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Between Fengshui and Neighbors: Case Studies of Participant-Led House-Making in Rural East China

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Between Fengshui and Neighbors: Case Studies of Participant-Led House-Making in Rural East China Youcao Ren and Jan Woudstra

ABSTRACT China’s ongoing rural transition has led to dramatic infrastructural improvements in rural areas, yet local culture continues to decline. In rural east China fengshui has traditionally informed local building practice and has been revived since the “Reform and Opening” policy of 1978. It is practiced in those regions that have not yet been subjected to wholesale demolition and renewal, where residents are able to express a distinct connection to their homes. Adhering to fengshui enables an everyday placemaking process of engagement involving both practitioner and villagers. Through ethnographic field studies in rural Zhejiang province, this paper reveals how in a period of rapid rural transition the engagement with and (re)interpretation of fengshui contribute to the preservation of local building culture and community spirit. We argue that the findings indicate a need for much greater resident involvement in rural regeneration projects.

Introduction

We are saying farewell to agrarian China.¹ With the release of the 2016 “National Population Development Plan” that declares the intention to accommodate 70 percent of the country’s population in

urban areas by 2030, the intense pressure to develop has extended beyond the mega-cities to lower-tier cities. In parallel to this unprecedented urban development is a striking rural decline that has become arguably one of the country's biggest concerns.² From the early communist era onwards, China adopted a dual-track development structure, urban and rural, to facilitate the country's economic transformation. Policies for urban and rural development were seen as separate issues, causing substantial urban-rural disparities that have resulted in "one country, two societies."³ The rural sector contributed greatly by making significant sacrifices to enable urban growth – the requisition of rural land for urban expansion is the most visible of these.⁴ At the same time, young labor is transferred to cities in order to support industrial development. Villages therefore suffer from persistent depopulation,⁵ leading to significant aging among those who stay behind and the abandonment of agricultural land and rural housing.⁶

Since the turn of the new millennium rural development has therefore been considered a national priority. In China's most recent "Five-Year Plan for National Economic and Social Development," published in 2020, the focus persists. Rural development has been identified as the key to achieving prosperity for all. The successful delivery of this ambitious target, as indicated in the five-year plan, requires the implementation of a consistent urban-rural development strategy referred to as "coordinated development."⁷ This involves paying renewed attention to the rural sector, as well as meeting ongoing goals for urbanization.

The country's determination to improve rural development is manifested in the "New Socialist Countryside," a multi-layered rural development policy framework implemented since 2005, and intensified by the 2018 "Rural Revitalization Strategy." Both policies highlight the importance of improving built infrastructure in rural areas to ease the problems of the hollowing-out of villages through depopulation. One of the priorities is the spatial restructuring of rural areas through the consolidation of currently fragmented populations, settlements, and agricultural land. In this way the efficiency of public infrastructure and social services is optimized, as is that of agriculture.⁸ In practice this approach means that rural settlements are concentrated, thus becoming larger, and, more than ever, centralized.

While rural infrastructure is being rapidly improved, particularly in the east coast region,⁹ efforts to retain rural culture continue to fail. In the Yangtze River Delta, China's urban development paradigm, it is projected that the nation's target of a population that is 70 percent urban will be achieved by 2025; the figure is currently 60 percent.¹⁰ At the same time, this region reveals the most serious rural decline in the whole country. Villages have lost their identity as a result of top-down approaches to rural transition that seldom appreciate local characteristics.¹¹ The continuing neglect of local practices means that efforts to regenerate rural life fail to involve proper investigation and are

implemented without being subjected to local public scrutiny. The relationship between rural residents and their living environment remains poorly understood.

This is particularly evident in twentieth-century villages. While a number of Chinese villages are now classed as historic, and some of them have become renowned for their architectural form and are celebrated as tourist destinations, the vast majority are “new” villages dating from the early communist period. By the beginning of the Reform era in the late 1970s, China’s rural population had increased to 790 million from 400 million in 1949;¹² it reached a peak of 859 million in 1995.¹³ This came with a vast increase in the number of villages and rapidly expanding rural housing, mostly built by the villagers themselves with little top-down interference. These new villages have irregular layouts; many are “natural villages” that originated from single extended families or clans. With their “earthbound” social structure and lifestyle, the villages were renowned for their stability.¹⁴ A strong attachment to their homes leads residents to continually rebuild family houses and infill neighboring spaces with additional rooms as required. Spatial decisions about where and how to build are taken through improvisation and negotiation, in stark contrast to urban practices, where all environments, inside and outside, are designed for people without their participation. It is also different from the newly developed rural settlements and townships where residents are increasingly expected to adopt an “urban style” of living.¹⁵ The activities of improvisation and negotiation have not been studied in the belief that they are outdated or unprofessional, particularly as they do not adhere to modern planning conventions. Yet these culturally specific practices involve a whole range of rules and traditions that call into question the architect’s role and the usual architectural terms of engagement with community, site and builder.¹⁶

This paper sheds light on everyday practices of village building, or village making, through the lens of fengshui. Since the “Reform and Opening Up” policy of 1978 China has witnessed a reinvestment in fengshui (风水. 风: wind; 水: water) as part of a general religious revival. In rural and peri-urban areas on the east coast fengshui is again having a considerable impact on house-building and burial, both understood as aspects of a communal culture shared among residents, after having been prohibited between the 1950s and the 1970s.¹⁷ While the significance of fengshui has been extensively discussed in relation to historic architecture and village planning,¹⁸ its role in the twentieth-century villages, which are in the majority, has not been explored.¹⁹ This is the starting point for this paper, which investigates ongoing fengshui in light of rural transition and explores its importance in engaging rural residents and preserving local building cultures. This is nowhere more important than in China’s transforming countryside, which through constant depopulation and rapid redevelopment has suffered a loss of continuity.

