BEING CAUGHT BY A FISHNET
ON FENGSHUI IN SOUTHEASTERN CHINA

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Big Stream Village is situated on the east shore of Tide Cove in Hong Kong's New Territories. It is a Hakka-speaking settlement exclusively inhabited by people of the surname of Zhang (张), all members of one major lineage. In 1964 there were 146 persons in the village and 33 members of the community working elsewhere. Big Stream Village is located at the mouth of a mountain valley. About one mile and a half further up this valley the small Plum Grove Village is picturesquely situated on the lower slopes of a cone-shaped mountain. It is inhabited by a localized major lineage of the surname of Wu (吴). In 1964 their number was 74 but over 20 members were then away.¹

I was told a story about these two villages. Formerly, the story has it, the people of Plum Grove Village were living on the spot now occupied by the Zhang; and the Zhang were living where the Wu are now. Because of influences emanating from the natural surroundings the Wu were not too happy about their location at the mouth of the valley. It is said that the Zhang people pointed out to the Wu that the mountain on the other side of the fields in front of the village was a fishnet. This fact, it was pronounced, had a very special effect on the settlers there. The local Hakka pronunciation of Wu, their shared surname, is Ng. But ng in Hakka also means 'fish', and the Zhang assured the settlers at the mouth of the valley that they were, for certain, in the process of being caught by the net. The Wu seem to have agreed with this suggestion, and the result was that both communities exchanged their locations for their present-day situations.

This story may need some comments. It deals with influences emanating from the natural surroundings, a believed-in order that in Chinese is designated fēngshuí — 'wind — water'. It implies an aspect of ecological adjustment in that it is concerned with natural

¹ Standard Chinese is given in pinyin form. Dr. Aijmer, whose article "Expansion and Extension in Hakka Society" appeared in Vol. VII of the Journal, is Assistant Professor in the University of Stockholm.
phenomena. *Fengshui* is a ritual language: a set of symbols and ways of combining these symbols into ritual statements. The *fengshui* language is largely shared and understood by all Chinese and it provides an important instrument in Chinese society for a diffusion of local ideas into the larger society. The system of symbols can also be manipulated; individuals in the process of maximizing their resources employ special techniques — 'geomancy' — to discover and map localized symbolic sub-systems. Natural surroundings are explored in terms of *fengshui*. The natural influences — the interaction between the symbols — can be played upon to the benefit of the player. This facet of *fengshui* has recently been discussed in anthropological literature. The argument of this paper is concerned with its communicative aspect.

The *fengshui* influences of a given ecological setting are of extreme importance to the people who are dependent on this setting. They are not static, but are changing in 60-year cycles. The *fengshui* has a bearing not only on the particular individuals, but is equally important for the whole localized group. The effect of the influences can be measured in terms of good or bad fortune: the latter experienced in few sons, bad crops, and so on. In the same way as individuals are maximizing their resources, a whole community may try to manipulate the *fengshui*. An example of this was to be found in Grass Field Village, further up the valley mentioned above. A most striking feature in the scenery there is one of the two peaks of the imposing mountain Maanshan (Ma On Shan) peeping up from behind the lower mountain ridges surrounding the village. Villagers explained that they always have a feeling that this mountain top is watching them from above. Apparently this watching implied a negative influence; people tried to check it by planting trees on the ridge in order to screen off the sinister mountain top. However, during the Japanese Occupation these trees were cut down, fuel being reckoned then as more essential than negative influences.

On the other hand, one seldom finds a general agreement as to the positive or negative character of the *fengshui* influences in a certain setting. Poor people tend to regard the *fengshui* of their locality as a 'killing breath', while better-off persons in the same settlement may say that it is after all 'not too bad'. *Fengshui* language, then, is used to express social and economic differentiation.
If we return to the story about the two villages we find that it is concerned with two localized groups and their dependence on the natural surroundings. The mountain is a fishnet—a symbol in the set constituting the fengshui language. The people were in a similar way classified as fishes, and a fishnet is obviously something to be avoided by fish. Now, the grammar of fengshui is structured on the concepts of the two fundamental systems of wuxing and yinyang. Wuxing implies a correlation and classification into five categories of the features of the universe. Yinyang is a classification of the universe into binary oppositions. In the actual story we may, I think, substitute fish for water and yin—the female, passive and negative cosmic force. Fishnet may be substituted by mountain and yang—the male, active and positive force. In the locality under discussion yang influences dominated, and the people, by virtue of their shared surname affiliated with yin, had better escape a situation that was for them negative and out-of-balance.

\[\text{Wu lineage} \leftarrow \text{bad luck} \leftarrow \text{mountain} \]
\[\text{fish} \leftarrow \text{destroying} \leftarrow \text{fishnet} \]
\[\text{yin} \leftarrow \text{dominating} \leftarrow \text{yang} \]

If we turn to the content of the story, it will be recalled that the essential thing expressed is that the two populations in the villages had exchanged their abodes at one time. Yet if we scrutinize what can be reconstructed of the history of the two settlements we will find no evidence whatsoever that such an exchange has ever taken place. From a historian’s point of view the story is a poor document. But the sociologist may still have something to learn by comparing its content with other data of the past.

