

## A summary of research history on Chinese Feng-shui and application of Feng-shui principles to environmental issues <sup>\*1</sup>

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Chen, B. X. and Nakama, Y. : **A summary of research history on Chinese Feng-shui and application of Feng-shui principles to environmental issues** *Kyusyu J. For. Res.* 57 : 297-301, 2004 With recent rapid economic development, such issues as unplanned land use and environmental destruction have become more and more conspicuous in China, in particular in rural regions. Traditional Feng-shui concept on basis of a philosophy of harmonizing man and nature should be an effective solution to such problems. This report summarizes the previous Feng-shui research achievements in China, with a focus on application of Feng-shui concept to environmentalism. Most of previous researches based on document research and restricted to folklore studies on house building and cemetery Feng-shui. While, Feng-shui researches with environmental concerns are still very rare.

**Key words:** Feng-shui, definition, social and political issues, architecture, ecological and environmental concerns

### I. Introduction

Feng-shui tradition, a Chinese practical art intertwined with human life and has a deep influence, in particular, on south-eastern China at the aspects of shaping city and village landscape and forming characteristic architecture, etc. It was rooted from Chinese philosophy of harmonious coexistence with nature and human. The sound effect of Feng-shui on environment has embodied a sustainable agricultural society in China for two thousand years.

With recent rapid economic development, such issues as unplanned land use and environmental destruction have become more and more conspicuous in China, in particular in rural regions. In wide spread rural areas, land erosion and deforestation resulting from immoderate exploitation of natural resource were witnessed since China's reform in 1978. Therefore, a reevaluation of Feng-shui tradition's role playing in environmental protection would provide with an effective solution to these environmental problems in the future.

Thus, it is worth focusing on the environmental concept of Feng-shui and applying it to the theory of environmental conservation and land use system in the future research. In order to illustrate the environmental concept of Feng-shui and its traditional application in land use system of Feng-shui village, this study is to clarify the research history of Feng-shui in China through summarizing the previous research achievement.

Feng-shui tradition existed in China since the beginning of Chinese ancient culture. Feng-shui has been widely practiced in China, and even influenced its neighboring East Asian areas, such as Hong Kong, Taiwan, Korea, Okinawa, and Vietnam and etc. However, the academic study of Feng-shui didn't appear until western missionary's coming to China. The superstitious appearance and magic power of Feng-shui has attracted multitudinous research efforts and variant argument. It is worth noticing that researchers' attitudes towards Feng-shui art were never independent from their historic background. When western missionaries arrived in China two hundred years ago, having been frustrated at employing their constructing and engineering in the landscape, they were annoyed with the widespread existence of Feng-shui art. Similar point of view was also held by contemporary Chinese native scholars. Not until 1960s, Feng-shui art was appreciated for its role playing in cultural and social development. The tendency of previous research paralleled with the awareness of worldwide ecological and environmental crisis. Feng-shui attracted researchers' enthusiasm with its sound environmental impact. While, the research achievements on Feng-shui studies mainly constitute of discussions on its intertwinement with Chinese traditional culture and architecture. However, research with environmental concern was still very rare and a systematical research has not come into being.

In order to make my work easier to understand and seem

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more logical, I try to summarize the previous research achievements in light of their characteristics chronologically. However, there is some difficulties in classifying all related outstanding works chronologically, since there are still some works excluding my referred period do a great help for us to shape the research history of Feng-shui. Thus, the years appearing in the subtitle only state that such a research trend present as the mainstream study during this period. Related old documents and previous research papers are collected and classified with their research features into four parts as the following.

## **II. Before 1960's : arguments on definitions of Feng-shui**

Historically Feng-shui was widely practiced throughout China by the emperor as well as the masses, the sacred and the profane. While, academic research on Feng-shui did not appear until western missionary's coming to China from 1800's. During the period before 1960's, most Feng-shui study described Feng-shui in such words as superstitious, charlatanism, etc.

De Groot (1962), an 18<sup>th</sup> century Sinologist wrote in his monumental work "Religious System of China", defining Feng-shui art as "a ridiculous caricature of science," a "farrago of absurdities," and "a quasi-scientific system". It is likely to impress us today on first encounter as a baffling and silly mishmash of things better sorted out as physical science, religion, esthetics, psychology, philosophy, and sociology (Andrew, 1968).

Such animus arose from the belief that geomancy was to blame for difficulties in promoting, in China, Christianity and trade and the "gospel of natural science" which served both (Dukes, 1885). It was the greatest obstacle to Christian activities including construction and engineering in the landscape, which were considered to be necessary by the Westerners for the development of the country (e.g. Dukes, 1885).

