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Chinese Villages as Didactic Texts

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It is a paradox that traditional Chinese society was both conspicuously diverse and strikingly integrated. Although it is possible to document differences through time and across space, there is substantial evidence of the emergence of a broad consensus concerning basic ideas, beliefs, and values that were shared by commoners and elites in spite of significant social and dialect boundaries. Elements of elite culture were formally and informally transmitted among those who were literate through written texts and an articulated set of rituals. These same elements were shared with the population at large via plays and performance, folk ballads, admonitory tracts, moralistic primers, genealogies, family instructions, woodblock prints, calendrical and life-cycle activities, domestic ritual, temple decorations, thereby promoting orthodox ideas in Chinese villages. In addition, it is now acknowledged that the iconography found within and about village buildings also had a symbolic power that elevated it beyond mere ornamentation. The representative density of images and words found above and around entryways and windows, on interior lattice door and window panels, as well as in and about altar rooms, kitchens, bedsteads, and on other furniture contributed to shaping popular mentalities (Berliner, Berliner and Handler, Chow, Ebrey, Johnson, Knapp, Li, Liu Dingkun, Liu Su, Murray, Po and Johnson, Smith, Wu, Xu, among others). This essay introduces an additional means by which the highly textualized literary culture of China's elites was communicated to illiterate villagers through the "scripting" of narrative village landscapes by local gentry.

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Employing spatial compositions as signifiers, of course, is an acknowledged practice in Chinese traditional architecture. Individual structures, such as the northern *siheyuan* courtyard-type dwelling and its many variants throughout the country clearly embody the symbolic hierarchical distinctions relating to generation, sex, and sibling relationships. The ordering of space in the prototypical *siheyuan* proclaimed the organic unity of status relationships that ideally exist within the Chinese family: the senior generation occupies the main building (*zhengfang*); younger generations reside in side halls (*xiangfang*). In southeastern China, the central ceremonial room (*ting*) of a U-shaped compound represents agnatic unity, and *fang*, the flanking bedrooms, spatially depict the hierarchical patterns of the family. In Taiwan and Fujian, the *ting* is viewed as relatively public space (*gongting*) while *fang* is regarded as more private (*sifang*); this view illustrates a phenomenon of growth and division that is underscored by a multiplication of stoves as domestic economies separate (Chen 1991). The addition of receding courtyards and halls as well as wings called *hulong* or "protecting dragons" found in dwellings such as the Antai Lin residence in Taiwan further reveals a scripted spatial text of hierarchical expectations and graduated privacy linked to upper/lower (*shang/xia*), left/right (*zuo/you*) and inner/outer (*nei/wai*) associations, all fundamental elements of *li* (Chinese ritual) (Knapp 1986, 92–97).

Village Plans as Narratives

This essay, however, moves to a more expansive scale in the built environment—the village plan itself. Based upon fieldwork in rural Zhejiang province and observations in other areas of southern China, this essay reveals several examples in which the physical forms of villages were *self-consciously* conceived and composed—one might even say designed—for didactic purposes in the service of Confucian ideology. Most Chinese villages no doubt took shape with little more in mind than the need for shelter, simply juxtaposed spaces for residence and work. The extraordinary variety and irregularity of Chinese village plans are evidence of the unique circumstances that undergirded the development of particular rural settlements. Most villages originated from an individual or household's decision to settle in an area. As population increased and needs changed over time, unstructured incremental growth usually led to the unself-conscious emergence of maze-like village shapes that often appeared without any sense of order. The sites

and plans of many Chinese villages, of course, derive at least in part from the self-conscious application of *fengshui* principles in pursuit of a harmonious relationship between heaven and earth in which human occupancy is fitted within a greater cosmological framework. Some villages found in southern China that incorporate *fengshui* elements in their "design," moreover, also employ imaginative and explicit didactic devices as well. This essay focuses on two narrative landscape patterns among several that can be noted in southern villages: those that stress hierarchical family relationships (*xiaoti*) and those that speak of the importance of education (*quanxue*).

