

Cantonese Society in Hong Kong and Singapore

Gender, Religion, Medicine and Money

Essays by Marjorie Topley

Edited and Introduced by Jean DeBernardi



香港大學出版社

HONG KONG UNIVERSITY PRESS

Hong Kong University Press

14/F, Hing Wai Centre
7 Tin Wan Praya Road
Aberdeen
Hong Kong
www.hkupress.org

© Hong Kong University Press 2011

ISBN 978-988-8028-14-6

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Printed and bound by Pre Press Ltd, Hong Kong, China

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Introduction

**Cantonese Society in Hong Kong and Singapore:
Gender, Religion, Medicine and Money**

Essays by Marjorie Topley

Jean DeBernardi¹

This book collects the published articles of Dr. Marjorie Topley, who was a pioneer in the field of social anthropology in the postwar period. Her ethnographic research in Singapore and Hong Kong sets a high standard for urban anthropology, focusing on topics that remain current and important in the discipline.

Dr. Topley's publications reflect her training in British social anthropology, with its focus on fieldwork and detailed empirical observation. She was among the first to refine and extend those methods in the 1950s, adapting them to the study of modernizing urban settings like Singapore and Hong Kong. Her ethnographic research on the Great

1 For support for this project in its initial stage, thanks are due to Paul Kratoska of National University of Singapore Press and Colin Day of Hong Kong University Press. The Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada provided funding for a short period of research in Hong Kong in 2006 that allowed me to consult archival sources and to interview longtime members of the Hong Kong Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society (HKBRAS). Jenny Day, the Secretary of HKBRAS, assisted me in gaining access to their records at the Hong Kong Public Records Office. Hugh Baker, Colin Day, James Hayes, and Dan Waters shared knowledge and reminiscences that guided me in preparation of the Introduction, as did Prof. Wang Gungwu, whom Dr. Topley first met in Singapore in the 1950s while he was still a student. Thanks are also due to Michael Duckworth and Dennis Cheung for guiding the manuscript through the final publication process. Last but not least, Dr. Marjorie Topley shared reminiscences, reprints, and photographs, and offered advice as the volume was being prepared.

For their assistance in preparing the chapters for publication, special thanks are due to Paul Harms, Cathy Kmita, and Hsu Yu-tsuen, all of the Department of Anthropology, University of Alberta. Prof. Hugh Baker generously spent many hours refining Cantonese entries in the Chinese glossary and also scanned original photographs in Marjorie Topley's private collection for inclusion in this publication. For careful work in copyediting the manuscript Yat-kong Fung is due special thanks, as is Moira Calder for preparing the index.

Way of Former Heaven sectarian movement and Cantonese women's vegetarian halls in Singapore in the 1950s is an early contribution to the study of sub-cultural groups in a complex urban society, and she asks insightful questions about the relationship between religion, secularism, and modernity. Because of extensive social change in Singapore and Hong Kong, many of the temples and religious organizations that she describes have disappeared or experienced radical transformation. Consequently, her work on these topics also has added value as historical documentation of the recent past.

Dr. Topley was a pioneer in several areas of scholarship. She conducted important early research on Chinese women's organizations, and her article on "Marriage Resistance in Rural Kwangtung" (1978) is a classic in the fields of Chinese anthropology and women's studies. She also broke new ground in the field of Chinese medical anthropology, exploring the interface between Chinese and Western medicine and medical practitioners in Hong Kong, and also investigating Chinese women's use of traditional and modern remedies especially in the treatment of their children's illnesses. Her 1974 article, "Cosmic Antagonisms: A Mother-Child Syndrome", which appeared in a volume on *Religion and Ritual in Chinese Society* that Arthur Wolf edited, is widely known and cited. A student of Raymond Firth's, she also focused a number of articles on economic issues, including the collective management of property and wealth.

Dr. Topley never held a full-time academic appointment, but until her return to England in 1983 took full advantage of residence in Singapore and Hong Kong to conduct research, teach, and participate in international conferences. In 1959, she helped to revive the Hong Kong Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society, creating a vibrant organization that organizes public lectures and symposia, publishes a journal and monographs, and invites members on popular expert-led field trips and tours.

