



## *The Making of a New Rural Order in South China*

Among the large caches of private documents discovered and collected in China over the past century, few rival the Huizhou sources for the range and depth of insight they provide into the workings of Chinese local society and economy over the past millennium. Having spent decades researching these exceptionally rich sources, Joseph P. McDermott presents in two volumes his findings about the major social and economic changes in this important prefecture of south China from around 900 to 1700. In this first volume, covering Huizhou's history up to the end of the sixteenth century, we learn about the process of village settlement, competition among village religious institutions, premodern agricultural production, the management of land and lineage, the rise of the lineage as the dominant institution, and its members' application of commercial practices to local forestry operations. This landmark study seeks to understand how these lineages gained their social and commercial success and thereby laid the basis for their becoming the pre-eminent regional group of merchants in south China. Its analysis of religious life and economic activity, of lineage and land, and of rural residents and urban commercial practices provides a comprehensive and compelling new framework for understanding a distinctive path of economic and social development for premodern China and beyond.

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# The Making of a New Rural Order in South China

I. Village, Land, and Lineage in Huizhou,  
900–1600

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*To my parents, John and Elizabeth McDermott*

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## *Acknowledgments*

Imagine that you have gained entry to a grand house, whose host welcomes you into a well-appointed drawing room. Seated alongside a fireplace, he treats you to a smooth account of how this house has become big and successful. The longer he holds forth, however, the more you feel strangely displaced. It is not simply that the room's windows are few and their views unrevealing. Even sharper is the sense that the entire room is tangentially connected to the rest of the house. Your host's talk mentions other places and events in the house, but he never takes you outside his room. The kitchen seems far away, the servants even farther. He mentions a library, but shows you neither a book nor the study. He discusses his family, but introduces none of its members. More oddly, he never mentions upstairs, though you hear noises through the ceiling – is someone raising his, or her, voice? Down the corridor a door slams – has another guest come and gone? And some cheerful sounds slip through the window casements – is someone playing in the garden, or is it laughter at what your host has just said?

Meanwhile, your host continues with his story, as if nothing else matters to you and indeed as if nothing else matters to him and his story. Eventually, you depart, more knowledgeable than before about the house but not about what you had come to learn: how has this house been built? How is it run and used? What makes its residents tick? And what are they up to?

This sense of a mission only partly accomplished, I confess, is what I have often felt after reading the traditional Chinese dynastic histories. Filtered through several committees of court officials, these standard histories stick faithfully to their assigned agenda of explaining the dynasty's fate. Official memorials and reports, though originating outside the court, all too often share this blinkered perspective, and so their reports are as likely to reveal official views and assumptions as to express provincial concerns and realities. Admittedly, poems, unofficial histories, memoirs, family instruction manuals, stone inscriptions,

and records of local affairs provide relief from the heavy hand of dynastic concerns. But rarely have they satisfied my wish to investigate those noises upstairs and voices next-door, to learn about the unnamed men and women who crowded local villages as well as those who left unpublished records about their lives there. If we were to start our exploration of Chinese history from inside one such family and gain entry to the private documents stored in its back rooms, how then might the story told so competently by our host have to be rewritten?

This book, especially its first volume, is my response to this question, to my growing doubts about the standard accounts of Chinese history so fluently reported in the latest of publications. It delves into the rich family records of the southern prefecture of Huizhou and comes out, I believe, with a different story of this prefecture's history and, by loose extension, that of much of the rest of China. It is concerned not with officials but with ordinary people, not with claims of a twelfth-century shift of elite interest from the court to the local but with how village institutions and villagers' ways of living and making a living changed over a very long period of time. It has explored the links between religious institutions and economic life, between families and other village institutions, between land management and labor, and between agricultural lives and commercial practices. In short, it is a book written for a time like ours, when the lives of ordinary Chinese fascinate us as much as those of their lettered betters.

To complete this research I have had the good fortune of gaining entry to the back rooms of numerous libraries on three continents. Most deserving of my gratitude are those institutions and people in China who brought out their Huizhou sources for me to examine: Anhui Provincial Library and Anhui University, the History Department of Nanjing University, Beijing University Library, the Institute of Economics and the Institute of History of CASS, the National Library of China, and especially the Shanghai Library. Next, in Japan I found genealogies and other rare Huizhou materials in the Tōyō bunko, the Tōyō bunka kenkyūjo at the University of Tokyo, the Naikaku bunko, and the Sonkeikaku bunko; for some reason the librarians at each of these places never tired of my requests. In the United States, the Harvard-Yenching Library, the Gest Library at Princeton, the East Asian Collection at Columbia, and the Library of Congress Collection all opened their doors and shared their books. Back in Britain, the Cambridge University Library and the Bodleian likewise indulged my



