

A woman's place is in her homes

BY QUINTON CHAN

THE sleepy village of Yeung Siu Hang doesn't look like the kind of place where decades of tradition are under fire.

Although it nestles behind the concrete jungle of Tuen Mun, the village, with fewer than a hundred houses, seems to have been bypassed the march of progress.

But if Mrs Tsang Wan-ho has her way, the law which prevents her from getting what she thinks is rightfully hers will soon be blown away.

After years of fighting — often physically — with enemies in her clan and being ignored by Government officials, she is going to the courts to challenge the ancestral customs which have barred her from inheriting land.

Mrs Tsang, who is taking advice from the Legal Aid Department, wanted to become the manager of her own fong in order to keep two houses in the village, after her mother dies. She has no male descendants to claim them.

"All I want is to keep these two houses which were built by my father and keep my father's altar inside the houses," Mrs Tsang said.

"I don't care about money, I can work, but to keep these two houses was my father's hope before his death."

The 39-year-old cleaning worker, a daughter of one of the village's prominent trustees, failed to inherit from her mother Mrs Lee Giu the right to be manager of her fong, despite the fact that she has complained to different Government departments. This is because of the traditional land succession law which favours male inheritance.

In his latest report, Ombudsman Mr Arthur Garcia said Mrs Tsang's case pointed to the need for an overhaul of New Territories' land laws, which he hinted were out of step with modern times and might conflict with the Bill of Rights.

But not only is Mrs Tsang fighting the law, she is battling against personal feuds in the village which stretch back generations.

Her fong is one of two splinters formed from a village tso — a committee set up by a land owner which, after his death, manages the land for the benefit of his male descendants.

The tso was founded in 1934 by her grandfather Tsang Chong-won. It split into two fongs, each run by his sons — her father Tsang Won-shing and uncle Tsang Ah-fat, whose offspring have become her enemies.

When Mrs Tsang's cousin, Tsang Kar-fai, took over as head of the rival fong two years ago, she objected in vain. But her rival's constant opposition to her taking over the reins of her own fong have been successful because ancestral laws are in his favour. Mrs Tsang fears he will now

be able to gain control of the two houses she wants to keep. Talk to either side about their rival and voices rise.

Ask Tsang Kar-fai about the death of his father two years ago and he will claim that it was the constant arguments with the women that brought on his heart attack.

His mother Ching Siu-ying stands by her son. She claims Mrs Tsang's late father, Won-shing, caused all the bad feeling by selling off a lot of the family's property when he was running the tso.

But on the flip side of the coin, Mrs Tsang claims her enemies have broken into her houses twice and attacked her mother and other relatives.

She said she has called the police but in vain.

"I don't understand why women should still be deprived of the right to inherit the ancestral property of a tso," Mrs Tsang said.

"My father built the two houses, why I can't inherit them?"

But Mr Tsang Wing-fu, another male descendant belonging to the rival fong, insisted that they were the only people who could inherit the property.

"We have nothing to say about this case but the woman (Mrs Tsang Wan-ho) brought on my father's death."

When asked whether they would take back the two disputed houses or not, Mr Tsang said: "We haven't decided yet."

Mrs Ching agreed that women should not inherit property.

"The traditional custom has been running throughout the whole New Territories for more than a hundred years," she said.

"All my family are very angry about the woman's behaviour. Her unreasonable complaint has given my family trouble."