

I

The old “feudal” order: Zengbu before
Liberation

Prior to Liberation in 1949, Sandhill, Pondside, and Lu’s Home, the three major villages of Zengbu, were organized as single-surname lineage villages. Such settlements are very common in this part of China, where the old Chinese lineages (“clans,” or *jiazu*) were especially strong (see Freedman 1958, pp. 1–8). Two separate Liu lineages inhabited Sandhill and Pondside and, as the name indicates, a Lu lineage inhabited Lu’s Home. Groups of people with various other surnames, interspersed with colonies of families from the dominant lineages, inhabited Upper Stream and New Market, Zengbu’s two smaller villages, satellites of Lu’s Home and Sandhill, respectively.

The Lius of Sandhill and Pondside first settled in Zengbu over nine hundred years ago, in the Song Dynasty, when many of the old established lineages of Guangdong province were founded by Chinese migrating from central and northern China. The Lius first settled in Pondside village next to a Zhong lineage, which at that time lived in the present Lu’s Home village area. The founding ancestors of the Liu lineages were half-brothers, sons of the same man by different wives. The Pondside Lius are believed to be descended from the son of the first wife, the Sandhill Lius from the son of the second. These two men founded two lineage villages, each with its own separate ancestral hall. As the present-day villagers put it in their own ritual idiom, “the two groups did not share sacrificial pork,” which they would have done if they had considered themselves members of one group. The two Liu lineages of Zengbu have not had very good relations over the generations, being in continuous competition with one another for wealth, power, and prestige in local society and maintaining an uneasy coexistence as rival groups. Occasionally they have fought one another and engaged in lengthy feuds; open battles between the two have occurred within the memory of the older villagers.

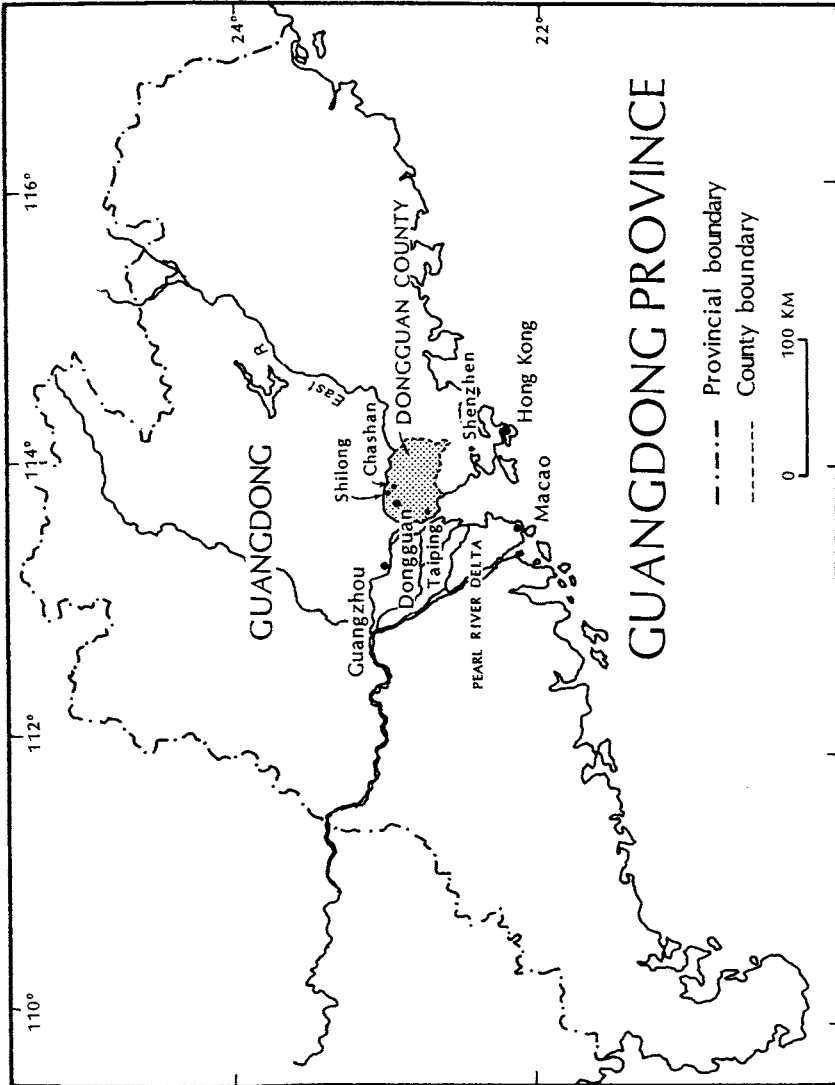
The Lus of Lu’s Home village settled in Zengbu 400 years ago, some five centuries or so later than the Lius. Initially they settled next to the Zhongs,