*Acknowledgments*

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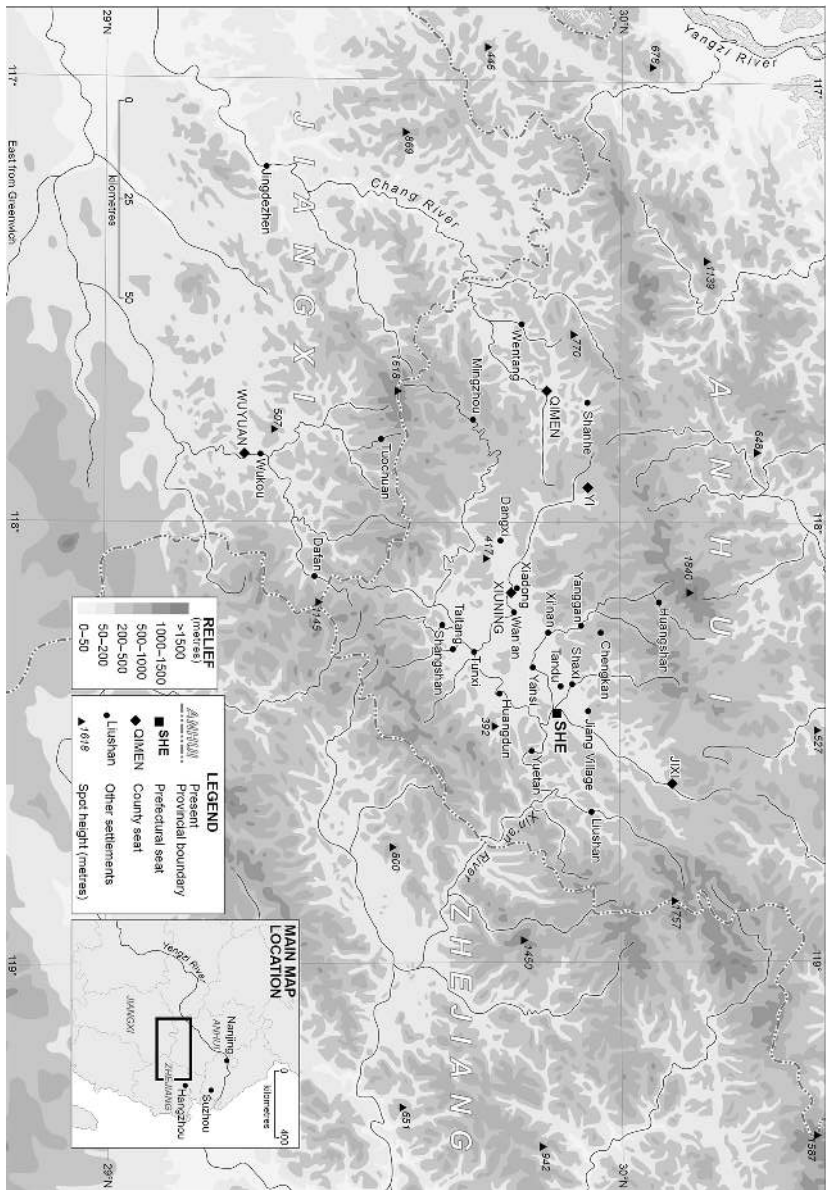
research interests. To the librarians of all these institutions let me express my heartfelt thanks. This book, so heavily dependent on unique documents, rare imprints, and unpublished manuscripts, could not have been written without your assistance.

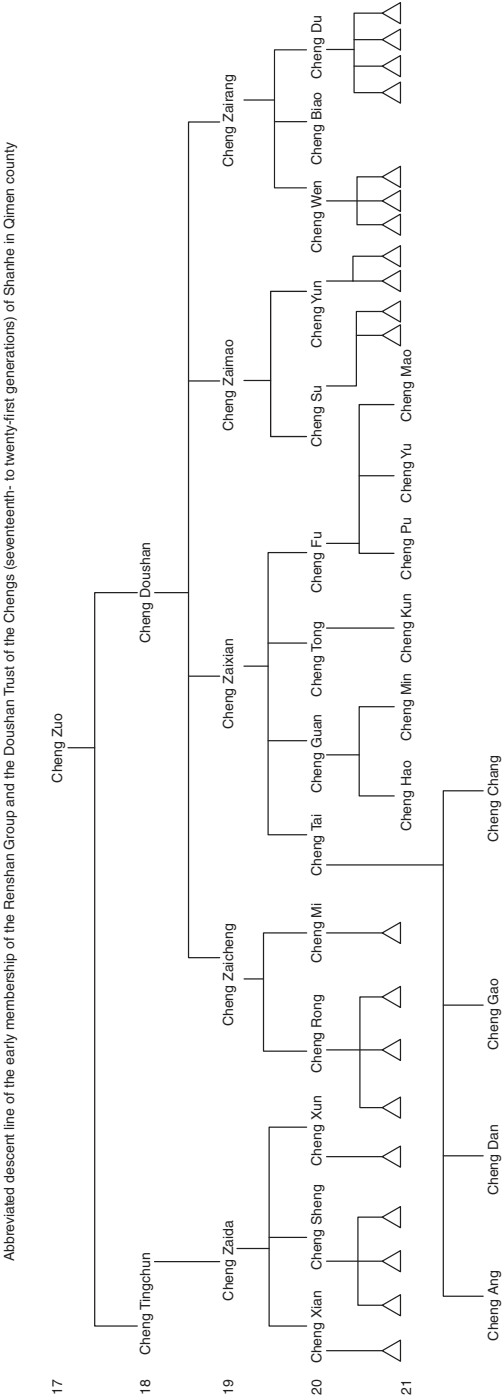
Along the way certain friends encouraged me to report on my findings either with an oral presentation or with a draft chapter. Li Bozhong, Long Denggao, Zhou Shengchun, Wang Xiaofu, Deng Xiaonan, and Guo Runtao invited me to seminars or conferences in Beijing and Hangzhou; Richard von Glahn and Paul Smith had me participate in an important conference in California; Choi Chi-cheung, David Faure, and John Lagerwey asked me to talk to lively audiences in Hong Kong; Tian Yuan Tan generously arranged for me to present a talk at SOAS in London; and Mary Laven and Hans van de Ven invited me to present seminar papers in Cambridge. The last of these occasions was particularly memorable, if only because the audience had to listen during a power cut to my fading recall of darkened lecture notes on the differences between Song villages and those of medieval Europe.

