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Geomancy and the Environment in Premodern Taiwan

Abstract

This paper examines the relationship between the environment and the practice of geomancy in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Taiwan. Citing such legal records as rulings, contracts, and deeds, it demonstrates that the geomantic approach to the environment, which emphasized conservation of the "numinous" landscape, frequently came into conflict with the opposite, utilitarian approach, which treated nature as an exploitable economic resource. However, it also shows that, despite frequent confrontations, the two approaches could in fact be fruitfully reconciled under certain circumstances. Thus geomancy in premodern Taiwan was not an unbendable ideology, but was amenable to practical compromises that took into account both the geomantic and the economic interests of the people involved.

Key words: Chinese geomancy—environment—burial—folk religion—Taiwan

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IT HAS SOMETIMES been pointed out that Chinese geomancy (*dili* 地理 or *fengshui* 風水), the art of locating beneficial sites on the landscape in accordance with the flow of cosmic forces, may be understood as a premodern form of environmental or ecological science.[1] In this paper I shall explore some aspects of the relation between the practice of geomancy and the environment in pre-twentieth-century Taiwan. I shall not discuss, however, the compatibility between geomancy and modern notions of the environment.

As a technique of and discourse on siting, geomancy not only interprets the environment on the basis of certain assumptions but also has practical implications for the environment itself. Fundamental to its practice is the belief that there exists an interactive relationship between human beings and the numinous environment in which they live. That the natural environment is numinous and "alive" is a notion deriving from the more general belief that the entire universe is suffused with cosmic forces (*qi* 氣). Some of these forces are beneficial to humans and life forms in general while others are malignant. Prudence requires that humans try to harness the good influences and avoid those which are harmful. In addition to quality, the quantity of cosmic forces also makes a difference. Depending on the time and place, the forces may wax or wane; they encourage growth when in the right quantity but become harmful when deficient or in excess. Hence gauging the flow of cosmic forces is just as important as discerning their quality.[2]

These forces, as a key component of the universe, impregnate the earth, moving along certain underground conduits known as "veins" (also called *longmai* 龍脈, "dragon veins") and concentrating at nodal points called *xue* 穴 ("caverns"). While the forces themselves are invisible and intangible, the network of veins and caverns manifests itself to the trained eye in the form of topographical features. For example, a row of hillocks suggests the extension of a vein beneath, while a valley of a certain shape indicates the location of an underground cavern. But geomancy is not mere "topomancy," for it also takes into account the condition of the vegetation when seeking to inter-

pret the hidden quality of the landscape. Thus lush vegetation is taken as a sign of an abundant supply of vital forces, whereas withered plants betray an overwhelming presence of harmful influences (*shaqi* 殺氣)

The belief that humans in particular are influenced by the forces that suffuse the earth follows from the fact that humans are not just a part of the universe but are necessarily earthbound as well. There is thus a need for them to act in accordance with the cosmic attributes of the landscape on which they live in order to maximize benefits and avoid harm. In other words, by detecting and then conforming to the dynamic cosmic order embodied in the earth, humans can better position themselves to receive the positive influences of the universe.

But the assumption of an interactive relationship also allows for influences to be exerted in the reverse direction: from humans to the cosmic forces through the mediation of the environment. This means humans are not just passively under the influence of these forces, but are actively capable of manipulating them through the preservation, modification, or even destruction of essential features of the landscape. It is in this two-way relationship that one finds geomantic practices impinging on the natural environment. Human effort is necessary for the preservation of the advantageous features of a site so that its geomantic worth does not diminish over time. Conversely, whenever the environmental integrity of a geomantic site is compromised it is up to the people affected to contain and reverse the damage. The record shows that sites may even be sabotaged by competing parties who are intent on undermining each other's fortunes (BAKER 1979, 148–49, 219–25).

In this paper I shall analyze a selection of legal cases from eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Taiwan in which the geomantic approach to the environment came into conflict with a utilitarian approach that treated the environment as a repository of economic resources fit for exploitation. Such cases of social conflict were selected to highlight the practical relevance of geomancy to the environment rather than its theoretical possibilities as a philosophical system.