Training in England²

When I interviewed Dr. Topley in 2005, she recalled her early life and training in anthropology. Marjorie Topley (née Wills) was born in Hendon, London, in 1927. As a girl she attended Church of England schools that she describes as "ordinary". She was fascinated by Egyptology and wanted to become an archaeologist. When she was about

2 While doing archival research in London in May 2005, I visited Dr. Topley at her home and interviewed her about her life and career. The following account is based on that interview.

12 years old she wrote to Sir Flinders Petrie (1853–1942), one of the founders of modern Egyptology. She got a letter back, “You’ve got to be well-off and a man to be an archaeologist.” She resigned herself “to give that one up”.

She was a teenager during World War II:

Of course, you know, I grew up during the war. We were bombed at one point. We used to sleep in an air raid shelter. I was allowed to stay up until 9:30. I stayed up and a German plane dropped two bombs, one behind and one in front. I was calling “Mother, mother”, and she was calling “Mother, mother” too. We were lucky; we weren’t injured.

Because she failed to pass a crucial scholarship examination, for a time she went to a technical college that taught skills like shorthand and typing. She was deeply unhappy there, and the headmaster offered to help her enter the City of London College. She succeeded in winning an award to support her studies, prepared for the London School of Economics (LSE) entrance exam, and passed it.

In her first year she studied geography, but she became bored with it and switched to sociology. But she again lost interest, concluding that sociology was based too much on common sense. Initially anthropology was not an option since Raymond Firth, who was head of department, had concluded that undergraduates should not study anthropology since the subject was morally relative and potentially disturbing. When he changed his mind, she switched her major from sociology to anthropology. Consequently Topley was the first undergraduate student in anthropology at the London School of Economics.

While still an undergraduate Topley attended the famous LSE seminar that Malinowski had initiated during his term as Professor of Anthropology, and which Firth had continued when he assumed the position of Professor. Her fellow students were all postgraduates coming back from the field, and she could only write “little essays from books”. After she read one of these essays out loud to the seminar group, Austrian-born Siegfried Nadel, then a lecturer at the LSE, asked, “Was your journey *really* necessary?” quoting the words on a government war-time poster. She was devastated by his sarcasm. But she also met more congenial anthropology postgraduates, including Barbara Ward, Maurice Freedman, and Judith Djamour Freedman. Before she was 21 years old, she also did a summer course at the University of Chicago. She found the M.A. students at Chicago to be no more advanced than the undergraduate majors at the LSE, who had specialized in their subject earlier in their careers.

At the LSE Marjorie met her husband, Kenneth Wallis Joseph Topley (1922–2007), who had entered the LSE to study political science after leaving the air force at the end of World War II. There he studied government under Harold Laski (Topley 1969: xviii), a controversial political theorist who also was Chairman of the British Labour Party from 1945–46 and contributed to shaping the party’s policies.³

At that time, anthropology students went directly into the Ph.D. programme without doing an M.A. Marjorie did not think that she could do any further degree since she would have had to do fieldwork. Her formal training in anthropology ended and her work as an ethnographic researcher began when her husband joined the colonial service. In preparation, they studied Chinese at the School of Oriental and African Studies, and in 1951 they went to Singapore.

Singapore (1951–55)

During World War II, the British lost control of Malaya and the Straits Settlements to Japan. On their return to Singapore after World War II, they faced armed opposition to the restoration of colonial rule. From 1948–60, the Malayan Communist Party’s Malayan Races Liberation Army (MRLA) fought a guerrilla war in which they sought to overthrow the British colonial administration. In Malaya, the British forced over 500,000 people — most of them ethnic Chinese — to relocate from isolated areas, seeking to prevent them from providing the insurgents with food. The policy of resettlement, which caused great hardship, only intensified support for the Communists. By the time the Topleys arrived in Singapore in 1951, a number of violent clashes had occurred (see Stubbs 2008). The “Malayan Emergency” was the British colonial government’s name for this conflict.