Nowadays fengshui is practiced openly; it is neither mysterious nor occult; it is communicated in simple terms among participants. In today's Zhejiang province, the core region of the Yangtze River Delta, fengshui's considerable impact on rural house-making and burial continues. Fengshui practitioners, the individuals who have been specifically trained in reading a fengshui compass as well as the surroundings and to orientate dwellings and graves, fulfill tasks that in a modern society would normally be carried out by architecture and planning professionals.²⁰ Observing the processes of the fengshui practitioner can help us better understand the needs and concerns of rural communities and the features of local building culture. An understanding of these aspects may help in reformulating rural policies and assist in promoting participatory design and democratic decision-making, which is urgent in China given that the problems of rural depopulation and decline affect the nation as a whole.²¹ Our intention in this article is to highlight fengshui practice as an agent of local building culture and a tool of communication between neighbors. Case studies of real-life examples show that it is possible for many members of the community to be involved in the building of their physical environment,²² suggesting that it might provide a model for planning policy.

Methodology

The study uses an ethnographic approach to observe and scrutinize what is perceived, understood, and experienced by rural communities when adhering to fengshui building practices. Field study was conducted from September to December 2017, and again between April and August 2018, in two villages of Wuyi, a county in the mountainous southwest Zhejiang province with a total population of 340,000. A third visit was made in May and June 2019 following the demolition of one of these villages. Administratively, the county of Wuyi belongs to Jinhua, a prefecture-level city in Zhejiang province (Figures 1 and 2).

Despite the rapid urbanization of this region along the east coast, residents in rural Wuyi retain traditional lifestyles in which fengshui has an important place. We had links with local fengshui practitioner, Tao Zhencheng (born 1976), whose comes from a family that has for generations been respected in Wuyi for the practice of fengshui. Daily contact with Tao facilitated our observations of fengshui practices in the villages. On-site conversations and house visits were then carried out, in order to conduct in-depth interviews with twenty-six of the villagers who participated in the practices observed. While designed to be open-ended, the intense interviews covered issues like village history, family history, kinship, neighborhood relations, and everyday life routines.

One of the authors lived in Wuyi for years and is fluent in the local dialect. Trained with an architectural background in the global north, she is neither more nor less familiar with fengshui than the villagers. Rather than summarize, analyze, or test fengshui principles, the intention was

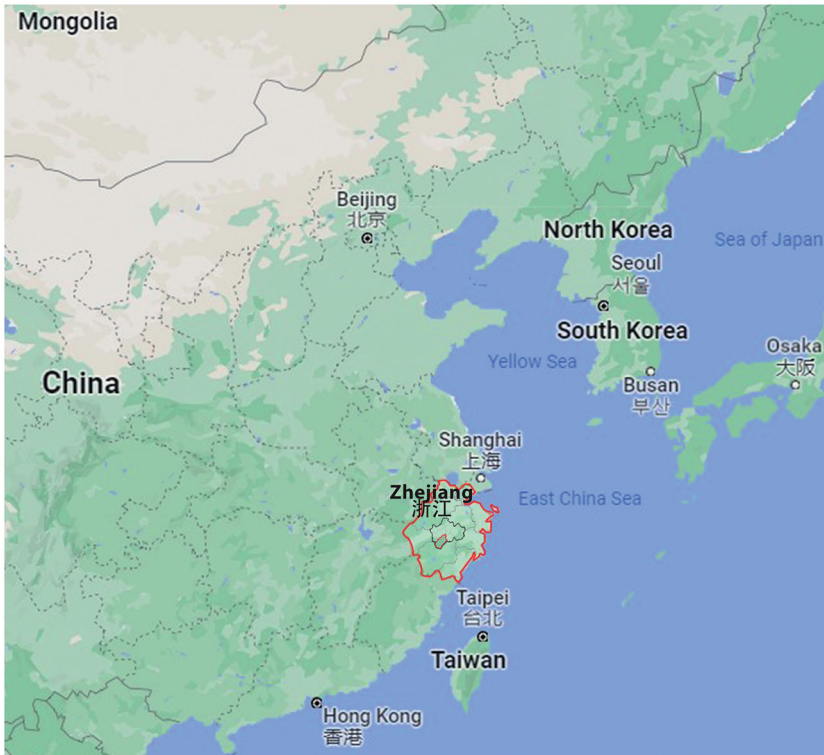


Figure 1
Eastern coastal China, showing the location of Zhejiang province. Although Zhejiang is one of China's most developed regions, the mountainous topography of southwest Zhejiang has allowed the preservation of traditional agricultural culture. Google Maps.