Specific chapters were read and commented on by Denis Twitchett, David McMullen, Roel Sterckx, Adam Chau, Michela Bussotti, John Lagerwey, Shiba Yoshinobu, and Imre Galambos, all of whom gave expert advice and warm encouragement. Others like Yanagida Setsuko, Tanaka Issei, Jack Goody, Partha Dasgupta, and Zhao Huafu listened to my ideas and generously shared their wisdom. Cynthia Brokaw merits particular thanks. Penetrating unkempt drafts, she urged me to remove much of the foliage and trust to the power of the main storyline. If too much of their underbrush remains, that is due more to my unruly fascination with this provincial life than to her editorial insight and scholarly intelligence. I also wish to express my gratitude to the National Science Academy, the British Academy, the Japanese Society for the Promotion of Science, the ACLS, the Institute for Advanced Study, and St John's College, Cambridge, for vital aid over the years that enabled me to visit some back rooms in China and have the time to write this long book. Thanks also are due to Peter Goddard for his enlightened mastership on both sides of the Atlantic, to Robert Tombs for listening as wisely as he questioned, and for Jack Goody who always knew what I was groping to say and then generously suggested how to take the argument farther. My Cambridge students – especially Edward Allen, David Camp, Helen Furrow, and Zhang Ling – helped me in ways they seldom realized. The two referees

for Cambridge University Press made many useful suggestions, as has its expert editorial staff under Lucy Rhymer. And my wife Hiroko fortunately engaged my attention repeatedly in other matters very close to our hearts.

Last but not least, I wish to dedicate this book to my parents, who long bore with the wayward wishes of an unfilial son intent on spending so much time away from home in order to learn about other families. What they privately thought of his errant ways, they were too polite (and resigned?) to say. But this book on the power of family ties is my belated response to their open-hearted support and understanding, for their encouragement to be always curious about what was happening in the rest of the house.





Source: Cheng Chang, *Qimen Shanhe Chengshi pu* (1541 edn), 8.1a–7a.

## Ming weights and measures

Weight	1 <i>liang</i> 兩	= 1.3 ounces		
	1 <i>jin</i> 斤	= 16 <i>liang</i>	= c. 1.3 pounds	
Capacity	1 <i>sheng</i> 升	= c. 0.99 quart		
	1 <i>dou</i> 斗	= 10 <i>sheng</i>		
	1 <i>dan</i> 石	= 10 <i>dou</i>	= 99 quarts	= 3.1 bushels
Area	1 <i>mu</i> 畝	= 0.14 acre		

Note: Premodern Chinese measurements are notoriously unreliable, and not only because landlords replaced standard-size grain measures with those more to their liking or because at times government clerks indiscriminately used areal and fiscal units of land measurement without indicating the distinction. Some prefectures in addition had local rice-measuring units with their own variations. In Huizhou, for instance, landowners commonly measured rice in units of *cheng* 秤 rather than *dan*. Yet, no uniform exchange rate between their *cheng* and the standard units of *jin* and *dan* can be assumed, either over time or even within a rural district. One *cheng* is said to have equalled fifteen *jin* in the Song, but often rose to twenty *jin* in the Ming and Qing dynasties. Some Ming tenancy contracts indicate an even wider range of exchange rates, varying from eighteen to thirty-five *jin* for each *cheng*.<sup>1</sup> Likewise, each *dou* might equal fourteen, fifteen, or seventeen *jin*, thereby making one *dan* equal to 140, 150, or 170 *jin*. Although scholarly convention considers twenty *jin* the equivalent of a *cheng* and 150 *jin* the equivalent of a *dan*,<sup>2</sup> determining a fixed *cheng*-to-*dan* rate on the basis of

<sup>1</sup> Huidong, “Ming Qing shiqi Huizhou de muzhi he zuliang,” *Anhui shixue* 1986.6, 69–70.

<sup>2</sup> Zhou Shaoquan, Ming Qing Huizhou muchan liang lice,” *Mingshi yanjiu* 2 (1992), 58–59.

these sets of figures is clearly hazardous. On the few occasions such calculations are attempted in this book, the rate adopted is roughly seven to eight *cheng* per *dan*. Such extrapolations should be considered tentative.