GEOMANCY AND GRAVES

In the popular belief system of premodern Taiwan, graves had special geomantic significance. If built properly in the right location—that is, either along a vein or on a cavern—they would provide the living with privileged access to beneficial cosmic forces. On the contrary, poor siting and a defective structure would prevent them from producing the desired results, if not turn them into a source of misfortune. In fact, burial sites and geomancy were so inseparably linked in premodern Taiwanese culture that graves were called *fengshui*—geomancy—in the local dialect.[3] The people of Taiwan

thus approached the siting and upkeep of graves with great care. Every family had a stake in the correct placement of a grave, and to ensure the grave's continued efficacy it had to preserve the environmental integrity of the burial site.

Ideally, nothing on the site should be changed once the grave had been sealed according to a specialist's prescription. For in a universe where all parts are interrelated, any change in the environment on the surface of the earth inevitably affects the flow of cosmic forces beneath. In principle this conservationist attitude should lead to the creation of a miniature "nature reserve" every time a grave was built, for not only was the burial site itself considered inviolable but the surrounding area too had to be kept free from intrusive human action. In practice, however, the record shows that one family's geomantic interest in its graves often clashed with the economic interests of other families. While a particular family was bound by duty (and self-interest) to prevent changes to the environment of its ancestral graves, other people were tempted by the natural resources found on and around the same sites. There was thus an irony here: the better preserved the environment of a burial site, the more attractive it appeared to potential trespassers. Unguarded sites provided grazing for herdsmen and firewood for peasants ever hungry for fuel. Even earth and stone might be removed for use as construction material.

The petition of a certain Wang Chaogang 王朝綱 is typical of the conflict between the geomantic and utilitarian approaches to the natural environment around a burial site. Wang, a *juren* 舉人 (holder of the intermediate degree), petitioned the magistrate of Jiayi 嘉義 County in 1827 for an order to stop peasants from damaging his mother's grave (TYJY 1966, 463). He complained that villagers took their cattle to graze on the burial site and thereby stripped the land of its protective vegetation, making it susceptible to erosion from the heavy rains. He was worried that if the illegal herding was not stopped in time then soil erosion would eventually cause the grave mound to collapse. Since repeated interventions by community elders (*qilao* 耆老) and monks from a nearby temple had failed to dissuade the offenders, Wang asked for an official order of prohibition. The magistrate granted his request.

A similar injunction was obtained in 1813 by a Wang Xunming 王遜鳴 from the magistrate of Taiwan County (TYJY 1966, 441–42). The supplicant, a *shengyuan* 生員 (holder of the first degree), requested an order of protection for the grave of his grandfather, a military officer who was killed while battling rebels and was subsequently included in the roster of individuals receiving imperial sacrifices. In recognition of the deceased's distinguished service to the throne, the magistrate ordered that such activities as herding,

felling trees, constructing roads, and building new graves be forbidden at the burial site. He ordered surveyors sent to determine and clearly mark the boundaries of the graveyard.

Both cases concerned essentially the same matter, namely, the preservation of the environmental integrity of ancestral graves. Although the records contain neither the word "geomancy" nor any technical geomantic terms, in light of the general identification of graves with geomancy, the complaints had to stem, at least in part, from geomantic concerns. In the first case the complaint arose out of a specific transgression: grazing caused soil erosion, which in turn threatened to destroy the grave and expose the remains inside. Should the burial ground be violated, its geomantic value would be nullified and the descendants would suffer as a consequence. The second case was a preventive effort of a more sweeping nature: a prohibition was sought that would bar all attempts by others to exploit the natural resources of the burial site.

Whatever the specifics, these cases had the same effect on the environment: parts of the landscape came under legal protection against human exploitation because of the presence of graves. Yet the very existence of these petitions and rulings shows that there were conflicting standards for determining the value of particular parts of the environment, with the geomantic approach under constant threat from the economic, utilitarian approach.

