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Citation (APA)
Tan, D. (2025). Persistence of Everyday Sacred Landscapes: Shrines, Village Temples, and Hillside Cemetery in Shenzhen. *Space and Culture*, *29 (2026)*(4), 717-734. https://doi.org/10.1177/12063312251367253

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Original Article

Space and Culture
2026, Vol. 29(4) 717–734
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Persistence of Everyday Sacred Landscapes: Shrines, Village Temples, and Hillside Cemetery in Shenzhen

Diwen Tan[1*]

Abstract

This study analyzes the persistence of everyday sacred landscapes in the Chinese megacity of Shenzhen. It is inspired by Lefebvre's notion of bodies in relation to space, material religion, and Chinese popular religion concerning reciprocal interactions of bodies and souls. Through a detailed examination of shrines, village temples, and a hillside cemetery using architectural ethnographic mapping and qualitative methods, the case study of Pingshan village demonstrates that various sacred spatial practices persist and actively intersect with modern interventions and urban regulations, woven into everyday life. The process of production and reproduction of sacred landscapes reveals their dual nature as both enduring and temporary, challenging the static notions of space. In conclusion, this study suggests that recognizing the intersubjectivities among human, natural, and spiritual elements allows the sacred to function as a spatial figure of landscape infrastructure, one that possesses the structuring power to reconfigure urban settlements toward inclusivity.

Keywords

bodies, souls, urban sacred landscape, Chinese popular religion, embodied methodology

Introduction

Many studies have shown that various sacred practices and spaces persist and intermingle with the modern urban lives of people across the globe (Gómez & Van Herck, 2012; Yelle & Trein, 2020). And increasing attention is given to the geography or spatiality of religion, as these sacred practices have contributed to shaping the future of urbanism by engaging with and critiquing modernity through a deeper sense of embodiment (Kwon, 2008; Lanz, 2014; Wilford, 2010). The research covers a wide range of relevant topics, including social and spatial transformations of religion (della Dora, 2018; Kiong & Kong, 2000), production of sacred spaces (Jones, 2019), and community making (Fan, 2003). However, the concept of immaterial souls or spirits has largely been excluded from these debates. Only few exceptions (Heng, 2022) acknowledge souls' active

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*The name is rendered here in western style: Given-name Family-name.

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interactions with human bodies. This explicit acknowledgment is important in challenging the prevalent worldview that has focused on the bodily, physical, and human aspects of existence, with "the divine removed to an other-worldly reality" (Sahlins, 2022, p. 11). In other words, it aids us in reimagining the enchantment of the modern world (Wilford, 2010).

Therefore, this study uses Lefebvre's concept of bodies in relation to space to examine the reciprocal relationships between bodies and souls and to reimagine space becoming enchanted. It proposes that the interactions, negotiations, and borrowings between the enchanted and disenchanted worlds enable us to reconceptualize urban spaces beyond their purely physical and bodily aspects to inform a more inclusive approach to urban planning and design.

The study focuses on a Chinese metropolitan area as the site for empirical investigation, where diverse forms of soul beliefs exist and traditional culture began to resurge in the post-reform era. This landscape presents a juxtaposition to the country's pursuit of modernization and advancement in science and technology. Following the Taylor (2007) and Caseau (1999) secularization narratives, Chinese cities' rapid transformation was accompanied by three dynamics: desacralization and desecration, which involved removing elements deemed "superstitious" or "feudal"; resacralization in which new "proper" forms were legitimized for environmental reasons as part of a sanitizing process; and the reinvention of national traditional culture through cultural revitalization programs (Cartier, 2019; Ren, 2018). However, beneath this modern and orderly façade, popular beliefs in Daoism, Buddhism, yin-yang, and ancestral spirits endure. In other words, modern life in China seems still enchanted; the physical world and the parallel spiritual world are never fully separate, as observed in lived experiences (Fan, 2003; Gao et al., 2019).

The study takes an urban village in Shenzhen as a case study to investigate the persistence of sacred landscapes. It is a place that epitomizes how rural origins are encompassed by a larger city (O'Donnell et al., 2017) and a microcosm where popular religion is entangled with urbanization and modernization dynamics. Using embodied methodologies, the study illustrates sacred spatial practices in the daily lives of migrants, villagers, and the village collective, emphasizing their intersection with state-led urbanization and transformation. This analysis reveals the sensory and affective qualities of evolving but enduring sacred landscapes. Moreover, it enchants understandings of the social production of space by seeking to move away from the Cartesian framework and instead adopting embodied subjectivities from a human-decentered perspective.

Body, Soul, and Sacred Landscape

The living body and its relationship with space have been thoroughly explored by Lefebvre (1974/1991). He rejected the idea of Cartesian space as a container waiting to be occupied by bodies, and instead proposed the concept of a body that has the capacity to create space through the deployment of various energies governed by the laws of nature. The first core element of this concept is to oppose viewing space and bodies as objects and bring in the perspective of embodied subjects (Kinkaid, 2020). This is shared by the phenomenological work by Merleau-Ponty (1962), emphasizing bodies' inherent capacities to direct behaviors. The second element is that the relationship between bodies and space is immediate, reciprocal, and intersubjective; it is through interactions and relations among multiple bodies that space is produced. As Lefebvre (1974/1991, p. 170) asserts, "each living body is space and has its space: it produces itself in space and it also produces that space." Bodies as subjects produce and reproduce space's meanings through social practices, and at the same time space orders bodies through social and spatial codes (Kinkaid, 2020). Also, these social practices are often performed in repetition and reoccurrence, thus imparting rhythms to everyday life (Lefebvre, 2004; Simonsen, 2005).

This phenomenological understanding of space and time provides a foundation for scholars interpreting urban spaces as appropriated by groups of embodied differences or the city in its

entirety. As illustrated by De Boeck and Plissart (2004), Kinshasa can be portrayed as a giant living body comprising many individual bodies that move, act, and interrelate, generating the city's "inner drive and rhythms." The body, therefore, is both physical and social, producing specific forms of social lives and imbuing various urban spaces with multiple meanings.

