

WESTERN RESPONSES TO FENG SHUI

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ABSTRACT: *Feng shui is a practice that has affected the development of traditional cultural landscapes in East Asia. It arises out of Chinese concepts regarding yin-yang theory and qi energy. Western reactions to the practice of feng shui have varied. In the nineteenth century, the general response was negative, and Westerners described the practice as superstitious, irrational, and unprogressive. In the early part of the twentieth century the few accounts that dealt with the practice were less critical, but still portrayed the practice as irrational. Academic studies of feng shui since the 1960's have viewed the practice as a legitimate and sophisticated aspect of traditional culture. Such academic works have been overshadowed by thousands of popular discourses on the topic which have appeared in the last ten years. Although much of the interest surrounding feng shui in the postmodern West seems based on commercial possibilities, there are some significant lessons that geographers can learn from these developments.*

INTRODUCTION

Feng shui is a traditional East Asian practice based on the dynamics of *qi* energy in the human and natural environments of the world. *Feng* is the Chinese term for wind, and *shui* is the term for water. Often feng shui is appended with the term *di li*, meaning geography. Feng shui has a long history and is responsible for many of the unique characteristics of traditional landscapes in China, Korea and Japan. The siting of millions of burials, such as the Ming tombs, along with the configuration of traditional villages, the alignment of roads, and even the location of major cities such as Seoul can be traced to the historic application of feng shui principles. Although feng shui has been studied by scholars from many disciplines, it is of particular interest and concern to geographers. Feng shui is about the perception of places and cultural patterns expressed in the landscape.

The concern here is to explore how the practice of feng shui has come to be known and perceived by those in European based cultures. The basic premise is that the disparate attitudes expressed over time by writers, practitioners, missionaries, scholars, and laypersons say more about changes in Western culture than they do about traditional East

Asian philosophy and practice. The main objective in this paper is to explore these attitudes and draw some inferences about their significance to geographers today.

This discussion takes on an immediacy that it did not have in the past. Even twenty years ago, any awareness of feng shui in the West was largely limited to a few academics and East Asian immigrants. Now, thousands of people are learning the techniques and principles of feng shui. Consultants are working with well-heeled clients, and the general public sees advertisements for feng shui paraphernalia and starter kits in popular publications and on the internet. Ironically, the main locales of growth are not in Beijing, Shanghai or Seoul, but in places like Los Angeles, London, and Long Island. The practice is becoming increasingly popular in Europe, North America, Australia, and New Zealand, even at a time when you would be hard pressed to find many people in the People's Republic of China who openly pursue the practice. Whether or not feng shui will have an equivalent impact on the landscapes of Europe and North America as it has had in East Asia remains to be seen. Nevertheless, feng shui is undoubtedly a growing cultural phenomenon of the postmodern West, to which geographers can make significant contributions and critiques.

HISTORICAL RESPONSES TO FENG SHUI BY WESTERNERS

The rise in popularity in feng shui in the West today is truly remarkable. It is especially notable because many of the tenets of feng shui are alien to Western belief systems. In fact, we do not have to go very far in the past to find evidence that people in Europe and North America had very different attitudes about feng shui.

Although the basic principles of feng shui emerged before the Han Dynasty, Western accounts of the practice did not appear until European imperialism opened up East Asia to merchants and missionaries in the nineteenth century. During this period, a number of individuals wrote diaries, letters, and books about their experiences in East Asia. When these individuals encountered the practice of feng shui, their responses were generally negative. For example, in a book entitled *Everyday Life in China*, published by the Religious Tract Society in London in 1885, Edwin Dukes writes:

... but if any one wishes to see to what a howling wilderness of erratic dogmatism the human mind can arrive, when speculation usurps the place of science, and theories are revered equally with facts, let him endeavour to fathom even the elementary principles of the abyss of insane vagaries, the science of Feng Shui.... We can only wait until Christian truths and the gospel of a sound philosophy shall lay the axe at the foot of this deeply-rooted tree of superstition, and level it with all its branches of folly and fear (Dukes 1885: 145-6).

In a different account by C.F. Gordon-Cumming, published in Edinburgh in 1900, the author states:

... there are two superstitions so deeply rooted in the national mind that an allusion to these is at any time sufficient to arouse the mob. These two ruling forces are Fear and Reverence for the Dead and the mysterious, undefinable Feng Shui; and it truly seems impossible for any one who has not had long experience of this extraordinary and incomprehensible race to realise the extent to which all social and domestic life in China is influenced by these twin forces. . . (Gordon-Cumming 1900:233).