Cambridge University Press

0521355214 - China's Peasants: The Anthropology of a Revolution - Sulamith Heins Potter and Jack M. Potter

Excerpt

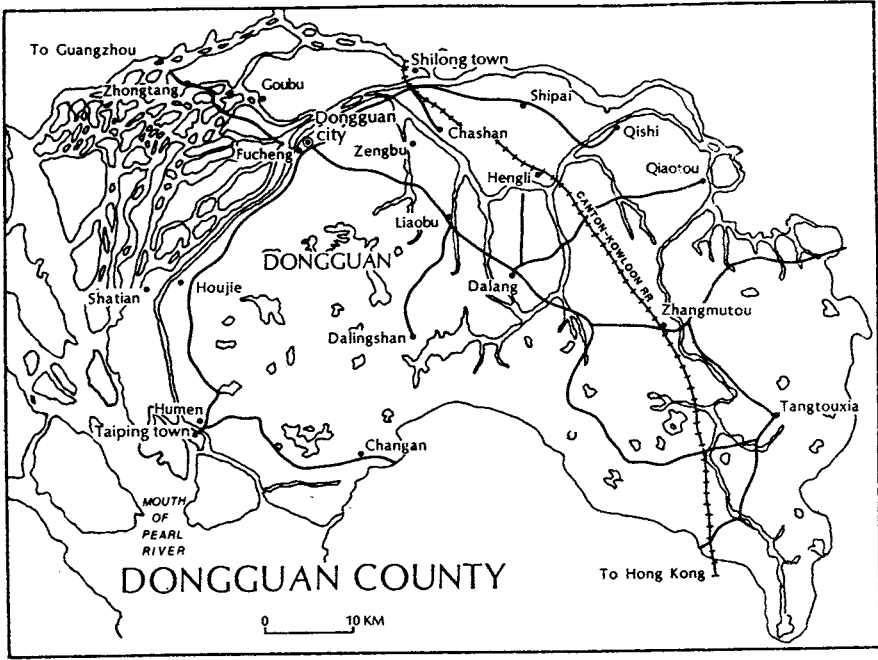
[More information](#)



