

RESEARCH OF NOTE

Editor's Note: The following article is a slightly revised version of Professor Watson's keynote plenary address to the 2010 ASIANetwork Conference, hosted by Agnes Scott College, in Atlanta, Georgia on April 9.

**FORTY YEARS ON THE
BORDER: HONG KONG/CHINA**

James Watson

Harvard University

Today's talk is, in part, a preview of the jointly authored book that Rubie Watson and I are writing on colonialism, tentatively entitled *The Last Colony: Everyday Life in British Hong Kong, 1898-1997*.

Here I will discuss some of our recent research on the border that separated British Hong Kong from what was, in sequence, the Qing Empire, the Republic of China, the People's Republic of China (in its Maoist guise), and, today, the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone. It is a saga marked by banditry, political violence, Cold War intrigue, and the never-ending waves of refugees, immigrants, and emigrants. Recently released police archives in the Hong Kong Public Records Office have allowed us to fill in many gaps in our ethnographic field notes.

The focus of our new book is rural Hong Kong, the Yuen Long District in the New Territories, the site of our 40-plus years of fieldwork in two Cantonese villages (J. Watson 1975; R. Watson 1985). Both communities are located in the border zone.

As many of you know, the term "border" has come to mean many things in contemporary social sciences. What I discuss today is a border in the strict, literal sense of the term, which,

according to Webster’s Dictionary, refers to “a physical boundary, or a frontier.” The phenomenon I will explore is the disappearing border, or the softening of formerly hard, dangerous, and politically charged borders.

The 1960s

Let me start by taking you back to the late 1960s, during the height of the Cold War: the Vietnam War is escalating daily, and China is in the throes of the Cultural Revolution (see Photo 1). It is in this political context that I caught my first



Photo 1: Jordan Road, Kowloon, China Products Store. © J. L. Watson, 1969.

glimpse of the Chinese border from the police lookout atop Lok Ma Chau Hill in the New Territories (see Photo 2). Stretched



Photo 2: Lok Ma Chau Lookout. © J. L. Watson, 1969.

out in front of us is a meandering, muddy creek that constitutes the border, or what the British called “the Frontier.” On the south side, in the British zone, is a set of three, steel-link fences, topped with barbed wire. One hundred yards back from the fence are gun emplacements for Gurkha troops. Land Rovers filled with Scots Guards and the Black Watch drive by, along single-lane roads. British regiments are in full battle garb; weapons are on loaded and ready.

On the north side of the Shenzhen River, in Chinese territory, one can see bright red political banners hanging on drab commune buildings. Through binoculars I read the following slogans:

“Support our Vietnamese Brothers!”

“Long Life Chairman Mao!”

“Down with American Imperialism!”

When the wind shifts south, one can hear the tinny strains of *The East Is Red* wafting across the river, sung in a high soprano, female voice, sounding like someone who has just inhaled helium.

This is a place, like Checkpoint Charlie, that drills itself into your memory; you will never forget it. The muddy little river in front of us was the East Asian equivalent of the Berlin Wall. Like Panmunjom, the Shenzhen River was a front line of the Cold War.

San Tin Village

On that summer day in 1969 I also caught a glimpse of San Tin, the village that would soon become my first field site. San Tin is the home of the *Man* lineage, a kinship group that has preoccupied me ever since. All of the males from San Tin are descendants of a single, founding ancestor who settled on this fertile coast seven and a half centuries ago. The founder, and all of his descendants, are surnamed *Man* in Cantonese (*Wen* in Mandarin). They, like their neighbors, spoke an earthy subdialect of Cantonese native to rural Hong Kong and Shenzhen.

Today there are approximately 4,000 living members of the *Man* lineage, which owns extremely valuable land on the Hong Kong-Chinese border. Critical parcels of this land are owned by ancestral estates, as corporations, in the name of various illustrious founders, most of whom have been dead for centuries. The *Man* lineage was a corporation in multiple senses, not just in respect to joint landownership. Membership conferred protection, access to government officials, jobs, and status—the importance of which is hard to overestimate in an environment racked by intense competition and deadly rivalries.

