

Feng Shui

By C. Fred Smith

Founder: Feng Shui does not have an individual as a founder; instead it has developed within Chinese culture over centuries, in many respects integrated with popular Chinese religion and philosophy.

Sacred Scriptures: No one modern-day book dominates though several ancient writings highlight different aspects of Feng Shui, such as the way nature behaves and how human intervention might cooperate with the natural order.

Extent: It is impossible to know how many of China's over 3 Billion people practice Feng Shui. The beliefs are wrapped up in Confucianism, the Tao, and other aspects of the Chinese worldview so much that anyone whose cultural assumptions are basically Chinese may be said to be an adherent of Feng Shui, at least to a certain extent.

INTRODUCTION

Feng Shui has been the subject of much confusion, especially since it has become popular in recent years.¹ Some see it as primarily a home decorating guide, others as a kind of New Age way of being at peace with one's surroundings. For others, it is a kind of divinization method that will produce good fortune. The fact is, Feng Shui relates to all of these things, but it is much more than all of them. The term itself means "Wind and Water" relating to the idea of the calming of the wind, *Tsang Feng*, and the acquiring of water, *Te Shui*.² Wind and Water are two of the Five Elements (see below) that are the visible dynamic for how the natural world operates. Feng Shui is about cooperating with these elements and the spiritual forces that drive them, in ways that make life both pleasant, and productive. There is an aesthetic component to it—a sense of beauty, found in order and balance, "which accounts for the great beauty of the siting of so many forms, houses, and villages throughout China."³ It is this aesthetic aspect that has attracted most of the attention among westerners, including Americans.

HISTORY

The early history of Feng Shui is lost in antiquity. Better, the early history of predecessors to Feng Shui is lost. Feng Shui, both as a term and as the system we know today, is of recent origin. In older times it was called *Kan Yu*, a term having to do with the understanding of time and of geography. Other names have emphasized the need for observing the landscape and the use of space or the recognition of the forces of Yin and Yang. Modern-day Feng Shui combines all of these with other Chinese cultural assumptions into the version we know today.

Feng Shui is concerned with what, in the Orient, would be seen as the scientific enterprise of making sense of the physical world.⁴ The terms mentioned above, (Wind, Water, geography, time, and even *Yin* and *Yang*) point to this reality. As such it is not strictly concerned with the supernatural, although the supernatural runs behind and through it. Feng Shui brings together science, religion (or religions—for it touches on many of them found in traditional Chinese culture), and a coherent, if limited, worldview that is multi-faceted, and, in many ways always changing.

FOUNDATIONS

Foundational to Feng Shui is the idea of *Ch'i*. Chi is pervasive, kind of like "ether." It is everywhere and is the spiritual source of all goodness. It gives life to the human body, makes plants to grow, and pervades the forces of the weather and all of nature.

Ch'i may have negative aspects as well, for there is waning *ch'i*, which brings depression and lethargy. Truly negative chi causes conflict, flareups of anger and is the force behind natural and human dangers, crime, oppression and all kinds of evil.⁵ Feng shui assumes "an animated world, a world where energy flows and pulses through the earth as well as the human body." One "cosmic

motor” (ch’i) runs the whole world and through the human body. Similar to the way that a central heating unit pulses heat all throughout a building while remaining hidden behind walls and in the ceiling. In the way that humanity feels the effects of ch’i, so also, we are able to guide ch’i, this “cosmic breath” to our own advantage.⁶

Feng Shui also draws from other Chinese religions and yet it is in some ways embedded in them. For example, the concept of Yin and Yang plays a major role in Feng Shui but also pervades much of Chinese worldview and culture. The Yin and Yang principle is one of balance. Yin balances Yang in many areas of life. We are all familiar with “sweet and sour Chicken” where the chicken is immersed in a sauce that balances these two opposite flavors pleasingly to the palate. The principle also figures into balancing hot and cold, light and dark, active and passive, and even good and evil. In some Chinese stories, Yin and Yang drive the plot. The ending is not about good triumphing over evil, as in an American movie, but about the two ending in a kind of stasis. The villain dies at the end of the movie—but so does the hero. This Yin and Yang plot device makes Chinese movies look odd and unfinished to Americans, but in China, it is expected. Feng Shui takes the balance of Yin and Yang into account on matters of household arrangement and the order of life, and other matters.

