

# *Fengshui*, or the Search for a Very Human Dragon

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Like acupuncture, some signs of the Zodiac and three or four dishes, *fengshui* is now part of the collection of rare practices and skills that has emerged from China and been reworked in the local style. Everyone, or almost everyone, living in the West today has heard of it. In a word it has been, so to speak, 'globalized'. This appearance in the daily life of hundreds of millions of people of a few fragments of Chinese material and intellectual culture touches some essential points, as we can see: the body and health, 'fate', food and, as far as *fengshui* is concerned, the influence landscapes and architecture have on the lives of human beings. This phenomenon can be received and understood in many ways, from scientific and sectarian rejection to amused mockery or multiculturalistic enthusiasm. Nevertheless, people are now treated with needles in Paris, Berlin and New York, and at dinner parties you can hear anecdotes in which people's distress or success are discussed with reference to *yin* and *yang*. Here I would like to describe succinctly what is known about *fengshui* as it existed and still exists in China, and to examine how it saw and talked about nature.

## The history of *fengshui*

*Fengshui* is based on a number of complex connected ideas from cosmology, the philosophy of nature, astrology and astronomy concerning the general organization of the universe and the possibility that organization has of influencing human lives. It is mainly concerned with finding the best possible arrangement in space and somehow in time to position a grave – the residence of the dead – or a habitation – the residence of the living – in such a way that human beings who have a link with that place (descendants of the buried ancestors or those living in the house) might have success and happiness. The basic idea is that a good geomantic site will fill the distant ancestors with peace in their grave and that they will thus do everything to help their family; houses or towns existing by their good influence bring a happy life

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to their inhabitants, who, on the other hand, will suffer nothing but misfortune and poverty if the architecture does not obey the correct rules. It is understandable that legal cases associated with *fengshui* have been frequent throughout Chinese history, since it is a matter of life and death. These are the principles; all that remains is to put them into practice.

If we wish to attempt to grasp the historical development of Chinese geomancy,<sup>1</sup> we have to remember three points. First, there has come down to us only a tiny portion of the treatises setting out the theory and practice of the divinatory art, and this may be more true for writings from the late empire and the republic (19th–20th century), which were mercilessly destroyed in recent times (Cultural Revolution) as expressions of the ‘superstitions’ of a hated society. Second, it would be illusory to think *fengshui* evolved in a linear and homogeneous manner to form a perfectly coherent system, regardless of location in China, since geographical variations are significant. Finally, the art of the geomancer, who was not always highly literate, is based on skill at spinning an oral discourse, which by definition eludes written description. In this sense we must bear in mind that, even more than in the case of medicine, we cannot deduce the reality of the practices associated with *fengshui* from reading specialized texts, and that in addition we must always try to situate those practices in the social and intellectual context concerned, which is rarely simple, given the elliptical nature of many Chinese documents.

In ancient times, though it was very likely that the art of geomancy was still only at the teething stage, the term *dili* (today ‘geography’), which literally means ‘the earth’s lineaments’, or ‘the earth’s principles’, was the name for a divinatory practice based on observing the earth’s relief. Along the same lines, the category ‘models of form’ referred to writings dealing with the appearance of towns, houses, people (physiognomy), animals (for instance there are texts about horses) or certain objects. Scrutiny and interpretation of these forms supplied the seer with information so as to decide whether certain projects (like war or marriage) were justified or at least to determine the appropriate time to carry out a private or public task. Another category of divination concerning this choice of the ‘right moment’ was called *kanyu* (two terms meaning ‘canopy’ and ‘chariot’, which by analogy indicated heavens and earth). It was under this name that much later, in the 18th century, texts on geomancy were collected together in the great encyclopedia *The Sum of Books and Figures from Past and Present* (*Gujin tushu jicheng*).

