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Introduction: The Origins and Early Years of the County of San On

Before 222 B.C. the Kwangtung (廣東, Guangdong) area was inhabited by unsinicised barbarian peoples, and the southern border of the Chinese Empire lay along the Lingnan Mountains (嶺南, Ling Nam), on the northern border of today's province of Kwangtung. During the fourth and third century B.C., however, merchants from South-East Asia started to arrive to trade at Canton (廣州, Guangzhou), and a thriving mercantile town grew up there. Chinese merchants began to travel south from the empire to Canton to take part in this trade, and a Chinese mercantile community began to establish itself.¹ The first emperor (秦始皇) became concerned that a community of Chinese merchants was growing up outside his control, and he sent his armies across the Lingnan Mountains to bring the Kwangtung area into his empire (234–222 B.C.).²

After the Canton area had successfully been absorbed into the empire (222 B.C.), Chinese civilisation slowly spread over the surrounding region. As soon as this happened, counties, to administer this newly Chinese territory, were established. The area to the south and east of Canton, the area centred on the lower East River (東江) valley and the eastern coast of the Pearl River estuary (珠江), was thus divided off to form a new county. This county, at most dates called Tung Kwun (東莞, Dongguan, literally “eastern grasslands”), was originally very large, but was slowly reduced in area until, in 972–973, in the early Song dynasty, it was reduced to the size it was to remain until 1573.³

This county of Tung Kwun was centred on the fertile lands along the East River. This was where the county city was established. Between the East River and the Pearl River to the west and between the East River and the southern coast, however, were ranges of hills: in the Song and earlier these ranges were very rough, forest-covered land. Most of the people living in these hills in these early centuries were Yao (獠) people, unsinicised barbarian tribes; the last of these Yao people only disappeared from the area at the time of the Coastal Evacuation in the 1660s.⁴

The coastal strip on the western and southern sides of this range of hills, along the Pearl River and the southern coast, did have some good, flat, and fertile land, but initially it would seem, few if any Han Chinese people lived there.

There are only a few written records of the early history of this riverine and coastal area, and hardly any post-prehistoric archaeological information. In the absence of good written or archaeological records, we are left with assumptions arising from what educated guesses suggest are probabilities, centred on what written records have survived. Nonetheless, it is worth the attempt to sketch these probabilities into a coherent story.

Taking all this into account, it seems probable that the area to the west and south of the Tung Kwun hills was under military control and martial law in the Northern Song and earlier. The imperial authorities had a number of interests here — salt working, pearl fishing, and ensuring that a naval garrison controlled access into the Pearl River — and these interests meant that the area was required to be kept under close military control. Han Chinese settlement was generally, it would seem, forbidden in the interests of greater security in this period (this was certainly so for the eastern half of today's New Territories, which was, in these early centuries, under the control of the imperial pearl monopoly). At the least, the dates of foundation of the villages in the area today are all quite late, suggesting that establishment of Han Chinese villages was not permitted in early centuries.

The eastern shore of the Pearl River was the closest place to Canton where salt could be made (the water near the western shore, off the delta mouths of the West River, 西江, was too fresh and too laden with silt, for effective salt working). Salt is essential to health, and salt working was usually, throughout the imperial period, a state monopoly, with the salt trade under official supervision and control. The Canton authorities needed direct governance of the salt fields to facilitate state control of the salt trade within Kwangtung. This was especially so during periods when the south of China was independent of north and central China, and thus could not easily access salt from the salt fields in those areas. Long before the Song, therefore, the eastern Pearl River shore below the Bogue (虎口, Hukou, “the tiger's mouth”: this is where the Pearl River suddenly broadens out — above it, it is a river, below it, a wide estuary) had been almost entirely turned into salt fields, to provide salt for Canton. A salt superintendency,

centred on the fortress at Nam Tau (南頭, Nantou, see Map 1) was established at an early date to control these salt fields. This superintendency was probably established by the Nanyueh (南越) Kingdom, a southern kingdom covering Kwangtung, Kwangsi (廣西, Guangxi), and the northernmost parts of Vietnam in the second century B.C. Initially there was only one salt field complex here, but, by the early Northern Song there were six salt field complexes under this superintendency (see Map 2).⁵

In 1208, the viceroy, Chen Kuei (經略陳規, Chan Kwai) stated that:

All the salt fields within the Canton area are in remote and distant areas, they are places without merchants to manage them, and they have low annual income; they cause nothing but harm to the people (廣州所屬鹽場僻遠, 非商賈所經之地, 歲入無幾, 徒為民害).