Map 2. Guangdong province

The old "feudal" order: Zengbu before Liberation

3

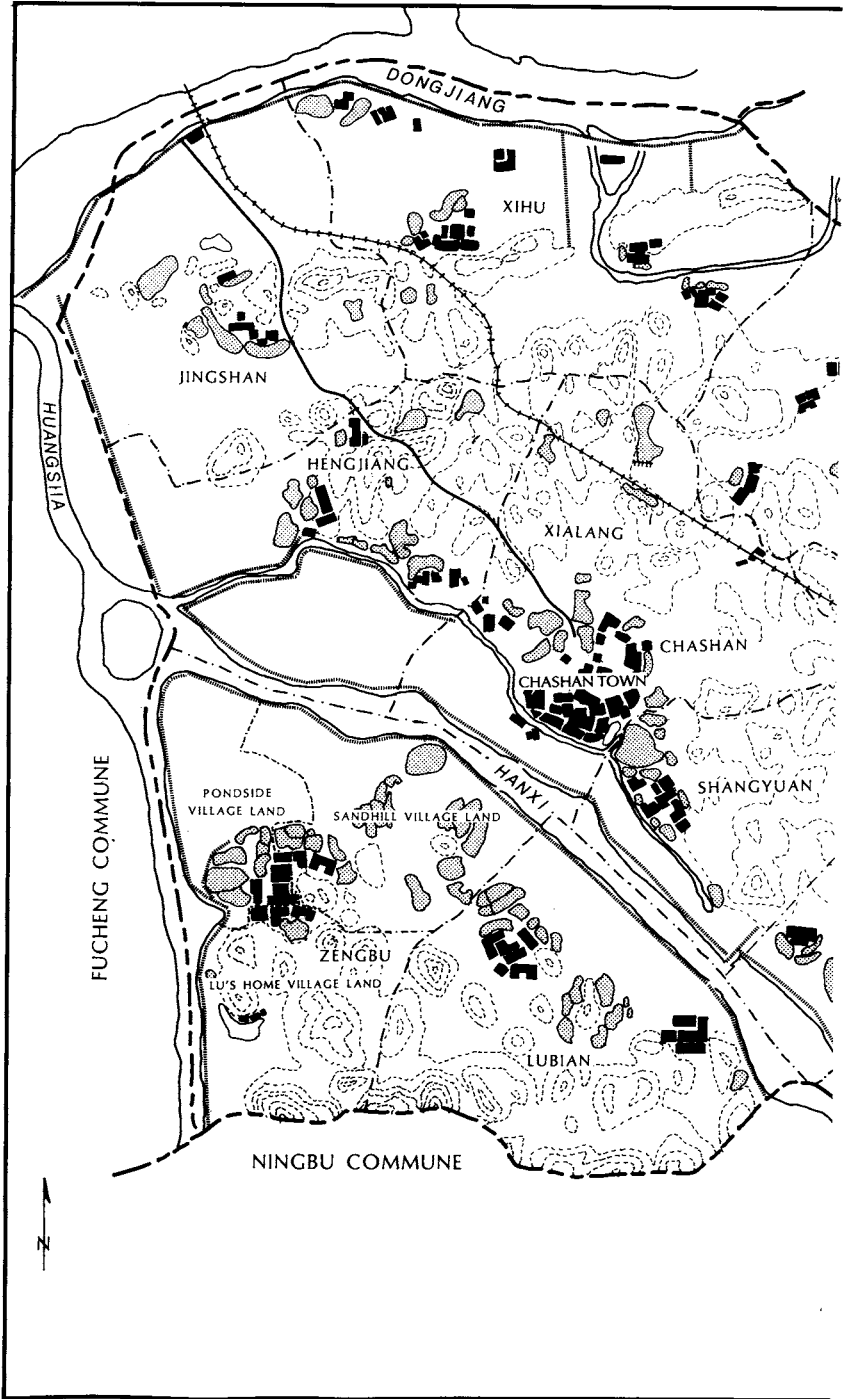


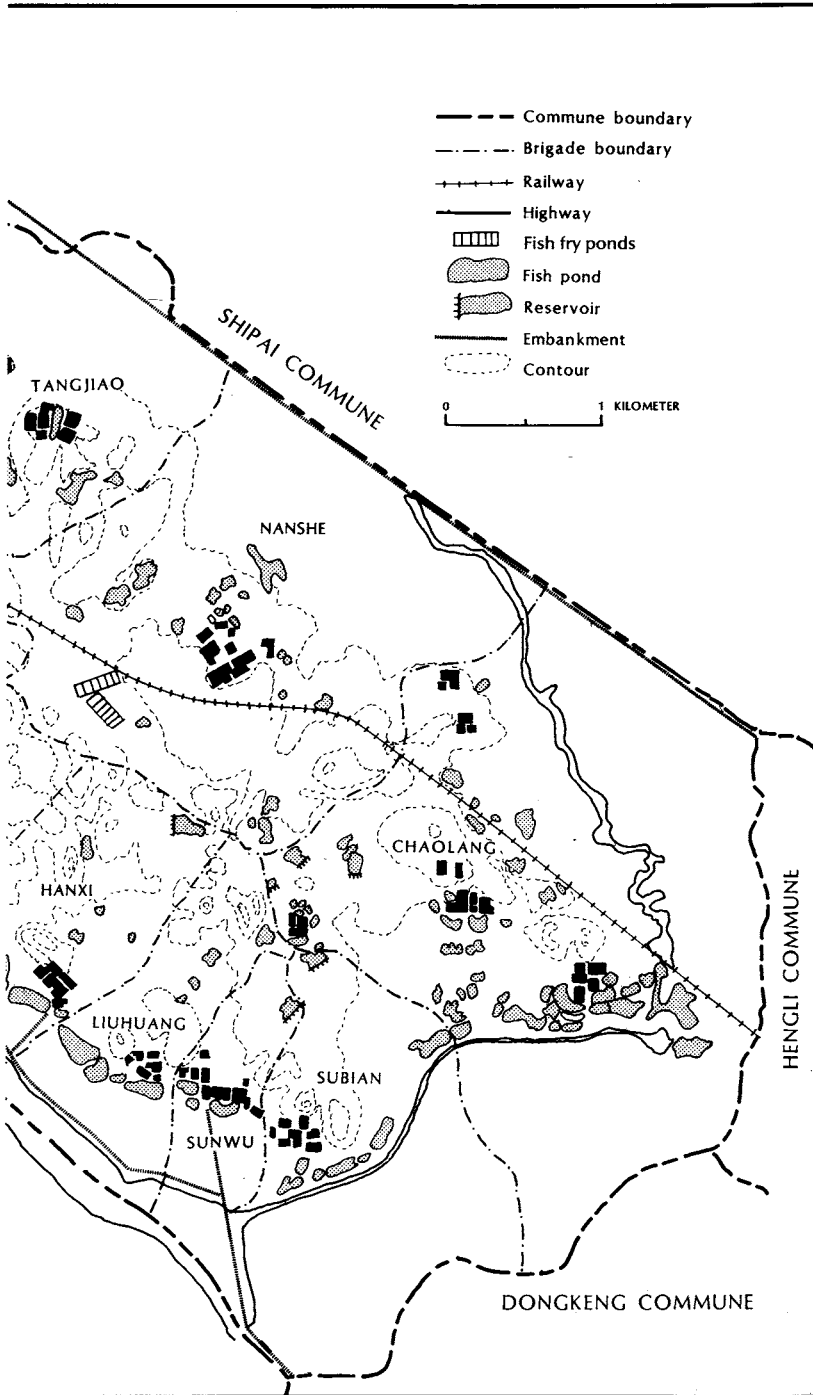
Map 3. Dongguan country

but as time went on the Lus waxed and the Zhongs waned. To avoid being bullied by the Lus, the Zhongs finally moved away. Lu's Home village was first settled by two families who came to Zengbu from Hobei province in northern China. Although they shared a common surname, they were not brothers and, like the Lius, did not found a common ancestral hall. Instead, the first-generation men or their descendants built two ancestral halls in Lu's Home village, one for the descendants of each founder. Today one of the halls serves as a brigade school and the other as the brigade kindergarten. Over the centuries the descendants of the branch that built the school prospered and grew in numbers, and they now form over 90 percent of the village population. Descendants of the kindergarten hall branch did not increase in wealth or numbers to such an extent and consequently were dominated by the larger branch.