Contemporary villages in the Nanxijiang area of Yongjia county in southeastern Zhejiang, as elsewhere in China, reflect an accumulation of various factors that have contributed to their present form: the requirements of an agricultural economy; the pressures of population increase; the ebb and flow of material prosperity; a degree of environmental awareness, especially of the recurring patterns of nature; and the promotion of elements of traditional literary culture. No village, however, is a preserved fossil of a single historical period or merely an accumulation of unconnected events. Many villages were dramatically altered at some time in the past by the actions of particular village leaders. The actions of such leaders in carrying out meticulous evaluations of their village's site and situation over a relatively short time then led to focused decisions and a striking, rather rapid, metamorphosis of the village's cultural landscape. Such marked change and the remodeling of landscape elements often imposed an order of meaning—a self-conscious design—on the village plan, creating a retrospective "history" of substantial clarity to a process of settlement that had been up to that time vague. Transformative efforts of this type typically punctuated longer periods of unordered growth and relative stagnation. The self-conscious structuring of village narratives composed of spatial or architectural elements that were carriers of memory and unquestionably surrogates for literary language can be documented in villages throughout the region.

Cangpo Village

Cangpo village, for example, was born like many Chinese villages from the nucleus of a solitary house constructed by a migrant who had escaped hardship elsewhere. In time, however, Cangpo's buildings and overall village plan were skillfully scripted as narratives, imprints of tradition, as the settlement evolved and expanded. The village landscape itself thus came to serve as a primer stating a

limited range of orthodox Confucian social norms, attitudes, virtues, and patterns of human relationships. Cangpo village records trace its origin to a settler from Fujian, named Li, who migrated to the Nanxijiang area, took a local wife, and in 955 constructed a modest dwelling on a riverine terrace with mountains to its sides and the Nanxijiang River to its front. The remnants of his grave are marked in an open area in the southwest quadrant of the village.

Through natural growth over a two-hundred-year period, Cangpo took an unplanned, irregular form composed of three hamlets, each representing a different *fang* or branch of the Li clan, with dwellings and other structures placed according to individual needs. By the early part of the twelfth century, as the area became more prosperous, ancestral halls and village dwellings came to face a common south or southwest direction according to common *fengshui* requirements. As Cangpo developed, attention clearly was paid to *wuxing* (Five Phases) cosmology, specifically the regenerative and destructive aspects of the cycle as they were represented in the shape of surrounding hills (figure 1). The western hills of Cangpo, for example, which should have been broad and flat—representative of metal—instead were composed of sharp peaks like fire. To the north, representing water, there in fact was insufficient water to offset the intrusive fire from the western peaks and the assumed primary fire from the south. The peril of this profusion of fire led to an attempt to ameliorate it with the construction of two large rectangular ponds in the southeast quadrant of Cangpo (figure 2). The laying out of a crisscrossed network of stone-lined channels for water to run downslope throughout the village, it was believed, further afforded geomantic artifice to protect Cangpo from the likely encroachment of excessive fire.

Aside from the building of ancestral halls with their important ceremonial functions, it was not until the purposeful construction of a pair of pavilions in 1128 that the full power of narrative began to be inscribed in the Cangpo landscape. Two brothers of the sixth generation built a set of pavilions that not only physically survive but serve as the vocabulary for one of the enduring hierarchical distinctions or bonds in basic Confucian thought, that between elder brother and younger brother. Li Qiushan, the elder brother, built his house some three hundred meters to the south of Cangpo on the road to Yantou. At a place called Fangxiang, he constructed a *ting* or pavilion called Songdi Ge (The Pavilion for Seeing Younger Brother Off; figure 3). Standing in this pavilion, according to legend, elder brother would bid goodbye to his younger brother,