He ordered that they be closed (悉行除罷).⁶ The editor of the 1464 Tung Kwun County Gazetteer clearly regarded this as a major event in the history of the salt fields in Tung Kwun: it is the only thing recorded in that gazetteer in the “Salt Fields” (鹽場) section from before the Ming. The implication of this 1208 pronouncement must be that, since the salt fields were “without merchants to manage them”, they were, before that date, run directly by the state, implying that the workers were under military discipline, and were thus either convicts or state bond-slaves. Certainly, men from the unsinicised barbarian tribes of the area had been forced into the status of state bond-slaves before the Southern Song period, and tied to the salt fields as labourers, especially in the Kwun Fu (官富, Guanfu) salt fields, centred on the Kowloon (九龍, Jiulong) City area, and with salt fields on the Kowloon peninsula, Lantau island (大嶼山, Dayushan) and in

Mirs Bay (大鵬灣, Dapengwan).⁷ It is probable that the salt fields on the Pearl River shore were, before they were closed down in 1208, operated by convict labour.

If these salt fields were worked by convicts or state bondslaves before 1208, then there was a high risk of the salt workers absconding, to say nothing of the ever-present risk of salt smuggling. These risks would have been very much increased if the salt workers could communicate with Chinese accomplices. As a result, it would seem probable that all the areas immediately inland of the salt fields were closed to ordinary Chinese. There were, it would seem, no Chinese villages permitted in these areas: at the least, the major villages there today claim dates of foundation after this period. Even casual visits were probably forbidden without permits issued by the appropriate authorities in Canton. The area inland of the salt fields was, it would seem, made into a series of exclusion districts, patrolled by soldiers of the salt monopoly, to control the salt works, to check smuggling, and to keep unauthorised Chinese out of the area. Later, the county of San On was divided into districts (都): there were five of these along the Pearl River shore, each with one of the Song salt field complexes in it. It is probable that these five districts represent the pre-1208 exclusion districts of the five salt field complexes there (see Map 2).

There were substantial numbers of these salt troops before 1208. Most is known about the troops attached to the Kwun Fu (官富) salt fields.

In the twelfth century there was a regiment of irregular shock troops, the “sharp attack garrison of water-borne soldiers” (催鋒水軍), headquartered on the coast near Chiu Chau (潮州, Chaozhou). These troops were marines, and had ships: detachments of this

garrison could thus be dispatched at short notice to support the regular forces wherever along the coast of eastern Kwangtung they were needed. During this time the islanders living on Lantau, who had been tied to the salt fields there as state bond-slaves, were in an almost constant state of revolt. Detachments of troops of the sharp attack garrison were frequently stationed so as to support the salt troops of the Kwun Fu salt works, and keep the islanders under control. The water-borne soldiers at Kwun Fu in the late twelfth century are referred to as a “half garrison” (半屯於官富場): since the whole of this sharp attack garrison comprised nominally 1,200 men, this can be taken as implying that 500–600 water-borne soldiers were usually stationed at the Kwun Fu salt works. Some of the unsinicised barbarian men of Lantau were forced to serve as water-borne soldiers: one such conscripted officer mutinied and then led his fellow islanders in a major revolt. Shortly after, in 1197, the authorities decided to massacre the entire population of Lantau to end these constant revolts. The troops used for this massacre were some 300 of the water-borne soldiers (水軍三百) from the garrison at Kwun Fu (官富場屯).⁸

In addition to these soldiers stationed at Kwun Fu, there would have been some land-based regular troops of the salt monopoly there as well. The unsettled situation on Lantau led the authorities (in the years before the decision to massacre them was taken) to gather the population into concentration camps (“stockades”, 寨), where they were placed under permanent military guard; the stockade guards were probably land-based salt troops from the Kwun Fu garrison.⁹

It is likely that there were other land-based troops stationed at Nam Tau, who would have patrolled the salt-working areas along the Pearl River shore. Up to 1208, it is probable that almost

all the seashore areas of Tung Kwun were controlled by the salt troops, supported by the water-borne soldiers.

The salt superintendent had his offices at Nam Tau on the Pearl River coast, and this was doubtless also where the headquarters of the salt troops were before 1208.

The salt fields were reopened shortly after the viceroy had closed them in 1208 (the 1464 gazetteer says “they were reopened shortly after”, 未幾復設), but they were thereafter run by merchants under salt monopoly supervision who employed free salt workers in the same way as elsewhere along the coast of China, and thus could be operated with ordinary Chinese people living nearby, since the risk of the salt workers absconding was much less than before. It is likely that the actions of the viceroy in 1208 thus marked a major change in the operation of the salt fields in this area, and, in consequence, a major change in the management of the coastal areas of Tung Kwun county.

