LANDSCAPES LOST and FOUND

Appreciating Hong Kong's Heritage Cultural Landscapes

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Figure 1.1 Aerial view of Hong Kong Island showing the dynamic human interaction with the natural landscape. Watercolour by Janice Nicolson.

Introduction

Hong Kong has a rich and diverse natural and cultural heritage. Dubious conservation decisions in recent years have fuelled much public debate about what should be conserved and how sustainable management of natural and built heritage resources can be achieved. Whether it is the headline-grabbing demolition of Queen's Pier and the Star Ferry Clock Tower, or the more insidious in-filling of fish ponds in the New Territories for lorry parks and container storage, heritage conservation has been frustratingly lacking in direction and embarrassingly ineffective.

On a global scale, environmental sciences have made dramatic and unprecedented advances within a single generation to reveal the complexity and vulnerability of our planet's ecosystem. Examples of mismanagement and human exploitation of limited natural resources, such as felling of our rainforests, burning fossil fuels, and the resulting pollution of our oceans and atmosphere are well documented. In parallel with these ecological crises, the case for better understanding and stewardship of our cultural heritage in the face of growing globalisation has been and continues to be well made. Perhaps the most important aspect of the international conservation movement has been the recognition that we need to consider both natural and cultural heritage issues together in order to develop more effective conservation strategies.

Much of Hong Kong's problem appears to have resulted from a misguided assumption that nature conservation and built heritage conservation should be mutually exclusive. It may be administratively convenient to do so but it is nonsense in reality. Hong Kong is lagging behind international practice in this regard and needs to catch up.

However, there is hope. The recent controversy about whether or not to conserve the former Central Government Offices (CGO) once again raised the thorny issue of how we in Hong Kong value and protect our heritage. During the various exchanges between government officials and conservation groups, the CGO was described as being an integral part of the 'cultural landscape of Government Hill'. This simple phrase can be easily overlooked but, in two respects, it has the potential to be an important tipping point in how we define, understand, and conserve our heritage resources.

Figure 1.2 Central Government Offices which form part of Hong Kong's 'Government Hill'

Firstly, it requires that the former CGO buildings are valued as part of a larger heritage site that, at various times, has included Hong Kong's administrative, legislative, judicial, military, and religious power bases. Acknowledging the significance of this historic ensemble and defining Government Hill as a heritage 'area' marks a quantum leap forward and refreshing change to the usual approach of focusing on heritage 'points' such as single buildings.

Secondly, it requires that the past and present influence of the natural topography and hillside woodland setting needs to be taken into account. The original steep terrain was formed into a series of strategic building platforms to take advantage of the high ground overlooking Central. Over time, the trees planted along the roadsides, embankments, and in open spaces and gardens linking these platforms have matured and now provide a lush, unifying

backdrop to the ensemble of historic buildings. The establishment and survival of such a remarkably rich flora and fauna habitat in the heart of the urban area is due primarily to the relative permanence of the power base buildings. The combination of natural and built heritage resources, or cultural landscape, is what truly defines the character of Government Hill.

Thanks to well-argued public opinion, the Development Bureau, at the eleventh hour, decided not to demolish the CGO West Wing, keeping a vital component of the Government Hill cultural landscape intact, for now.

Unfortunately, not all of Hong Kong's heritage cultural landscapes have been so lucky. *Landscapes Lost and Found* is intended to evoke an image of valuable items that have been lost or overlooked and, unless efforts are made to search for and retrieve them, may be thrown away altogether. This book will examine how and why some of Hong Kong's most valuable cultural landscapes slipped through our fingers and will present some wonderful examples that deserve our attention and protection. Hopefully, lessons learned from these examples will help show how Hong Kong can get up to speed in the field of heritage conservation.

Cultural Landscapes

The term 'landscape', as defined in the West, first appeared in Dutch and German words, *landschap* and *landschaft* respectively, meaning a clearly defined territory that has been significantly modified by permanent inhabitants and forms a self-sufficient administrative or legislative region.[1] In the fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries, landscape was understood to be the visible world subdivided into areas of distinctive character, for example, a woodland, farmland, or range of hills that could be captured in a picture. Dutch painters of this era, such as Dürer and Jan van Eyck, popularised this representation of the landscape as a picture, resulting in the term becoming synonymous with the art form.

As knowledge of the natural environment grew, geographers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries adopted a more objective approach using the sciences of geomorphology and climatology to describe the complexity of natural forces that constantly shape and reshape the landscape.[2] Building on this scientific background, twentieth-century ecologists revolutionised the way we perceive landscape today. Ecology has made 'sustainability' a household word by highlighting the rich diversity and subtle interrelationships between different flora and fauna as well as their vulnerability to damage by irresponsible human actions on a local and global scale. Whatever the interpretation of the landscape, be it as an art form or modern environmental science, landscapes are generally understood to have four key characteristics:

1. They occupy a space or territory and can be shown on a map.
2. They have visual form that can be illustrated in a picture.
3. They comprise dynamic systems and processes.
4. They are evolving.[3]

Humankind is one element in the landscape. To survive, humans need water, food, and shelter, and the natural environment provides these essential resources. Whenever humans enter a natural landscape to, say, plough a field to grow crops or fell trees to build a house, the result is a cultural landscape. The relationship between humans and nature is two-way. Some areas have better sources of water than others or have more fertile soils for farming. While humans have power to change and shape the landscape, the local topography, drainage, soils, climate, etc., have in turn influenced human decisions on everything from how to align a road to what crops to grow. The geographer Carl Sauer is generally credited as being the first to use the term 'cultural landscape'. In 1925, Sauer described cultural landscapes as being fashioned from a natural landscape, over time, by a cultural group. In his words, 'culture is the agent, the natural area the medium, the cultural landscape the result'.[4]

It follows that as a culture changes through time, the cultural landscape is renewed. This can result in a layering effect of new cultural landscapes being superimposed on remnants of declining or obsolete ones. It would be easy to stop at this point and draw a line under Sauer's definition. However, Sauer stressed that as a geographer he was primarily concerned with studying humans' tangible interventions in the landscape and not with the more intangible aspects like customs or beliefs.[5]

To understand the heart and soul of cultural landscapes, we need to consider not only humans' practical survival techniques and responses to the physical geography of the natural environment but also our continuing pursuit of scientific knowledge, artistic expression, and spiritual relationship with nature.

