

**INFORMATION REPORT**

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SUBJECT The Informal Power Structure in a Village near Canton

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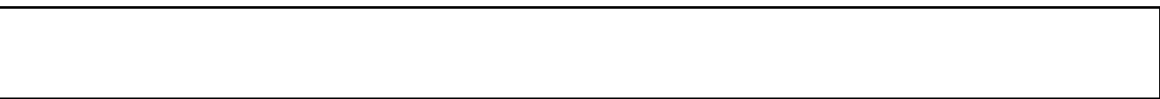
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1. By power structure is meant the system of organizations designed to produce or induce conscious and unconscious obedience and cooperation from individuals. The formal structure of power is represented by government and the legal system of power organizations under its direct control. In the rural sector of the country, this takes the form of county, township, town and village governments, as well as legal organizations like the inter-village council, which formed a link in the chain of governmental agencies for the control of the countryside under the Nationalist regime. On the other hand, informal power structure is a system of social organizations which, consciously or unconsciously, performs the function of compelling obedience and cooperation from the community without the formal authority of law and government.
2. In China's long history, regimes of formal power have risen and fallen, but the informal power structure in the villages has changed but little. The long social and cultural continuity of China has relied heavily upon this system of informal power structure. No formal power structure can endure long without the cooperation and support of the informal structure in the vast countryside because, a part of the formal power structure has to be manned by local leaders whose authority and prestige is rooted in the informal structure and, in order to be effective, the exercise of power by the formal government needs the assistance of the informal structure.
3. While the informal structure of power has seen little change over the past centuries, it has undergone increasing rapid alteration in the past half of a century, especially during the last two or three decades.
4. The village under consideration is about five miles from the city of Canton, on the rich delta land of the Pearl River. Such proximity to a great urban center produces many characteristics that differentiate the village from the average rural community deeper inland in agricultural China. Commercialized agriculture is the general rule, about 80% of the village's produce is sold outside, so there is only a low degree of self-sufficiency. The village is also only 80 miles from Hong Kong and Macao. This causes the migration of about 10% of the village's population to Canton, Hong Kong Macao and places in Southeast Asia where they engage in trade and other employment. Some of these emigrants have made money and have bought land in the village. This causes a heavy concentration of landownership in the hands of a small

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- percentage of the population. The proximity to great cities has also brought the villagers into intimate contact with modern social, economic and political changes.
6. The village is situated low enough to enjoy the benefits of irrigation, but high enough to be free from flood and drought. The record of some 150 years shows no natural disaster. The place is also fairly distant from strategic highways, something that has saved it from the scorch of war in the past decades of incessant fighting. From the viewpoint of location, the community can be considered as representative of an average suburban village on the South China coast.
  6. The village consists of 250 families, about 1,000 population. The sex and age composition of the population is normal. In the eight years of anti-Japanese war, there seemed to be a slight natural decrease, but since then, the natural increase seems to be going at the rate of 4 to 5 per 1,000. The people make their living mainly off about 1,000 mow, approximately 150 acres, of rich delta land. About three-fourths of this land is devoted to the raising of rice, and the rest to truck gardening. The high percentage of land devoted to truck gardening is the result of the village being near Canton and Hong Kong. The comparatively high income from truck gardening is partly why a population of 1,000 can be supported on only 1,000 mow of land, averaging only 0.15 acre per capita.
  7. Supplementing the land are several other minor sources of livelihood. There are some 60 irrigation ponds sprinkled among the paddy fields. These ponds, besides irrigation, are used for raising fish. There are fairly thick dikes which are generally covered with fruit trees. Embroidery is a developed skill among the women folk and finds a good market in Canton. All these yield a subsidiary income to farming. Small trades provide a livelihood for the few who do not farm.
  8. Eight families, a total of 50 of their members residing in the village, own 330 mow of land. About 10 per cent of the population is landless, eking out a living on odd jobs such as doing farm work for neighbors, collecting eatable weeds, catching frogs and fish from the common streams, and peddling small quantities of whatever goods (generally food) they can buy with their minute savings. Numerically predominant are about 70 families (about 38 per cent of the total) of middle peasants, and about 90 families (about 36 per cent of total) of poor peasants.
  9. The middle peasants are in all cases part tenants, owning one to five mow of land, meanwhile renting a few more mow from other owners. On the average, they farm about 10 mow, or 1.5 acre, which yield a fairly attractive livelihood at the native standard. The average net earning per family of this class, after the deduction of rent and protection fees and other public charges, is about 30 piculs or approximately 4000 lbs. of hulled rice per year. This is the equivalent of HK\$1,800 a year, in terms of buying power of rice in Hong Kong. This sum would be about 35 per cent more than what it takes for food for the family.
  10. But the poor peasants live considerably below this level. The vast majority of them are pure tenants, who have to pay about 40 per cent of their crop for rent alone. And after paying other charges, the average poor peasant keeps only about half of what he produces. A small proportion of them own a little land, but usually not more than two mow per family. The average farm worked by this class is about 6 mow. Their average annual net income is about 14.7 piculs or about 1,950 lbs. of hulled rice per family. This barely pays for food, leaving practically nothing for other necessities. As to the 10 per cent of the population who are landless, they live even worse than the poor peasants, frequently missing their meals when odd jobs are unavailable and when the nearby cities are not in condition to offer seasonal employment.

