Instituto Superior de Ciências do Trabalho e da Empresa (ISCTE)

The process of kinship and identity in a common-surname village among the Cantonese of rural Southeastern China

I. MAIN TEXT

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Orientação Científica:
Charles Stafford (London School of Economics)
Nélia Dias (ISCTE)

Gonçalo Duro dos Santos
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Chapter 3 – What does the material village world look like? The 'rice paddies', the 'farmers' and the 'emperor'.

In this chapter, I shall extend my contextual descriptions of the village setting to issues of ecology in the broader sense of the word focusing most generally on the relations between the village community and its surrounding environment, and through these on the social relations of the members of the village community with one another. I shall suggest that the kinds of 'encompassing relations of hierarchic opposition' below-described at the heart of the native practical schemes of classification of people in different caste-like groups based on items of material property and on performances is deeply entrenched in the ways the local people have been socially reproducing - and have also been materially reproduced by - their ecological environment. As we shall see in more detail in the last chapter, the village of Harmony Cave was first founded during the late 17th to the early 18th centuries. My demographic data and my interviews with older villagers suggest that as recently as the 19th century some parts of the material village world were very much like a yet largely undomesticated sub-tropical forest. Some older villagers still remember the days - as recently as the period before the Communist Liberation - when almost every family had a gun [local farmers usually credit Chairman Mao with the achievement of having effectively put an end to the widespread use of guns in the local countryside], and people would go out hunting wild game such as wild pigs, many species of wild birds. The local flora was also astonishingly rich. Since that time however, much of the wilderness of this material world has already gone. This is because ever since the sound colonisation of this local area began - most likely well before the 17th and 18th centuries -, the area has been undergoing an historical process of colonising expansion known as *agricultural involution* that is usually associated with paddy rice cultivation and that is commonly found in much of Southeast Asia (see Pasternak, 1972,1981 for historico-ethnographic descriptions of issues of irrigation and water control in rural Taiwan; see Wittfogel, 1957 and Elvin et. al, 1994 for historical work on the centrality of issues of irrigation and water control in Greater China). This has meant that the sub-tropical forest has been significantly receding during the last few centuries in

favour of the notorious mosaic-shaped paddies associated with agrarian societies based on intensively irrigated rice cultivation.

Today, the material village world is very much dominated by the distinctive Southeast Asian form of mosaic-patterned rice paddies(田洞) whose muddy field ridges often substitute the roads that are still mostly missing in much of the local countryside, even after many centuries of settlement by Han Chinese populations. As in much of the village world of Brightpath, this village landscape of intensively irrigated rice paddies is coloured by small vegetable gardens surrounding the village residential areas and by small fishponds corporately owned by various village family groupings, and is punctuated by huge and exquisitely shaped limestone mountains(石山) full of caves and with no more than 300m high, and by a small range of clay mountains(泥山) with no more than 300-500 meters (see figure 30). One should note that although the above-mentioned process of agricultural involution has never really stopped in the village area - the only plots of local land that have not yet been opened to agricultural exploitation are unfertile lands in the hills of the local clay-mountains -, the way the local people has been reacting to the local implementation of the open-reforms has already brought in some important changes to this process including the facts that many families no longer farm full-time their lands in the village, and that a few others have already abandoned part of their village land (see figures 37,38,39). I shall try to suggest however that although the nature of the social relation of attachment of the villagers to land clearly is - given their openly expressed readiness to abandon it - less substantialist than politico-economic, I do believe that the fact that the people of rural areas of Southeastern China such as Brightpath have been politico-economically tied to the land and to rice-farming in long-term history has played an important role in the social production of culture. I shall try to draw here attention to a point of intersection between the worldview emerging from the native techniques of socialisation of nature and the native systems of classification of people in terms of different class-status groups. I shall suggest though that if we want not to let ourselves fall prey to these enchanting emic relational associations (and to the kind of transcendental reality they postulate) we have to look at the historical reality of their strategic use down there in the paddies. Although as we've seen in the previous chapter it would be highly misleading to argue that the present daily lives of all villagers are taken

up by the kind of agricultural practices here described - even if all village families (the exception here being the village families in the process of moving out of the village) remain tied in one way or another to their land and to paddy rice cultivation -, I should note nevertheless that all the villagers (and their ancestors) grew up in a social environment in which much of their daily lives was indeed about these kinds of practical experiences. Moreover, although rice-farming as a mode of life has been in the process of being formally devalued ever since the local implementation of the neoliberal open reforms began, the fact remains that rice-farming still is materially speaking overwhelmingly present in the local landscape, and still is symbolically speaking overwhelmingly present in the local idioms and language games – in a word, in the local rural unconscious. But perhaps more important is to note that my writings about paddy-rice cultivation were above all imposed upon me by the fact that the people in the village (and myself) were constantly engaged in one way or another in the farming of the local land.

1. What does the material village world look like?

As we've already seen in chapter 2, the province of Guangdong is, with the exception of Hainan Island, the most southerly of all provinces and autonomous regions of the People's Republic of China (PRC) (see figure 1). Because much of Guangdong lies south of the tropic of Cancer, it is amongst the few Chinese provinces, along with Hainan and Guangxi, with tropical climates, mostly subtropical in the case of Guangdong (Yeuhng &Chu, 1998). Its comparatively milder winter allows for, unlike most other provinces further north, biannual crops of rice (兩造) to be grown. The villagers tell me however that its winter is not warm enough for the agricultural land to have the '生育能力', roughly the 'reproductive capacity', to grow, as on Hainan island, three annual crops of rice – note that the expression 'reproductive capacity' is also used to refer to human beings. As to the local version of this sub-tropical climate, although the villagers often noted that it clearly distinguishes the four seasons (分明四季), my own individual observations and impressions suggest that there is also a clear-cut distinction between a rainy season - that more or less corresponds to the 'busy farming season'(農忙) - and a dry season - that more or less corresponds to the three months of the 'slack farming

season'(農閑). If one tries to stick to the villagers' own descriptions of the annual cycle of the local climate, it immediately becomes apparent however that it is impossible to do so without at the same time describing a whole lot of *forms of social life* that are not separate from the local traditional village world of paddy rice cultivation, and that are most easily condensed (even if far too artificially and coherently than in the reality of the rough ground) in synoptic diagrams such as the one in figure 40. As shown in this figure, there are in present-day Brightpath - as in all Han Chinese dominated areas of the PRC even if not without significant regional and local variations - three main systems of time reckoning including the traditional lunar calendar (TLC) - that the locals call the 'old calendar'(舊曆) or the 'Yin calendar'(陰曆), and that is explicitly associated with the annual ritual cycle of the local communities -, the traditional solar calendar (TSC) - that people call the 'agricultural calendar'(農曆) or the 'Yang calendar'(陽曆), and that is explicitly associated with the annual agricultural cycle of the local communities -, and the official solar calendar (OSC) - that people call the 'new calendar'(新曆) or the 'common calendar'(公曆) because it was only introduced at the local level as the official calendar of the PRC as recently as the 1950's, and that is explicitly associated with the annual official cycle of the PRC (in its relations with the international community).

One should remember however that these different systems of time-reckoning and the social uses the locals make of them are inextricably tied to the interface between the local sub-tropical rural ecosystem - the objectivist dimension of the local material world -, and the way this ecosystem is perceived and already transformed by what the people who use it make of it – the subjectivist dimension of the local material world. What follows is a post-fieldwork retrospective adaptation of field notes dating from August 1999 reporting an early informal conversation with Clear Water [a 60 year-old Harmony Cave villager from the 3rd production-team] during which he tried to describe the local material world in his own way. I believe that these impressionistic passages (together with figure 40) can give us a glimpse of some of the above-mentioned intricate ties between the objectivist and the subjectivist dimensions of the material village world and of its annual cycle:

It's one of those August hot and rainy days in which, as everyone knows, one can always say that there's nothing to do but to play (無哩做, 得耍) – and that's hard work as well. It's so hot

that I'm always sweating, and, unlike Clear Water and most other villagers, I still waste my time moaning about it. Seated in my room in the Harmony First residential area, we drink different cups of the same cheap green tea that I bought in Brightpath's periodical market – [I note that at the time I was drinking about five litres of tea per day to compensate for dehydration]. Clear Water tells me that the temperatures reported yesterday night on Ornate Harmony's television were much higher than 30 degrees. As we cool down in my room by my expensive 15RMB (1.5€) electric-fan, we 'blow some trumpets'(吹喇叭), meaning that we smoke (as almost all village men do) some yellow tobacco rolled cigarettes. Clear Water tells me that the few families with economic ability who use electric-fans on a daily basis will spend more money in the summer on electricity. As I've been noticing, Clear Water is one of those who cool down in the wind of someone else's electricity bill – he is also widely known in the village to smoke the tobacco of others. He tells me that, in the past - or as recently as before 1984 -, when there was no electricity in the village, a lot of people would go and sit inside the famous *Stream Cave*, next to the village's *Old Place* residential area. The *Stream Cave*, where I would often go to hunt informants in a casual way while recovering from the heat, is the only place in Brightpath where - visiting tourists are said to have reported - the wind blows almost as fresh as the wind from a modern air-conditioner. As everyone in the village knows however, the problem of the *Stream Cave* in the summer is that the water of the stream running down the cave's dam is very noisy, and the 'aatjai'(兀仔) - a kind of tiny little insect that is worse than the mosquitoes because it is almost invisible - are literally impossible to cope with if one sits long enough to attract them. And this will not take long because the summer (together with the spring) is the season of the insects as well as that of all other members of the exuberant local fauna and flora. But lets us have a look with Clear Water at the local turning of the seasons that he, like most villagers, was unable to dissociate from the timing stages of paddy rice cultivation. And so it goes.