Turning to the word *fengshui*, which is most commonly used today to indicate geomancy and is the best-known term outside the Chinese world, the two characters *feng* and *shui* signify ‘wind and water’, thus referring to two natural elements that were extremely important in the history of China, concretely as well as intellectually and symbolically. The wind occupied a prominent place in Chinese antiquity, especially in a divinatory and ritual context. Indeed it was the object of rites from the Shang dynasty (18th–11th century), where it appeared both as a nourishing divinity connected with cereals and as the messenger carrying the words of the emperor of the heavens. Later, during antiquity, one of the main ways of consulting the oracle was to observe the winds coming from the eight easts and make forecasts related to the difference between the ‘normal’ direction at a specific moment and the one noted. The philosopher Wang Chong (27–97) reported, in the following passage from

his *Words Weighed in the Balance (Lunheng)*, the day-to-day consequences of this kind of practice:

Those who predict wealth or poverty using the winds think the wind that has passed over the residences of kings and ministers brings wealth, the one that comes from the regions of prisoners and death brings poverty . . . When the wind arrives, those who buy grain raise or lower the prices, so extraordinary is the influence of the heavenly breath (*qi*) on people and things.

In this text we should note the mention of an idea that is particularly central in the conception of the world gradually built up during Chinese antiquity, the idea of *qi*; it has been demonstrated that its development was made possible by, among other things, a conceptual shift from the notion of wind. As we know, this protean concept of *qi* is difficult to grasp; one of the few definitions we have of it mentions the steam given off by a plate of cereal while being cooked (according to the first dictionary of Chinese characters compiled, Xu Shen's *Shuowen jiezi*, completed in AD 100). However, without getting into details, we can think of it as being a sort of general substrate for life (hence the translations that are often suggested, 'breath' or 'energy'), an element common to all beings, all things in the universe:

The human being is born of a condensation of *qi*. It is the *qi* that produces life as it condenses and the same *qi* that brings death as it disperses.<sup>2</sup>

What we should remember here is that from Chinese antiquity the existence of this *qi*, which can be qualified (for instance there is a life-giving *qi* and a deadly *qi*), enabled specialists in cosmology, the calendar, divination or medical arts to conceive of the universe as a great organism in which all the elements are linked one to the other, continually interact one with another, and may be grouped together within a vast and complex system of correspondences.<sup>3</sup>

The other character in the word *fengshui* is water, which played such a large part throughout the whole history of China, both from a mythological viewpoint and in an extremely concrete way. Indeed the Chinese people had constantly to tame an element that occasionally proved devastating (think of the floods that were often so deadly) but which, on the other hand, was the mainspring of the economy once it had been controlled by irrigation networks or a system of canals. There is no doubt that, in often violent natural conditions, the image of water as a benefactor, flowing through the country (or, turned into blood, in the human body) was highly valued.

### The geomancer at work

It was particularly from the Tang (618–907) and even more so the Song dynasty (960–1279) that *fengshui* became important in Chinese society. The geomancer (more often than not 'the possessor of recipes', a sort of wise man who had quite a lowly social status), in order to determine the right position for a grave or habitation, had several methods at his disposal according to the school to which he belonged:

One is called the ancestral temple method. It arose in Fujian, and its origins are very far off. It became popular under the Song, thanks to Wang Ji. This school is mainly based on the planets, the trigrams, the fact that a *yang* mountain must have a *yang* direction and a *yin* mountain a *yin* direction, so that there is no opposition; it relies solely on the eight trigrams and the five planets to determine the principles for producing and conquering [the five elements]. This doctrine is still passed on to the Zhejiang, but those who use it are few. The other approach is called the Jiangxi method. It began with Yang Yunsong and Zeng Wendi from Ganzhou, and was developed by Lai Dayou and Xie Ziyi. This school attaches most importance to the shapes of the ground and their potential; it determines positions and orientations from the rises and edges [of configurations]. It is interested solely in the arrangement of dragons, caves, sandbanks and waters, and ignores the rest. Today this method is adopted by everybody south of the Yangtze.<sup>4</sup>

In fact geomancers, who were pragmatic people, had no compunction in employing a syncretic mixture of both methods and both schools: they used the compass characteristic of the Fujian school as well as surveying the shape of the land in order to determine its auspicious and inauspicious aspects, which belonged to the Jiangxi school (the school of forms).