In the scholarship of spatiality of religion, sacred spaces are often seen as inhabited by divine forces. These spaces are artifacts with unique forms that exert structural power on a city. They can become a place of attraction, organizing sequences of sanctity and assembling buildings that surround them (Kostof, 1992/2005). They may serve, individually or collectively, as the predominant structure of a city or be embedded within the urban fabric while signifying the area, such as roadside memorials (Dickens, 2021). According to Rossi (1984), the persistence of a sacred artifact is "a result of its capacity to constitute the city, its history and art, its being and memory" (p. 60). From material religion approach, artifacts or objects "become icons when they have not only material force but also symbolic power" (Bartmański & Alexander, 2012). In this way of embodiment, invisible souls, spirits, or deities are made tangibly present (Knott et al., 2016). However, while more emphasis has been given to the human experience with material things such as sensations, souls as subjects are less explicitly discussed. This is partially influenced by naturalistic orientation (Descola, 2013) where the concept of souls is often supplanted by the concepts of the mind or consciousness, and Plato's theory of the immortal soul that views the soul as an autonomous thinking thing to be freed from bodily constraints (Swinburne, 2021).

Conducting this study within the Chinese cultural context of analogical thinking and divination traditions (Descola, 2013; Yang, 1961) necessitates an alternative understanding of souls. We must view souls as connected to bodies and space by incorporating aspects of the soul's active and effective influence on the body's movements (Heng, 2022). It is this network of movements that has formed the territory of sacred landscapes. Chinese souls (*hun* or *hunpo*, often seen as plural entities for each living body) are rather abstract and relate to cosmic energy *qi* (or *jingqi*). This embodies the yin-yang interaction and constitutes the *wu* (beings), whether animate or inanimate (A. C. Yu, 1987). Collectively, it becomes a world of myriad things (*wanwu*), including bodies and souls, governed by the cosmic order.

This *wanwu* world permeates the everyday lives of the bodily human world, through gestures of veneration, including incense worshipping, burial rites, and funeral rites. Chinese souls are ubiquitous in different forms, either as deities, spirits, or ghosts (including ancestral spirits; Gu, 1929; Y.-S. Yu, 2005). These animated beings invite actions and gestures, thereby instantly creating and maintaining sacred spaces. These sacred landscapes (from tablets and shrines to temples and tombs) not only serve as individual buildings for worshipping but also give cosmological spatial structure and social order as exemplified by auspicious site orientation and relational location (Needham, 1956). When controversies over modern urban planning and land rulings arise, such landscapes and beliefs in souls can also become forms of silent, nonviolent resistance. For example, some may appear under the disguised name of "cultural square" to align with modern public space classifications, while others are expressed through revived ritual performances that reunite the community, affirming the symbolic importance of place (Gao et al., 2019; Guo & Herrmann-Pillath, 2023).

The belief in the existence of souls in plural forms and their inextricable links with the living invites a re-examination of how urban spaces are shaped and constituted, not only through material bodies but also through immaterial souls. This approach enables decentering human dimension in viewing the world (Lane, 2001; Sahlins, 2022), by requiring the acknowledgment of ghost-gods as subjects with free wills, emotions, and differential powers, as equal as bodies. In this sense, Lefebvre's notion of bodies can be broadly interpreted to include nonhuman beings, such as souls. The materiality and embodied experiences inspired by the material religion can extend to the capacities of souls or spirits.

Figure 1. Omnipresence of Sacred Spaces in Pingshan Village. These Include (a) Shop Front Sacred Spaces of Chaoshanese Migrants, Where the Shrine of Caishen (the God of Wealth) Either Follows the Village's Southwest Orientation or Prioritizes the Door-Facing; (b) Local Villagers' Houses With Divine Family Guardians, Who Are Mainly Enshrined at Home; and (c) Communal Temples Situated at the Old Village's Border.

Method

This study presents a case study of Pingshan village, located on the urban fringe of the Shenzhen metropolitan area. Here, a mountain range has served as a natural barrier to the accelerating urban expansion. Before the 1980s, the village was a typical clan village dedicated to rice farming, pond fishing, and livestock farming. Since then, through land requisition for new urban forms and redevelopment, the agrarian landscape shaped by the Sha River and surrounding mountains has been radically transformed into a contested and entangled landscape. High-rise apartments for the middle classes, shopping malls and hotels, and university campuses and research institutes have gradually encroached stigmatized neighborhoods (labeled "urban village") that are now crowded with rural migrants and fresh graduates. This study closely examines the dynamics of various sacred landscapes that are retained amid the rapid urban transformations (Figure 1).

Using embodied methodologies, this empirical research draws on qualitative data collected during fieldwork I conducted during two separate trips in 2023 and 2024. The first fieldwork, conducted from March 1 to May 30, 2023, provided an overall understanding of the village, including its history, demography, spatial configuration, and rhythms of daily activities. Staying in the village allowed me to gradually immerse myself in the community, while my daily walks within and around the village and numerous interactions with the community committee and residents also helped build trust. The discovery of omnipresent sacred spaces arose organically through my sensory experiences on-site, including the smell and smoke of burning incense, the visual aesthetics of temples, and the sound of firecrackers during *Qingming* (Tomb-Sweeping Festival).

Building on the established relationships I developed in the village, the second fieldwork took place from May 12 to August 4, 2024. I used architectural ethnographic mapping (Kaijima et al., 2018) as the main method to visually map the observed spatial characteristics, including material representation and spatial arrangement, and gestures and social practices involved in making sacredness and sacred spaces. To capture the complexity of the production of sacred spaces, this method was complemented by photography and field note-taking, derived from interviews and my experiential engagement with people's daily lives at the site through all senses and a reflective mind.

I made sketches on-site to document shape, size, structure, activities, and environments at different moments. The act of drawing necessitates a careful and slower mode of observation, termed "attentive observation" by Gandy (2024). Long-term observation using this mode is also essential for capturing those ephemeral sacred rituals that are integral to daily practices. In parallel, a series of interviews was conducted through casual and extended conversations with residents who have direct experience of the sacred activities in the village. They had diverse backgrounds in terms of gender, age, and migration status and represented different groups that are associated with various sacred locations.