In late Qing Dynasty, criticism of Feng-shui aimed to clear away ideological obstacles for building new mining industry and transportation (Guo, 1994). With introduction of western dichotomy and social evolution theory to China at the turning point of 19<sup>th</sup> century, Feng-shui was criticized with its mysterious traditional culture marks. Labelled with superstition, Feng-shui tradition was regarded as culture dross, and remained neglected by researchers totally for almost one century.

The Europeans' detestation of geomancy must have arisen not only from the obstacles it opposed to their activities, but also from their own inability wholly to disbelieve it—they shared the experience but the meaning seemed a parody of their own practice (Andrew, 1968).

Lately Needham and Freedman, each from their angle, have shown more tolerance and genuine interest (Andrew, 1968).

Needham recognized it for its role in the development of Chinese science and technology. Needham (1956) argued that Feng-shui embodied a marked aesthetic component, which accounts for the great beauty of the siting of the so many farms, houses and villages throughout China.

By Feng-shui it is place oneself spatially and temporally in an appropriate relation to the flow of natural processes (Feuchtwang, 1974). The Feng-shui practitioner seeks to understand the movement of energy (Qi) through a landscape, and how that movement is effected by the altitude and placement of mountains, trees, and rivers, as well as man-made features, through time (Leonard, 2000).

Research during this long period almost involves with arguments on definition of Feng-shui. These arguments show human's first efforts to comprehend it. And animus toward Feng-shui in the earlier period indicates human's prejudice on Feng-shui before 1960's.

## **III. 1970's : Feng-shui and social and economic issues in China**

The most prominent research achievements of this decade lie in its involvement with social and economic issues in China. Through studies on cemetery Feng-shui, Andrew (1968) revealed that Feng-shui is closely associated with ancestor worship and also involved in the formation and development of southeastern clans in China. Since 1970's, Research in Taiwan also showed that Feng-shui has been successfully utilized to prevent economic development activities in southern China, such as mining industry and railway building. In mainland China, Feng-shui research highlights its interaction with native religions, such as Daoism, Buddhism, and etc, maintaining that both of them share the same philosophical creed that is the harmonically coexistence between nature and human being.

Feng-shui, a practical tradition was produced to satisfy human's enthusiasm for a more prosperous life and a pleasant living environment. Feng-shui also developed and transformed with social and economic process of human history. The influence of Feng-shui was overwhelming in less developed period, and became weaker in modern China (Yoon, 1980). However, Feng-shui art maintained for almost two thousand years and intertwined with almost every aspects of human life. Many disputes between western colonies and native Chinese showed Feng-shui was successful utilized to prevent economic development activities in southern China, such as mining industry and railway building.

The close relationship between Feng-shui art and traditional culture was realized since the beginning period of recent Feng-shui research. It is worth noticing that Feng-shui art research has discovered that Feng-shui art also involved in the formation and development of Southeastern clans. Feng-shui art was

utilized by ancient clans in southeast China to expand their power range. And a study of Han nationality in Taiwan found out that Feng-shui art actually performed as a power to promote the formation of destiny community of village fellows (cited by Chen, 2002).

Studies through Feng-shui burial art observe the ancient Chinese ancestor worship tradition. The geomancy of burial considers it appropriate to superimpose two sentiments. One is the feeling at a true site of life breath and "another world"; the other is the emotion directed to the body of a dead parent. So much need mean only that one tries to bury a parent in a landscape of some charm. It must really work in some circumstances. The decision on the part of a family to take pains and spend money to find a first-rate gravesites is itself a sign to themselves and their neighbors that they are ambitious and confident. Such a gesture can arouse and concentrate their energies, embody their commitment to the collective good of the lineage, and bind them together by an indivisible investment in their common future (Andrew, 1968).

Japanese scholars have contributed a lot to Feng-shui art research, in particular on folklore significance from the view of a nonnative culture. Japanese anthropologist, Watanabe (2002), argues that Feng-shui exists as folklore knowledge among Chinese people, thus it should be observed in its folklore background. After thorough field trip comparative studies between Okinawa and Chinese Southeastern part, Watanabe asserted that in Okinawa, Feng-shui art has been transferred from its neighboring China, however, it has shaped its own characterized geomancy tradition. His argument implies that we should turn to probe into the respective particularity of Feng-shui art in Asian countries besides their similarities.

However, most of the researches referred in this section were restricted to folklore studies on house building and cemetery Feng-shui.

#### **IV. 1980's : Application of Feng-shui concept to Architecture**

During this decade, research papers related to architecture on Feng-shui were brought forward, especially in Taiwan. While, in mainland China, similar study did not appear until 1990's which witnessed a Feng-shui research boom in Republic China.