J. B. Jackson, writing in the 1950s and 1960s, recognised the importance of adopting a more holistic approach to studying cultural landscapes that included the tangible and intangible relationships between humans and nature. He urged that landscape should be viewed as symbolic of a culture's social and religious beliefs and that humans' blunders as well as triumphs are 'expressions of a persistent desire to make the earth over in the image of some heaven'.[6] Jackson's insight helps us to interpret cultural landscapes with greater depth and subtlety. It is relatively simple to illustrate the tangible relationships between humans and nature—geographers and map-makers have been doing it for decades. It is harder to demonstrate the intangible and spiritual relationships between humans and nature—artists and designers have been striving to do so for centuries.

It is a common human goal to understand our place in the cosmos but interpretations can differ widely from one culture to the next. For example, compare the Chinese and Western zodiacs. Both cultures see the same night sky in the northern hemisphere but have evolved two totally different sets of symbols and mythical creatures to explain and make sense of the stars. Similarly, Western and Chinese art and landscapes appear to be poles apart in style and content. As the following sections show, they have evolved along very different paths, on a different time scale, guided by different religious and philosophical beliefs. Those involved in conserving heritage cultural landscapes need to recognise, understand, and protect such cultural distinctions.

Western Interpretation of Landscape

What better place to start than the Book of Genesis and, Adam, the first man to make an impact on the natural landscape. Even before he was introduced to Eve, 'The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.'[7] The traditional images of the Garden of Eden, a landscape with sparkling streams of cool, fresh water, lush green meadows, shade-bearing trees with abundant flowers and fruits, truly a heaven on earth, have persisted in Western art and landscape design though the ages.

In pre-industrial, agrarian society, humans' impact on the landscape was largely curtailed by the need to manage the landscape responsibly in order to survive. Life was tough, the work was hard, nature was fickle, and the main concern would have been whether or not the crop would fail rather than if the lush green meadows resembled Eden. However, for the privileged few with a surplus of wealth and leisure time, landscape became a medium to express power and authority over people and over nature. The Palace and Gardens of Versailles, created by Louis XIV, are a good example of such hubris; a forced orderliness on a grand scale where nature was walled in, straightened out, and clipped into geometric submission. Although this approach was adopted in many gardens and private estates across Europe it lacked spiritual conviction and proved to be unsatisfactory over time.

In eighteenth-century Britain, a different approach to landscape emerged, championed by landscape designers like Lancelot 'Capability' Brown. Brown's nickname was derived from his assertion to his clients that a particular landscape had 'capabilities' or natural potential of which he would make the most in his designs. In so doing, he identified and expressed the 'genius loci' or spiritual presence of a place. He endeavoured to blend the artificial landscape of his clients' estates seamlessly with the surrounding natural countryside. Formal, ruler-straight paths, canals, and avenues of trees were replaced with Brown's trademark use of soft-edged lakes, serpentine streams, naturally

contoured sweeps of pasture and informal blocks of woodland. Humans and nature were now on more even terms, partners living in harmony. The English landscape painter, John Constable, captured the spirit of the age and helped promote this idyllic pastoral life. Two well-known examples of his paintings are *The Haywain* and *Wivenhoe Park*. Today, if we are asked to conjure up an image of the typical Western landscape, it is very likely to resemble the works of Brown or Constable.

Figure 1.3 *Wivenhoe Park, Essex* by John Constable 1816. Courtesy of the National Gallery of Art, Washington, Widener Collection (www.nga.gov).

However, this balance between humans and nature was a temporary respite ahead of the Industrial Revolution that was about to sweep through the Western world. In England, from around 1760 to 1850, advances in agricultural and manufacturing technologies led to rapid urban growth. Large numbers of people migrated from the countryside to the towns seeking better opportunities. Canals and railways cut across the countryside connecting the coal mines with heavy industries and transporting goods to the rapidly expanding towns and ports. The clamour, smoke, and avarice of this new age brought discord to humans' relationship with nature.

There were heroic feats of engineering that created bridges, tunnels, and landmark buildings which we value today for their industrial and architectural heritage. There were also the oppressive, polluting factories and unhealthy, slum housing—a hell on earth for thousands of city dwellers. Clearly, not all cultural landscapes in this new industrial age were going to be things of beauty or sources of spiritual inspiration.

Like it or not, the city was here to stay, warts and all. To counter the ill-effects of the 'dark satanic mills',[8] civic-minded city fathers set aside land for urban parks where city dwellers could find relief from the drudgery of factory work, get a breath of fresh air, and reconnect with nature. Common features of these parks were lakes, large expanses of lawn, and belts of trees, reminiscent of Brown's and Constable's Arcadian landscapes. Arguably, the best-known surviving urban park from the mid-1800s that still exhibits these landscape features in their purest form is Central Park in New York, conceived by landscape designer Frederick Law Olmsted.