Fieldwork itself, (re)drawing, and writing constituted a long process of contemplation from a human-decentered perspective, which aimed to elucidate the intersubjectivity of human, natural, and perceived spiritual elements. The final drawings, synthesized from observed data in the form of sketches, photos, and fieldnotes, were the result of contemplation. They translate abstract and spiritual concepts and elements into tangible visual forms that encompass materiality and spatiality, illustrating sacred spaces in the process of being assembled and constituted. Combined with photographs and writings, these drawings offer a narrative interpretation of bodies, souls, and everyday practices in time and space, revealing embedded cultural meanings.

In addition, I made a 3-day visit to a young migrant's hometown in the Chaoshan[1] countryside to better understand the regional culture. Also, a guided visit to the city's commercial public cemetery allowed me to learn the modern planning strategies on death and burial. To address privacy and ethical considerations, all personal characteristics were anonymized in the drawings, and pseudonyms were used.

In the following two sections, I elaborate on how sacred spaces are produced, reproduced, and maintained in contemporary society through four narratives, each epitomizing key features of a particular typology. I begin with the omnipresent sacred within the village and then turn to the landscape of practices related to death—the hillside cemetery established on the village's collective land following Granny Zhan's passing.

Omnipresence of the Sacred as Defining Parameter

The sacred in Pingshan village endures, with multiple spaces frequently overlapping and intersecting with the social realm. These include (a) the widely spread shop front sacred spaces of Chaoshanese migrants; (b) villagers' divine family guardians enshrined in each house; and (c) village-owned communal temples, including ancestral halls and a Buddhist temple, that have been collectively maintained as an expression of clan identity since their ancestors settled here 500 years ago.

A Migrant's Shop Defined by Caishen

Since the late 1980s, large numbers of migrants have arrived in the village, with Chaoshanese migrants forming the predominant group. They soon established businesses with sacred spaces to sustain their livelihoods. As commonly claimed by them, the god of wealth, *Caishen*, must be honorarily invited (*qing*) when starting their businesses. Various shops along the streets and alleys feature a shrine dedicated to the worship of *Caishen.* Unlike homogenized chain shops, these businesses are very personalized and specialized, including restaurants, grocery shops, tobacco sellers, tea and liquor shops, mini markets, greengrocers, and secondhand electric appliance retailers. This practice not only necessitates the normative process but also defines the shop's spatial arrangement.

The village's only DIY shop has had a *Caishen* enshrined in the front room since 1999. The shop belongs to Uncle Liu, who came to Shenzhen around the age of 17 in the 1980s. After spending 10 years working in various industries in Nantou village, Shenzhen, Uncle Liu

decided to move to Pingshan to start his own business. At the time, farmland and orchards still dominated the largely rural landscape of Pingshan village, along with industrial factories with color steel tiles. Seeing the opportunities presented by the farmland's requisition for a university campus and the surrounding urban development, he decided to open his DIY shop. It became the first one in the village, and even in the subdistrict, anticipating the high demand for building materials.

The *Caishen* statue was invited (*qing*) from a temple in his hometown that his family often visited. It came with a full set of supplies, including a wooden shrine, a ceramic incense burner, three red liquor cups, and a pair of electric lotus lamps. For Uncle Liu and his wife, the specific form of the god is less important, whether it is the legendary figure of Lord Zhao, Fan Li, or a hybrid representation, or a statue, image or simply incense ashes from the god's worship. What truly matters is the process of consecration (*kaiguang*) to imbue the material and physical form with spiritual power (*lingli*); the object is then perceived as a divine being.

It is a newly built three-story building where he established his shop, located right in front of the old village. The village collective constructed the building, in a modern concrete style on former agricultural land, following the axis of the communal ancestral halls and the fishpond (Figure 2). The ground floor consists of seven units. Following the traditional layout of old village houses, each unit has a spacious room in the front and a small one in the back, with a high ceiling of approximately 3.8 m to accommodate a mezzanine. This design proved to be ideal for business people, offering storage space or the flexibility to combine working and living functions. The ground floor was quickly filled with shops and restaurants.

If the building provides the locational and volumetric convenience for the business, then the design of a *Caishen* shrine defines the shop's arrangement. At Uncle Liu's DIY shop, a *Caishen* shrine is located in the back of the front room and above the door to the back room, positioned to face the shop door while aligning with the village's southwest orientation. The shelves of goods are then arranged within this structure, ensuring an unobstructed view of the god. Strictly speaking, the shrine's distance from the walls and floor should be carefully measured using a *luban* ruler and aligned with the owner's horoscope to ensure maximum luck. However, this is not always strictly observed, and flexibility is often exercised. In practice, a location that is convenient for worshipping is recommended. For example, although the height of Uncle Liu's shrine is not ideal, it is practical for him and his wife using a chair.

For over 20 years, every morning and evening, Uncle Liu (or sometimes his wife) has opened the daily business by burning incense for *Caishen*. On the first and 15th of every lunar month, his wife offers sacrifices, including food and drink, burns incense, and prays at the shrine before burning joss paper (*yuanbao)* in the space out front, which has patterned pavement next to the green belt. This offering is not only made for *Caishen* but for all the gods that she remembers, regardless of religion. The sacrifices are nourishment for the gods, while the act of burning is a means of communicating with and directing them. These ritual practices are simplified, Uncle Liu explained, to adapt to the local customs. Here, the customs refer to modern urban practices shaped by a series of state regulations on sanitation and cleanliness under the banner of eco-civilization. For example, it is required to use an iron basket to burn joss paper outdoors. After consuming the "shadow" of the sacrifices, the worshipped gods leave behind a residue with invisible power, *lingqi*. It then becomes an honor for offerors like Liu's wife to share this enspirited residue with family members and guests.

Inviting and devoted worship of *Caishen* is indispensable for Chaoshanese business people, but they do not rely solely on god's power (*lingli*) for success nor blame failure on it. "To gods, *xinyi* [heart and mind] is important. To succeed in a thing, yourself must make efforts to do it well," Uncle Liu explained. Liu's philosophy is widely shared by others and observable in their business strategies. Without consciously realizing it, their actions often embody a reverent attitude (*xinyi)* or sincere mind (*chengyi)* toward the gods. Liu adopted human emotions or

Figure 2. Uncle Liu's DIY Shop Opened With Caishen, Who Is Invited, Enshrined, and Daily Worshipped.

compassion for others (*renqing*) as the fundamental reciprocal trading principle (Mauss, 2002). Offering help and convenience to others, such as allowing late payments in the early stages of his business, earned him trust and more contracts. Such *renqing*, as many business people believe, brings undetermined luck (*yunqi*) to business, which is considered an important factor alongside one's fate (*ming*).