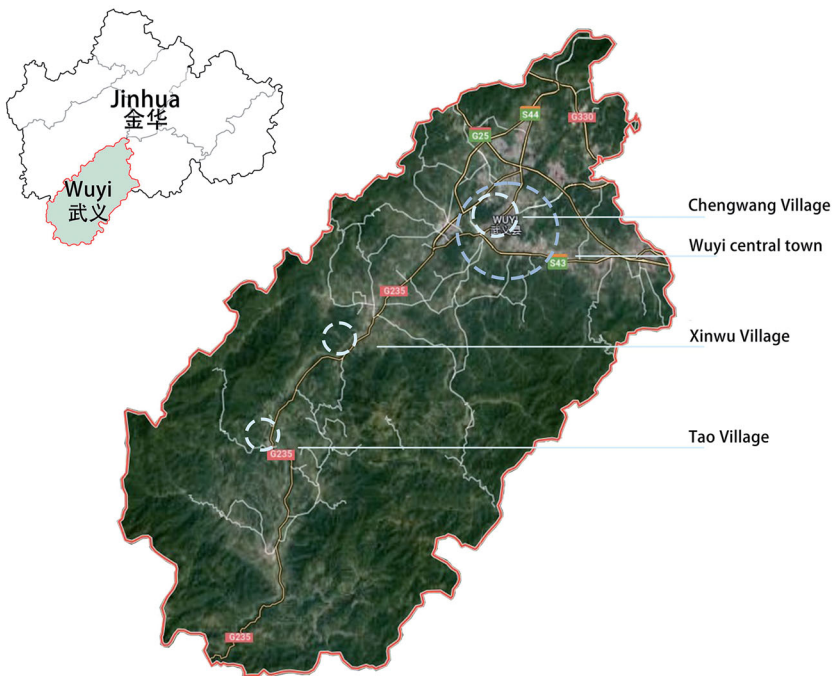


Figure 2
Wuyi county belongs to the prefecture-level city of Jinhua, which is expanding rapidly. The transformation of Chengwang Village is the result of this expansion. Xinwu Village, together with Tao Village where fengshui practitioner Tao Zhencheng lives, retain characteristics of “natural villages” in Wuyi's vast rural area. Map drawn by Youcao Ren, 2020.

simply to observe, in order to provide qualitative descriptions of everyday building activities in the name of fengshui. In the discussion that follows, evidence extracted from ethnographic observations and direct interview quotes is used to provide narratives about rural fengshui practices in relationship to house-making. To protect the anonymity of research participants, all names used are pseudonyms.

Case Studies in Wuyi

Tao Zhencheng is a highly regarded fengshui practitioner in great demand in rural Wuyi. Tao's family has for generations lived in Tao Village, a "natural village" in the south of Wuyi county. He is among a few practitioners of similar age in nearby villages who were all said to be trained through family tradition. Tao's grandfather was a reputed fengshui practitioner from the 1940s to the 1960s. The family's fengshui practice ceased in the late 1960s, when fengshui was declared illegal – it was considered a superstition, denigrated as part of the "Four Olds" (old customs, old culture, old habits, and old ideas).²³ After the Reform era it was resumed by Tao Zhencheng's father Tao Laosan, by popular demand from the villagers. Tao Zhencheng's current practice follows family tradition and consists of two parts: "Yangzhai fengshui" (阳宅风水), which concerns the orientation and arrangement of the domestic building; and "Yinzhai fengshui" (阴宅风水), which determines the location and orientation of tombs where cremated remains are interred. "Zhai" (宅), common to both, is the historic Chinese term for "dwelling." Yang and Yin correspond respectively to life and death. Therefore, "Yangzhai" means the dwelling of the living, while "Yinzhai" means the dwelling of the dead. Tao's Yangzhai fengshui practices scrutinized below provide a perspective to understand everyday building activities in rural Wuyi.

Tao's fengshui compass is his tool. The traditional instrument consists of concentric rings arranged around a magnetic needle. Holding the compass horizontally, a fengshui practitioner positions himself in relation to a house or a grave and reads the notes on the rings to determine if a specific orientation is auspicious (Figure 3). Tao told us that a skillful practitioner should put an equal focus on observing the surroundings and interpreting his impressions using the compass. One could consider Tao a kind of "barefoot architect," yet in what followed it was clear that a fengshui practitioner's engagement with the community extends beyond that usually expected of architecture.²⁴

New House-Making in Xinwu Village

In September 2017, Tao Zhencheng was invited to Xinwu village to consult on the reconstruction of the home of one of the villagers, Jin Chengyi. This small "natural village" consists of some 120 households, mainly with the surnames Liu and Jin. Jin Chengyi's old house was built by Jin and his wife when they were first married. Considered their family home, it had been partially torn down three months earlier, in anticipation of rebuilding. At that time Tao had visited the site, having been asked to suggest an auspicious



Figure 3
A fengshui compass is held horizontally in relation to a house. Tao the fengshui practitioner is reading the notes on the concentric rings and deciding on auspicious orientations. Photograph by Youcao Ren, 2017.

date for demolition. The main reason given for rebuilding the house was the fact that Jin believed his life in the past two decades had been merely adequate, not good. While he had two daughters, he did not have a son; in the traditional Chinese context a family without a son is not a perfect family. His elder daughter had just married, and it was now his great wish to see her bear a son to restore the family's fortunes. To facilitate this, the family home needed to be auspiciously re-arranged – this despite the fact that Jin now seldom lives there. In his own words he explained this as follows:

During the first few decades living in my old house brought good luck, but in recent years it diminished. I think it was because decades have passed, and my fortune has now changed. It is necessary to build a new house that suits my new fortune.²⁵

