

The Truth about Chinese Fengshui

This will not be a standard exposé. I do not seek to discredit a movement or any particular proponent of a movement. Instead, as a scholar of ancient China who has studied the origin and development of Chinese fengshui, I feel it is my duty to educate rather than excoriate. There is so much misinformation being supplied to the public by uninformed individuals that someone needs to step forward and set the record straight. I will try in this essay to correct the errors and clarify the misunderstanding.

So what exactly is fengshui? Is it an art or a science? Is it a religion or a philosophy? In order to answer these questions, we will need to look more closely at the practice of fengshui. Complicating our task is the fact that there is more than one kind of fengshui, and more than one purpose for conducting fengshui readings. For our purposes, I will accept the common generalization that there are two major schools of fengshui--the Form School, where the physical aspects of the landscape are the focus, and the Compass School, where the astrological or cosmological orientation of the site is the focus of examination. The earliest texts on the subject of fengshui deal almost exclusively with the geophysical environment, and that is how I shall begin the analysis.



Let me begin the discussion of the external environment of fengshui by invoking the image of the dragon. From a Western perspective we can say that the dragon is a metaphor that represents the lay of the land. We name our landforms in a similar fashion. So, near the town of Wimberly, Texas, is a feature called the Devil's Backbone. However, for the Chinese, describing a topographical feature as a dragon is not simply descriptive of its profile against the horizon. The physical environment is perceived to be a living entity, and the external resemblance is a manifestation of the internal life. Therefore, in traditional China the physical environment is perceived to be a real dragon, and the ultimate purpose of fengshui is to locate the cave or lair of the dragon.

The earliest Chinese text to discuss the physical environment of fengshui is the *Book of Burial*, written in the 4th century AD. It discusses the placement of tombs rather than residences, but the procedures for

locating both were basically the same. Let's see how the *Book of Burial* describes the dragon:

Arteries spring from low land terrain; bones spring from mountain terrain. They wind sinuously from east to west and from south to north. Thousands of feet high is called forces; hundreds of feet high is called features. Forces advance and finish in features. ... Where forces cease and features soar high, with a stream in front and a hill behind, here hides the head of the dragon. ... Where terrain winds about and collects at the center, this is called the belly of the dragon.

This is the geophysical character of the dragon, but there is also a very important meteorological element in the physical description of the site. The following passage from the *Book of Burial* is the first time in recorded history that the term *fengshui* is used:

Qi rides the wind (*feng*) and scatters, but is retained when encountering water (*shui*). The ancients collected it to prevent its dissipation, and guided it to assure its retention. Thus it was called *fengshui*. According to the laws of fengshui, the site that attracts water is optimal, followed by the site that catches wind.

As we can see here, fengshui does not mean "the way of wind and water." Instead, wind and water are means by which qi is controlled. Wind scatters qi, so we should block its ingress. Water collects qi, so we should encourage its presence. This will ensure that sufficient qi surrounds the tomb or house. A proper translation of fengshui therefore is "(hinder the) wind (and hoard the) water."

So what is qi? One of the earliest descriptions of qi, appearing in a 4th century BC text, reads as follows:

Water is the root of all things and the source of all life.... Water is the blood and breath [*qi*] of the earth, functioning in similar fashion to the circulation of blood and breath in the sinews and veins.
Guanzi, ch. 39.

Here, qi is breath, and water is the blood and breath of the earth. The *Book of Burial* elaborates: "Where the ground holds auspicious qi, the earth conforms and rises. When ridges hold accumulated qi, water conforms and accompanies them." Ridges in this passage is a physiological term referring to the arterial branches or vessels of the dragon veins. Where water flows on the surface, qi flows beneath the surface. When the flow of qi is discovered, then we must look for the location where that flow slows down and pools or accumulates. The *Book of Burial* clarifies in this fashion:

Where the earth takes shape, qi flows accordingly; thereby things

are born. For qi courses within the ground, its flow follows the contour of the ground, and its accumulation results from the halt of terrain.

This pooling or concentration of qi is an ancient concept that also began as an explanation of human physiology. The following passage is from a 4th century BC Daoist book of philosophy called the *Zhuangzi* (ch. 22): "Man's life is the assembling of qi. The assembling is deemed birth; the dispersal is deemed death." Which of course is why a pool of qi is advantageous for the lair. According to the *Book of Burial*: "Life is accumulated qi. It solidifies into bone, which alone remains after death. Burial returns qi to the bones, which is how the living are endowed." Somehow the pooling of qi around the interred bones affects the lives of the descendants of the deceased. This final passage reveals the metaphysical aspect of qi--its ability to enhance the lives of people in its proximity.

