

Geomancy, Politics and Colonial Encounters in Rural Hong Kong

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During the last forty years, Hong Kong's rural hinterland has been transformed from a patchwork of green hills punctuated by fertile valleys into a hodgepodge of new, purpose-built cities complete with forty-storey apartment blocks. Many old villages dating to the 1600s are now surrounded by four-lane highways and train lines, by huge drainage canals, by fields that have been converted into storage depots and by massive housing estates. In a single generation, a once intimate, agrarian landscape has been transformed beyond recognition. In this paper we explore how a cosmology that Hong Kong people call *fengshui* (literally 'wind and water') informs local understandings of the environment. Specifically, we discuss the changing relationship between *fengshui* (or geomancy) practices and local politics from 1898, when Great Britain assumed control of the New Territories, until 1997, when sovereignty was transferred to the People's Republic of China.

Chinese geomancy encompasses a set of cosmological principles that manifest themselves in ideas regarding the flow of wind and water – of vital energy or *qi* – in the environment. It is the job of the geomancer² to place temples, houses, graves and villages in a positive relationship to this flow so that individuals, families and whole communities can benefit. There is good *fengshui* and bad *fengshui* – bringing fortune or disaster, depending on environmental circumstances. Buddhists, Daoists, Christians, atheists and followers of local gods all may observe the tenants of *fengshui*.³ Among the people of Hong Kong's New Territories geomancy is deeply intertwined with the ancestor cult and can be considered integral to many local religious practices.⁴ Geomancy not only allows humans to comprehend and take advantage of the forces of nature that surround them but also guides the creation and maintenance of landscapes. During the period under discussion here, a discourse of *fengshui* emphasised respect for the status quo – for the old ways and for those who believed that they embodied those ways. We also argue

that *fengshui* facilitated interactions between colonial officials – agents of the British Crown Colony of Hong Kong – and New Territories' villagers until the 1980s.

Chinese Geomancy has been called a religion, a cosmological system, a feudal superstition, a form of divination and proto-environmentalism. The anthropologist Maurice Freedman, who studied *fengshui* in Hong Kong's New Territories in the 1960s, argued that geomancy is an amoral system founded on esoteric knowledge and complex techniques (1966). If knowledge and technique are sufficiently developed, he argued, benefits would follow as light follows darkness. In Freedman's view, *fengshui* is neither science nor religion but rather offers a mode of explanation resting upon a certain understanding of the cosmic order.⁵

Although geomancy can be found in some form among Han people almost everywhere in China, Chinese states from imperial times to the present have often been hostile to its popular practice.⁶ Chinese geomancy, we argue, is highly localised, and we agree with Brun that disputes involving *fengshui* can and often do give voice to anti-authoritarian views. While this by no means explains everything we may want to know about Chinese geomancy, there is no doubt that a link between *fengshui* and anti-government protests exists and deserves attention (Brun 2003: 256, 259; see also Cheung 2001).

As Escobar (2001) had argued, the rise of global studies had led to a marked tendency to ignore or deny the salience of *place*. In this paper, we examine processes by which people make places for themselves – how landscapes are created and, once constructed, how they are protected in the face of radically altered political circumstances. We also endeavour to show why place and place-making deserve renewed attention (see also Bender 1993; Feld and Basso 1996; Casey 1997; Gupta and Ferguson 1997; Dirlik 2001; Feuchtwang 2004; cf. Appadurai 1996: 139–99). During the past two decades, there has been much insightful research on the conditions of 'placelessness' created by migration, diaspora formation and the collapse of time and space – the foundations of postmodernity. Here, we discuss the dramatic transformation of a place – a landscape – as well as the erosion of a form of geomancy that once guided, produced and articulated local understandings and appreciations of that place.

Geomancy, which guides the process by which spaces become places and environments become landscapes, is deeply implicated in the ongoing processes by which people constitute themselves as communities, neighbourhoods and localities. Geomancy offers a powerful and intimate form of local knowledge that arms its practitioners with the ability not only to diagnose a *fengshui* *wenti* (a geomancy problem) but also to overcome it – to change or modify what had been changed. A family that suffers economic loss might suspect that their good *fengshui* has been altered; perhaps someone has built in front of their grandfather's grave or a stream has been blocked near their home. A geomancer can confirm their diagnosis (or provide another) and offer a solution – move their grandfather's grave or redirect the stream so that wind and water can be propitiously reoriented. In Hong Kong's New Territories, each generation was responsible for understanding wind and water in order to safeguard family

prosperity and health. Of course, Hong Kong's places were always changing – environmental transformation did not begin in the 1970s – and geomancy was always both active (emplacing) as well as reactive (countering the effects of emplacement), and was, therefore, part of the process by which people's attachment to place – locating themselves in the landscape – was created and re-created. Geomancy was a cornerstone of the practice of local geography.

The location of ancestral tombs was of utmost importance. Like many others in southeastern China, New Territories people practiced secondary burial.⁷ After death, the deceased was interred in a simple, unmarked grave. On an auspicious day chosen by a geomancer (sometimes years after the initial burial), descendants retrieved and cleaned the bones of their ancestor. The bones were then re-arranged, placed in a pottery urn (or *jin* *td*), a geomancer was hired to find a good *fengshui* site and a tomb was secured.⁸ It is generally believed that descendants and ancestors interact through the medium of *fengshui* – thus connecting the living not only to the dead but also to sources of cosmic power (see, for example, Potter 1968, 1970; J. Watson 1982; for Taiwan see Ahern 1973: 175–90). Ancestral bones are thought to channel the generative forces of wind and water to male descendants through the medium of sacrificial pigs, which are offered at annual tomb rites. Major lineages staged (and some continue to stage) elaborate rituals at their founders' tombs, involving hundreds, even thousands, of descendants (see R. Watson 1988; J. Watson 2004).

Lineages claimed territory by burying their ancestors in new lands and, on occasion, in locales once held by rival kinship groups. 'Fengshui towers', brick walls, trees, ponds or buildings may enhance or redirect the positive flow of wind and water – occasionally at the expense of neighbouring households or villages. The placement of ancestors within the landscape carried serious consequences for one's own well being and for one's descendants.

Geomancy and Colonialism

During the colonial era, New Territories people pulled government officials into a special dialogue based on geomancy. It was a dialogue, we argue, that recognised and at times reinforced certain entrenched privileges. Discussions based on geomancy both obscured and exposed the fault lines of a colonial relationship forged at the beginning of the twentieth century, when agrarian elites (wealthy members of powerful patrilineages) dominated the New Territories. Eventually, this dialogue was overwhelmed by economic and environmental changes as well as by new forms of colonial governance, although it was never completely silenced.

The ethnographic research upon which this paper is based was carried out in two villages located in Xuen Long District, northwest New Territories. We draw most heavily on work carried out in Ha Tsuen, a single-patrilineage village inhabited by descendants of a twelfth century pioneer surnamed Deng (all males born into this lineage community are surnamed Deng).⁹ We lived in Ha Tsuen for fifteen months in 1977–1978 and have returned to the community

on many occasions during the past twenty-nine years. Another single-patrilineage village, San Tin, also informs this essay (most of the people in that settlement are surnamed Man, Wen in Mandarin).¹⁰ We lived in San Tin for seventeen months in 1969–1971 and have revisited the community periodically since the late-1970s.

Ha Tsuen and San Tin fell under British colonial control in 1898 when the Qing (Manchu) government in Beijing signed a 99-year lease granting the British Crown extraterritorial rights over a 365 square-mile section of Xin'an County in southern Guangdong Province. First called 'the new territory', this area was later renamed the New Territories. The local colonial administration was a unique, specialised bureaucracy devised to rule this small section of Chinese territory. Until 1997, when Hong Kong returned to Beijing rule, local government consisted of a colonial administration managed through a District Office. During most of the colonial period, Ha Tsuen and San Tin fell under the administrative control of the Yuen Long District Office. Villagers treated the local District Officer (D.O.) and his Cantonese-speaking staff as the face of government, and village politics were played out with the District Office firmly in mind.