Gordon-Cumming, after describing the practice of feng shui, later states:

This may appear rather a tedious digression on a very nonsensical subject, but unfortunately it is one which throughout this empire is a living reality, and one which is not only a bar to all scientific and material progress, but also often involves real danger and persecution to the promoters of Christian work (Gordon-Cumming 1900:236).

These excerpts illustrate several key aspects of the early Western, specifically British, attitude. One is that feng shui was seen to be irrational and highly superstitious. Feng shui, as far as these observers were able to tell, was not based on any scientific principle. It was not logically consistent. They could discern no force that the Chinese referred to as *qi*. To them, the forces involved in feng shui were no more real than ghosts or getting good luck from finding a four-leaf clover.

It was not simply seen as superstitious, however. Europeans tolerated many superstitions, including their own. Feng shui drew a sharper rebuke. It was seen as evil and malevolent. Part of this response could well have come from the fact that feng shui was perceived as having little or nothing to do with Christianity. However, formal religions such as Buddhism and Islam, although discounted by Westerners, did not generally receive the same degree of criticism. Feng shui did not have an organized theology or priesthood. These British commentators did not even accord feng shui the status of a religious phenomenon.

There was also a perception that feng shui was a barrier to material progress. There are many accounts by British commentators claiming that they were hindered in their attempts to build roads, railways, settlements, and mining operations in China because of feng shui considerations (1). Protesters stood in the way or resorted to violence if they thought the feng shui of the area was being affected by a construction or road building project. Many Europeans truly believed in economic development as a means to bettering the lives of people in East Asia. They would certainly have found it easy to condemn the practice if they were foiled or delayed in their endeavors by protests based on feng shui considerations.

There is yet a third aspect of the Western attitude displayed. There is a racist tone to the whole discussion. To such Western observers, feng shui was the product of the Chinese mind, a mind that was obviously not as intelligent or sophisticated as the British. The Chinese were stubborn and unwilling to change. They were prone to violence. They were "incomprehensible" and subject to mobs and riots.

Despite such initial perceptions, there were eventually accounts that were more sympathetic to feng shui, especially during the first half of the 20th century. L.C. Porter, writing in the 1920's tried to understand the practice in greater depth, and was sincerely interested in its philosophical bases. Even so, Porter referred to feng shui as ". . . this strange mixture of religion, magic, and attempts at science. . . ." (Porter 1920:838) and thought that feng shui might be a historical relic that represented "the earliest stages of mankind's groping after truth" (*ibid*).

Joseph Needham, who wrote *Science and Civilization in China*, turned his attention to feng shui as part of his larger project. He saw feng shui not so much as a superstition or evil practice to thwart modern progress, but rather as a pseudo-science. The magnetic compass was invented by the Chinese, not for navigation and other such purposes, but for use in determining auspicious places in the landscape. For Needham, this innovation, and feng shui in general, was certainly notable, but difficult to categorize. Feng shui was not true science, but at least a movement in that direction.

Whether it be Needham or earlier commentators, we can note that feng shui, seen through the lens of modernism, has serious shortcomings. Feng shui's fatal flaws were that it was irrational, unscientific, and unprogressive.

Mao Zedong and the Communists took power in China in 1949. Whatever their differences with mainstream political philosophy in the West, the Communists had acquired much of the modernist vision. In the new People's Republic of China (PRC) feng shui, especially because it was also associated with Confucian and Taoist principles, wealthy landlords and the bourgeoisie, was systematically condemned. As a result, the practice declined and remains greatly diminished as a cultural characteristic in the PRC today.

Feng shui did not disappear from East Asia entirely. Feng shui remained vibrant in Korea,

Taiwan and Hong Kong. However, because of the rapid modernization of those economies, feng shui changed and became more restricted in practice. People moved away from the rural areas to the crowded cities, and as new land tenure systems and agricultural practices changed the countryside itself, Western education and ideas also become more prevalent. Educational systems and businesses became increasingly tied into global networks dominated by Westerners.

