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Reviving traditional burial rituals with feng shui: changing landscapes in China

Youcao Ren and Jan Woudstra

For centuries feng shui structured the practice of burial in China, only to be prohibited during the People's Republic when it declared illegal. With the Reform and Opening-up policy after 1978, feng shui practices have surreptitiously been revived. This paper explores these burial rituals and the way they are impacting on the landscape, both physically and socially. After providing some historical context to indicate how burial was practiced prior to the Republican era, this paper explores how feng shui has been revived after 1978. With case studies from Zhejiang province, the work of two practitioners is followed, one in a rural area, and the other in an affluent city. In this region cremation of remains has become the norm since 1997, yet feng shui burial has continued to be practiced. While feng shui is possible within public cemeteries, plots in the countryside are also common. With increasing wealth and mobility, the option of feng shui burial is now available to many, which can cause conflicts raising questions as to the need for legalisation of the practice and regulatory policies.

Keywords: wild burial; burial landscape; natural landscapes; burial ritual; feng shui

Introduction

In November 2017 Wu Dashi, a well-known feng shui practitioner from the city of Jinhua, conducted his fieldwork with the wealthy Hong family, his client of two decades. Having been driven by Hong Jiuzong, the oldest male member of the family, for several hours, the practitioner was expected to determine an ideal burial site to re-locate Hong's parents' tomb to. Wu and Hong inspected four potential burial sites within wooded and mountainous areas in the east of China, that had previously been identified by Wu on Google Earth, spending a couple of days doing so. This search would not cease till an ideal site had been identified and Hong was insistent that this would be done prior to the

Chinese New Year so that the family's good fortune for the next year would be assured.

A few weeks later, Tao Zhengcheng, a feng shui practitioner in a rural area in the same region, performed a feng shui burial ritual in front of dozens of villagers. The arrangements for the burial had been advertised in advance, giving the mourners time to prepare sacrifices and inform others. The burial site, located on fallow farmland, had been selected by Tao in relation to the deceased's date of birth. Years earlier the deceased had been involved in confirming this location, when he had obtained the right of use, and reserved it with the village committee through the payment of a small fee. The funeral was planned in strict accordance with feng shui rules. A public burial ritual was also considered a means to announce the ownership of the site.

Such ritual feng shui practices were unthinkable in the communist era when they were considered as superstitious and declared illegal, but they have seen a surreptitious re-introduction since the Reform and Opening-up policy of 1978, even though they have never been declared legal. Combined with the fact that burial is a highly regulated matter on the east coast of China, where cemeteries are planned and built by the government, and burial in wild or natural areas and protected scenic areas is illegal, it is remarkable how feng shui has become a thriving practice. This paper uses ethnographic observation to describe, explain and critically assess the practice, particularly in the light of the social structure and the landscape.

Background

Feng shui (Chinese: 风水), literally wind and water, suggests that one can achieve physical and spiritual harmony by manipulating Qi (气), the core energy of the universe. Feng shui, which was considered a spiritual extension of Confucianism (Yang, 1991), is

in recent studies treated as a conscious living tradition that serves specific purposes (Bruun, 2011). In burial, feng shui's prime application, rules emphasise certain auspicious landscape forms. Qi shapes the topography of the landscape; it flows within mountain ranges, from high to low. In places where Qi gathers there appears a 'xue' (穴), the feng shui notion of an ideal site. By constructing a tomb on a xue, it is believed that both the tomb owner and his or her descendants can obtain long-lasting prosperity. This theory thus encourages burial in places outside dedicated cemeteries, within the countryside. Anyone who has travelled to China has seen funereal monuments or modern burial mounds on the edges of fields, in woodland and on mountainsides. Although in some cases it is a financial decision to bury outside cemeteries - indeed in big cities burial within official cemeteries can be expensive - the choice of 'wild' burials frequently involves feng shui. In comparison to those in the flatter land, burial according to feng shui rituals within natural or semi-natural mountain regions tend to be implemented with further considerations to pursue ideal surrounding landscape forms. With all the land belonging to the state and local government such burial is clandestine, and yet it continues to be practiced, with a whole machinery existing to identify auspicious places, to prepare plots and to make them accessible. With increasing wealth within the population, these practices are proliferating, and they increasingly mark the landscape.