In April 1951 Topley took a post at the Raffles Museum as curator of anthropology since “they couldn’t get a man to come out during [the] bandit troubles”, i.e., the Emergency. In 1952, a *Straits Times* reporter interviewed Topley for an article entitled “She Spent a Night in a Death House: Portrait of a Pretty Anthropologist” (Hall 1952). As Topley described it, when she first entered the huge, dusty rooms at the back of the Museum, she found piles of unsorted specimens and exhibits, some of which had been hurriedly stored before the Japanese occupation. Although she would have liked to travel to Malaya to collect items for the museum collection, the “Communist war” made that impractical.

3 For further details on Harold Laski, see the LSE website: <http://www.lse.ac.uk/resources/LSEHistory/laski.htm> (consulted on 3 August 2008).

Consequently, she focused her attention on Singapore. The reporter commented “This young English girl is now as familiar with the inside and the occupants of Buddhist temples, vegetarian halls, Sago lane death-houses, Waterloo Streets’s fertility temple and Chinese cemeteries as she is with Raffles Place.” (Hall 1952)

The Museum expected her to conduct research into subjects of her choice, and her first research focused on occasional rites performed by Cantonese women acting on their own (see Topley 1951; 1952; 1953 [Chapters 1–3 in this book]). When she decided to complete a doctoral degree at the LSE as an external student she launched more intensive research on Cantonese vegetarian halls (or *zhaitang*), focusing on the economic role of these organizations. She began the research in 1951–52 and continued it in 1954–55.

Topley chose to study the vegetarian halls on the advice of Alan Elliott, who was then working on a doctoral thesis on Chinese spirit medium cults that he published in 1955. In the course of that research, he came across a vegetarian house and suggested that she study it: “Marjorie, I think this would be an excellent thing for you to study, you are a woman and they are women; it would be difficult for a man to do it in any case.” As she described it, “I barged along, and introduced myself. Sometimes I stayed the night, and once they gave me toffees for breakfast.” There were many such vegetarian houses, and she got to know the women living in them, whom she described as very kind to her, and also intrigued that a *guailo* knew Cantonese.

When they went to Singapore, the Topleys studied both Hokkien and Cantonese with language tutors.⁴ In 1953 the government sent them to Macau where they studied Cantonese intensively, spending three to four hours a day with a team of four tutors in preparation for government exams. There, she recalled, she made fairly rapid progress, and started to think in Chinese. As an aid to language learning she also volunteered as tutor for poor children who didn’t speak any English, which forced her to speak Cantonese

She began research on the vegetarian halls in 1951–52, and on her return to Singapore from Macau decided that it would be possible for her to conduct a more detailed study. In 1954–55, she focused on the religious role of the vegetarian halls and the kind of “social satisfactions that attracted” participants (Topley 1958: 22). She also examined more closely the relationship of the *zhaitang* to ideas of religious authority and leadership. She discovered by chance that some of the vegetarian halls that she was studying were part of the Great Way of Former Heaven

4 Cantonese was Topley’s primary research language in Singapore and Hong Kong, but when I met her she could still speak some Hokkien with impressive precision.

(*Xiantian Dadao*), a sectarian group that traced its descent through a line of patriarchs, and her richly detailed doctoral thesis also investigated this group's history, organization, and ideology.

She also recalls that she collaborated with friends to photograph some of the rituals that she observed in Singapore, including death rituals and other occasional rites. Sago Lane had "dying houses", and she used to go along there to observe "these fantastic Taoist funeral rites where the Taoist priest leaped over flames." One time she took a friend, Ivor Polunin, a medical doctor who was keen on doing photography. She obtained permission to photograph and the Taoist priests agreed, but the event was disastrous. Dr. Polunin showed up dressed in bright red shorts, and when he plugged in his flash unit, he blew out all the lights.

Fortunately the priests were forgiving. Another time one of the Taoist priests rang her up at the museum to invite her to a ghost marriage. This time she invited her co-worker at the museum, Carl A. Gibson-Hill, a naturalist and skilled photographer who often accompanied her, taking photographs as she took notes and observed. The woman who had arranged to have the ghost marriage performed was having bad luck, and had trouble getting pregnant. Seeking to diagnose the source of her misfortune, she learned that her husband had been engaged before and that the girl had died before the wedding. Consequently, they arranged a ceremony to marry off the spirit. But Topley and Gibson-Hill's efforts were again intrusive to the point of being disastrous. The woman did not speak much English, but she looked at Gibson-Hill's camera and said, "Very, very, very not good." As Dr. Topley recalls it, "we both felt terribly ashamed."