In 1984, to the dismay and alarm of many in the New Territories, an accord between the Chinese and British governments was announced. The accord stated in clear terms that the New Territories (in fact, the entire colony of Hong Kong) would revert to Chinese control in mid-1997. During the 1980s the pace of political change quickened, new political institutions were created, the colonial administration changed form, and massive infrastructure and housing projects were implemented, one of the largest near the village of Ha Tsuen. When we first arrived in the New Territories, District Officers were young men from England and Scotland, often fresh out of Oxford or Cambridge, with degrees in classics or history. By the 1990s, District Officers were young Chinese graduates of Hong Kong University, with special training in public administration. During the run-up to Beijing control, new construction projects transformed the landscape of the New Territories. These projects had a profound impact not only on the place-based administrative apparatus and politics of the New Territories but also on the hills, streams, valleys, bays, temples, graves and villages that guided the flow of wind and water and, for centuries, had grounded the villagers of Ha Tsuen and San Tin in a landscape that sustained the local economy, gave a physicality to their history and connected them to their ancestors.

Colonialism, Quasi-Colonialism and Postcolonialism in Hong Kong

The people of the New Territories have experienced many forms of colonialism during the past 800 years. According to their own accounts, ancestors of New Territories people fled Jiangxi Province – 500 miles north of Hong Kong – just prior to and during the turmoil of the Mongol invasions (thirteenth century). Settling in the Pearl River Delta, they formed communities such as Ha Tsuen and San Tin that still exist today. In the seventeenth century, Han-Chinese rulers of the Ming dynasty (who had overthrown the Mongols in 1368) were themselves replaced by yet another foreign regime – Manchu overlords who

ruled from 1644 to 1911. Manchu (Qing) rule ended early for the people of Ha Tsuen and San Tin when the New Territories was leased to the British in 1898.¹¹ British colonial rule was interrupted by a Japanese military occupation that lasted from 1941 to 1945, when Hong Kong returned to British colonial status. During the Cold War, Hong Kong was perched on the front line between capitalism and socialism: in many respects it was akin to Berlin. In 1997 Hong Kong and the New Territories reverted to China, and the people of the New Territories found themselves subject to yet another outsider regime. The Cantonese-speaking administrators of Hong Kong now 'watch the faces' of Mandarin-speaking Communist Party leaders in Beijing.

During the tenure of these colonial and quasi-colonial regimes, the residents of the New Territories have survived, and in many cases prospered (see, for example, Baker 1968; Potter 1968; J. Watson 1975, 2004; R. Watson 1985). In 1898 the designation *benldren* (literally 'of the earth', perhaps best translated as 'local') became a protected category that conferred special privileges. Since 1997, the terminology used to describe this group has become a point of contention as post-colonial identities are reformulated. Space, the environment, place and geomancy provide arenas within which the battles over 'indigenous' rights have taken shape. In this paper, New Territories residents who trace descent to pre-1898 villagers are referred to as *indigenes* – a term that emphasises their 'local', historically grounded origins.

Britain Leases the New Territories

On 9 June 1898 in Beijing, Sir Claude MacDonald and Li Hung-chang signed the Convention Respecting an Extension of the Hong Kong Territory marking the Qing government's agreement to lease a part of Xin'an County to Great Britain for a period of ninety-nine years (see Wesley-Smith 1980: 1–3). This was one of a series of unequal treaties forced upon China in the aftermath of the Sino-Japanese War and the ensuing scramble for Chinese territory by Russia, Japan, Germany, France and Great Britain. Colonial officials and Hong Kong merchants (British and Chinese alike) had successfully argued for a buffer between Hong Kong Island, where government and business were conducted, and China, where Qing law was often conspicuous by its absence (Wesley-Smith 1980: 11–17). This buffer zone became the New Territories.

At first, the transition to British rule seemed to go smoothly, but as the handover date drew near tensions became apparent. During the Spring of 1899, British authorities were confronted by angry villagers protesting the disturbance of their 'wind and water'. On 3 April 1899, Captain F.H. May, with a small contingent of Sikh policemen and soldiers, tried to relieve two Indian constables who were erecting a temporary police station near the market of Tai Po. Nearby villagers were incensed and claimed that the station blocked the efficacious flow of geomantic forces to their families and ancestors. Words and bricks were hurled and after an uncomfortable night, as the British retreated to the safety of urban Hong Kong to await further instructions, the temporary station was torched (Wesley-Smith 1980: 59–60).

This was the first of many colonial encounters over 'wind and water'. During the next ninety-nine years, Hong Kong officials were to hear a great deal more about geomancy from rural elites and ordinary villagers alike. Eventually, geomancy became not only a framework for demarcating local interests in opposition to the colonial government but also, ironically, a method for educating colonial officers in the proper appreciation of local traditions. In 1898 the British were practiced colonials with experience not only in South Asia and Africa but also in Hong Kong. In 1842 they had wrested Hong Kong Island from China and in 1860 they added the Kowloon peninsula, thereby securing Hong Kong Harbour. However, the land that they leased in 1898 was different from these possessions. The 'new territory' was populated with long-settled villages and locally powerful elites, who owned sizeable parcels of land. And, of course, southern Xin'an County had been leased rather than ceded. In 1898 the fact that the British were leasers and had to contend with a long and arbitrary border with China contributed to the decisions they made regarding governance. The new regime had to confront and somehow co-opt local elites who were accustomed to taking care of themselves – thriving in a situation that, under the Qing, had been virtually devoid of state authorities.

James Stewart Lockhart was called upon to propose solutions to the problems presented by the new territory. Lockhart, a Scotsman, was not a typical colonial official. His biographer writes that because of his language ability and the small number of cadets in Hong Kong, he received a series of quick promotions after joining the office of the Colonial Secretary in 1882. As Registrar General he took on responsibility in 1887 for liaison with Hong Kong's Chinese merchants – part of his job was to see that British ordinances did not seriously contravene Chinese sensibilities. In 1895 he became Colonial Secretary, the Governor's most senior official, while continuing to hold the post of Registrar General (see Airle 1989: 34–38). In 1898 the Colonial Office in London asked Stewart Lockhart to survey the leased territory and ascertain how revenues could be raised 'without exciting the suspicions or irritating the feelings and prejudices of the Chinese inhabitants'. In August he toured southern Xin'an County to gather information and explore the terrain. On 8 October 1898 Lockhart presented his report, in which he argued that local organisations should be retained as far as possible and direct British control limited (Wesley-Smith 1980: 46).

Lockhart argued for a degree of separation between the colonial government and the leased territory. Instead, a cost-saving compromise was reached by which the Colonial Secretary of Hong Kong (who happened to be Lockhart) was placed in charge of the Colony as well as the New Territories administration (see Airle 1989: 97–98). The leased territory, it was decided, would be joined to the existing colonial government and local villagers would be subject to the laws of Hong Kong. There were, however, two important caveats: family affairs (marriage, succession, adoption and inheritance) and matters relating to land would continue to be governed by Chinese custom and Qing law. Section 13 of the New Territory Ordinance stated: 'In any proceedings in the Supreme Court or the District Court in relation to land in the New Territories, the court shall have power to recognize and enforce any Chinese custom or customary right affecting such land' (Wesley-Smith 1980: 91–103; see also Evans 1971).

Four basic principles governed colonial relationships in the leased territory. First, inscribed in the treaty, the British committed to 'no expropriation or expulsion of the inhabitants of the district included within the extension, and that if land is required for public office, fortification, or the like official purposes, it shall be bought at a fair price'. Second, the presiding Governor at the time of the lease, Henry Blake, promised in the New Territory Ordinance of 1900 that the colonial administration would not interfere with the 'usages and good customs' of territory residents. Third, the newly leased territory would be joined administratively and legally to the colony of Hong Kong, except, as noted, with regard to family and land law. And fourth, local (indigenous) organisations were to be utilised whenever possible. The recognition of New Territories residents (indigenes) as a special category different from the general population of Hong Kong was implied in these principles (see below), which were not without contradictions, although Hong Kong officials and the territory's residents learned to work around and within them.