Geomancy and Communal Cemeteries

In premodern Taiwan the protection of burial sites was a concern not just of individual families but of communities as well. While wealthy families could bury their dead in specially chosen sites located on private land, the majority of commoners lacked such means and had to settle for communal graveyards. Hence, just as families had a stake in preserving the environmental integrity of their ancestral burial sites, communities had an interest in preventing degradation of their common burial grounds. While a family paid attention only to the graves of its kin, a community assumed responsibility for the overall condition of its communal cemetery. The following cases provide evidence that communities related to public cemeteries in essentially the same way that families did to ancestral graves.

A group of community leaders—including a *gongsheng* 貢生 (tribute student), several *shengyuan*, and a *yinyang sheng* 陰陽生 (student of geomancy)—appealed to the magistrate of Taiwan County and obtained a ban in 1802 on the environmental destruction of the county's communal cemeteries (*yizhong* 義塚, TYJY 1966, 437–39). The petitioners pointed out in their complaint that the cemeteries in the north and south of the county had been made barren by peasants who, in defiance of a standing prohibition, habitu-

ally cleared shrub for fuel, extracted earth, and grazed their cattle on the sites. Heavy rains then caused landslides in various parts of the unprotected landscape, leading to the collapse of burial mounds and the exposure of the remains inside. In response, the magistrate reaffirmed the earlier order that nobody be allowed to injure the flora or alter the topography of the cemeteries. The peasants were instructed to gather fuel and hay on "unclaimed land" (*kuangpu huangshan* 曠埔荒山).

Just a few years later a similar complaint was filed in another part of Taiwan. In 1813 a group of local leaders, headed by a *jiansheng* 監生 (student of the Imperial Academy) and a *gongsheng* from Zhanghua 彰化 County in central Taiwan, made an appeal to a magistrate concerning the condition of their community's cemeteries (TYJY 1962, 83–84). They claimed that since former times several pieces of uncultivated land on the periphery of their community had been reserved as common burial ground. However, in spite of an existing injunction, "unscrupulous people" with a desire for profit had recently begun removing earth and digging up trees from these places. Their activity caused so much damage to the sites that landslides had occurred, ruining the structures of graves. The magistrate confirmed the standing ban and ordered an end to the destructive activity. He also added that cattle should not be allowed to stray onto sites where they might trample on graves.

The tension between the "conservationists" and the "exploiters" was not confined to central Taiwan, but has been documented for the northern part of the island as well. A ruling issued in Danshui 淡水 in 1851 is an example of an official attempt to arbitrate the conflicting interests of licensed colonists (*kenhu* 墾戶) and those concerned with the geomantic integrity of their graves (RTKC 1910–11, 3:296–98). The ruling decided on two points. First, the colonists were to stop encroaching on communal cemeteries that had been set up on unclaimed land (*kuangdi* 曠地) and uncultivated hilltops (*puding* 埔頂). Boundary markers were to be reestablished to clearly delineate the borders of the burial ground. Second, even on the land to which the colonists held valid leases, inhabitants of nearby villages were to be allowed, upon payment of a fee, to bury their dead on locations deemed unsuitable for cultivation.

In 1881 the magistrate of Xinzhu 新竹 County issued an injunction under similar circumstances (RTKC 1910–11, 3:300). In this case the communal burial ground was threatened by people who removed boundary markers in order to cultivate on land reserved for burial purposes. They also ran the oxcarts they used for transportation over the graves, causing the graves' superstructures to collapse and exposing the coffins inside. Responding to the complaint of the village leaders, the magistrate upheld

the sanctity of the communal cemetery and warned people against engaging in "private undertakings" (*yingsi* 營私) on communal property.

The above cases show that local communities guarded public cemeteries from encroachment by individuals as jealously as families protected their ancestral graves. Concerned about damaged graves, community leaders regularly resorted to legal remedies. The magistrates in turn fully supported the claims that public cemeteries were communal property of a special sort, not just a kind of wilderness that anybody could claim as he saw fit. But herein lies the crux of the issue: the arbitrary nature of defining the attributes of a piece of land. For instance, the magistrate of Taiwan (TYJY 1966, 437–39) made a distinction between a communal cemetery and unclaimed wilderness in his ruling, suggesting the existence of some objective difference between the two types of land. Meanwhile, another case from Zhanghua shows that communal cemeteries were, by the supplicants' own admission, located on *huangshan* 荒山, "hills without owners" (TYJY 1962, 83–84). Yet, ruling in favor of the petitioners, the magistrate of Zhanghua County defined the same sites as *zhongshan* 塚山, or "burial hills," and thereby denied access to anybody not intending to use them for this purpose. The difficulty of establishing and enforcing a unitary, geomantic definition of a piece of land highlights the fundamental arbitrariness of such definitions, whether sanctioned by state authority or the result of convention.