The process whereby the bones are energized is called "mutual resonance." According to a 2nd century BC text:

All things are the same as their qi; all things respond to their own class. ... Things within the same class mutually move each other; root and twig mutually respond to each other. *Huainanzi*, chs. 3, 4

The standard proof of mutual resonance given by the ancient philosophers is this: if a string on one lute is plucked, the same string on a nearby lute will simultaneously vibrate. It follows, then, that the qi of the interred corpse and the qi of the living descendants are identical. Therefore, when the vital, life-giving qi of the burial site surrounds the bones, they are energized like a dead battery being recharged, and the lives of the descendants are thereby endowed. We might be tempted to speculate that it is the spirit of the deceased that consciously bestows rewards or punishments, based on the ability of the living to properly orient the tombs of the dead. But this is not the case. Ancestor worship is directed mainly toward the patriarch, while fengshui is not so sexist! Even if grandma's spirit was not worshiped, it was still important to properly orient her tomb.

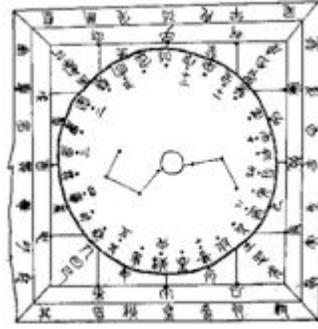
When we realize that the unplucked lute string vibrates because it is tuned to the sound waves produced by the plucked string, we may speculate that fengshui is a science, and qi some type of energy wave. Another analogy may prove helpful here. The Chinese believe that qi flows through meridians within the human body just like it flows within ridges and branches in the earth. The acupuncture point on the human body is also called a cave or lair, so we can say that the mountain lair is simply the acupuncture point on the earth. When the grave is excavated or the foundation of the house is dug, the geophysical meridians are tapped just like those reached by the acupuncture needle in the human

body. Acupuncture has been proven to work, although scientists have not been able to discover how. In other words, science has yet to prove the existence of a qi force flowing in the human body.

What about a qi force flowing in the body of earth? Certainly there are forces at work within the earth that cannot be seen or consciously felt by humans--especially magnetic fields. Certain creatures do have an affinity for magnetic waves--dolphins, whales, sea turtles, and homing pigeons all have magnetite in their brains that gives them a magnetic sense of direction. It is possible that humans are influenced on some level by magnetism. Is it possible that an electromagnetic radiation of some kind is the focus of fengshui? The compass was invented by the Chinese specifically to assist in the reading of terrestrial fengshui. So it appears that the Chinese knew early on that the unseen force called qi was electromagnetic in character. Unfortunately, modern science has been unable to determine the influence of such waves on the well being of humans. If qi could be proven to exist, or if magnetic fields could be proven to influence human life, then fengshui might be considered an environmental science.

The subject of direction is a convenient segue to the discussion of Compass School fengshui. As we have seen in the *Book of Burial*, mountainous landscape is the optimum environment in which to trace the flow of qi. But not all landscape is mountainous, so there had to be a way to detect qi when the topographical forms and features did not protrude sufficiently to locate the hidden dragon veins. The Chinese believed that the realms of heaven, earth, and man were infinitely correlated. So the qi of any given locale or any given person on earth was capable of being read in the stars.

In ancient China there was no distinction between astronomy and astrology, because the stars in the night sky were celestial deities. Those with an understanding of the movement of stars therefore gained an understanding of the will of heavenly spirits. This was crucial information for the emperor, who was the center of the human realm as was Shang Di, or God on High, the center of the heavenly realm. Shang Di's celestial throne was the Big Dipper, around which all other stars revolved. The handle of the Dipper was the sword of God, which was capable of dealing death and destruction in the direction to which it pointed. The Chinese accordingly created an instrument that was capable of determining the configuration of the Big Dipper in the sky at any time of day or night. This was the *shipan*, or cosmograph, pictured here:



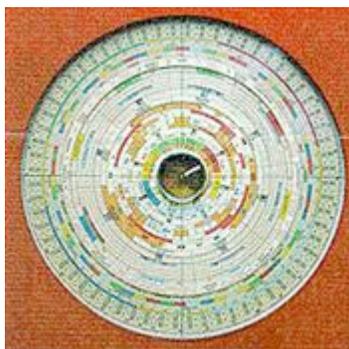
The instrument consists of a square fixed earth plate on bottom and a rotating heaven disc on top. Around the circumference of both plate and disc are arranged the names of the 28 constellations of the Chinese zodiac. In the center of the dial is a representation of the Big Dipper. The function of the instrument is similar to a planisphere--which allows the user to locate any star or constellation in the sky at any moment of the year, except that it is only the stars of the zodiac and the Big Dipper that are represented on the cosmograph.