The Tolo Harbour (大埔海) and Sai Kung (西貢, Xigong) areas were, in these early centuries, not under the control of the salt troops, however, but managed by the imperial pearl monopoly. More contemporary documents survive as to how this pearl monopoly area was managed, as compared with contemporary information on the salt monopoly areas. Pearls were found in considerable numbers here, in the Song and earlier. The pearl fishers were men from the local unsinicised barbarian tribes, who were, as with the salt workers in the Kwun Fu salt fields area, forced into the status of state bond-slaves and tied to the pearl fishing grounds as labourers, that is, as pearl fishers. Since pearls are small, but very valuable, the risk of theft and smuggling was clearly very high. The pearl monopoly thus had a large garrison of soldiers (contemporary documents state that there were some

2,000 troops there) to patrol the area behind the pearl-fishing grounds, centred at the local pearl monopoly headquarters at Tai Po (大埔, Dabu). These contemporary documents also state that no Chinese could enter the area without a permit, to reduce the risk. The soldiers of the pearl monopoly also convoyed the pearls gathered up to Canton.¹⁰ The pearl monopoly exclusion district probably extended from the Kowloon Hills to the hills north of Sham Chun (深圳, Shenzhen).

Sailing ships arriving in China inevitably make landfall at the mouth of the Pearl River: the summer monsoon winds bring all ships from South-East Asia to this landfall (the winter monsoon blows them back to South-East Asia).¹¹ This made Canton one of the greatest commercial cities of Asia. However, there was always a risk that ships would suddenly appear over the horizon, bringing, not merchants and goods, but brigands seeking to sack the city and make off with its riches. This did, in fact, happen twice, in 404, when the city was captured from the sea by the rebel Lu Xun (盧循), and in 758, when the city was “sacked by Arabs and Persians, who then fled by sea” (波斯與大食同寇廣州劫倉庫焚盧舍浮海而去).¹² The threat of a sea-based bandit attack was, therefore, a real one. The city was sacked once again, in 879, by the rebel Huang Chao (黃巢), but Huang Chao attacked the city by land: his forces approached Canton through the East River Valley.¹³

The response to this threat by the imperial authorities was to establish a strong naval force to patrol the mouth of the Pearl River. This was headquartered at Tuen Mun (屯門, Tunmen), on the eastern, Tung Kwun, shore of the Pearl River. Three naval patrol lines were set up: one at the outer edge of the most seaward

of the Ladrões Islands (老萬山, Lao Wenshan), one between Tuen Mun and the Macao area, and the third at the Bogue, where the waterway suddenly narrows. Any ship arriving would be stopped by one of these patrol lines, and brought into Tuen Mun, where the ship would pay duty and be searched for contraband or weapons. It would then be escorted up to Canton under a naval pilot.¹⁴ The threat of smuggling, of offloading valuable material at Tuen Mun to Chinese accomplices, was obviously great, and so the hinterland of Tuen Mun was, again, it would seem, an exclusion district, stretching from Tuen Mun Bay up to at least the Sham Chun River, and so probably covering about half the area of today's New Territories. This area would have been patrolled by the soldiers of the Tuen Mun garrison to prohibit entrance to the area to any person without a permit issued by the Canton authorities, as with the pearl monopoly exclusion district.

In all these areas under martial law, no Chinese villages seem to have been permitted. On Lantau and in the pearl monopoly area the families of the state bond-slave workers grew the food needed, elsewhere food for the salt workers and naval personnel was probably produced by convicts (屯子) working as farmers on the periphery of the salt fields or naval garrison area, hence, probably, the village place name Tuen Tsz Wai (屯子圍), literally “convict stockade”, near Tuen Mun.

All of these imperial estates were established well before the Song. The salt fields and the salt superintendency here are mentioned in a document of before 220 A.D., and again in 265, and the salt superintendency also appears in a document from 331.¹⁵ The Eastern Han tomb, at Lei Cheng Uk (李鄭屋, Lizhengwu), dates from before 220, and is quite probably the tomb of a salt official. However, the salt fields were probably

established here several hundred years earlier, under the Nanyueh emperors, who established an independent state in the area of Kwangtung, Kwangsi, and north Vietnam, with its capital at Canton, between 196 and 111 B.C. The Nanyueh would not have been able to secure salt from the salt fields further north, which were all under the control of other polities, and would have had to establish salt fields of their own, and this area, the eastern shore of the Pearl River, would have been the obvious choice. The salt field areas would doubtless have been patrolled by salt troops ever since they were first established.