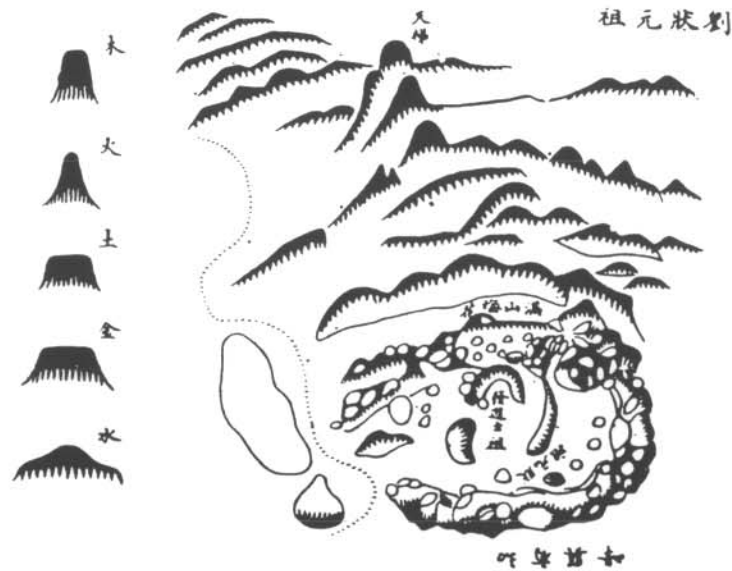


Figure 1. The shape of hills is a key to *fengshui* siting principles. As shown in this diagram that relates them to the landscape occupied by a successful degree candidate, hill shapes (from top to bottom: wood, fire, earth, metal, and water) are correlated to *wuxing* cosmology. Source: *Dixue tanyuan* (An investigation into the origins of *fengshui*) (Taipei: Liuyi chubanshe, 1986).

watching him as he followed the path back to the nearby nucleated village. On the southeast corner of Cangpo village itself, the younger brother built Wangxiong Ting (The Pavilion for Gazing at Elder Brother; figure 4) to complement his brother's pavilion at Fangxiang. As recounted in village lore, younger brother would light a lamp in the pavilion to signal his elder brother that he had returned safely home.

These pavilions are not merely mute structures standing alone but instead narrate a lesson of mutual fraternal love, the reciprocal caring and loyalty of brothers as a basic kinship bond. The family with its hierarchical relationships was, of course, a basic element of the Confucian view of society, whether it was the relationship between elder brother and younger brother, husband and wife, or father and son. It was the naturalness of these graded relationships, together with the more equal friend-and-friend relationship, that served as the prototype for other hierarchical roles and associations



Figure 2. To reduce the danger that supposedly emanated from the "fire"-shaped hills on the west and to remedy the deficit of water in the northern environs of the village, two rectangular ponds were built on the southern side of Cangpo village. (Photo by Ronald G. Knapp)

