

FENGSHUI, LANDSCAPE, AND HISTORY 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 and 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, an agrarian landscape has been transformed beyond recognition. In this paper I explore how a cosmology that Hong Kong people call *fengshui* (literally "wind and water") informs local understandings of the environment.

Chinese *fengshui* (usually translated by the word 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 geomancer to place temples, houses, graves, and villages in a positive rela-

is deeply intertwined with the ancestor cult and can be considered integral to many local religious practices. 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. Chinese geomancy has been called a religion, a cosmological system, a feudal superstition, a form of divination, and proto-environmentalism. Although geomancy can be found in some form among Han people almost everywhere in China, governments from imperial times to the present have often been hostile to its popular practice. Chinese geomancy is highly localized, and disputes involving *fengshui*, many of which pit the interests of ordinary people against government-inspired development projects, can and often do give voice to anti-establishment views.

Geomancy plays an important role in the formation and maintenance of communities. 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. 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 grandfather's grave or redirect the stream so that wind and water can be reoriented and family prosperity renewed.

In Hong Kong's rural hinterland, each generation has been responsible for understanding wind and water to safeguard family prosperity and health.

The location of ancestral tombs was of utmost importance. Like many others in southeastern China, local



Old village house with red door gods, 1969. All photos by James Watson.

people practiced secondary burial. After death, the deceased was interred in a simple, unmarked grave. On an auspicious day chosen by a geomancer (usually seven or more 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 ta*); a geomancer was hired to find a good *fengshui* site, and a permanent tomb constructed. 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. 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 and later consumed at annual tomb rites.

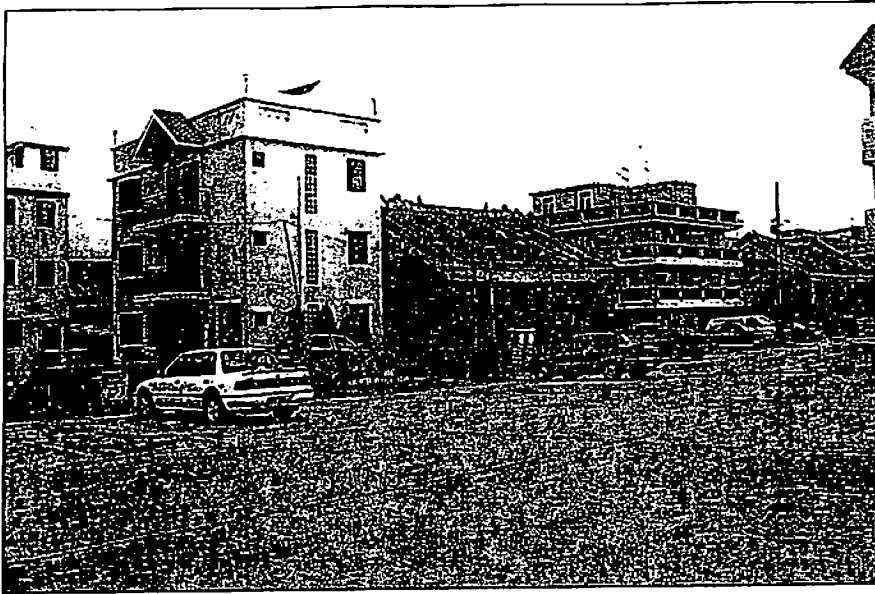
In the late 1970s, I lived in a Hong Kong village called Ha Tsuen, and for thirty years, I have continued to visit and conduct research there.

Established in the fourteenth century and consisting of a group of hamlets,

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tionship 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 teachings of *fengshui*. Among the people of rural Hong Kong, geomancy



New village houses and old temples, 1994.

“salt fields” (*han tian*) and canals that once served the local market. With the help of local villagers it was possible to visualize the outline of a lived-in past. Old men, who on sunny days could usually be found sitting outside the gates of Ha Tsuen’s main ancestral hall, imparted a physicality to the past as they talked of lineage history and historic sites. Sites, it should be noted, that were often distinguished by features of the landscape with *fengshui* names. Walks along village paths might occasion 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 David Lowenthal’s words, the landscape, both natural and built, was very much part of the “tangible past.”³

Nevertheless, the local landscape was changing and the pace of change was quickening. During the 1970s and 1980s, New Towns, housing hundreds of thousands, were built in the New Territories. Of course, environmental change was nothing new. 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 entrepreneurs. There are, however, significant differences between the low-tech conversion projects that characterized the delta until the 1950s and the mechanized, high-speed reclamations that convert marshes 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.

By the 1990s, Ha Tsuen’s recognizable and intimately known environment had been transformed. Hills had disappeared, huge drainage systems altered the flow of streams, rail lines snaked through nearby fields, shipping container parks dotted the countryside, and a New Town—Tin Shui Wai—was taking shape just a few hundred yards from Ha Tsuen’s main ancestral hall and market. Tin Shui Wai was built on land reclaimed from an expanse of salt marshes that, in the view of local residents, had funneled prosperity-laden *fengshui* to Ha Tsuen for centuries. In 1993 and again in 1994, during my return visits to Hong Kong, Ha Tsuen villagers and colonial officials discussed the question of a *fengshui* corridor that would pass through Tin Shui Wai New Town and, in the official view, safeguard the flow

of wind and water. Villagers, however, were less than confident of the government’s corridor; and expected the government to pay for a special ritual of placation (*fasi*) that would at least propitiate the powers—spiritual and natural—from which they feared they had been cut off.

