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In *Laws of the Land: Fengshui and the State in Qing Dynasty China*, historian Tristan G. Brown breaks new ground by contextualizing fengshui (風水, lit. “wind and water”) in China’s legal landscape during the Qing dynasty (1644-1912). Through analyzing numerous fengshui-related judicial cases (including maps) based in Nanbu as well as Ba County, Sichuan Province (the latter now located in Chongqing) and drawing on a wide range of primary materials including archival sources from Beijing and Taipei, he convincingly reveals that fengshui, having been invoked in imperial law for centuries, impacted Qing administrators’ decision-making processes in coping with demographic, social, economic, and political changes. Fengshui played such roles because it was deeply enmeshed in elites’ and commoners’ lives—a reality that became globally recognized when the industrial extraction of resources from the land began to sweep the country at the turn of twentieth century.

Brown’s work is a timely product of a deep dive into China’s local archive wealth, based on his own archival research in Sichuan in the early to mid-2010s. It contributes to the growing academic literature on legal culture in late imperial China along with a thriving trend in local archival research and publishing within Ming-Qing China studies. The significance of this book, however, goes much beyond a regional study of Northern Sichuan (which was at various points during the Qing dynasty some combination of a frontier, a periphery, and a hinterland). Sichuan did not have the highest rates of fengshui litigation in the empire; parts of Jiangnan and southeast China had even higher caseloads. Yet, as Brown points out, Sichuan court records reveal fengshui practices “in real-time,” with locals presenting arguments with the help of litigation masters and geomancers, as well as officials weighing claims against their prior knowledge (p. 16). Brown’s sharpness in capturing these extraordinary conversations, arguments, and debates led him to develop an authentically distinctive approach to fengshui’s history and Chinese law.

Diverging from modernization narratives singularly defined by imperialism, scientism, or materialism, Brown unearths a hitherto neglected, and largely misinterpreted, history of fengshui in late imperial China. Critical toward both Orientalists’ misunderstanding of fengshui as superstition (in contrast to “Western science”) and toward the popular “modernization” narratives of China that view “Confucian traditions” as static or timeless, Brown examines fengshui as “an arena where today’s categories of law, religion, science, and economy seamlessly intersected in China” (p. 191). This insight challenges commonly held binaries
such as tradition/modernity, religion/science, superstition/rationality, and culture/nature. He invites scholars to question the conceptual and disciplinary boundaries rooted in Western natural and social sciences. In other words, Brown takes fengshui seriously and asks how Qing history may be read differently when we do so.

In this regard, Brown draws our attention to one of fengshui’s historical expressions in the epigraph to the book: dili (地理 “earthly principles”). Through depicting fengshui across the legal landscape, this book seamlessly connects the term li (理 “principles or reasoning”) to the notion of “rationality” or rationalization in the Chinese legal system. Most strikingly, dili was one term favored by scholars and officials for fengshui when addressing “the learned, empirical content of their judgments” (p. 87) in legal cases. Therefore, “the laws of the land” encompass the rationality of the Qing legal system through, first, laws (fa 法) issued by the state and, second, through the cosmic powers of the land, that is, earthly principles (dili) or fengshui, which the state selectively recognized in the course of administration. This insight stands to reject Max Weber’s well-known “irrationality” critiques of the Chinese imperial bureaucracy and legal system.

This genuinely interdisciplinary book is a substantial contribution to Chinese history, the environmental humanities, the history of science, and legal history. We are presented with a nineteenth century not only defined by geologists or engineers who set the “scientific” or “modern” pace for exploring natural resources and developing the land, but one also shaped by the fengshui experts or land masters in Chinese terms “geomancers (dilijia 地理家) or geomancy specialists (kanyujia 堪輿家),” Yin-yang officers, and ritual specialists (p. 7). In this context, trees and water sources could provide valuable information for determining whether fengshui had been harmed; officials and civilians could use maps to record and verify specific claims about fengshui; and scholars could cite the fortunes of locals, the passing rate of examination candidates, and the health of children as evidence for or against a specific interpretation of fengshui. In other words, fengshui sustained and altered environments, wherein trees, soils, minerals and rocks, water, and living people were all understood as interconnected. In the process, Brown argues, it became “a territorial language of power that expressed connections between people and places, families and land, and social status and environment” (p. 45).