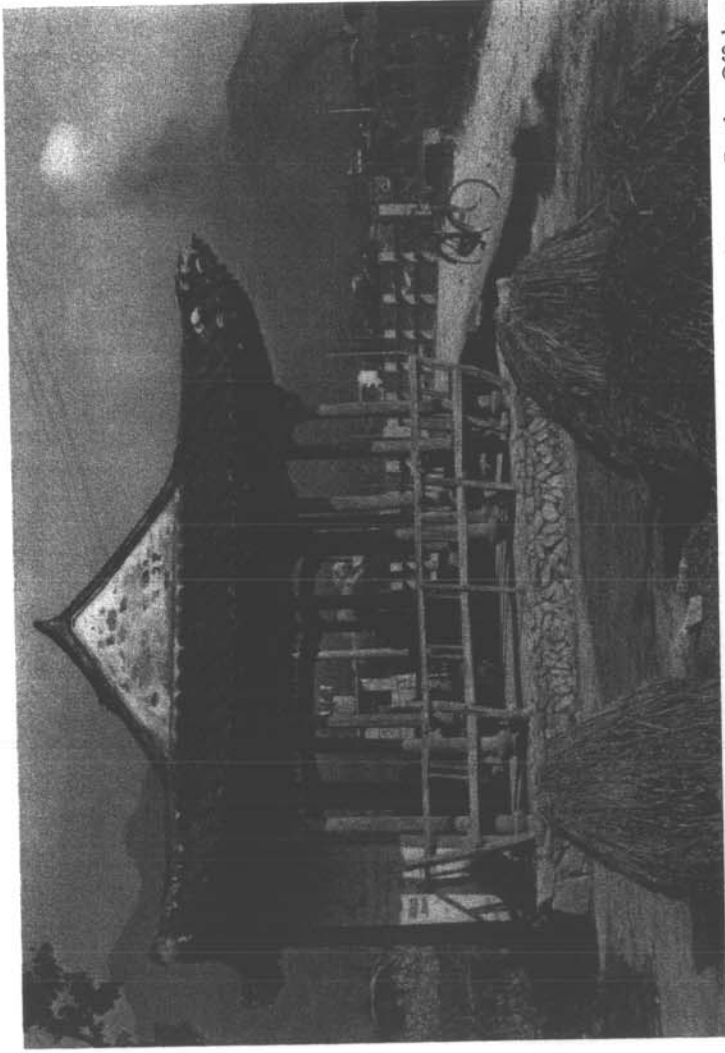


Figure 3. Built by Li Qiushan at Fangxiang, Songdi Ge (The Pavilion for Seeing Younger Brother Off) has a small shrine within it. (Photo by Ronald G. Knapp)

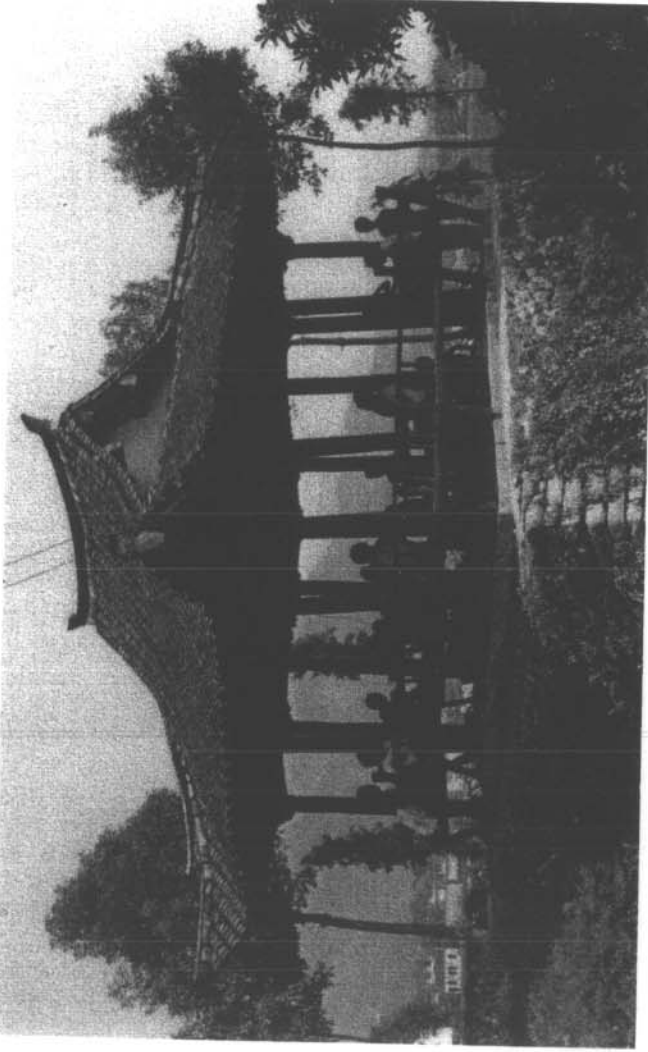


Figure 4. Wangxiong Ting (The Pavilion for Gazing at Younger Brother) sits atop the southeastern corner of Cangpo. Today it is a place for village elders to catch the breeze and relax from village work. (Photo by Ronald G. Knapp)

in society, especially that of ruler and minister, and undergirded the Confucian notion of order of *wulun* (the Five Relations). All had their foundation in explicit statements and depictions found in genealogies, clan rules, family instructions, and ritual handbooks of various sorts. It may well be that the emphasis on the bonds between younger brother and elder brother was directed at promoting kinship solidarity and thereby minimizing the likelihood of the division of the household and making it easier to perpetuate a large clan estate.