For their part, government officials were clearly proud of the Tin Shui Wai development, which would house tens of thousands of people. I was told that the flooding that once had 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 tunneled, huge drainage canals now passed through the village, and tens of thousands of “outsiders” were now on their doorstep; but, I was assured, there had been no major residential disruptions to the villagers themselves.

As my interviews with colonial officials continued, however, the language of the planner and property developer was increasingly interspersed with allusions to *fengshui*. In part this was due to my questions, but it also reflected the interests and enthusiasms of the officials themselves. Yes, they confirmed, a compensation payment for a *fasi* ritual had been made in 1991 after villagers claimed that tunneling in the Ha Tsuen hills had ruptured the “veins of the dragon.” Yes, a *fengshui* corridor had been built into Tin Shui Wai. But, the longer we talked the more it became clear that there was something more here than a concern with good government. These officials—by the 1990s, they were 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 *fasi* rituals, dragons’ veins, and compensation payments are quaint, coun-

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GUY TILLIM NAMED THE FIRST RECIPIENT OF THE ROBERT GARDNER FELLOWSHIP IN PHOTOGRAPHY

In December 2006, the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology announced that Mr. Guy Tillim, an award-winning documentary still photographer from South Africa, would be the first recipient of the Robert Gardner Fellowship in Photography, beginning January 2000. Tillim began his professional career in 1986 and worked as a freelance photo-journalist for the local and foreign media, including Reuters and Agence France-Presse. He has exhibited in more than a dozen countries and published in numerous volumes and journals. His work has focused on documenting social conflict and inequality in the countries of Africa. From teenage soldiers in Rwanda to civil war in Congo to the dislocation of entire populations in Angola, Tillim

returns to lands whose violence he once covered as a journalist to recover the shadows that violence produced in the people and lands. In the words of arts curator Michket Krifa, "Tillim... combines a profound sense of historic documentation of African countries ravaged by conflicts and tragedies of all kinds and a very stringent formal aesthetic devoid of all mannerism."

Tillim has received many awards for his work including the Prix SCAM (Societe Civile des Auteurs Multimedia) Roger Pic in 2002, the Higashikawa Overseas Photographer Award (Japan) in 2003, the 2004 DaimlerChrysler Award for South African photography, and the 2005 Leica Oskar Barnack Award.

The Robert Gardner Fellowship in Photography funds an "established

practitioner of the photographic arts to create and subsequently publish through the Peabody Museum a major book of photographs on the human condition anywhere in the world." The Fellowship committee invites nominations from experts around the world; nominees are reviewed and selected by a committee of three. The Fellowship provides a stipend of \$50,000. The fellowship is unique in its dedication to funding professional documentary photography. The Fellowship was given by Robert Gardner, award-winning documentary filmmaker and author, whose films including "Dead Birds" and "Forest of Bliss" and books *Gardens of War* and *A Human Document* have entered the permanent canon of non-fiction filmmaking.

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tivity 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; for them, like Hong Kong's urbanites, it now operates in the realm of personal meaning and local pride.

For Ha Tsuen villagers, most 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 meaningful 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 seems less and less inclined to listen to their claims for attention.

After considerable debate, protest, and behind the scenes maneuvering New Territories indigenes have retained some of the privileges that

they enjoyed under the British. At this writing, they can still claim land to build village houses, although this privilege is now subject to modification and increasing restriction. Ancestral halls and tombs continue to receive protection, and patrilineal succession to ancestral estates (which can carry significant financial rewards) is still recognized. Women, however, have been given inheritance rights to private (family) property, which was a bitter blow to many villagers.⁴

In what James Hayes refers to as the "transition from resident to citizen," indigene privileges have taken a beating.⁵ *Fengshui* no longer guides the creation of the New Territories landscape. It seems unlikely that geomancy can offer a creative response to the highly built environment that surrounds—in some cases envelops—many New Territories villages. Geomancy still guides the location of graves and tombs, but one suspects that unfettered access to the steep, green hills where ancestors are buried—and, in an important sense, the New Territories' past resides—will soon be challenged by new develop-

ments and development agendas.

1. The preceding discussion is based on my own field research in rural Hong Kong as well as the work of others: Ole Brun, *Fengshui in China: Geomantic Divination between State Orthodoxy and Popular Religion*, 2003; Jack Potter, "Wind, Water, Bones, and Souls: The Religious World of the Cantonese Peasant," *Journal of Oriental Studies* 8:139–153, 1970; James L. Watson, "Presidential Address: Virtual Kinship, Real Estate and Diaspora Formation—the Man Lineage Revisited," *Journal of Asian Studies* 63:893–910, 2004; Rubie Watson, "Remembering the Dead: Graves and Politics in Southeastern China," in *Death Ritual in Late Imperial and Modern China* ed. By James L. Watson and Evelyn Rawski, 1988; Peter Wesley-Smith, *Unequal Treaty, 1898–1997: China, Great Britain and Hong Kong's New Territories*, 1980.
2. Austin Coates, *Myself a Mandarin: Memories of a Special Magistrate*, 1968, p. 170.
3. David Lowenthal, *The Past Is a Foreign Country*, 1985.
4. Sally Merry and Rachele E. Stern, "The Female Inheritance Movement in Hong Kong: Theorizing the Local/Global Interface," *Current Anthropology* 46:387–410, 2005.
5. James Hayes, *Friends and Teachers: Hong Kong and its People, 1953–1987*, 1996, pp. 280, 296.