A glance in the 1911 Census Report reveals that at that time the population of Big Stream Village amounted to 173 persons and that of Plum Grove Village to 59. Already in this period it is known from other sources that the former community had several overseas members while Plum Grove Village had few, if any. The population actually present in Big Stream Village in 1911 was 2.9 times as large as that of Plum Grove Village. If we then turn our attention to the District Demarcation Maps, drawn soon after the British take-over in 1899, we will find that the area of arable land available around Big Stream Village was nearly the same as that
available in Plum Grove Village. In Big Stream Village rice land occupied 16.8 acres and dry cultivation 8.6 acres. The total was then 25.4 acres. The corresponding figures for Plum Grove Village are 17.9 and 6.5 giving a total of 24.4 acres. The ratio between Plum Grove land and Big Stream land is then 6.9, 1.3, and 1.0 respectively.

There is yet a complication to be taken into account. Plum Grove villagers were not the sole occupants of land around their own village. Three other settlements further up in the mountains own a considerable amount of paddy fields and dry cultivation land there. A very old lady in one of these other villages thought she had heard that these fields were bought ‘a very long time ago’ and that they were then very expensive. The land around Plum Grove Village is generally considered the best in this mountain area. It is not possible to establish how outsiders were vested with rights in this land. My guess is that this small village could not supply labour enough to make full use of what was at least potentially arable land, and outsiders were let in. There may also have been an earlier decrease in population. Out of the 24.4 acres registered soon after 1899 only 15.5 were controlled by local villagers. The outsiders from the other three villages had together 8.6 acres of rice fields and 0.3 acres of dry land. Thus only 64% of the local arable area were in the hands of Plum Grove people at the turn of the century. If we then compare the actual landholdings of the two villages at this period we still find that the 2.9 times larger population of Big Stream Village had access to arable land that was only 1.5 times as large as that of Plum Grove Village; which means roughly that five persons in the former village had to live on what three persons were dependent on in the latter. As to the more vital rice land the proportions are the same.

To this basic situation could be added some other factors that were to the advantage of Plum Grove Village. They had a better supply of water for irrigation, they had better-quality soil, and they had better conditions for the formerly important complementary tea plantations. Their situation up in the mountains offered more security than could be obtained on the coast in a pirate-haunted strip of land. Plum Grove people will also have had better marketing conditions in that their traditional market town Xigong (Sai Kung) was situated in a predominantly Hakka-speaking and small-scale lineage area, while Big Stream people were dependent
on Dabu Jixu (Tai Po Old Market), dominated by a single mighty Cantonese lineage, who tried their best to harass market visitors.⁹

This rather tedious exercise provides us with evidence enough to justify an assumption that the people of Plum Grove Village were better off than their neighbours of Big Stream Village.¹⁰

A key factor for the understanding of social change in this area is the rapid urbanization on the Kowloon Peninsula after 1875. For the villages in question this process implied a set of new choices, e.g. the use of a new, comparatively lucrative market developing at Youmadi (Yau Ma Tei). Here they came to sell firewood, and once in town they encountered new possibilities. The demand from overseas for Chinese labour had led to the establishment of labour-recruiting bureaux and agencies. The expanding shipping trade in the Hong Kong harbour offered opportunities for jobs on board transoceanic steamers. At the same time the appearance of new industrial products on the market drastically reduced traditionally complementary incomes from home industries.

The men of Big Stream Village soon jumped at the new opportunities that were displayed in Kowloon. Many of them ended up in the United States, Canada, and the West Indies. Through their remittances the home community now had access to an inflow of external incomes. As time passed considerable accumulation of capital brought about changes in the economic status of the village. Before the Pacific War several large and spacious houses were constructed by a handful of very successful emigrés. Conditions had improved, although economic differentiation within the community now was more marked than in the traditional situation. The general location of the village will also have become more favourable as the Kowloon-Canton Railway and a modern road were constructed on the other side of Tide Cove in the opening years of the 20th century.