Since 1980's, there were voluminous graduate papers involved with Feng-shui culture embodied Chinese traditional architecture in Taiwan, and in American and Mainland China at the end of 1980's and 1990's.

He (1990) and Wang (1992) represent the highest achievements on the Feng-shui and Chinese ancient architecture. Ms. He has contributed a lot to Yan Zai (House) building architecture. After investigation in southeastern part of China and reading many genealogies, she gave a historical

description of Feng-shui theory on house building. She argues that Chinese people commonly are guided with Feng-shui principle unconsciously during habitat choosing, planning and building in the ancient and even nowadays.

In the research collection edited by Wang (1992) is a first most comprehensive research results on architecture theory on basis of Feng-shui culture, including the theory and methodology of site choosing, planning and building, geographical and geological research, and landscape and ecological research. This book illustrates the ancient architecture culture theoretically. It argues that the core of ancient buildings is to examine the nature thoroughly, to conform to it, and to utilize and reform the nature abstinently in order to build a harmonious habitat among the heaven, nature, and human.

Obliviously, western architecture could not be completely applied to the attractive Chinese ancient building. This theoretic margin urged architects on turn to Chinese native culture, since none building in China escaped the influence of Feng-shui. A close watch to concepts of recent western landscape architecture and ecological architecture, we will find similar connotations in them with Feng-shui tradition on the aspect of man-nature relationship. Landscape architecture highlights the natural environment protection and the harmonious coexistence between man and nature. While, ecological architecture underlines the wholeness of human being and the environment, on basis of giving priority to nature. Therefore, a few argued that Feng-shui art will provide guideline to look into the future development of architecture research (Wang, 1992 p240 ; He, 1990) and Chinese traditional architecture.

These researches theoretically bring forward the answer to why Chinese building has been so attractive. However, these researches focus on the application of Feng-shui concept to habitat building, while, more applicable aspects of Feng-shui was neglected.

#### **V. Since 1990's : Research with environmental and ecological concern**

With the coming of 1990's, the focal point of Feng-shui also changed with the awareness of worldwide ecological and environmental crisis. The ecological and functional effect of Feng-shui on landscape was noticed, as in trapping sunlight, keeping off wind, avoiding floods and choosing well drained sites while keeping water at convenient reach for daily use and irrigation, etc. Korean geographer, Yoon Hong-Key (1980) is perhaps the first to relate Feng-shui tradition with environmental stress. Some ecologists held that man should live in harmony with nature, and that human activities should be "designed with nature."

Except that Feng-shui contains a lot of superstitious concepts or it always takes a superstitious look, researchers recently

began to consider the ecological and environmental concept of Feng-shui. Joseph Needham has been criticized for, in effect, identifying Western science too wholly with a universal science and forcing traditional Chinese thought into our mold ; thus geomancy and other such arts, important to many thoughtful Chinese, are to him only pseudo-sciences (cited in Andrew, 1968).

As for the quality of landscape as the result of Feng-shui practice, even the most vociferous scoffers could not but agree that places selected and arranged with Feng-shui were attractive. "There must be poetry in the Chinese soul after all," Storrs Turner gasped in admiration (cited in March, 1969). But even scoffers noticed that geomantically chosen sites were attractive.

Feng-shui principle of village site choosing embodies Chinese traditional philosophical pursuit and ecological concern. Jia (1998) states ecological principles of Feng-shui as the followings. An ideal village should be located in a recessed position. This would enable the village to be both secluded and sheltered while commanding a view of the fields and distant landscape in front. It should preferably be backed by hills and flanked on both sides by hills. To the front distant mountains can be seen across flowing water. The river or stream flowing on south side of the site should be in curving form like a ribbon. All elements of the environment should facilitate good Qi to flow within the site for the prosperity of the people. The environmental capacity depends on Qi. A flowing stream at the southern side feeds the entire village. The ideal pattern of settlement described in Feng-shui theory clearly demonstrates an ecological concern. Firstly, all the natural elements, including hills, land, water, soil, orientation and climate, are considered as part of the settlement planning. Secondly, as a result of the arrangement of natural elements, a boundary is clearly formed by having mountains at the rear, hills on two sides, and water in the front. Thirdly, the capacity within the boundary, which supports consumption of residents and absorbs their wastes, is symbolized by Qi. The settlement on the inner bank of the river is in accordance with

the principle of hydraulic inertia: with the passage of time, deposition would extend the land area. (An ideal village landscape in light of Feng-shui shown as the following figure.)