The ancestral or clan hall (*zongci* or *citang*), like tended graves and the ritual room in each dwelling, provided a further village spatial form for asserting moral values and the tutelage role of local literati. Both within individual households and at sites having a broader lineage dimension, ritual affirmed not only the fraternal bond but also the virtue of filiality, among other values of Confucian family ethics. Rituals provided regular and formal means for villagers to “absorb the Confucian values expressed in the ceremonies but also gain a greater consciousness of sharing in a common Chinese culture” (Ebrey 1989, 277–278). The Li ancestral hall in Cangpo confirmed the existence of the extended lineage within the village, stressing the need to honor one’s parents and patrilineal ancestors. Particularly important within the lineage hall was the open courtyard space at its center; that space accommodated a large stage or *xitai* for the periodic performance of local opera (figure 5). Such performances were more than entertainment, more than diversions from the difficulties of daily life. They were a significant social force, providing an oral medium of instruction for the elite to disseminate and inspire cultural norms and values via popular stories of legend and history to all—literate and illiterate alike. During the Southern Song period, the Yongjia region gave birth to a southern opera form that subsequently flourished during the Ming dynasty. There is no record of what plays were staged in Cangpo village. Nonetheless, they must have been similar to those described by Lin Yutang: “Practically all the standardized Chinese notions of loyal ministers and filial sons and brave warriors and faithful wives and chaste maidens and intriguing maidservants are reflected in... plays. Represented in the form of stories with human characters, whom they hate or love as the case may be, they sink deep into [the people’s] moral consciousness” and “become their concrete conceptions of good and evil conduct” (1939, 252). Cangpo’s lineage halls and the ritual center of many dwellings also provided substantial spaces for calligraphic adornment. Adages in