The *Man*, like their immediate neighbors, found themselves incorporated into the British Colony of Hong Kong in 1898, when the British government negotiated a 99-year lease on what became known as the New Territories. That lease, as you know, expired at midnight on June 30, 1997, at which point Hong Kong reverted to Chinese control.

For reasons that are still not entirely clear even today, Chairman Mao and his closest advisors decided not to retake Hong Kong after the new communist government was formed on October 1, 1949. Accordingly, the *Man* and their neighbors in other New Territories villages missed three decades of Maoist land reform, collectivization, Cultural Revolution chaos, and political isolation. Hong Kong was referred to during those years as “a borrowed place, living on borrowed time.”

San Tin village is situated only a few hundred yards from the border, straddling what the British referred to as the Restricted Zone. In the 1960s, the residents of San Tin spoke in hushed tones about the border and the society on the other side. To most of my village friends, China was a source of danger. Red Guards had stormed across the river in 1967 and performed revolutionary skits in the village plaza, frightening older residents half to death. Refugees occasionally slipped through San Tin in the dead of night, after swimming past two sets of Communist border guards. We now know, from formerly classified records maintained by the Hong Kong Police, the micro-details of some of the terrible things that were happening along this border, such as execution-murders of young people

fleeing across the river, carried out by Communist Border Guards who crossed into British Territory and hauled the bodies back across the border. Some of these executions were witnessed by British Police and Gurkha troops, who were under strict orders not to intervene, for fear, no doubt, of starting a major international incident (and, hence, a spark for World War III).

During our stay in San Tin, 1969-1970, Rubie and I knew refugees had strayed into the village late at night when our neighbors' guard dogs erupted into coordinated, orchestrated barking, signaling alarm. No one went out after dark in 1969.

But the story of the border was not entirely grim: starting as early as the 1920s, immigrants from rural Guangdong moved into the New Territories to avoid unsettled conditions in Guangdong Province. Large numbers began to set up vegetable farms on land rented from long-settled lineages (such as the San Tin Man). The rate of immigration picked up dramatically after Maoist land reform campaigns in the early 1950s, and there were always tensions simmering just below the surface. This created two, new social categories of New Territories people: the locals, who called themselves *buhn-dei-yahn* (Mandarin *bendiren*) and the new group of outsiders (*ngoi-loih-yahn*, or *wailairen*).

Today, in the aftermath of urbanization and New Town development in the New Territories, the old *buhn-dei-yahn* have become *yuen-gui-man* (Mandarin *yuanzhumin*), a political term best translated as "indigene." The adoption of this term of identity purposely links the New Territories indigenes with Native American Indians, the Maori, and Australian natives, other colonized groups that have been swamped by newcomers from alien societies. The use of *yuen-gui-man* emphasized the "original-ness" of New Territories people and the state of siege they feel themselves under. They have become a tiny minority in a territory that they once controlled with confidence and unchallenged authority.

Meanwhile, as the Cold War raged on and the New Territories was being swamped by Guangdong immigrants, the

residents of San Tin had other preoccupations: Most residents of San Tin faced south, away from the Chinese border, and out of the New Territories altogether. The borders that interested them were thousands of miles away, namely, the white lines in front of immigration counters in various European and Canadian airports: Amsterdam, Frankfurt, Brussels, Toronto, Vancouver, and London Heathrow.

Man Emigration

In the brief period between 1955 and 1962, San Tin became an emigrant community, almost completely dependent on remittances from kinsmen working in the European and Canadian diaspora. Eighty-five to ninety percent of the able-bodied males in the village took advantage of their status as British colonial subjects and acquired British passports.

The year 1962 marked two key historical events that conditioned *Man* emigration. The first was the 1962 passage of the Commonwealth Immigrants Act, a Parliamentary measure that cut off further free entry of colonial and post-colonial workers into Britain. The July 1 deadline meant that it was now or never for potential emigrants from San Tin.

The other key historical event was a brief interlude in strict border control: In April, 1962, Chinese guards suddenly stopped watching their side of the border, and continued to do so sporadically for the next two months. Word spread rapidly and within days tens of thousands of potential refugees—mostly young people—began massing on the Guangdong hills overlooking the river, waiting for an opportunity to cross. On a single day during this period (May 23, 1962) 5,620 “I.I.s” (illegal immigrants, as the British called them) were detained in the New Territories – which means that many more thousands evaded capture and made it to sanctuary in Hong Kong’s urban areas.