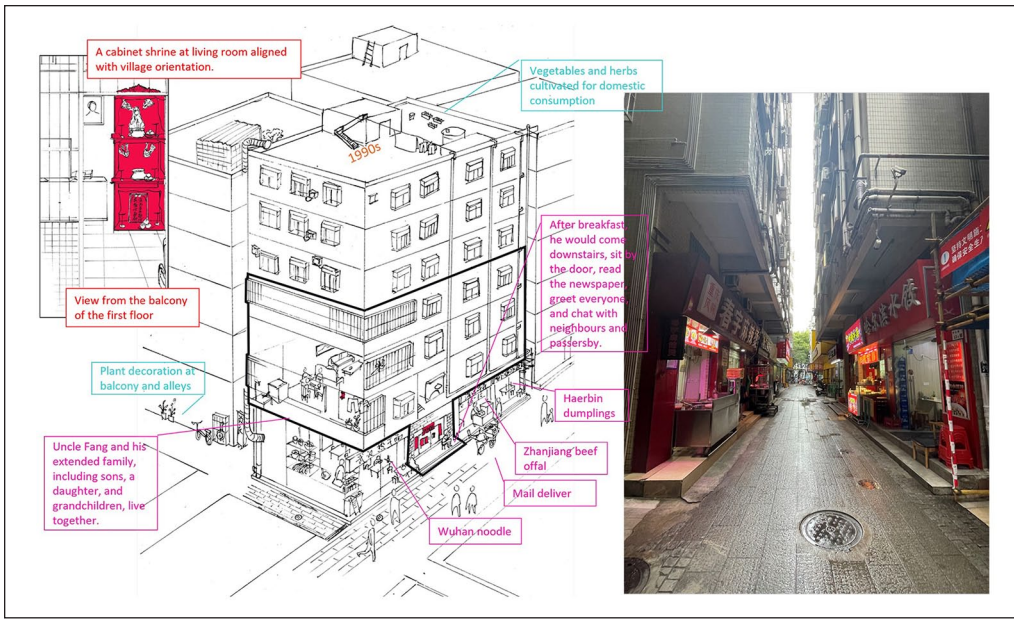

Figure 3. Uncle Fang's Home at the Extended Area of the Village and With Divine Family Guardians.

Villager's House Ordered by Divine Family Guardians

As more migrants move in and occupy the ground floor for businesses, an increasing number of villagers have relocated from the village core to the extended area or beyond, often opting for elevated housing. In response to the waves of migration and state-led urban sprawl, the village extended its residential area to the eastern side in the 1990s by replacing its rice fields with mid-rise apartment buildings of six to seven floors, constructed in a rigid grid pattern. These buildings have since been rented to rural migrants and recent graduates, while some floors are reserved for villagers' own extended families, usually with two to three generations.

As villagers with families moved homes, their divine family guardians were also moved from a one- to two-story house with a yard to a mid-rise apartment (Figure 3). Divine family guardians include *Tudi* (the earth god), *Menshen* (door gods that protect against evil influences while encouraging the entrance of good ones), *Tianguan* (heavenly official, often referred to as heavenly father and earthly mother), recent ancestors, and *Guanyin* (goddess of mercy). Some sacred materials and spaces were moved from outdoors to indoors, while others were elevated from the ground floor to the upper floor. These changes are consistent with observations made in Singaporean Chinese society (Kiong & Kong, 2000). However, despite their elevated position, divine guardians maintained the spatial and cultural order of the house, suggesting an inside-outside and top-down hierarchy. Also, since all buildings in the extended area align with the village's orientation, the relative positioning of family gods remained the same.

Uncle Fang's house exemplifies this spatial order. He designed his apartment building with construction skills honed through practice in Hong Kong when he was young, and now lives with a family of three generations. *Tudi*, who was traditionally located at the left of the main door or front yard gate facing outside and at ground level, was relocated to the indoor living room on the first floor. *Tudi* now shares a cabinet shrine made of Cunninghamia wood with the greater god *Guanyin*, who is placed at the top. Recent ancestors are placed in the middle, following the hierarchy of gods. *Tianguan*, who used to be placed alongside the door facing the front yard and at a certain distance from the ground, was lifted to the first-floor balcony. The *Menshen*, in the form

of two hero figures, continues to be affixed to the main door, renewed annually along with the couplet and five *menjian* (door papercuts featuring patterns of old copper coins) placed around the main door. However, the copper wall incense burner traditionally used for worshipping *Menshen* is no longer used, leaving the door façade relatively clean. This is mainly because the alley along Uncle Fang's three apartment buildings was long ago transformed into a vibrant and bustling "cuisine variety street," known among residents and nearby students. The building façade is subject to national campaigns of "sanitary and civilised city" that regulate the spatial order and behaviors. In the more hidden and narrow alleys, the *Menshen* worshipping burner is still visible. During the *Qingming* Festival, the smoke rising from balconies and windows would suffuse alleys, more precisely the space in between the buildings.

"Every family has [its own] *shenpo* [sorceress]," villagers often joked. In earlier times, the village used to have a sorceress who was believed to cure illnesses and resolve abnormal behaviors or situations, especially when kids were "hunted," 'possessed,' or "scared" by ghosts. However, after she passed away, no person inherited the shamanic (*wu*) personality (*ge*) required to communicate with ghost-gods. Nowadays, every woman—whether the head of household or their wife—continues serving all gods with deference through daily worship and rituals on important dates. Every morning, the first task of Uncle Fang's wife is to burn incense, add lamp oil, and pray. On the first and 15th of the lunar month, she offers sacrifices and burns joss paper in an iron basket for all gods. Once this is done, she and any daughters prepare breakfast for the family and manage the household chores. In such a way, she assumes the role of the family *shenpo*; communicating with family guardians has become her daily routine.

