong weiyuanhui*, are distinguished. Another association may be in charge of running the primary school if the village is large enough to afford one. These different institutionalized groups exist in most villages, even in those where such specific places do not exist yet but where funds are searched to establish them. The village embellishment committee is nonetheless the only one to deal with affairs common to all villagers. The *Conglou Zazhi*, published twice a year, offers regularly in its last pages the lists of the latest donors to various *Cunrong jijinghui* or village foundations, runned by such committees. In its 26th issue (June 1994) for instance, 39 emigrants named Li are listed who contributed to the village committee of Yongcheng US\$ 6,950, Can\$ 1,000, HK\$ 800 and 200 *yuan* RMB. Such benefactors are often also honoured in the village by writing their names on a ceramic wall.

The village embellishment committee is therefore linked to the necessity to run the funds collected from the Overseas Chinese. In other words, the existence of funds coming from abroad and independent from the local administration, supported the creation of such a specialized and rather autonomous body. Besides the emigrants' donations, this structure enjoys financial support from local people and asks for fixed and compulsory contributions from village inhabitants whenever necessary. As a matter of fact, its members are actually going to decide about matters regarding, in other areas of China, the village affairs committee. Overseas Chinese contributions are thus not only playing an important economic part: they have supported the creation of various associations which are bound to speak on behalf of different

groups, debate and eventually reach an agreement with the other existing power structures, including the village affairs committee.

The main procedures used to establish these village embellishment committees aims primarily at attracting the trust and confidence of the emigrant community. The launching of collections between local groups and their emigrated fellows is a complicated process. Communities abroad are often organized under the leadership or authority of a few members who emigrated a long time ago and help the newly arrived emigrants. These members of the older generation resent China's policy after the beginning of the fifties and distrust local cadres or activists. In other words, in order to succeed, a collection must be launched abroad by someone who has 'face' there, and who is going to send the money back to someone that is trusted. This means actually in most cases someone who enjoyed some 'face' before 1949. Some village embellishment committees of the Mai community are thus centered around a figure, enjoying a good reputation abroad, and whose main tasks are going to be to convince the emigrated members of the group of the importance of the objective assigned to a collection, to gather the money, to control the realization of the stated activity and to report to the emigrants how exactly the money was spent. To establish the committee, usually a meeting takes place during which other members are more often appointed through a process of discussion and cooptation than through direct elections. These committees have to conform to a basic implicit principle which states that all the lineage segments of a village must be represented in order to ensure to all inhabitants as well as their emigrated relatives that every group's interests will be protected. Age too plays an important role, and each *fang* is going to choose one or two representatives among its older male members, one of the reasons advocated being that 'they know more people abroad, and more people abroad know who they are.'¹⁹ In other

¹⁹ Interview, Mai Qingle, Manshi village, January 1995.

words, a personal quality, – the consideration assigned by the emigrant community – or the capacity, very much linked to seniority, to represent a smaller kinship unit even if one enjoys no special prestige abroad or at home, are the most important factors explaining the choice of the committee members.

The identity of this committee head is quite important to attract Overseas Chinese contributions. One member of the Mai community would complain for instance that 'they have been so stupid in my village, they did not keep anyone who had face before, they disappeared one by one during the political campaigns, so today we are left with no one the emigrants trust. It makes it difficult to collect money. The younger emigrants are striving to make a living abroad, they have not much to give even when they care about their homeland, and they are unable to mobilize other emigrants.'²⁰ It may happen also that some inhabitants meet the needed requirements to stand as an intermediary between the emigrant community and local people but refuse to do so. The confidence enjoyed by the head of this committee has such an influence on the financial support this body can get that some individuals, before passing away, designate among the younger generations the person who should succeed to them and be trusted by the emigrants.

Sometimes, no one is going to be recognized and almost appointed by the emigrant community as head of the committee, and a body will be established by choosing locally those who are more likely than others to satisfy and reassure the emigrant community. The committee will then designate a leader.

Cooperation is often required therefore between these two formal bodies since the word 'embellishment' is understood in a very broad sense. For instance, in Conglou, cadres of one *guanliqu* gathered the heads of the various village affairs committees in February 1995 and told them that each village should build a road large enough for cars to use it and linked to a main road of the area.