Meanwhile, she did her doctoral research externally and had no assigned supervisor. Fortunately she knew Maurice Freedman, who by then was a lecturer at the LSE and had conducted research in Singapore on Chinese kinship from 1949–51 while his wife Judith Djamour studied a Malay village (Skinner 1976: 871). Freedman informally supervised Topley, who wrote to him and sent him sections of her thesis for comments.

Hong Kong (1955–83)

After their intensive language study in Macau, the Topleys decided that they wanted to be in Hong Kong where the majority of the population spoke Cantonese, and in 1955 they transferred there. In 1958 Marjorie completed her doctoral thesis (entitled *The Organisation and Social Function of Chinese Women's Chai T'ang in Singapore*). She took her viva (the oral examination that North American academics call a thesis

defense) while they were on leave in England, and Freedman was one of her examiners. Her other examiner — a Sinologist at Cambridge University — was sceptical of her research, but nonetheless passed the thesis.

In Hong Kong, Kenneth Topley served in a variety of government departments, including Labour, Resettlement, University Grants Committee, Social Welfare, and Census and Statistics, finally serving as Director of Education (Waters 2008). Although she did not seek full-time academic employment,⁵ Marjorie maintained a high profile internationally through her research and publications. Through participation in international conferences and in the activities of the Hong Kong Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society, she was widely networked with scholars involved in the growing fields of Sinology and Chinese anthropology. When Mr. Topley retired in 1983, she returned with him to England. But he soon returned to Macau, where he took an administrative position at the University of East Asia in Macau before moving to the Open University in Hong Kong (Waters 2006: 212). In this period, the Topleys divorced.

One factor promoting the prominence of Dr. Topley's work was the growth of social science research focusing on the Asian region in the so-called Cold War period. After World War II, the Communist party took control of the Chinese mainland, forming the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949. Because the PRC was part of the Cold War Communist bloc, Western-trained social scientists were not able to enter the country to conduct research. For this reason, Topley's thesis examiner at the LSE, Maurice Freedman and American anthropologist and Sinologist, G. William Skinner collaborated to promote research on Chinese communities in Taiwan and Hong Kong. As a full-time resident of Hong Kong, Topley was well-positioned to take advantage of this development.

As Freedman noted in a 1962 article, as a research site Hong Kong was not just a "listening post" for China (1962: 113). He viewed the fishing and farming communities of the New Territories as still being representative of many aspects of life in rural south-eastern China before Communist rule. Hong Kong he described as a large urban centre undergoing an industrial revolution, and noted the research of Barbara E. Ward, Jean Pratt, and Marjorie Topley. Topley and others were aware that they were seeking to adapt the micro-sociological methods (as Freedman

5 Topley did some teaching of sociology at Hong Kong universities, including Chung Chi College and United College at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, and held a Postgraduate Research Fellowship at the Centre of Asian Studies at The University of Hong Kong where she became involved in medical anthropology research.

described them) to the study of complex, urban environments (Freedman 1963; Topley 1969).

In 1962 Freedman and Skinner organized the London-Cornell Project to consolidate funding resources for social research. Three institutions collaborated in the project: Cornell University in New York state, where Skinner taught, the School of Oriental and African Studies, and the London School of Economics, where Freedman taught (Skinner 1976: 876). From 1962–72, the London-Cornell Project funded a number of researchers in East and Southeast Asia. Because Topley was well-networked with these scholars, she knew when they were planning to visit Hong Kong and recruited them to give public lectures at the meetings of the Royal Asiatic Society Hong Kong Branch and to publish their work in the society's journal.

In the 1960s and 1970s, the growth of support for foreign area studies in the United States meant funding not only for research but also for international conferences. In those decades Topley received invitations to participate in a number of these prestigious events, including a 1960 symposium that Raymond Firth and Bert Hoselitz organized on the theme of Economics and Anthropology. The symposium was held at the Wenner-Gren Foundation's European Conference Center at Burg Wartenstein, an eleventh-century castle in Austria that the foundation purchased in 1957. Between 1958 and 1980, Burg Wartenstein was the site of a number of week-long symposia that shaped the development of anthropology as a discipline, and anthropologists highly coveted invitations to these events (Silverman 2002). Reportedly participants tended to be senior males in the discipline; Topley's inclusion as a new doctorate suggests that Firth highly regarded her scholarly work and promise.