Uncle Fang, freed from such duties, serves as a respected elder and guardian of the vibrant neighborhood. He likes to go downstairs and sit in front of the house on a small stool to spend the morning watching people, reading the newspaper, and chatting with neighbors (restaurateurs who rented the ground floors from him) while smoking. Around noon, his wife or daughter calls him for lunch from the balcony or stairway window. After lunch and a brief rest, he routinely comes downstairs again for his 3:00 p.m. bubble tea—a habit developed during his time laboring in Hong Kong—if no family mahjong game is organized. While sitting at the same doorway with a bubble tea and cigarette in his hands, he anticipates various encounters and silently observes residents' lives.

To Uncle Fang and other villagers, family extends far beyond a nuclear one: It encompasses the immediate extended family to the whole kindred village. Their earliest common ancestors, enshrined at the grand ancestral temple, are believed to have the power to control the village's fate and oversee individuals' well-being, while their own recent ancestors are worshipped at home and believed to guard their families. "When the fortune is endowed, you should be able to 'receive' it," Uncle Fang reflected. He believes that he inherited a fortune (i.e., land) from his ancestors and was able to manage it well. However, while people are "under the protection" of benevolent ancestors, this is conditional. If offended, their anger can bring suffering and hardship, not only to individuals, but in the case of high-ranking villagers, to the entire village. That is why he challenged a village leader who supported the ongoing rehabilitation project "Talent Town" by pointedly asking, "Can you hold a clear conscience in front of your great ancestors?"

Village Bordered by Temples for Lineage Ancestors and Communal Gods

As mentioned above, family holds a far-reaching meaning for a lineage-based village. Artifacts such as ancestral halls and communal temples are tied to its collective identity and shared history and memory. Being constructed in specific styles and appropriately located following fengshui principles, they spatially frame and spiritually safeguard the village. At the very front and back of the old village of Pingshan are ancestral halls, honored by the community. The grand ancestral temple with three halls is located on the upper terrain and enshrines wooden memorial tablets of

early ancestors. Men's full names are carved into the tablets, along with their spouses' surnames, indicating their clan. This hall is often closed and only opens for lineage-related events, such as New Year worship by the village collective.

On the village's front edge are two connected subfamily ancestral halls. These have become a social space, with the open space in front having been converted into a small, popular park. The right[2] subfamily ancestral hall is used for storing equipment, including a floor speaker, cables, and chairs for the daily group dances held in the morning and evening. The left hall recently reopened following renovations of the elderly entertainment center and is only open from noon until mid-afternoon for elderly villagers to play mahjong. Tables placed at the entrance create a makeshift "wall" to provide a degree of privacy from the outside while generating curiosity about the interior. Inside the hall, there is a sacred and quiet atmosphere, with the background sound of mahjong. The quietness is accentuated by the high-ceilinged hall supported by marble pillars, narrative ink murals along the tops of walls, carvings of animals on the beams, and a modest altar dedicated to Ancestor XII.

The *Guanyin* temple, located at the east edge of the old village and aligned with the village's orientation, was originally built when the village was established in the early Qing dynasty (1644–1911) as a place to pray for fertility, peace, and prosperity. There are no records showing how many times it has been destroyed and rebuilt, but the most recent reconstruction occurred in 1998. Due to severe damage and a lack of proper maintenance, the wood structure had to be dismantled, according to the villager in charge of the reconstruction. However, the reassembly was not successful: the main beam was broken, and most pillars were too corroded to be reused. Consequently, the temple failed to be listed as a city's historical and cultural site for preservation. Today's *Guanyin* temple is a new construction (*xinmiao*, as local villagers refer to it) built with bricks and marble pillars and painted red (Figure 4). Residents who are not familiar with its long history call it red temple (*hongmiao*). Nevertheless, its location, size, orientation, and functions have remained unchanged. As the only *Guanyin* temple in the whole district, it is a source of pride for the villagers and is frequently visited.

The *Guanyin* temple not only enshrines the Buddhist goddess *Guanyin* but also various other gods serving different purposes, including the folklore god of wealth *Caishen*, the folklore fertility goddess *Shi'er Nainiang* (literally "wet nurse with 12 children"), the folklore sea goddess *Tianhou* (also known as Mazu), and the earth god *Tudi*. A local villager in his 60s is responsible for daily maintenance, including cleaning and regularly repainting the wooden gates with preservative oil. Every first and 15th of the lunar month, he comes early at 8:00 a.m. to relight the candle tower and hang and burn large incense cones for each family offering. Around the same time, a middle-aged woman who voluntarily acts as an agent of the village comes to worship all the gods in clockwise order. She offers hundreds of burning incense sticks at once and burns a pile of joss paper for the village. Each village family contributes a yearly fee for this service. This practice is practical since most households now enshrine and worship their own *Guanyins* and other guardian gods at home, as seen earlier in the case of Uncle Fang. Nevertheless, the cooperative model of worshiping the communal gods demonstrates the continued social bond between individual families and the village collective. Throughout the day on these significant dates, other residents, including migrants, also visit the temple and pray for blessings, including health, wealth, family happiness, marriage, childbirth, education, and career—encompassing all areas of life.

From the Living to the Dead: Cemetery Embedded in Lychee Orchards

A cemetery—a place for the burial of the dead and for the living to pay their homage—is traditionally located near, yet apart from, the settlement area. Chinese peasants have commonly embedded cemeteries within productive landscapes, such as farmlands. Since the late 1990s,