Olmsted's vision was to bring the restorative tranquillity of the countryside into the heart of the city. He had studied parks and country estates in England and believed that experiencing such pastoral scenes was vital for the urban dweller to find relief from the stress of city life and maintain a healthy physical and psychological balance. Quoting from Psalm 23, Olmsted described the essence of this landscape sanctuary, which can be seen and felt in many Western city parks today, 'He makes me lie down in green pastures, He leads me beside quiet waters.'[9] Although there have been many variations to this pastoral theme in the intervening years, the landscape triumvirate of lawn, lake, and woodland has persisted as a successful formula in Western landscapes to capture the essence of nature and portray heaven on earth. How disconcerting to Western sensibilities, then, to hear a respected Chinese gentleman visiting Europe in the 1920s remark upon viewing a manicured lawn that, 'while no doubt of interest to a cow, offers nothing to the intellect of a human being'.[10]

Eastern Interpretation of Landscape

Chinese philosophy holds that everything in existence is composed of the same fundamental *qi* or 'breath'. When *qi* is pure and light, it rises to become heaven. When it is muddy and heavy, it sinks to form the earth. Human beings are a blend of both and stand midway, united with the surrounding natural world. Recognition and contemplation of nature triggers this sense of unity.[11]

Thus, from early times, artists have been inspired to capture the essence of *qi* in their portrayal and interpretation of nature whether in painting, calligraphy, poetry, or garden design. Chinese scholars were expected to be proficient in all four disciplines which helps explain the enduring consistency and similarity between the different art forms, particularly representation of nature in Chinese paintings and garden designs. Paintings were traditionally produced on scrolls which were unrolled a bit at a time to reveal the composition and invite the viewer to 'take a walk through the landscape'. Gardens were designed as three-dimensional paintings to be experienced as a carefully composed series of views.

Figure 1.4 Chinese landscape in the style of Yan Wengui and Fan Kuan circa 1350–75. Courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Edward Elliott Family Collection, Purchase, the Dillon Fund Gift, 1981 (www.metmuseum.org).

Confucius wrote that 'the wise find pleasure in water, the virtuous find pleasure in the hills'.[12] In Chinese, landscape is referred to as *shan shui* or 'mountains and water'. Rock and water, representing masculine *yang* and feminine *yin* energy respectively, remain essential elements in Chinese landscapes today. The juxtaposition of these opposing, complementary, and cyclical forces of nature is what the Chinese from ancient times see as the core driving force of the universe.

The earliest Chinese civilisation settled and farmed the great fertile plains enriched by the silt-laden waters of the Yellow River with a hinterland of hills covered in vast and richly diverse forests. Over time, the farmers learned to make best use of the fertile soils by building elaborate terraces and ingenious irrigation channels and flood control measures. Although this cultural landscape was enormous in scale, it proved to be environmentally sustainable, supporting an expanding population over many centuries. It worked because the farmers regarded themselves as an integral part of nature. Their primary goal was to grow enough food to survive. However, underpinning the basic survival instinct was a philosophy that true happiness and prosperity depended on showing respect for and learning to adjust to the forces of nature.

A stable food supply allowed more leisure time, at least for the more privileged. Like Western kings, Chinese emperors sought to portray their power and authority through the medium of landscape. Imperial gardens were

a microcosm of the emperor's realm, including a cross-section of natural scenery to represent the rich diversity of China's landscape. Imposing mountains were a key component of the gardens not just for their dramatic visual impact but for their spiritual significance as well. The Immortals of Chinese legend were believed to live in the mythical mountains to the West, or the modern-day Himalayas, and on magical islands to the East, generally regarded as being Japan.

Wudi, emperor of the Han dynasty (or Han Wu-ti) (141–86 BC) commissioned a replica of the three legendary islands, surrounded by a lake, to be built in his imperial gardens. Wudi's plan was to create a beautiful abode to lure the Immortals to visit and perhaps share the elixir of life with him. An interesting comparison of royal vanity can be made here with the French King Louis XIV, portraying statues of legendary Western gods frolicking in his fountains at Versailles almost two thousand years later. Although the Immortals did not take Wudi's bait, his image of the Immortals' heaven on earth, comprising three mountains and a lake, has persisted in Chinese landscapes ever since.

The collapse of the Han dynasty and rising corruption and weakness in the government led to a loss of trust in Confucian values. Respected scholars, critical of the old failing regimes, chose to leave the towns and cities and found refuge in the mountains, living as hermits in wild and stunning natural landscapes. Isolated from the wicked deeds of corrupt men and inspired by their dramatic surroundings, they sought alternative philosophies which could provide a better moral compass to society. They discovered that Daoist values and later Buddhism provided a sense of unity with nature and cyclical harmony between the sensual, material, and spiritual worlds.

In time, when political stability had been restored, the scholars returned to the towns and cities. Their urban courtyard gardens were a far cry from the scale and drama of the wilderness. Nevertheless, they endeavoured to reproduce natural scenery within the confines of their gardens and the concept of Dao came to be symbolised by the use of large upright river-worn rocks, reminiscent of their former mountain hermitages. These timeless monoliths were treasured for their weathered appearance, displaying the perpetual motion between the opposing but complementary forces of rock and water.

Whether it is in the imperial gardens which recreated mountains and a lake to represent the Immortals' mystical domain or in scholar gardens that reproduced the wild landscape of mountain hermitages, rocks and water are the key features of Chinese landscapes. There is not a blade of grass in sight. The lush meadows of Western landscapes would have had bad connotations for the Chinese, reminding them of the constant threat from the fierce nomadic Mongol armies that roamed the expansive plateau grasslands of northern China.