While the Big Dipper in the center of the heaven plate is clearly the focus of the instrument, each of the four sides of the earth plate is marked with one of four greater constellations, each made of seven of the lesser constellations. There is the Green Dragon (composed of the Horn, the Neck, the Heart, and the Tail, for example), the Red Bird (composed of the Beak, the Gullet, the Crop, and the Wings, for example), the White Tiger, and the Dark Turtle.

So what does the cosmograph have to do with fengshui? A passage from the *Book of Burial* reads as follows:

The Dark Turtle hangs its head,
 The Red Bird hovers in dance,
 The Green Dragon coils sinuously,
 The White Tiger crouches down.

In the period of time between the invention of the cosmograph and the writing of the *Book of Burial*, a space of some six or seven centuries, the celestial deities came down to earth. The deities now represent topographical formations surrounding the lair or tomb site--the coiled dragon toward the east, the crouching tiger toward the west, the hovering bird in the south, and hanging turtle in the north. The Big Dipper on the cosmograph transformed into the needle of the magnetic compass as the *shipan* evolved into the *luopan*, or fengshui compass. The *luopan*, illustrated below, is the standard tool of the fengshui master.



How is the *luopan* used to determine the fengshui of a particular site? In the most popular type of Compass School fengshui--called Nine Star after the stars of the Big Dipper--the cardinal directions of the square, its four corners, and the center are all assigned characteristics based on Chinese correlative cosmology. The Chinese are masters of correlations based on the microcosm of man and the macrocosm of heaven and earth. For example, there is the two-term system *yin* and *yang*, the four-term system of cardinal directions and seasons, the five-term system of the Five Elements or Phases--wood, fire, earth, metal, and water, and so on. Each ring of the *luopan* represents one or more of these correlative systems. When a particular location is oriented by means of the compass, its various elevations could then be correlated according to any number of factors.

While correlative cosmology can be quite complicated, one of the correlative systems--the Five Elements--is the basis of fengshui as practiced in the U.S. According to this philosophical concept, qi naturally progresses through five different phases as time progresses. Furthermore, each year has a particular elemental character. So, based on year of birth, every individual has his or her own characteristic element. Two primary systems of phase shift are as follows:

Production Order	Destruction Order
Earth harbors Metal	Earth dams Water
Metal condenses Water	Water quenches Fire
Water nourishes Wood	Fire smelts Metal
Wood feeds Fire	Metal cuts Wood
Fire burns to Earth	Wood plows Earth

According to fengshui, any process that can be considered generative or productive will produce good fortune. Destructive processes, on the other hand, produce bad luck. For example, a person born under the element of metal would not want to live in a house facing the direction south, because south belongs to the element fire, and fire melts metal in the destruction order of the elements. A good direction for this person's house

to face would be southwest, because southwest belongs to the element earth, which harbors ores, thus producing metal.

Compass School fengshui makes use of many philosophical concepts, most notably Five Elements theory. But for fengshui to be considered a legitimate philosophy, then its component theories would need to be universal and comprehensive. While the phase shift orders of the five elements are fascinating explanations of phenomenal change, they have no basis in scientific fact.

Thus far we have determined that fengshui cannot be considered a science unless qi can be proven to exist. It is not a religion because qi is not a spirit. And it is not a philosophy because its component theories have no basis in fact. That only leaves one possibility. Fengshui is an art, and its individual practice is a work of art. From the vantage of an aesthetic worldview we do not have to judge the reality of a phenomenon in order to derive gain from it. It is not principles of rational order that should solely determine the value of our vision, but the capacity of our vision to satisfy our responsibility for ethical order. It doesn't really matter if the dragon is a living, breathing creature draped with the features of the landscape, or just a fanciful image. It doesn't matter if qi is spirit or electromagnetic energy or "psychophysiological" breath. The mere perception of an integrated system functioning in our environment according to the aesthetic principles of fengshui is enough to satisfy the mind of the perceiver. And such pleasure is its own reward.

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