



The Science of Feng Shui

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Introduction

Feng Shui, in Chinese “wind and water” but more formally termed “Kan Yu,” is the ancient Chinese principles and practices which for thousands of years have been the cornerstone of the Chinese built environment. It has also become one of the most popular subjects in the modern world. There are more than ten thousand websites related to this discipline and many Feng Shui topics have been covered in books, magazines and different media. For instance, Sarah Rossbach published her book *Interior Design with Feng Shui* in 1987, which brought Feng Shui immediately into interior design circles, and its popularity has grown ever since in America. In 1996, Lillian Too’s *Complete Illustrated Guide to Feng Shui* was the first international best seller on this subject. The magazine, *Feng Shui for Modern Living*, edited by Stephen Skinner, first published in 1998, tried to bridge the gap between popular and serious Chinese Feng Shui by including a mixture of “soft interior decorating Feng Shui” together with traditional technical articles.

Although Feng Shui is built on ancient Chinese philosophy, it has always been treated as a branch of metaphysics, being viewed by most people as something superstitious. This is because there are so many different schools and techniques of Feng Shui. In the past, different Feng Shui Masters specialized in

one or more schools while they normally ignored or rejected those not in their own school or not taught by their teachers. Nowadays, Feng Shui Masters usually combine techniques of different schools, but they normally apply one single technique to one specific scenario instead of comparing the effectiveness of different techniques on the same case. It is then difficult to judge or verify which technique is right and which is wrong. Very often, masters still tend to criticize masters of other schools for using techniques considered not applicable or even fake.

Scientific Feng Shui

What are the similarities between the philosophical backgrounds of East and West? Since the emergence of the new scientific paradigm and the beginning of Westerners accepting the view of Eastern philosophy, scientists have found that all known theories of natural science could never fully explain the whole realm of natural phenomena and have begun to recognize the interdependency and holistic nature of the world. Since the 1970s, Western scientists’ perceptions have shifted to accept the development of a new complexity paradigm and acknowledge that there are similarities between modern science and Eastern philosophy. Westerners sought a deeper understanding of the relationship between the human and natural environments, and that is Feng Shui from the Chinese perspective. Scientific methods are objective ways and systems



of gaining, organizing, analyzing, summarizing and keeping data or information in the form of knowledge that can be passed down through history. There are stringent requirements for such methods and for different schools to practice them. Without any approach in terms of scientific methods, the study would easily fall prey to superstition. When studying Feng Shui, one should always bear in mind the essence of science, and ever keep an open mind to analyze any rules or theories pertaining to different schools, to criticize, to evaluate and not to blindly believe in anything.

term “Scientific Feng Shui” was first introduced in the International Symposium on Scientific Feng Shui and Built Environment conducted at City University of Hong Kong in 2005 by the author and Dr. Michael Mak, co-author of several books on Feng Shui. To us, Feng Shui still cannot be classified as a school of science but it can be studied scientifically in a logical way. Scientific research in Feng Shui can be classified into two different categories:

- (a) The verification of Feng Shui principles experimentally
- (b) The study of Feng Shui logically and consistently in a scientific way

To be simple, Feng Shui aims at creating a harmonized environment for people to live in.

The similar Western approach of Feng Shui in ancient times may be termed “Geomancy” which is mainly divination based on configurations seen in a handful of earth thrown on the ground. According to Professor Stephan Feuchtwang’s early publication *An anthropological analysis of Chinese Geomancy* in 1974, the primitive knowledge of Feng Shui was based on the observation from three sources: astronomical phenomena, natural phenomena on Earth and human behavior, revealing that Feng Shui is much more than Geomancy. The foundation of Chinese Feng Shui is rooted in the greatest Chinese philosophical document *Yi Jing (The Book of Changes)* that was compiled around 800 BCE. Feuchtwang’s famous elaboration stated that “To be in the right place facing the right direction doing the right thing at the right time is, then, a cross between being practically efficient and being ritually correct. It is being in tune with the universe.” To be simple, Feng Shui aims at creating a harmonized environment for people to live in and it represents a traditional Chinese architectural theory for selecting favorable sites as well as designing cities and buildings.

In the early 1970s, research on Feng Shui was initiated in the Western world and it has become popular with accelerating momentum since the 1990s. The

Approach (a) seems to be more demanding and difficult while approach (b) could be the convenient tool at present. For example, a number of investigations were conducted on the scientific applications of Feng Shui knowledge for the built environment, such as the establishment of a Feng Shui framework for the complexity in design, and the application to preliminary building design evaluation using a knowledge-based expert system approach. Readers may start to learn the two main categories of Feng Shui, namely the Form School and the Compass School and then dive into detailed research.

