

Areas of Excellence Scheme – The Historical Anthropology of Chinese Society

(AoE/H-01/08)

Layman's Summary

This project studies changes in local society over 15 parts of China in the very long period from the Song dynasty to the twentieth century, approximately a thousand years. While every local society studied retained its own characteristics and identities, many of which were retained in local religious practices, this project found some generalizations. Although it is popularly thought that Chinese people had lived together as lineages (sometimes referred to as the extended family) from ancient times, this project found that it was adopted locally only in a gradual process over the period studied. As a common practice, lineage practices branched out from areas strongly controlled by the government during the Southern Song period, and extended to its periphery only by the Ming and the Qing. Ethnicity was closely associated to Ming dynasty taxation practices. Taxation, strongly dependent on the land tax, was restricted by the limitations of traditional land measurement methods. Ritual markers which identify social practices, including ethnicity, had extended with the extension of land reclamation for agriculture in lowland areas of south, central and east China, while in the upland areas and the north, military garrisons settled in the Ming dynasty became foci for local society. The process affected huge populations (numbers of which are unknown) that had lived in “boats and sheds” by causing them to move ashore. Lineage practices in many parts of China were associated with sacrifice to ancestors. However, among the Hui people, who do not practice ancestral sacrifice, the popularity of genealogy compilation also led to marked consequences in their communities that were focused on their mosques.

** The above summary is written mainly by the project team. The views expressed in the summary do not necessarily represent those of the University Grants Committee / Research Grants Council.*