Sitting in the spacious courtyard of an 18th-century ancestral hall belonging to his clan, William Liu defiantly rejects a lucrative birthright that his special status as one of Hong Kong’s male indigenous villagers affords him.

Mr. Liu hails from the rural northern part of Hong Kong known as the “New Territories”, which were leased by Britain from China in 1898.

Under a colonial-era policy that remains in place, any male who can trace his lineage back to that period has the right to build a three-storey house on his land without paying a land fee.

In a city with the world’s least affordable property market, that exclusively male right is a major windfall.

But it is being challenged in the courts as both discriminatory to women and unfair to millions of Hong Kongers unable to get on the property ladder.

Mr. Liu is a villager who agrees with the court case against the building rights.

“It’s an unfair policy and I will not use it,” the 22-year-old said.

**Discriminatory policy**

Mr. Liu, a democracy activist, is opposed both to the discriminatory nature of the policy and the way the city’s connected housing developers have still been able to use it to build properties.

“The small house policy has turned into something that is just being abused by a small handful of people working with developers to make money,” he explained.

Liber Research Community, a local land concern group, estimates that at least one out of four indigenous houses in the New Territories have been built illegally, with commercial developers making secret deals with villagers to use their land rights.

Authorities largely turn a blind eye to the practice.

The so-called “ding rights” were enacted in 1972 by the British as an interim measure to improve living standards for farmers. It continued after the 1997 handover to China.