Cultural Comparisons

This brief review of how Western and Eastern cultures interpret and idealise their spiritual connection with the landscape has revealed some interesting similarities and important differences. Both cultures acknowledge that having a close relationship with nature is necessary for survival as well as being good for the soul. The Qianlong emperor (or Ch'ien-lung) (1711–99) argued that 'every emperor and ruler, when he has retired from audience, and has finished his public duties, must have a garden in which he may stroll, look around, and relax his heart. If he has a suitable place for this it will refresh his mind and regulate his emotions but if he has not, he will become engrossed in sensual pleasures and lose his will power.'[13] These sentiments sound uncannily similar to Frederick Law Olmsted, designer of New York's Central Park a century later: 'A man's eyes cannot be as much occupied as they are in large cities by artificial things . . . without a harmful effect, first on his mental and nervous system and ultimately on his entire constitutional organisation.' Landscape is able 'to refresh and delight the eye and through the eye, the mind and the spirit'.[14]

Both cultures attribute nature with a spiritual quality. In the West, the term 'genius loci' was originally used to express the belief that the unique character of a site was derived from the presence and influence of a supernatural or divine spirit. When modern thought rejected this superstitious notion, 'genius loci' came to mean the special atmosphere of a place and its effect on the visitor to create a feeling of well-being or reverence. In Eastern cultures, the principles of feng shui can be used to express this relationship. Put simply, when man feels comfortable in his environment, whether it be at home, work, or leisure, the *qi* or life energy of the place is in balance and man is in harmony with nature.

Why the Chinese abhor grass in their gardens, compared with the Western love of lawns, has more practical roots. In the West, a gently undulating meadow landscape is best suited to rearing cattle and growing crops. In the East, the staple diet of rice requires paddy fields. Less productive grassland, instead, became the domain of nomadic and warring tribes. It is interesting to note that in Hong Kong, a city that is influenced by both Western and Eastern cultures, public parks tend to include areas of lawn, stands of trees as well as Chinese-style rock and water features.

Western philosophy, based primarily on Christian beliefs, identifies man as a steward of nature. In the Bible, the book of Genesis tells us that Adam and Eve were placed in the Garden of Eden to '[b]e fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth'.[15] Although man is believed to have a God-given right to 'subdue'

his environment, that right comes with the responsibility to 'replenish the earth'—a biblical version of what we call sustainability today.

Chinese philosophy, shaped by Confucian, and latterly, Daoist and Buddhist beliefs, identify humans as an integral part of the natural life and death cycle and, instead of being master of their environment, places them on an equal material and spiritual standing with nature. This is a fundamental difference between Western and Eastern value systems and affects the way we should perceive the dynamics of cultural landscapes in Hong Kong.

Hong Kong's Cultural Landscapes

There are no truly natural landscapes in Hong Kong. That may seem difficult to believe since over 40 per cent of land in Hong Kong is designated as country park. However, even these remote tracts of the countryside have been and continue to be influenced by humans to some degree. The most obvious human intrusions include reservoirs in valleys, radio transmitter masts on prominent peaks, remnants of World War II military outposts, seasonal loss of vegetation due to hill fires and replanting after hill fires to create fire belts. Less visually intrusive examples include hiking trails, way markers, and abandoned, overgrown field terraces. Whether it is a light human touch to build a country path or a heavier footprint to reclaim land from the sea and build Central's high-rise buildings, Hong Kong is an intricate patchwork of cultural landscapes which covers the entire city from north to south and east to west.

Interpreting how and why humans have interacted with the landscape reveals much about Hong Kong's cultural heritage. The first settlers were fishermen who took advantage of the numerous inlets and bays along the coast to shelter from storms and establish a secure base for fishing. The fertile land in valleys and floodplains proved ideal for rice-growing and over several hundred years were settled by immigrant farmers mainly from Mainland China. However, the most dramatic interaction took place since the arrival of the British in 1841. The sheltered, deep-water harbour proved ideal for establishing Hong Kong as a major trading port. Land suitable for development was limited due to the mountainous backdrop of Hong Kong Island and Kowloon, so when more land was required to cater for a rapidly expanding city, the coastline was extended by several phases of reclamation. Further post–World War II expansion required clearance of villages and farmland in urban fringe and rural areas for high-rise housing estates and new towns as well as major road and rail infrastructure development.

Modern technology has allowed humans to adopt a more arrogant interaction with nature. Hong Kong has built reservoirs and cross-border pipelines to supply water to residents who live many kilometres from the water

source. Farmland that sustained village communities for centuries has been sacrificed for housing development and the majority of the city's food supplies are shipped on a daily basis from foreign countries by plane, train, truck, and boat. Even the bulk of Hong Kong's concrete, stone, steel, and glass building materials are now imported. Put bluntly, Hong Kong is, today, one of the most unsustainable cities on the planet. Phenomenal population growth and urban expansion has far outstripped the city's own natural resources of water, food, and building materials required by its seven million souls to survive.

Sustainable growth is often quoted by the government as a guiding policy for development. However, this kind of sustainability is concerned primarily with ensuring that the economy continues to grow at an acceptable rate each year. In contrast, environmental sustainability can be defined as the wise use of natural resources that does not result in their net depletion over time and allows for their continued use and enjoyment by future generations. Hong Kong's first village settlements can teach us a lot about environmental sustainability. Villagers had to understand and interact wisely with the land to survive. There were no supermarkets to turn to if the rice crop failed.