When the preparations for the first annual crop (上造, lit. 'upper crop') begin on the 2nd lunar month (March-April), that means that the *Vernal Equinox* (春份) of the TSC has once again arrived, and that the warm and humid southern winds are already very much in the air (春份暖分分). Many village families had been particularly apprehensive during the previous month - soon after the *Spring Festival* celebrations of the Chinese New Lunar Year - because they had to spend a lot of money to sign up (報名) their children for the spring-summer term at school – some didn't make it. At least since the *Excited Insects* (驚蟄) of the TSC (March), the irrigation water together with the exuberant local fauna and flora have been reappearing as if miraculously in the fields. After having been filled with people spreading herbicide (落除草劑) to get rid of the

weeds, the local rice paddies are now filled with people (mostly village men) ploughing (犁田) and raking (耙田) their plots of land with the help of water buffaloes or yellow cows. Although most village families immediately grow their rice-seedlings (浸穀種來育秧), it will only be after the local celebrations of the traditional national festival of ancestor worship (清明) - including here the celebrations of the anniversary of the village founding ancestor families (祖紀) - during the 2nd or 3rd lunar months (April) that they will actually start to transplant the rice-seedlings (用秧托插田) into their paddies (see below). By this time, the rains are mild, and there usually is a spring breeze cooling us down from the heat of the sun. When the summer comes - the *Summer Begins* (立夏) of the TSC -, by the 4th lunar month (May), the village families will be spreading the first bags of chemical-fertiliser (撒肥) in the rice-fields. The following two months will be months of taking caring of the growing rice plants (睇禾仔). The levels of irrigation water in the paddies have to be constantly controlled(望水). The weeds have to be constantly pulled (搵草). Pesticides have to be sprayed in the fields (噴農藥) – these pesticides are the reason why there are now so few dogs in the village. More bags of artificial fertilisers have also to be spread in the fields (撒肥). By the time the harvest (收穫) of this first annual crop of rice begins - before the *Autumn Begins* (立秋) of the TSC and during the 6th to 7th lunar months (July) -, the village families will say that they are so busy (唔得閑) that they can't even go to the periodical market. At this stage, the weather is already extremely hot and at times tropically rainy and stormy. We are entering the middle of the summer, and the fauna and flora of the village surroundings is still quite exuberant in spite of just being a pale shadow of what it once was in the past. At night, mosquitoes and singing frogs are the kings, but the local ecosystem is also filled with many other species of insects, reptiles and small rodents. This explains for example why it is that during the day one can easily spot grasshopper-catchers (捉蜢佬) and snake-catchers (捉蛇佬) in the fields, or why it is that when one returns from an exhausting day's work in the paddies one can easily spot many clouds of dragonflies flying round, like the children, with no clear direction.

During the whole of the summer period - July and August especially -, it is not unusual that strong winds (大風) and stormy rains (大水) suddenly appear and last for a few days. However, they are not as bad as the ones many villagers have heard about in the southern coastal parts of the province (e.g., Macao, Hong Kong) where highly destructive typhoons are customary during this period of the year. The thunders that often accompany these strong local winds and stormy rains are locally known as the 'noisy husbands'(響老公), and, according to the local customs, one

can scare them away by setting off big firecrackers (射大炮), that is, by making even more noise than the 'noisy husbands' themselves. These summer 'noisy husbands' are however good business for the 5th production-team owners of the local kiln factory that supplies most villages in Three Mountains brigade with local-style clay tiles and bricks. This is because these 'noisy husbands' often blow away and break the clay-tiles of the traditional 'mud-houses', and people will want to replace them immediately fearing a flood. In July 2000, one such 'noisy husband' confirmed to the villagers the high prestige of the solid modern-style 'mansions' that, unlike the fragile traditional-style 'mud-houses', did not suffer any damage whatsoever. The local humidity levels in the summer, as in much of the province, are commonly higher than 90%, meaning that, in the absence of the sophisticated technological devices of the modern urban ecosystems, there's really no place for us to cool down as we're permanently immersed in a gigantic rural sauna. I am however unsuccessful in explaining to Clear Water - and the other villagers who have meanwhile joined us in my room - what I meant by humidity levels. What to me is not normal and particularly uncomfortable (as I am experiencing it for the first time), to them is simply *the way things are*, an objective ecological reality to which they had to get used ever since infancy, and of which they do not know of course whether it is uncomfortable or not when viewed from a global perspective. This can be easily illustrated by what the villagers call '皮難', roughly 'skin-difficulties', meaning a kind of skin irritation that is caused by the heat and humidity of the summer, and that is so 'itchy'(痒) that it forces one to scratch one's skin repeatedly and thus provoke serious sore – the worst period to have it is during a rice harvest when one's body will get covered with a highly infectious membrana of mud and rice straw due to intense work in the fields. While I only began to have these 'skin-difficulties' after my arrival in this rural ecological environment – and I note that I had never had them before even while living in other places (e.g., Macao, Hong Kong, Guangzhou) in the same cultural and ecological region but with the above-mentioned sophisticated technologies of ambiance so characteristic of the modern urban ecosystems -, the local people start to have them immediately after birth so that by the time they reach adulthood their bodies will have largely got used to them – or at least got used to the *reality* that it is pointless to moan about it. I am convinced that this is the practical reason why only infants and children complain about them.

But let us carry on with Clear Water's descriptions of the turning of the local seasons and calendars. It is while the first crop of rice is still being collected that the village families begin to sow the seedlings for the second crop of rice (下造, lit. 'lower-crop'). This means that is only when the *Autumn Begins* (立秋) of the TSC (August) arrives that the village families begin

transplanting the rice seedlings into their paddies. And yet, although the autumn has formally arrived, the heat won't cool down until the first autumn breezes start to blow after the arrival of the *White Dew* (白露) of the TSC during the 8th lunar month (September) when the villagers are about to celebrate what constitutes together with the festival of ancestor worship the second major local festival, the traditional national festival of Mid-Autumn (中秋節). This means that by the time the villagers set off firecrackers and burn incense to worship the moonlight (拜月亮) on the full month night of the 15th of the 8th lunar month, the water in the paddies is no longer as hot as it usually is during the summer. Soon after the Mid-Autumn festival celebrations, many village families are again apprehensive because the time has come for them to spend a lot of money to sign up (報名) their children for the autumn-winter term at school that is about to start – some didn't make it again. In the month of October of the OSC, while the village families are taking care of their rice paddies and doing all the other usual things, the children at school will be participating in the local version of the country wide formal celebrations of the foundation of the PRC (國慶) - just like they participated on June 1st in the local version of the country wide formal celebrations of the International Children's Day. A month later, when the *Winter Begins* (立冬) of the TSC arrives during the 10th lunar month (November), the time has come for the harvest of the second annual crop of rice – and also for the second one of peanuts and for the single one of sweet potatoes. The early mornings of this time of the year are already quite cold and the frost – that people call 'snow' - has come to stay. The cold northern winds are now blowing steadily, and all the insects and animals are about to vanish from sight. The question, 'how many clothes are you wearing?'(著幾多件衫?), starts to be heard with some frequency during this period. It is the time of marriage banquets and construction works. It is also the time of funerals because, so people say, people's 'natural deaths' tend to happen only when the cold begins to arrive. Clear Water tells me that here and there people gather and warm themselves around fireplaces (火炙) - we ourselves would be 'blowing many trumpets' round such fireplaces some months later. Some families are only able to use firewood in their fireplaces - firewood being gathered for free in the surrounding mountains - while fewer families are able to use coal that can be bought in the local periodical market. It is because of the smoke of these fireplaces that the inside walls of all village houses are blackened – a typical comment of class-based derision made by the market town people about the village people being that the walls of village houses are dirty black like cow sheds. By December, as the village celebrations of the official New Year of the OSC approach, people look as though they have grown fat from all the clothes they are wearing. The fields by contrast are now fully dry and their once exuberant green clothing and animal shouting is now

gone. After the second annual harvest has been taken care of, and during the following three months until the first annual crop starts once again, people say that there's really nothing to do in the fields. Since the local implementation of the open reforms, many go out of the village to 'look for money'. Some villagers use their familial connections to look for wage-labour (外出打工搵錢) in the village and surrounding areas - mason work being particularly sought after due to it being well paid [about 50RMB (5€) per day] -, others venture to the major urban centres of the southern parts of the province willing to do almost anything for money, and others still simply go to the suburban vegetable gardens of their family members in the provincial capital to help them out. It's really cold by now, early mornings especially. It's so cold that [without the above-mentioned sophisticated technologies of ambiance so characteristic of the modern urban ecosystems] many villagers often 'lose their sounds'(失聲), meaning that they get husky voices due to the cold. Moreover, and just as during the summer period, many villagers often also get colds(感冒) and have to seek a barefoot doctor to get expensive injections to prevent them from going to bed.

