Meat – specifically pork – is the most highly prized item in Chinese cuisine. Shortages of pork spark street disorders, initiate bank runs and (if allowed to continue too long) threaten the stability of the state. Many countries, including the United States and Britain, maintain strategic petroleum reserves. China has a strategic pork reserve.² Pork plays a leading role in Chinese ancestral rites, wedding banquets, funeral rituals, graduation celebrations and communist party festivities. Pork, in other words, is central to all discussions of food in the Chinese world.

This chapter focuses on the gradual transformation of meat (pig flesh) from a restricted item of exchange to a commodity readily obtainable at shops, street stalls and supermarkets. Meat, I argue, has a cultural biography that changes over time, depending on economic, political and social circumstances. The following sections track the social history of meat in the Cantonese-speaking regions of the Pearl River Delta, Guangdong Province.

Before proceeding, it is important to keep in mind a central fact: meat is dead animal flesh. In the absence of modern refrigeration technology, meat (especially pork) lasts only a few hours before it has to be processed into edible food. Furthermore, meat is messy. Pigs have to be killed, bled and butchered – a complex set of procedures that requires the services of an experienced butcher. The high-pitched keening of a stuck pig, caught in its death throes, is a sound – once heard – that can never be forgotten. Meat, in other words, is a by-product of death. But meat is also the means by which human rituals are sustained and community solidarity reaffirmed. This is true whether we are discussing Swedish smorgasbord in Illinois or Cantonese ancestral rites in Hong Kong.
'Meat': an ethnographic and etymological excursion

The Chinese term for 'meat' (肉 Mandarin rou, Cantonese yuk) has a complex genealogy. The default of this character – and its primary denotation – refers to pork; in south China people do not have to insert the prefix zhu (猪 pig) when they speak of pork (see also Zhou 2001: 257–258). It is only when one introduces other forms of mammalian flesh that a qualifier is required, as in niu rou (牛肉 beef) or yang rou (羊肉 lamb/mutton). Until their recent appearance in Chinese supermarkets, beef and lamb played marginal roles in south China's local cuisines. Other than pork, the alternative forms of meat available in pre-modern times were water buffalo¹ (an almost inedible, impossible to chew dish), dog² (consumed by elderly males as a winter warmer), domestic cat³ (for eye problems and arthritis) and a local variety of wild civet⁴ (an aphrodisiac). In everyday conversations, all of these 'meats' required the suffix rou to distinguish the butchered from the live animal.

Most village households raised a handful of chickens but seldom ate them at home; they were far too valuable and were sold for cash in nearby market towns (see Liu 2008). Duck, goose and pigeon were also available in markets but entered village cuisine only on rare, ceremonial occasions. The suffix rou (meat) was not used when speaking of poultry; for most rural people, bird flesh was consumed in soups, health dishes and as a condiment for banquet dishes. Another rare, but nonetheless significant, category of animal flesh was snake⁵ – an aphrodisiac that did not require the rou suffix.

Shrimp, crab and oysters were produced in great quantities along the estuaries of the Pearl River Delta but, like poultry, these high-value foods were sold to wholesalers. Low quality, dried/salted fish was a dietary staple, although it was never a preferred item.⁶ Ordinary villagers consumed oysters once each year, during the annual celebration for the local patron goddess (天后 Tianhou, 'Empress of Heaven'). All forms of meat and poultry are banned during this three- to five-day festival, on the assumption that Tianhou would be offended by the killing. During the festival, villagers eat only vegetarian foods, which – in the local view – includes oysters. Oysters are 'planted' by inserting stones into prepared mudflats, and they 'grow' like plants as the polyps develop; hence, the mature oyster is perceived to be a vegetable rather than an animal (see Liu 1995: 85).

The sheep category of meat presents an interesting commentary on the overpowering significance of pork in China. Sheep were not raised in the delta region, primarily because of a lack of pasturage and a preference for other forms of meat. In the 1960s and 1970s, lamb was available as an imported item (from New Zealand, Australia and north China) in a handful of Muslim restaurants located in the cities of Guangzhou and Kowloon.⁹ The hegemony of pork in southern and central China presented special problems for Muslim merchants and travellers, as well as Orthodox Jews who worked in China. Lard is everywhere in China. It was, and still is, nearly impossible to avoid – even, or perhaps especially, in vegetarian restaurants where it is commonly used for cooking and seasoning. Chinese packaged foods often contain lard, although it is rarely mentioned in the list of ingredients.¹⁰ The Chinese term qingzhen (清真 'pure and true') is roughly equivalent to halal – an Arabic concept that means 'lawful' and governs food consumption in Muslim societies. In everyday usage qingzhen refers to food items that are free of lard or pig by-products (Gillette 2000a: 118-138; Gladney 1991: 7–15). Pork thus dominates all aspects of life in China, even among minorities who try their best to avoid it.¹¹