One of the first accounts of feng shui based on historical and philosophical analyses was written by the geographer Andrew March in 1968. March's article is a landmark in Western perception of feng shui. It is particularly notable that March's article paints the practice not as irrational, superstitious, or naïve, but as a legitimate and complex aspect of sophisticated Asian cultures. Indeed, the title of his article is "An Appreciation of Chinese Geomancy". Since March's article, a number of geographers and other scholars have added greatly to our understanding of the practice, including Hong-Key Yoon, a Korean who did his graduate work in geography at Berkeley (2), Ronald Knapp (3), and David Nemeth (4).

POSTMODERN PRACTICE OF FENG SHUI IN THE WEST

Much of the Western interest in feng shui, especially since the mid 1980's has been taking place in very different arenas, and has a decidedly different tone than that which has been expressed in academia. The last five to ten years have witnessed an explosion of new writings by laypersons, workshops by people with few academic degrees, and other popular discourses on feng shui. Much of this has been produced in the English speaking world, but there is also a significant amount in German, French, and Spanish. This new body of literature and activity, or series of texts, can be characterized in a number of different ways.

One characteristic of this current trend is that feng shui has been adopted along with a number of other ideas and practices within the context of 'new age' spirituality. One of the first of the 'new age' books to include feng shui was entitled *The New*

View Over Atlantis by John Michell, published in 1969. In that text, Michell talked not only about feng shui, but also about ley lines, numerology, megalithic circles, and astrology. Michell postulated that these were all related to each other and represented some kind of supernatural system understood by the ancients, but lost to the modern world.

Much of this integration and mixing with other ideas and practices still characterizes present day texts. For example, an organization called the "Feng Shui Institute of America" (FSIA), recently held a training conference at Georgia O'Keefe's Ghost Ranch in New Mexico, which was attended by 128 people from around the country. Their report about the conference actually had little to say about feng shui. Instead the focus was on a variety of other activities that took place including meditation, yoga, working with 'transpersonal oracles', dousing, and lectures by Richard Feather Anderson about the 'secrets of geometric life'. Their opening ceremony started with all the participants holding candles and forming a giant spiral. The Institute's on-line bookstore of approximately 60 titles only contains 18 books that are specifically about feng shui. Some of the other titles they offer include *The Aromatherapy Workbook*, *The Sacred Earth*, *The Dancing Wu Li Masters*, *Deep Ecology for the 21st Century*, a number of works by Edward Hall, and interestingly enough, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* by Jane Jacobs and the *Geography of Nowhere* by James Kunstler.

A second characteristic of feng shui in the postmodern west is that it is commercially oriented. Of the thousands of web sites that come up with a simple search on the internet, almost all of the addresses indicate commercial ventures. There are very few sites sponsored or created by educational or non-profit organizations. Hundreds of individuals have become feng shui consultants. The typical advertisement indicates that for a fee, the consultant will conduct an evaluation and recommend ways that to improve on the feng shui of your home or business. It has become so popular that celebrities such as former members of the Spice Girls, Donald Trump, and George Bush Sr. have jumped on the bandwagon and hired individuals to evaluate their living quarters.

Many feng shui practitioners are now becoming masters. It is unclear how one becomes a master feng shui practitioner, as there is no

accrediting organization. However obtained, master status appears to give one not only the ability to charge more for consultations, but the option of setting up a school to teach others the practice. The FSIA, for example, charges students \$1500 to take their correspondence course. Another option is to write a book and add to the 180+ titles about feng shui currently in print. There is also a great deal of paraphernalia that can be sold. Various individuals, private institutes, and even such mainstream marketing firms such as the Quality Paperback Book Club and public radio stations are selling kits that include mirrors, decorations, and manuals used to practice feng shui.

A prominent figure in the postmodern feng shui is Thomas Lin Yun. In the early 1980's, Mr. Lin Yun founded 'Black Sect Tantric Buddhism'. In addition to drawing on diverse sources such as Buddhism, Bon, and even new age color theory, he has created a church and theology that includes his own version of feng shui. Mr. Lin Yun has drawn enough adherents and clients to his religion who in turn contribute enough money so that he is able to spend most of his time in great luxury, flying around the world reportedly with a mostly female entourage (Wellman, 1998). His church owns several expensive mansions, such as one in the East Bay Hills of California and the former Grace Estate on Long Island.