In January, when the *Spring Festival* (過年節 / 春節) is approaching, it is still very cold and dry but the village families are already preparing the warm and noisy celebrations of the biggest traditional festival of the year, the Lunar New Year, also commonly known in English as the Chinese New Year. Almost all villagers who have been working outside the village will return to the village for the traditional family reunion meals (團年飯) which usually take place during this period. The children will also get some very welcomed school holidays. All village 'mansions' and 'mud-houses' will get decorated with so many small rectangular-shaped red sheets of paper containing auspicious antithetical couplets written in golden characters that they will seem to be alive. Although the village families have been trying to be frugal throughout the year - or else, as some villagers put it euphemistically, the gods will punish them -, they will all explode the very early morning of the first day of the New Lunar Year when they wake up to learn that they have all survived - not without the help of the stove-god, so it is said, who interceded on their behalf with the supreme god of heaven - the celestial punishment. Accordingly, the moment they see one another for the first time, they will mutually bow with their hands closed together and say something auspicious like '恭喜發財, 萬事如意', roughly 'Congratulations! That you may strike it rich! And that all your affairs happen according to your wishes'. That same morning and in the following days, they will also light as many firecrackers as their spare money can buy. Small fortunes (by local standards) are often spent in no more than a few noisy minutes. Nobody is cold anymore, and yet it is quite cold out there. This is because, so it is said, there is nice food and

wine in the house, and the houses are filled with people. Families are very busy receiving New Lunar Year visits at least until the 7th day of the 1st month when the *Lantern festival* (過年仔節) puts an end to the New Year celebrations. Many people gamble - even more than is already the case throughout the year - as it is considered very auspicious to win at gambling during this time of the year. With the yearly accounting already done and the children already returning to classes, the local families start preparing for the ploughing of the fields, or, in the case of the family members working in the suburban areas of the provincial capital, preparing their new season in their rented vegetable gardens or in their employers' factories. A new solar/agricultural and lunar/ritual season is now beginning. The animal world will soon awake with the warm winds of the coming spring. As to the spectres of the ancestors - that have been wandering in the village area since the celebrations of the Spring Festival - will keep on doing so at least until the festival of ancestor worship (清明) during the 2nd or 3rd lunar months (April) after which the village families will start invading the local paddies to proceed once more to the transplanting of their rice-seedlings.

It is not difficult to have the feeling as one reads these impressionistic passages – these passages being the product not only of a certain local way of talking about the village annual cycle but also of Clear Water's (and my own) practical observation of it - that the village material world *looks* indeed as circular as it is represented in figure 40, and that this circularity is not separate from the *turning of the seasons* of the local sub-tropical rural ecosystem and from the *turning of the calendars*, i.e., from the ways the local rural ecosystem is socially perceived and is socially produced and reproduced by the people who use it and who are thereby also produced and reproduced by it. It is with this same impression of circularity - a local version of what is in all probability a universal dimension of the localised experience and conceptualisation of temporality among humans (Gell, 1992) - that we are confronted the moment one allows oneself to get one's hands and feet dirty and tries to accompany at close range the work of a village family in the paddies.

2. The 'rice paddies', the 'farmers', and the 'emperor'

The first time I was introduced in practice to the village world of paddy rice cultivation was immediately after my arrival in the village at a time when the first annual

rice harvest was about to start. That's when I 'scandalously' decided to follow some village families in their work in the village rice paddies (see introduction). At the time, I was still living in one of the 'mansions' of Bright Image's agnatic extended family, and old Bright Image often showed me his pride in the fact that his already partitioned extended family did not need, as most village families did, to farm the rice it eats because its source of income had already shifted most significantly to the capitalist exploitation of suburban vegetable gardens in the provincial capital where Bright Image's four sons and respective wives were working – much of the village land of Bright Image's extended family being either abandoned or rented to families from the neighbouring White Bay township who didn't have enough rice paddies back home. In time I also came to learn that Bright Image's pride in not needing to farm the rice he eats was particularly strong because he was among other things the nephew (SyB) of the only family in the village that had been classified back in the 1950's with the 'landlord' bad class label, meaning that he and his family had been of course the victim of brutal acts of formal and informal discrimination during much of the local Maoist period. Seen from this perspective, it is certainly not surprising that he as an individual was both suspicious and shocked by the fact that I wished to get my hands and feet dirty in the fields, and that I even seemed to be able to perform with relative ease many tasks in the fields. It turned out however that his suspicion and shock was also of a social nature as it was *widely spread* in the village being related, as we shall now see, to the fact that everyone in villages such as Harmony Cave takes it for granted that 'people with money and culture' (as I was seen to be) would never be willing and/or able to do such things of low class-status, as the present post-Mao political economy is now once again classifying the work of 'farming' (see introduction & chapter 2). [This explains for example why it was that when I once visited a couple of young villagers who, through their scholarly achievements, had already managed to move out of the village as teachers in the primary and secondary schools of Moist Light, a big and prestigious neighbouring market town, they talked to me about farming as if they had never farmed the land in their lives; and yet, I knew through my on-going conversations with their grandparents back in the village that they used to do so when they were younger like indeed everyone else in the village; that they acted like this is because, socially speaking, their new higher-level identity required them to show no

traces of their former lower-level identity or else strategic disadvantages would most likely follow.] But let us have a more detailed look at this culturally marked subjectivist description of the local strategic field of social action - a kind of *caste-like doxic practical logic of familist social stratification* (cf. J.Potter&S.Potter, 1990).

Ever since I started living in the village, many villagers would often remind me that the people (like them) that '做農民', roughly that 'do the farmers' or 'play the role of farmers', are 'backward'(落後) people whose familial lives, unlike mine, are still all about '耕田搵飯食', roughly 'toiling the soil to look for food (rice) to eat' (see chapters 2, 4). They would note that it was quite clear to them that I already did not need 'to toil the soil to look for food' because this was clearly objectified in the whiteness and softness of my hands and skin, or in the 'beautiful' (and/or 'expensive') shoes and clothes I was wearing upon my arrival in the village. Some of the oldest among them would also note that *that* had also been one of the methods adopted by the Maoist cadres during the class-background investigations of the early 1950's in the village to identify 'landlords' whose hands were said not to have the calluses of someone who works in the fields on a daily basis. Some other villagers would even ask me whether it was true that the farmers of the 'western countries', unlike the farmers of poor countries such as the PRC, did not need to farm the land themselves because they were already so 'advanced/developed'(先進) that they had many western scientific technological devices such as tractors to do it for them (see below). In short, to these villagers, there are different hierarchic categories of people/families, and these different hierarchic categories of people/families objectify their distinctive identities in the things they have (the bodies of persons included) and in the things they do. These different hierarchic categories of people/families are generally described by the villagers in terms of a never-ending series of encompassing hierarchic oppositions that are usually captured metaphorically through the encompassing relation of hierarchic opposition between the 'emperor'(皇帝) [the favourite top position of the native subjectivist scheme of politico-economic stratification] and the 'farmers'(農民) [its favourite underdog] (see J.Watson, 1991 for rural Hong Kong). Note that, as we shall see below, what matters the most here are less the terms in themselves than the kind of relation these terms entertain with one another.

As some villagers would often remind me, the 'emperor' and the 'farmers' are hierarchically distinguished one from the other just as 'heaven' above is from the 'earth' below, the masculine principle of 'yang' is from the feminine principle of 'yin', the 'father' is from the 'son', the 'husband' from the 'wife', the 'teacher' from the 'student', and so on. Such is the *formal way of things*. To act as if it is otherwise it is to act like the children who still don't know, so it is daily remarked, how to distinguish heaven from earth (唔分天地). Accordingly, to know how to distinguish heaven from earth is to know that the 'emperor' and the 'farmers' have and do things that are hierarchically distinct. It is to know for example that while the 'farmers' are only able to cultivate the land of the 'emperor' in order to have food to eat, the 'emperor' is able to collect heavy taxes (rice/money) from the 'farmers'; while the 'farmers' are only able to eat cheap staple food items such as, from lower to higher prestige, sweet-potatoes, taro, rice-congee and cooked white rice, the 'emperor' is able to eat any kind of expensive 'food toppings' including various extremely rare and expensive species of wild animals and plants known for their magical properties; while the 'farmers' are only able to smoke cheap hand-rolled yellow tobacco, the 'emperor' is able to smoke not only the most expensive western brands of cigarettes but also special brands of cigarettes that only the 'emperor' can smoke; while the 'farmers' are only able to live in small, cheap and backward 'mud-houses' the 'emperor' is able to live in big, expensive and modern 'mansions' and 'palaces'; and so on. But to know how to distinguish heaven from earth is also to know that although the 'emperor' and the 'farmers' are hierarchically distinguished one from the other, one cannot go without the other. This is because their relation of hierarchical opposition is of an *encompassing* nature. This does not mean that it has been, historically speaking, one of harmony, as it has often been represented historically by the official literati (Bray, 1997).