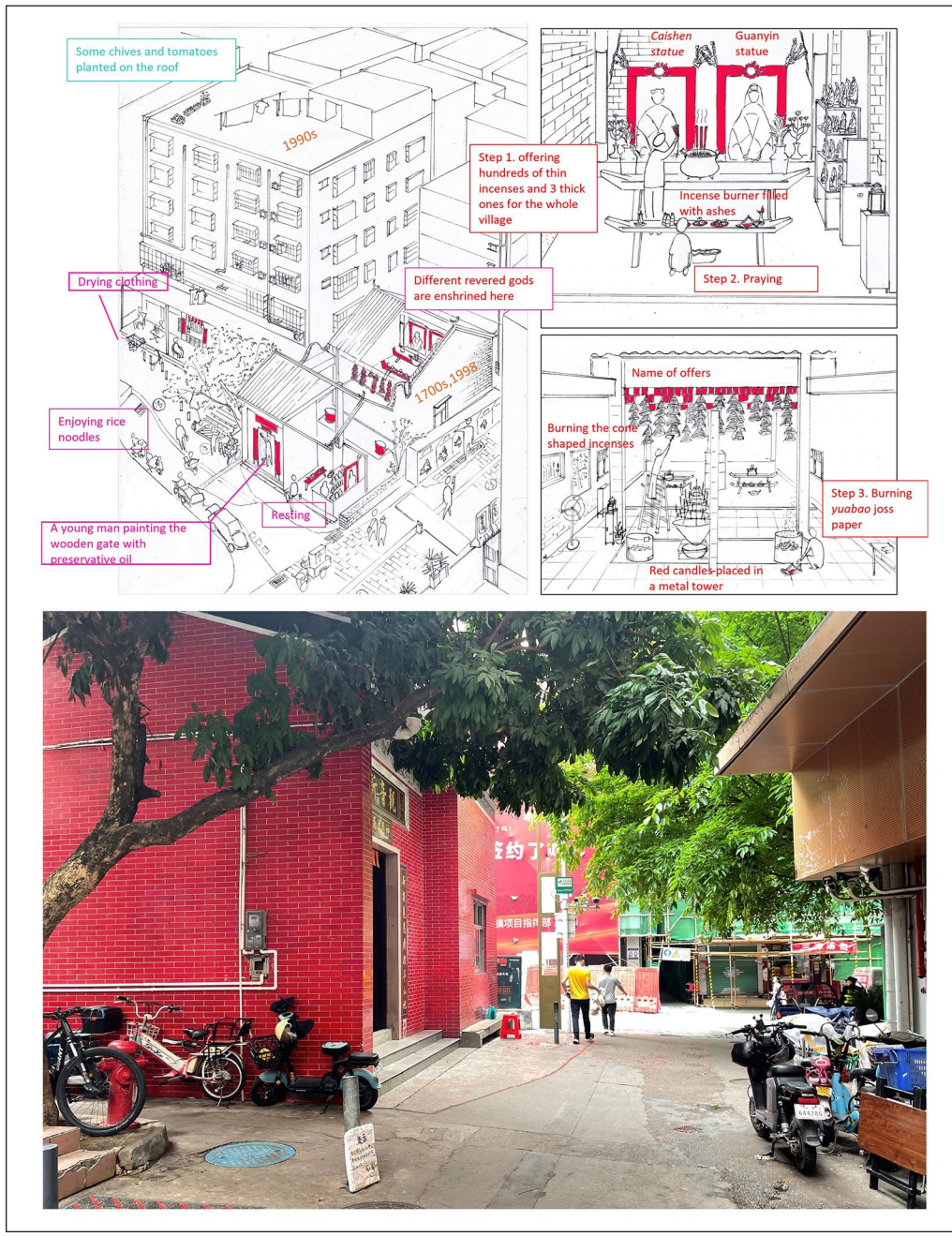

Figure 4. Village's Buddhist Temple, Known as the Red Temple, Which Houses Various Revered Gods From Daoist, Buddhist, and Folklore Traditions.

national and municipal regulations on modern urban cemeteries have been enacted; the establishment of the village's cemetery, categorized as a welfare public cemetery, was a negotiated result. Scattered, buried tombs (*fen*) in an arch shape with a tombstone (Teather, 2001) had been relocated into this collective cemetery, a hybrid product that lays on the productive landscape of hillside lychee orchards within a concrete rectangle design.

At age 90, Granny Zhan passed away at her house, located at the edge of the old village. Her funeral was a modest and quiet event held at her home, completed within 24 h. Rather than inviting *Nanm daoshi* (Daoist priests; Li et al., 2010) to perform dances to summon her departing souls or hosting a banquet to publicly announce the death, her family chose to follow modern municipal funeral regulations that were issued in 2000 and revised in 2004 and 2019 (Shenzhen Municipal People's Congress, 2019). After her passing at noon, a funeral was quickly organized at her house for relatives and close friends. Early the next morning, her body was sent for cremation before being interred at the village's communal cemetery on the mountainside. By noon, the procession had returned to the house, and the ceremony had finished.

Despite the silence and frugality, some village traditions subtly persist amid the modern urban cemetery and burial regulations. To transform the living room into a funeral hall, family members moved the furniture, including tables and chairs, outdoors against the wall beside the gate. The wooden chairs, adorned with flower carvings, served as silent markers that announced the death to the public. The body was bathed, dressed, and laid in a prepared wooden coffin covered with a piece of red cotton. The coffin was placed in the center of the room, with an incense burner serving as a small altar in front of it. Mourning was embedded in gestures of offering incense sticks.

Family members stayed awake for Granny Zhan until the second day, when the procession began early in the morning. Scheduled at an auspicious time according to *Tung Shing* (Cantonese for the "all-knowing book" or almanac), a quick but loud firecracker was set off in front of the house. After that, the procession departed. Family members stopped by the *Guanyin* temple with firecrackers, sacrifices, and joss papers to inform the village gods of her death and ask them to take care of her souls. Next, the procession and the body paused at the village's main gate (*paifang)*, where another firecracker was set off before leaving for the cremation. Remains of the burned firecrackers were almost immediately swept away by sanitation workers, leaving almost no trace.

After the cremation, the ashes were then carried to the hillside cemetery (Figure 5). Stairs flanked by young pine trees on both sides led people upward to the burial site—partially concreted terraces with a rectangular frame that were converted in 2015 from the village's lychee orchards. A red banner with a bold slogan stood out from the green, reminding people to refrain from using firecrackers and be thrifty and eco-friendly. On the terrace, between rows of lychee trees, the ashes were interred underground. The interment was accompanied by loud firecrackers and white joss paper thrown around the site. The bare soil was flattened once again and covered by a green mat to simulate vegetation as required by urban greening regulations. The families then offered sacrifices of rice, the deceased's favorite food, and liquor, worshipped with incense, and burned piles of joss paper in a pair of iron buckets.