Old houses in the area are constructed with timber and compacted yellow clay, both common building materials in rural eastern coastal China. These houses tend to be enlarged and rebuilt as brick or concrete structures when there are sufficient resources. The relationship between Jin's plot and the neighboring ones had changed over time because of the continuous renewal of houses that had transformed the village into a densely built-up area, with buildings only 1.5–2 meters apart. Tao explained that the altered relationships between the various buildings might be a possible cause of Jin's diminished fortune. To retain auspiciousness and

avoid possible conflicts between neighbors in such proximity, Tao acted as a mediator. A group of villagers keenly anticipated his arrival and welcomed him with fine wine and cigarettes. Once representatives of the various neighbors were all gathered, Jin expressed his desire to make full use of his plot for the new house. This included space previously viewed as communal. Tao mediated between the five neighboring families. The Yang family, who had lived in their house for five generations, was most affected, with their representative complaining that Jin's proposed house would result in harmful fengshui for the family as their gate would be facing the eastern corner of Jin's house directly (Figure 4). This issue was referred to as "chong" (冲) by the residents, meaning conflict, or harm. Thirteen years earlier, the Yang family house had been designed by Tao's father. Now the son was asked to resolve the issue of the arrangement of Jin's house. Tao had to work carefully in this case, otherwise his actions might be considered disrespectful to his father's work.



Figure 4

Jin's house is in an area that is relatively densely built up, with some buildings just 1.5–2 meters apart. If Jin were to make full use of his site, one of the corners of his house would point directly toward his neighbor's gate. Residents believed this would cause harm. Intervention from a fengshui practitioner was therefore required. Photograph and drawing by Youcao Ren, 2017.

Tao first used a ritual rule that he had made himself to measure the distance from the gate to the eastern corner of the proposed house. The ritual rule is one of the traditional architectural implements used to survey houses, and indicates geomancy results rather than numerical length.²⁶ Tao noted and memorized the result and explained the reading to the participants. He then measured the distance from the gate to another location roughly 2.4 meters behind the previously proposed eastern corner of the house, again noting the reading and repeating it out loud. Jin's neighboring households joined the process, actively discussing possible solutions deriving from Tao's readings (Figure 5). Tao then positioned his geomancy compass over each of the proposed corners for the building. His readings suggested that the position put forward by Jin himself during Tao's absence was indeed to his family's benefit, but in view of the criticism levied by the neighbors Tao suggested it should be moved back by about 2.4 meters so that the corner of Jin's house would not face Yang's gate. This suggestion was readily agreed upon by both Jin and Yang's family. Another neighbor, Jin Zan, in an adjoining building, was



Figure 5

Tao's house survey involved Jin and his neighbors. Together they actively negotiated possible solutions under Tao's guidance. Photograph by the author, 2017.

also asked to make adjustments. His chimney was directed toward Jin's proposed house which, according to Tao, would bring harm to Jin's household. Again, a solution was immediately agreed upon. Jin Zan proceeded to alter the position of the chimney there and then (Figure 6).

Although adjusting house plans and other features in favor of neighboring households is not an obligation, it is often considered a requirement in maintaining friendship within the community:

My house will be smaller in this way, but it will still have a good fengshui. Master Tao said this new house will give my family harmony. I don't want to make my neighbors unhappy either. It has been a lifetime that we have lived here together.²⁷

When Master Tao says I need to adjust my chimney to ensure a good fengshui for my neighbors, I adjust it. Otherwise I would be considered to have no manners.²⁸



Figure 6
Jin's neighbor in the process
of adjusting his chimney
as directed by Tao, to avoid
conflict in Jin's new house.
Photograph by Youcao Ren,
2017.

After he had concluded his activity on site, Tao conducted the final step of his consultation, writing a “qishu” (契书), an official “earth contract,” on a sheet of red paper (Figure 7). This was described as a report to the God of the Earth and indicated who had determined the footprint of the building and the start date for construction. Jin Chengyi, as the owner of the house, was required to perform a ritual on the date selected when Tao’s letter was to be burned on site. With this act, neighbors then considered the house-making to be officially sanctioned.

After finishing the house evaluation, Jin’s family invited Tao for lunch, a common courtesy in rural areas, to show respect and appreciation to a fengshui practitioner. Tao was paid 300 Yuan (about 30 pounds sterling) for the morning’s ritual, approximately half a week’s income for a villager, where average incomes range from 2000 to 3500 Yuan per month. Tao does not have a set rate for his work. The villager who has invited him decides how much he or she will pay; the amount is considered a reflection of one’s courtesy.