Trying to convey some of these tensions, villagers would often note during informal conversations - making use of the kinds of classic idioms often used by Chairman Mao - that the relation between the 'emperor' and the 'farmers' is just like the mythological relation between the 'tiger' and the 'dog', that is, although each side is assumed to be working for its own often mutually conflicting interests, it is quite clear who lies above and who lies below, meaning that, under normal circumstances, the 'dogs'

will not formally bark at the 'tiger' simply because they know very well what an angry 'tiger' is capable of, and that they will instead show formal deference to the 'tiger' because they know that it is by doing so that their interests are best looked after as the 'tiger' will largely leave them to themselves. To illustrate these considerations, some villagers would bring forth two historical examples: the first coming from the Maoist period when farmers were not allowed to engage in capitalist business(唔准做生意), and the second coming from the present post- Mao era at a time when the local guidelines of the family planning policy do not allow farming families to have as many babies as they may wish(唔准超生). Although it is obvious that these official prohibitions are not in the interests of the farmers, and although we know that most village farmers did and do protest informally against these laws, the fact remains that most have chosen to pursue their familial interests by showing formal deference to the governmental laws while trying to escape them informally and/or trying to accommodate their formal demands. That this is so is because, to put it in a local traditional saying often used by old Clear Water, '政府下農民，農民下牛', roughly 'the government orders the farmers, and the farmers order the cows', meaning that although people in rice-farming common-surname villages such as Harmony Cave equally tend to refer to themselves as 'farmers', the fact remains that there are also a few 'little emperors' among them who order the others around just like say the 'farmers' are said to order the cows around the fields. After all, to use an idiomatic rhetorical question often used by old Bright Image, '問人唔想做皇帝?', roughly 'who doesn't want to do the emperor?'. Although this turbulent introduction of mine to the village world of paddy rice cultivation was in many ways illuminating, my full-scale initiation to it would only occur the moment I actually moved from Bright Image's 'mansion' into the 'mud-house' of my second host in the village, Bright Gold, and started participating quite closely in the agricultural agenda of his family.

3. The water in the paddies comes from 'heaven' to 'earth'

At the time of my moving, Bright Gold's family – that was then temporarily cut down to Bright Gold and his three younger children because both his wife and his eldest son were temporarily working in the suburbs of the provincial capital - was about to start harvesting their first annual crop of rice (see figure 40). They were already slightly

behind schedule as they had barely started to harvest their peanuts(搵地豆) - about 2 *mauh* (0,1334 hectares) of them - and we were already well beyond the *Great Heat* of the TSL, meaning that, in accord with the guidelines of the local agricultural calendar, most village families were already starting to harvest their rice (see figure 40). This meant that the fields on the other side of the *Stream* cave were already filled with families cutting (割禾) their rice with a sickle and threshing (打禾) it with their pedal-operated rice-threshing machines (打禾機). Because most of these families had their own colourful sunshades and were widespread in the fields in an atomised pattern, these fields started to look like a European beach full of middle class families during the summer holidays. Of course, unlike the factory manufactured beach sunshades, these are sunshades of rural bricoleurs that are made of materials at hand; mostly bamboo, dried rice-plants, and cheap coloured market cloth. It was in these same sunshade-punctuated rice fields that Bright Gold's family (me included) would start harvesting their rice some days later. Given that we were clearly behind schedule and that we already had to prepare the second crop while still harvesting that one, Bright Gold was particularly anxious to start sowing the 8 *gan*(斤) (about 4kg) of rice seeds he had already bought at Brightpath's official agricultural station [just enough to cultivate about 3 *mauh* (0.2001 hectares) of rice]. To do that, he had already put aside a paddy of about 1 *fan* (0.00667 hectares) that he had duly flooded(派水), as required, the previous evening. At the time, I was of course still largely unaware of when or why he had done all these things. This is because during this early period of fieldwork most things still happened without me even noticing. Since I had no embodied past in the village - or even in the country in question -, I totally lacked the set of shared practical experiences required for me to really understand what was going on around me. To illustrate this point, I shall simply note that I didn't *even* know how to explain or simply to identify on the ground how big a plot of land of 1 *mauh* was - the *mauh* being the basic native unit of measure of land area corresponding to 0.0667 hectares, or about 1/10 a football pitch. Seen from this perspective, by following Bright Gold to the paddies and helping him sow his rice seeds, I was of course trying to use my own body to get closer to the kind of practical experiences shared by all villagers. Besides learning for example that the 'sowing of the rice' requires at a first stage that we

grow rice seedlings (下秧) in plastic bases (秧托) placed immediately under the surface of the muddy bed of a paddy specially prepared for that effect, and finally that we transplant these rice-seedlings into one's flooded paddies(插田), I was also learning what happens to us and what is happening around us when we're doing these things. To understand these though, we first have to reach a more detailed understanding of the material world around us and what it looks like. Take the example of water. Given that I knew that there was no major river in the village area and that there was no centralised system of local distribution of water for drinking or irrigation purposes, I often wondered while working in the fields where all the irrigation water flooding those rice paddies came from, and how people got hold of it so neatly?

Well, let's put it this way, from the perspective of Bright Gold and of an average local farmer, the water comes from 'heaven', and flows from 'heaven' above to the 'earth' below – many older villagers still remember quite distinctively those so-called days of 'feudal customs and superstitions' before the Communist Liberation of 1949 when the local village people would arrange (like they say the emperor also did) various kinds of big religious rituals to try to control the work of heaven in terms of rainfall and thus to increase the fertility and productivity of the local land. Things are however not as simple as this. To begin with, one has the mountains – these mountains being also metaphorically associated with the highness of 'heaven' and of the 'emperor'. The older part of the village of Harmony Cave was built at the feet of a series of figure-shaped limestone mountains (see figure 30). According to old Splendid Omen, it was during the 1957 reconstruction of the former major ancestral hall of the village that it was determined geomantically that the village should formally face the 'east'. This is why the doors of the two still existing ancestral halls within the village, the main door of the older part of the village, the doors of the various village residential compounds (including most new 'mansions'), and the doors of the primary-school and brigade-headquarters are all directed towards the east or the north-east. Note that there are many complex and detailed geomantic divergences in the village in terms of door-orientation, and that these differences have grown as the village grew in population and in residential compounds (see chapter 2). Although these divergences are an important objective indicator of the existence of conflicts in the village, one should keep in mind that what's important to

people at present is not the formal position and direction of all village houses but of its main doors so that whenever people leave (or come) through them they will always be heading to (or coming from) the east. The reason why the village and its doors have this formal position and orientation is because, so it was argued by the geomantic experts, it assures that '水流來, 唔系流走, roughly 'the water comes and does not flow away'. Briefly, in geomancy, the so-called cosmic breaths(氣) that constitute the efficacy of a site are blown about by the wind and held by the water. Generally speaking, if the water moves too fast or in the wrong direction, the cosmic breaths will be taken away. And if this happens, it will be most unfortunate. This is because just as a rice paddy without enough water will not be able to produce many rice grains, so a village without enough wind- and water-held cosmic breaths will not be able to prosper and produce many infants (males especially), i.e., future village members – [note that the comparison is not mine].

But let us move once again to the mountains and try to understand where the bulk of the local irrigation water comes from. As one stands at the main door of the old part of the village and faces the north-east (see figures 30&31), one can clearly see in the horizon a series of mountains locally known as clay mountains (泥山). These clay mountains represent the highest point in the Brightpath area, reaching almost 1000m in altitude and rising to the side of the neighbouring township of Back Cave. Given this 'highness', it is not surprising that they are the place where - given the local traditional customs of double burial (see J.Watson, 1982b) - both the corpses and then the bones of the dead are buried, and thus where most of the tombs of the ancestors are located. They are, in other words, explicitly associated with the village world of the spirits and of the ancestors. Indeed, the very spoken word for 'mountains' in the local Cantonese patois is largely homophonous with the spoken word for 'spirits', so that when one says 'to worship the ancestors' one is also saying to 'worship the mountains', and, in many ways, that's what one actually does because it is quite often to the mountains that one will set off to worship the tombs of one's ancestors. But these clay mountains are also the place from where much of the water originating from 'heaven' flows into the paddies in the plains. This is because it is there that the biggest water reservoir in the Three Mountains area is located. According to old Room Fortune - a charismatic primary school teacher

from the 1st production-team of Harmony Cave -, the *Stone Inscription* water reservoir was built in the 1958 winter during the so-called Maoist period of the collectives(集體嘅時候) in the zenith of the communal spirit of Mao's *Great Leap Forward* (see also chapter 2). This Wittfogelian local undertaking was carried out under a collectivist system of pooling of human labour per family(夾人力), and involved most of the working familial population (several hundreds) of the then officially emerging brigade of Three Mountains with its six common-surname villages. The reservoir is an artificial pond bigger than three football pitches put together that is located on a small plateau up in the clay-mountains of Three Mountains. Inside the reservoir, one will find a huge water pipe that was installed to channel the reservoir's water to the outside. In a watchtower built on one of the hills surrounding the reservoir, one will find the operating lever that controls the water levels of the reservoir by regulating its opening and closure.