While waiting for the procession's return, female relatives cleaned all the rooms and prepared sacred items to ward off "dirt." These included an enamel wash bowl (popular in the 1980s and 1990s) filled with water infused with pomelo leaves, along with a dozen needles threaded with a red string. Upon returning from the burial site, the procession was required to wash their hands with the fragrant pomelo water before entering the cleaned room. The *guahong* (literally attaching the red to clothing) with the prepared needle brooch was believed to bring good luck and longevity, symbolized by the metaphor of *congtou daowei* (from the beginning to the end) represented by the action of threading a needle. Once these rituals were complete, the family set up an altar with a framed photo of Granny Zhan, an incense burner, a pair of lamps, and a sacrifice for daily worship. From then on, Granny Zhan became a *xianren* (forebear). For the first 7 days, the family would visit the cemetery daily to renew the incense and add joss paper to allow the deceased's soul to rest without lingering and to comfort the living.

As a recent ancestor, Granny Zhan became one of the family's divine guardians, looking after the well-being of her family and descendants. While her physical body is now in the mountainside cemetery, her soul has been empowered with *lingli* through these rituals, granting her the ability to appear anywhere. She can remain in the house through spiritual objects

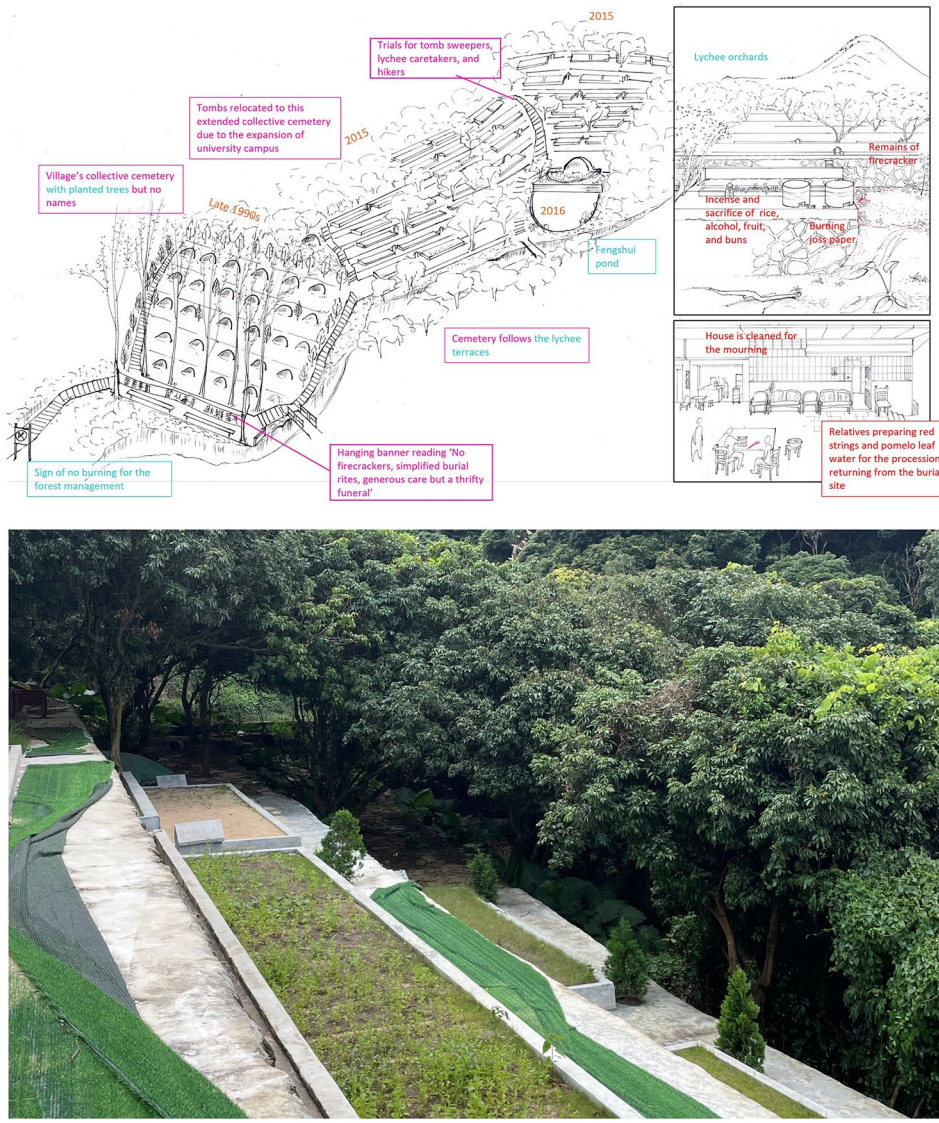

Figure 5. Village's Communal Urban Cemetery Built Since the Late 1990s and Extended in 2015 in a Modern Style on the Hillside.

and communicate with her family in various ways, such as through dreams. Her family members also approach her through daily worship at home and periodical visits to the hillside communal cemetery.

The cemetery, which is also lychee orchards and part of a park, fosters encounters with prayers, lychee caretakers, hikers, and forest rangers managing fire control, all in harmony with nature. In addition, a *tulu* (literally "soil trail"), an unpaved, winding path created by former villagers to walk between villages, connects these spaces. Lychee caretakers (villagers and hired migrants) regularly visit to perform necessary tasks such as pruning, insect control, and occasionally maintaining trails damaged by heavy rainfall. Descendants of the village make

seasonal visits to the cemetery, walking up the concrete stairs (constructed atop the soil trail) and praying on the concreted lychee terrace. Hikers explore various trails, marking newly discovered trails with red or other brightly colored bands tied to trees. Coming across cemeteries and some ancient tombs in the mountains would not be a surprise to these hikers, as they are part of the landscape and Chinese culture.

Concluding Discussion: Persistence of the Sacred and Accompanying Values

In the making and remaking of these sacred spaces, souls, represented as various ghost-gods with distinct functions, actively influence the daily gestures and practices of human bodies. They bestow material things, broadly including images, statues, shrine boxes, food, smell, and sound, with the power *lingli* to communicate with each individual and family as they desire. There is hardly any separation between bodies and souls in people's everyday life.