One impressive strength of this book is Brown’s innovative analysis of fengshui-related case files as evidence to illustrate how people “studied,” “practiced,” and “narrated” fengshui, instead of showing fengshui as a static “traditional” knowledge (p. 5). This analysis broadens the book’s focus from the legal system to general knowledge in Qing society: How was fengshui knowledge produced, mapped, verified, and legitimized? The topics discussed and analyzed in this book have far-reaching implications for facilitating dialogue among scholars interested in indigenous knowledge systems and those in search of alternative pathways from the past toward the future. This book also inspires readers to think through various “transformation” processes in a non-Western context, such as cultures of improving, repairing, sustaining, maintaining, planning, or general developmental projects without necessarily involving destructive creation (i.e., the twentieth-century sense of innovation).

The book consists of five chapters. The first four chapters examine major themes, namely graves (chapter 1), maps (chapter 2), examinations (chapter 3), and mining (chapter 4), respectively. Chapter 5 discusses the dramatic changes in the post-1870 era under Western encroachment and the shifting role of fengshui in Qing law, especially in Sino-foreign negotiations of rapid construction of telegraph lines and railroads empire-wide, when the legitimacy of Manchu rulership over the lands of China was challenged. Each chapter de-
picts a specific group’s relationship to fengshui: descendants of the dead (chapter 1), mappers and consumers of maps (chapter 2), examination-taking scholars (chapter 3), merchants and miners (chapter 4), and ultimately the vertical Qing bureaucracy from its highest levels down to the county (chapter 5). Although these five constituencies appear throughout the chapters, Brown manages to tell a coherent story about them. That is no easy feat.

Starting with fengshui disputes over graves, trees, and ancestral properties, chapter 1, “Litigating Graves,” provides an overview of court investigations into fengshui-related disputes involving graves. The cases depict the nuanced economic, familial, religious, and cosmological bonds between people and the land. When analyzed together, they show that population pressures and the accompanying commercialization of land fomenting conflicts in rural society were expressed and resolved through fengshui. One striking phenomenon in Nanbu County involved fengshui disputes over cemeteries and temple groves (or “fengshui trees”), which Brown situates within the context of nineteenth-century fuel anxiety. Brown shows that people knew how to safeguard their land through fengshui-related litigation. And as he aptly puts it, “graves and farmland rooted people firmly in place, which is exactly where the imperial state wanted them to be” (p. 50).

The chapter’s opening litigation case—especially relevant for historians of water—shows the process of adjudication in action. At the trial, a county magistrate cited “the presence of termites” around a gravesite as “evidence of poor fengshui” (p. 27). Why did the magistrate make this observation? Brown deploys a technical manual from 1831 (fig. 1.2, p. 28) that discusses fengshui issues related to water. The waters around graves and houses “must flow naturally” or else must be allowed to properly drain away (p. 27). Otherwise, fecund termite colonies will devour the foundations of house and wooden caskets—a process evidenced by recent agricultural research into rural irrigation systems. The case demolishes the assumed lines between “superstitious fengshui,” “modern science,” and “rational law.” Over the five chapters, Brown repeatedly shows that once one of these concepts is historically contextualized with adequate rigor and care, the other two start looking different.

Moving from the “why” of fengshui disputes to the “how” of solving them, chapter 2, “Mapping Fengshui,” uncovers the connections between fengshui and cartography. In part because Qing law strictly protected gravesites (chapter 1), everyone had ample reasons to map tombs—including the imperial family (see the book’s cover art). This chapter illustrates how “the Qing state used mapping as an administrative technology to solve disputes” and in the process of doing so, “produced new knowledge about the land” (p. 61). To explain the high number of house, grave, and tree maps produced by Nanbu’s court over the nineteenth century, Brown reveals that people assumed that fengshui problems needed to be mapped to be properly diagnosed and remedied. These maps, Brown argues, facilitated the applied knowledge of fengshui and permitted a degree of consistency and replication in its practice.

Brown’s analysis of legal cases in chapter 2 is well supplemented by interpreting the illustrations found in genealogies, gazetteers, and atlases. Fengshui-related cartography, which sometimes involved the use of the geomantic compass, both influenced people’s preferences for specific idealized landscapes while also shaping how real places were strategically depicted in genealogies and gazetteers. In particular, he points out that fengshui maps published in Sichuan’s genealogies sometimes had “considerable political influence due to a lack of alternative written records” in the province, which saw dramatic migration and resettlement over the 1700s (p. 106). Accordingly, both local elites and the state found incentives to map and record fengshui.
Chapter 3, “Examining Fortune,” continues with the discussion of fengshui and the built environment, but shifts focus to the civil service examinations and the local elites (“gentry”) formed through their relationship to that system. This group of men was involved in efforts to obtain and secure their wealth, success, and fortune. Brown’s narrative of Northern Sichuan provides a fascinating historical backdrop that fuses ancestral legacies, religious beliefs, and ethnic differences. The foundational myths of that region were not only related to eminent pre-Qing “Chinese” figures, such as Zhang Fei and Sima Guang, but in Qing times also came to incorporate Khoja Abd Allāh, a Sufi leader from Central Asia whose seventeenth-century burial shrine was thought to have improved the fengshui of the region in later centuries. Although Brown doesn’t make the case as explicitly as he might have, the case of Khoja is implicitly contrasted with Euro-American missionaries of the nineteenth century, when members of the local gentry cited church-building measures as harming fengshui (see chapter 5).