A third distinctive characteristic of postmodern feng shui is that current practice almost entirely focuses on interior design and decorating. Although there is an occasional mention about the broader environment, the concern is basically on problems of furniture placement, the location of windows, and the layout of rooms. There is a glossy magazine in print entitled *Feng Shui for Modern Living* that claims to be the "world's biggest selling feng shui magazine". Many of the articles, along with most of the advertisements, directly relate to interior design. One of the mainstays of traditional feng shui, the siting of tombs, has virtually disappeared from the discussion. The communal awareness of street alignment, village layout, and other aspects of the encompassing cultural landscape, so characteristic of traditional feng shui in East Asia, is absent in the isolated and privatized postmodern feng shui of the West.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

What can we learn from these developments and what kind of critique can geographers, in particular, add to the current discourse? First of all, feng shui has in the past, and continues today to be a mirror of Western culture. The response of nineteenth and early twentieth century observers said much about their beliefs and values. Theirs was an imperial world of economic exploitation, science, and enlightenment philosophy. It was also a world infused with great class and racial distinctions.

To modernists of the early to mid-twentieth century, feng shui was no longer a threat, but merely an interesting phenomena, albeit one which did not easily fit into the categories of thought and value. The modernist vision, however, was still a universal one based on science and material progress. Feng shui was seen as a phenomenon of the past and the study of which was necessarily relegated into those soft disciplines like mythology, folklore, or even historical and cultural geography.

Once again in the postmodern era, discourse on feng shui reflects Western perceptions and values. We are insecure and rootless. We pick and choose ideas and texts from a number of different places and time periods because we no longer have a consensus or tradition. In a post-fordist world of competitive capitalism, we are increasingly concerned about our individual well being and material success. We no longer have complete faith that science and technology can continue to provide us with the good life or general prosperity. We can at least hope that feng shui will increase our individual prosperity, improve our love life, help us lose weight, and improve our health.

There is more to learn about feng shui and its potential role in the West. Geographers in particular can educate students and the general public about positive insights that feng shui can provide. It is not particularly negative that people use feng shui to evaluate their homes and interiors. Many Chinese over the centuries have also used feng shui for similar purposes. Yet, in traditional East Asia, feng shui was used for much more. If feng shui was used today to evaluate the great variety of urban and rural landscapes of the world today, we might not only further a greater environmental awareness, but we

could help people see fresh perspectives on themselves in the wider social and ecological communities. One of the basic messages of feng shui is that people need to look at their surroundings in great detail, including the vegetation, topography, and watercourses. One of the other messages is that our surroundings have both direct and indirect effects on our well-being. These are certainly relevant messages.

There is one final point, and it is a key one. Despite all of the commercialization and charlatanism, feng shui should be regarded as a religious phenomenon. The basis of traditional feng shui is that *qi* energy animates and flows in the landscapes of the world as much as it does in our own bodies and the cosmic universe. Feng shui, and *qi* in particular are metaphysical phenomena. As much as we have tried in the past, and in many ways continue to try, the idea of *qi* in particular cannot be reduced to scientific explanation.

Despite the many differences in time and space, people in East Asia practiced feng shui 500 years ago for essentially the same reason that people in the postmodern West seek it out today. People are not simply biological beings. We are more than members of various cultures, societies and economic networks. Ultimately, we are also religious beings. For hundreds of years, feng shui gave people in East Asia a way to live in a world of cosmic harmony and numinous experience. People today in the West are spirits, too, and seek to live in sacralized landscapes. The modernist belief that positivist science is the only legitimate way to know reality has masked this fact or diminished its significance. People need to live in multi-dimensional worlds. Whatever their material aspirations might be, most practitioners in the postmodern West also truly believe in the spiritual value of feng shui. It is one reason that so many other people have become clients or seek out the practice in other ways. Geographers and other academics should take note.

Geographers should be helping people to understand and create sacred places and spiritual landscapes. One of the goals of any geographical education should be to foster a vision of places and landscapes as they could be, not necessarily as they are. A truly humane landscape is one that places people with feet firmly planted in both the material and spiritual realms. Andrew March, in a different

article published in *Parabola* in 1978, foresaw the developments of the past few years when he wrote:

America does not need another sort of fortune-telling superstition which would set people to vying for the best house and grave sites, guaranteed as cornucopias of love, success, and money. But the deeper perspectives of geomancy - the gentle appreciation of places; the disciplined blending of psyche and landscape; the bold imagery of extra-human experience - are as fresh and appropriate as ever (March 1978:34).

END NOTES

- 1) See for example Boxer (1968), or Potter (1973)
- 2) See Yoon (1982), and (1976)
- 3) See Knapp (1989) and (1986)
- 4) See Nemeth (1989) and (1981)

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