Confucianism: Confucianism also reinforces the idea that order and balance are greatly to be desired in one’s personal life and in society. Feng Shui pursues similar goals in shaping and managing the natural environment. One might be tempted to say that Feng Shui is a part of Confucianism, but the two are distinguishable, though deeply compatible.

Taoism: This desire for order and balance shows up in Taoism as well, a philosophy that is quite ancient, and which emphasizes living peacefully with oneself. The emphasis is on passivity, on avoiding fighting against the forces that impinge upon one’s life; instead, one seeks to go with the flow, and yet to succeed in the process of doing so. To be successful in life, one must “Yield and overcome/Empty and become full/ Bend and become straight.” Success comes in avoiding the fight and letting what comes come.⁷ In practical terms, this works its way out in those Martial Arts systems that use the opponent’s aggressiveness to defeat the opponent. Feng Shui takes from Taoism this idea of “aligning with the Way” of passively going along with the flow of things rather than insisting on having things (including buildings and interior décor) a certain way. Going with the forces that shape the environment (physical and spiritual) rather than trying to reshape them by force, leads to contentment and success in Feng Shui, just as passively using the opponent’s own strength against him, leads to success in martial arts.⁸

Five Elements

Central to Feng Shui, and to the larger culture, is the concept of the Five Elements. These are *metal, wood, fire, water, and earth*. The elements are born out of six ch’i’s which are understood as being in pairs: these six are Yin and Yang; Wind and rain; dark, and light. The five elements exist in an ever-changing, emerging and conflicting relationship with one another. Wood gives rise to fire, which melts metal. Metal is shaped into tools that cut down and shape wood. Fire gives way to ash, which is a form of earth. Earth is the source of the metal which is mined from it. The whole cycle continues as metal is shaped into tools that cut wood, which again makes fire, etc.

There is both an emergent aspect, and a conflicting aspect at work here. The emergent aspect relates to how these elements depend upon one another—as ash creates earth, which gives rise to metal. The conflicting aspect is demonstrated in the way that fire overcomes metal, which cuts wood, while fire itself is overcome by water.⁹ The emergent aspect appears to be related significantly to the Buddhist concept of “dependent origination”—the belief that every stage in life gives birth to the next and is dependent on the stage before it, in a never-ending circle. For example, birth leads to contact with the real world which leads to growth and pain etc. eventually leading to old age, and then death, which leads to rebirth. The cycle never ends, each stage of life being dependent on the one before and creating the one after.

The conflict aspect of how these five elements relate may share common roots with the children’s game of Rock, Paper, Scissors. In this game, there is a circular “hierarchy” where a rock breaks scissors, but scissors cut paper. Paper can wrap itself around the rock. Thus each of the three has power over one of the others and is itself overcome by one of the others.¹⁰ Each of the five elements in Feng Shui is overcome by another, and each has power over another. The elements then depend on one another and yet overpower one another, in a complex set of relationships which determine much of how the natural world functions, and which thus set forth parameters for the way people relate to the world and to how the physical environment may best be managed for the sake of peace and good order.

Heaven and earth, come into the picture from the larger Chinese culture where they are seen not just as physical locations but also as philosophical principles, which again are related to yin and yang, heaven being one and earth being the other.¹¹ Thus, the yin/yang idea of opposites pervades even the largest elements of the real world, even as they give structure to minor aspects of everyday life.

Larger Chinese culture then influences Feng Shui, and Feng Shui is itself a part of all of these philosophies, ethical systems and ways of being in the world. The result is a worldview that is deeply tied into Chinese culture and religion, and which itself goes along, passively, with these religious and cultural assumptions, while succeeding in its own way as a separate, but related discipline.