The setting: Cantonese rural society

In 1898, Britain leased a 365-square-mile section of Guangdong Province from China's Manchu court and attached it to the Crown Colony of Hong Kong (established in 1842). The indigenous villagers in this coastal enclave – known as the 'New Territories' – lived under British colonial rule for 99 years, reverting (along with the urban portions of the colony) to Chinese control on 1 July 1997. New Territories residents thus escaped the Maoist land reforms, collectivization campaigns and Cultural Revolution chaos that swept through China from the 1950s to the late 1970s. Colonial officials vigorously enforced an English-style legal system and collected land taxes without fail, but indigenous rites and religious activities continued unabated in the New Territories. Communist authorities in Guangdong Province, just across the Hong Kong border, denounced such practices as 'feudal' and launched a series of anti-superstition campaigns to eradicate any vestige of religious activity. By the late 1950s or early 1960s, the ritual system that underpinned Cantonese rural society had effectively disappeared in most parts of south China.

The villagers described in this chapter have sustained their indigenous ritual system – with minimal interference from state authorities – for at least 300 years, and probably much longer. This chapter draws on 45 years of ethnographic research centering on two Cantonese communities (San Tin 新田 and Ha Tsuen 哈村) located in Yuen Long District,
north-west New Territories, near the frontier between Hong Kong and Guangdong Province. Today the booming city of Shenzhen is just north of this border. San Tin and Ha Tsuen are representative of the landowning, politically connected communities that controlled this region since at least the Ming dynastic era (fourteenth century). Residents claim to be descendants of ethnic Han pioneers who fled to the Pearl River Delta in the immediate aftermath of the Mongol conquests of central China (twelfth and thirteenth centuries).

San Tin and Ha Tsuen are excellent examples of what sinological anthropologists refer to as lineage villages: the vast majority of male residents in these communities trace descent from a common founding ancestor. Circumstances in the New Territories have changed in recent decades, and more 'outsiders' (non-lineage families) have moved into villages of this type. Until the 1980s, San Tin was dominated by descendants of a pioneer named Man Sai-go and, hence, share the surname Man (Mandarin Wen). Most of the men in Ha Tsuen are descended from a Teng (Mandarin Deng) ancestor and carry his surname (see J. Watson 1975a; R. Watson 1985). Members of the Man and the Teng lineages follow a strict rule of patrilocal residence, meaning that all wives marry-in from other patrilineages and all daughters marry-out of their natal villages. For nearly four centuries the Man and the Teng – together with three other patrilineages – exchanged wives as they maintained a wary stand-off, competing among themselves for land, water and dominance of the local markets.

The rarity of meat-eating in the Cantonese heartland

The closed nature of Cantonese lineage structures led to a high degree of intra-village solidarity and an ideology of equality within the closed kinship group. But, as Rubie Watson has demonstrated, lineage-based communities were, in fact, riven by class and status distinctions (R. Watson 1985: 98–136). These differences were reflected, perhaps most clearly, in diet: households of wealthy landlord-merchants ate meat three or four times each week, whereas the households of ordinary villagers (farmers, tenant-workers) rarely consumed meat in contexts other than ancestral rituals or community celebrations. Meat, in other words, was a primary class marker in this part of south China: to eat meat on a regular basis, at home or in nearby market towns, was a clear and unambiguous sign of wealth.12

At the bottom of the local class hierarchy were residents of small, often ramshackle villages scattered along the coastal margins of the New Territories and the Pearl River Delta. Settlements of this type were inhabited by landless tenants, lime smelters, oyster fieldworkers, reed mat weavers, pond monitors, reclamation dikes builders, duck herders and fisher-people (boat and shoreline specialists). The farmers and landlords of San Tin and Ha Tsuen looked down on these people and treated them as transients, even though many had lived in the region for generations (see J. Watson 1977; Liu 1995).

Residents of such communities claimed to have gone for years – up to five years according to one tenant farmer – without eating even a trace of meat during the early twentieth century. It is not that residents of these small settlements were starving, or had an exceptionally meagre or unhealthy diet – quite the contrary, in fact. Their diet included fish (fresh and dried–salted), vegetables (varieties of cabbage) and sweet potatoes (the primary source of starch) but little, if any, rice – another dietary item they craved. Locally produced shrimp, crab and oysters – as noted earlier – were shipped to nearby seafood markets for sale.