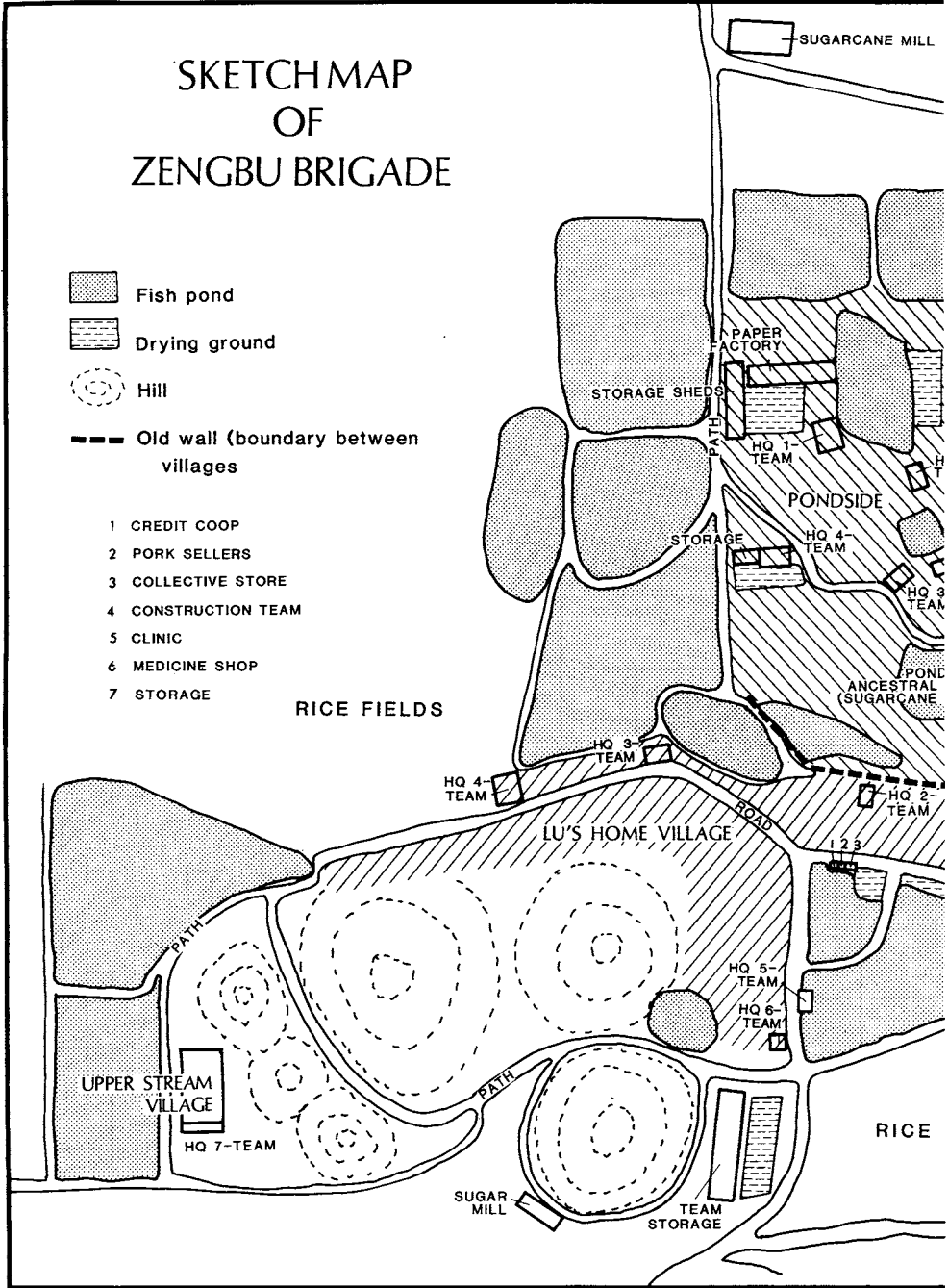
Before Liberation each of the three major Zengbu lineage villages constituted a very complex social unity. Each was a localized residential unit, clearly separated, if only by a narrow village lane, from the two adjacent lineage villages. There was unity derived from kinship in that the core of each lineage was a group of men descended in a direct line, traced through males only, from a known common ancestor. A written genealogy (*zupu*) was kept by