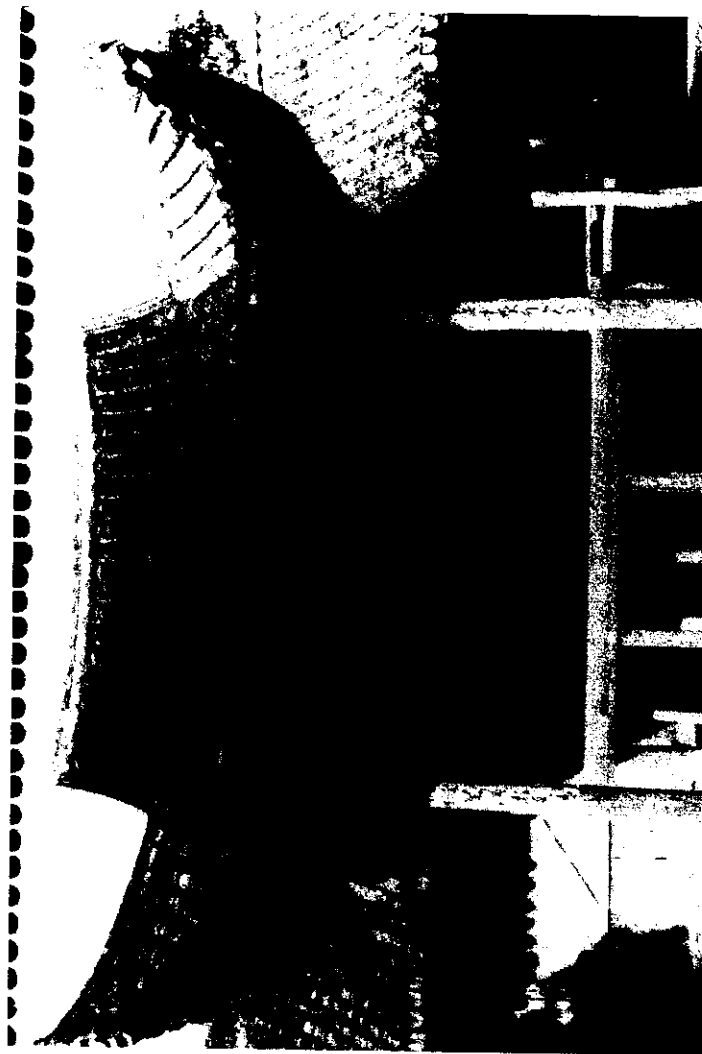


Figure 5. This stage (*xitai*) within the Li family ancestral hall provided the venue for performances of local operas that usually had didactic themes. (Photo by Ronald G. Knapp)

verse or epigrams—whether written in black ink on white paper and hung in paired couplets, or written on horizontal boards hung on the walls—expressed clearly the full range of orthodox neo-Confucian values.

Nothing, however, expresses the didactic character of Cangpo more than an imaginative design that took form in the twelfth century. Evoking the composition known as *wenfang sibao* ("four treasures of the studio"—writing brush, ink stick, ink slab, and writing paper), as represented in figure 6, the text is hardly a subtle invocation that learning is important and that no effort should be spared in its pursuit. The roughly square shape of the village was seen as a sheet of blank writing paper, the first treasure. A rectangular large pond dug on the south side of the village adjacent to the Li ancestral hall represents a *yanchi* or ink slab. Several slender rectangular pieces of stone approximately 4.5 by 0.5 by 0.3 meters were placed nearby to impersonate *mo* or ink sticks, as seen in figure 7. Each of these stone *mo* was beveled on the end to indicate that they had been worn down as ink was made on the inkstone. *Bijie* (Writing Brush Lane), a 300-meter-long lane running east to west and representing a *bi* or writing brush, completed the composition. *Bijie*, the essential element running from the ancestral hall, was oriented so that it would "rest" on *bijia*, a writing-brush holder or rack used by calligraphers as they work. It may be remembered that the rising and falling "fire peaks" that border Cangpo on the west were a potentially destructive feature within *wuxing* cosmology. With the same pointed natural feature now perceived as *bijia*, a negative feature of the landscape was transformed into a positive one. This borrowing of distant natural landscape features, of course, has a long history in the construction of Chinese gardens.

Yantou and Pengxi Villages

The *wenfang sibao* composition is observable also in nearby Yantou, the largest village in the area. In addition to a village plan that suggests writing paper, slightly different elements associated with the Tahu temple symbolize the remaining three treasures of the *wenfang sibao* composition: a pagoda represents the writing brush and several slender stone slabs stand for the ink sticks. The inkstone is elaborate, comprising an elevated area and a trough: a small 16.2-meter-wide peninsula called Qinyu suggests an elongated inkstone; it is attached to a temple with a *tianjing* or skywell that encloses a small pond representing a *shuicao*, a trough of water ready to be mixed with the ink (Qinghua 1992, 105).