During my interviews in the 1960s and 1970s, meat was a delicate topic in these villages. The mere mention of food set off long-winded (and very loud), public 'testimonies' by older residents for the benefit of younger neighbours: 'When I first married into this place, we went for years without eating even a single scrap of meat. It was terrible! What kind of life is that?' asked a 70-year-old widow during a 1977 encounter. Another villager proclaimed: 'I remember going for months without even smelling lard. Can any of my grandchildren imagine that? Like a lot of other people here we could not afford meat, but not having lard was the hardest, cruelest of fates'.

Levels of meat consumption varied in China, but – until the early twenty-first century – it was never plentiful. John Buck, in his 1920s study of Chinese farm economies, notes that American farmers received 39 times as much food energy from animal products as their counterparts in China (Buck 1930: 364). The environmental historian Vaclav Smil analysed Buck's monumental collection of household data (Buck 1937) and concludes that most rural Chinese ate meat only two or three times each year (Smil 2002: 608). European farm families fared somewhat better, but meat was always a luxury in the countryside (Weber 1976: 141–142). Excessive consumption of meat, so often reported in European historical lore, was restricted to urban elites and imperial courts (see Braudel 1973: 124–135). The majority of farmers in early twentieth-century France ate meat only at Easter, Saints' festivals and the occasional weddings (Smil 2002: 607).
Spheres of exchange, I: pigs from the ancestors

For ordinary villagers in the Pearl River Delta, the distribution of meat, prior to the 1960s, constituted a restricted sphere of exchange — a closed circle defined by descent from a specific ancestor or long-term residence in a community. The most important of these domains was the ancestor worship cult. Every autumn, during the Double Nine Festival (the ninth of the ninth lunar month) male elders gathered at the tombs of key ancestors to commemorate the dead and distribute portions of pork. The custom is called fen ju yuk (分猪肉), a colloquial Cantonese term that means ‘dividing/sharing pig meat’. Whole, gutted and cleaned pigs are required for the rites, which are conducted in front of the tomb — to demonstrate, in a quite literal sense, the good fortune of the ancestor. The pigs are purchased by the ancestor, through the agency of his landed estate (managed by a committee of descendants). Ancestors who ‘survive’ as named, individuated personalities beyond four or five generations after death must have their own income — generated by rental fields, commercial property and long-term investments (in recent decades this includes stocks, bonds and mutual funds). Estate income is used (1) to pay for annual shares of pork at autumn tomb rites; (2) to provide annual dividends (in cash) to living descendants; and (3) to pay for the upkeep of ancestral halls, the maintenance of schools and scholarships honouring the named ancestor. In 1905, there were 126 ancestral estates in San Tin and 82 estates in Ha Tsuen; most of these estates remain intact today.

The pigs presented at the tomb are the symbolic manifestations of the ancestor’s property and his continued attention to the corporal needs of living descendants. The balance in the relationship is heavily weighted on the side of the living because, under special circumstances, descendants can agree to sell their ancestor’s property and divide the proceeds. Ancestors must therefore deliver regular benefits to the living: ‘If there were no pigs’, a man elder told me during the 1970 autumn tomb rites, ‘no one would be here and there would be no ancestors’. When an estate is in financial trouble, all secondary and tertiary expenditures cease: the last thing to go is the pork. If no one appears at the autumn rites, the ancestor dies a second, more serious death — the final expiration of his spirit (神). Property may outlast individual life, but it is not eternal. During interviews, villagers confessed that they found spiritual extinction far more frightening than mere biological death (see J. Watson 1982).

Individual shares of pork varied in size depending upon the wealth of the estate and the number of descendants involved. In the 1960s and 1970s the larger estates, named in honour of apical ancestors (some of whom died 40 generations ago), had thousands of shareholders, each receiving no more than two or three ounces of pork (see, e.g., R. Watson 1988: 222–226). The wealthiest estates in San Tin and Ha Tsuen, on the other hand, distributed up to ten catties (13 English pounds, approximately 6.5 kilos) of meat per share — in addition to substantial cash dividends to each living descendant. Estates of this type often had only a handful of shareholders; the dividends were used to underwrite business and professional expenses, thereby reinforcing the recipients’ privileged positions in the community. For members of this class, the meat was an afterthought — although they were always careful to collect their allotments to verify their status as shareholders.