The presence of sacred landscapes is characterized by their dual nature as both enduring and temporary. The interdependent relationships between individual businesses and praying to *Caishen*, between villagers' homemaking and praying to divine guardians, between the village community and praying to ancestors, and between descendants and forebearers all contribute to the formation and perpetuation of sacred spaces alongside lived social spaces. Souls and spirits are invited and enshrined within carefully designed artifacts, placed in designated locations in a storefront, home, or the lychee orchard in the mountain park. As villagers' homes were transformed into mid-rise buildings, with courtyards shifting to balconies and rooftops, divine family guardians were also elevated. Even if they are not publicly visible, they are still important. Rather than merely adapting to social spaces, these presences actively define and shape the spatial order through their orientation and distance from the floor or main door. They are prayed to or worshipped every day through simple offerings of incense burning, lighting, and bowing, which are part of daily routines.

On the contrary, sacred spaces are often created informally through rituals that reappropriate public spaces. On important dates—such as the first and 15th of every lunar month, deities' birthdays, or traditional festivals—villagers and migrant residents briefly claim the space in front of their homes, which is usually pavement, alleys, or stairs, for ritual practices including burning joss papers, setting up sacrificial offerings, and lighting firecrackers. On funeral and burial days, the route from the deceased's house through the *Guanyin* temple and village *paifang* gate to the cremation and hillside cemetery is signified with intensified rites and mourning. While worshippers may use the same spaces regularly, their spatial transition is fleeting: Once the rituals conclude, spaces revert to their previous state, leaving few, if any, traces of their sacred uses (Jones, 2019).

Such sacred territory evokes an enchanted world with "infrasecular landscapes" (della Dora, 2018), dynamic, multilayered palimpsests where the sacred and profane spheres intertwine, and traditional thoughts and practices continuously negotiate with modern values, regulations, and initiatives. The resulting values rest on reimagining the spatiality of spirit (Bartolini et al., 2017) and the "plausible and relevant enchantment of the modern world" (Wilford, 2010, p. 335).

Reflecting on Lefebvre's bodies and his relevant analysis of everyday life and rhythm analysis, sacred practices contribute to a stable cyclical repetition that can balance with the linear repetition—the dominant temporality of modernity. The recurring acts of sacred-making create rhythms that align with natural cycles. The lunisolar calendar, used in the almanac *Tung Shing* by villagers, governs ritual practices and performances in rhythms that align with sunrise and sunset, the waxing and waning of the moon, and the seasons. At important dates, from the first and 15th of every lunar month to seasonal festivals such as *Qingming* and funerals, the fluid boundary between the human world and the spiritual world dissolved, and simultaneously,

emotions, affections, and symbolic representations are added to the linear time of contemporary life. In such a way, the intertwined cultural and natural meanings are produced.

Morality is produced, obeyed, and enforced by the simultaneous reflection of reverence and fear toward ghost-gods. It has led migrants to certain behaviors—keeping promises and being honest—that align with the Confucian classic *Doctrine of the Mean*, which have helped them build reliable personal relationships and served as essential livelihood strategies in an arrived city. The possible ambivalent results of blessings and punishments from the souls allowed the village to defend their communal temples regardless of their heritage value.

Furthermore, tension and negotiation with contemporary urban planning and design are unavoidable in the process of persistence (Guo & Herrmann-Pillath, 2023), and the resulting sacred landscapes are indeed hybrid, complex, frequently mixed-used, and more fluid (Burchardt et al., 2023). *Caishen* shrines share storefronts with a multitude of goods, supplies, or cooking apparatus; divine family guardians occupy elevated spaces in villagers' living rooms and courtyards; and the village's communal cemetery is hidden among the municipally designated mountain park, intersecting with lychee orchards and occasionally attracting adventurous hikers. Such landscapes stand in stark contrast to the designated, monofunctional land use regime.

Drawing further on the studied sacred landscapes to inform more sensitive and inclusive planning, this study proposes that sacred spaces should not be understood as static land use but as a dynamic landscape form. As such, these sacred landscapes can take on a structuring role alongside existing settlements, mountains, and agricultural landscapes, helping to redefine the urban framework. They give a spatial order that resonates with human behaviors, beyond merely addressing the functional needs of different users. Behaviors here constitute interactions or intersubjective relationships among human bodies, natural elements (e.g., topography, rivers, trees, and seasons), and immaterial spiritual presences. The ephemerality of such interactions in turn necessitates a meticulous reading of space from a human-decentred perspective. In addition, the persistence of sacred landscapes provides opportunities for ruderal spontaneous vegetation to recolonize the urban fabric. In sum, sacred landscapes should be considered as an "intermediate nature" (Corner & Tiberghien, 2009) that can function as landscape infrastructure that has the power to embody the bodily motions and connect both the enchanted and disenchanted worlds.

This study is an endeavor to unravel the omnipresence of tradition in spatial forms amid modernity, drawing extensively on fieldwork and theoretical reflection. A limitation lies in its direct replicability, due to the subjectivity inherent in ethnography, which is shaped by the observer's viewpoint and interpretation. Nevertheless, the methodological framework is thoroughly detailed to support its validity. It is also worth noting that the constantly evolving nature of urban spaces, influenced by technological advancements and socioeconomic shifts, may raise questions regarding the framework. Finally, the tension between sacred practices and contemporary urban regulations presents an important area for further investigation in future research.

Acknowledgement

I thank Roberto Rocco and Gregory Bracken for their gracious support; Filip de Boeck for advice on my second fieldwork; Minh Quang Nguyen for helpful feedback on an earlier version of this article; and two anonymous reviewers and editors for their professionalism and constructive comments. I am particularly grateful for the kindness and generosity of villagers, migrants, planners, the community work office, and everyone else I encountered in the field.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This work was funded by the Nuffic (CPI.21/00051).

Ethical Approval and Informed Consent Statements

The study design, as part of a doctoral research project, was approved by TU Delft Human Research Ethics Committee (approval n. 2627) on December 12, 2022. Informed consents were obtained.

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Data Availability Statement

The datasets generated during and/or analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Notes

1. Chaoshan, a region located in eastern Guangdong province, has a distinct identity characterized by its own language (Min Nan Teochew dialect) and rich cultural traditions. The region is particularly known for its vibrant rituals and mystical practices. Chaoshanese has become the dominant group among migrants in Pingshan village and the wider city.
2. When orienting a sacred space, "left" and "right" are used from the point of view of the enshrined god(s) and aligned with the orientation of the space, regardless of the human body's position. In classical Chinese thought, "left" is *yang* and "right" is *yin*.

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