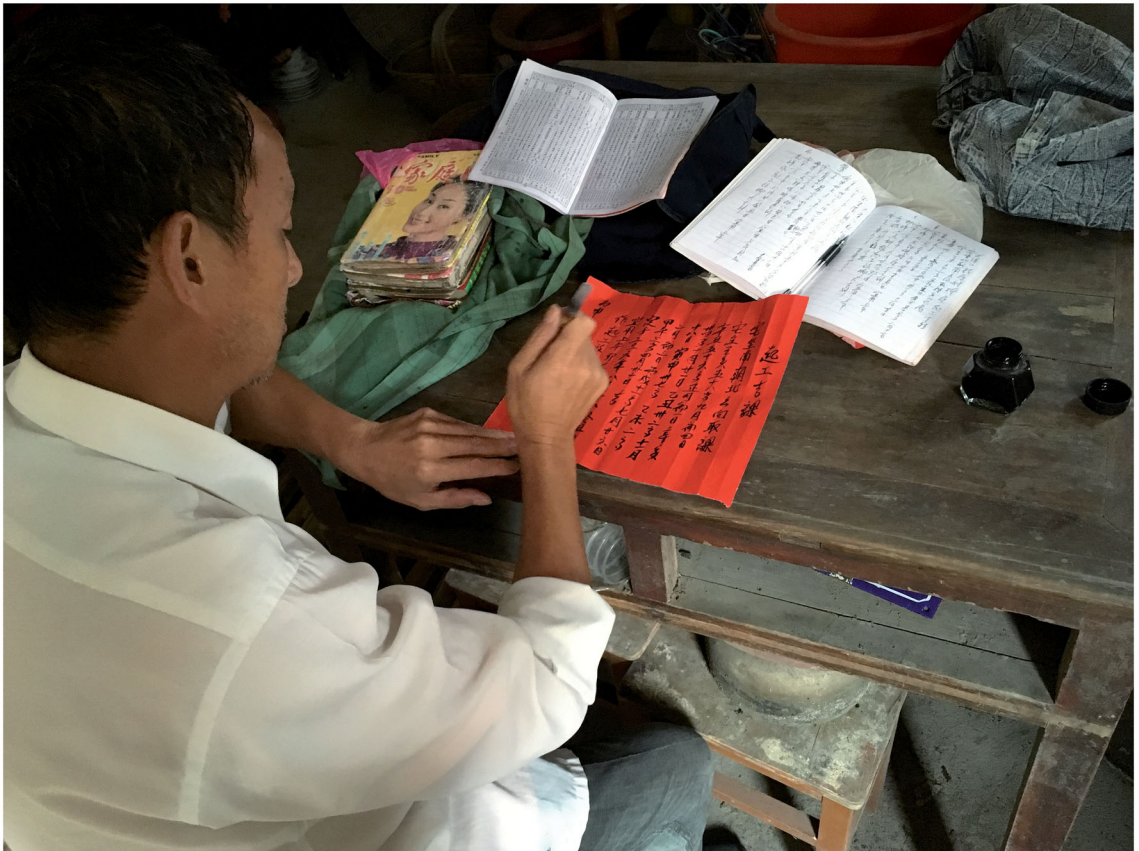


Figure 7
“Qishu,” an earth contract, is written with an ink brush on red paper to show its ritual significance. Photograph by Youcao Ren, 2017.

Xinwu village was settled before the 1970s, at a time when “family homes” were built, homes where several generations of the same family live together. New housing blocks, built by the local government since 2012, are located a few hundred meters away from Xinwu on the edge of a neighboring village. Such local government construction is the new norm in rural Zhejiang, an embodiment of rural development policies that envisage modern living conditions.²⁹ However, many residents have stayed in Xinwu and continue to improve their old dwellings for large families, with many older residents retaining a strong emotional connection. Improving the fengshui of an old house is considered of significance, particularly among the elderly:

My children and grandchildren were born in this house. The fengshui of this house matters because it will affect the whole family. When we built this house, we consulted a renowned fengshui master, that was Tao’s father. We told him that this house will be inhabited for generations, and we want the fengshui of this house to be good for the family’s flourishing population.³⁰

The old family house of Chen Yujuan, a much younger resident, lies near that of Jin Chengyi. The household credited Chen’s pregnancy to Tao’s fengshui practice. Chen explained:

My husband and I, together with my in-laws, built a new house years ago. But my in-laws still live in the old house. They invited Master Tao to practice fengshui on our old house to bless our family. He relocated the gate and windows of the old house to alter the view. Soon after that, I became pregnant. I gave birth to healthy twin boys last year [2016].³¹

Cheng Yujuan’s case was similar to that of Jin Chengyi’s. In both instances they built new houses but also opted to improve their old residences according to fengshui rituals. Despite the modern conveniences of the new local government development, the nucleus of the old village appears to be of great importance to long term residents, an importance which is confirmed and given presence by fengshui rituals. These regular rituals provide the cultural glue and social structure through participation that encourages a shared experience, a sense that “this is home to all of us.” They contribute to the social and cultural framework that makes the old villages into closely-knit communities.

Adjusting Building Features in Chengwang Village

In October 2017, Tao was invited to resolve a health issue in Chengwang village. Chengwang belongs to a growing sub-district that has a population of approximately 90,000 near the center of Wuyi county. In the late 1980s, a large area of agricultural land to the east of the village was requisitioned by the government for the construction of railways and

associated facilities. Governmental land acquisition then continued throughout the 1990s when new housing and commercial areas were developed, leading to a rapid decline of local agriculture. As a result, Chengwang village was removed from Wuyi's village listing in 2001 when it was pronounced a "community" and absorbed in a larger administrative unit, a visible representation of local rural-to-urban transition.

Chengwang, traditionally a small "natural village" that consisted of a few thousand residents, now has a population slightly over 6000, of which approximately 2700 are migrants from elsewhere. This is because the rural-to-urban transition has drawn people in from other provinces to engage in light labor work and small businesses. Along with numerous other urbanizing villages in east China, Chengwang has transformed from a close-knit society to a society of strangers.

Tao's fengshui practices deal with house-making activities in the remaining old part of Chengwang, where the buildings and small patches of declining farmland have been enveloped by new development. Here, residents have lived for generations and remain bound by strong social connections. Fengshui remains essential in their daily lives. Hong Fu, in her late eighties, had been healthy throughout her long life, but in 2016 she had experienced a series of minor problems. She had lived in Chengwang since 1982 and was widely respected by her neighbors as a former primary school teacher. Her sons, both highly educated with successful careers in the nearby city of Jinhua, were willing to seek new accommodation for her, but she refused to move out of the village.