In addition to recognising that Hong Kong comprises an intricate patchwork of cultural landscapes, it is important to remind ourselves that these cultural landscapes are constantly evolving. An abandoned village in a secluded part of the New Territories might undergo a gradual change as the former paddy fields become overgrown with wild grass and banyan trees invade roofless houses. In the urban area, as commercial fortunes ebb and flow, a row of shophouses may be demolished virtually overnight to make way for high-rise office or residential development.

It is vital to make a clear distinction between what is meant by preservation and conservation. The two terms are often misused. Preservation does not accommodate change and is aimed at keeping something exactly the way it is. Pickling vegetables in vinegar, embalming and entombing a pharaoh in his pyramid, or exhibiting an artefact under glass in a museum are all acts of preservation. This is not a practical or realistic approach to protecting Hong Kong's cultural heritage. On the other hand, conservation can be defined as the responsible management of change. For example, an abandoned village in the New Territories could be revitalised for organic allotment farming with houses adapted to serve as youth hostel accommodation, or it can be covered in asphalt and used as a lorry park. Both scenarios involve change. The former allows productive use of the site without compromising the character of the village whereas the latter would irreversibly destroy the farmland and integrity of the original village fabric.

Alarmed at the rate and scale of change when it results in the permanent loss of buildings and landscapes of heritage significance, the general public has become increasingly vocal in protest. The public tolerance 'tilting point' appears

to have been the demolition of the Star Ferry Terminal. On 12 December 2006, protestors made a concerted but unsuccessful effort to protect the terminal and its iconic clock tower by occupying the site for two days.

Since then, government officials and members of the public have become increasingly sensitive about conserving our built heritage. In addition, there is increasing awareness that saving an old building here and there is not a satisfactory way to approach heritage conservation. Two well-known examples to illustrate this point are the Tsim Sha Tsui Clock Tower and Haw Par Mansion. The former used to be an integral part of the former Kowloon–Canton Railway Terminal Building beside the Star Ferry. The train terminal was relocated to Hung Hom in 1975. Despite ardent petitioning from heritage groups, the original terminal building was demolished in 1977 and replaced with the numbingly bland Cultural Centre with only the clock tower to remind us of what the station used to be like. Similarly, Haw Par Mansion is all that is left of the former Tiger Balm Garden. When the site was purchased by a local developer, heritage officials scrambled to make an eleventh-hour deal to save the private house and sacrifice the public gardens. The result is a two-storey mansion sitting uncomfortably in the permanent shadow of towering blocks of flats. In both cases, the heritage buildings were mistakenly considered in isolation and not within their broader cultural landscapes—the Tsim Sha Tsui rail and ferry transport hub and the splendour of the unique Tiger Balm Garden.

There really is no excuse for not recognising the importance of cultural landscapes such as Tiger Balm Garden and the Star Ferry Terminal in Central. Some years before, the 1972 Convention concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage (more commonly referred to as the World Heritage Convention) had underlined that, when taking stock of heritage resources to be protected, governments should include not just iconic buildings or stunning natural landscapes but significant heritage sites that demonstrate the 'combined works of nature and man'.[16] Hong Kong has been a signatory to the World Heritage Convention since Britain endorsed it in 1984. China signed the following year.

Earlier conservation charters and conventions had focused on identifying and protecting either cultural heritage resources or natural scenery and wildlife habitats. The World Heritage Convention was the first global conservation initiative that recognised this to be a false dichotomy and that it was necessary to consider the dynamic interrelationship between humans and nature or, in other words, cultural landscapes, for conservation proposals to be more effective.

The definition 'combined works of nature and man' is very general and needed clarification. In 1992, guidelines were published to supplement the Convention and categorised all cultural landscapes into three types: designed, organically evolved, and associative.[17]

Designed cultural landscape

This is a cultural landscape created intentionally by humans. It is the most clearly defined and embraces garden and parkland landscapes constructed for aesthetic reasons which are often (but not always) associated with religious or other monumental buildings and ensembles. A well-known example inscribed on the World Heritage List is the Palace and Gardens of Versailles. Examples of designed cultural landscapes in Hong Kong would include the Zoological and Botanical Gardens, Hong Kong Cemetery, Victoria Park, Dragon Garden, and the former Tiger Balm Garden.

Figure 1.5 The Palace and Gardens of Versailles, France

Organically evolved cultural landscape

The organically evolved cultural landscape results from an initial social, economic, administrative, and/or religious imperative and has developed its present form by association with and in response to its natural environment. Such cultural landscapes reflect the process of evolution in their form and component features. They fall into two subcategories, namely, relic landscapes and continuing landscapes.

The relic landscape is one in which the evolutionary process has come to an end in the past, either abruptly or over a period of time. A well-known

example inscribed on the World Heritage List is the archaeological remains of the Khmer temples complex at Angkor in Cambodia. Examples of relic landscapes in Hong Kong would include the semi-derelict, World War II British military defensive positions, abandoned villages, and farmland in the New Territories and the former Battery near Tung Chung Village.

Figure 1.6 Temple of Angkor Wat, Cambodia

In contrast, the continuing landscape retains an active role in contemporary society closely associated with the traditional way of life and in which the evolutionary process is still in progress. At the same time, it exhibits significant material evidence of its evolution over time. This category is the most common one and is arguably the most challenging to manage and conserve. A well-known example inscribed on the World Heritage List is the Old Town in Lijiang, Yunnan Province, China. Examples of continuing landscapes in Hong Kong would include rural communities such as Tai O Fishing Village and the cluster of farming villages in Lam Tsuen Valley as well as urban neighbourhoods such as Government Hill or Dried Seafood Street in Sai Ying Pun.