The pearl monopoly garrison at Tai Po is first mentioned in the records of the Nanhan (南漢) dynasty (907–971): this was, again, a separate kingdom, centred on Canton, and ruling the south of China. Pearls were very important to the Nanhan emperors and they certainly greatly extended the work of the pearl monopoly within Kwangtung, but it is possible that the pearl grounds were under imperial control even earlier than this. The pearl monopoly remained in place at Tai Po until 1384, when the local pearl beds were exhausted and the pearl fishing was stopped.¹⁶

The naval and customs headquarters at Tuen Mun is first specifically mentioned in surviving documents dating from the first years of the Tang (唐) dynasty, about 615, but the naval patrol system is certainly a good deal older. The naval screen across the mouth of the Pearl River, with the Tuen Mun garrison, was probably put in place shortly after the sack of Canton in 404, probably by the Liu Song (劉宋) dynasty (420–478), yet another Southern dynasty.¹⁷ The garrison at Tuen Mun was definitely in place by 424–453, when the monk Pui To (杯渡, Beidu) established a hermitage on the mountain behind the anchorage (the

Castle Peak Monastery, 青山寺), and a monastery (the Ling To Monastery, 靈渡寺), a couple of miles away, to provide religious support to those working in the military there.¹⁸

Thus, by the later Northern Song it is probable that the coasts of the county of Tung Kwun had been under imperial control, and under martial law, for up to a thousand years and more, although detailed written or archaeological records of this period in this area are unfortunately somewhat few.

This system of military control seems to have started to break down from the later eleventh century, in the late Northern Song and Southern Song period. The Song government was, by that date, in extreme financial difficulties arising from non-stop fighting against the Mongol tribes from the north. The government, it would appear, tried to find some income by releasing military controlled land for development. It would seem that, little by little, the exclusion districts along the Tung Kwun coasts were reduced in size, and eventually done away with altogether.

The exclusion district which is believed to have lain behind the Tuen Mun naval garrison thus seems to have been reduced by half in the last years of the Northern Song (mid-eleventh century), with the border of the exclusion district brought down from the Sham Chun River Valley to the low pass at Au Tau (凹頭, Aotao), just north-east of Yuen Long (元朗, Yuanlang). This was the period when the dominant villages of the area thus released for development were first founded (Kam Tin, 錦田, Jintian, and Ho Sheung Heung, 河上鄉, Heshangxiang). The lands on the northern bank of the Sham Chun River were probably opened for settlement at this date as well: the dominant villages of that area were also, it would seem, first settled in this general period.

The areas behind the salt fields all seem to have been opened for settlement during the Southern Song period (from the mid-twelfth century). The government closed some areas of salt fields in the later twelfth century, probably specifically in order to release land for development. The Kowloon peninsula was thus made available for settlement in the third quarter of the twelfth century, probably in 1163, when the offices of the Kwun Fu salt fields were moved away from Kowloon City (九龍城, Jiulongcheng), to Tip Fuk (疊福, Diefu), on Mirs Bay (大鵬灣, Dapengwan) to the east.¹⁹ The dominant villages of the Kowloon peninsula area, Nga Tsin Wai (衙前圍, Yaqianwei), Ma Tau Wai (馬頭圍, Matouwei), and Po Kong (蒲崗, Pugang), were all founded at this late twelfth century date.²⁰ Some of the areas along the Pearl River coast near Nam Tau may have been opened for settlement at about this period as well. Following the ending of government management in the San On salt fields in 1208 the risk of salt workers absconding decreased sharply, and the areas inland of the remaining Pearl River salt fields could be settled by Chinese villagers. It is likely that most of the areas behind the salt fields along the shores of the Pearl River — that is, near Nam Tau, and between Nam Tau and the Bogue — were opened for settlement a little after 1208, as the dominant villages of this area seem to have been founded at about this period.

After the governor of Kwangtung, Qian Zhiwang (錢之望, Tsin Chi-mong) sent troops to massacre the population of Lantau in 1197–1200, the now empty island, less the salt fields, was granted to a retired senior Song official, Lei Mau-ying (李昂英, Li Maoying), to develop. The dominant rural villages of the island were all founded at the very end of the Southern Song, or in the Yuan, as tenancies of the Lei Kau Yuen Tong (李久遠堂, Li