Cambridge University Press
0521355214 - China's Peasants: The Anthropology of a Revolution - Sulamith Heins Potter and Jack M. Potter
Excerpt
[More information](#)

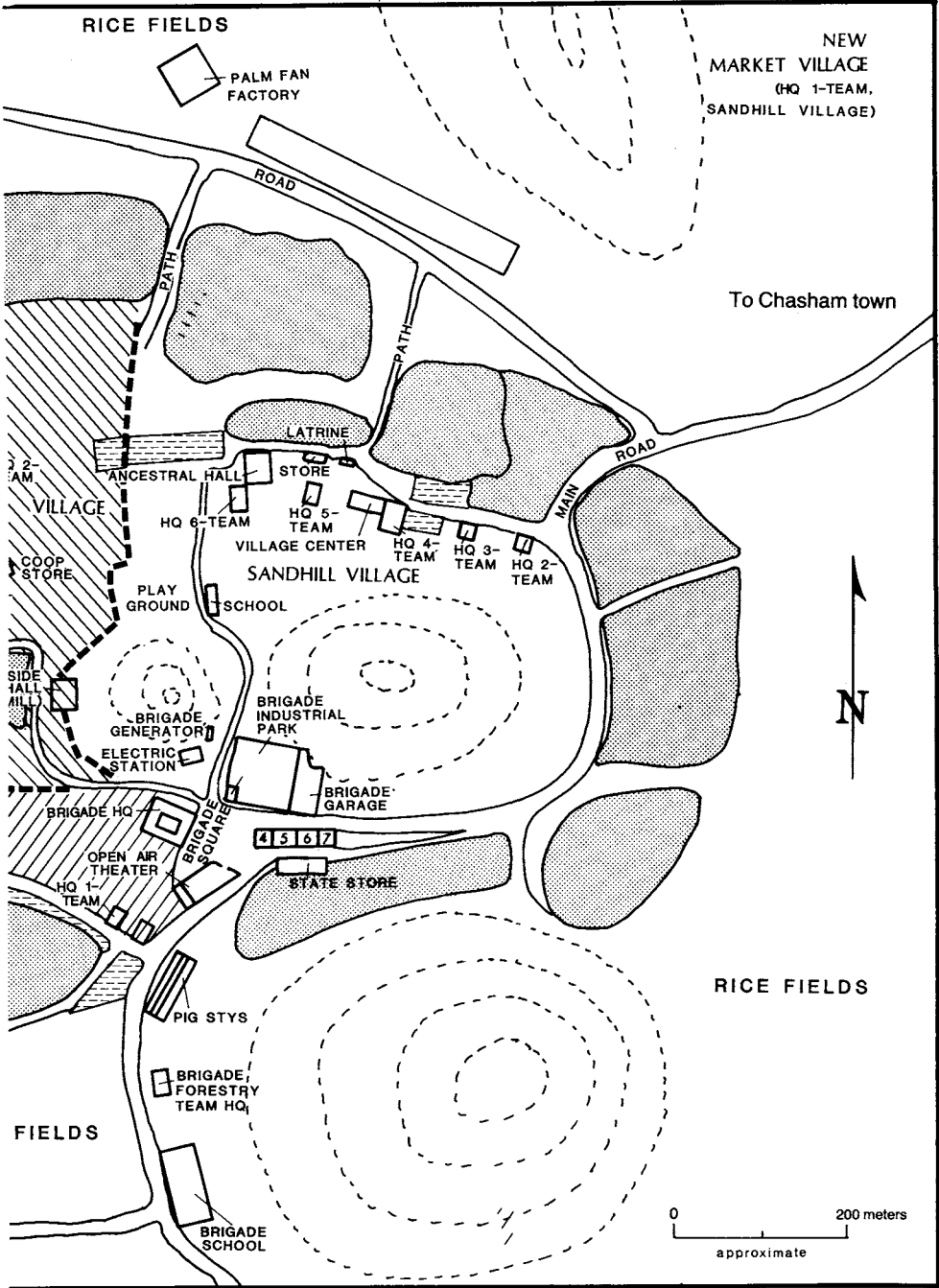




Map 4. Chashan commune (district)