Topley also attended the 1971 Burg Wartenstein symposium that Charles Leslie organized, which was the first major research conference on Asian medical systems (Leslie 1976). Contributors undertook the ethnographic study of classical Asian medical traditions like Ayurvedic and Chinese medicine as well as investigating the interrelationships between professional and popular medical traditions (see Castro and Farmer 2007: 46).

The Subcommittee on Research on Chinese Society of the Joint Committee on Contemporary China of the American Council of Learned Societies and the Social Science Research Council sponsored a series of international events that drew together top scholars in the China field. The subcommittee provided funding for a 1962 seminar on micro-social organization at Cornell University that Topley attended, to which she contributed a paper on "Chinese Religion and Rural Cohesion in the Nineteenth Century" (Topley 1968a: 40 [see Chapter 10, p. 242 in this

book]). Topley also attended a 1971 international conference on Chinese religion that Arthur P. Wolf organized at Asilomar, California, which was the fifth of six major conferences funded by them.

Although China was beginning to open up to foreign visitors at this time, extended fieldwork on the mainland was still not possible. Consequently the ethnographic researchers who participated in this event focused their papers on Hong Kong and Taiwan. In his preface to the book that resulted from this conference, *Religion and Ritual in Chinese Society*, Wolf defended this focus, noting that even though the contributors could only document a small part of a vast and complex society, they could provide detailed, long-term studies of the areas studied (Wolf 1974: v–vi).

The Royal Asiatic Society Hong Kong Branch

One of the pillars of Topley's intellectual life and contribution in Hong Kong was her involvement in the Hong Kong Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society. She played a major role in the revival of the society, serving as the group's Vice-President from 1966–1972 and as its President from 1972 until her return to England in 1983.

This society is one of ten Asian branches of the Royal Asiatic Society, which was founded in London in 1823 “for the investigation of subjects connected with and for the encouragement of science, literature and the arts, in relation to Asia.” The society formed branches in Bombay and Madras (1838), in Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) in 1845, and in Malaya in 1877. A branch was formed in Hong Kong in 1847, but had ceased to exist in 1859 when the Governor who had supported it, Sir John Bowring, left the colony. During those twelve years, the society published six volumes of its *Transactions*, which primarily included contributions from missionaries and members of the British consular service (Cranmer-Byng 1962: 1). In 1857, a North China Branch of the RAS was formed in Shanghai and thrived until political circumstances led to its dissolution in 1949.

On a visit to London in 1958 (during which time she also defended her thesis), Topley wrote a letter to the Secretary of the Royal Asiatic Society to ask if the RAS would be interested in a revival of the China branch in Hong Kong. On her return to Hong Kong, Topley and Jack Cranmer-Byng circulated a memo to assess local interest in which they proposed that the main focus of the branch would be publication of a journal that would be of interest both to specialists and to the educated

layman.⁶ Topley and Cranmer-Byng recruited the assistance of J. R. Jones, who had been a council member of the now defunct North China Branch of the RAS, and at that time was a legal advisor to the Hong Kong and Shanghai Banking Corporation. He agreed to help them canvass support among business firms in Hong Kong and to draft a constitution. A group of thirty met at the British Council Centre on 18 December 1959 and adopted a constitution that was quickly approved by the parent society in London. Jones was the society's first elected president, and Cranmer-Byng served as the editor of the journal, which produced its first volume in 1961. Topley was the driving force behind the revival of the group, but because she was young and a woman, she initially served as councillor together with James Liu, Holmes Welch, and G. B. Endacott, only later stepping into the roles of vice-president and president ("The Royal Asiatic Society" 1963; Hayes 1983).

From the start the Society formed a bridge between scholarly researchers and a wider public that includes policy makers and members of Hong Kong's business community. The list of members as on April 1960, for example, includes a number of scholars based at The University of Hong Kong and other academic institutions, but also government servants from a variety of departments (Census, Social Welfare, Education, Chinese Affairs), employees from the American, Canadian, German, and Italian consulates and the British Council, and members of the business community affiliated with prominent Hong Kong companies and financial institutions.⁷ The HKBRAS almost immediately started publishing a journal, the first issue of which appeared in 1961, and took steps to establish a library. They also organized educational and social events for members, including a regular speaker series.