Feng-shui concept aimed at pursuit of a perfect natural landscape. Facing with the diversified natural configuration, Feng-shui tradition also insisted on Feng-shui remedy measures besides conformity to nature principle (He, 1990). Some major means to repair the defected Feng-shui environment includes ditching to lead water around the village, planting vegetation on the Green Dragon and Sha Mountain and erecting pagoda at the water mouth is one of the two major factors to observe an ideal configuration, water was given a primary status, since water was deemed to bring fortune and prosperity for the villagers. Among the general rule of site selection " hinder the wind and obtain the water", it is primary to be accessed to water and wind is in the secondary consideration (Guo Pu 276-324 AD). Man-made ditch or pond is made to increase the vigor for the village. And it was believed to facilitate the dwellers' life with a practical significance (He, 1990). In the plain or in some areas where there are no huge mountains, vegetation is arranged behind and at the two sides of the dwelling to perform as the imaginary Dragon Mountain and Sha Mountain to remedy the imperfect landscape. However, besides preferring flourishing forests, Feng-shui concept highlights the Yin and Yang balance philosophy. Namely, in a confined space, too many trees should not be planted ; otherwise it will increase the shadowiness' (Extreme Yin). While for a hollow and sparse space (Extreme Yang), dense vegetation was welcomed to shape a relative personal space (Yang Dwellings Collection). Trees were able to hinder strong wind and concentrate living Qi. Neverthesis, they also increase the vitality of the village and perform to shape a micro-ecological environment. Pagoda were frequently built to hinder the unwelcome Qi or to impetrate a smooth fate for literati. Such three measures have their ecological and ethnic aesthetic significance (Jia, 1998).

In architectural totality, the aspirations embodied in Feng-shui regarding site selection are a practical reflection of Rudolf Schwarz's notion of a nested hierarchy of dwelling in which "the mountains are walls, the fields floors, the rivers paths, the coasts are edges and the lowest point in the mountain range the door (He, 1995)."

The way modern ecologists deal with the relationship of man and nature has been increasingly closer to that of Feng-shui, which held the Chinese ideal that man should live in harmony with nature, and that human activities should be "designed with nature." The same ideal is admired and much striven after by modern environmentalists in general and landscape architects like McHarg (1969) in particular, and is still considered to be the "most important question" for today and in the future for the profession of landscape architecture (e.g. Corner, 1992).

Yoon Hong-Key (1980) distinguishes concepts and cultural

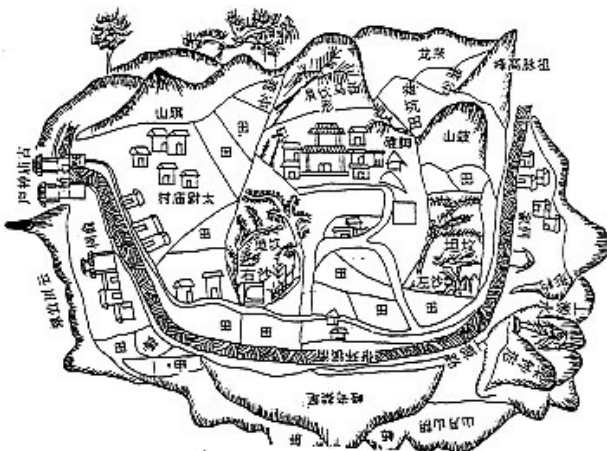


Fig. A village in Anhui Province shows most closely to the ideal site pattern (He, 1995)

connotations between Eastern geomancy (Feng-shui) and Western Environmental Determinism. According to him, both two concepts place strong emphasis on the primary role of environment in human life. While they both deal with man-nature relationships, geomancy is a much more complex and influencing system. In environmental determinism, the environment is conceived as qualitatively alien and external to man, and objectively existing quite apart from any human wish to change them. In geomancy, by contrast, both man and nature are expressions of one underlying spiritual unity, and man is an active participant in the realization of latent man-nature relationships, correcting the shortcomings of natural landscape and selecting auspicious sites for his activity (Yoon, 1982) .

Furthermore, according to the different connotations of Feng-shui tradition, terms of Folk Feng-shui and Environmental Feng-shui are made to refer respectively to the superstitious and landscape planning part of Feng-shui (Huang, 1999) . Huang argues that Folk Feng-shui exists because it meets the social need seeking the consolation of individual nervousness and frustration. He (1999) also describes Environmental Feng-shui as an environmental ecological system including the factors of architecture, agriculture.

During the past decade, Feng-shui research with environmental and ecological concern has been touched upon; however, a systematical research on environmental and ecological concept of Feng-shui has not come into being.

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