Although the cases reviewed so far provide useful insights into the social conflicts stemming from the contradiction between the geomantic and utilitarian approaches to the environment, they contain no explicit information on the geomantic reasoning behind the people's concern for their graveyards. For a glimpse into the conceptual world of geomantic practices we must turn to another case. In 1815 another appeal was made to the same Zhanghua magistracy (TYJY 1962, 87–88). The petitioners, consisting of *linsheng* 廩生 (students on government stipend), *shengyuan*, *jiansheng*, and *zhiyuan* 職員 (unofficial village leaders), complained that despite an earlier ban, large-scale illegal excavation was under way in the communal cemeteries on the outskirts of the county seat. Earth and stones were being taken illegally from the sites for sale. The complaint asserted that the digging had dire consequences for the community, as it had cut into the "dragon vein that passed under the county" (*xianlong guomai* 縣龍過脈), turned the "propitious burial land" (*xiusha* 秀砂) into "baleful stars" (*shayao* 殺曜),[4] and "inflicted injuries all over the dragon body" (*longti* 龍體), that is, the landscape. Recognizing the need to protect the cemeteries and thereby preserve the county's dragon vein (*xianzhi longmai* 縣治龍脈), the county magistrate upheld the petitioners' claim and banned further excavation as well as encroachment by land-hungry colonists.

Here the significance of public cemeteries for the communities concerned is articulated in clear geomantic terms. Like burial sites belonging to individual families, communal cemeteries were thought to be located on critical spots in a numinous landscape. These sites were animated by cosmic forces and possessed a cosmological significance—hence the active influence they had on the living. Because the sites were communally owned, environmental injury to them was thought to harm everyone in the surrounding villages. In fact, the integrity of certain important sites was equated with the fortunes of the entire county. The prevention of illegal excavation and reclamation thus became a legitimate concern not only for the immediate residents but also for the imperial government. The rulings cited above show that, in cases involving burial sites, county magistrates regularly and unequivocally supported the geomantic approach over the utilitarian. But perhaps the most interesting point about these cases is the evidence they provide that the geomantic approach was repeatedly ignored, even when supported by official injunctions. That prohibitions had to be reissued for the same sites is the best proof that the utilitarian approach to the environment constantly threatened to subvert the nominal consensus on the geomantic value of certain parts of the landscape.

Geomancy and the Landscape

As explained at the beginning of this paper, the basis of the belief that graves and cemeteries need protection from environmental degradation is the assumption that the earth itself is suffused with active cosmic forces. Accordingly, the alteration of locations other than burial sites may also constitute a cause for alarm. In Taiwan there were cases where families and communities took legal action to prevent the environmental degradation of places that, although unrelated to the dead, were nonetheless deemed geomantically vital to the welfare of the living.

Some insights into how individual Taiwanese understood the geomantic significance of the environment can be gained from a lease dated to 1895. The landlord, Huang Anbang 黃安邦 of northern Taiwan, took the geomantic aspect of his land so seriously that he stipulated in the lease that the tenant was not to initiate any excavation on his property (RTKC 1910–11, 1:65). While the tenant was granted the right to grow rice, tea, and fruit trees, he was expressly prohibited from mining for coal. Significantly, the justification given was not economic but geomantic: the lease stated that since "people prospered only if the land was efficacious" (*renjie youyu diling* 人傑由于地靈), mining was not permitted because of its harmful effects on the dragon vein. It warned that should the tenant breach the agreement, the landlord would summon the entire community to castigate him

(*chuanzhong gongzhu* 傳衆公誅).