Hong Kong was a major intellectual hub for Asian studies in this period. Scholars like Chinese poetry expert, James Liu, and Holmes Welch, who published extensively on Chinese religions, lived and worked in Hong Kong, and they often addressed the society, as did Topley. The society also screened the ethnographic films of Hugh Gibb, a Hong Kong resident whose seven-part series *The Borneo Story* had won a Grand Prix award at the Cannes Film festival.

The growth of air travel after World War II and Hong Kong's situation as a transportation hub for the region also meant that they were

6 Both the letter and the memo are deposited in the society's records at the Hong Kong Public Records Office. "RAS: Founding of the Society 1959-60", HKMS 169-1-5.

7 "The Hong Kong Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society List of Members" (April 1960). Hong Kong Public Records Office, HKMS 169-1-6. One member observed in an interview that typically there are two classes of members: Europeans who come to Hong Kong for a few years and want to learn something about Chinese society, and scholars who find the Society useful to them for making contacts.

able to schedule a remarkable roster of prominent scholars to give lectures to the society. The society's officers kept themselves well-informed of the travel plans of major scholars and invited them to speak in their public lecture series. The list of lectures held between January 1960 and May 1963, for example, includes lectures by a number of leading scholars in the growing field of Chinese studies. These included Prof. John K. Fairbank of Harvard University, who spoke on Chinese studies in the United States, Luther Carrington Goodrich of Columbia University, who lectured on the development of printing in China, and Maurice Freedman of the London School of Economics, who discussed "Social Anthropology and the Study of China" ("The Royal Asiatic Society" 1963).

Because Topley was centrally involved in the organization of these events, anthropologists often addressed the society. Between 1967 and 1970, for example, Barbara E. Ward discussed her research on "Social and Economic Changes among the Boat People of Hong Kong" (1967); Hugh Baker presented a lecture on "The Chinese Lineage Village: A Pyramid of Kinship" (1969); and Graham Johnson gave a talk entitled "From Rural Committee to Spirit Medium Cult" (1969). In addition, anthropologists associated with the HKBRAS sometimes led outings to places of ethnographic interest, including Chinese vegetarian halls (led by Marjorie Topley and James Hayes; see Chapter 15 below), and temples and shrines of the Tai Ping Shan Street area (Topley and Hayes 1967d).⁸

In the 1960s and 1970s, the Society organized a number of weekend symposia for its members and sometimes published the proceedings. Topley organized several of these well-attended events and edited three volumes of proceedings: *Aspects of Social Organization in the New Territories* (1964b), *Some Traditional Chinese Ideas and Conceptions in Hong Kong Social Life Today: Week-end Symposium, October 1966* (1967a), and *Hong Kong: The Interaction of Traditions and Life in the Towns* (1972). In 1969, Topley also organized a weekend symposium on "Anthropology and Sociology in Hong Kong" on behalf of The University of Hong Kong (Topley 1969). Participants included both Hong Kong residents (both academics and administrators in the Hong Kong government) and graduate students from Cornell University (Graham and Elizabeth Johnson), Columbia University (Frank Kehl), and Stanford University (John A. Young).⁹

8 Topley and Hayes' 1967 report on temples in the Tai Ping Shan Street area of Hong Kong is not reprinted in this book, but the book in which it was published (Topley 1967a) is available from the HKBRAS and also in electronic format through the Hong Kong University Library catalog.

9 Topley's two publications (1967a, 1972) are still available from the HKBRAS. See http://www.royalasiaticsociety.org.hk/publications/symposium_proceedings.htm

The papers and discussions recorded in the 1969 symposium offer a revealing snapshot of the research climate in Hong Kong at that time. In particular, the participants explored sensitive issues surrounding the relationship between the Hong Kong government and their academic scholarship. The graduate student researchers note that they depended on British district officers for advice and access, and also made extensive use of government documents and records in their research. These novice researchers in turn encountered the expectation that they would in turn give something back that would help guide the government as it made policy decisions.¹⁰ This symposium took place in 1969 — the height of the Vietnam War era — and contributors thoughtfully considered the ways in which they could make a useful contribution without compromising their scholarly goals or the confidentiality of individuals who had provided them with information (Topley 1969).

