

Laws of the Land: Fengshui and the State in Qing Dynasty China. By Tristan G. Brown. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023. Pp. xxviii + 328. \$45.00.

Tristan G. Brown, a young historian at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, sets out to correct our understanding of the role played by feng shui in imperial China. Almost exclusively, he argues, feng shui has either been dismissed as superstition or adopted by New Age practitioners for interior design and home decoration, while scholarly publications have shed light on its theories yet primarily focused on its applications in city planning, architecture, and aesthetics. However, what Western observers have overlooked is the penetrating role of feng shui in Chinese law, recounted with increasing intensity in the latter dynasties and culminating in the Qing dynasty. This is the theme of his book, which “invites readers to rethink the nature of law in the late imperial era, the inner workings of the Qing dynasty’s administration, and the complex social and economic forces that drove people to record and analyze changes in natural and human landscapes” (p. 223).

The author convincingly shows how feng shui concerns, such as over graves, burials, and trees, rose to become a major subject in legal disputes, in some counties easily covering half of the cases. At the same time, the rising challenges of the Qing empire stemming from foreign pressure and rapidly developing mining, railway construction, and manufacturing activities contributed to common anxieties, to which feng shui provided articulation. With an outset in Sichuan province, Brown notes that “In a broader sense, by giving a powerful voice to pervasive anxieties over health, land, wealth, and family in the Qing period, fengshui helped to preserve the imperial order in Sichuan and, most certainly, in other parts of China” (p. 224). Feng shui was related to everything from filial piety to land claims and natural resources, and addressed fortune and misfortune in a myriad of contexts. It projected the power of the state and its representatives, gave influence to scholars and specialists, and provided rural families with an avenue for legal recourse and protest. Brown shows us that by bridging heaven and earth, scholars and commoners, and the living and the dead, feng shui principles served in countless ways as *Laws of the Land* in China’s imperial tradition, particularly so in the last dynasty. In particular, growing anxieties, rising tensions, and looming rebellions in the last century of the Qing dynasty induced the rulers to adjust the legal system to meet these challenges “within the politics of the possible.”

Eventually, the emergence of industrial capitalism, new technology like railways and telegraph lines and the popular protests arisen from their construction, the cancellation of the imperial examination system, and political events like the Boxer Uprising (1899–1901) tore up the fabric of the old society and permanently altered the relations between people, land, and reason.

This book is extremely well researched and builds on an impressive range of archival resources, primarily from Sichuan, Taiwan, Beijing, and Taipei, and including hundreds of litigation cases, judicial maps, local gazetteers, judicial handbooks, and geomantic manuals from the Qing period. It is structured into introduction, five specialized chapters, and concluding remarks. The five chapters focus on: (1) litigating graves, including issues relating to the strong protection of graves under the Qing law and the rising pressure on land from population growth; (2) mapping feng shui, which documents how feng shui disputes were carefully mapped in court; (3) examining fortune, which analyses how the use of feng shui was tied to the examination system and the success of local candidates; (4) mining Sichuan, which looks at the growing feng shui controversies relating to mineral extraction during the Qing period; and (5) breaking the land, which engages with the debates and controversies over industrialization and disturbances to the “veins of the earth” in the final phase of the dynasty.

It was never easy for Westerners to come to terms with Chinese approaches to cosmology, religion, and beliefs in general, and feng shui lies at the core of this challenge. Brown outlines how people did different things with feng shui during the Qing dynasty. First, scholars, geomancers, and others all studied it, and geomantic information was widely disseminated in towns and villages. Second, people practised it, and geomantic knowledge was sold by specialist for a variety of purposes, including even instructions for presenting lawsuits. Third, people narrated and mobilized feng shui to explain various phenomena in the world, including good fortune or loss, family histories, property claims, and a host of everyday issues. Similarly, Qing officials resolved legal cases pertaining to feng shui with a variety of motives. Some were committed to its principles, while others relied on titbits of practical knowledge on houses, graves, and so forth. Some conveyed a considerable scepticism in court, while others relied on their eye for expedient solutions to complex conflicts. As Brown explains, “These diverse motives often overlapped in court in fascinating ways, mirroring the complex inner lives of individuals tasked to uphold proper ritual and enforce the law” (p. 11). However, the unique positions of county

magistrates, having passed several levels of exams and possessing exclusive legal authority, gave them reasons to be confident in court. Thus, they did not need to *believe* in feng shui to engage, analyse, and adjudicate cases about it. Chinese administrators were presumably always aware to tread carefully when giving credence to feng shui, and routinely condemned its plebeian practitioners. This book provides a wealth of material on their concerns, deliberations, debates, and political motives in a period of accelerating changes.

In summary, this work is an extremely well researched, beautifully written, and highly important contribution to what the author himself identifies as “a largely misunderstood historical phenomenon” (p. 223). It provides rich documentation to the remarkable rise of feng shui from popular cosmology to social convention to legal code in Chinese imperial history, including its boundless ramifications in culture, society, economy, and foreign relations, and deserves a wide readership among scholars, students, and the feng shui–interested public.

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