The possibilities displayed in Kowloon did not have the same attraction for the people in Plum Grove Village. Land was still sufficient, the yield in normal years will have been reckoned as satisfying, and the fire-wood cutting, charcoal burning, and other home industries could for a long time bridge the slowly emerging gap between increasing population and static means of production. Part of the land that in 1906 belonged to outsiders seems to have been bought back by local people, but such expansion of produc-
tion was limited as the population pressure increased in the two other land-owning communities as well. Generally, new land was not available. As time passed people of Plum Grove Village reached the optimum point where they had to look for new alternatives to traditional local production. The men started to emigrate, mostly to Southeast Asia. But the prospects of these areas were very different from those in America. Around 1910 some ten men left for Nanyang. People have never heard from them since. It is supposed that they were killed by the effects of the damp climate. But the movement had to continue. Later emigrants set out for Singapore but they returned as poor as they went, and there was no accumulation of capital at all. Today it is very apparent that Plum Grove Village is a much poorer place than Big Stream Village.

What has been exchanged between the two lineages Zhang and Wu is not their respective localization, but the image of their relative prosperity. What is communicated in the myth is that the economic situation of one settlement has improved while that of another has declined. The shift of the respective conditions is referred to as emanating from natural influences.

Fengshui is not just a way to communicate, but is a believed-in-order. In Big Stream Village one can still find traces of earlier attempts to minimize negative influences; large stones inscribed with the conventional trigram — $yinyang$ patterns and series of characters have been erected outside some of the houses in order to avert negative forces in the natural surroundings. The four character series are completely meaningless to villagers, who nowadays know nothing about the stones, except that they realize that they have been erected there for $fengshui$ purposes. It is apparent that special knowledge is required to make sense out of a combination of words meaning ‘purple’, ‘minimal’, ‘first month’, and ‘illuminate’. These stones, however, are evidence that people in Big Stream Village were really concerned about their bad $fengshui$ position at one time. But this aspect cannot be separated from the aspect of communication. The stones carried a message telling about misfortune. They made the poverty of the locality explicit and understood by others. Nothing comparable to these stones is to be found in Plum Grove Village. In the latter place they now explain their decline, in a less explicit way, by referring to the bad
position of their ancestral hall into which the dragon of the hill behind is 'crashing' all the time.

By way of summing up, we may say that social and economic differentiation is projected on the natural surroundings. The phenomena of nature in their symbolic aspect project back the image of differentiation in the form of rational models — concepts of systems of natural influences affecting man and social life. These models can be manipulated by their constructors. They also carry messages that can be communicated between individuals and between groups.

NOTES

1 For a somewhat fuller description of the two villages, see Aijmer 1967. Big Stream Village (Dashuikeng) and Plum Grove Village (Meizilin) are in Hong Kong known under the Cantonese designations 'Tai Shui Hang' and 'Mui Tsz Lam'. Grass Field Village (Mauping) is 'Mau Ping'. They can be located with the help of Gazetteer 1960. Standard Chinese is given in pinyin form. Field work was financed by six Swedish funds; I gratefully acknowledge their support. Thanks are due to Mr. James Hayes, Hong Kong, and my wife for comments.


3 An alternative to, or perhaps rather a facet of, manipulating was fleeing. Examples of how people broke away from localities considered having bad fengshui have been given by Hayes (1963; 1967).

4 It may be of interest to point out that nets are instrumental in exorcistic ceremonies, when malevolent spirits may be caught or scared away with fishnets. I have this from a Buddhist monk whom I interviewed in Macau in 1965.

5 Census 1911, 103:27.

6 The sources classify Plum Grove land as third class land whereas Big Stream land is rated as second class. In the former place farming is done on terraced fields only.

7 In Plum Grove Village 35 houses were registered in 1906. If we compare this with the population figure of the Census of 1911, we will find that, if in use, each house unit was inhabited by 1.7 persons. This is an amazingly low figure, as we would have expected something around 5 or more as an average. Even if we allow for the ten men mentioned below, the figure would increase to just about two. The implication of these facts must be a reduction in population, perhaps by way of a lineage segment breaking away to settle elsewhere. In Big Stream Village 77 houses gave shelter to average families of 2.2 persons. Not even male absenteeism, discussed later, can explain this low figure to satisfaction.

8 Information obtained from the District Demarcation Maps and the 'New Territories Crown Leases of District No. 188' of 1906 and the 'New Territories Crown Leases of District No. 196' of the same year, to be seen at the Tai Po District Office, New Territories, Hong Kong.
9 See Groves 1965a and 1965b.

10 In an attempt to recover an even earlier period we may assume that at one time all house-units were inhabited by one household each and that the land at the same period had the same acreage as in 1906. If we disregard the possibility of outsiders as landowners we will find that one average household in Big Stream Village owned 0.33 acre whereas the corresponding figure for Plum Grove Village is 0.70, which is more than twice as much as in the former place.*

REFERENCES


Census 1911 1911 ‘Report on the Census of the Colony for 1911’, Papers Laid Before the Legislative Council of Hong Kong 1911, Hong Kong.


* It is hoped to include in the 1969 Journal a note on the occupancy level of village houses in the Hong Kong region in the early 20th Century. Ed.