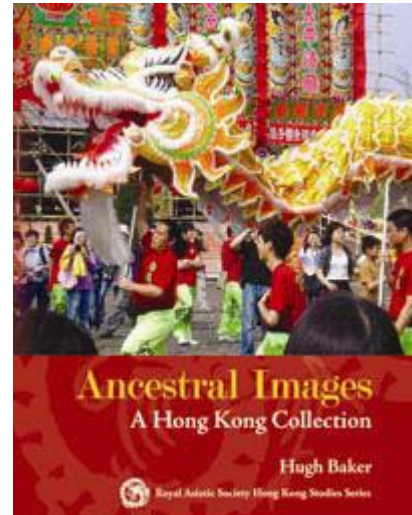


Book Reviews

***Ancestral Images: A Hong Kong Collection.* By Hugh Baker. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University, 2011. xiii + 390 pp. (hardback), ISBN 978-988-8083-09-1.**

Reviewed By Christopher CHENG¹

Ancestral Images emerges at a time when much of the recent works produced speak of the forces and effects of post-colonialism in Hong Kong and the city's reintegration with mainland China. Therefore, in this sense, it is refreshing in the studies of Hong Kong, at least, to read a different kind of book: one which is distinctly inherent to Hong Kong, although the city of Macau has also been mentioned here and there. Baker's work, however, is by no means new; it has been about half a century since the sinologist-anthropologist first set foot in Hong Kong and the then still rural-lying villages of the New Territories. This book is, in fact, an updated re-print of 120 short articles with photos that first appeared in print in the 1980s in three distinct volumes; though this time the articles are compiled into one complete hardbound volume.



In many ways, the new *Ancestral Images* is a much-welcomed addition and telling reminder of another way of life, experience and thinking that had once characterized Chinese peasant-farmers in Hong Kong. First, the richness of each excerpt, both in the author's vivid description, and the quality of data gathered, makes each of the three to four page essays an intriguing and stimulating read. These snippets cover a broad range of themes from the mundane every day such as Hakka (Chapter 65), Rice (Chapter 118) and Smoke (Chapter 57), to the ceremonies and rituals of Hong Kong, with topics including Pigs (Chapter 9), Nuns (Chapter 67), Ching Ming (Chapter 27) and Lanterns (Chapter 32), just to name a few. While some articles, such as the piece on Daai Si (Chapter 6), are more analytical, others such as those on Land (Chapter 1) and Funerals (Chapter 22) are purely descriptive and allegorical, explanatory, or are a combination of various writing styles. More importantly, each has a unique and different story to tell. The amount of time and effort that the author has invested in making sense of the fragments of ethnographic data, stories and imagery—and cross-referencing them against other well-read scholarly accounts on Hong Kong and its territories—is evident throughout.

Moreover, what Baker observed and learned from the stories that he collected during the time of his fieldwork, mainly in the 1960s and 1970s, would have faded into complete obscurity if it was not for his detailed records reproduced in this book, both in

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writing and in the colorful photography. In some cases the stories portrayed have become part of a vanished tradition, a forgotten past, and an imagined history. *Ancestral Images* is, hence, a clear reminder that the anthropology of the here and the now continues to serve an important purpose in tomorrow's local social-cultural history. Many of the stories, myths, legends and folk-tales are told, re-told, and interpreted to convey the pious ways and values of the Chinese peasants, which have not only intrigued foreign scholars, who, in the same way as Baker, came to Hong Kong to study when the Chinese border was still strictly sanctioned, but also undoubtedly continue to be of interest to anybody with an inclination towards Chinese customs, culture and semiotics today. Some of Baker's revelations demystify the less-understood facets of Chinese social life, while other articles leave the reader bewildered. Overall, however, the effect is that after each chapter, the reader will never think about the supernatural, lifeways, beliefs and customs particular to the Chinese in the same way as before.

This book, however, is also somewhat misleading in some ways. When I first picked it up, I was expecting to see paintings of ancestor-like figures; the title, *Ancestral Images*, conjured certain expectations in my mind. Further, as I began to read the contents, I was not only surprised to see that it was not what I had expected, but wondered how the contents were associated with ancestors at all. Given Baker's initial study on, and preoccupation with, the Chinese village and lineage in Sheung Shui, it is understandable how he may have drawn a connection between his present work and the ancestors. In a Chinese lineage, ancestral beings are central images in the everyday lives of villagers, both in a real and in a symbolic sense, but I also wonder if this single phenomenon of ancestors really applies to all that is described in the book. Given the large volume of data and topics covered, this book could also be better organized. Each chapter appears as a stand-alone theme, and thus the lack of logic in the organization of the various chapters detracts from the book's flow and overall coherence. Chapters 100-102, for example, cover themes ranging from Hundred Surnames, to Vegetables and Talismans respectively. Thus, it is not surprising to read in the author's preface that these were originally written as separate pieces for a newspaper and were not planned to be read together. Given that the book is only loosely focused around the central theme of ancestral images, a more fitting title to the odd selection of annotated photographs would be along the lines of "From My Album: Photos From the Field" (see Preface, p.xi).

Besides these few minor issues, *Ancestral Images* is a rewarding read. For the student of fieldwork, this book also offers an alternative approach to the traditional ethnographic monograph, adding to the repertoire of possible methods by which to convert a minefield of scattered and loose threads of valuable field data into rich, discrete and informative excerpts. Published in English with supplementary Chinese text (Chinese characters and Cantonese pronunciations), it is particularly helpful to its foreign non-Chinese readers who wish to quickly familiarize themselves with culturally specific concepts and a way of life that cannot readily be translated or understood at first sight. *Ancestral Images* will certainly appeal to anybody, not only to students of history, anthropology, Hong Kong studies or Chinese culture.