If, as the lease indicates, the community had a vested interest in the preservation of the geomantic efficacy of one of its members' land, it should not be difficult to imagine that it guarded with a particular vigilance those sites believed to affect the entire community. Take the case of a market town near Danshui, where in 1867 a group of community leaders sought a formal ban on excavation on a dragon vein that fed into the town (RTKC 1906, 1:230–31). They claimed that as the beneficiary of the positive forces channeled by the vein, which took the form of a roll of hillocks, the town had flourished and grown to its present size of several thousand households. They claimed that once in the recent past the site had been endangered by some villains who had quarried stone on the efficacious feature of the landscape. The community had successfully resisted and put a stop to the destructive project. Furthermore, the damaged landscape had been restored and offerings made to propitiate the offended dragon spirit (*longshen* 龍神). The petitioners were worried, however, that in the future unscrupulous people would again be tempted to injure the geomantic vein, if only to extort money from the concerned villagers. Thus they sought an official ban on excavation on the site. The magistrate agreed and an order was issued to that effect.

These examples show that the Chinese inhabitants of Taiwan attributed geomantic significance not just to burial sites but to other parts of the landscape as well, and that as a result they took an active interest in the protection of any site considered to be of particular geomantic importance. Just as well-preserved graves and cemeteries had beneficial effects on the descendants of those buried there, the environmental integrity of nonburial geomantic sites had a crucial impact on the continued well-being of the communities concerned. But, as the last case shows, even though this broad notion of geomantic efficacy helped to create pockets of "nature reserves" in and around many human settlements on Taiwan, it also increased the chances of disputes between groups of people who took contrary approaches to the environment.

Conclusion

From the above discussion it is clear that the practice of geomancy had real, although rather limited, consequences for the conservation of the environment in Taiwan. The various applications of the geomantic notion of a numinous and interactive universe encouraged the people of premodern Taiwan to set aside certain sites and stretches of land for protection against economic exploitation. But the very existence of the legal records demon-

strates that geomantic thinking was by no means the sole standard for deciding how a particular piece of land should be used. Rather, it is precisely because the geomantic interpretation of the landscape was regularly and widely challenged that we have these court injunctions engraved on stone as a warning to potential trespassers—and thereby preserved for present-day historians.

At one level the cases cited may be interpreted in narrow, legalistic terms. From this perspective they represent legal actions taken by individuals and communities to assert and vindicate their control over their properties. As the lawful owners—or at least legitimate users—they claimed the right to either leave the land fallow or reserve it for the exclusive purpose of burial. Hence peasants who felled trees and herded cattle on burial grounds were branded trespassers and forbidden from infringing upon the rights of the lawful proprietors, while those who quarried stone were censured for engaging in "private profiteering" at the expense of the public interest.

But there is another level of meaning to these conflicts. For the disputes between owners/users and trespassers represented not only a conflict over property rights but also a clash between two different approaches to the environment. Those who used a piece of land for burial insisted on understanding it in geomantic terms and were therefore determined to protect it from any form of utilitarian exploitation. They attempted to prevent others from changing the environment of such sites, not because they themselves wanted to exploit the sites' natural resources but because they did not want to alter their delicate position in the geomantic scheme of cosmic forces. Meanwhile, those who had no cognizance of the geomantic attributes of a site saw the same piece of land as nothing other than a repository of natural resources. The underutilized resources of burial grounds and other geomantic sites were thus tempting targets for people who took a utilitarian and materialistic approach to the landscape. The cases analyzed so far documented an ongoing struggle between these two approaches to the environment.

We should, however, resist dichotomizing the geomantic and the utilitarian approaches. That they often clashed does not mean they were irreconcilable in all circumstances. An 1857 land deed shows how compromises were possible (RTKC 1910–11, 3:17–18).[5] The sellers of a piece of ancestral land stipulated that a particular portion of the property was not to be converted into rice paddies, although it could be used to grow vegetables. The reason was that the sellers considered this particular spot to be part of a dragon vein connected to an ancestral grave on another part of the land sold. What is interesting about this sale is that, although the buyer was forbidden to disturb the burial site in any way, he was allowed to utilize within certain limits an associated geomantic site. In other words, in spite of their concern

about the continual efficacy of the dragon vein, the original owners were willing to accept a moderate form of farming on it, rejecting only the sort of drastic modifications required by rice cultivation. A balance was thus struck between geomantic and economic interests.