Although having some elements derived from early agricultural rituals, feng shui first rose as an independent practice following the rise of Neo-Confucianism during the Song dynasty (AD 960–1126) (Eitel, 1984; Bruun, 2008). The thinking promoted the spiritual connection between heaven, earth, and the human by popularising the conception of Qi. Qi was interpreted as something that reflected the cosmic rules (or the 'Li', Chinese: 理) (Herman, 2001) that connect the ancestors and their descendants. While Neo-Confucianism was taken as Song's official philosophy, Qi was taken as its fundamental

principle, which meant that the connection between the dead and the living was widely recognised. The literati considered feng shui as an extended practice of contemporary orthodoxy and ideal burial plans were produced and recorded in court-edited feng shui books. This included *Dili canzanxuanji xianpoji* (地理参赞玄机仙婆集, *Essence of the Rules of the Earth*, published between 1573-1620 which depicted burial sites as a way of affirming a family's status. These illustrations were widely distributed and would have been of educational value, not just to a general audience, but also to practitioners of feng shui who would have used them as guidance for their practice (figure 1).

Feng shui remained common practice until the republican period (1912-1949) when after the downfall of imperial rule there was a desire to learn from the West. The enthusiasm with which this western learning was adopted by the educated Chinese, included the introduction of western science and technology and the claim that traditional practices were inefficient and corrupt. In order to advance the country, it was claimed, these outdated practices had to be abolished. Among other practices and beliefs, feng shui was declared superstitious and was to be eradicated. In 'A Letter to the Youth' (敬告青年) written by Chen Duxiu (1879-1942) in the first issue of *La Jeunesse* (or *New Youth*, 新青年), he recorded the perception of feng shui among the elite during the New Culture Movement of the mid-1910s and 1920s:

When the scholars were not educated by science, they believed in yin-yang and feng shui, ridiculously hoping that it would benefit them by manipulating Qi and burial, but not science and democracy [...] So you youth of China, if one wants to save the country, be independent rather than enslaved; be progressive rather than conservative; be at the forefront rather than lag behind; be internationalist rather than isolationist; be practical but not rhetorical; be scientific rather than

superstitious. (D. Chen, 1915)

Abandoning belief in feng shui was, as Chen indicated, a basic attribute of the modern scholar. This was no doubt a powerful incentive for separating feng shui from elite culture, echoed by several different ‘anti-superstition’ campaigns in the 1930s (Duara, 1991).

The movement of destroying traditional culture became more concerted during the early communist era (after 1949) and became particularly aggressive during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) with the campaign to ‘Destroy the Four Olds’. The concept ‘Four Olds’ included ‘old customs, old culture, old habits, and old ideas’, which were described as anti-proletarian, as having been ‘fostered by the exploiting classes, (and to) have poisoned the minds of the people for thousands of years’(B. Chen, 1966). The campaign to destroy the four olds (Lu, 2004) challenged anything relates to historic belief systems and resulted in them being declared illegal; they were the ‘Cow Demons and Snake Spirits’ of modern society. Feng shui was clearly within this category. Even after the Reform and Open Up policy (1978) feng shui remained an undesirable practice. In 1982 the Communist Party formulated its religious policy in ‘Document 19’ (中共中央文件 19 号), including a statement on feng shui:

In the whole population, those who worship spirits and folk gods are many, yet those who believe in religion are few. Citizens who practice divining, feng shui and astrology should be re-educated and supervised. Relevant government officials should encourage and assist them in finding other employment, rather than having them continue superstitious practices. If they do not oblige, such practices shall be legally banned. (CPC Central Committee, 1982)

Feng shui being considered a superstitious illegal practice related to an outdated belief system, remained the general view, and only saw a partial reprieve by architectural historians, who in the late 1980s rediscovered the historic significance in traditional forms of planning and building (He, 1988; Wang, 2002). In doing this feng shui's new proponents were careful not to upset or challenge contemporary perception and cautiously avoided the notion of feng shui as being a belief system, instead characterising it as a 'traditional planning and design practice'. The subject was later promoted as a scientific approach to the built environment (Mak & So, 2011) although there is no apparent relationship with science proper. The practice of feng shui burial, however, has not seen a rise in scholarly interest, despite its widespread practice and its clear social significance.