For weeks the world press was treated to the spectacle of Hong Kong Police and British soldiers carting lorry loads of distraught Chinese youths through the New Territories and forcing them back across the border. American Congressmen,

notably members of the right-wing Free China Lobby, loudly denounced the “cowardly” Hong Kong Government and their London overlords.

We still do not know why Chinese authorities stopped watching the border, but at the time the British Foreign Office believed it was a plot by Mao to inundate Hong Kong with millions of penniless refugees and thus destroy the Colony’s economy. (Today historians and political scientists relate the 1962 influx to famine conditions and social disorder in southern Guangdong.)

Meanwhile, through all of this turmoil, the *Man* were emigrating, en masse, to Britain and Holland where they established a chain of restaurants that would dominate the European takeout trade: chop-suey and chips to start, eventually evolving into middle-class, white-tablecloth restaurants serving a reasonable approximation of Cantonese cuisine (see Photo 3). By 1970, members of the *Man* lineage owned and managed more than 400 restaurants scattered throughout Western Europe and 100 in Canada. But that is another story, for another time (J. Watson 2004).



Photo 3: Amsterdam Restaurant. © J. L. Watson, 1974.

During my first two decades of fieldwork in rural Hong Kong and in the European diaspora, the residents of San Tin seldom mentioned their patrilineal kin who lived across the river in Chinese territory. Prior to the 1949 Communist revolution and the subsequent closure of the border, the New Territories *Man* had loose political alliances with five other *Man* lineage settlements just north of the Shenzhen River. Together these

settlements constitute six branches of what anthropologists refer to as a *higher-order-lineage* (H-O-L).

The *Man* H-O-L was a corporate kinship organization in the full sense of the term: it owned and managed paddy fields and a lucrative rice mill. Its ritual headquarters was a large ancestral hall ten miles across the river, in Chinese territory. The various branches of the *Man* H-O-L occasionally fought among themselves over property rights and management positions (the annual ancestral rites were always occasions for power struggles and ritual humiliations). Cantonese kinship, like kinship in my native Iowa, did not always involve cozy, warm relationships. After all, what *is* kinship if it is not about property, inheritance, and the distribution of resources?

Border Transformations

For much of the early twentieth century, the border was a porous frontier, marked by boundary stones and a handful of rather sleepy customs stations. Traffic across the river by local residents was a routine, daily activity; up to 300 people a day crossed the river at a footbridge near San Tin (see Photo 4).



Photo 4: San Tin path to border. © J. L. Watson,

For members of the *Man* lineage, the border was not a serious impediment: it was a muddy creek, not an impenetrable wall.

In 1922 and again in 1925, anti-imperialist demonstrators from Guangzhou briefly closed

the border and took pot shots at Hong Kong Police and the

Sikh regiment guarding the British side (when permission was granted to return fire, Sikh marksmen shot several of the student demonstrators). The anti-imperialist pickets and informal border guards were soon replaced by ill-trained troops of various warlords who vied for control of Guangzhou and Guangdong Province. The “squeeze” activities of these troops did not affect the everyday lives of border villagers.

On February 21, 1939, the scene changed dramatically as Japanese troops took up positions on the northern side of the river. British forces reacted by dismantling border bridges and removing tracks on the Kowloon-Canton Railway Bridge at Lu Wu. Japanese fighter planes strafed and bombed the border zone, intruding into British territory; a Hong Kong Police constable, recruited from the Punjab, was killed by a Japanese bomb. (The multi-ethnic dimension of the colonial service is a topic I am pursuing in our new book.)

Thus, from February 1939, the sleepy river became a full-fledged, militarized frontier. Japanese forces crossed the border near San Tin on December 7, 1941, and occupied Hong Kong until 1945. During the Chinese Civil War, 1945-1949, Nationalist (Guomindang) guerrillas and infantry regularly raided New Territories villages for supplies. British Police posts along the border became armed defensive fortresses during this period.

The militarization hardened on February 15, 1951, when the People’s Liberation Army abruptly closed all border crossings and British colonial police began to install a series of defensive fences along the southern side of the river. The Cold War had reached Hong Kong.