The first time I actually visited this water reservoir was on a so-called spring trip (春游) with the 5th grade class of the Three Mountains primary-school under the guidance of the above-mentioned teacher Room Fortune. The purpose of this 'spring trip' was to draw the children's attention to certain topics delineated on-sight by the teacher for them to write a composition. Talking as usual in the local dialect (not in Mandarin), Room Fortune described how this construction had been a colossal achievement of the Communist-Party, and how the local farmers had bravely endured the hardships of having to dig the artificial lake and to shoulder all necessary construction materials up the mountains. Some days later, after drinking his daily bottle of rice-wine, Room Fortune would sing to me some of the songs whistled by the local farmers during this colossal undertaking. Here's the most popular: '起啊起啊起啊唷，起啊起啊起啊唷，起啊起啊起啊唷，要揚河水上山坡，要揚山溪變成河，你挖泥，我挖土，一心一得搭人路，起啊起啊起啊唷，起啊起啊起啊唷，起啊起啊起啊唷，上河水好艱作，諷首歌大家和', roughly 'up-yo up-yo up-yo up-a-yo, up-yo up-yo up-yo up-a-yo, one needs to bring the river water up the mountain hill, one needs to transform the mountain stream into a river; you dig mud, I dig sand, together we will build our road, up-yo up-yo up-yo up-a-yo, up-yo up-yo up-yo up-a-yo, bringing the river water up the mountain is so hard and sour, chanting a song makes us all more harmonic'. The story goes that it took several

months of solidaristic singing and hardships to finish the reservoir. As a gigantic construction effort (by local technological standards), this reservoir could have never been realised without a working force as big as the one of the adult working population of the brigade, or the Higher-Level co-operative as it was then known. That all local villages united in this gigantic effort was because this water reservoir was presented by the official cadres (and their allied local elites) as the key to the maximisation of the area of irrigated land in Three Mountains and to the rationalisation of the control of the local seasonal levels of irrigation water so as to avoid the floods of the unusually humid summers and the early droughts of the unusually dry autumns - and yet, besides serving the (divided interests of the) local farmers, this water reservoir was also of course a local objectification of the power of the State, i.e., the State's appropriation at the local level of the perceived cosmological capacity of 'heaven' to control and be a source of water.

Although the historical impact of this water reservoir on the local world was in many ways unprecedented, this historical impact was certainly not that obvious at first. That this was so is largely due to three key factors, including the destructive storms that afflicted the area during the summer of 1959, the low productivity of the local agricultural practices (that only started to use high-quality rice-seeds, fertilisers, herbicides and insecticides during the 1960's), and the miscalculated extraction of rural surpluses to support industry and subsidise food prices in the cities. Perhaps not surprisingly then, the people of Harmony Cave and Three Mountains (like most other brigades or higher-level co-operatives in Brightpath) ran out of grain in the winter of 1959 and had to endure starvation for several weeks until the State relief arrived – some older villagers still recall having to eat bark from trees, others even tell stories of cannibalism. The same thing would happen the following winter, and I was told that this second famine was even responsible for the deadly starvation of many local farmers – it is today estimated that during this so-called *Great Famine* period at least 30 million people died of hunger in the whole of China. But in 1961, as we've seen in chapter 2, things began to change in Three Mountains – as in China as a whole. That's when large quantities of grain (bought from Canada) were sent by the central government, and when the communal spirit of the *Great Leap Forward* started to be rolled back. That's also when the first concrete effects of the *Stone Inscription* water reservoir started to become

more visible. What this reservoir provided to the local farmers was a colossal State-managed reserve of irrigation water [a kind of State bank account with huge amounts of irrigation water capital] that assured not only that a greater area of agricultural lands in the plains of Three Mountains had access to irrigation water – thus leading to the domestication of much of the wilderness of the local material world - but also that all local communities had enough water for the second annual crop of rice in case of drought. This suggests that this water reservoir played a key role in the historical sustenance of the local agrarian mode of life by providing the local communities with a new source of irrigation capital that turned out to be big enough to feed the exponential growth of the local population during the Maoist period.

The present Three Mountains irrigation system works as follows (see figure 30). Briefly, the water, originating from 'heaven', accumulates in the mountain reservoir (built by the 'farmers' but under the guidance of the 'emperor') on 'earth', and from there it flows into the lower plains, so that by the time it reaches the paddy area it has already become fragmented into several small streams - five of these small streams converging in the *Stream Cave* - and into thousands of watercourses running in-between the paddies (that are usually flooded during much of the spring, summer and autumn). The symbolic message here is quite clear, even if ultimately arbitrary, as most of these socially enchanting associations usually are: because 'heaven' is to the 'earth' what the 'emperor' is to the 'farmers', then just as the thousands of watercourses in the paddies ('earth') are seen to be inescapably under the control of 'heaven' (and of heaven's ideological incarnation on 'earth', the State), so the hundreds of 'farmers' in the fields are seen to be inescapably under the control of the 'emperor'. This suggests that the way this concrete local system of irrigation is seen to look like on the ground constitute an enchanting social objectification of the above-mentioned 'encompassing relations of hierarchical opposition'. As we shall see in chapters 4, 5 and 6, these so-called 'encompassing relations of hierarchical opposition' are most often (and, to some extent, most fundamentally) framed within the native familist idiom of patrilineal identity. We will show for example in chapter 6 that this analogy with the water is quite commonly found at the level of the formal discourse in the prefaces of the notorious local written genealogies where the relations 'emperor' - 'farmers' or 'heaven' - 'earth' take the form

of the relation 'patrilineal ancestor family' – 'patrilineal descendant families', meaning that just as the water of the rivers is seen to be inescapably under the shadow of 'heaven', and just as the 'farmers' in the fields are seen to be inescapably under the shadow of the 'emperor', so people are inescapably under the shadow of their 'patrilineal ancestor families'.

4. The land of the paddies comes from the 'emperor' to the 'farmers'

After reaching the 'earth' coming from 'heaven', and once it starts flowing from the reservoir in the mountains into the local plains, the water has to face particular land arrangements just like different generations of farmers often face different political economies [the comparison is again not mine]. Historically, the present land arrangements in terms of ownership of the village and brigade areas started to take shape soon after the Communist Liberation of 1949 when the Communist land reform was locally implemented. That's when the present 7 official areas of agricultural land in the brigade of Three Mountains were formally defined by the Maoist administration. As shown in figure 30, these official areas of agricultural land - most of them filled with rice paddies - include:

(1) Stream Cave paddies
(2) Front of Face paddies
(3) Little Bamboo Man with Official Rank paddies
(4) Army paddies
(5) Nurturing Old Pond paddies
(6) Concave Neck Dragon paddies
(7) Mountain Back paddies

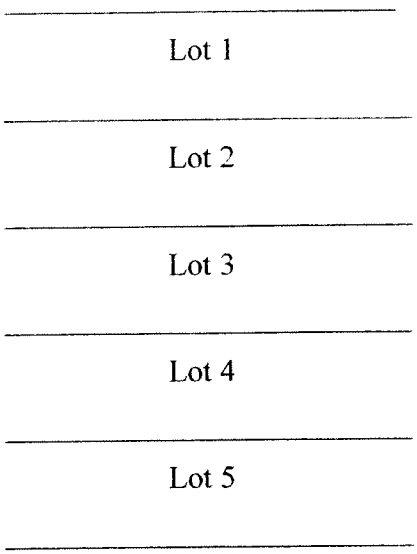
I say 'official areas' because all local agricultural land - as indeed all agricultural land of the PRC - officially belongs to the central government (the 'emperor') and only belongs to the locals (the 'farmers') insofar as it is allocated to them by the central government in exchange for agricultural taxes.

Just as in previous imperial governments (even if with different objectives and guidelines), land distribution was one of the big issues of the communist reforms. The Brightpath area was no exception. After the communist liberation of 1949, all local agricultural land was first appropriated by the communist party-state - this was in fact an appropriation of an appropriation in the sense that all land already belonged at least officially to the previous central government -, and was then redistributed to the local families and villages. But if before the communist liberation during the so-called period of the Nationalist party, most of the local land was unofficially in the hands of local landlords and warlords who exploited the local farmers with rents, protection fees, corvée services, with the communist land reforms, the local land was randomly allocated to all local families and villages in exchange for annual agricultural taxes. These are what the local farmers traditionally call '搞公糧', roughly 'hand in the public provision'[1] – this 'public provision' being said by the officials to be for the country to use (國家使用嘅), and being said by the farmers to be for the officials 'to travel round the world'(探世界). In the present, this agricultural tax is generally paid once a year during any of the two annual crops. According to Splendid Omen, in the early 1950's, when it was introduced in its Communist format, the villagers had to pay about 24 *gan* (about 12kg) of unhusked rice per head; and in 2000 they had to pay about 46 *gan* (about 23kg) per head. Since the 1980's, this so-called 'public provision' can be given not only in unhusked rice but also in cash. The government tries to encourage the local farmers to pay in kind by increasing the amount to be paid if the payment is made in cash. The exception here is a recently (in 1998) introduced annual local tax (糧金糧費) that was designed by the local officials, following provincial guidelines, to extract money from the local families to pay for public construction works such as local roads. In 1998, the local officials managed to extract as much as 80RMB (8€) per individual, in 1999 about 50RMB (5€), and in 2000 no more than 40RMB (4€). If any local family refuses to pay, people will say that, to put it in the above-mentioned idiom of the 'dog' and the 'tiger', such a family is dangerously barking at the 'tiger'. One of the few times that I've actually seen the otherwise largely absent 'tiger' assaulting people's houses in the village was precisely during the collection of these highly contested local taxes. And although I came to understand why people say

that the officials look hateful and detestable (惡), it was quite clear to me that the conviction that people are inescapably in the hands of these officials (the 'emperor') is - given that it is widely distributed - of a social nature. Seen from this perspective, socially enchanting metaphoric relations such as the ones here being described of the 'land' being inescapably in the hands of the emperor' just like the 'water' is inescapably in the hands of 'heaven' only work for the *naturalisation* of this pattern of *sociability*.