Today in Zhejiang province, the province at the east coast of China, south of Shanghai, there has been a significant increase in the popularity of traditional philosophies, with people choosing and mixing different belief systems from the four main religions (i.e. Buddhism, Taoism, Christianity, Islam) (Chen & Lin, 2016). Feng shui has also been rediscovered, particularly its significance for interment, with illegal burials taking place everywhere in the countryside. The growth of such illegal practices was acknowledged in the 1997 *National Burial Law*, which declared that "urn burial should be promoted in the areas with high population density, limited farmland, and well-developed transportation systems. No burial activities shall be performed in the wild. Burials in farmland, forests, natural scenery protection areas, on riversides, and near reservoirs are forbidden" (Ministry of Civil Affairs of the People's Republic of China [MCA], 1997). In Zhejiang this law has been successful in promoting the wide acceptance of cremation and urn burial, which is reportedly 100% (Li, 2017) compared to a national statistic of 48.6% ([MCA], 2017). This transformation was supported by both local regulations and the regional perception of seeing cremation as an indicator of the shift to

modern burial practice (Knight, 2018, p314).

A proper burial, traditionally thought of as a series of burial rituals in addition to the preparation and interment of the body, are the basis of Confucian filial duty. Only when the ancestor's body is placed to rest and seasonal sacrifices are made, is one considered filial. Tombs have been significant places for ancestral sacrifices since the Song dynasty (Ebrey 1986). Although cremation is now widely practiced in east China, spreading of ashes in the wild, has remained undesirable with the Chinese who prefer a permanent marker, revealing the significance adhered to having an identifiable plot which requires regular visiting (Hsu, 1967). This is reflected in the unwavering popularity of rituals, such as the Qingming Festival, or Tomb Sweeping Day, and has resulted in constantly increasing costs of burial. Site visits and observations conducted by the author reveal that wild burial – of cremated remains – continues to be practiced as a result of increasing interest in feng shui. This is illustrated with the following case studies drawn from both rural and urban areas. Wild burial, understood here as burial in the natural and semi-natural countryside, generally adopts the traditional dome-shaped tomb form, nowadays constructed in brick and reinforced by concrete, with a stone marker in front identifying the deceased.

Feng shui burial cases with Tao

Tao Zhencheng (born August 1976) is a feng shui practitioner well regarded and in great demand in the rural area near Wuyi, a city in mountainous southern Zhejiang. His family has practiced this vocation for generations. Tao lives in Tao village, where his father and grandfather both lived. He covers a wide area and travels between the villages on an electric tricycle, the common mode of transport among the local farmers. Tao's feng shui practice is dedicated mainly to two types of work: 'yang zhai feng shui' (阳宅风水), or

house feng shui, concerned with the orientation and planning of dwellings; and ‘yin burials feng shui’ (阴宅风水), i.e. burial feng shui, which determines the location and orientation of tombs, and is the main source of his income. Names of these two practices are particularly explicit in the traditional Chinese context: Yang refers to the living; Yin, as the opposite of Yang, refers to the dead. Zhai means dwelling.

Tao was trained by his father Tao Laosan, who took him on as an apprentice from 1985 onwards when he was just eight years old. By the time Tao was fifteen, he was allowed to assist his father in reading the compass, but he did not independently carry out feng shui until three years later. Tao’s successful feng shui practice during the past two decades ensures he is widely known in the local villages. In December 2016, Tao was called to Xitou village, where he was entrusted with finding an ideal burial place for a recently deceased member of the Chen family, a farmer who had died aged 94. The village, located 70 kilometres west to Wuyi adheres strictly to the national burial regulations, enforcing the use of the public cemetery, but feng shui is still considered necessary in burial. Like most Chinese villages today, the population of Xitou consists largely of older people, since the younger generations have left to work in the cities. This older generation tends to cling to traditional burial practices since this promises to provide them with a peaceful afterlife and to benefit future generations. With any costs usually being covered by the urban-dwelling children, consulting a feng shui practitioner in this process is often the norm.