The Form School

The Form School deals with the landscape, distribution of mountain ridges and water flow. The fundamental principle of the Form School concerns the physical form of the building site under consideration and its surrounding environment to identify the subtle flow of Qi, a kind of holistic energy that governs the whole universe, as believed by ancient Chinese. In modern days, Qi is also called “Force” or “Unknown Energy.” It is one mission of modern Feng Shui researchers to find out what Qi is, detect and trace it. It seems that aura may be one form of Qi as emitted by the human body. The practice of the Form



School first observes the land formation and terrain, based on which the location and orientation of cities and buildings are determined.

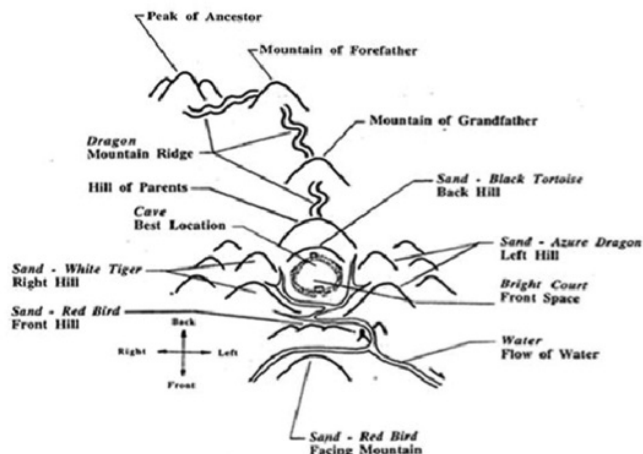


Figure 1 Ideal Form School Model

The ideal Form School model is shown in Figure 1 where the five geographical secrets are depicted:

1. "Dragon" refers to the mountain ridges behind the Feng Shui spot, the taller and longer the better, preferably in the north for buildings in the northern hemisphere.
2. "Sand" refers to the short hills to the left, called Azure (actually green in Chinese) Dragon and to the right, called White Tiger.
3. "Water" refers to streams or rivers flowing by the side and in front of the Feng Shui spot, straight being inauspicious and wavy being favorable.
4. "Cave" refers to the exact Feng Shui spot where the tomb sits or the building is built.
5. "Direction" refers to what exists along the facing direction, preferably a flat piece of land called Bright Court, farther off a short hill called Table Hill and a slightly taller hill far away, called Facing Mountain.

As a matter of fact, great graveyards of emperors centuries ago, shown in Figure 2(a) and typical courtyard houses in Beijing, China, shown in Figure 2(b), both complied with this theory of the Form School. In

Hong Kong, lots of existing heritage houses were built according to the Form School model.

Qing Dong Tombs 清東陵

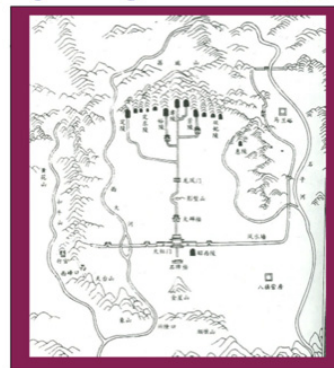


Figure 2(a) Emperor's Cemetery

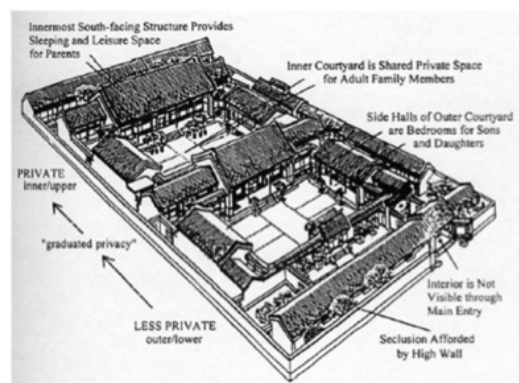


Figure 2(b) Courtyard in Beijing

The Compass School

The Compass School focuses on the study of directions and time. Several ancient texts, including the He Tu (Diagram of the Dragon) shown in Figure 3(a), Luo Shu (Drawing of the Tortoise) shown in Figure 3(b), and Yi Jing as well as other Daoist scriptures, together shed useful light on the formation and development of the Compass School. Luo Shu could be shown in the form of a magic square or even a matrix, as shown in Figure 3(c).