Although the British took formal possession of the leased territory on 1 July 1898, they did not assume full control until the spring of 1899. They knew little about the territory and deemed it prudent to wait for Lockhart's report. Colonial officials also needed time to lay plans to survey and register land holdings and make decisions about boundary demarcation, customs and Chinese jurisdiction in Kowloon's Walled City (Wesley-Smith 1980: 46–55). The earliest days of British rule were unsettling. The 3 April geomancy protest at Tai Po turned out to be but one skirmish in what became a full-scale uprising. On 15 April Captain May, this time supported by a company of the Hong Kong Regiment, once again met protestors at Tai Po, but instead of a band of angry villagers he encountered more than a thousand organised Chinese who opened fire. Assisted by reinforcements from HMS Fame, British forces routed the insurgents, and the Union Jack was raised at Tai Po on 16 April 1899. Lockhart, dressed in his official uniform and accompanied by Commodore Powell, 400 men from the Hong Kong Regiment, and two fully dressed ships personally raised the flag to the sound of an artillery salute (Wesley-Smith 1980: 45). The next evening hostilities continued when the British camp at Tai Po was attacked. British troops (primarily Punjabi Sikhs) repelled the assault but another attack followed when they reached the village of Kam Tin. This, however, was the final battle. Local leaders apparently recognised that they could not defeat the British, and gradually conceded control to yet another set of occupiers, replacing Qing with British overseers (Wesley-Smith 1980: 61–63; see also Groves 1969). The newcomers, however, were to prove far more intrusive – and tenacious – than the emperor's officials.

Lockhart spent the final two weeks of April securing the New Territories, travelling from village to village, lecturing elders, arresting protest ringleaders and confiscating arms. Throughout the uprising, and after, the British remained deeply suspicious of the Qing government's encouragement of the rebels. But, as many scholars have pointed out, documents captured by the British clearly indicate that the resistance was spearheaded by indigenous militia organisations. The leaders came mostly from the wealthiest, single-lineage villages in the region (see, for example, Groves 1969: 43, 57).

Lockhart was furious with the resisters and argued for retribution. He wrote to Hong Kong's Governor: 'It will, I fear, tend to shake the belief of the people in British justice if the rascals who have created all the trouble are allowed to escape unpunished.' The Governor, however, disagreed: 'It is to my mind not improbable that in the future the leaders in the movement may be our most useful assistants in carrying out the local arrangements in the new territory' (quoted in Wesley-Smith 1980: 68-69). The governor won the day, but not before Lockhart, the 'old China hand', had built a string of police stations without any concessions to local geomancy sensitivities and torched the houses of three Ha Tsuen men, accused of murdering a fellow villager hired to post the official announcement proclaiming British sovereignty (Wesley-Smith 1980: 69-70).¹²

Hostility toward the British during 1898 and 1899 can be attributed to many factors but rumours regarding land confiscation and the desecration of tombs were certainly key (Wesley-Smith 1980: 84). Chinese land speculators, one of whom was said to be a confidant of Lockhart, were accused of feeding these rumours in hopes of buying cheap land (Wesley-Smith 1980: 70, 83-84). Local 'tax' arrangements also played a role. For generations, wealthy landowners and elite lineages had extorted 'revenue' through a taxlord system, whereby smaller villages and their residents paid fees (variously described as taxes, rents, protection money) to their wealthier and more powerful neighbours (Kamm 1977; Wesley-Smith 1980: 85-87; Palmer 1987: 16-23). There is no doubt that a great deal was at stake for local, landed elites, and it is no accident that their home villages became centres of resistance.

From 1900 to 1905 the British surveyed and registered all land in the leased territory and established a Land Court to settle disputed registrations. The new administration, as noted above, agreed to accept Chinese land law, which had been haphazardly applied in Xin'an County under the Qing. The taxlord system was not accepted, however. Acting Governor May set forth the policy that taxlord claims were to be evaluated by Chinese law (as reflected in Qing statutes and custom) at the time of the 1898 convention. In effect, this eliminated taxlords as a group, which further diminished the power and wealth of many elite lineage communities (Kamm 1977: 76-77; Wesley-Smith 1980: 96; Palmer 1987: 88-93).

In one of the many ironies of colonial rule in Hong Kong, British authorities did a more thorough job enforcing Chinese land law than China's imperial officials had ever managed. In the process, extractions by taxlords ceased,¹³ land titles were allocated to people who could show proof of ownership, lineage land holdings (corporate ancestral estates) were recognised and managers of these estates were required to register with the new government. British readings of Qing law produced a land reform in everything but name (R. Watson 1985: 59-61).¹⁴ Many small-scale owners were given full rights to their land, and some land owners, including lineages, lost properties to which they had long laid claim. The colonial government was keen, of course, to collect taxes, which they did with bureaucratic tenacity and zeal. However, after protests in 1905, they conceded that Crown Rents would not be raised for the duration of the 99-year lease (Wesley-Smith 1980: 98-99). Once the land

question had been resolved and taxes assessed, the British were in a strong position from which to reach out to local elites, who became essential players in Hong Kong's version of indirect rule. Given the tiny staff of the New Territories Administration, some concessions to local power holders and village leaders were not only judicious but also necessary. The colonial administration determined that order and revenue collection were best achieved by cooperation rather than further confrontation. The processes of bureaucratic routinisation had begun and colonial rule was gradually established in the practice of everyday life.

Colonialism in Practice: The District Office

As noted earlier, New Territories residents were enumerated and recognised as a special category with significant privileges vis-à-vis not only their counterparts on Hong Kong Island and Kowloon but also those who migrated from China into the New Territories after 1898. These privileges, including the application of Chinese land law and family custom, were granted by the colonial government to those who were enumerated during the first New Territories census in 1911 (totalling approximately 100,000 people) and extended to their descendants. By means of this special status, village residents secured the continuation of certain practices, including patrilineal inheritance and succession, protection of corporate lineage estates, adoption rules, concubinage, rights to build village houses and burial customs that highlighted geomancy.

Endacott, an historian of Hong Kong, notes that the administrative structure of the New Territories evolved slowly. 'At first', he writes, 'the main problems were law and order and the land revenues.' In the early years a Chief Police Officer and two Assistant Land Officers coped with the 'main problems', while two districts – northern and southern – gradually took shape (see Endacott 1964: 268). In 1905 the position of District Officer was established for the northern region, which contained all the elite lineages in the leased territory. In 1909 the Land Officer became the Assistant District Officer and was placed under the District Officer's authority, and finally in 1910 a new administrative unit – the District Office – was created. A similar structure developed more slowly in the southern district, which included Hong Kong's islands (see Endacott 1964: 268-69).¹⁵

District Officers had wide-ranging responsibilities and limited power. In fact, a number of District Officers have compared themselves to Qing officials. Like the storied 'mother-father officials' (*jumiguan*) of late imperial China, District Officers were expected to settle disputes, handle land issues, attend ceremonies, know and abide by local forms of protocol as well as explain, and if necessary enforce, government policy. With regard to the latter, it appears that 'enforcement' often took the form of negotiation. James Hayes, who served many years in the New Territories Administration, refers to 'benevolent paternalism' and government by 'negotiation ad nauseam' (1996: 41, 194). Negotiation tended to focus on public works projects that required land. It was

in this highly contentious arena that conflicts between the colonial government and indigenous villagers frequently arose and, not surprisingly, it was here that geomancy discussions and claims flourished.

Whenever a road was built, a drainage system constructed, or a village relocated, the government (in the guise of the District Officer) regularly entertained and paid compensation to *fengshui* claimants. Payments for environmental disturbances – as determined by geomantic principles – involved a well-understood process in which local interests and sensitivities were considered. The special customs of the indigenous New Territories population were accommodated whenever possible (Wesley-Smith 1992: 91–100). British colonial officials could not have been surprised by the *fengshui* protests they encountered during their early years in the New Territories.¹⁶ Ole Brun provides a summary of many European encounters with *fengshui* as they tried to extend their commercial and missionary activities in China. *Fengshui*, he argues, 'could easily accommodate expressions of proto-nationalistic sentiments' (Brun 2003: 64). The degree to which the New Territories uprising of 1899 can be considered proto-nationalistic or a purely local attempt to protect entrenched privilege, or both, has yet to be examined in detail. But, what is clear is that the vehemence with which *fengshui* claims were thrust upon the new colonial rulers of the New Territories set the tone for later negotiations.¹⁷

In the late nineteenth century, the area that was to become the New Territories was peppered with tightly packed villages, many of which were walled.¹⁸ Many villages were set among expanses of irrigated rice fields, others hugged the shores of rivers and bays, and some were built on terraced hills where farmers cultivated sweet potatoes and tea. Steep green hills marked off intensively farmed valleys, and everywhere water – in the form of streams, canals, bays and sea – influenced local life. Some of the cultivated land had been wrested from the estuaries and river deltas that gave the landscape its special shape and texture. Temples and shrines were protected by *fengshui* groves of litchi or banyan trees and villages were sited to capture the flow of the 'cosmic current', as Brun puts it (2003: 3). Farmers lived in small, often windowless houses with one door that was designed to direct and maximise this current. The hills were dotted with graves, bone urns and tombs – all of which interacted with the flow of wind and water.