Among the many insights Brown offers in chapter 3 is the distinctive role that fengshui played in frontier zones grappling with limited examination success. Lacking local talent to point to, Qing officials had to focus on fortune—an insight that pairs well with Fei Huang’s recent study on Yunnan Province.[1] “Fostering geomantic fortune along imperial frontiers” (p. 134), as Brown summarizes, was “a strategy of Qing statecraft in peripheral areas” (p. 123). In this way, fengshui helped support the continued coherence of an examination system that increasingly seemed more arbitrary over the 1800s, as En Li’s recent book on gambling and the exams makes clear.[2]

Brown also draws attention to an understudied professional group hired by the Qing government: licensed Yin-yang officers. These officers played roles in managing construction projects by selecting “the time for beginning construction and the position (i.e., location) and orientation of structures” (p. 134), and in overseeing other local ceremonies in relation to “meteorological analyses, fengshui, divination, and astrology” (p. 130). Brown’s analysis of Yin-yang officers adds important geographic and personnel dimensions to our understanding of Qing governance: Who represented the imperial state at the local level? And “how much power did local Qing officials have?” (p. 156). Getting fengshui experts, alongside clerks, runners, brokers, and other intermediaries involved in local governance demonstrated “the Qing state’s power and authority to the people” but at the same time also underlined the striking limits of its influence (p. 130).

Some of the most entertaining portions of the book come when Brown addresses fengshui’s mobilization in law for town zoning. Members of the local gentry drew on fengshui to regulate the placement and position of oil-press shops, noodle shops, iron furnaces, water-powered trip hammers, and ox-powered millstones. These sites had been identified by geomantic texts as noise-making objects which could disturb fengshui and lead to misfortune (including but not limited to examination failures and devastating fires). Consequently, some fengshui-influenced regulations for the placement of these sites were de facto recognized in Qing law. Environmental concerns over noise pollution provide compelling historical precedents for understanding later opposition to the development of railways or mining industries (as discussed in chapter 5). While notions of environmental protection and conservation only emerged in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, this portion of chapter 3 makes fengshui relevant and relatable for readers and will likely provoke interesting discussions.

Chapter 4, “Mining Sichuan,” explores extraction activities and the control over “fortunes that grew beneath the ground” (p. 157). By 1800, a variety of mining activities in the mineral-rich province Sichuan were often taking place along rural landscapes densely packed with farms,
graves, houses, and temples. Some officials cited mining as “a threat to agriculture and gravesites” for harming surrounding trees and water sources (p. 159). Since “drought, famine, poor examination performances and worsening security conditions” were all bad evidence of fengshui as recorded in widely circulating geomantic manuals, mining was frequently banned in specific areas throughout the empire, including in Sichuan (p. 161).

Brown pays particular attention to the diverse array of participants in mining ventures. One gripping insight relates to the imperial calendar, which provided auspicious and inauspicious times for taking up particular actions. Brown speculates that the government-issued calendar functioned much like an extension of or supplement to “law” into everyday life, since people potentially would suffer “inauspicious repercussions” (akin to “punishments”) if they did not follow the correct calendrical guideline (p. 165). For this reason, economic activities such as breaking the land or opening a mine had to be carefully discussed and planned, which in turn created significant demand for ritual specialists (e.g., geomancers and Daoist priests) within the province’s mining industry. Public performances, such as “temple sacrifices and opera performances” (p. 181) became common by providing “ritual insurance” for protecting miners and merchants from geomantic extortion, which was understood as “a serious issue in Sichuanese society” (p. 184).

Some fascinating points emerge here as well. In his discussion of salt well divination, Brown points out that Sichuan’s eminent salt merchants were proficient in fengshui and were even sometimes “the most celebrated geomancers” in the province at any given time (p. 168). Unsurprisingly, geomantic terminology commonly appeared in salt-related contracts and legal complaints. Brown reminds readers that salt merchants often donated for building public institutions such as schools, pagodas, or temples. These actions fused subterranean and topsoil fortunes together, which all helped sustain salt merchants’ local prestige in the absence of formal degree-holding through examination success. This combined role of merchants and geomancers also recalls (chapter 1) the overlapping occupations and identities of taxheads and geomancers for exerting control over land in Sichuan. The blurring boundaries of social groups showcase how fortune was accumulated through the aid of local fengshui experts.