It was then during the 1950's that the Communist land reforms led to the official redistribution of the agricultural land of Three Mountains. This was a process that was parallel to the process of reorganisation of the local villages in 'production-teams'. As to the village of Harmony Cave, it was divided in five production-teams that ended up socially reproducing - largely inadvertently, given the anti-lineage policy of the Communists - higher-level agnatic family groupings already existing in the village: the 1st, 2nd and 3rd production teams largely corresponding to the village branch of Fortunate Fragrance [the younger son of the founder of the village], and the 4th and 5th teams largely corresponding to the village branch of Fortunate Auspicious [the older son of the founder of the village] (see chapter 2 for more details). According to older villagers, an effort was made during the official redistribution of land to give the same share of good and bad land to each family, production-team and village. This meant that each family, production-team and village was allocated land in each of the above-mentioned official areas of agricultural land in function of its total population at a variable of 0.8 *mauh* (0.05336 hectares) to 1 *mauh* (0.0667 hectares) per head. Let us see how.

I shall only focus here, for reasons of space, on the proceedings at the level of the village of Harmony Cave. I should note nevertheless that the same method of land distribution was used in all other local communities. This method is as follows. Given that each of the five production-teams of the village was entitled to a specific amount of land, the portion of land in each of the above-mentioned official areas of agricultural land was accordingly divided in five smaller portions each of them corresponding to a numbered lot that was put inside a bag. That's when the leader of each production-team was asked to draw a lot at random in order to determine the portion of land in that official area of agricultural land that would be allocated to his team.



These kinds of methods of redistribution of land (or any other resources) based on drawing lots at random (執標) were (and are still) widely used throughout the Chinese countryside (see e.g. Liu, 2000) – they were in fact already used before the Communist liberation of 1949. This is because – so I am told by a villager as we observe the owners of a village fishpond drawing lots to redistribute the fish they just have caught in it - these methods are the best way to avoid ill feelings between individuals and/or family groupings since only luck, not people, can be blamed for the outcome. In the early 1980's, when the local implementation of the open reforms and of the household responsibility system began, because the official rights of exploitation of the land returned once again to the family, the land was once again randomly redistributed according to the brigade's population numbers. Ever since, the local brigade is expected to promote demographic adjustments of the land distribution at least every five years – at the time of my fieldwork, the last adjustment had occurred in 1997. Regardless of the particulars of these adjustments, the fact remains that the kind of social landscape that has been emerging out of the history of the local land distribution is one that is extraordinarily fragmented and segmented. This is not only because of the historically produced fragmentation of the form of the local land in thousands of small mosaic-shaped paddies but also because of the historically produced fragmentation of the ownership of the local land in several dispersed paddies amidst thousands of others.

We have here, I believe, some rather explicit circular analogies with the above-presented subjectivist descriptions of the local system of irrigation. This is because in both cases the forms of *agrarian capital* in question - 'water' / 'land' - are equally seen to be under the inescapable control of their higher-level source - 'heaven' / emperor -, and to be already very fragmented and segmented once they reach their lower-level receptacles - 'earth' / 'farmers'. But what produces fragmentation and segmentation in this last case is not seen to be the perceived natural work of the encompassing relation of hierarchical opposition between 'heaven' and 'earth' but the naturalised cosmological work of the encompassing relation of hierarchical opposition between 'emperor' and 'farmers'. The overall symbolic message of these subjectivist representations of the village material world should by now be very clear: just as the irrigation 'water' of the farmers in the paddies below is seen to be inescapably under the control of 'heaven' above - and also, given the power of the State as illustrated in its colossal reservoir, under the control of the 'emperor' above –, and just as the 'land' of the farmers in the plains below is seen to be inescapably under the control of the 'emperor' above, so the 'farmers' themselves below are seen to be inescapably under the control of the 'emperor' above. One should remember that these are no more than socially enchanting metaphoric representations that, as suggested above, are only contributing to the *naturalisation* of a certain pattern of *sociability* – that they are so powerful is because they also have, as we've seen, a material basis, i.e., they are ecological objectifications of a certain culturally marked and historically situated sense of practice. As such, they recall in many ways a concept that we borrowed in chapter 2 from the French anthropologist Pierre Bourdieu, the concept of 'field'(*champ*). A 'field', as Bourdieu (Bourdieu&Wacquant, 1992: 72) once defined it most clearly, is:

(...) a network or a configuration of objective relations between positions. These positions are objectively defined in its existence and in the determinations they impose on their occupants, agents or institutions, by their actual or potential situation (*situs*) in the structure of distribution of the different species of power (or capital) whose possession commands the access to the specific gains that are at stake in the field, and, simultaneously, by their objective relations with other positions (domination, subordination, homology, etc).

What Bourdieu does not note here is that a major requirement to full and effective participation in a 'field of social action' such as the one above-described [a 'field' being itself the product of this participation] is that one has to fulfil a certain number of (largely taken for granted) technical requirements - these being like 'passports' allowing us to get into the paddy-arena where all the relevant competitive action is going on. But let me illustrate what I mean by technical requirements with some examples coming straight from the paddies. To do this, I'm afraid that we have no scientific means other than trying ourselves to *learn by body* how to participate in the action going on in the above-described chessboard of flooded paddies.

5. Walking along the tiny field ridges of the paddies

For us to get into a flooded paddy, we have to take off our flip-flops, as the villagers normally do, and leave the flip-flops on the field ridges. This is because we don't want to dirty them with mud, and obviously because we wouldn't be able to walk with them on the soft brown muddy bed of the flooded paddies. That's what Bright Gold and I did on the summer morning of the 19th of the 6th lunar month when we started sowing the rice of his second crop in a small paddy in the *Stream* fields he had set aside for that purpose due to its convenient location in terms of solar exposure and in terms of irrigation – note that Bright Gold's three younger children kept on harvesting the rice of the first crop in the paddies nearby, the youngest one having been given the lighter task of herding the yellow cow. As everyone knows, although the soft brown muddy bed of the paddies feels great under one's feet - just like say, the soft yellow sand of an Algarve beach when it's bathed in ocean water -, it is also the host of a species of annoying friends one would be better off avoiding; these are the black leeches of the paddies that sometimes stick onto one's skin to suck one's blood, and are often very painful to remove. Obviously, people don't think too much about these leeches, they just do whatever they have to do in the paddy, just like say, people driving a car along a highway don't think about car accidents all the time, they just drive the car.

As I've mentioned before, the local method of 'sowing rice' involves a series of practical procedures that are far from obvious for a non-native city slicker. First of all, we have to have mastered the techniques of paddy water control. This basically means that

one has to know how to flood and how to drain a paddy. To drain a paddy, one has to open one or more ridge-fissures in the lower part of the paddy so that the water may flow out of it. To flood a paddy by contrast, one needs to open one or more ridge-fissures in the higher part of the paddy so that the surrounding watercourse may flow into it. Depending of course on how fast one wants to drain or flood the paddy, one can open a greater or lesser amount of ridge-fissures in the paddy. I should note however that most villagers prefer to use spots in the ridges that were already previously used as ridge-fissures instead of having the trouble of opening new ridge-fissures themselves. This is because these spots in the ridges already have the stones that, as we shall see, play a key role in the changing of the direction of the water flow. These stones will largely go unnoticed to the eyes of the unaccustomed visitor (as they are usually mixed up and covered with paddy mud), but they can be easily spotted with a shovel. That morning in Bright Gold's paddy for example, we opened two ridge-fissures in the lower part of that small paddy to get it drained - one of them having being newly opened by Bright Gold with his shovel. About 15 minutes later, the small paddy was already drained, and we started to sow his 4kg of rice seeds. To do this, we first had to set a series of plastic bases (秧托) underneath the surface of the paddy's soft brown muddy bed. It is on to the mud of these plastic bases that the rice seedlings root themselves. Note that the sowing area here required is not that big because we are just growing rice seedlings and these do not require as big a portion of land to grow as they will need later on. After spreading the seeds over the muddy bed of the 'plastic bases', we started to flood the paddy(浸水) once again. To do this, we closed the previous ridge-fissures and opened new ones in the higher part of the paddy. At this point, the flow of the watercourse surrounding the paddy started to bifurcate. That's when we placed the above-mentioned stones of the ridge-fissures in such a way so as to switch completely the direction of the water flow towards the paddy. It's then just a question of minutes before the task is accomplished; after which we have once again to close ridge-fissures with stones and mud. In no time (some days later), and with proper care, the seeds will have grown into rice seedlings, and we will have to drain the paddy once again in order to be able to pull out the 'plastic-bases' with the seedlings and proceed to their transplantation (插田) into Bright Gold's 3 *mauh* (0.2001 hectares) of paddies.