The landscape that the British found in 1898 had been created during the Ming and Qing dynasties (1368–1911). It was fashioned by many human hands – Han migrants, local tribal people with whom the Han intermarried and eventually supplanted and state agents. The reclamations that turned marshes into fields, the irrigation systems that nurtured the rice paddies, the waterways that made inter-village communication possible were highly complex. Their maintenance was crucial and allowed many to survive and some to prosper. For hundreds of years, local geomancers and educated villagers had studied and mapped the contours of land and water. Specific formations were named and widely recognised: The Winking Elephant, Phoenix Landing, Dead Man's Gully (three prominent landmarks in the hills surrounding Ha Tsuen). Stories relating to these geomancy sites were deeply intertwined with family, lineage and local histories. Into this landscape the

British came, armed with ideas about land surveys and taxes, railroads and paved roads, harbour reclamations, district offices and police stations.

During the first decades of British rule, a skeletal road system, a railway between Kowloon and Guangzhou and government-licensed land reclamations were initiated and eventually completed. Most of these projects were located in Northern District, home of the largest and most powerful lineages (including those settled in Ha Tsuen and San Tin). A case in point is the 1930s *fengshui* dispute involving an ancestral tomb located near the present-day industrial town of Tsuen Wan, where the founder of many Deng lineage settlements in southern Guangdong Province, Deng Fuxie, was buried. The tomb is famous for its excellent *fengshui*: it looks out to the sea and is protected by a low rise of hills that produces a much sought after armchair effect. Deng lineage members claim that during the excavations for Fuxie's tomb, an ancient stone inscribed with a poem commemorating the glories of the site was found (see R. Watson 1988).

In the 1920s, the colonial authorities tried to have Fuxie's tomb moved to another location to make way for construction of a major road. The Deng immediately mounted a protest, citing Governor Blake's 1900 commitment to New Territories residents, which, they argued, guaranteed their right to practice local customs. Fuxie's tomb, they maintained, is sacred to all Deng in the New Territories, and they would not give up the grave's wonderful *fengshui* for an uncertain, untried locale, even if the government would bear the expense of relocation.

Although colonial land reform and the 1899 uprising had significantly affected many members of the New Territories elite, Deng villagers were still land rich and may well have been loath to allow or, perhaps more importantly, to be seen to allow colonial officials to interfere with their founding ancestor's tomb. For the Deng, this tomb represented irrefutable evidence of their long and illustrious history. For hundreds of years, good fortune had been captured and channelled to living Deng via their founder's tomb, and the colonial government could not have chosen a site that was more likely to stir up protest. Fuxie's tomb became a *cause célèbre* among Deng peoples throughout the Hong Kong region; protestors came from as far away as Guangzhou. In time, Deng leaders and the colonial government reached an accommodation and the tomb remained untouched. However, because of its location near an emerging road system, it faced continuing threats of encroachment. During the 1930s the Deng formed a Tomb Protection Society, which eventually purchased the site surrounding Fuxie's remains. Colonial officials, it should be noted, had always claimed that the tomb was on government land. In the 1970s, the society leased part of the site to a non-Deng who operated a potted-flower business. This enterprise, Deng elders explained in 1978, would not disturb the tomb and showed 'the government that the land around the tomb is cared for and put to good use'. The tomb survived into the 1990s, but each year factories, apartment buildings and office blocks impinged, altering the *fengshui* that secures the prosperity of Fuxie's descendants. In recent years, there were negotiations afoot to remove the tomb, but no final decision has been made. Since the dispute over Fuxie's tomb in the 1930s, half a dozen 'New Towns'

with populations of hundreds of thousands have been built in the New Territories – affecting many important tombs.

Post-World War Two Developments: Closed Border and Colonial Modernisation

In December 1941, the Japanese occupied Hong Kong and remained until 30 August 1945 (Eindacott 1964: 300). The British resumed civil administration in 1946 and soon after, in an attempt to foster more representative forms of political organisation, began to establish Rural Committees in the New Territories. Members of these advisory bodies, elected by adult males who could claim indigene status, were organised to serve as channels of communication between the government and villagers. In time the Rural Committees evolved into important political institutions. The Chairmen and Executive Committee members met regularly with the District Officer and his assistants, and, not surprisingly, Rural Committee elections became hotly contested affairs (see R. Watson 1985: 139–42).

The New Territories (and indeed the entire colony) was just beginning to recover from the Japanese Occupation when, in 1949, the People's Liberation Army closed the Hong Kong border and the northern-most sector of the New Territories (which includes San Tin) was militarised by the British. During the Chinese Civil War (1945–1949) and the early days of the People's Republic of China, many thousands of Chinese streamed across the border into Hong Kong. The Korean War heightened tensions along the Anglo-Chinese border and once again (as in 1898) the New Territories became a buffer between the colonial government and wealthy merchants, on the one hand, and what were perceived to be the lurking dangers of socialism, threatening to spill over the Chinese border, on the other. To maintain order and protect business interests, the British once again needed good relations with the rural establishment. However, the New Territories was changing and the hold of the old elites was eroding. The instability created by the Japanese Occupation, increased presence of British military units, elections for the new Rural Committees and new economic opportunities during the 1950s and 1960s all lead to fissures in the control that indigene elites had exercised over both their poorer lineage mates and former tenants. New, 'up-from-the-ranks' leaders – men who had fought against the Japanese, or made small fortunes smuggling petrol and trucks to the People's Liberation Army across the border, or started new businesses in the booming market towns – began to challenge the hold of the old landed elite (see R. Watson 1985: 142–49). There were, however, two things about which all New Territories villagers could agree: they had privileges, which they expected the colonial government to respect, and they would defend their *fengshui* sites (around which their tombs, houses and villages had been aligned). Increasingly, *fengshui* became a means of pressing their claims for special treatment.

As Hong Kong's population skyrocketed in the post-occupation period,¹⁹ water became a key resource. In an effort to increase water supplies, the colonial government initiated the Shek Pik Reservoir project on Lantau Island

in the 1950s. James Hayes refers to the government-village negotiations over this reservoir as 'a classic of its kind' (1996: 31): 'the Shek Pik negotiation exemplified the Hong Kong government's desire to achieve its aims by negotiation ... All requirements – and they were legion – were negotiated from start to finish, never letting up and never allowing the villagers to get away from the negotiating table' (1996: 31). Shek Pik concessions, Hayes argues, were 'in line with the generally conciliatory policies pursued by the District Administration in those sensitive years, when urban needs called for the construction of major public works in the New Territories' (1996: 41). The colonial government was always asking 'the indigeneous population ... to give up this or that landed property or customary entitlement in the interests of progress' and discussion rather than formal legal action seemed the most effective way of achieving development goals (Hayes 1996: 208). The Shek Pik project, which involved the destruction of villages, temples, ancestral halls and sometimes the surrounding hills and streams, was handled through discussion and compensation.

Geomancy was, of course, a key dimension of the Shek Pik project. In carrying out preparatory soil tests for reservoir construction, engineers exposed red earth in view of village homes. To the villagers, Hayes relates, '[t]his was a sign that the dragon's vein [an important local geomantic concept] ... had been cut and was 'bleeding', affecting the flow of beneficial influences in the locality'. After some debate, villagers' fears were calmed by protective rituals performed by a Daoist priest, with expenses paid by the District Office (Hayes 1996: 34). According to Hayes, the claims lodged during the Shek Pik project were complicated by the village's recent and troubled past. During the early decades of the twentieth century, in hopes of ending the population losses that they had suffered, Shek Pik residents had taken the drastic measure of moving their village to a new site, one with better *fengshui* (see Hayes 1996: 34–35). To ask them to relocate only a generation after this move was asking a great deal indeed.