### The compass

Various astro-calendar instruments were used during Chinese antiquity, some of which are the direct ancestors of the geomancers' compass (*luopan*). This is especially true of the *shi* divination table, which was made up of two wooden parts covered with black lacquer, one of them square and symbolizing the earth, and the other circular and able to turn on itself, symbolizing the heavens. On these two elements were represented various astronomical items with 12 numbers corresponding to the 12 months of the civil year, 28 equatorial divisions used to calculate the positions in the heavens or, in the centre of the table-sky, the seven stars of the Great Chariot of the Great Bear constellation (in Chinese *beidou*, the Northern Bushel). In a slightly different instrument, instead of this representation there was a magnetic spoon that turned to point its handle to the south, which makes this arrangement the direct forerunner of the compass used by geomancers, then, in a slightly different version, by sailors (from the late 13th century).

The geomancers' compass was as follows: placed on a square base (the earth table), it took the shape of a wooden disc whose bottom was concave and whose upper part – lacquered yellow – had in its centre a rounded hollow (the celestial bowl) containing, mounted on an axis, a little magnetic needle giving the north-south direction. Around the needle there were, in black and red and variable numbers (from 10 to more than 30), concentric circles on which were inscribed, in an order that was not immutable and in various combinations, symbols peculiar to Chinese cosmological thought: the eight trigrams from the *Book of Changes (I-ching)*, markers of time and space (earthly branches and heavenly trunks), some of which were auspicious and others inauspicious, the five elements (wood, fire, earth, metal and water), the 24 directions, etc.

Clearly the presentation of the use of this compass by that master of space and

time, the geomancer, who ordained fortune or misfortune, had to be carried out with all the solemnity appropriate to ritual acts. Having lined up the compass needle on the red mark on the first circle, the *fengshui* master began to analyse the site or habitation he had to assess, focusing on the elements he saw as significant. For this he used a red thread held taut by two weights, which he passed through the centre of the compass. Of course the whole art of the specialist lay in the interpretation of the data that could be read on the instrument, which were very complex, because there were many and they were superimposed on one another.

### The school of forms

The other great movement in Chinese geomancy, the school of forms, is about discovering the propitious site to position a grave or erect a building by the closest possible observation, based on both one's skill and one's intuitive sensitivity, of the natural landscape (mountains, hills, valleys, streams, etc.) or the human constructions that are already there on the site. The place sought is indicated by the term *xue*, which means 'the hole', 'the cave', 'the cavern' – it is worth noting that this is also the name acupuncturists give to the points on the body where they place needles. This position has to be found by analysing the potential of the general configuration of the area, and so detecting where there is the maximum concentration of life-giving breath (*shengqi*), which is supposed to circulate in the blood vessels of the dragon (an extremely favourable creature), whose coils are evoked by the undulating landscape. One has to avoid dispersing this life-giving breath, whereas water, especially if stagnant, is seen as beneficial since it helps to retain the good influence of the *qi*, as Guo Pu (276–324) pointed out in his *Book of Graves* (*Zangshu*):<sup>5</sup>

If the breath (*qi*) rides the wind, it is dispersed, if it meets water, it stops. The ancients did not let it disperse if it accumulated, and contained it if it was circulating; that is why this is called wind and water (*fengshui*). The operation of *fengshui* consists first in finding water, second in holding back the wind.

To assist the geomancer in his search, *fengshui* manuals suggest many examples of configurations in which the relationships between the elevation of the land (generally *yang* in nature) and the valleys or watercourses (*yin* by nature) are represented. The part to the east of the favourable site is symbolically called Azure Dragon (*qinglong*), the one to the west White Tiger (*baihu*), associated with the cosmological representations of the orients developed during antiquity. In the same line of thinking, relationships were established between basic shapes and the five elements (*wuxing*): conical corresponds to fire, long to wood, square to earth, round to metal, wavy to water. In general, elevations should protect the desired position; the south remains open, light, sunny, while the other three are closed so that good influences can be concentrated. It is essential that a rise should face the harmful winds from the north. A number of codified sites, auspicious or inauspicious, were defined, such as the famous ones produced by Yang Yunsong (Tang dynasty 618–907) of 12 models of mountainous configurations on which are drawn the cave, symbolized by a small

circle, the dragon's main vein, the sandbanks (*sha*) surrounding the *xue*, the waters. It is not surprising that, in addition, extreme positions are forbidden: an over-steep mountainside, a plunging waterfall, an enclosed place. The best thing is to find a kind of promontory (we should bear in mind that China is a country with an uneven relief), rearing up amid hills or mountains. On plains vertical elements such as trees (in some regions there are lots of *fengshui* trees) or pagodas take the place of mountains.