Depending upon one’s position within the hierarchy of lineage segments, lucky villagers received four or five portions of meat during the autumn rites. Others collected a single share from the apical ancestor’s estate and nothing more. During the 1960s and 1970s, the majority of shareholders in San Tin and Ha Tsuen received approximately two catties (2.6 English pounds, rather more than a kilo) of ancestral pork during the autumn rites and a smaller share (0.3 pounds or less) to mark the Lunar New Year.16

The meat distribution system privileged age over status: elders (men aged 61 or over) received one extra share in recognition of their senior status in the lineage. Those lucky enough to reach the age of 71 received two extra shares; at the age of 81, three shares; and at the age of 91 (rare until recently) an elder was granted five extra shares. Most estates in San Tin and Ha Tsuen had only enough money to provide shares for elders, who in turn redistributed some of the meat to their sons and nephews. The wealthiest estates gave meat (and dividends) to every living, male descendant of the donor ancestor — including infants.

One never asked (as the author soon learned during his first field trip), ‘How many shares (fen) did you get this year?’ After butchering, the meat was divided and shares were weighed with exacting detail to ensure equal distribution; elders then collected their allotments and carried them home for cooking. Neighbours always knew who received the most meat, but this was not a topic of public discussion.

Spheres of exchange, II: community banquets

The distribution of pork associated with the ancestor worship cult was closed to non-members. It was also unequal and hierarchical, in the sense that some people received more meat — and cash dividends — than
others. The educated, wealthy males who managed Cantonese lineages cultivated an ideology of egalitarianism ('we are all equal in the eyes of the ancestors'), but this was an obvious fiction, unmasked most clearly in the division of ancestral pork.

Fortunately for the average villager, there were other, more equal means of distributing meat in the community: frequent banquets to celebrate weddings, births, adoptions, housewarmings and the 'return' of emigrants who had spent years working abroad.19 These banquets also constituted a restricted sphere of exchange in the sense that the events were open only to invited guests, who were expected to reciprocate when the occasion warranted. Money was not at issue and entry to the banquet hall could not be purchased.

Referred to in Cantonese as puhn-choi (盆茶 'pot/basin dining'), village banquets were defiantly egalitarian and violated elite Chinese dining conventions. There were no toasts or speeches; guests were fed on a first-come, first-served basis. They ate and departed, without thanking the host or lingering to talk with neighbours. The protocol was to eat quickly and make room for the next wave of diners (J. Watson 1987: 107–108). The host family was expected to invite at least one person from each household in their hamlet – a named subdivision within the larger village complex (San Tin had eight hamlets and Ha Tsuen had seven). Hamlet residents knew each other intimately and cooperated to perform various rites to protect the neighbourhood; each hamlet also maintained an informal village watch, consisting of older women who rarely left their hamlet and were not afraid to challenge strangers.

Banquet invitations took the form of public notices posted on a hamlet wall reserved for this purpose: 'The family of Man Dak-sam is calling-in a daughter-in-law [i.e., celebrating the marriage of a local-born son] on the fifth of the third lunar month. Elders of Fan Tin Tsuen [a hamlet in San Tin] are invited to attend'.20 Everyone in the hamlet knew about the wedding weeks in advance, but the public posting was part of the formal rites. As specified in the announcement, each household was expected to send a designated eater – usually a male elder (age 60 or over) who 'ate for' the household. If a household did not have an elder capable of attending, a male substitute could be sent to eat in his stead. By consuming the food the household representative conferred his (and his family's) recognition of the marriage, birth, or adoption being celebrated.21

At wedding banquets during the 1960s and 1970s, special guests were seated at designated tables. This party included members of the groom's family (including his mother, paternal grandmother and mother's brother), representatives of the bride's family (primarily male),22 local political leaders and police officers from the nearest station. A group of female 'bride-callers' and 'bride-senders' who accompanied the bride (see R. Watson 1985: 121–123) also sat at reserved tables. The largest group – elders and household representatives – did not have assigned tables and ate wherever they could find a seat. Hamlet women who helped prepare the food and clean the banquet hall, along with an unruly scrum of hungry children, ate in the kitchen or in the alley behind the building. Every morsel of food, every dollop of sauce, vanished during banquets the author attended in the 1960s and 1970s. Nothing, other than picked bones, was left for the ravenous watchdogs that lurked on the sidelines.