The 'bleeding dragon' was by no means the only geomancy-related conflict. An excavation on a slope facing Shek Pik and the creation of a jeep track across the hills near a village neighbouring Shek Pik also involved protests and work stoppages. Sometimes villagers requested that protective walls and stands of trees be added to alleviate the dangers of a *fengshui* disturbance, or demanded that special rituals (*tsai*) be performed (Strauch 1980; Wesley-Smith 1992: 10, 25–26). These rituals were often accepted as legitimate claims on colonial coffers. In the case of the jeep track, government officials required that the contractor cease work after a geomancer hired by the government reported 'that he could only advise that no track be built' (Hayes 1996: 36). The removal of Shek Pik villagers to multi-storey apartment blocks in the industrial city of Tsuen Wan (compensation to which they had agreed) took place in 1960 after much negotiation over a 'lucky day' for the move and a series of *fengshui* claims and negotiations (Hayes 1996: 47–49).

In the Shek Pik project, it was the job of the District Office to negotiate the recovery of all private land (totalling 103 acres) necessary for the reservoir and to reach agreement with villagers regarding compensation and rehousing

(Hayes 1996: 38). But Fan Pui, a small village neighbouring Shek Pik also affected by the reservoir project, refused to allow the removal of 'its *jung shui* hill' for reservoir construction until the entire village had been relocated (see Hayes 1996: 40, 43). Colonial officials had agreed to create a new settlement and fields, but Fan Pui villagers required an assurance with details of electricity, piped water as well as road, pier and outbuilding construction before agreeing to move (Hayes 1996: 44). After months of deliberations, the villagers agreed to the package, which included, according to Hayes, 'customary rituals associated with any village removal' (for a list see Hayes 1996: 44). The local District Officer had, however, forgotten to consult a geomancer when the new village was sited. Hayes writes: 'Mercifully, the site was acceptable to the [belatedly commissioned] geomancer' (1996: 45). Using three motor junks, five sampans and three lorries, villagers moved to their new village on 5–6 October 1959. Just prior to their move, Hayes reports, priests performed rituals in the old village 'and at the lucky hour the ancestral tablets of each household were moved to the new houses and installed there' (1996: 46). The engineers wasted no time and began work at the foot of the '*jung shui* hill' on 5 October and on the hill itself on 6 October. Hayes concludes the Fan Pui resettlement story: 'a few trees have been cut down and these by arrangement, have been picked up for firewood by the [departing] villagers, who, now that the issue of the hill had been settled, were nothing if not frugal and practical' (1996: 46).

Hayes notes that local *jungshui* disputes had an element of theatre, often hugely enjoyed by whole villages, but he does not consider geomancy claims to be 'hokey' as some colleagues and many contractors contended (Hayes 1996: 34–35). He attributes local geomancy and religious practices to '[f]ear of the elements, fear of disease, fear of bandits and sea robbers, and a general fear of the unknown ... The villagers felt it was vital to retain the goodwill of the gods of their locality ... such beliefs shaped their actions when faced with any family crisis or with sustained indications that life was out of kilter' (1996: 35). This kind of interpretation prevailed among many in the New Territories administration, although the interpretative range was broad and encompassed sympathetic as well as negative attitudes (see below).²⁰

Austin Coates, also a one-time District Officer, writes in his memoirs about his own understanding (or perhaps lack of understanding) of geomancy. With regard to mining operations on one of Hong Kong's islands during the Korean War, Coates writes:

Did the [village head] really believe the dragon had become malevolent? Or was it that, partly believing it, and knowing that government in the New Territories (where there was no Revolution of 1912) was more old-fashioned than in China, he considered he might use it as a convenient weapon or argument? Or was it that he did not believe it at all, but knew that Europeans thought Chinese did believe in such things, so that consequently, when a Chinese [village head] spoke of *jungshui*, it meant that a European official had to sit up and take notice?

These questions, Coates continues, recurred to him when he had to handle village *jungshui* cases, but 'I do not think I ever gave myself an answer which I could have sworn was correct' (1968: 170).

In 1961–1962 China suffered a devastating famine in which as many as forty million people lost their lives (see, for example, Bannister 1987: 85–86, 118; Yang 1996). In 1962, within the span of a week, border guards stood by as tens of thousands of refugees walked across the border between Hong Kong and China. Many found or made shelters in squatter settlements in or near Hong Kong's urban centres, but some stayed in the New Territories and joined the 'outsider' vegetable farmers who had migrated in 1949 and 1950. These poor, landless farmers rented fields from local owners who themselves were giving up agriculture in favour of emigration to Britain, factory work or small business operations. During the 1950s and 1960s, the pace of environmental change quickened. Reservoirs, squatter settlements, military compounds, new roads, garment factories and intensively farmed vegetable fields were replacing the once ubiquitous rice paddies. In most cases, the old villages with their tightly nucleated houses, *jungshui* groves and earth god shrines, protective walls and ponds remained, but the prospects – the views – from many of these villages were changing. Increasingly, familiar landmarks were disappearing and newcomers – refugee vegetable farmers, migrant factory workers, small-scale entrepreneurs – were making their presence felt. These new residents, it should be noted, were treated as intrusive minorities by both residents of Hong Kong's old villages and government officials alike.

Population growth and a hostile China had made the colonial government increasingly dependent on the New Territories for water, food and electricity. China was never completely out of the picture, however, because local suppliers could not begin to keep pace with what was needed. Mao's Cultural Revolution, launched in 1966, only added to what was becoming an immensely complicated and volatile mix. In 1967 serious rioting broke out in Hong Kong. Maoist propaganda groups crossed the border to perform 'loyalty dances' in Northern District villages (including San Tin), a colonial official was kidnapped and there were rumours that the British could not hold Hong Kong. They did, however, remain and in the aftermath of 1967 and the appointment of a new governor (Murray Maclehoose) in 1971, the colonial government began ambitious programs that transformed its relationship with the indigenes of the New Territories (and the Hong Kong population in general). Colonial administrators were buoyed by the response of most residents, who had stood with the government (or at least did not participate) during the 1967 riots.²¹ Hayes argues that in 1968 there was a realisation that the government could no longer depend only on elites and benevolent authoritarianism (1996: 281, 290).

In 1981 the heretofore separate administrative structures for Hong Kong Island/Kowloon and the New Territories were amalgamated into one unit – the City and New Territories Administration (Miners 1995: 169). In 1982 the Lands Department was formed and all land administration duties were transferred from the New Territories Administration to the new department (Ho 2004: 133). In rapid order the District Officers lost a key function – oversight of land transactions – and much influence.

In 1977 the Hong Kong government established New Territories District Advisory Boards, which included villagers as well as newcomer migrants (Hayes 1996: 278). In 1981 the Board structure (re-named District Boards) was extended to all of Hong Kong (Miners 1995: 169), and a year later District Board elections were first held.²¹ In 1985 District Officers and other officials ceased being members of the Boards, although they continued 'to attend meetings by invitation to answer questions, give explanations, and present papers' (Miners 1995: 170). In many respects, District Boards were like Rural Committees (which continued to exist) in that, as Miners points out, they had no right to give instructions to government officials, no power to raise money ... and no authority to spend it' (1995: 176). However, they did make it possible for members to call attention to important social and economic issues and to be privy to valuable information.

Gradually, a new breed of government official – technocrats – were beginning to take over.²² These men (and occasionally women), although they might be Hong Kong-born Cantonese, showed little interest in or appreciation of rural customs. Increasingly, villagers found it difficult to secure any benefits from the development projects that were altering their communities and affecting their futures. When land was resumed for development purposes, people were paid a sum that approximated the market value of their property. If they had to leave their homes, their removal expenses were compensated and they were usually rehoused, although not necessarily to their liking. But they played no active role in the planning of these large developments. Once a project was approved, they had no choice but to relinquish their land and move. One of the only ways for villagers to register their sadness, dissatisfaction and distress was to lodge complaints based on geomancy.

By 1980 the New Territories had already undergone considerable development: rural villas (small private houses) had sprung up like bamboo shoots and private as well as government-sponsored construction projects were increasingly visible. It is well to remember that for hundreds of years the Pearl River Delta, of which the New Territories is a part, has been a highly manipulated environment. The elaborate reclamation projects of Qing times that still survive from that era are testimony to the environmentally transformative agendas of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Guangdong. However, there are significant differences between the low-tech conversion projects that characterised the delta until the 1950s (see, for example, J. Watson 1975; Siu 1989: 1–35) and more recent mechanised, high-speed reclamations that convert marshes or tidal lands into new cities in a matter of four or five years. The development projects of the 1980s and 1990s moved at what New Territories villagers perceived as lightning speed, and the consequences were increasingly disorienting for local people.