²⁰ Interview, Mai Liangdu, Chang'an, March 1995.

This information was transmitted by the village heads to the members of the *cunrong weiyuanhui* who organized meetings to discuss the matter. Various solutions were compared according to the villages' physical setting and to their economic resources and in most cases agreements were reached. Detailed decisions were taken during these meetings regarding for instance how much would be spent from the collective fund accumulated thanks to Overseas Chinese contributions and how much would be asked to each household. Menial tasks linked to this matter were then executed by the village affairs committees, while the building of the roads themselves will be supervised by both bodies. The village embellishment committees play of course a very important part when former local inhabitants come back for a short stay. Emigrants returning home after a long period of absence are often visited upon their arrival by the village head accompanied by the main leaders of the *cunrong weiyuanhui*, the first one playing an almost insignificant part during the remaining formal social exchanges between the visiting emigrant and the local community.

Although formally established to run internal village affairs, the village embellishment committees do not always enjoy enough prestige locally to help inhabitants find the smallest common denominator between the interests of different families and *fang*. In other words, they may not have the capacity to encourage villagers' consensus on different matters. Informal leaders and villagers participating in village meetings play a very important part to decide about local affairs.

A legitimacy stemming from the social considerations enjoyed locally

In each village of the Mai community, a few persons are recognized for their ability, better than others, to find appropriate solutions when a problem arises. These persons are said locally to 'have face'. Their advice is sought by local inhabitants and often met with fewer objections than others'. They may be members of the village embellishment

committees or any other association running Overseas Chinese contributions but they may also belong to none of these institutions. The fact that some of them are entrusted with the emigrants' community's confidence adds to their status, but the consideration attached to them is anchored in their local behavior and the way it is perceived by village inhabitants. On the contrary, someone may be known and trusted by those who are living abroad while enjoying no consideration at home. Asked for instance by an emigrant why the head of the village committee was not invited a farewell dinner, a member of his lineage segment answered:

'Just because he was a primary-school teacher before 1949, they know him and trust him abroad, but his reputation here is getting worse everyday. He is always trying to protect his own *fang*, trying to scare the others, and does not listen to anyone in the village because he has so many sons. His sons are doing some bad business, and no one gives him face today, even among his own people'.²¹

Some similarities clearly exist between these informal local leaders and the *fluxiong* who decided about local affairs before 1949. For instance, no clear procedure is used to designate them and they acquire their power gradually. In order to gain some authority, they have to express their willingness and ability to solve common problems. But differences are important. First, the interpretation of individual or family matters as having consequences for the whole *fang* or village and calling for the intervention of these groups' leaders is much more difficult today. The definition of what should be considered as a common affair is also much narrower, which in its turn limits the power of formal as well as informal leaders.²²

²¹ Interview, Mai Changong, Manshi village, December 1995.

²² This does not contradict the fact that local administration can forcefully interfere in matters such as birth control.

As far as the qualities that enable these informal leaders to gain such a status are considered for instance, the sense of equity is no more stressed as a main capacity. To act as a local mediator, and especially as a local mediator for the whole group, is less considered then before and actually avoided by village members. Among other reasons explaining such a change is the fact that the decisions taken by such informal leaders may be rejected by local administration. Another reason comes from the feeling, widely shared by Conglou inhabitants, that no more collective principles or *daoli* can be found today to support common agreements. Particular interests are considered to prevail making it more difficult to find common grounds enabling people to interpret a situation and reach an agreement. To find a good solution appears much more difficult than before since the problem nowadays is not so much to solve the debate arising from the various ways to appreciate an event or situation according to common principles, but to establish a compromise between principles stemming from different periods of Chinese history which are still considered to be legitimate by different social actors: the principles linked for instance to the pre-1949 period, those attached to the collectivist period and those developed after the reforms. Finally, the situation appears even more complex if one takes into account the need to protect the interests of different lineage segments, which are still considered as relevant entities, but also to respond to the wishes of individual members belonging to different generations and less likely than before to put the group's interests above all. Plurality of norms and principles, stratification of society according to age and descent groups, absence of any clear authority entitled to settle discussions: all these factors contribute to narrow the power of today's informal leaders and make it almost impossible to compare their position with that of the pre-1949 *fluxiong*.