Banquet fare was – and still is in some parts of the New Territories – a specially prepared concoction of local foods, the most important of which was boiled pork (roast pork was a later innovation, starting in the late 1960s). Nine basic ingredients were cooked separately and combined into a large wooden basin: fat-back pork, small portions of chicken (as a garnish), white turnips, dried salt fish, fresh fish, ground fish balls, dried (reconstituted) pork skin, dried bean curd skin and dried (reconstituted) squid.23 All of these items, save for the turnips used as filler and the salt fish, were considered delicacies by villagers. Chefs were always male, usually local villagers who prided themselves in their skills and their secret blend of spices that made the food palatable.24 These men never cooked meals in their own homes, delegating that task to their wives or daughters-in-law. An important feature of common-pot dining was its obvious egalitarian overtones: everyone ate from the same basin, using chopsticks to search out and seize prize pieces of pork or chicken. This type of dining defies the normal procedures of Chinese dining: wedding banquets in urban settings featured nine25 separate dishes, eaten in sequence as they are delivered by staff waiting on diners at table. During the 1960s and 1970s, educated urbanites considered village banqueting to be crude, backward and dangerous to one's health (see J. Watson 2011: 45).

The primary attraction of common-pot dining was the opportunity to eat meat – other ingredients, including the fish, were consumed after the pork was gone. Older guests, the majority of whom had lost most of their teeth,26 preferred to chew on cubes of fat rather than portions of boiled meat. It was, in fact, the fat rather than meat (red-muscle fibre) that most villagers craved during hard times.27 Fatty pork was sometimes dangerous for elders who were not used to regular meat consumption. In San Tin during the 1950s and 1960s, elders often became
ill after consuming large pieces of congealed fat, no doubt suffering from gallbladder complications.

The sexual division of eating

In terms of overall meat consumption, common-pot dining was far more significant to larger numbers of villagers than the pork distributed by ancestral estates. Without these banquets, many women in San Tin and Ha Tsuen (prior to 1970) would rarely have eaten meat, if ever. There was, in other words, a sexual division in respect to eating: men consumed more meat than women; boys were privileged over girls; and mothers always ate last. The percentage of meat calories in the overall diet (prior to the 1980s) was relatively low, which means that the sexual differential probably had little effect on long-term health — but the social distinction between meat-eating males and meat-deprived females was an accepted and unchallenged feature of Cantonese village life.

There were also cosmological considerations that governed meat consumption. Pork from the ancestors was — according to leading elders — reserved for the exclusive benefit of male descendants. The pigs were displayed in front of the ancestor's tomb for approximately one hour, during which time the spiritual power, or 'essence' (qi), of the ancestor was said to transform the meat and 'makes it special', to quote one well-informed San Tin elder. Other elders claimed that consumption of the ancestral pork was essential if men hoped to reproduce the next generation of lineage males. Women were (theoretically) proscribed from eating any of this special pork, although it was invariably women who cooked it once the men brought it home — and, according to village friends, female cooks often ate some in the privacy of their kitchens.

In his classic study, Cooking, Cuisine and Class, Jack Goody (1982) argues that Eurasia — and China in particular — is marked by hierarchical divisions between the sexes; West Africa, by contrast, is less rigidly divided in this respect. He claims that the sexual differential is most evident in the closely connected realms of marriage and diet: 'Where women are endowed [with dowry] and ranked [as claimants in the inheritance system], they tend to eat with men of equal status, enjoying the same cuisine' (1982: 11). Cantonese marriage customs are highly complex (Involving both dowry and bridewealth), but unlike the West African systems studied by Goody, dowry in south China is a privilege — not a right (R. Watson 1981: 607–609). Furthermore, Cantonese women in the New Territories did not — until 1994 — have legal rights to inherit any of their fathers' property (R. Watson 2011); rights to ancestral estate properties is another matter altogether (discussed below).

Cantonese village women had few of the dietary privileges enjoyed by the women In Goody's study. West African women may have eaten separately from men on ritual occasions, but there were few 'inhibitions of eating together [in public]' (Goody 1982: 111). Prior to the 1970s, San Tin and Ha Tsuen women rarely ate with men outside the home. When women attended the village banquets, they usually sat at separate tables. Rubie Watson discovered that older, post-menopausal women sometimes removed a basin of banquet food from the public hall and carried it to another location where it was consumed in isolation from male diners. The teahouses that village men frequented in nearby market towns were male-only domains; women worked in the kitchens and carried food in these establishments, but until the late twentieth century women did not eat there. Starting in the 1970s, village women (always accompanied by male family members) attended formal wedding banquets in market town restaurants designed specifically for this purpose. The introduction of Western-style fast food restaurants in the 1990s altered the culinary landscape in a fundamental way: for the first time, village women of all ages felt comfortable enough to eat by themselves, or in female-only groups, at McDonald's and KFC (J. Watson 1997).