The small public (official) burial ground of Xitou village is at the north-eastern end of the village, west of the Chen family house. Here a total of forty grave plots were available, with a few already reserved. Tao first had to calculate a burial time by analysing the deceased’s date of birth and precise birth time. Tao then interpreted the date of birth

in combination with the five elements: metal, wood, water, fire, and earth, which are believed to have an impact on one's general life path. Tao suggested that a qualified practitioner can 'see all the important events in one's life by reading his or her precise birth time'. Possible days of burial were then identified by consulting Tao's handwritten almanac which he developed on his own. Additionally, he had decided on the location of the tomb and a preferred tomb orientation. This had required the reading of a feng shui compass, a traditional instrument that consists of concentric rings arranged around a magnetic needle. A feng shui practitioner reads the notes on the rings to determine if a specific orientation is good and uses the magnetic needle to locate the auspicious direction. Secondly, he observed the surroundings, providing his impressions. Tao did not indicate what feng shui theory he was applying, but instead said he would 'build on an honest application of his family's knowledge and his own understanding'. In what followed it was clear that these initial observations and reading of the surroundings were of great importance.

Three locations were identified by compass reading, all in one row, oriented in the same direction, but facing slightly different views. The procedure that followed saw more than half of the deceased's family members gathered around, since choosing an auspicious tomb site is considered important to the family as a whole. Arriving on the site, Tao adjusted his position in relation to the possible burial position and the hills. While standing in front of the selected locations and facing the hills he read instructions on his compass to evaluate orientation and the best burial time (Figure 2). In several instances, there was a need to slightly adjust the reading by rotating the compass and observe the movement of the magnetic needle to enable a more precise outcome. He concluded the ritual by affirming to the family that a proposed burial time, nine days hence, would be an auspicious date.

Having settled the date, the next task was to choose which of the three possible burial sites would be most suitable. Tao carefully considered the wider surroundings of each location, while maintaining that the more ridges of mountains there were in front of the tomb, the better the feng shui. Tao explained to the family that the number of mountain ridges is positively related to the strength of Qi. The tomb located nearest to the eastern side of the burial ground was selected, as this faced five ridges of mountains. Tao, as well as the Chen family, particularly appreciated the small hill in front of the proposed location and the mountains behind it, as together the hill and mountains here were shaped like a Chinese ingot, and they were encompassed by a river. Tao suggested that by burying the deceased in this location, the family would gain wealth. His proposal was eagerly accepted by the Chen family, thus concluding his contribution, with Tao being paid in cash the agreed fee of six hundred yuan (approximately 70 pounds Sterling, or a week's salary for local residents). Although locating a tomb within a public cemetery causes no controversy, this open display of feng shui conflicts with the *Interim Measures for the Administration of Public Cemeteries* which 'strictly prohibits superstitious activities in a public cemetery' ([MCA], 1992). But 'superstitious' was not how feng shui burial was perceived by the Chen family. The youngest children in Chen's family, 10 and 12 years old respectively, were told at the event that they were to 'find a new home for great grandfather so that he can settle down happily.'

This case study illustrates how feng shui burial can be applied within a public cemetery located in a semi-natural setting regardless of the restricted space to manoeuvre. The main practice of feng shui burial, however, remains wild burials, where auspicious burial sites are located in the countryside. Another instance of Tao's practice was in the village of Daxikou, approximately 110km southwest of Wuyi, where he located a site for burial of a local resident. Daxikou is both larger and much more densely populated than

Xitou with a disproportionate percentage of elderly people. In Daxikou the public cemetery can only barely manage the local death rate of 8.5% and as a result is overfull. This leaves residents to venture outside for alternative locations, in overgrown farmland, particularly on hillsides (Figures 3). Wild burials represent the biggest demand for feng shui practices. In this area, many people now prefer wild burials over public cemeteries.

At Daxikou, Tao had been entrusted with a special commission: he was asked to locate an auspicious site and conduct funereal rites for a former resident of the village who had died elsewhere without family. After decades away from the village, the deceased had insisted on being buried there. The locals had taken this as a communal responsibility, with five residents acting as the deceased's kin. It was their obligation to assure the burial ritual was performed appropriately. The deceased was a government official and had died peacefully of old age at 93 - this was considered a blessing. To local villagers, participating in the burial was considered a way of showing their respect for the deceased (Lee, 1991). The event was organised in several stages: the actual burial started at precisely 11:00 am on 23 December 2017, as suggested by Tao, again based on the calculation of the deceased's date of birth. Due to the complexity of the proposed rituals, time management was Tao's great concern. Every part of the ritual was required to be performed on time to ensure the burial was in the deceased's favour. The burial commenced with a procession from the village hall to the area selected for burial, a fifteen-minute walk to the north of the village. A total of some sixty people processed in a long queue, led by four men who played ritual music on two gongs and two suonas, instruments historically used at funerals. The five kin and friends were upfront, followed by other villagers. One of the kin carried the deceased's urn and handed it to Tao when they arrived at the place of burial, where a small burial area lay adjoining farmland. While wild burial is not officially permitted, such burial grounds and tombs are well respected