An even more revealing case comes from Zhanghua County. In 1830 several individuals entered into a joint venture (RTKC 1910–11, 2: 321–23). In response to the local magistrate's call, they signed an agreement to reforest the community's cemetery so as to fortify the county's dragon vein, which had been damaged by illegal quarrying. The remedial project was deemed necessary because the community had suffered disturbances and disasters as a result of the violation of the landscape. But the individuals concerned added a twist to this ostensibly public-spirited undertaking by stipulating in the same document that after the trees had matured they would be felled and sold as lumber! It is unfortunate that we have no information on the outcome of the investment plan—whether it yielded profit or was abandoned because of opposition from the other villagers. What can be inferred from the contract is that for at least some Taiwanese, geomancy was not antithetical to the profit motive even with regard to the same site. The gentlemen from Zhanghua were apparently oblivious to the contradiction inherent in their decision to plant trees for geomantic reasons, then later cut the very same trees for profit.

It seems that geomancy, like modern environmentalism, was open to a wide range of interpretations by interested parties (CYLKE 1983). Geomancy could work in opposition to the utilitarian approach under one set of conditions, yet reconcile itself with economic interests under a different set of conditions. In this sense the environmental implications of geomancy cannot be deduced from its philosophical aspects but will have to be understood with reference to actual practice.

NOTES

1. There are quite a number of works on Chinese geomancy, ranging from scholarly to popular. For the basic concepts and theories, see FEUCHTWANG 1974 and MARCH 1968. Useful anthropological information on Fujian and Guangdong (including Hong Kong) can be found in BAKER 1979; FREEDMAN 1966 (118–54) and 1979 (189–211); and the *Journal of the Hongkong Branch, Royal Asiatic Society*. On practices in Taiwan, see AHERN 1973 and SANGREN 1987. For modern attempts at application, see LIP 1989; LO 1994; and LOW 1995. It is interesting to note that until as late as the 1960s opinions on geomancy among Westerners were overwhelmingly negative (MARCH 1968). Since then anthropological writing has tended to treat geomancy as a system of folk knowledge. Latter-day advocates of the art like to stress that what they practice is not only rational but indeed scientific.

2. The reader is referred to FEUCHTWANG 1974 and MARCH 1968 for more information on the concepts and principles of geomancy. The scope of this paper allows but the briefest

account necessary for elucidating the legal cases that constitute the paper's focus. Ambiguities in geomancy as a system of thought, especially regarding the qualitative and quantitative nature of *qi*, are not discussed as they are not directly relevant to the analytical thrust of the paper. I am grateful to Alan Chan for alerting me to the many theoretical ambiguities in geomantic thinking.

3. Land deeds from this period show that graves were frequently referred to as *fengshui* rather than the standard term *fenmu* 墳墓 or its variations (RTKC 1906, 1:167–74; 1910–11, 3:1–20). The reverse is true in formal writing: for example, in the rulings of county magistrates graves are usually called *fenmu* instead of *fengshui*. The difference in the convention of linguistic use shows that in the popular consciousness of premodern Taiwan graves were understood first and foremost as geomantic structures.

4. *Sha* 砂, literally "sand" or "gravel," is another term for geomantic sites. The connection between geomantic sites and stars is apparent from the structure of the geomancer's compass, which has concentric circles showing various correlative combinations of directions, hours, seasons, the hexagrams, and stars. Hence the quality of a site may be described in terms of its heavenly correlation. I am grateful to Lee Cheuk Yin for bringing the geomancer's compass to my attention. See HOU 1979 for a discussion of the belief in baleful stars in Chinese literature.

5. The geographic origin of this document is not specified in the source.

ABBREVIATIONS

RTKC: Rinji Taiwan Kyūkan Chōsakai 臨時台灣舊慣調查會
TYJY: Taiwan Yinhang Jingji Yenjiushi 台灣銀行經濟研究室

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