Meat in today's diet (A pig in every pot)

By the late twentieth century, Deng Xiaoping's 'opening' of the Chinese economy had turned the Pearl River Delta into an affluent industrial and commercial region. The everyday diet of indigenous villagers in the delta, including the residents of San Tin and Ha Tsuen, has changed dramatically: rural Cantonese can now (should they wish to do so) eat more meat in a week than their great grandparents did in a year. In 2011, the average Chinese consumed 84 pounds of pork per annum; Americans ate 59 pounds per person during the same period (Larson 2012). The International Food Policy Research Institute estimates that by 2020, China will account for 41 per cent of all new demand for meat, worldwide (as well as 25 per cent of all new demand for grain to feed livestock). In Hong Kong and the New Territories, the consumption of meat skyrocketed during the late twentieth century, rising from 170,000 tons per year in 1982 (at the beginning of Deng's economic reforms) to 254,000 tons per year in 2002.

New Territories villagers have also joined the refrigerator/freezer revolution that has transformed dietary practices throughout the world
the traditional pork. (The turnips, salt fish and reconstituted squid have long since disappeared from the common pots.)

Meanwhile, the pork shares distributed by Man and Teng ancestral estates have shrunk – dramatically in some cases. During the 2009 tomb rites for San Tin's apical ancestor, two (small) roasted pigs were divided into bite-sized portions and consumed, on-site, by the 400+ worshippers in attendance. In 1970, seven large pigs were displayed at this tomb; the pigs were then carried back to San Tin and divided into substantial, three-pound shares. In another departure from past practice, Man daughters – and even daughters-in-law – not only worshipped with their brothers and husbands during the 2009 tomb rites, they were given portions of the ancestral pork. In the 1960s and 1970s, women did not accompany male worshippers to the tomb and did not consume any of the pork (in public, at least). What matters today is not the meat, but the dividends that are still distributed to male descendants of certain ancestors. Man daughters may be commensal with their patrilineal ancestor in the sense that they consume portions of his pigs, but (as of 2010) they did not have a financial stake in his ancestral estate.

Common-pot dining and pork-sharing assumed new, overtly political meanings in the aftermath of Hong Kong's 1997 repatriation to China. These rites now confirm one's identity as a generations-long resident of the New Territories, a status that carries certain rights and privileges – including access to Hong Kong government hospitals, schools, driving licences and resident cards. The large influx of migrants from other parts of China during recent years is perceived by many local residents as a threat to Hong Kong's distinctiveness; they fear that Hong Kong will become just another Chinese megalopolis.

In today's political environment, the dual rites of commensality (pork-sharing and common-pot banquetting) may have retained their outward forms, but the 'meanings' of these acts have changed. The rites were once purely local, in the sense that villagers performed them with a community audience in mind; few outside the New Territories had any interest or involvement in the banquets or the ancestral rituals. Today, in post-colonial Hong Kong, common-pot banquets and pork-sharing are public events, with print and television media covering every detail (see J. Watson 2011: 50–51). Lineage leaders take advantage of these occasions to proclaim their political rights as 'indigenous people' (yuanjunmin 原居民), descendants of Han Chinese pioneers who settled in this part of the delta centuries before the British – or even the Manchus – arrived on the scene. The message is clear: 'We were here first, and we deserve special consideration'. The rites discussed in this
chapter have entered the realm of identity politics and, as such, they are likely to survive well into the twenty-first century, and perhaps beyond. The meat – once the centrepiece of the rituals – is still there, but it has become a prop, a convenient symbol of past glories and a reminder of hard times.

Notes

1. Abbreviated versions of this chapter were presented as public lectures at Rutgers University (2012) and Haverford College (2013). The author thanks Maris Gillette, Jakob Klein and Rubie Watson for their helpful critiques of earlier drafts.


3. Water buffaloes were not slaughtered until they could no longer work in the fields. In the 1960s, aged animals were sold to butchers in nearby market towns, and the meat appeared in teahouses under the menu category ‘beef’ (牛肉 niú rou). Local people knew, however, that it was not cow meat. Eating aged water buffalo is akin to chewing leather. In many parts of China, the consumption of beef (including water buffalo) was proscribed and thought to be revolting (see Swislocki 2009: 115–116).

4. Dog meat was available at local market stalls as winter stew; it was also sold in certain teahouses located in the town of Yuen Long. Given that dog meat was (theoretically) illegal in Hong Kong, it was never advertised. Dog buyers visited San Tin and Ha Tsuen in the winters and purchased puppies that had been raised specifically for the market. Buyers preferred sam gan gau (三斤狗), Cantonese for ‘three-catty dog’ (approximately four English pounds, two kilos). The plump puppies were loaded into cages on the back of bicycles and wheeled to market – inevitably followed by a snarling pack of village dogs. Dog buying was a hazardous occupation. More will be said about village watchdogs in a subsequent essay to be published by the author.