due to the Chinese's awe of the deceased (Watson, 1988). Damage to burial grounds as a result of religious and ethnic differences is rarely a concern here (Rugg, 2000).

The actual site for a tomb had been selected by Tao together with the deceased some four years earlier in an area that had already become the location for other burials (Figure 4). Many elderly people consider it important to choose plots themselves. A flat area surrounded by small hills had been selected as auspicious. It was left to Tao to determine the precise orientation of the tomb on the day of burial. Yet in this instance as a result of the many tombs already located here, Tao's compass readings indicated that there was insufficient Qi left for new burials. To ensure a stronger feng shui Tao performed the ritual of 'Handi' (Han: shout, di: earth. Chinese: 喊地), meaning 'to command the land'. The practice, which is rarely used by modern practitioners, is believed to perfect places with respect to feng shui. While standing in front of the tomb, Tao gathered all villagers present. He then raised his feng shui compass and started chanting in dialect:

I am Tao Zhencheng of the Tao village. Today we are gathered in the Daxikou to send off the deceased, Ding Yi, on his last journey. Now I want you all to listen carefully. This burial land was rightfully claimed by the deceased, and I was the agent for him and this land. I command all mountains and waters here to protect the deceased from this day onwards. May the deceased be blessed. May his descendants have wealth, fertility, and harmony. You are all my witnesses.'¹

¹ Summarised by the author, present at the ritual on 23 December 2017.

During the process Tao held the compass high, signifying that he commanded the surroundings as a feng shui practitioner in ordering an auspicious Qi. The ritual also appeared to be intended to assure good feng shui by gathering as many villagers as possible. As a sign of appreciation, the deceased's acting kin gave all attendants a red envelope with 98 Yuan 'lucky money' at the end of the ritual. The author, though a stranger, was also given one as insisted by both the deceased's acting kin and Tao: 'We thank you for being here to send him off, it would be extremely rude of us to not to give you this.'

Feng shui burial case with Wu

An instance of urban feng shui burial is drawn from my fieldwork in the city of Jinhua, a prefecture-level city in central Zhejiang province. In 2016, the population of Jinhua reached 4.8 million, with an 8.43% death rate. Although official cemeteries are highly controlled, feng shui burial is very popular.

Wu Dashi (born, June 1975), a feng shui practitioner in Jinhua, reveals how feng shui burial is handled for urban residents. The majority of urban practitioners are trained through feng shui courses and concentrate on feng shui around the home. As a result, feng shui burial practitioners are few and far between. Since Wu Dashi registered his practice in 2002, he has had a continuous flow of work. Wu was trained by a master while in his early twenties. After three years of training, the apprentices were sent off to practice feng shui in various sites and asked to report back to their master, with only three gaining his approval. Wu was one of these three. He inherited old feng shui books and a compass from his master. These are highly prized, as they enable Wu to distinguish himself through this progeny as being more authentic than others. Because of his special skills and provenance, and being located within an affluent urban environment, he is able to

charge much higher fees for his work than his competitors. Wu charges a minimum of 1,000 yuan per day, but for burial cases he charges up to 3,000 yuan per day. As current burial laws forbid wild burial, any would-be clients are also expected to have sufficient resources to claim a small area of land, which requires not only financial resources but also political influence.

The Hong family is one of the families that has both the required financial means and the political influence to stage wild burials. The family's relationship with Wu dates back to the late 1990s when he first started practising feng shui. Hong Jiuzong, the family's oldest son who had just launched his business, connected to Wu through recommendations. In 2008, the Hong parents' tomb had been moved to a location at a remote mountain some 70 kilometres southwest of Jinhua city as proposed by Wu. Since then, the Hong family had become very successful in business, which they credited to Wu's feng shui services. To the Hong family, an ideal tomb feng shui and regular tomb visit are both important in demonstrating filial piety. Therefore they have visited the tomb regularly, requiring a drive of an hour by means of country roads bringing them halfway up the mountain, followed by a service road and a short walk. The service road, as well as parking area and stairs that lead to the tomb were all constructed by the Hong family (figure 5). They managed to negotiate the right to use this area with the Shatianfan village, the legal owner of the land.