Of course observing water is similarly important. In general a confluence is favourable (since it reminds one of the concentration of energy), whereas a division into several branches is unfavourable in that it signifies dispersal. Taking account of similar considerations, it is important to face the approaching water, to look upstream and not to turn downstream, because in the latter case good influences can only be carried away from you.

All in all the ideal site should, according to frequently suggested images, remind you of either a horseshoe or a bent arm, or else the 'origin of the world', the female genitals, which the many plans in classic *fengshui* manuals recall fairly explicitly.

As can be seen, the geomancer's perception of the natural landscape is based both on analogical and metaphorical thinking (the shape of a mountain resembling a beneficial animal will be seen as a good sign, whereas the sharp ridge of a hill or building will be aggressive and unfavourable), and on the specialist's sensitivity and intuition. For several authors a remarkable, 'magical' light indicates an authentic site. They add that this 'magic' cannot be described in words but only sensed intuitively. It is as if we were 'in another world', thus pointing up the almost 'mystical' character of the experience claimed by the geomancer.

However, we must be careful not to forget that the *fengshui* master is not a pure spirit, that he operates to earn his living, and that he lives in a society where he is asked to bring people what every Chinese (and not only every Chinese . . .) hopes for from life: prosperity, happiness, long life and descendants. The person who consults him becomes his client, and many anecdotes, comical or dramatic, could be recounted that show that the specialist is first and foremost a social actor.

### Taming the symbols

The geomancer also deals with the internal arrangement of habitations. Two main directions are distinguished here, the one faced by the back of the building (the 'seat', the base) and the one faced by the front (the 'view') of the house with the main entrance, which should face south if possible. The role of 'manipulator' of symbols that is the *fengshui* master's appears very clear in the case of a house. If, for instance, a room is to be added to the existing architectural shape, the geomancer's task is to mitigate the change by suggesting that amulets or charms (*fu*)<sup>6</sup> should be placed in certain strategic places in the house, and especially in its centre (the 'central palace'), where the tablets of the ancestors associated with Confucian rituals reside, a centre that can be transferred to another place when it has received the *fengshui* master's blessing. He must also perform complex calculations to choose the best moment for the works in accordance with the client's wishes and astrological characteristics (the 'eight characters', *bazi*, giving the hour, day, month and year of his birth).

The geomancer is the fate-tamer, responsible for his client's time and space, and so he must propose what counts more than sad, trivial technical reality. In this sense questions have been asked as to what the true influence of *fengshui* on Chinese architecture is. In fact, when a new house is built, the geomancer is regularly consulted by the owner, carpenter or builder, particularly in the southern provinces, where the influence of *fengshui* is greater. The question is whether the building would be different with or without geomancy: according to many observations it seems that the geomancer's main role is to enable an *imaginary architecture* to be achieved, which is inscribed over the walls or roof and gives them a genuine symbolic and social value. For example, as Ruitenbeek found when working with carpenters, when measuring it is enough to use a rule with dual gradations, showing subdivisions into inches, some favourable, others unfavourable. The auspicious measurement that is closest to that required by purely technical considerations is chosen; the difference is imperceptible to the eye, but the action has enabled construction to be integrated into the interplay, so complex and so significant, of combinations of good and bad fate punctuating Chinese time and space and giving them all their flavour.

It would be possible to apply the same considerations to architectural groupings of much larger dimensions such as towns, or to scholars' gardens. For instance, Beijing, or at least the old part, can be analysed in terms of ancient cosmology, but an understanding of it cannot be limited to that approach.<sup>7</sup>

In certain cases the search for a geomantically favourable site may have helped to shape the Chinese landscape, as was noted by Xie Zhaozhe (1567–1624), a somewhat sarcastic Ming dynasty scholar:

Among those who are fooled by the 'earth principles', my compatriots from Fujian are the worst. Some use a hundred stratagems throughout their lives without ever having any success; others are duped by the geomancers and eventually ruined because of burials. Still others, who are rich and from great families, obtain some land that is basically excellent but they think it is full of faults and not pleasant to look at; consequently they erect mounds, turn the fields into slopes which they put walls around, create streams, build bridges and terraces. They spend up to ten thousand silver ligatures, take ten years over the works. It is as if you rectified your ears or nose by chiselling or modelling them. It only conceals the truth, and what's the point! Tiring yourself out blocking the veins of the earth cannot bring good fortune, in fact it creates disasters.