5. Cat meat was available, in small quantities, as soup at market stalls (like puppies mentioned in note 4 above, fat kittens were preferred). Older women, notably those suffering from rheumatism or arthritis were partial to cat soup; they believed feline agility could be transferred to humans. Similarly, the soup was thought to confer better eyesight (villagers believed cats could see in the dark).

6. Wild civets are caught in the hills of the Pearl River Delta and brewed into stews or soups consumed by ageing males in search of lost sexual potency. Civets were suspected of being one of the species responsible for the SARS epidemic in 2002; the charge, however, was never proven (see Murray 2006: 23).

7. Rural Cantonese believe that snake is the most powerful aphrodisiac. Snakes caught in the marshes and hills of the Pearl River Delta are highly prized (especially the Checkered Keeback (Xenochrophis piscator)). In the 1970s, snake-catchers regularly visited Ha Tsuen teahouses, leaving their live captives in wire cages at the door. Snake flesh and snake gall bladders (used as medicinals) have to be fresh killed to be effective, according to village friends. Pythons were also found in paddy fields, notably in the San Tin area, but they were harder to catch and more dangerous to handle.

8. Dried-salted fish was the dominant form of seafood consumed by ordinary Chinese until the late twentieth century (see Anderson 1972; Liu 1995). Health authorities have traced the high rate of oesophageal cancer in Hong Kong and surrounding counties to the regular consumption of salted fish (see, e.g., Yu 1986).

9. In the 1960s and early 1970s, frozen lamb from New Zealand was available in Dairy Farm stores located in Kowloon. Pakistani restaurants, catering primarily to the local Muslim community, were located in Kowloon and Victoria; two halal restaurants served Pakistani, Indian and Nepalese customers in the New Territories market town of Tai Po. Menus for the latter are found in Watson New Territories Digital Archive (Misc. Doc. MD075).

10. Many Chinese Muslims will not buy Chinese packaged foods because they are thought to contain lard; however, they will eat American-style ‘Western’ snacks (even those made in China) on the assumption that such foods are not adulterated with pork (Gillette 2000b: 80–81).

11. In the southern province of Fujian, the anthropologist Dru Gladney encountered pig farmers who are descendants of Muslim merchants. Although these farmers eat their own livestock, they do not offer pork to their long-dead Arab ancestors. This, according to Gladney, is the only remaining vestige of their Muslim heritage; in all other respects they are indistinguishable from their ethnic Han neighbours (personal communication, referring to Gladney 1987).

12. On meat and class, see also Staples (this volume).

13. Sphere of exchange refers to separate domains within which items (such as gifts) are exchanged, but the same items are not transferred between or across domains (Plattner 1989: 175–176; see also Bloch and Parry 1989: 12–16). The idea derives from the work of Paul Bohannan (1955), who studied the Tiv in West Africa.

14. Unfilial decisions of this nature have occurred among Cantonese villagers in the New Territories region, but such decisions are rare, given that every living descendant must agree to the sale. The larger and wealthier the group of descendants, the less likely they are to reach universal agreement on anything – least of all the decision to sell their ancestor’s estate (see Potter 1968: 168; R. Watson 1985: 61–72).

15. Villagers believed that ancestral spirits (祖先 shen) had to be fed during the annual tomb rites; without this ‘meal’, spirits were thought to dissipate and eventually disappear. The ancestor thus had to pay not only for the pigs that fed his living descendants but also for ritual foods (boiled pork, rice, rice wine, tea, fruit and candy) that sustained his own spirit (see R. Watson 1968).

16. Weights varied year by year. Figures used in this chapter are based on data collected in 1969–1970 and 1977–1978 in the New Territories villages of San Tin and Ha Tsuen. The only period when pork was not distributed was during the Japanese occupation (1941–1945).

17. The number four is a homophone for ‘death’ (in both Cantonese and Mandarin) and is never used in the context of auspicious rites.
18. Pork shares contained (more or less) equal portions of all cuts of meat: pig's feet were cut into small pieces; slabs of red-muscle meat were balanced by lumps of fat; tails were chopped like carrots; and ears were sliced with razor blades. Smaller estates were more careful with this type of division than larger estates. See Watson New Territories Digital Archive, Photos, Pork Division section for details.