Set on a mountain slope, the tomb faced the village on the plain, which is surrounded by mountain ranges. The landscape concerned here is of much larger dimensions than what Tao was accustomed to deal with, with Wu suggesting that the mountain behind the tomb was 'tall enough and did not have an aggressive shape', while those mountains in front of the tomb were shaped 'as if an important man was being escorted by his followers'. These characteristics were considered auspicious.

There were hills either side of the tomb. Burial in this location was believed to enhance power and increase good fortune for the family. In selecting this site, Wu had foreseen the Hong brothers' success, and this success in turn now became evidence of his abilities. Hong's family tomb was the only tomb on this mountainside for a decade. However, the family's regular visits to the tomb must have been noticed – and particularly of course the newly-built road and the stairs. In early 2017, a new tomb was constructed right behind the Hong parents' tomb slightly higher up the hill oriented at a different angle. After being notified, this tomb was inspected by Wu, who noticed it as being another carefully located tomb according to feng shui principles. Since Qi runs through mountain ranges and flows from the higher ground to the lower ground like a stream, the new tomb was believed to have 'robbed' Qi from the Hong tomb by taking the higher ground behind. This suggests that between different families and practitioners there is little concern about ethics in the competition for feng shui burial locations (Freedman, 1968). Hong Jiuzong, the oldest male member of the Hong family, resented the action: 'Anyone capable of performing this kind of feng shui would know for a fact that robbing Qi from another tomb will destroy a whole family's fortune.'

The newly constructed tomb and its additional road were also thought to have damaged the topology and vegetation behind the Hong tomb to such an extent that it could no longer be considered auspicious (figure 6). The presence of vegetation is significant here as an indication of Qi (Clayden & Dixon, 2007). Similar attention to a burial's surrounding vegetation exists in other regions in southern China (Bruun, 2008). Thus the Hong family decided to move the tomb, using this as an opportunity to find a site that would mean that even greater successes might be granted to the family. Wu and Hong Jiuzong therefore visited various potential sites, which were surveyed for appropriateness. The author investigated these sites with Wu and Hong in November

2017.

Wu was able to search and locate suitable sites using a four-wheel drive car and the latest software mapping technology. As a result, he was able to locate sites with the perfect feng shui. All the locations selected by him had in common that they consisted of continuous mountain ranges, since isolated mountains are considered unfavourable for strong Qi. Similarly to Tao with his ancient feng shui books, Wu said a 'xue' must be surrounded by multi-layered mountains that demonstrate perfect forms. Wu claimed his ability to locate a xue in a vast mountainous area, was related to his qualifications in surveying the natural topography, now aided by Google Earth (Figure 7). Using this, Wu identified five potential sites for relocation of the Hong family tomb.

Wu considered Google Earth a valuable aid to 'real practitioners', yet he also considered traditional techniques irreplaceable. He explained:

'Before we had these technologies, we would not have been able to see the dynamics of mountain ranges and where they form a xue. Hence choices of traditional feng shui practitioners were restricted. In the old times, many travelled for years only to be able to find one good xue. Now the map is helping, provided you know how to read the dynamics of mountain ranges properly. But the maps don't tell you everything as they don't demonstrate mountain forms. You still have to be there. Nine out of ten times, the map only indicates a false xue... Reading of different shapes requires true techniques. That you can't gain from anything but years of proper training, some luck, and some talent.'