Housing and infrastructure development, which had added hundreds of thousands of residents to the New Territories, took an enormous toll on the local environment. 'One could say', Hayes muses, 'that development had tended to be in the New Territories rather than for the New Territories' (1996: 249). New Town projects, which often lacked coordination and clear impact

analyses, created problems that could no longer be solved by the villagers themselves or their local organisations.

Geomancy, Protest and Development

Beginning in the 1970s, the informal pact between indigenous villagers and government – built on mutual need – began to unravel. Ha Tsuen provides an illustration of that unravelling process. In 1982 a New Town development was taking shape near the village of Ha Tsuen. The complex, known as Tin Shui Wai, was to be built on reclaimed land in an area that had been marsh, fishponds, brackish paddy and wasteland. Ha Tsuen's main ancestral hall had historically claimed the Tin Shui Wai area, but in the 1920s the Hong Kong government sold the marshland to outside speculators, arguing that the Deng had no proper title. In the 1970s, the land was resold to 'private developers'.²⁴ By 1980 a 448 hectare site had been acquired by Mighty City, a China-led consortium (see SCMP 26 March 1993). Mighty City proposed to create a New Town with a population of 500,000, but the Hong Kong Government quickly vetoed the plan as too ambitious. Eventually a high-rise complex for 135,000 residents was approved. There followed a period of wrangling between Mighty City and the government, occasioned by changes in Hong Kong's real estate market and disagreements concerning payment for the site's infrastructure needs, which were enormous.

By 1982, a new deal was struck in which the Hong Kong Government bought the site for HK\$2.26 billion and sold back forty hectares (for HK\$800 million) to private developers. This was the largest sum that the Government had ever paid for a parcel of land (paid, it should be noted, to Mighty City not to New Territories villagers). Furthermore, it was the first time that the government had bought land not earmarked for a specific project. Later, at the opening of Tin Shui Wai New Town, government officials proclaimed to the assembled press that the development represented a unique joint venture in which government and the private sector had cooperated from the origin of the project (SCMP 26 March 1993). (The extent to which PRC-dominated Mighty City could be considered 'private' is an interesting question.) In 1993, when the first residents moved into Tin Shui Wai, government sources reported that the venture had cost HK\$10 billion, two-thirds of which was supplied by the Hong Kong Government. Government officials proudly announced that the massive construction had 'worked around a traditional *feng shui* sightline which bisects the town. Not even a footbridge has been allowed to cross this line' (SCMP March 26, 1993).

Prior to the creation of Tin Shui Wai, one could stand at the gates of Ha Tsuen's main ancestral hall, built in 1751, and see open land stretching into and beyond the marshes of the Pearl River estuary. Every day for generations elderly men have gathered at the great stone platforms that frame the hall's entrance to exchange news, pass the time and watch grandchildren. Today, when one looks out from the gates, the original sight line is blocked by enormous apartment towers. If there is a *fengshui* corridor, villagers say, only the planners can see it.²⁵

From the 1950s to the 1970s, the locatedness of New Territories villagers – the common places of their everyday lives – remained largely intact. Even in the late 1970s, one could still see the fields near Ha Tsuen and San Tin that once produced rice, visit an old sugar refinery, sit in houses that had been built during the seventeenth century, walk along stone paths and make out the outline of reclaimed 'salt fields' (*han tian*) and canals that once served the local market. With the help of villagers it was possible to visualise the outline of a 'lived in past'. As the old men sat outside the gates of their ancestral hall talking about lineage history they pointed to historic sites and features of the landscape, imparting a physicality to the past that was deeply reassuring. Walks along village paths often occasioned stories about lineage feuds fought in the surrounding fields. Visits to ancestral tombs in the hills behind Ha Tsuen provided lessons in judging the attributes of well-known *fengshui* sites. In Lowenthal's words, the landscape, both natural and built, was very much part of the 'tangible past' (1985).

However, by the mid-1980s Ha Tsuen's recognisable and intimate environment was changing. Hills disappeared, huge drainage systems altered the flow of streams, rail lines snaked through nearby fields, and ship container parks²⁶ dotted the countryside. In 1993 and again in 1994, during return visits to Hong Kong, Ha Tsuen villagers and colonial officials discussed the question of a *fengshui* corridor passing through Tin Shui Wai New Town. Villagers, who pointed out that their access to the forces of wind and water had been blocked, expected the government to pay for a special ritual of placation (*fasti*). During our conversations with government officials, a sense of pride in the Tin Shui Wai development and what it had represented for Yuen Long District was evident. We were told that the flooding that had once been endemic in the Ha Tsuen area was no longer a problem because of the drainage network that had been constructed. Transportation had been greatly improved and no major villages, the officials noted, had been relocated. Ha Tsuen was, in their view, intact. Of course, the surrounding hills and fields had been tunnelled, huge drainage canals now passed through the village, and tens of thousands of 'outsiders' were now on their doorstep; but, we were assured, there had been no major residential disruptions to the villagers themselves.

As discussions with colonial officials continued, however, the language of the planner and business developer was increasingly interspersed with allusions to *fengshui*. In part this was due to our questions, but it also reflected the interests and enthusiasms of the officials themselves. Yes, they confirmed, a compensation payment for a *fasti* ritual had been made in 1991 after villagers claimed that tunnelling in the Ha Tsuen hills had ruptured the 'veins of the dragon'. Yes, a *fengshui* corridor was built in Tin Shui Wai.

The longer we talked the more it became clear that there was something more here than a concern with good government. These officials – Hong Kong born Cantonese with university degrees – claimed that *fengshui* was a kind of technology or science. 'There really is something to it,' they argued, 'it is environmentally sound'. In their view, *fasti* rituals, dragons' veins and compensation payments are quaint, country ways of understanding what they believe to be more complex notions that underlie *fengshui*. They did not say: 'We urban,

educated people understand these matters on a higher plane', but this was their implicit message.

Geomancy as practised in urban Hong Kong is different in important respects from the *fengshui* of New Territories villages.²⁷ The urban population consists primarily of (relative) newcomers, people who arrived in Hong Kong since the 1950s. Their tangible past, represented by squatter settlements, tenements and factories²⁸ of the early post-Cold War era, has been largely erased. Until recently, their identification with Hong Kong has been tentative, if indeed they thought about it at all (see Siu 1996; J. Watson 2006; Mathews 2001). For many émigrés, Hong Kong was indeed 'a borrowed place living on borrowed time' (Hughes 1968). Not surprisingly, the Chinese–British Accord on Hong Kong's reversion to Beijing set off an identity crisis that reached a peak just prior to 1997. During the late 1980s and 1990s, the colonial government slashed their administration, poured vast funds into the university system, and made large contributions to local art, music and drama associations. New magazines and newspapers appeared and Hong Kong took on a kind of international cache during the last years of colonial rule. The formation of a Hong Kong identity ('we are different from those Chinese north of the border') required a past, but until the 1980s Hong Kong history had been badly neglected – the preserve of a few anthropologists and local historians.²⁹

In the 1990s many in Hong Kong became keen preservationists whose 'tangible past' was encapsulated in a museum, a restored temple or a preserved ancestral hall. And, it should not be surprising that for many 'the past' came to reside in the New Territories. In this vision, *fengshui* was acceptable if it was cleansed of the political – anything that hinted at negotiation or stratagem. *Fengshui* had to be pure if it were to serve the social agenda of Hong Kong activists. For some intellectuals, *fengshui* is the 'opiate of the masses' (to quote one university professor). For others geomancy was one of the cultural elements that made Hong Kong unique. In the view of many urbanites, who pay the high fees that popular geomancers command, *fengshui* as it is practiced in the New Territories is superstition or, worse, extortion. Urban *fengshui*, by contrast, is technology ('it is like science'). It helps one live in the world that other people (governments, developers, planners) have created.³⁰ The 'wind and water' of the urban *fengshui* devotee does not course through an intimate, past-laden landscape. Rather, it allows urban apartment dwellers to position themselves – to arrange their apartments or offices – so that they can take advantage of new, rapidly changing opportunities or counteract danger from the built environment that surrounds them (see, for example, Rooney 2001: 66; Cheung and Ma 2005).³¹