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11. Organizations of the Informal Power Structure: The basic organization of the village is the clan. There are two clans (two surnames) in the village, each clan occupying one section of the village. There are three other surnames in the village, but they are numerically in the minority. Up to the time of the Communist take over in 1949, the clan was still the center around which individuals and families were organized into bigger units for collective activities. And the people possess the full share of clannishness, for which the people of the province are well known.
12. But the development of education and the introduction of modern conception of life have caused the clannish character to decline rapidly, especially during the past ten years. Some 66 per cent of the male population over ten years of age are found to be literate in a survey at the end of 1950, but only one per cent of the female population over ten years of age is literate.
13. The traditional seat of informal village power has always belonged to the elders in a clan. This is especially so in Kwangtung where the clan plays a more important role than in other parts of China. The clan is but an expanded family, and in the traditional family, the patriarchal authority is graduated according to the age hierarchy. Hence the structure of the traditional family is one factor that gives the elders their importance in a village community where the clan is the fundamental organization. Besides, there is the well-known factor of the value of experience of the old, in a culture where empirical knowledge was most important and universal education was not existent.
14. Theoretically, any man over 60 is an elder. Actually, in order to qualify as an elder, one has to give a feast to all elders on his 60th birthday. If he is free from any objectionable record in his past 60 years, he will be formally recognized as an elder at this feast, and from then on, he will be invited to the meetings of the elders' council with full rights to participate in the settlement of issues. If he is financially unable to give the feast, his relatives will usually chip in to do it for him. But if his relatives are as poor as he or are unwilling, then he will be just a poor old man after his 60th birthday, with no formal status of an elder, unless he has been an influential person right along. So, the actual qualification of an elder includes wealth besides age. This is a significant factor in the informal power structure of the village.
15. In the two major clans of the village, one has 17 and the other 11 elders. In each clan, the elders are organized into a council which meets at ceremonial occasions and when issues arise calling for settlement by the council. The leading functions of the council are:
- a. Care of the clan's property by appointing a manager each year and deciding, in general, the use of the income from the property. Here the wealthy and influential elders enjoy a stronger voice.
  - b. Celebration of various types of clan ceremonies, which include ancestral religious sacrifices and the upkeep of ancestral halls. This function helps to maintain the symbols of the prestige and authority of the clan.
  - c. Maintenance of order and discipline among members of the clan. Two decades ago, this function of the elders' council possessed a semi-judiciary character, and it was an effective means of maintaining local law and order. The elders had the authority to banish or even put to death anyone who committed acts against the rules or customs of the clan. But in the recent two decades, this function of the elders has deteriorated tremendously because of the rise of the younger generation in power and the direct extension of the legal system to the village from nearby Canton. Now, elders could only reprimand the young culprit or tell the next of kin to discipline him, with no direct authority to compel obedience.