Coincidentally, the veneration of numbers was not a unique characteristic of ancient Chinese philosophy and metaphysics; similar practices and beliefs were held in the West during the same historical period, called the philosophy and mathematics of

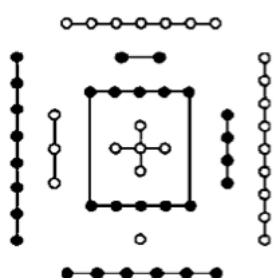


Fig 3(a) He Tu

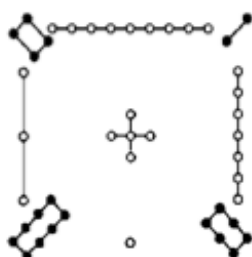


Fig 3(b) Luo Shu

4=I	9=E	2=G
3=H	5=A	7=C
8=D	1=F	6=B

Fig 3(c) Luo Shu as a Magic Square

Pythagoras. The Pythagoreans reduced all higher numbers to the original ten numerals by successively adding the digits together until a single digit was reached. It is a surprising coincidence between the two cultural schools of thought at almost the same period of time at around 500 BCE. Recently, "Vortex-based Mathematics" developed in the United States also claims that all higher mathematics can be reduced to discrete-number mathematics.

The Luo Shu is the foundation of several major schools of Compass Feng Shui, in particular, the Flying Stars Method, Eight Mansion Method and Qi Men Dun Jia. Reference is made to Figure 3(c) again. If alphabet letters are used to replace the numbers, readers can easily see the path trajectory from position "A" to "B" to "C" and finally to "I." The original Luo Shu put A=5. However, it was invented by ancient Chinese that all the remaining eight numbers, from 1 to 4 and from 6 to 9 could be placed at position "A" as well. Once a number at position "A" is fixed, others numbers can sequentially and cyclically be placed in other positions, or called cells or palaces, until 9 is reached and then 1 is the next number. This is called forward flying. It is also possible to use the sequence from A=5 to B=4 to C=3 until I=6. This is called backward flying. Eventually, there could be nine charts for forward flying by putting each one of the nine numbers at position "A" and another nine charts for backward flying


by putting each one of the nine numbers at position "A," totaling 18 charts.

Compass School Feng Shui Masters have made use of these 18 charts to locate the orientation of Qi based on the Flying Stars Method and to give comments on a building in general as well as the nine compartments of the building, namely south, southwest, west, northwest, north, northeast, east, southeast and the center. The method of Qi Men Dun Jia sometimes even extends the 18 charts to 36 charts. Recently, Feng Shui Masters in Australia discovered that the Luo Shu should be turned upside down for use in the southern hemisphere, thus resulting in up to 36 more charts. Finally, readers are reminded that ancient Chinese put south on top and north on the bottom, i.e. position "E" for south and position "F" for north on the Magic Square chart.

Conclusion

Feng Shui has been practiced by Chinese for at least 2,500 years, of course, with evolutions from dynasties to dynasties. It is sometimes easier to correlate rules of the Form School with rules of environmental science or architecture. For example, people should dwell on the concave bank of a river but not on the convex bank or it is inauspicious to face two tall buildings with a very narrow gap between them. However, rules of the Compass School seem to be more mystical and more research has to be conducted to unveil its truth. The author of this article is working with others to build up a modern mathematical platform to study and apply Luo Shu. It is hoped that with such a platform, practicing the Compass School could be more scientific and logical in the near future. One point clear enough is that ancient Chinese believed that humankind must live in harmony with nature and nature is cherished by Qi. It is a mission of top priority that anyone practicing Feng Shui should identify the flow of Qi and manipulate it for the betterment of our lives. The author agrees that quite a substantial part of Feng Shui rules has been polluted by superstitious concepts and researchers must develop something scientific enough to easily verify genuine rules and discard superstitious rules.



Readers who are interested in this study may find the three books written by the author beneficial. 

1. Mak, Michael Y. & So, Albert T. (2009). *Research in Scientific Feng Shui and the Built Environment*. Hong Kong: City University of Hong Kong Press.
2. Mak, Michael Y. & So, Albert T. (2011). *Scientific Feng Shui for the Built Environment—Fundamentals and Case Studies*. Hong Kong: City University of Hong Kong Press.
3. Mak, Michael Y. & So, Albert T. (2015). *Scientific Feng Shui for the Built Environment—Theories and Applications (Enhanced New Edition)*. Hong Kong: City University of Hong Kong Press.



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