The present society is often described by Conglou inhabitants, whatever their age, as very difficult to manage. As an informant put it for instance:

'It is much more difficult to run local affairs today than before, and one of the reasons is that young people do not follow the leaders of their lineage segment as it was the case before, they do not support automatically their decisions. What is more, even if they like you and give face to you, they may reject your advise. They will not accept your solution today just because you took good decisions in the past. They discuss every problem in itself, without feeling grateful for what you may have done in the past'.²³

The political and social transformations which occurred make it more difficult to accumulate 'face', and 'face' and power are less intimately linked than before 1949. The informal leaders of today are much more offering advises than imposing a given solution.

'I know people are waiting for my advise in the village, but I do not always take the floor unless I really think I have a much better solution. Otherwise there is no point for me to face criticisms and diminish the amount of face I possess. I rather say nothing. When I speak, I do it at the last minute, when all kinds of opinions have been expressed and I feel I can find a good compromise. Every meeting is a challenge to the face I possess, while the old *fluxiong* had so much face that their advise was easily followed. It took a lot of time for people to begin to criticize their solutions once they enjoyed so much face and their power was so great'.²⁴

The path and scope of the social changes which have occurred and the need to settle a discussion by taking into account various and often contradictory opinions, has encouraged the rise of informal leaders who would never have become *fluxiong* before 1949 because their fathers were very poorly considered. As a capital transmitted from generation to generation, lack of social es-

²³ Interview, Mai Liangdu, Chang'an village, March 1995.

²⁴ Interview, Mai Lanchao, Chang'an village, March 1995.

teem assigned to the former generations usually prevented individuals to enjoy special consideration. Some villagers were not chosen as members of the local village embellishment committee for this reason nor were they given much 'face' during the previous decades, but exhibited during the recent years some capacity to encourage local consensus.

The rather limited power enjoyed by informal leaders may explain why their influence on village affairs is less directly linked to the group and what they can offer to it, than to personal qualities which have an indirect positive effect on the group. The reasons put forward by Conglou inhabitants to explain why some of them enjoy a large amount of 'face' are for instance that 'he has dignity and self-respect', 'he is willing to help others when possible', 'he is not looking after his own interests and trying to take advantage of others.' The feeling that such persons will not hurt the others and eventually will use their resources to help those who need it, are not coupled, like it was the case before 1949, with principles clearly associated with the group: *daoli*, sense of equity, defense of group's interests.

Such individuals play nonetheless an important part. For instance, they help local inhabitants to reach a consensus when a problem is discussed, they use their social network to solve the problems some members of the village are confronted with, and they actually act as intermediaries inside the village or between the village and the outside world for all these matters which are not in conformity with official policy and cannot be formally reported to the village affairs committee.

Finally, three other characteristics are shared by the individuals that may be considered as local informal leaders. First, most of them are willing to speak publicly if necessary and have a reputation to be rather good orators, although some of them are not highly cultivated. They are the ones for instance who are asked by the village heads to make the official speeches on occasions such as the Women's Day or the Old People's Day

while no other local leaders are offered to do so. The same reasons which account for their role to achieve consensus among villagers explain the fact that they are likely to know what to say on such occasions and how to say it. Second, an analysis of these village leaders in the Mai community shows that they often manage, directly or through their sons, to have good ties with the members of the younger generations, mainly the unmarried or newly-married men. This enables them to understand them better, offer solutions they will not oppose, and rely on them to encourage the approval, at the village level, of ideas they support. Third, most of these individuals have no vested interests at the village or market-town level. Some are supported by their sons who are working in Guangzhou or Shenzhen, others by relatives abroad. A peasant who had been exploiting the village pond for a few years but offered too low a bid during the last auctions and lost this right, explains:

'I lost the pond, but it became easier for me to speak in the village. No one can accuse me anymore to defend my own interests when I am offering an advise.'²⁵

These words were echoed by many villagers. If it was convenient to use the word leader in this paper to designate these individuals, the nature of their power may prove such qualification to be inappropriate. As a matter of fact, most villagers would not recognize them as *fluxiong* or local leaders. They do not consider they are bound to obey them once they recognize their specific skills. They simply speak about them as persons enjoying a lot of 'face' in the village and playing a special part in local affairs. However, if we assign to the concept of power a meaning close to that defined by H. Arendt (1967), power being most of all 'the power to act together', than the ability of such individuals to encourage local consensus can be considered as an important part of the local power structure.