19. San Tin, in particular, had a large number of (male) emigrants who worked in the European restaurant trade. When they retired to their home villages (around age 55), they sponsored public banquets to announce their successful sojourn and their return to village life.

20. The name and date are changed, but this is a typical example of a public wedding invitation. Several photographic examples can be found in Watson New Territories Digital Archive (Misc. Doc. MD140).

21. To sit quietly and refuse to eat was a very serious challenge to the legitimacy of the marriage, birth or adoption in question. This has not happened in San Tin or Ha Tsuen since the early 1960s, when several Man elders refused to eat the puhn-choi provided by a wealthy man who sought recognition for the adoption of a non-lineage member as his primary heir. The elders were induced to eat (and to sign a cloth banner recognizing the adoption) after the presentation of red envelopes, each containing HK$100 – a vast sum in those days (see J. Watson 1975a: 298–299).

22. The groom's mother's brother plays a central role in various property decisions in Cantonese lineages. Given that they have no claim on the property of their sister's husbands, they are ideal adjudicators for decisions regarding the distribution of land, commercial holdings and household goods. Rubie Watson has explored this delicate and complex relationship in the context of marriage and death rites (1981: 610–614).

23. This was the common list of items used in puhn-choi recipes in San Tin (1969–1970); a very similar list (with nine items) was common in Ha Tsuen (1977–1978). The quality of the ingredients varied with the relative wealth of the host family.

24. One of these spice recipes, handwritten by a Ha Tsuen chef, is preserved in the Watson New Territories Digital Archive (Misc. Doc. MD049).

25. Note the numerical parallels: urban banquets and village puhn-choi banquets both feature nine basic dishes – in the village case, however, the 'dishes' are cooked separately and combined in a common pot. The parallel cannot be accidental. The putative origins of puhn-choi are discussed in Watson 1987: 111–112.

26. The social and medical implications of early tooth loss among rural Chinese is a topic anthropologists have yet to explore; for comparative perspectives, see Zhou and Zheng (2008).

27. The craving for fat is a central theme in Marvin Harris's reconstruction of human dietary evolution (1985: 41–42). Chinese pigs were bred for heavy fat separated from red meat in a thick layer known as fatback; this contrasts with the marbling of fat throughout the carcass, as preferred by American consumers (Anderson and Anderson 1977: 337). In north China during the 1930s, pork fat was sold for twice the price of red-muscle pork (Schalzer 2002: 19).

28. The pre-1970s meat deficit was exacerbated by the picnics held in the hills during the double-nine festival (ancestor worship season). Many small estates did not distribute pork shares, as such; instead a butchered, raw pig was carried to the relevant tomb and the meat (together with rice and vegetables) was cooked and consumed on-site. These small feasts were, by definition, male-only because women did not attend the rites (until the mid-1990s). Only the larger ancestral estates with dozens (or hundreds) of member descendants engaged in the large-scale pork divisions described in this chapter.

29. It is significant that the bones of pigs presented at ancestral tombs were buried in deep trenches outside the village. This was not true of pig bones butchered for common-pot banquets. Watchdogs waited impatiently to consume banquet leftovers, but it was considered inappropriate for dogs to feed on pig bones that had been used during ancestral rites. Elsewhere I have argued that there is a cosmological connection between the human bones preserved in ancestral tombs and the flesh of pigs used in the annual rites (J. Watson 1982).

30. This pot of food was first offered to 'hungry ghosts' that were (according to villagers) thought to hover on the fringes of banquets. The 'leftover' food was then consumed by older, post-menopausal women who conceived of this act as a social service to the community (Rubie Watson, personal communication).

31. IFPRI (on-line), clari-biz.industry.food:11915.
33. In 1998, 50 per cent of pork consumed in Hong Kong was frozen or chilled; by 2002, this figure had risen to 59 per cent. Fewer and fewer people, including New Territories villagers, are eating 'fresh' (i.e., locally killed and butchered) pork; see source cited in note 31.

34. On the transformation of local foods into 'cultural heritage', see also Abbots (this volume) and Sobral (this volume).

35. These distribution rules are changing rapidly in the New Territories. Selina Chan notes that in the Pang lineage of Fan Ling, not far from San Tin, women (daughters) descended from the Pang apical ancestor are now given annual cash payments from his estate (see S. Chan 1997: 159–160).

36. See, for example, Anka Lee, 'Can Hong Kong Control Its Own Fate', The Diplomat (thediplomat.com), 16 April 2012.

37. Maurice Bloch has written about a similar process of change in the meaning of a ritual system of Madagascar (1986: 157–195).

References