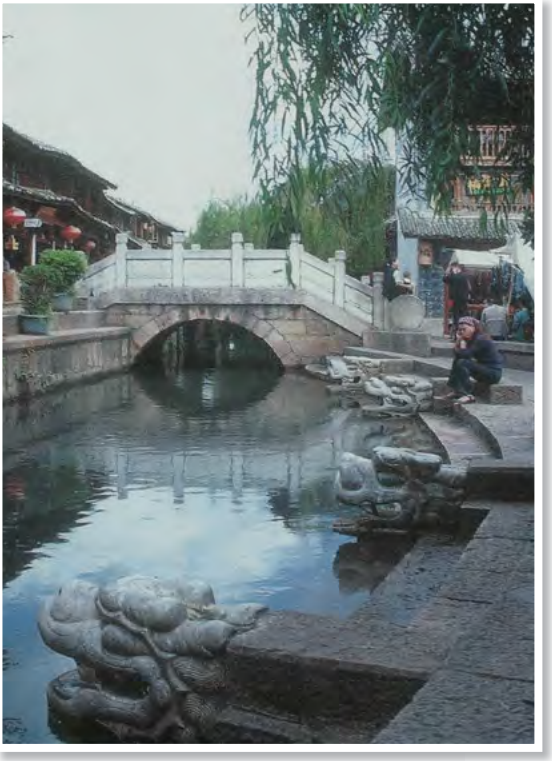

Figure 1.7 Lijiang Old Town, China

Associative cultural landscape

The associative cultural landscape is one where a natural element is recognised by a cultural group to have powerful religious, artistic, or cultural significance. These associations are usually expressed in intangible ways with little or no material form. A well-known example inscribed on the World Heritage List is Uluru in Australia (formerly known as Ayer's Rock) which has deep spiritual meaning to the aboriginal people. Examples of associative cultural landscapes abound in Hong Kong in a menagerie of feng shui landforms including dragons' backs, tiger hills, Ping Shan Village's crab and, the author's personal favourite, San Tau Village's elephant's trunk.

Figure 1.8 Uluru, Australia

Hong Kong is blessed with a wonderful cross-section of all categories of cultural landscape which have been enriched by a cultural cocktail of Western and Eastern values. The following chapters present examples of Hong Kong cultural landscapes (see Figure 1.9) with three objectives in mind. Firstly, it is intended to highlight the very existence of cultural landscapes because, until now, they seem to have been invisible to officialdom. Secondly, by detailed study of how each one has evolved, it is possible to show how important cultural landscapes are in recording and understanding our heritage. Thirdly, some of the examples presented are already lost or seriously depleted, but by analysing what went wrong we can learn how not to repeat past mistakes and plan ahead to protect the valuable landscapes that have been found.

9 Pulling the Threads Together

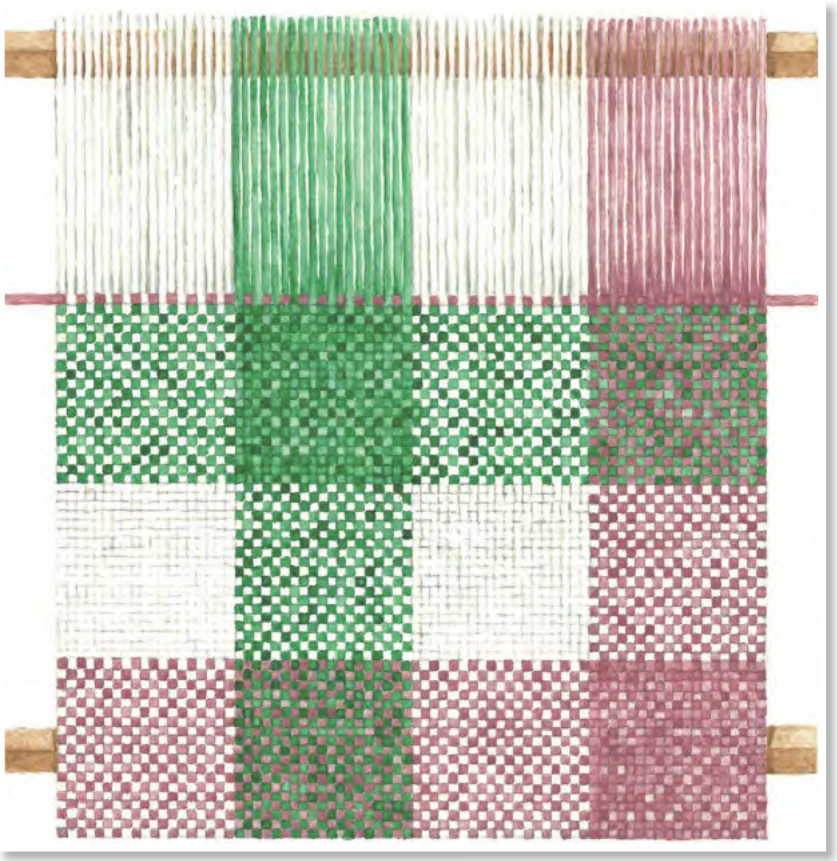

Figure 9.1 Weaving cloth. Watercolour by Janice Nicolson.