²⁵ Interview, Mai Liangdu, Chang'an village, April 1994.

A legitimacy stemming from the participation in village meetings

Finally, the practice to organize meetings in one of the ancestors' temple, called *shang citang* like before 1949, whenever important decisions should be taken at the village level, still exists nowadays. While a specific and limited group of persons was invited to attend these meetings by the *fuxiong* until the beginning of the war against Japan, while the younger members of the lineage in charge of the *baojia* system hold sometimes during the forties that more persons should be allowed to participate and raise objections, everyone can participate in such decision-making process today. Important matters like the use of the funds controlled by the *cunrong weiyuanhui* are discussed on such occasions. The audiences vary according to the attention attracted by the matter discussed, an audience of around thirty to forty persons being considered as representative for a village of some four hundred inhabitants. Those who do not attend the meeting, – and many villagers are never seen or heard on such occasions – abandon their right to object to the decision taken and agree beforehand to conform to it. Since every person may raise an objection or express his point of view, regular attendance to such meetings influences the way in which a given intervention is received. An agreement is reached when no more objections are raised, while the majority principle most often prevails in the village affairs committees of Jiujiang villages.

For instance, in Chang'an village of the Mai community, during the first three months of 1995, such meetings discussed the way pressure could be put on the *zhen* government to improve the new road built by the *zhen* to replace an old one destroyed to build a school. A collective demonstration in front of the building of the local government was suggested by a villager and approved by the participants. Such a means actually proved to be quite efficient.

With security worsening, some villagers asked for a meeting to be organized to sort out appropriate solutions. After having

heard different proposals, an informal leader suggested that a self-defense team should be created, following the example of the former *gengfu*. As the villager who offered this advice explains: 'When I explained my idea, I was almost sure it was going to be received. This is the kind of decision that can be taken today: every family, every *fang* would benefit from it. The young people were also happy to be given the responsibility to protect the village.'²⁶ Four groups of eight persons each were organized. When, a few weeks later, it was decided to do without the group of self-defense who was too costly and because the *zhen* had increased security forces, the same man suggested that the names of these four groups should be kept on the wall of the ancestor's temple in order for outsiders to believe they were still performing their duties. Such meetings offer young villagers the opportunity to show their ability and eventually succeed in being later recognized as individuals whose words are more important than others.

Conclusion

First, the variety of the patterns observed in these two localities is remarkable. We have found that it is possible to elect a 'Board of Directors' without any preliminary designation of candidates, and to couple this with the election of a 'village affairs committee' under the constraints established by the former brigade in Jiujiang; or debates could be held during village meetings between members of the 'village affairs committee', the village embellishment committee, and other villagers, among which some play a more important part than others in Conglou. An explanation of these differences would require a more systematic study of the evolution of the two localities over the previous decades. Special attention should be given, for instance, to the differences characterizing both emigration processes, at the point of the time

²⁶ Interview, Mai Liangdu, Chang'an village, March 1995.

of the main departure waves, and the composition and location of the emigrant community.

Secondly, two main procedures to discuss and take decisions about common affairs at the village level have been described. In one case, a choice is made of representatives who are going to enjoy a rather high level of autonomy from the group, but we are also going to have to assume the responsibility of their acts and eventually be dismissed from their functions. On the other hand, a division of labor is established between different bodies and institutions making it difficult for anyone to have a final say in local affairs, consensus being reached through debates and discussions involving those interested in common matters. The way these two types of procedure are going to evolve is difficult to ascertain. Nonetheless, despite the claims made by local people which can be illustrated by numerous examples, that there are no more common references and values, that individual and groups' relative strength (which encompass for instance the social network as well as the administration resources that can be mobilized) are the decisive factors which influence the outcome of what one can do and achieve, the situation inside the villages of the Mai community shows that local communities are no longer integrated in a context where a rather mechanical process of collective solidarity prevails. At the village level at least, debates and discussions contribute to the constitution of new norms governing the relationship between the individual and the group, and to the emergence of the notion of contract as supporting the social links between the members of a community.

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