Hong's children and neighbors believed that recent alterations to the buildings in and around Chengwang had affected the fengshui of her home and decided to consult Tao. Most houses in the remaining old part of the village were constructed between the early 1950s and the 1990s by the villagers themselves. Since then, there had been few changes, until this area too was scheduled for total demolition and renewal: sudden house re-building activities are common when demolition is threatened as part of rural restructuring, as the native residents attempt to maximize compensation from the government by increasing the built-up area.³² This is why one of Hong Fu's neighbors, Yang Xinwen, had extended his house with a new wing in 2015.

On arrival Tao inspected Hong's house, starting with the gate to the house, then the main bedroom, continuing to the kitchen. Having understood this arrangement, he then inspected the surrounding houses. He quickly concluded that the newly constructed wing of the neighbor's house was too tall and too close to Hong's main bedroom, creating "aggressive energy." While standing in front of the main bedroom Tao took out his compass, taking time to read its message, which confirmed his assessment, before announcing this to the audience of Hong Fu's family and neighbors. We interviewed Hong Fu's neighbor Yang Xinwen, who had built his extension without consulting a fengshui practitioner, but

nevertheless came to observe Tao's fengshui ritual for Hong. He explained his motivation for building:

I have been living here for thirty-two years. I built this extension because it expands my house's footprint so that I can get higher demolition compensation. Otherwise, I would never have bothered to change it. I'm too old to farm now, and this shop does not provide much income.³³

To resolve the issue Tao suggested protecting Hong's main bedroom, which faces the new wing of Yang's house, from the aggressive energy. He suggested a "shield" to cover the yard so that the corner of the new wing would not be so visibly directed at the bedroom. He also proposed that a mirror, a ruler, and pair of scissors should be tied together and hung above Hong's bedroom door, suggesting that these would offer additional protection. This is an auspicious symbol commonly observed in villages of Wuyi, where residents living along newly developed roads put this on the front wall of their houses. In Chengwang the symbol



Figure 8

The auspicious symbol of a mirror, a ruler, and pair of scissors tied together is believed to offer protection against the alterations to the outside environment when hung on the wall of a building. Photograph by Youcao Ren, 2017.



Figure 9

Hong Fu's yard was covered with a shield, as directed by Tao, to protect the house from the negative energy caused by her neighbor's new house wing. An auspicious fengshui symbol of a mirror, a ruler, and pair of scissors tied together was hung above Hong's bedroom door facing the courtyard. Photographs by Youcao Ren, 2018.

seems to be widely understood, as Tao was not asked to explain how these three objects were to be tied together. Hong's household was familiar with it and immediately took Tao's advice (Figure 8).

Tao was paid 500 Chinese Yuan for his work and treated to lunch as the Hong family was highly appreciative of his advice. Yang Xinwen, Hong Fu's neighbor, sent a dish to the lunch in a gesture that was accepted with grace by the Hong family. A visit six months later, in April 2018, revealed that even though all the sunlight in the yard was now obscured, the householder had followed Tao's suggestions (Figure 9). Hong Fu indicated that she had been in great shape since taking Tao's fengshui advice. Her two sons credited Tao's intervention.

All the remaining houses in Chengwang were demolished in late 2018 as a part of a local urban village reconstruction program. Hong has been re-located to a transitional apartment block but is to move into a new government resettlement housing scheme when it is completed. Most of her neighbors have chosen cash compensation and will be settled in different compounds. Hong no longer leaves her third-floor apartment:

Before, my neighbors bought vegetables for me. They either left them at my door or in my courtyard. I used to leave my door unlocked, so they could come in at any time. Now my sons have hired care for me, she comes three half days a week. I went downstairs once or twice with her help when I first moved here.

But there is nothing outside but a road. So, I stopped going out. Every day I sit here in this room.³⁴

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Fengshui in the Changing Countryside

The fengshui practices highlighted in the above cases do not deal with the making of houses alone but are part of a general desire to create an auspicious living space that incorporates neighborhood relationships and local conditions. They illustrate that the involvement with fengshui is a communal affair, a ritual that is publicly shared. To rural residents, fengshui is integrated with everyday practices which not only determine the physical features of houses but also enable a connection with both the village and the community. It seems likely that the closely packed buildings with diverse orientations that emerged in the natural villages of eastern and southern China as a response to topography and the hot and humid climate themselves invite the need for fengshui's conflict resolution practices. Yet it is also clear that the current fengshui revival fulfills a social need within the aging rural populations.

While new developments are widely implemented in Wuyi, and along the east coast more generally, there seems to be little consideration for preserving local culture and social ties. Ongoing rural transition is accomplished through large-scale demolition and rebuilding which leads to the instant disappearance of villages that were culturally and socially enriching. Despite the importance of existing residents in maintaining the communitarian cultural traditions of the villages – an importance that is recognized by the government – these residents are not involved in the new planning and design processes. In Xinwu Village, residents have so far been able to keep their old houses and continue a socially connected life. This is important as these interactions promote a local social network that enables residents to retain a sense of self, making the village a good place to grow old. Conversely Chengwang village, being much closer to Jinhua, Wuyi's principal town, encountered a wholesale demolition program. Although housing demolition in eastern China is generously compensated by the government, the destruction of the original living environment and removal of established social networks raises considerable challenges for older residents.³⁵ Given the nature of top-down rural revitalization programs, this is a struggle that is shared throughout the Chinese countryside. To older people like Hong Fu, being “in place” was an important means of staying both physically independent and socially connected – something that is extremely difficult to replicate in modern apartment blocks.³⁶

Conclusions

The fengshui practices observed in this paper were performed in villages dating back to the early communist era whose layout was not controlled by the state, and where local social and physical networks had led to the development of strong communities. The recent change of environment in these villages and settlements as a result of rapid urbanization and a

series of rural revitalization policies is dramatic. Those who remain in the older communist villages have tended to cling onto their rural lifestyles, and fengshui is very much part of their culture.