Introduction

One way to understand the dynamics of cultural landscapes is to visualise someone weaving cloth. A loom has vertical warp threads stretched over a frame and the weaver passes a shuttle to and fro between them to introduce the horizontal weft threads. When warp and weft threads are tightly interwoven, the cloth produced is strong and stable and, depending on the colours and patterns used, can be simple or complex in design. In this image, the warp threads represent the natural landscape and the weft threads represent human intervention that creates the cultural landscape. If that cultural landscape is deemed to be of value and worth keeping, it is obviously critical to protect the bonds between the natural and cultural heritage 'threads'. If the focus is only on one or the other, the fabric of the cultural landscape will become unstable and eventually unravel.

Cultural landscapes are most likely to come unstuck when the existing use of the land is no longer economically viable. For example, when the younger generation of a village moves away and the farmland is abandoned or an older urban neighbourhood is earmarked for redevelopment, the future of the cultural landscape hangs in the balance. This is the crux of heritage conservation. Which thread we, the weavers, choose next will either enhance, maintain, damage or destroy the cultural landscape. To make that choice, we need to ask whether the cultural landscape is worth protecting. Has anyone even noticed that we might be about to lose another valuable heritage resource that will not be missed until it is too late? Or should we just adopt a hands-off approach and let nature and market forces take their course, for better or for worse?

The contention of this book is that our lives are enriched by the cultural landscapes that we have created and we should make the effort to understand, appreciate, and nurture them. Whether or not we are aware of their influence on our daily lives, we miss them when they are gone. J. B. Jackson stated that 'cultural landscapes will always remain elusive expressions of a persistent desire to make the earth over in the image of some heaven'. This may be easier to visualise in idyllic rural settings than in some of the more gritty urban cultural landscapes. Nevertheless, call it 'genius loci' or *qi*, the test of a balanced and beneficial cultural landscape is when it makes the resident, worker, or visitor feel at one with the surroundings.

It has been stressed that heritage conservation is not about maintaining the status quo. Cultural landscapes are constantly evolving. Some are in a balanced state and others are not. The challenge is to identify those that we value most and steer them towards beneficial rather than harmful change. Relatively small changes and adaptations are normal and can be easily assimilated. It is the

more abrupt, large-scale changes that can cause the most damage and arouse public concern.

During the 1980s, many New Territories landowners could no longer make a living from farming and sold out to haulage firms who filled in the abandoned paddy fields and fish ponds to accommodate lorry parks, scrapyards, and container storage. Such activities pollute the land, making it difficult to reverse the impacts thirty years later and respond to the current demand to reuse abandoned farmland to grow organic vegetables and provide allotments for city dwellers to get back to nature. Urban areas are equally prone to irreversible damage. Many of Hong Kong's urban renewal projects have generated large-scale impacts by bulldozing traditional street markets and corner-shop neighbourhoods, replacing them with towering residential blocks and impersonal malls.

Strategic planning requires a comprehensive database, otherwise heritage conservation will continue to be a piecemeal, firefighting exercise. To get ahead of the curve, Hong Kong needs to take stock of its heritage resources and identify valuable and vulnerable cultural landscapes before they deteriorate or vanish altogether. Several helpful databases produced by different government departments are already in place. For example, the Antiquities and Monuments Office (AMO) has compiled a list of Hong Kong's monuments, graded historic buildings as well as intangible heritage. Unfortunately, the cultural landscape fabric that defines the context of each building was not taken into consideration and so only one set of 'threads' is protected. The Planning Department has produced a map of landscape types across Hong Kong based on visual character. This is helpful but, once again, stops short of analysing why the landscapes look the way they do. The missing link is the insight to overlay and meld such databases to reveal and interpret the interaction between the natural and built heritage resources that shape our cultural landscapes.

It can be done, although to see it in practice we need to look overseas. One example is a system called LANDMAP, implemented by the Countryside Council for Wales. LANDMAP (Landscape Assessment and Decision Making Process) provides total coverage of the Welsh landscape which comprises an area twenty times larger than Hong Kong. The landscape is mapped using five different aspects (Geological, Landscape Habitat, Visual and Sensory, Historic and Cultural). Every distinct area within each aspect is assigned a value, its current and anticipated future condition is assessed, and management guidelines are recommended. Each aspect map can be overlaid with any of the others to investigate, for example, how cultural elements are impacting on a particular landscape habitat and identify areas that need priority attention. This award-winning system has proved very successful in evaluating, forward planning, and management of Wales' cultural landscapes.

Assessment Process

In the likelihood that no such coordinated databases will be available in Hong Kong in the near future, the business of heritage conservation needs to carry on and the following five-step process is suggested as a general guide for practitioners as well as concerned members of the public who want to identify and map local heritage cultural landscapes, assess why they are significant, review their condition and any pressures for change, and recommend how to protect and enhance them.

Step 1: Establish who first settled there and why

It is often easier to identify and understand how a rural cultural landscape was established. The chapters on Ping Shan and Tai O illustrate that it is relatively straightforward, centuries later, to interpret the relationship between such human settlements and the natural landscape. In urban cultural landscapes, such as Dried Seafood Street, it can be more complicated because human intervention tends to happen in shorter cycles and have a greater impact; great swathes of coastline are reclaimed, whole neighbourhoods are redeveloped, and hectares of natural vegetation covered in asphalt. To write the first chapter in the story of a cultural landscape, rural or urban, needs the successive layers of development to be peeled back to reveal what it was about the original landscape that enticed the first human arrivals to put down their roots on that particular spot.