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- d. The elders decide on the funds and appoint the board of trustees for the village school. They also decide on whether to allocate sufficient funds for the school so that education can be free or whether to charge tuition. On this issue, the poor and the rich factions of the elders usually fight heatedly every year when the issue comes up, for the poor wants free education or very low tuition, while the rich usually refuse to provide it.
- e. The elders decide on public projects, allocate funds and manpower (in the form of a labor levy) and appoint managers for public projects, such as the building and maintenance of roads, bridges and dikes, and the dredging of streams and the maintenance and construction of dikes for water control. The last big job of public project took place in 1936 when a new dike was built to fence in some 250 mow of mud flats of the village stream, making the mud flat into fertile fields, thus increasing the village's cultivated land by 25 per cent.
16. The elders' councils of the two major clans in the village under consideration have also organized a joint elders' council to solve problems between the two clans. Deep seated conflict of economic interests and social prejudice exist between the two clans.
17. Up to about 20 years ago, the elders' council was the center of village authority, though it never was a part of the formal government. But, the past two decades has seen the phenomenal rise of the young in power and prestige in China, and this village, so close to big cities, cannot escape the influence of this general tendency. In this period, the authority and prestige of the elders suffered a drastic decline. The old memories of experience, the rich empirical knowledge, of the elders was once looked up to by the community and command the respect of the young. But that set of old experience no longer serves the purpose of the new environment. New problems that arose in recent decades could find no satisfactory solution from the old formulae that the elders know and treasure. It was the younger elements who mingle with the new environment with a receptive mind who came out from time to time with satisfactory solutions, as exemplified by numerous incidents in the village. Bit by bit, the younger elements stepped into the position of leadership, though still needing the approval of the elders at first. Later, about 10 years ago, even this formal approval from the elders was dispensed with. Where the elders refused to budge, the younger generation took it at gun point, thus almost completely collapsing the coercive authority of the elders.
18. One incident serves to illustrate this vital tendency of the rise of the young. About 1939, a year after the Japanese took Canton, the suburban district was thrown into disorder. Threatened by insecurity, the village began to expand its own facility of self defense. The elders wanted to follow their old pattern of militia organization. But a group of vigorous young fellows, some of whom were involved with guerrilla activities against the Japanese, suggested another scheme. The elders refused to yield, and the young fellows finally fought a gun battle with the elders and their supporters. The young faction won. After that the affairs of village defense passed into the hands of the younger generation, who are more acquainted with the situation outside of the village confines and who possessed outside hookups which are so vital at a time when the isolation of the village has been thoroughly broken down, something that the elders are not deeply aware of. In a way, this incident possesses the character of a limited revolution in the informal power structure of the community.
19. But, up to the time of the Communist take over at the end of 1949, the elders' council was still functioning, though with drastically reduced authority, especially on the matter of maintenance of social order and discipline. On the other matters, the judgment rendered the council still had the respect of the community. This remnant of its authority had propped up the heads of several landlords' families, whose views and interests lie on the side of the

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elders. Nevertheless, when the Communists marched in, the elders as a power group had traveled a long downhill road, and the Communist policy of giving all powers to the young only climaxed an already existing trend.

20. The family is not only a basic unit of social life, but also a basic unit in community power if the family acquires wealth, education and connections, and consequently expands the number of its own members. By business connections and by marital relationships, the members of a rising family act collectively on intimate common interests and form a unit of informal power in the community. In a village which is essentially a kinship community, this is very important. An influential family exercises its power in the community through controlling various organizations more explicitly designed for the exercise of authority, such as the elders' council and defense organization. If at the time of the Communist take over, the authority of the elders had drastically declined, there was no sign of appreciable weakening of family ties and the influence of important families in the village.
21. One may take one or two important families in the village for example. There is first family A. Forty years ago, Mr. A was but a poor peasant, a tenant farmer, but who had more than the average share of courage and cunning. Driven by poverty, he joined with a bandit leader in the neighboring village, and grabbed some income from that illegal source. That was the time of revolution and rapidly shifting political regimes. Once he saved the life of the bandit leader by hiding him in his own home. Later the bandit leader became a leading official of Kwangtung. From then on, Mr. A rose in wealth and power. He used the bandit leader's influence to engage in opium and other illegal traffic. Later he opened stores in the city. Now, in the village, he has a fine modern house with a garden and 150 mow of land, 15 per cent of all the land in the village. His four sons were married and live together with him in the same house and help manage his property. Mr. A does not go to the elders' council, though he is a qualified member. But the majority of the elders do his bidding. One of his sons married the daughter of a politician; this, together with A's own underworld influence, put him in a leading position in the village defense organization. In many things his words are law, and his four sons are his eyes and ears in village affairs.
22. There is family B. Mr. B, like A, was a poor peasant some 35 years ago. Unmarried and financially desperate, he left home with only his clothes on his back. He joined the crew of a ship on which his uncle worked. With some savings, he went into business in Hong Kong. He was unusually successful in trade. Now, he has three wives, 12 children (8 sons, 4 of them college graduates), and 40 mow of land in the village. He settled his third wife and two sons in the village to watch the land, and he himself comes back to the village several times a year. Though not personally in control of power in the village, his views and words, as relayed through his wife and sons, are taken seriously. Up to the Communist take over, nothing against his view and interest has been done, for besides his sons in the village, he had many henchmen among the elders as well as the younger groups. In fact, one person slated by the Communist authority to be the chairman of the village peasant association is his faithful follower.
23. Still another example is family C. Mr. C's father was a rich peasant and an influential leader in the village but declined in wealth and status when C was about 12 years of age. At 12, C went to Hong Kong to be an apprentice in a book store, where he read a great deal in his spare time. When C grew up he went into business with moderate success. When the Japanese took Hong Kong, his business was ruined. With what little money he had left, he came back to the village and bought 8 mow of land and started farming. When the Japanese tightened control over the village he went into guerrilla activities, which brought him into connection with Nationalist officialdom. At the time of the Communist take over, he and his two married sons ran a farm of 35 mow, operating the two biggest fish ponds in the village. As a family unit, it was well-to-do. His knowledge of the modern world and his political connections made him the most influential man in the village, occupying a leading position in all village organizations except the elders' council.