### *Fengshui, nature and landscape*

This 'internal' criticism is not offered here in order to denigrate *fengshui*, but to remind readers that the practice, which is partly related to an esoteric art based on allegiance to a vision of the world inherited, with continual adjustments, from Chinese antiquity, cannot be understood and appreciated if we forget the historical context in which it was worked out and evolved.

From a social and cultural viewpoint *fengshui* masters still have an important place today in daily life in China. Aside from the conventional uses of geomancy (deciding the siting of houses and graves, calculating dates for weddings and funerals, etc.), the anthropologist Ole Bruun, when he was carrying out research

recently in Sichuan and Jiangsu, came across other reasons for calling on a geomancer. On the one hand the *fengshui* master is increasingly tending to replace traditional medical specialists (doctors, Tao monks . . .) who are disappearing. He is frequently asked to try to modify the geomantic configuration of a house lived in by a family affected by illness, madness or untimely death. Furthermore, around two-thirds of incidents in which geomancers are consulted involve cases of 'misfortune' and money problems. In this sense the *fengshui* master is often, for Chinese peasants, a way of battling tough economic circumstances, just as in the 19th century he frequently resisted westerners' hegemonic intentions as regards regional planning.

Should we conclude from this that *fengshui* has nothing to tell us about nature and the landscape? It is clear that we cannot but be sensitive to the motivated imaginings as to the 'psychic' properties of the natural world and matter. The perception of the earth as an organism with breath, accumulation or dispersal of 'energy', vessels in which the *qi* circulates, appeals to us and reinforces our 'ecological' awareness, which is seeking the world's lost unity, and we are surprised to find that we westerners too are looking for the auspicious dragon: 'What is the dragon? It is the vessels of the mountain . . . The earth is the dragon's flesh, the rocks are its bones, the grass its hairs.' Similarly, aesthetic praise of the curve, the detour, the undulation synonymous with dynamism, vitality, may help to refine our view of the landscape. Whereas contemporary discourse about architecture, housing and the natural world tends to be only a technical, disillusioned discourse, we cannot fail to be touched by *fengshui*, which suggests recipes for mitigating human misfortunes. Just as the vogue for acupuncture is often a response to the wish to be seen by the doctor as a person and not an illness, current interest in *fengshui* in the West probably reflects a desire to humanize architecture and the landscape. But we should not forget that the sole aim of the whole tradition of geomancy was to use nature for the benefit of human society, and never to respect it *per se*, if only because the worldview underlying *fengshui* places the human being at the centre of the world, between heaven and earth.

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Translated from the French by Jean Burrell

## Notes

1. The term geomancy ('divination using the earth') is not an entirely satisfactory translation of the word *fengshui* insofar as it refers to a very different mantic practice of Arab origin, which also existed in the medieval West and Africa and involved drawing figures on the ground, in a partly ad hoc fashion, using earth, thus forming a system to be interpreted by the seer.
2. Zhuangzi, *juan* 6, ch. 22, translated into English from the French translation by Liou Kia-hway (1969), Paris, Gallimard, p. 176.
3. This is what Joseph Needham called 'correlative thought', with the interplay of the five elements (wood, fire, earth, metal, water), *yin* and *yang*, the mantic figures from the *Book of Changes (I-ching)*, etc. For a detailed description of these ideas, see for example Joseph Needham (1954–65), *Science and Civilisation in China*, Cambridge, CUP.

4. Wang Wei (Ming dynasty), *Siku quanshu zongmu*, juan 109.
5. The text attributed to Guo Pu is probably from several centuries later.
6. Charms may be octagonal representations of the eight trigrams from the *Book of Changes*, or the now famous *yin* and *yang* 'logo', or 'baroque' graphic elaborations inspired by some Chinese characters.
7. On this topic see Susan Naquin (2000), *Peking: Temples and City Life, 1400–1900*, Berkeley, University of California Press.

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