The old "feudal" order: Zengbu before Liberation



Map. 5 Sketch map of Zengbu brigade

the elders of each lineage which included the names of all the male members of the group down through the generations. These registers served as legal documents which defined the exact membership of the lineage and its various subbranches and specified which people had shares in the ancestral estates owned by the lineage and its subbranches. When a man was adopted as an heir of a lineage member (the common solution to having no sons), he first had to secure the permission of the elders and his close adoptive male relatives (who would have to give up their share of the potential inheritance); then the adopted man's name was entered into the genealogy and his position legalized.

All male members of the same generation within a given lineage considered themselves to be brothers and used appropriate fraternal forms of address. All women members of the same generation (excluding wives who had married in) considered themselves to be sisters and employed the same terms of address as those used by real sisters. The different generations, in the same way, used appropriate kinship terms, calling one another uncles and nephews and aunts and nieces, so that everyone within the Zengbu lineage villages was incorporated linguistically into a family-like group. However, the lineage was not an expanded family: it was a corporate group with economic, ritual, political, judicial, and military functions.

Zengbu lineages were economic corporations based upon the collective ownership of ancestral estates attached to ancestral halls. The ancestral hall elders (the oldest men in the most senior generations) rented out their halls' land, orchards, and fishponds, and used the income to pay the land tax, to keep the fields in good condition, to hire classical tutors to educate the young men of the lineage in the Confucian classics, to give charity rice to widows and orphans who were in need, and (if the estates were wealthy enough) to divide among the lineage's constituent families on a *per stirpes* basis as private income. Before the fall of the dynastic system in 1911, lineages also gave stipends to lineage members who had passed the imperial civil service examinations, to reward them for their accomplishments. Such men were useful to the lineage because they belonged to the prestigious group of scholars who staffed the imperial bureaucracy. Local graduates used their positions to represent their lineages' interests to the government.

Ancestral trust property was the foundation of the lineage, and the strength of a lineage was directly related to the size of its estate (Freedman 1958). Zengbu ancestral estates were quite modest in size compared to those of the powerful Yuan lineages who lived in and near the market town of Chashan. The Yuans owned large ancestral estates, which they rented to men from dependent tenant lineages in the surrounding countryside. Many of the Yuans were wealthy merchants with shops in the market town. The Yuans had a long tradition of scholarly accomplishment with many examination graduates among their members, who gave them prestige and official

connections. After 1927, many of the Yuans became officials in the new Guomindang ("Nationalist") government. The Yuans controlled the market town as well as the local government administration, filling the important official posts. They hired local mercenaries, some of whom were little better than thugs, to protect themselves and their property against bandits and as instruments to dominate local society. Combining landlordism, commerce, and official careers in the same group, the Yuans were typical representatives of the bureaucratic gentry class which dominated the local levels of Chinese society. Together with the leaders of other wealthy and important lineages in the Dongguan countryside, they ruled local society and exploited it for their own profit (see Fei 1953 for a discussion of this class, especially its character after 1911). After the Qing government was weakened by foreign intrusion and rebellions, beginning in the middle of the nineteenth century, these local gentry had gained increasing autonomy from the national government and their power increased in the early twentieth century as China almost disintegrated into territories controlled by warlords and political armies.