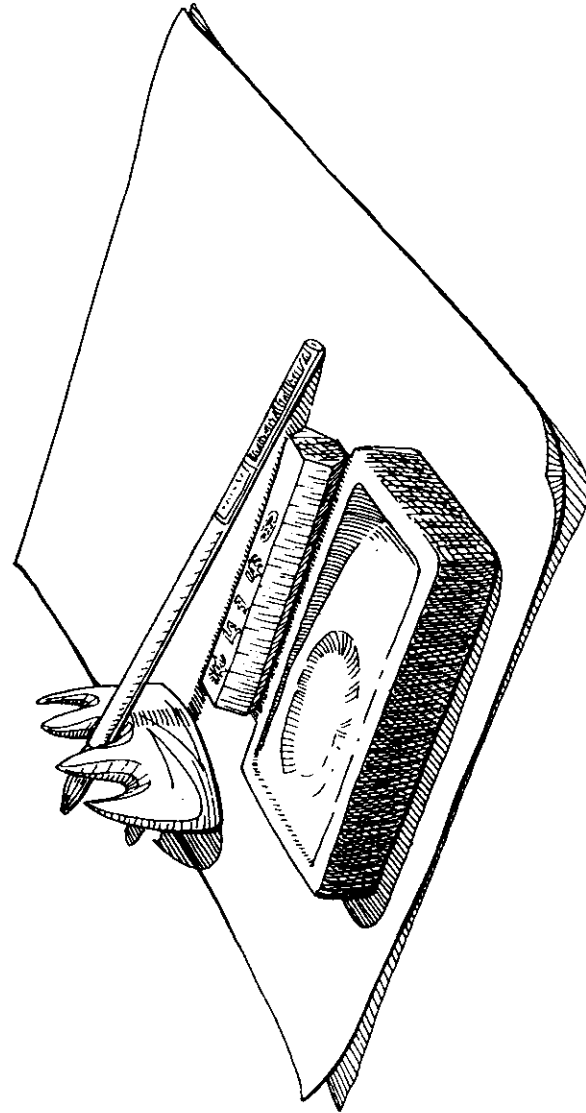


Figure 6. In southern China, *wenfang sibao* (four treasures of the studio) was self-consciously employed by local gentry as a village design element that could serve as an inculcating medium. (Drawing by Camy Fischer)



Figure 7. Running from the lower right corner is Bijie (Writing Brush Lane), oriented to appear to rest in the crook of the brush stand formed by the rise and fall of the mountains on the west of the village. The oblong stones arranged on the left of the lane represent ink sticks. Nearby but not visible is a pond that represents the inkstone. (Photo by Ronald G. Knapp)

Elsewhere in the vicinity of Cangpo are many tapered peaks and bodies of water that also have been ingeniously used to symbolize learning. These are termed *wenfeng* or *wenbifeng* because their conical shape can be associated with the tip of a Chinese writing brush. Their inverted attenuated images are reflected in nearby ponds and streams as the sun passes across the sky on certain days during the year. As this occurs, the images of the peaks and the water become part of a composition known as "the writing brush dipping into ink" (*wen bi zhan mo*). Although some see this phenomenon in the reflection of some of Cangpo's "fire peaks" being immersed in the pond that had been designated a *yanchi*, such dipping is more readily visualized in the topographical features associated with Pengxi village. Such features of the landscape led to the construction of literary allusions that not only elicited expectations concerning the attainment of degrees but also offered some explanation for the high level of achievement of many in the rural villages of Zhejiang. The socially accepted way to wealth in traditional times in China was study rather than commerce or land ownership; study eventually led to the passing of exacting examinations and the achievement of degrees. Pingti Ho has told us that wealth "was not in itself an ultimate source of power. It had to be translated into official status to make its power fully felt" (1962, 51). From the Yuan dynasty onward, Zhejiang ranked among Chinese provinces at or near the top in the number of individuals passing examinations and attaining official positions.

Zheng Village

A similar attempt to evoke the *wenfang sibao* motif has been described for Zheng village, Sanshui county, Guangdong, but there is insufficient textual corroboration for the phenomenon (Ho 1995, 48–49). Here, the elements of the "four treasures of the studio" are said to occupy only fragmented parts of the village layout: a threshing ground represents the paper, a pond the ink slab, an adjacent row of ancestral halls the ink stick, and a three-story pagoda with a pointed conical roof the writing brush (figure 8).

Conclusions

There is increasing evidence that the values and general moral system of China's elite "permeated popular consciousness" and "made possible a hegemony of startling strength and scope" by the