Step 2: Record the evolution and condition of natural landscape features

The next step records how natural landscape resources have evolved and seeks to understand how they have shaped human activities over time. This will include a condition assessment of the local topography, watercourses, woodland, and other flora and fauna habitats. Although flora and fauna habitats are very vulnerable to damage from development, it is surprising how often the local topography survives relatively intact and remains a dominant factor in defining a cultural landscape even when the associated human activities have changed. This is particularly true of feng shui features, such as hills, ridges, and water bodies that continue to play an important role in influencing the physical form of settlements as well as the spiritual well-being of the residents.

To help establish the relative condition of the natural resources, a useful comparison is to consider how the landscape would have looked today if there had been no human intervention. Typically, when humans intervene in the landscape, biodiversity decreases; woodland is felled, rivers are channelled, and wildlife runs, swims, and flies for cover. Nevertheless, there are rare occasions when human activity enhances biodiversity and such cultural landscapes should be treasured. The Mai Po Wetlands, described above, are an excellent example of this. Dragon Garden is another. Government Hill would be very much the poorer without the hundreds of mature trees, planted generations ago, which have created a green 'oasis' in the heart of Central.

Of course, in many urban cultural landscapes, there may never have been any vegetation cover. Dried Seafood Street was built on land reclaimed from the sea. The presence of vegetation is not a prerequisite for a cultural landscape. Instead, the establishment and evolution of Dried Seafood Street should be interpreted in the broader landscape context of Hong Kong Island's northern coastline as part of the human intervention (reclamation) to overcome topographical constraints.

Step 3: Record the human interventions and their impacts on the landscape

This step records how local cultural heritage has evolved and seeks to understand how human activities have shaped the landscape. Initial interventions normally achieve a balanced, sustainable relationship between humans and nature in order not to damage or overexploit the life-supporting advantages offered by the land. For example, residents of a traditional rice-growing village would take care to control the water supply to the paddy fields so that it deposited rather than eroded fertile soil. Trees would only be felled to supply villagers' essential needs for fuel or construction. Collectively, the community had an intimate knowledge of and respect for the land. It appreciated the interaction between different components of the cultural landscape (feng shui hill, woodland, fields, water supply, settlement pattern, etc.), knowledge that we have all but lost today.

Then, as Hong Kong prospered, its rapidly growing population no longer depended upon understanding and working the land for survival. To cater to the new demands of this modern city, human interventions in the landscape became increasingly aggressive and exploitive. Therefore, when studying a cultural landscape, decision-makers need to inform themselves fully regarding the present condition of the heritage resources and establish if the cultural landscape is improving, stable or declining. Mapping the sequence, type,

and scale of human interventions that have shaped the cultural landscape over time helps to identify at what point it was balanced and sustainable, which interventions were damaging or enhancing, what impacts different interventions are likely to cause in the future, and how any bad trends might be reversed to restore the cultural landscape.

Step 4: Establish the significance of the cultural landscape

A major flaw in Hong Kong's heritage conservation system is that it does not recognise the dynamics of cultural landscapes. Instead, it persists in separating the 'threads' and drawing an administratively convenient but false dichotomy between natural heritage and built heritage. To establish the heritage significance of a cultural landscape needs contributions from experts in different disciplines and cooperation between government departments. It may sound complicated but it boils down to asking why the site is important, how the natural and cultural elements (tangible and intangible) interact to define the character of the site, and what is the most appropriate way to protect and enhance them.

Heritage significance will be determined by several values which vary in importance between different sites. Typically, these might include: ecological value of the flora and fauna habitats that may reflect, say, rarity of species; architectural value of the buildings and structures either singly or as an ensemble; social value attached to the site by the community as a result of shared memories and experiences; historical value arising from associations with famous people and events connected with the site. Although such valuations are made by the expert study team, the reasoning should be set out in a clear statement of significance listing the key character-defining elements for public scrutiny, debate, and agreement.

Step 5: Put protection measures in place and plan ahead

The best way to protect a heritage cultural landscape in the long term is to help make it environmentally sustainable, commercially viable, and inspirational to the community that lives, works or plays in it. Financial assistance to property owners to help refurbish ageing properties or depleted flora and fauna habitats can make a big difference. Careful use of the transfer of plot ratio system that respects property owners' rights to develop but relocates overwhelming new development to less sensitive sites is a useful tool. Wise planning that avoids

the zoning mistakes made with Tiger Balm Garden and Ping Shan is very important. Ideally, a new land use zoning such as 'Heritage Conservation Area' or 'Heritage Cultural Landscape' should be introduced to planning vocabulary to provide statutory protection to both natural and built heritage resources of a valued cultural landscape.

Establishing a realistic boundary for conservation management of a cultural landscape is critical. It should take into account the character-defining elements identified in the statement of significance and may extend beyond the obvious tangible site features. For example, the feng shui lines that dictated the orientation of temples and clan halls with, say, distant mountain peaks, need to be respected and not obstructed by new development. A loosely drawn boundary allows the sort of cumulative impacts described in the Ping Shan case study to happen.

None of these protection measures would be effective unless it is part of an integrated system where every level of government and stakeholder is on the same page, referred to in the Ping Shan and Mai Po case studies as the four Ps (policy, planning, project, and people): policy guidance from government, planning development control, project coordination, and support by local people.

Conclusion

In the handful of case studies presented above, it appears that where there was success, it was due more to luck than design. The right people happened to be in the right place at the right time to avert disaster. This book respectfully requests members of the public and those in positions of authority to take stock of the many wonderful cultural landscapes that we have created and enhance our daily lives. Take heed of the landscapes lost and be inspired by the landscapes found. If Hong Kong is serious about heritage conservation, it should be very clear by now that spending millions of dollars to save a handful of old buildings here and there will not cut it. Cultural landscape is the more valuable unit of heritage currency that we should be using.

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