Likewise, Brown’s cases on coal- and timber-related fengshui disputes in Nanbu and Ba Counties in Sichuan fill a lacuna in the literature on Qing coal mining and energy transformations. Despite fuel shortages and provincial authorities’ encouragement for opening coal mines, “geomantic objections” remained common in Sichuan into the late nineteenth century (p. 171). Gentry petitions often concerned mining’s influence on examination fortunes as well as their county’s “natural landscapes” (p. 176). Commoners cared much about mining sites that would obstruct their ancestral graves or land. Consequently, concerns over fengshui had “effectively blocked” some coal mines from being exploited into the 1880s (p. 175). Similar dynamics were at play in gold mining and stone quarrying. To his credit, Brown shows conclusively that the relative lack of government oversight of mining necessitated officials’ engagement with fengshui to both permit and forbid extractive activities.

That final insight is fleshed out in chapter 5, “Breaking the Land.” Here, Brown moves smoothly to the analysis of views held by high officials and reformers in the Self-Strengthening Movement (1861–95) and sheds new light on real fears that many held regarding declining fengshui. He argues that these fears should be recontextualized and understood as “an expression of officials and scholars strategically and intelligently applying Qing law to new problems” (p. 195). As Brown emphasizes, the attitudes held by reformist statesmen like Li Hongzhang toward fengshui and industrial policies in the 1860s–70s were not much
different from that of “conservatives” like the Sichuan governor-general Wu Tang (introduced in chapter 4). Supporting the limited use of new technologies, Li parted from his ideological opponents by holding that telegraph lines, railways, and mines could be constructed without harming fengshui. Few Qing officials dismissed fengshui out of hand in the 1870s and 1880s. Why? Droughts and flooding disasters were occurring more frequently in the late Qing, and so arguments about harmed fengshui made a lot of sense to a lot of people—both elites and non-elites. Perhaps the most striking aspect of the chapter is when Brown returns to Nanbu County to show that new development in fact did at times lead to deforestation, as new government incentives took away long-standing legal checks on abuses.

Like any book of this scale and ambition, there are a couple of small issues worth noting. One is that the quality of some of the images in the book could be better, especially for readers who may want to closely analyze the finer details of the prints. Another question relates to fengshui as an “insider” strategy for extorting “outsiders.” Based on my own research on Qing mining, geomantic extortion was most likely to occur when a non-local attempted to purchase or alter the land of a local. We see evidence for this phenomenon in Brown’s book through the cases of Sichuanese mining, dredging waterways along the Yangzi River, and even in telegraph and rail construction in the late nineteenth century.[3] Plenty of other examples exist. For instance, in the late 1870s, when the central government commanded officials to exploit more mineral resources in Hubei Province, fengshui-related resistance against these surveying and extraction efforts followed. When foreign geologists, engineers, and investors began to survey and exploit other mining regions after 1860, local resistance in the name of fengshui against “outsiders”—including against Chinese involved in cross-regional surveying—was likewise prominent. Put simply, fengshui enabled local control over wealth and resources, and thus in the nineteenth century specifically hindered the physical linking of transregional geographical space across the empire. For Western observers, those actions made it appear that fengshui was hindering “technological progress” or “scientific modernity,” but in fact the imperial system’s resilience derived in part from recognizing substantial local control over resources, wealth, and manpower. Brown implicitly documents this “insider/outsider” story of fengshui, but an explicit discussion of it may have clarified certain phenomena when he turns to the national stage in chapters 4 and 5.

In sum, Laws of the Land presents a much-needed empirical study that meaningfully contributes to the fields of legal history, history of knowledge, history of science and technology, and environmental history in non-Western contexts. Brown’s text is carefully, thoughtfully, and elegantly crafted, providing not only background information for general readers but also in-depth legal case studies, valuable illustrations from geomantic manuals, and extensive consulting of other types of primary sources such as gazetteers to advance his analysis and argument. This book opens many new horizons for future research, such as exploring the links between the imperial calendar and legal practice, the reception and adaptation of Jesuit-introduced Western knowledge in Qing society, the distinct trajectory of Chinese mapping practices as mediated through legal institutions, and courts’ appraisals of “religious” claims as legal evidence. These features make this book comprehensive in scope, not only a research monograph on fengshui but also a quite suitable text for a wide range of courses, especially in Chinese history and culture. Admittedly, the book is not light reading, so readers looking for an easy guide to “fengshui” their living room might be left disappointed. But scholars who have waited a long time for a serious look at an understudied topic in Chinese history and culture are bound to be delighted.

Notes


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