In common with other parts of the east coast, the villages discussed in this study are either being surrounded by new developments or are being proposed for redevelopment themselves. Others are being gradually transformed into peri-urban areas. From fengshui's continuing popularity it is clear, however, that many villagers have different expectations from those of the government of what countryside should be like, and of its relationship with urban environments. The result of official policies is a blurring of the characteristics of rural and urban settlements to produce a "new rural" of anonymous, regimented, state controlled new towns. The application of fengshui may be read as a remonstrance to this trend.

For its participants, fengshui forms an integral part of the building process, carried out by fengshui practitioners who are engaged from the very beginning of a project, and who also explore the needs of neighbors. "Good fengshui" concerns not just the appropriate location and positioning of houses; more importantly, it is also used as a vehicle to mediate and maintain favorable relationships between householders. These factors together mean that, through fengshui, social and emotional connections between the villagers and their environment are perpetuated. Particularly for older people, this sense of attachment is of great significance.

The study of aspects of village life on the east coast described in this paper suggests that the intimate nature of the communities and the tightly-knit relationships between villagers, as mediated by fengshui, seems to preserve older values of Chinese rural society. It is perhaps surprising that a revival of fengshui practices should occur now, at a time of tremendous economic progress in which there has been an emphasis on personal enrichment – and given that during the early communist era it was prohibited. Yet the benefits of China's economic miracle have largely passed the rural populations by. The "renewed" countryside that is being rapidly created has little to do with the character and social networks of these villages. Through current policies, they are being not so much ignored as dismantled, resulting in a waning sense of community and local cultural heritage. Evidence in this study suggests that the real renewal of villages should involve residents, including discussions on planning and building practices, rather than being purely a top-down process. It would be desirable to review current policy in the light of common practice to explore how residents might be engaged in an effective and creative manner that retains their sense of belonging. The plight of an aging rural population is particularly noted as being of further consideration to affect a sustainable transition. Fengshui provides just such an engagement – it represents an enduring function that keeps people involved and socially connected.

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Notes

1. See Gregory Eliyu Guldin, *Farewell to Peasant China: Rural Urbanization and Social Change in the Late Twentieth Century* (New York: Routledge, 2016).
2. See Yansui Liu, Shasha Lu, and Yufu Chen, "Spatio-Temporal Change of Urban-Rural Equalized Development Patterns in China and its Driving Factors," *Journal of Rural Studies*, 32 (2013): 320–330.
3. Martin King Whyte, *One Country, Two Societies: Rural-Urban Inequality in Contemporary China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2010).
4. See Hualou Long et al., "Analysis of Rural Transformation Development in China Since the Turn of the New Millennium," *Applied Geography* 31 (2011): 1094–1105.
5. See Qianyu Zhao and Zhanlu Zhang, "Does China's 'Increasing Versus Decreasing Balance' Land-Restructuring Policy Restructure Rural Life? Evidence from Dongfan Village, Shaanxi Province," *Land Use Policy* 68 (2017): 649–659; Shuangshuang Tu et al., "Rural Restructuring at Village Level Under Rapid Urbanization in Metropolitan Suburbs of China and Its Implications for Innovations in Land Use Policy," *Habitat International* 77 (2018): 143–152; Jingzhong Ye, "Stayers in China's 'Hollowed-out' Villages: A Counter Narrative on Massive Rural-Urban Migration," *Population, Space and Place*, 24.4 (2018): e2128. Available online: <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/toc/15448452/2018/24/4> (accessed April 2022).
6. Xuesong Gao et al., "Understanding Rural Housing Abandonment in China's Rapid Urbanization," *Habitat International*, 67 (2017): 13–21.
7. "Co-ordinated development" is highlighted in China's most recent national development plan, **中华人民共和国国民经济和社会发展第十四个五年规划和2035年远景目标纲要** [Outline of the 14th Five-Year Plan (2021–2025) for National Economic and Social Development and Vision 2035 of the People's Republic of China], approved by the National People's Congress in 2021.
8. Hualou Long, "Land Consolidation: An Indispensable Way of Spatial Restructuring in Rural China," *Journal of Geographical Sciences* 23 (2014): 211–25. See also Hualou Long and Yansui Liu, "Rural Restructuring in China," *Journal of Rural Studies* 47 (2016): 387–391.
9. Yansui Liu, Fugang Zhang, and Yingwen Zhang, "Appraisal of Typical Rural Development Models during Rapid Urbanization in the Eastern Coastal Region of China," *Journal of Geographical Sciences*, 19.5 (2009): 557–567; Hualou Long et al., "Building New Countryside in China: A Geographical Perspective," *Land Use Policy*, 27.2 (2010): 457–470.
10. This is stated in **长江三角洲区域一体化发展规划纲要** ("Outline of the Yangtze River Delta Regional Integrated Development Plan"), jointly issued by The Communist