Locations identified by Wu all required hours of driving, with one situated near Jinhua city within a natural scenic area, a drive of about 140 km. The intended location could be reached conveniently as roads within the scenic area had been well constructed,

but it still required a half-hour walk up the mountain. When the intended location was reached Wu, in the presence of his client, thoughtfully observed the terrain and the shape of the surrounding mountains. Wu always surveyed more than one site for the fundamental requirements of a xue – in this instance he selected two possible sites some 32 metres apart. Feng shui rules determine that Qi only gathers in one location, with other sites considered to be false. Deciding the correct one required Wu to do further survey work, observe mountain forms as well as to operate his feng shui compass. He first positioned himself in each location and looked at the general views, in particular the south, the north, the east and the west (which he respectively referred to as the front, the back, the left and the right). Having done this he was able to determine that one of the sites was not only ‘oblique to the good scenery’, but also did not indicate a satisfactory compass reading. Wu detailed the differences to his client, who having heard the explanation agreed with the selected location. Once the xue had been identified, Wu used his feng shui compass to position himself in relation to the xue. He once again observed the shapes of the surrounding landscape and interpreted these in relation to historical feng shui rules, which enabled him to further explain the possible benefits of this specific xue. Wu announced that this xue would endow the Hong family with great political advantage.

On a second day, Wu and Hong drove for more than three hours to survey another potential site located near Wolong reservoir, an area of protected natural scenery (literally: the sleeping dragon reservoir) c. 270 kilometres southwest of Jinhua city. The reservoir separates an old village from the mountains. Approaching the mountain range, the road leads from the village to the newly developed Wolong Resort, constructed on both sides of the reservoir at the bottom of the valley. Wu first looked at the mountain range from the east side while standing on the road, suggesting that the number of mountain ridges indicated a xue of great power. This clearly had already been recognized

by others since the mountainside was already covered with tombs, all located along the road towards the resort, facing the mountain ridge. Most of these tombs were of recent construction, but though they responded well to auspicious feng shui generally, Wu commented that they were tombs of ‘small fortune’, since they were ‘located in a good area but not in the right location’. He then explained that these burials merely brought the households fertility and limited wealth, but not the great political success that Hong pursued. Wu and Hong talked to local villagers and were informed that many of these tombs were built here during the last decade when the access route to the reservoir was developed and the favourable feng shui here had become widely known among the locals.

To reach what Wu considered the right location, he and Hong walked across the exposed bed of the half-empty reservoir reaching the foot of the mountain, hiking up it through rough terrain. There were no paths in this area and the going was difficult (figure 8). Once on the mountain, Wu again did his observations and read his compass determining that this would be a suitable location. Yet Hong had his reservations; while he was assured by one of his governmental contacts that use for this purpose might be possible and that he could be reassured that tomb construction would not be halted by the authorities, access to the site would be difficult. In wet periods visiting the tomb would be impossible and he argued that if the tomb is regularly visited, a feng shui burial would not be as auspicious as expected. It was clear that the family related the frequency of tomb visits to the effectiveness of feng shui burial.

Discussion and conclusions

As one of the beliefs revived in China in recent years, feng shui has once again become a widespread ritual for burial, despite its illegality. ‘Proper burial’ remains a common concern and to accomplish this people have resorted more and more to feng shui

as a means to provide this. This is despite a near 100% cremation rate, meaning that burial only involves cremated remains. A carefully selected tomb plot to inter ashes is considered a good compromise to proper burial as it enables continuity of centuries-old traditions of ancestral worship. The practice of feng shui burial today continues to be related to fundamental Neo-Confucianism thinking including Qi and filial piety. A successful feng shui burial, which can only be achieved considering a combination of the ideal tomb location, surrounding view, orientation, and burial time, provides a sense of well-being and good fortune to all those involved. While feng shui is practised in cemeteries, it is also practised out in the countryside. Here highly artificial tomb structures affect the setting, but it is clear that this is not a general concern since people take the presence of a tomb as an indicator of good feng shui, and read this as an omen, encouraging them to build their own memorials there.

Although the national burial laws prohibit it and the public burial system has limited scope to enable feng shui to be practised, the examples here show how ideal burials can be achieved either within a controlled cemetery or in the wild. As seen from the above case studies, a feng shui practitioner tends to visit multiple sites to determine which is the most auspicious location for burial by observing the surroundings and reading a compass, all in relation to the deceased's date of birth. The aid of new technology in locating an ideal burial site has also become evident. This has suggested that the relationship of feng shui burial with the landscape is perpetuated today and the ability to read the auspiciousness in the topography of the surrounding landscape, without doubt, remains the most significant technique of the ritual. The examples of the practitioners discussed here, show how both traditional feng shui, as continued in the countryside, and as practised for urban residents really pursue similar objectives: there is a general preference for continuous mountain ranges, multiple mountain ridges, and

beautifully shaped mountains. There are also interesting differences: choice of auspicious burial in rural areas is much limited by locality, but the example shows how with ingenuity plots may be adapted and provided with the right xue nevertheless.