From 1939 until the mid-1990s, the *Man* lineage on the Hong Kong side existed in more or less complete isolation from the five *Man* lineage settlements on the communist side. Deng Xiaoping’s economic reforms changed all this in short order. China’s political heat began to cool in the 1980s and by the early 1990s the sleepy market town of Shenzhen, just across the river on the Chinese side, had been transformed, seemingly overnight, into a frontier boomtown. The Shenzhen Special Economic Zone attracted migrants (mostly Mandarin-speakers)

from all over China and Cantonese rapidly became a minority language in the new city.

Globalized Kinship

The consequence of all this was that, when the San Tin Man returned from Europe in the 1990s, they found themselves facing not a muddy river but a towering wall of gleaming, post-modern, high-rise office buildings—lined up on the opposite side of the border, in the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone (see Photo 5). One old friend in the *Man* lineage told me it felt like he had been beamed into an alternate universe (his metaphor,



Photo 5: SEZ from San Tin. © J. L. Watson, 1997.

not mine), with bare-knuckled, out-of-control capitalism thriving on the Communist-controlled side of the river while rule-bound, conservative bureaucrats were slowing down development on the Hong Kong side. For the people of San Tin, this was a completely bizarre, surreal situation.

While China plodded through three decades of Maoist isolationism, many San Tin villagers had attained a remarkably high level of business success and affluence in Europe and Canada. A transnational diaspora of *Man* emigrants had emerged and San Tin had become a wealthy retirement community, complete with fancy, centrally air-conditioned houses; Mercedes Benzes; and elaborate, renovated ancestral halls. Suddenly, the dynamism had shifted from the Hong Kong side of the river to the Chinese side and the *Man* were momentarily caught flat-footed. But their confusion did not last long.

In the mid-1990s, San Tin's emigrant entrepreneurs began searching for business opportunities in China's rapidly expanding

economy. Not surprisingly, kinship played a leading role in determining where San Tin investors chose to put their hard-earned capital. During this period, the *Man* higher-order-lineage was rapidly reconstituted in a new, commercially advantageous form. Bonds of “brotherhood” were forged across the river, linking San Tin’s capitalist businessmen with long-lost patrilineal kin – who just happened to be leading party cadres in the Special Economic Zone. New rituals were invented, and old ancestors were resurrected as genealogical ties reunited *Man* leaders in what was rapidly becoming the Greater Hong Kong Region, a new term that, you will note, privileges the Hong Kong side.

The Border as an Economic Rather than Political Barrier

From the perspective of *Man* entrepreneurs, the border is no longer a physical boundary or a dangerous frontier. Since Hong Kong’s repatriation in 1997, the border has taken on a new meaning: it had become an immigration barrier, much like the border between Mexico and the United States. Its primary function today is to control the flow of cheap labor and goods into Hong Kong.

The border is no longer a political barrier, separating two opposing ideological systems ruled by mutually antagonistic leaders. Today the Shenzhen River is obscured by a series of exceedingly busy customs-control stations. Lorry traffic, backed up for miles on each side, is the dominant scene. Today, one of the world’s busiest border crossings is less than a mile from San Tin, abutting land owned by corporate ancestral estates of the *Man* lineage. Not far from San Tin, just west along the delta mud flats, is the world-famous Mai Po Bird Sanctuary, championed by Prince Charles and managed by the World Wildlife Fund. This proximity has complicated development in the San Tin area and is one reason why the old ancestral estates are relatively untouched (by Hong Kong standards, at least).

The strategic location of the *Man* estate land means, of course, that lineage membership is not just a spiritual attachment; it has become a bridge to future developments along the border – Hong Kong’s only remaining open space. If you can prove

that you are a legitimate descendant of the founding ancestor, economic and political advantages accrue. (There are, of course, strict rules determining who is and who is not a legitimate member of the *Man* lineage, another subject of my ongoing research.)

Returning to the border, I am sorry to say that it is no longer any fun: you no longer see characters right out of a John le Carré spy novel, sweating their way through the East Asian equivalent of Checkpoint Charlie. The irony of ironies (for me, at least) is that, today, the most furtive border-crossers are not spies but Shenzhen primary students, rushing through immigration control to reach the buses that take them to Hong Kong schools – one of which is San Tin’s primary school, named in honor of the founder of the *Man* lineage. (In 2009 daily border-crossers constituted 65 per cent of San Tin’s 351 students.) These are the same kids whose grandparents stood on the border in the 1960s, denouncing the Hong Kong Police as running-dog lackies of British imperialism.