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24. One notable fact in the above cases is that none of the influential families rose from the land, but from politics, business and even banditry. The soil itself breeds no wealth or status. It was in the influence of the outside world that gave them the position of informal power.
25. While both the elders' council and the family are distinctly kinship groups, the fraternity is a pseudo-kinship or non-kinship organization. Individuals, mostly young men, from different clans in the village at some time in the past have got together to set up a fraternity. It is a very common organization not merely in the countryside, but also in the cities. Twenty or thirty years ago, the fraternity was a formal affair, with elaborate ceremonies of initiation of new members. But, now, in this village, it is an informal organization. Fellows with common interest and similar temperament associate intimately and call themselves members of a fraternity which has no particular name. New fellows who want to join are initiated at an informal tea in a nearby tea house.
26. The stated purpose of the fraternity is a social one, for intimate association in ordinary times, for making merry at the wedding of a brother, and for mutual help at the time of need. But actually the common interest and the internal cohesion of the group is so strong that it acts as a group of influence and informal power in the village. There is no stated class line; actually the members of the village fraternity all come from the middle and upper social levels, with no poor peasants participating.
27. There are four different fraternities in the village, and most of the young men belong to one or the other. The most influential one is lead by Mr. C above. Mr. C has a rich store of common sense about the modern world, and can discuss current issues like a college student. He can write well, and a very effective public speaker, virtually a rabble rouser. He has had wide connection with the middle and lower section of the local Kuomintang officialdom. In the same fraternity is Mr. X, who uses his pistol freely, an underworld character. His underworld connections are in the Pearl River Delta, having worked two years for a well-known badman some 70 miles south of the village, to earn a little extra money. With a few of his fraternity brothers he has organized protection teams to protect some ship sailing through the troubled waters in the delta land. He also protects gambling and opium traffic in the village as well as in the neighborhood, much against the objection of the elders. Still another outstanding member is Mr. W. He was a poor peasant by origin who went to Hong Kong as a peddler of vegetables. Making no headway in Hong Kong, he came back to the village, bought three mow of land and rented about 15 mow from others and became a middle peasant with a fair income. He is literate and energetic, and he was Mr. B's henchman. He has been active in all public affairs of such as the village school and ancestral hall management. Now, he is slated by the Communist authority to be the chairman of the village's peasant association.
28. As mentioned above, the fraternity does a lot of things other than enjoying social times. The group just mentioned, for instance, run joint operation of fish ponds, renting the choicest ponds from the clan property by special influence. It jointly invests in small business operations, such as shipping small loads of fresh vegetables to Hong Kong. With such common interests it is only expected that they would stand together in struggling for influence and power in the village. Their influence permeates every village organization, and nothing without their approval would go in the community. In fact, it was this fraternity's influence, more than any other immediate and direct factor, that pulled down the authority of the elders. In a way, the elders, with their obsolete knowledge and experience, are in no position to compete successfully with them. The older generation having no connections outside the village, could only step aside. But, while the former authority of the elders was based upon the traditions and customs of a stable culture, the new power of the younger groups stems from unstable groups in a rapidly shifting outside world.
29. Natives of Kwangtung province love to dance with the paper lion and the accompanying gong and drum as a sport. It takes a group to play this.