The choices are greater for those participants with the appropriate resources. Yet the most significant resource required to be able to organise a luxurious feng shui burial seems to be social. In Hong's case it was mostly the family's social connections that allowed their tomb construction in the wild and scenic conservation area, to be left 'undisturbed'. The preference is to select a plot in the natural environment that fits feng shui's descriptions of an ideal landscape. There is a willingness and desire to consider all types of locations, in different directions even in areas where the deceased did not have any local connections. All that matters to the feng shui is whether it receives the maximum amount of Qi, and thus enhances good fortune. As a result, it is also of significance that a site is 'undisturbed', away from competition between other burials and practitioners. There appears to be little concern for others or the landscape more generally. When the good fortune of the Hong family was challenged when another tomb was built above it, the solution was to remove the tomb altogether and relocate this at another site hundreds of kilometres away. The fact that this involved a move to a protected scenic area did not appear to have been a concern. Although beauty in mountains is culturally widely recognised in China, the presence of artificial tombs does not seem to affect this appreciation. Personal need for burial auspiciousness is of greater importance than the needs of others, or the desire to keep natural beauty unaffected by human constructions. Meanwhile, burial in rural areas still reveals an attachment to place - former residents return to their villages of origin, preferring them as a final resting place. The manipulation and adaptation possible with feng shui rules as demonstrated by the Daxikou case, suggest the feng shui of a burial land is considered affirmed while being approved by fellow

villagers. Rituals seemed to be a means to make up for the shortcomings of the site's physical settings.

Feng shui burial is clearly tolerated by local governments in rural areas. In both Tao's cases, the feng shui burials were public affairs, where there did not appear to be any danger of prosecution, despite the fact that the burials violated public burial laws. There are also cases to suggest that feng shui burial has become the preserve of the rich and is regarded as conspicuous consumption, requiring not only an expensive feng shui master, but also the ability to pay other fees and bribes necessary for acquiring a burial plot and building of a tomb. Such burials also require the means to allow regular access to the chosen location. People in privilege positions can connect with a hidden market in which their wishes can be granted. One of the consequences of this hidden market is bribery; there is also damage to some of the most beautiful countrysides through ad hoc engineering works done for private benefit. It is clear, that it will be necessary to regulate current feng shui practices, particularly for the growing aging population, so that the future landscapes will not be determined only by those with the means of seeking auspicious burial.

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List of figures

Figure 1. Two ideal burial sites in feng shui book *Dili canzanxuanji xianpoji* published in 1518 depicted the context of the family's achievements, being recorded to provide references to auspicious fengshui and to claim the family's social status. (Source: Harvard

College Library Harvard-Yenching Library, <http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:FHCL:1191948>) [accessed on 2 July 2017])

Figure 2. Tao Zhengcheng reading instructions on his feng shui compass on one of the proposed tomb sites for the Chen family in Xitou village. (Photograph: Author, December 2016)

Figure 3. The Chen family tomb is located amongst others next to farmland below a small hill at Daxikou village, a location favoured for providing auspicious feng shui (Photograph: Author, December 2017).

Figure 4. The regularly maintained levelled carparking area providing access to the Hong family tomb, at Shatianfan village, with the tomb hidden behind vegetation on the right-hand side. (Photograph: Author, November 2017)

Figure 5. The newly build tomb and associated road construction behind the Hong family tomb in Shatianfan village, which were believed to ruin the feng shui for the site. (Photograph: Author, November 2017)

Figure 6. The newly build tomb and associated road construction behind the Hong family tomb in Shatianfan village, which were believed to ruin the feng shui for the site. (Photograph: Author, November 2017)

Figure 7. Wu identifying potential sites on Google Earth, suggesting the software allows him to read the dynamics of mountain ranges easily. (Photograph: Author, December 2017)

Figure 8. Wu Dashi and Hong Jiuzong walking towards the foot of the mountain across the exposed bed of the half-empty Wolong reservoir in order to inspect an ideal location from the perspective of feng shui. (Photograph: Author, December 2017)