Geomancy, Place and Identity

The relationship between Hong Kong urbanites and New Territories indigenes has been fraught in recent years. Each side lays claim to places deeply inscribed in the landscape but they share little else. Much of the approbation urbanites direct at rural *fengshui* is aimed at the New Territories power establishment, represented by a unique organisation called the Heung Yee Kuk. Roughly

translated as 'rural consultative council', this organisation is composed of village leaders and political brokers who informally represent the old villagers (the indigenes) of the New Territories. During the 1990s, members of the Heung Yee Kuk worked to retain the privileges granted to villagers by the British colonial administration. In 1898, Leaders of the Kuk were well aware that colonial arrangements could not be imported wholesale into a future dominated by the Communist Party. To protect their special privileges, therefore, they had to redefine what it meant to be an indigenous villager. For much of the twentieth century, literate villagers made claims for a special kind of pioneer heritage founded in the competitive logic of Chinese history. They were *Tang-ren*, or the 'People of Tang Dynasty', and thus the living repositories of Han Chinese culture, which they proclaimed had disappeared in China itself (see Chan 1998). This was a claim that set local people apart from the aboriginal (non-Han) populations of the south and distinguished them from the Mongol and Manchu rulers who lived in north China.

However, in the 1990s New Territories leaders began to style themselves not as *Tang-ren* but as *guanzhumin*, a term that translates literally as 'original-residing peoples'. In a full page ad appearing in Hong Kong's newspapers Heung Yee Kuk propagandists likened the New Territories *guanzhumin* to the Maori of New Zealand and to North American Indians (SCMP 20 May 1994). This special status, they argued, entitled them to maintain traditional cultural forms and political privileges by right of their heritage. These customs – patrilineal inheritance, special rights to house lots, privileged access to government authorities, burial sites in the New Territories and greater control over local land use – were in their view sacrosanct. Their long residence in the New Territories, their resistance to the British in 1898 (valorised in the months prior to the 1997 repatriation ceremonies) and their distinct customs (ancestor worship, purification rituals or *jiao*, secondary burial and *fengshui* practices) led these villagers to expect special consideration from their new Communist masters. How deeply these particular claims resonated with ordinary villagers remains an open question. Many villagers of our acquaintance were either shocked or amused by the comparison between themselves and their putative allies in New Zealand and North America.

Leaders of the Heung Yee Kuk were not interested in crafting a new identity for everyone in Hong Kong. Their goal was highly restricted. They wished to reaffirm what it meant to be a New Territories indigene, but to do so they had to make claims to represent an entire category of people and to determine what was best for them. Urban intellectuals, in contrast, were concerned to create an inclusive Hong Kong identity, which built on carefully selected rural customs and architectural monuments. In doing so they came into conflict with the Heung Yee Kuk leaders and other New Territories power brokers.

Conclusions

Hong Kong's space wars and identity battles are far from settled. Villagers continue to hire geomancers, to extract fees for placation rites, and to pay

careful attention to the *fengshui* of their ancestral tombs. Nonetheless, much has changed. For some, geomancy is no longer a political resource; it now operates in the realm of personal meaning and local pride. Highly educated and well-travelled New Territories migrants regularly compare their ritual activities to the Muslim, Christian and (organised) Buddhist practices they see in urban Hong Kong and elsewhere. For them, geomancy is now perceived as a form of 'religion' (*zongjiao*) that is inseparable from their system of ancestor worship. Treated as a religious practice, *fengshui* is compartmentalised and detached from the mundane concerns of politics.

During our field research in the New Territories in the late 1960s, *fengshui* was closely interwoven with local politics. As the grandchildren of our Ha Tsuen and San Tin neighbours moved abroad or to new houses outside the old villages, their general vision of the New Territories also changed. In the case of San Tin, these ancient villages are no longer 'home' for a generation of diasporics born and reared in Britain, Germany, Netherlands, Belgium, Sweden and Canada (among other places). For these people, the New Territories represents a place of origin, a pilgrimage site where one can pursue 'roots' (Watson 2004). Ancestor worship rites and *fengshui* practices (encountered during brief visits to Ha Tsuen and San Tin) are interpreted through the lens of ethnic identity. 'These rituals are what makes me Chinese', said one 1990s pilgrim to San Tin (who speaks German and English, but not Cantonese). For this young man geomancy has nothing whatsoever to do with local politics, community organisation or space wars. For many in the Hong Kong diaspora, geomancy has become a personal resource that can be understood by consulting English language books and web sites, or by sending emails to Harvard anthropologists. It is no longer the 'lived-in' system that their grandparents took for granted and discussed in the metaphorical language of wind and water. Geomancy is still practiced in the New Territories, but for many it has moved from the centre of political life to what one might describe as the margins of religion.

For Ha Tsuen villagers, many of whom continue to live in the New Territories, *fengshui* remains important. There is pride in the auspicious setting of their ancestral halls and tombs, but the transformation of their surrounding landscape and their increasing inability to engage local officials in discussions of their *fengshui* makes the heretofore familiar conversation one-sided. In fact, one might argue that they lack a conversation partner altogether as the Hong Kong government turns a deaf ear to their claims for attention.

After considerable debate, protest and behind the scenes manoeuvring New Territories indigenes have retained some of the privileges that they enjoyed under the British. At this writing (2005), they can still claim land to build village houses, although this privilege is now subject to modification and restriction. Ancestral halls and tombs continue to receive protection and patrilineal succession to ancestral estates is still recognised. Women, however, have been given inheritance rights to private (family) property, which was a bitter blow to many villagers (Chan 1997, 2003; Merry and Stern 2005).

The geomancer who 'sees *fengshui*' and the villagers who seek his services, we argue, created the landscape that the British encountered in 1898.¹² As

that landscape took form, vested interests sought to maintain it. What were they maintaining? In *Sediments of Time*, J.R. McNeill places Chinese environmental history in global perspective. He argues that the 'Chinese agricultural landscape ... was thoroughly anthropogenic' (1998: 37). Because it was so heavily manufactured, McNeill continues, 'the Chinese landscape was unusually dependent on demographic and political stability, and unusually vulnerable to disruption by neglect' (1998: 37). In this regard, it is worth considering the creative role that geomancy played not only in manufacturing Chinese landscapes but also in sustaining them. Given an agricultural regime created by and dependent upon a complex and highly manipulated environment, geomancy practices may well have been a conservative force that protected the environmental status quo. There is no doubt that geomancy ultimately failed to block changes in the New Territories, as estuaries were reclaimed, streams were rerouted and hills were flattened. Nonetheless, as we have demonstrated, villagers did indeed resist – given that they had little to gain from these monumental changes.

Since the 1950s, the population of Hong Kong, which has nearly tripled to six million, has experienced good times (1980s and 1990s) and bad times (1950–1970). Most Hong Kong people are better educated, have access to a higher standard of health care, eat better, travel more easily and live in better housing than they did twenty-five years ago. These achievements, however, have come at a price, reflected in overcrowding (for many people apartments are costly, cramped and noisy) and in a form of competitive consumerism that is as alienating as it is incessant. Hong Kong's manufactured environment makes few concessions to the natural world. In what Hayes refers to as the 'transition from resident to citizen', indigene privileges have taken a beating (1996: 280, 296).¹¹ *Fengshui* no longer guides the creation of the New Territories landscape, neither geomancy practice nor discourse has the power to influence decisions about the local environment significantly. Whether in the future local geomancy practices can offer a creative response to the highly built environment in which many New Territories people find themselves seems unlikely. We do not claim special insights into the motives of villagers we have known since the late 1960s. Some clearly believed in the efficacy of *fengshui*, whereas others remained firmly agnostic and cynically manipulated the system for their own benefit. Geomancy does still guide tomb locations, but one suspects that unfiltered access to the steep, green hills where ancestors and, in an important sense, the New Territories' past, are buried will become increasingly difficult.