What I'm first of all suggesting here is that, in spite of the post- open reforms' growing *official formal* devaluation of farming as a mode of livelihood, these agricultural practices still are - both symbolically and concretely - what much of the daily life of villages such as Harmony Cave is all about. To erase them, like today's post- open reforms hegemonic discourses are trying to, is simply to erase *history*. Whether these *historical practices* are relevant or not, it is neither up to us nor to this top-down policy to decide. What's important to us anthropologists is that they are relevant to the ones that practice them by the simple fact that they still practice them and talk about them, i.e., that the time that many of them *still* have to spend in the village fields taking care of their crops (and doing all those other things that go unmentioned while doing it) is (as in the past) far from being insignificant[2]. This is because - to take the case of rice (the crop traditionally most cherished by the farmers) as my example - village families simply have to take care of their rice plants (睇禾仔) on a daily basis (see figure 40) - just like, as we will learn in chapter 5, they have to take care of their children on a daily basis. After transplanting the rice-sprouts, they have to spread fertiliser (撒肥 / 施肥) and insecticide (噴虫) several times, but, above all, they have to daily control the water levels of their paddies not only because the rice-plants require it but also because there's always the possibility that somebody may be playing dirty tricks on them. But here what I want to suggest above all is that although most villagers tend to take for granted and even devalue their skills in the fields - showing themselves instead (not always truthfully) to be fascinated with the skills of 'people with money and culture' (e.g., the speed of my handwriting) -, in fact they often achieve many practical feats in the fields that are no less than a prodigious Cantonese farming sample of mankind's genius. Let me explain myself.

I started my narrative above with Bright Gold and me already inside a paddy. What I didn't describe though was how we got into that paddy in the middle of the *Stream* fields in the first place – one of my first adventures walking in the local paddies. The *Stream* fields - like much of the local landscape during the busy farming season - are largely made up of flooded mosaic-shaped paddies that are often surrounded by tiny watercourses spreading irrigation water along the fields, and that are separated one from the other with tiny field-ridges (田畸). These tiny field-ridges are used as walking-paths in the paddies and as separating walls clearly fixing the boundaries of the paddies. As one

walks out of the *Stream* cave first into the *Stream* fields (where Bright Gold's paddy was located), the initial path is quite large - even if being, at the time, quite muddy and soft due to the humidity and rains of the summer. I'm afraid however that that's as many large paths as one can find there. From then on, if one wants to reach the paddy in question (about 200m ahead of us), one has to be able to walk with 3RMB (0.3€) plastic-made flip-flops (涼鞋) - or else without them and holding them in one's hands - along the tiny field ridges of the paddies. Problems begin to appear when we realise that the humidity and the sweat on one's feet make them slip out of the flip-flops as we try to find one's balance on the ridges. The more so in my case because my flip-flops - the highest number available in Brightpath market town (41 according to Portuguese standards) - were obviously too small for my feet that usually require between 42 and 43. One is thus forced to walk very slowly in order to secure the flip-flops with one's toe. More problems come up however when we reach the area of the *Stream* fields whose paddies are already flooded as they have already contain transplanted rice-seedlings. This is because, from then on, one has to be able to walk along the same kinds of field-ridges, but this time, surrounded by flooded not drained paddies. This means that if we use (as I was up till then often using) the land of the drained paddies on either side as a walking support in case of losing our balance we will literally fall into the water of the flooded paddies, and probably loose one's flip-flops in them. Eventually of course, that's what happened. It happened in fact so many times that I even started to consider going back, which, fortunately, I didn't do. As to Bright Gold and his children - who had started this journey with me along these same tiny field ridges at exactly the same time -, they had already arrived in the paddy in question, and were of course already laughing at my clumsy way of walking in the paddies [just like say city people often laugh at the behaviour of farmers in the cities]. Eventually, some 5 minutes later (I am not exaggerating), I finally arrived to the paddy in question. I was 'learning by body' that this flip-flopping business in the paddies was surely not as easy, as it looked at first. And this was during the daytime, and without a fully loaded (maximum of 50kg!) bamboo pole on one's back as many villagers often have to do. Moreover, people (mostly men) also have to do it during the night - the night in the local countryside having no light other than the moonlight.

The first time I went at night to this same area of paddies in the *Stream* fields was some weeks later with Transmit Lotus from the second production-team, one of the few snake-catchers and pig-killers of the village. I should note that some people (men and women) simply refuse to do this because they are afraid to bump into 'ghosts' in the fields – as many say they do. That night with Transmit Lotus, we went with a lantern each in one's hands – lanterns (like the torches of the past) being key tools for walking in the village area at night. As we reached the other side of the *Stream* cave we started to walk along the above-mentioned initial large path heading towards the tiny field-ridges ahead. I was feeling confident, I must say. I had been practising quite a lot during the previous weeks, and I thought I had already managed not to fall so often in the paddies at least. But that was during the day *not* during the night, and even less during a new moon night such as that one in which the only light we get is the one coming from our cheap lanterns. Perhaps not surprisingly, serious problems emerged soon after having started to walk along the tiny field ridges. Trying to keep up with the no less than amazing walking speed of Transmit Lotus, I literally splashed into the flooded paddy. After standing up and feeling rather frustrated, I immediately tried to retrieve my lantern and flip-flops in the flooded muddy bed of the paddy. We decided however that I should not proceed any further, and that - since my lantern was now not even working - I should stay put right there, and wait for him to come back so that we could return together to the village with his lantern. It was then completely soaked in paddy water and right there in the middle of all those paddies that I observed with fascination the speed at which Transmit Lotus lantern circulated in the pitch dark of the fields. It took him no more than a few minutes to walk more than 200 meters along those tiny field ridges, find his paddies in the midst of the hundreds of paddies in those fields, check the water levels, and walk the same more than 200 meters back. I was impressed. It was obvious to me that these were 'techniques of the body' (Mauss, 1950) that required an extraordinary bodily agility (in many ways comparable to the agility of say a basketball player), and an equally extraordinary embodied knowledge of the land arrangements of the local fields (also in many ways comparable to a basketball player's embodied knowledge of a court).

One should note however that the fact that these 'techniques of the body' are widely distributed among the villagers (without the villagers ever having learned them

specifically) suggests that that they are part and parcel of a long-term process of informal practical learning that, as my observations on the ground suggest, seems to begin in early childhood when the young children start to explore the material village world doing things as diverse as bathing in the irrigation stream, hunting lizards, hunting rats, stealing bananas from uncle X banana--tree, fishing, climbing trees, stealing peanuts from uncle Y peanut fields, and so on, and seems to continue well beyond the moment when the still very young children start to help their parents and grandparents taking care of the fields – this pattern may now be changing among some of the temporary migrant families of the village that prefer to have their children learn the techniques required to get by in the suburbs of the provincial capital. Given that most if not everyone in the village has been up till now historically bound to become if not a professional at least an amateur in the performance of these 'body techniques', the effect of this social phenomenon is one of *practical self-closure* – all outsiders being discouraged from trying to get in simply because they are out of tune in this maestro-less practical orchestra and also because they will be constantly reminded that they are so. This reminds us however that these 'body-techniques' are not only about being able to do it but also, and above all, about being able to do it well and, if possible, with elegance. Thus, to be good (and elegant) at walking along the tiny field ridges of the paddies one has to be able to do it not only (of course) without falling into the flooded paddies but also in a steady medium pace and without bending one's head down. We need a steady medium pace because if we do it too slow we will fall more easily, and if we do it too fast we'll be revealing that we are in a hurry – and the villagers tell me that it is always best to go unnoticed. As to 'not bending one's head down' this is because if we bend it down we won't be able to see what's going on around us in the fields – the villagers tell me in fact that one can always spot an outsider in the fields by checking his/her head and his/her pace.

6. The more informal and practical social reality of strategic competition in the paddies

But why is it so important 'to see what's going on around us in the fields'? The answer to this question is quite simply that if there is one truth about the above-described village world of paddy rice cultivation is that it is submerged in challenges that are by

and large the product of the informal social competition between players at various social levels (individuals, families and all other family-like collectives). That these players compete with one another is, to use the image of a 'game' to describe this field of social action (cf. Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992: 73), because they accept - by the simple fact of 'playing the game' (and not by 'being forced' or by any kind of 'contract') - that the 'game' is worth the effort. As we shall see in more detail in chapter 4, the 'social game' here in question - that is neither a deliberate creation of the villagers nor the product of rules and regularities clearly codified by them - is one whose key players are less biological individuals than what I will call 'stove-families' in the next chapter. One can have a glimpse of this 'game' if one goes back to Bright Gold's family and their 'late' sowing of the seeds of the second crop. As mentioned above, while one is harvesting one's first crop, one also has to start growing the rice seedlings of the next one. If one does it too late, this can have disastrous consequences not only in terms of agricultural productivity but also in terms of social prestige. This is because, like much of the social reality in the village, working in the fields is like engaging in an informal competition with the other village families over who's 'faster' than the others doing the shared required tasks – all village families being socially expected to keep at it so as not to bend under the burden and play the role of the family that 'looses face' because it is the last one to finish its tasks. Thus, when Bright Gold started to sow his rice behind schedule, this meant not only that he was late according to the local agricultural calendar but also that he was late in relation to the other village families (as he was in fact constantly being reminded of by the humiliating comments of these other village families). His bad management had in other words placed his family in the 'lowest'/'most backward' positions of the rice-farming working platoon of village families, just as people are now saying that the families still living in 'mud-houses' are placing themselves in the 'lowest'/'most backward' positions of the post- open-reforms working platoon of village families whose 'highest'/'most advanced' positions are of course occupied by the families already living in 'mansions' – this comparison (that is not mine but the villagers') being particularly good to draw our attention to some of the most important historical transformations going on in the contemporary field of social action of the village.