Elders of the Zengbu lineages used the rental from lineage property to finance the ancestor-worshipping ceremonies held twice yearly, in the spring and autumn. In the fall, the male members of each lineage assembled in their spacious and imposing central ancestral halls, beautifully decorated with carved wooden and porcelain panels and hung with wooden plaques on which were written samples of the calligraphy of famous scholarly ancestors, to carry out the rituals of the ancestral sacrifices. Women were not allowed in the halls, but sometimes they crowded in the doorway so that their infant sons could observe the proceedings. Offerings of cakes, wine, chickens, and golden roast pigs were placed before the ancestors, on altars surrounded by burning ritual candles and ritual vessels. The men of the lineage, dressed in floor-length blue and gray robes, came up in order of their generation – first the 27th, then the 28th, followed by the 29th and so on – to bow before the ancestors and pour out libations of rice wine, being guided in the ritual by the director of ceremonies, who stood at the side barking out instructions. The air was filled with the intoxicating smoke of burning incense and candles. These, together with the smell of the burnt offerings, the sound of the ritual oboes with their high, mournful, whining notes, and the noise of the firecrackers set off outside to signify the end of the ceremony, all contributed to the overwhelming atmosphere. Afterwards, the sacrificial pigs (whose essence had been consumed by the spirits of the ancestors) were chopped up on the floor of the hall, and one share was given to every male member of the lineage, with the elders getting additional shares in accord with their dignity.

In addition to their unified nature as an economic corporation and a religious body, each lineage had internal political mechanisms for making decisions for the group as a whole and for enforcing lineage customs and regulating sex, marriage, and inheritance. Leaders of the Zengbu lineages were of two kinds.

The “elders” (*fulao*) of the lineage, the oldest men in the most senior generation, were the ritual leaders in the ancestor-worshipping ceremonies in the halls and at the ancestral tombs scattered in the countryside; they also helped manage the ancestral property. Recruited on the basis of age and seniority alone, the elders might be poor and inconsequential men.

The really powerful lineage leaders, however, were always wealthy men of high status. Before the fall of the Qing Dynasty, in 1911, the leaders included the gentry graduates of the nationwide civil service examinations, which qualified them for official office and for membership in a privileged stratum of society; and in the Republican period, from 1911 to 1949, they were rich landlords and local despots, with ties to the warlord regimes and later to the Guomindang. In cooperation with the lineage elders (whom they controlled by bribes or intimidation), they dominated lineage affairs, and frequently used lineage property for their own interests, renting it for small sums from the ancestral halls which they controlled and then subletting it to others at a profit or exploiting it for their own benefit.

Powerful leaders of the lineages of Zengbu organized village guards, young armed men who supposedly protected the village against bandits, but who actually served as thugs of local landlords and bullies, offering “protection” and “insurance” to weaker lineages for a yearly fee. The right to operate the village guards in this area of China was frequently auctioned off to local bullies by the central ancestral hall of each wealthy and powerful lineage. In return, the gang leaders agreed to pay so much to the ancestral hall each year and to furnish a banquet of fixed specifications for the lineage elders.

The lineages of southeastern China were notorious for their quarrelsome and warlike character. They often fought among themselves – sometimes in well-publicized pitched battles fought by the young men of different lineages on neutral ground, and sometimes in treacherous sneak attacks at night. Their fortified villages, complete with walls and moats, were not purely decorative. Confucian officials from Northern China looked upon these troublesome people as barbarians.

Lineage leaders also served as a judicial body because each lineage preferred to solve its own disputes rather than take them outside to the government courts, which could prove to be costly and humiliating. In cases of sexual transgressions – premarital sex, adultery, or premarital pregnancy – lineage leaders punished offenders by having the village guards whip them, drive them from the village, or place them in a woven bamboo pig-carrying basket and drown them in the fishpond, a place where the bedding of dead people and other polluting things were thrown, the symbolism being explicit. In some cases of flagrant transgression against lineage sexual mores, the elders ordered all the pigs in the village to be slaughtered and eaten in a communal feast, with the bill being given to the offending families, who sometimes had to sell their houses and land to pay it, or else leave the village.