Intellectual Contribution

When the authors of works focusing on the history of anthropology treat the post-war period, they typically focus on the work of scholars like Claude Levi-Strauss, who promoted structuralism to a wide readership, or E. E. Evans-Pritchard, whose contributions to kinship studies and the anthropology of religion are highly regarded. Although contemporary readers may find much to appreciate in widely-anthologized excerpts from these scholars' works, nonetheless those who seek to better understand the present era of globalization, migration, and social change will not find much in the way of illumination in their contributions. Indeed, in *The Savage Mind* (1966) Levi-Strauss famously contrasted “cold societies” that had not undergone change (a euphemism for primitive societies) with modern, progressive societies, regarding the former (and also the “primitive” in universal human mentality) as the appropriate object of anthropological analysis. In the same period, however, a small number of scholars were developing new forms of

10 In a paper entitled “Anthropology, Practicality and Policy in Hong Kong: A Governmental Point of View”, for example, Kenneth Topley proposed that academic anthropologists could be useful in providing government with “guiding rules on the planning of urban development: what peoples might be expected to live harmoniously side by side with other peoples” (Kenneth Topley 1969: 56). He suggested that rather than investigating highly charged conflicts in which sides had been drawn, scholars should investigate topics that might have implications for Hong Kong's future development, proposing as an example that they study class and status in Hong Kong (Kenneth Topley 1969).

anthropological theory and practice in urban centres like Singapore and Hong Kong.

Topley's publications make contributions in three major areas of scholarly research: anthropology of religion, economic anthropology, and medical anthropology, and this anthology organizes her articles under those major headings. But other themes are threaded throughout her work. In both Singapore and Hong Kong, her ethnographic focus was on Cantonese speakers, and her research contributes to the anthropology of that important linguistic and cultural sub-ethnic group. Her research undoubtedly marks a major contribution to urban history and sociology, and her most important and influential articles are based on research done with and about women.

Perhaps her most famous work is her 1978 article on marriage resistance (Chapter 16), which scholars working in the field of gender studies still cite, and which set a standard for ethnographic research on Chinese religion and gender (see ter Haar 1992: 375). With this research Topley distinguished herself from colleagues working in the British functionalist tradition, who tended to focus on the workings of the highly normative patrilineal kinship system (see, for example, Freedman 1958; 1966). Her article examines instead an unusual group of women who appeared to defy that system by choosing not to marry, seeking autonomy from its demands. The article also touched briefly on lesbian practices among these women, which undoubtedly accounts for its ability to astonish anthropology undergraduate students decades after its first publication.

Topley's work in the field of anthropology of religion perhaps stays closest to the British functionalist agenda, with its focus on social organization and institutional life. But there too she broke new ground. In her unpublished dissertation and also in a 1963 publication (1963a [see Chapter 9 in this book]), she documented the Great Way of Former Heaven's organization and ideology in impressive detail. In her analysis, she combined knowledge that she derived from her observations and interviews with information that she culled from the society's own publications, which presented a detailed historical account of their provenance. She blended information gathered through her ethnographic research in Singapore with the deft use of these rare textual sources, setting a high standard for research on Chinese religion.

In Hong Kong, Topley made original scholarly contributions to the fields of economic and urban anthropology. Her teacher at the LSE, Raymond Firth, undoubtedly instilled an appreciation for the economic dimension of social life, and in an unpublished chapter of her thesis she had investigated the economic organization of Chinese women's vegetarian halls in impressive detail. In two articles on Hong Kong that she

published in the 1960s, she provided a macro-ethnographic analysis that contrasts with her micro-sociological work, but which showed a similar erudition and facility with detail.