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- consequently, lion's clubs are found all over the province, in the countryside as well as the cities. And there is one in this village.
30. The function of the lion's club, however, is much more than dancing the paper lion. Much more important, it is a place where the young men gather to hire a boxing teacher and learn shadow boxing and the art of wielding various ancient weapons like the spear and swords. It is actually a physical culture organization, dancing with the lion only on ceremonial occasions. In the ancestral hall, where the lion's club is located, one can see young fellows doing their exercise in the morning and evening. This organization is especially common among the poorer class of the population.
31. For the present purpose, yet more important than the function of physical culture is the fact that this is a fighting organization. The young fellows belonging to the lion's club stand with each other in case of conflict with others. And the organization is frequently connected with secret societies. For this reason, the Communist authority in Canton recently ordered strict supervision of all lion's clubs, and disbanded many of them as reactionary organizations.
32. The club in this village does not have any secret society connection, so far as known. But it is distinctly a link in the informal power structure in the community. The members play with real guns besides ancient weapons. It was traditionally controlled by the elders. But about 10 years ago, Mr. X moved in and got control of the organization. Since then, the elders have had no more organized armed support. At the time of the Communist take over, the club still was going strong with some 40 paying adult members, and parents still send their young sons there for physical development.
33. The village used to have a militia unit based upon the clan organization. But when the Japanese came in, this was demobilized. About 8 years ago, Mr. X and a group of young men, mainly his fraternity brothers, organized a new village defense corps. When the Communists came, the organization had about 50 members, with some 30 rifles, 10 small arms, and two light machine guns. It was completely in the hands of the younger group, subject to no direct control from any quarter, either the elders or the government.
34. The purpose of the organization is stated to be the maintenance of peace and order in the village. One of its chief functions is the "protection" of green crops in the fields. It collects a protection fee of 10 catties of unhulled rice from every mow of land in production in return for guarantee against theft and destruction by malicious people. In case of loss, the owner of the crop can claim payment from the organization. Besides the protection of crops, it also protects gambling and opium dens in the village. Besides its own guns and men, it has extensive connections with the underworld in the neighboring districts.
35. Up to the time of the Communist take over this organization was the power in the village, capable of commanding obedience and cooperation from anyone in the community, with the exception of Mr. A mentioned above. With Mr. A, the organization maintains cordial relations and some degree of cooperation. Through Mr. C, who is secretary of the organization, the organization also comes into touch with the local Kuomintang officialdom. Asked what he thought of this organization, a villager replied: "Who dares to argue with these guys when their hips are bulging with guns."
36. The above five informal power organizations function with intricate interlocking relations. The same set of men exercise influence on all of them. The set is made up of landlords, rich peasants, underworld characters, men with official connections and knowledge of the changing outside world. Some of these men are peasants rooted in the soil and making an honest living from the soil. This is the informal power structure of the village that confronted the Communists when they arrived in 1949 to set up their new order in the countryside.

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27. Absent from the above data is the proverbial country gentry class. If by gentry is meant the class of village literati who possess an imperial examination degree, and who frequent the forbidden land of the yamen, serving as the bridge between the common people and the officialdom, then, this class has been eliminated from the power structure of the village for 20 years. It was eliminated by the same set of factors that caused the decline of the authority of the elders, namely the change of the national setting that renders obsolete the knowledge and connections of the old gentry. The imperial examination degrees they once held is the symbol of a body of knowledge, experience and social connections that no longer function in the present world. The classics they are acquainted with no longer serves as a guide to moral and social standards. The officials they knew are either dead or replaced.
28. There is still the abject picture of the gentry characters in the village. One old fellow held a licentiate degree and was looked up to some 30 years ago, but he is now financially broke, and he is not allowed even to teach in the village school, for people realize what he can teach no longer meets the needs of the modern period. Needless to say, he would not be received by officials under the Nationalist regime on account of his degree and gentry status. Another degree holder was wise enough to see the change of the environment, and he left the village some 20 years ago and made a success in business in Canton. Occasionally he comes back to the village to see his kinfolk, and donate some money to the village school. But nowhere does he perform the vital function which was once performed by the gentry class.
29. What rose to take its place are younger elements like Mr. C and Mr. X, who are experienced in the modern setting of things, schooled in modern literature, and widely connected with the new officialdom and men of influence (some of whom are connected with the underworld). They are the ones who find entrance into the government offices and bring local issues to the officials, serving, as did the gentry, as the bridge between the government and the unorganized and largely illiterate common people. If part of the qualification of the old gentry is education, then the new set that took its place also possess this qualification. This is one thing the two groups, the old gentry and the new set, have in common. In a largely illiterate community, the educated men have the weapon of literacy to aid their struggle for community leadership, a weapon that is needed to deal with the government and the outside world. The community still needs these educated elements as a bridge to the formal power of the government in order to settle many issues and solve problems. But, aside from this similarity, the new set holds very little common ground with the old gentry.
30. So, before the Communists arrived, the gentry class had already been eliminated by the changing social and political forces of the recent three decades.