Notes

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2. The task of the geomancer (*fengshui xiansheng*) is to 'see *fengshui*'. Brun notes, the geomancer 'scrutinizes his geomantic compass (*luopan*) and consults the traditional calendar (*nongli*) ... determines the location of the White Tiger (*bai hu*) and the Green Dragon [the active forces of geomancy] ... calculates the birth data of the owner [of the site] ... The actual techniques involved in rural *fengshui*-siting are simple' (Brun 2003: 4).
3. For a good discussion of *fengshui* in the New Territories that is sensitive to local terminology see Potter (1970: 140–42).
4. We understand geomancy to be a set of practices that exist within a complex and loosely organised conceptual frame. See Brun (2003: 2–32), who argues against the view that *fengshui* forms a coherent system.
5. According to Feuchtwang, Daoism and *fengshui* share 'a conception of the emergence of things from a great unity through the fertile balances of Yin and Yang' and 'is elaborated in a cosmology of flows of *qi* energies and substances, of destructive as well as constructive interaction of the five Elements, and of the astrological influence of stars, likewise harmful or benign' (2003: ix).
6. On occasion, however, officials did use local *fengshui* disputes for their own benefit, especially during Qing times (1644–1911) when state authorities attempted to limit foreign intervention (see, for example, Brun 2003: 9, 45–46, 65–71).
7. The very poor and those who died without descendants might be denied burial. Sometimes months or even years passed before urns were placed in tombs, and some urns were never entombed. One can see *li ta* – often they are dug into ledges – throughout the hills of the New Territories.
9. Until the late 1980s the village of Ha Tsuen and the Ha Tsuen Teng lineage were largely coterminous. However, in recent years many Ha Tsuen villagers have rented their old houses to 'outsiders' (non-lineage members) and built new houses on the periphery of the original village complex.
10. The residents of these two villages speak a sub-dialect of Cantonese that is common in the Pearl River Delta of Guangdong Province.
11. Hong Kong Island became a colony of Great Britain in 1841, following the first Opium War.
12. For discussion of punishment of these men see Wesley-Smith (1980: 70–71).
13. Village security forces filled the vacuum left by taxlords and their agents. 'Fees' were collected from local farmers and commercial premises were 'protected' by village guardsmen who staked out territory after 1899. The guardsmen were recognised by colonial officials and allowed to carry firearms during the early years of British rule (see J. Watson 1989).
14. For a different perspective see Palmer (1987: 84–93).
15. In 1914 there were nearly 4,450 posts in Hong Kong's public service; by 1939 the total had increased to just over 10,000. Miners points out that this increase paralleled the colony's population growth from 462,422 in 1911 to 1,050,000 in 1939. Prior to the Japanese Occupation, many Europeans were employed (in both high and low positions) in the colonial service (11.6% in 1914 and 1.1% in 1930). Many of these Europeans served as 'ordinary constables in the police force, warders in the prisons, inspectors in the Sanitary Department, overseers of labour in the Public Works Department, and as clerks in all branches of the government' (Miners 1987: 79). They received higher wages than non-Europeans; for example, a British constable was paid seven times the wage of his Chinese or Indian counterparts (Miners 1987: 79). Disparities of this nature were justified, Miners notes, on the

- 'dubious evidence that European subordinates were more trustworthy and less corrupt than Chinese and were more efficient at their work' (Miners 1987: 80). Although pressure for more local hires increased over time, Miners points out that 'progress in replacing Europeans by local staff was slow' (1987: 83). Nevertheless, pressure from the Colonial Office in London and from Chinese and Portuguese members of Hong Kong's Legislative Council grew during the 1930s, but the number of Chinese staff increased only slightly (Miners 1987: 83-84).
16. For examples of *jengshui* disputes during the nineteenth century on Hong Kong Island see Etzel (1985: 1-2).
 17. With the major exceptions of land registration, revenue collection and a Pax Britannica that accepted local control as long as it did not threaten British interests, New Territories people experienced considerable autonomy during the early years of Colonial administration. Village security forces continued to operate and male slavery and female domestic bondage continued until the 1920s (see J. Watson 1976; R. Watson 1991).
 18. For another description of the New Territories in 1898 see Groves 1969.
 19. Hong Kong's population increased from approximately 600,000 in 1945 to four million in 1970.
 20. For a discussion of Chinese government and European observers' perspectives on geomancy see Brun (2003: 34-72).
 21. J.S. Hoadley refers to Hong Kong's Chinese residents as 'willing subjects of a foreign government' (1970: 210).
 22. The right to vote was extended to those who were twenty-one years of age or older, had lived in Hong Kong for seven years, and had registered. For a discussion of District Board elections in 1980s see Lau and Kuan 1987.
 23. For discussion of Generalists-Specialists in Hong Kong's Colonial Service see Scott 1988.
 24. For a discussion of private land investment companies in the Hong Kong area during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries see Palmer (1987: 40-52).
 25. Yet another celebrated geomancy case, in which compensation was not the issue, involved not a government-inspired project but a private entrepreneur. The residents of Sheung Tsuen, a village in Pat Heung District, demanded that the developer of a massive, fifty million Hong Kong dollar columbarium (a bone ash depository) cease all operations. In 1992 and again in 1994 a coalition of villagers received a judgment from the Hong Kong Town Planning Board and finally the Town Planning Appeal Board against the project (and the developer, Treasure Base Development Company). The judgment required that the columbarium developer stop all work (*South China Morning Post* 28 May 1992; SCMP 9 October 1993). This case involved the active participation of Sheung Tsuen's *ah po* or 'old ladies' who literally 'womaned' the barricades and were the most visible protestors. Villagers also engaged in a march on the Town Planning Board on Hong Kong Island and orchestrated a very effective protest campaign in the local media. It is believed that the developer, who was well into the project when the protests began, lost nearly thirty million Hong Kong dollars.
- Villagers argued that the site would destroy their *jengshui* and bring bad fortune on the community. A series of deaths in Sheung Tsuen, attributed to disturbances caused by the development, provided clear evidence, villagers claimed, that the local balance of wind and water had to be restored (see SCMP 9 October 1993). In 1991 villagers swore an oath before their temple god, refusing to accept compensation from the developer, which would have split the community. An 84-year-old village woman is reported to have said: 'you never know what the

- developers and the Government have come up with ... We are always kept in the dark and the last ones to know what is really happening'. She went on to say that she and about twenty other elderly villagers were spending most of each day at the building site to block the developers from entering. 'Whenever we see them approach', she said, 'we stand in a human wall and point our sticks at them and hit them. So all they can do is just leave' (SCMP 28 May 1992).
26. Many rice fields had been turned into storage fields where containers - the kind that transport goods on land and sea and from ships to trucks - were stacked four to five high. Berrill blamed 'outsiders' who had leased the fields but urbanites blamed *bendiren* for their greed.
 27. For a discussion of *jengshui* in Hong Kong during the 1980s and 1990s see Waters 1997.
 28. Most manufacturing and thus many factories moved to China during the 1980s.
 29. For recent historical research on Hong Kong see, for example, Sinn 1989.
 30. For most people in Hong Kong *jengshui* serves as a handy weapon in the arsenal that one needs to be competitive in a rapidly changing urban environment. These are the consumers of the geomancy magazines, handbooks and television programs hosted by *jengshui* masters that are now so much a part of the Hong Kong scene. Like the forms of *jengshui* practiced in the New Territories, urban geomancy is a technical and an amoral system devoted to optimising one's place in the environment. But, urbanites are more likely to begin their *jengshui* questions with 'how' rather than 'why'. 'How can I move my desk to improve working relations in my office? How can I create better qi (energy) in my factory so that my workers are more productive (and I can make more money)? How can I rearrange my apartment to enhance relations with my spouse or children? Wind and water are perceived as natural forces, but in urban geomancy such forces operate within a highly built environment. Decisions regarding the location of apartments, factories or office buildings are not made by the occupiers of those spaces. Nonetheless, geomancy offers the people who must live in this built world an opportunity to secure their future by manipulating their personal spaces.
 31. To be successful in business a geomancer might tell his client to 'move your desk here', 'place a fish bowl there', or 'put a mirror on the veranda'.
 32. Lung (1980) provides a good illustration of '*jengshui* at work' in the creation of the walled village of Kat Hong Wai; see also Potter (1970: 142-43) and Knapp (1998).
 33. For a general discussion of political participation in Hong Kong see Lam 2004.

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