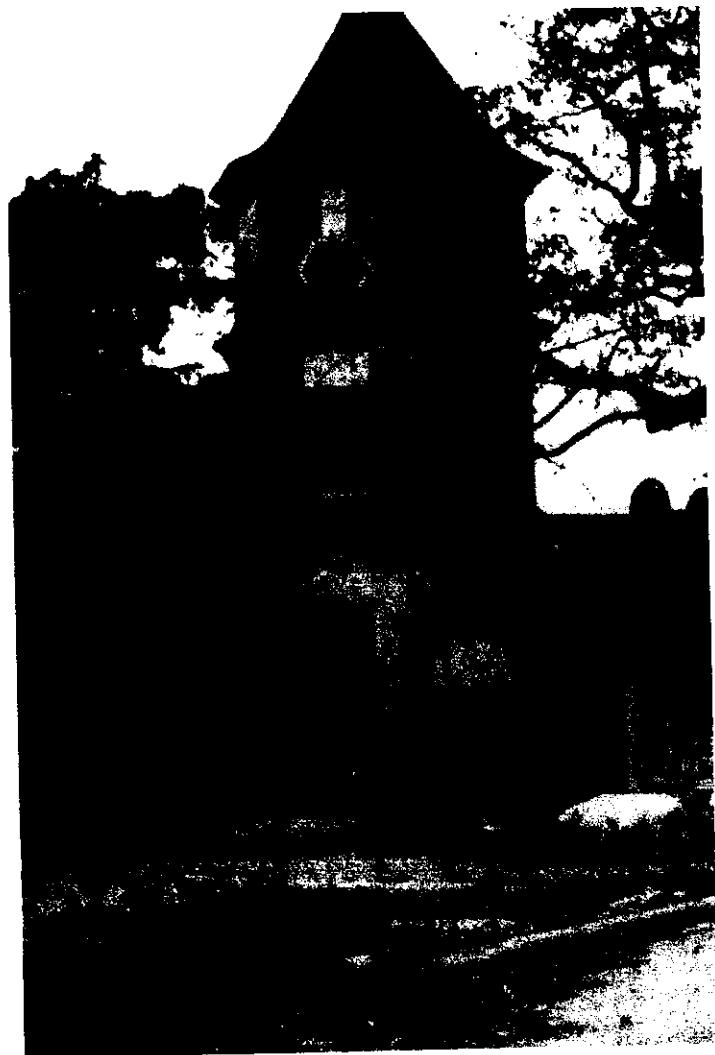


Figure 8. In Zheng village, Sanshui county, Guangdong, this three-story pagoda with its tapered roof represents the writing brush. A nearby pond stands in for the inkstone, the ancestral shrine serves as the ink stick, and a threshing ground, the paper. (Photo courtesy of Puay-peng Ho)

end of the Ming period (Johnson 1985, 46, 47). Confucian values and norms that gave form to the fabric of Chinese social life were communicated by way of an astonishing array of agents: textually through a well-rehearsed canon accessible to the literate; orally by way of folk tales, ballads, aphorisms, and performance available in many forms to all Chinese; visually via a fertile repertoire of symbols that pervade Chinese life; and experientially through actions in well-orchestrated rituals performed by all segments of Chinese society. The ongoing, insistent repetition of verbal and nonverbal cultural messages in many forms provided the means to transmit the collective mentalities that define what it means to be Chinese. Yet one must admit that it is not possible to understand fully how, or even if, in Chinese villages in the past, local elites and especially peasants actually read and interpreted the symbolic ornamentation, architectural structures, and spatial configurations of their inhabited space. Villagers today, as they move about their inherited spaces and observe replicated the vivid symbolic ornamentation about them, however, certainly do recognize forms that took shape centuries ago and that animate their values and norms even today.

There is no doubt that countless Chinese villages were built with nothing more than the need for shelter in mind, simply juxtaposed spaces for residence and work, havens from the elements and vessels for daily life, rather than as means to transmit the Confucian code of behavior. Yet just as it can be argued that *fengshui* "helped restrain Chinese villagers from unwise ecological decisions, nurturing reasonably sound ecological practices and leading to 'planned' settlements far ahead of their time" (Fan 1992, 45), it seems certain that some village gentry self-consciously fashioned cultural landscapes of extraordinary beauty and meaning. In the process, their constructed landscape narratives very likely supplemented and affirmed the more formal text- and ritual-based means of inculcation more generally employed in nurturing cultural orthodoxy.

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