In an article (1964a) published in a volume that Firth edited together with B. S. Yamey (see Chapter 12 in this book), she analyzed master farmers in the New Territories, and contrasted the practices of indigenous rice farmers with those of more recent immigrants specialized in vegetable farming in light of their social organization, economic opportunity and political status. Although she attended to traditional forms of social organization like ancestral associations, she also explored the farmers' interactions with governmental and philanthropic organizations. In her contribution to a book that I. C. Jarvie edited, *Hong Kong: A Society in Transition* (1969a), she provided an even broader perspective, describing Hong Kong as a society in the midst of an industrial revolution, and proposing ways to adapt the methods of social anthropology to the study of this heterogeneous, complicated urban setting (see Chapter 11). Although published more than forty years ago, these articles have a modern flavour and provide a detailed ethnographic record of a society in transition.

As a postgraduate fellow at the Centre of Asian Studies at The University of Hong Kong from 1971 to 1974, Topley shifted her focus to the new field of medical anthropology. Together with a research assistant, she interviewed Chinese and Western doctors to investigate how the two medical systems worked, seeking to learn whether they complemented each other or were opposed. She grounded her discussion in detailed empirical consideration of how people make medical choices in light of traditional interpretations of the causes and treatments of disease, but also in light of the options available to them in a complex urban environment. The approach that she adopted in this research addresses many issues that scholars still seek to address, including the issue of contact and competition between Western and Chinese medical practices.

Topley also collaborated on a research project with Dr. Constance Elaine Field, a well-known medical practitioner who founded the Department of Paediatrics at The University of Hong Kong in 1962, and who did field studies of various aspects of child rearing. One of Topley's articles from this period focuses on the traditional Cantonese treatment for measles, a topic that she stumbled upon when her Chinese amah insisted on treating her youngest son the Chinese way when he fell ill with the disease (Topley 1970 [see Chapter 17 in this book]).

Topley's well-known 1974 article "Cosmic Antagonisms: A Mother-Child Syndrome" was based on interviews that she conducted with women who lived in high-rise flats in Kowloon (see Chapter 18). Topley focused the paper on widely shared everyday practices and cosmological

explanations that Cantonese mothers invoked when they encountered difficulties in child-rearing. Although she did not seek to promote a new theoretical or methodological agenda with this paper, nonetheless her treatment of the subject resonates with that of Pierre Bourdieu's practice theory. In a period in which the influence of structuralism and of Lévi-Strausian style analysis was widespread, Bourdieu recommended that anthropologists focus their analysis not on structures or rules but rather on *habitus*, a term he used to describe the everyday habits of thought and action that guide people's choices (see [1972] 1977).

Topley contributed this paper to a book in which Freedman addressed the larger question of whether a Chinese religion exists. In a formulation that resonates with a structuralist approach, he proposed that there were "ruling principles of ideas across a vast field of apparently heterogeneous beliefs" and "ruling principles of form and organization" across a similarly varied terrain. He further concluded that scholars seek to analyse what he termed transformations (a term that also evokes the structuralist agenda), including for example relationship between elite and popular forms (Freedman 1974: 20, 39). By contrast, Topley closely documented habits and explanations that some Western scholars label religious or cosmological but others regard as medical, focusing (like Bourdieu) on everyday practices and choice rather than principles, rules, and structures. Consequently her analysis easily accommodates the fact that the Christian women whom she interviewed offered the same explanation and remedies for difficulties in child-rearing as the non-Christians, and she goes beyond the details of her case study to convincingly identify similarities between Cantonese and Taiwanese explanations and remedies.

In her publications, Marjorie Topley proposed innovative strategies for the investigation of modern urban society. At the same time that she broke new ground for anthropology as a discipline, she also documented Chinese society in Singapore and Hong Kong in the decades leading up to the end of the British colonial period. Her essays deserve to be republished and read.

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A Note on Chinese Romanization

In her publications Marjorie Topley used Wade-Giles romanization, which is no longer commonly used, and also supplied Cantonese and Hokkien terms using diverse systems of romanization. She often supplemented the romanized words with Chinese characters in the text or in a glossary.

To simplify the production process of this book, Hong Kong University Press has elected not to reproduce the original diacritic marks on Cantonese terms used in Topley’s publications, which will be unfamiliar to most readers. Instead, the editor has added *pinyin* to the text and also supplied a Chinese glossary that includes the romanization together with characters and *pinyin*, which should clarify the meaning of terms cited in the text.

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