Conclusions

What can one conclude from this saga of a Chinese lineage on the Hong Kong border? First, never underestimate the power and the dynamism of kinship to serve as a bridge over troubled waters (in this case, quite literally). Kinship will always be a lens through which humans view and negotiate power, money, and status. Kinship also overlaps borders all over the world, and it is the ties of kinship that often outlast borders, helping to chip away at their foundations: witness cross-border family ties in Korea and similar bonds in Cold War Germany.

My second concluding point is that long-term, longitudinal research is essential if one wishes to comprehend the kind of changes that affect diasporics and border peoples. In the mid-twentieth century it was deemed appropriate for anthropologists to do “single-shot” field research and then spend the rest of their careers writing about that experience, in the present tense (as if nothing ever changed). Today, anthropologists speak of “multi-sited” field research as an alternative to single-site studies.

The work described here is both “single-” and “multi-sited” in the sense that I have tracked the *Man* as they emigrated from their home village to Europe and Canada. The results of this four-decades-long study have yet to be written (in final form) because, frankly speaking, I am having difficulty deciding how to write an ethnography of a diasporic lineage, situated on a border, in a political environment that is always changing.

And, finally, my third concluding point is about borders: Borders seldom keep the same form for long and, if you watch carefully, you will be surprised. (Keep close watch on Panmunjom, and also of course, the U.S.-Mexico border.) Borders are like mirrors that reflect the most important historical breakpoints of the modern era, correlating to the emergence of the sovereign (that is, the modern) state. Borders such as the one described today speak volumes about changing notions of nationalism and nationhood. Furthermore, all of the relevant “-isms” that preoccupy social scientists are worked out most clearly along international borders.

The saga of this particular border is by no means over. It has not disappeared, even though Hong Kong has been absorbed back into China. For the first 50 years after its repatriation (that is, until 2047) the original colonial frontier will demarcate the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region from the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone (SAR versus SEZ).

What is the future of this outdated, increasingly obsolete geographical barrier? It is clearly the key to Hong Kong’s future, as it was to its past. Will this special place continue to be a culturally distinct, politically separate entity? (Somewhat like Singapore, for instance?) Or, will it be absorbed into China, the *daai-lok* (mainland) as my New Territories friends call it, the behemoth to the north? Will Hong Kong become just another Chinese city?

There are many signs of disappearance and absorption: Mandarin speaking taxi drivers and shopkeepers are now found everywhere; this is a dramatic change from 1997. Hong Kong now supports a virtual flood of mainlander tourists, whereas in the past only a handful was admitted each month. Residents of

the Shenzhen SEZ can get easy, quick visas for Hong Kong (they no longer need to return to their place of permanent residence to apply). Today there is fierce job competition in all Hong Kong professions from Chinese university graduates (much to the irritation of local university graduates.) Meanwhile, Hong Kong universities are fast becoming national centers of education; instruction in Cantonese is disappearing rapidly, while English and Mandarin are encouraged among recently recruited faculty. And, as Rubie Watson shows in her recent research, mainlander mothers are crossing the border to have their babies – babies that are essential to maintain Hong Kong’s fertility rate, which is perhaps the lowest in the world (R. Watson 2010).

It is clear that the border still matters, and it matters profoundly if Hong Kong is to remain a unique, special, cosmopolitan outpost on the South China coast. So watch this space: the saga continues.

References

- Watson, James L. *Emigration and the Chinese Lineage: The Mans in Hong Kong and London*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975.
- . “Presidential Address: Virtual Kinship, Real Estate, and Diaspora Formation – The Man Lineage Revisited.” *Journal of Asian Studies* 63 (2004): 893-910.
- Watson, Rubie S. *Inequality Among Brothers: Class and Kinship in South China*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985.
- . “The Anatomy of A Fertility Decline: Unmarried, No Children in Hong Kong.” *Harvard China Review* 6 (2010): 32-43.