- Party of China Central Committee and the State Council in 2019.
11. Xiang Ren, "Anonymous Process and Absent Architect: Behind the Scenes of Chinese Rural Regeneration," *Architecture and Culture*, 6.1 (2018): 145–154; Nick R. Smith, "Beyond Top-down / Bottom-up: Village Transformation on China's Urban Edge," *Cities*, 41 (2014): 209–220.
 12. Laurence J. C. Ma, 中国大陆的城镇人口及城镇化水平 [Mainland China's Urban Population and Urbanization], *人口学刊* [Journal of Population Studies], 12 (1988): 17.
 13. Zhuping Zhou, 中国农村人口空心化及其挑战 [Hollowing out of China's Rural Population and Its Challenges], *人口研究* [Population Research], 32.2 (2008): 47.
 14. Hsiao Tung-Fei and Chih I. Chang, *Earthbound China: A Study of the Rural Economy of Yunnan* (London: Routledge, 1998 [1949]). See also Xiaotong Fei, *From the Soil: The Foundations of Chinese Society*, trans. Gary G. Hamilton and Wang Zheng (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 1992 [1947]).
 15. Jingru Cheng, "Territory, Settlement, Household: A Project of Rural China" (Ph.D. diss., The Open University, 2018), 20.
 16. Ben Stringer, "Architecture and Culture: A Villages and Globalization Issue," *Architecture and Culture*, 5.1 (2017): 3.
 17. Fengshui was officially declared illegal during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), but a campaign against it, viewing it as superstition, had begun in the early communist era, mostly led by the cultural elites.
 18. Ping Xu, "Feng-Shui Models Structured Traditional Beijing Courtyard Houses," *Journal of Architectural and Planning Research*, 15.4 (1998): 271–282; Michael Y. Mak and S. Thomas Ng, "The Art and Science of Feng Shui – a Study on Architects' Perception," *Building and Environment*, 40.3 (2005): 427–434; Su-Ju Lu and Peter Blundell Jones, "House Design by Surname in Feng Shui," *The Journal of Architecture*, 5.4 (2000): 355–367.
 19. One of the interesting aspects of fengshui emerging from recent studies is that its current practices tend to have little association with traditional literature and are constantly (re)interpreted by its practitioners and participants in accordance with their everyday lives. See Ole Bruun, *An Introduction to Feng Shui* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2008).
 20. Youcao Ren and Jan Woudstra, "Reviving Traditional Burial Rituals with Feng Shui: Changing Landscapes in China," *Mortality*, 26.1 (2021): 89.
 21. Yurui Li et al., "Community-Based Rural Residential Land Consolidation and Allocation Can Help to Revitalize Hollowed Villages in Traditional Agricultural Areas of China: Evidence from Dancheng County, Henan Province," *Land Use Policy*, 39 (2014): 188–198.
 22. It might be argued, of course, that this is how architecture, too, can and does operate – despite the way we talk about it, it is not only the work of a small group of professional men. See Jessica Kelly, "Anonymity and Hidden Mechanisms in Design and Architecture," *Architecture and Culture*, 6.1 (2018): 5–15.
 23. The term "Four Olds," meaning old customs, old culture, old habits, and old ideas, first appeared in an editorial in *People's Daily* on June 1, 1966 headlined "Sweep Away All Monsters and Demons." The editorial marked the start of the Cultural Revolution and suggested that these "Four Olds" should be destroyed, as they had done nothing but poison Chinese society and its people. The term was closely associated with "Monsters and Demons," a political concept that referred to enemies of the masses.
 24. In China, the term "barefoot" was primarily used in the early Communist era to describe rural medical practitioners who had not been officially trained in medicine. Here its use has been extended to include any rural professionals who are self-taught or family-trained but do not hold modern certificates or qualifications from educational establishments.
 25. Interview with Jin, C, 69 years old, Xinwu, September 2017.
 26. For a detailed discussion of the traditional architectural rule, see Kendra Schank Smith, Albert C. Smith, and

- Xuemei Li, "A Human Measure: Structure, Meaning and Operation of the 'Lu Ban' Foot-Rule (鲁班尺) of the Dong Carpenters," *arg: Architectural Research Quarterly*, 17.3-4 (2013): 227–236.
27. Interview with Jin, C, 69 years old.
28. Interview with Jin, Z, 68 years old, Xinwu, September 2017.
29. Yansui Liu, Lijuan Wang, and Hualou Long, "Spatio-Temporal Analysis of Land-Use Conversion in the Eastern Coastal China during 1996–2005," *Journal of Geographical Sciences*, 18.3 (2008): 274–282.
30. Interview with Yang, 89 years old, Xinwu, September 2017.
31. Interview with Chen, 34 years old, Xinwu, September 2017.
32. Yan Guo, Yang Xiao, and Qifeng Yuan, "The Redevelopment of Peri-Urban Villages in the Context of Path-Dependent Land Institution Change and its Impact on Chinese Inclusive Urbanization: The Case of Nanhai, China," *Cities*, 60 (2017): 467.
33. Interview with Yang, 74 years old, Chengwang, October 2017.
34. Interview with Hong, 88 years old, Chengwang, December 2018.
35. See Setha M. Low and Irwin Altman, "Place Attachment," in *Place Attachment*, eds. Setha M. Low and Irwin Altman (New York: Springer US, 1992); Jeffrey S. Smith and Matthew R. Cartledge, "Place Attachment Among Retirees in Greensburg, Kansas," *Geographical Review*, 101.4 (2011): 536–555.
36. See Graham D. Rowles, "Place and Personal Identity in Old Age: Observations from Appalachia," *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, 3.4 (1983): 299–313; Janine L. Wiles et al., "The Meaning of 'Aging in Place' to Older People," *The Gerontologist*, 52.3 (2012): 357–366.

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