Now, given that all village families are in competition, and given that they share the same agricultural resources (water/land), it is hardly surprising that conflicts occur. This is because the agricultural strategies of the different families socially engaged in competition are quite often at odds with one another in practice - this is in fact one of the main reasons why the village families have to take care of the fields all the time; if they don't do it, their crops may be ruined by the others' misuse of common resources. And yet, whenever these conflicts occur and the ones directly involved in them start to quarrel with one another, people will comment that such unreasonable behaviour is not very good to look at (唔好睇) as it is typical of people who (like the children) don't know the way of things (唔懂道理) – the way of things being that since everybody is but a farmer and everybody is but a member of a village made up of families of patrilineal 'brothers and uncles', then everybody is the same and should act likewise and thus avoid creating conflicts. And yet, although villagers say that everybody is the same because everybody is but a 'farmer', in practice we know that not all village families farm full time (see chapter 2). As we've already seen in previous chapters, the differential results in terms of profits of the differential strategies of livelihood of the village families since the open reforms began to be locally implemented during the early 1980's have been in the process of being objectified in the village in the form of an encompassing hierarchical distinction between the advanced 'lower-base' of the village where most families who have already managed to build a modern-style 'mansion' live, and the backward 'inner-base' of the village where most families who still occupy the old traditional-style residential compounds of 'mud-houses' live (see chapter 2). In spite of these growing distinctions that make it that, to put it in the words of villagers such as Bright Gold, just as the 'emperor steps upon the farmers, so the lower-base of the village steps upon the inner-base', the villagers still look at one another as equals, not only as 'farmers' or members of the group of the ones who still have to farm the rice they eat, but also, and above all, as 'village relatives' or members of a localised agnatic family grouping of families of patrilineal 'brothers and uncles' (cf. R.Watson, 1985). And yet, if one looks at the everyday life practice in the village the competitive drive to distinguish oneself from the other is (and is said to have always been) very much in the air – this, in spite of the above-mentioned egalitarian social ideology. Take the example of the present post- open-

reforms social uses and ways of talking about cows and tractors, the two major local agricultural instruments to plough and rake the fields.

There are two kinds of cows in Brightpath, the 'water buffalo'(水牛) and the 'yellow cow'(黃牛). It has been observed - just as it has been observed of men in relation to women - that water buffaloes are bigger, stronger and more powerful than yellow cows. Practically speaking, this means that there are some difficult plots of land that yellow cows are unable to help us plough and rake - yellow cows are also not that good in walking in circles in a small area of mud (踩泥) to prepare the mud for the moulding of clay bricks and tiles. Perhaps not surprisingly, the water buffalo is the most expensive; it costs between 800RMB (80€) and 1.400RMB (140€) depending on its age, strength and health, while yellow cows only cost between 400RMB (40€) to 800RMB (80€) also depending on its age, strength and health. But besides being more expensive, water buffaloes are also much more demanding in terms of care as they have to eat more grass, have to be put in water for long periods of time, and have to be more carefully watched not to be stolen. In short, water buffaloes are, objectively speaking, more highly valued at the local social level than yellow cows. Although these kinds of distinctions could remain informal among the local farmers, this is not what happens in the field where the local farmers clearly pay a good deal of social attention to these kinds of distinctions. Accordingly, if a farming family only has a yellow cow (and not a water buffalo) people will say that this is because that family had no ability to get a water buffalo - just like if a farming family only has traditional-style 'mud-houses' (and not a modern-style 'mansion') people will say that this is because that family has no ability to get the money to build a 'mansion'. The same can be said about modern tractors.

If a village family only has a cow, people will say that this is because that family has no ability to get the money to buy a tractor. This is because tractors are seen to stand to cows in general just like the more prestigious water buffaloes stand to yellow cows. Like cows, tractors are also used to plough and rake the fields, but unlike cows, tractors are also used for various transportation purposes being particularly instrumental during construction works for example. Moreover, tractors are said to be much faster (較快) and much more convenient (唔使咁辛苦) than cows because they are new modern scientific

technologies (有科學技術) coming from the 'western countries' – note that tractors were first introduced in the village area only during the 1980's. Accordingly, the tractors are of course more highly valued at the local social level than cows. They are thus much more expensive, and also much rarer – while there is only one tractor in the village, there are still more than 40 cows in the village that are more than enough to guarantee the ploughing of the fields in the village as the village families with cows lend them to the other families in exchange for favours, money or other things. And yet, in spite of telling me all the time that they don't have as much money as the farmers from the 'western countries' to buy tractors, the village families often engage in informal farming tournaments of 'face' in which families compete with one another over who has the capacity to '請拖拉機', roughly 'to invite a tractor', meaning to hire a local tractor to do the ploughing of the fields. This was for example what Transport Open from the 1st production-team did during the ploughing of the second annual crop of rice in 1999. In spite of not having money even to send his only son to school, he spent the small fortune (by local standards) of 120RMB (12€) to have his 3 *mauh* (0.2001 hectares) of paddy fields fully ploughed and raked during two days without him needing to get his hands and feet dirty in the mud. Some days later, he ended up having to sell his cow to pay for basic expenses in the house. That he did what he did was because he wanted badly 'to have face'(有面) and look 'smart'(叻) in front of the others even if just for Andy Warhol's famous '15 minutes'.

The above-mentioned examples suggest that, in the ethnographic context in question, the relation between one's identity and one's possessions and performances is, formally speaking, over-determined. This means that, not unlike the former Maoist classifications of people in function of property, different kinds of hierarchically valued material possessions and performances are socially (and explicitly) associated with different kinds of hierarchically valued class-status identities, thus forming a caste-like 'ladder of success' with both synchronic (higher/lower) and diachronic (advanced/backward) dimensions. This *native practical scheme of hierarchical classification of people in class-status groups based on material possessions and doings* is in many ways analogous to the largely informal practical schemes of hierarchical classification of people in class-status groups based on taste among late 20th century

capitalist and individualist democratic Europeans (see e.g. Bourdieu, 1979). However, what distinguishes first of all this native practical scheme of hierarchical classification from its European counterpart is the fact that, as we've seen in the previous chapter, it has also been historically formalised at the official level in various forms (e.g., the 'good-bad class categories', the 'household registration system', the 'family planning policy'). Moreover, and as we shall see in the next chapter, what fundamentally distinguishes the form of this native practical scheme of hierarchical classification from its European counterpart is the fact that it is more performative than essentialist - meaning that what matters here is less 'what we are' than what 'we were able to do, to have what we have, and do what we do' -, and also that it is largely framed in an all-encompassing familist idiom of identity with a very long history in the Chinese world. As we shall also see in the next chapter, in villages such as Harmony Cave, this familist idiom of identity is part and parcel of the process through which - given the informal absence of the state on the ground - the local community became unofficially enclosed in a symbolic and politico-economic world of its own in which the objectivity of the inequality between village families has been socially formalised in an encompassing kinship-based pattern of local social organisation that takes this inequality for granted. My suggestion here was only that the kinds of 'encompassing relations of hierarchic opposition' at the heart of the native practical scheme of hierarchical classification of people are deeply entrenched in the ways the local people have been socially reproducing - and have also been (re)produced by - their ecological environment. If we look at these ways in the present what we will find in the paddies is a post-Mao version of a very old culturally marked informal historical reality of competitive strategies of encompassing distinction between village families and village family-groupings. I believe that our ethnographic awareness of these strategies of distinction will help us counterbalance a certain tendency to fall prey to the enchanting native idioms of encompassing harmony between distinct opposites and the kind of transcendental reality they postulate. It is to these that we shall now turn as we welcome the reader to the world of the 'stove-family'.

[1] I note that this expression 'hand in the public provision' is also used to say 'to defecate'. This is because the local farming communities generally use the human faeces accumulated in common ditches as a natural fertiliser. Accordingly, people refer to these 'natural fertilisers' as the '公糧', roughly the 'public provisions', because everybody is expected to contribute to its accumulation in the common ditches so that everyone can make a profitable use of it. Praising the quality of human faeces as natural fertilisers, the local farmers say that that it is not very difficult to distinguish the more tasty vegetables nurtured with these natural fertilisers from the more gum-like vegetables nurtured with artificial fertilisers.

[2] Quite curiously, the same can be said in fact of the members of village families living in huts in the suburbs of the provincial capital where they set their own family-enterprises of vegetable gardening in land rented from former local farmers (the new 'emperor' of these migrants) at exorbitant prices (see chapter 2). My first-hand observations in these vegetable gardens suggest that they also spend most of their time in their rented lands taking care of their cash-crop vegetables. They have not, in other words, freed themselves from the land. I should note however that the levels of work-rationalisation in these suburban vegetable gardens are much higher than in the village where the carrying out of an agricultural task usually involves many other things (e.g., chit-chatting, smoking) which remain largely unmentioned. This is because whereas in the vegetable gardens 'time is money' as one can grow many crops of vegetables every year, back in the village there's no point in rushing because we can only grow two annual crops of rice, and thus the only requirement is to keep up with the rhythm of the rice-nurturing work of 'heaven' (water) and 'earth' (land).