There are various schools of Feng Shui, sometimes reflecting the way that this worldview has developed over the centuries. Two important ones of these are the “form school” which focuses on the landscape on rivers and other natural features as indications of the lines of harmony, and the compass school which focuses more on the heavens. The cosmology school or compass school seeks to understand the forces that drive the stars and other bodies in the heavens and to use clues from all of this to devise strategies for living and being in the world.¹²

PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS

Feng Shui seeks to work with the landscape to create harmony—and certainly not to work against the landscape. Here, Yin and Yang assist in balancing light and dark, as well as rural—yin, and cities—yang, and even balancing colors. Blues and greens are Yin while reds to yellows are Yang.¹³

The Form School of Feng Shui focusing on the landscape seeks to determine the best siting, the best location and direction, of buildings, and homes, and even whole towns. This is especially true in recent times, due to a resurgence in the practice.¹⁴ For example, mountains serve as guides to orientation for houses, and even for gravesites. Ideal sites are often “halfway up a mountain overlooking water.” Thus, mountains and water are “the yin and yang of the landscape.”¹⁵

The same thinking goes into the placement of furniture and the overall interior arrangement of a home or office.¹⁶ This is the aspect of Feng Shui best known among westerners. A Feng Shui master will be consulted, someone deeply familiar with all of the cosmological aspects of Feng Shui belief, including cosmology and ch’i, the Five Elements and the series of inter-relationships between different kinds of physical realities. This will include both the natural and man-made environmental realities.¹⁷ The master will consider all of this in light of the “Five geographical secrets. The first of these is **The Dragon** (mountains are “dragon veins” and the nature of a nearby mountain whether it is beautiful or barren, a pleasant slope, or broken crags, will have an effect on the well-being of residents)¹⁸ and may help determine whether a home should be built there or not.

The next geographical secret is “**the Sha**” (literally “the sand” or “earth”¹⁹) which actually refers to the small hills that may be in front of a site protecting it. The home should face away from the Dragon Vein and perhaps should have lower hills in front. The next geographical secret is **Water**²⁰—water flowing into a site or through a site “represents the physical and visible flow” of ch’i energy, and is “the most preferred feature in the practice of the Form School.”²¹ Clearly, flowing water on a site is better than stagnant water. The fourth geographical secret is the one that points to the actual site for the building. This secret is called “**the Cave**” but it “literally means ‘pit’ or ‘spot.’”²² The final secret deals with “**Direction**”²³—where should the building (house, business, gravesite) be facing. Where should the front or main approach to the site be?²⁴

The Feng Shui master takes into account these five geographical secrets along with all of the cosmological matters related to yin and yang, the current cycle in time, the Five Elements and others to develop a comprehensive idea of where to locate the building, and how it should be oriented. Many other factors come into play, too numerous to discuss here, and full knowledge of them all requires years of study and quite a bit of practice. The process then involves the practical application of principles, but there is clearly some intuition at work here as well. This is as much “art” as it is “craft” and as such, it is not an exact science. Even so, the process that begins with “the Dragon” and ends with “Direction” is the basic application of the Form School of Feng Shui. It was originally applied to the siting of graves but came to be applied to home and eventually businesses. Today it has been adapted to home decorating as well.²⁵ Feng Shui ideas from the Form School and others have been adapted into systems similar to astrology²⁶ or the occult and even New Age thought in books that purport to be guides to wealth, inner peace and wholeness, and deeper self-awareness.

CHRISTIAN RESPONSE

The Bible treats cosmology very differently from Feng Shui. For one thing, the universe has a personal beginning, in the intentional actions of a creator God, who placed a personal evaluation on His creation (he repeatedly “saw that it was good,” Gen. 1), an evaluation with both moral and aesthetic dimensions. Feng Shui sees creation as impersonal. The various elements, secrets, and forces all act on the world with no personality behind it. The moral evaluation of creation is completely pragmatic. A flowing river on a site gives it more positive energy, ch’i that works out in terms of harmony and prosperity. There is no absolute good or evil, only what works or does not work for human ends. In the Bible, the elements and forces of creation point to the glory of the Creator Himself (Ps. 19), and induce us to worship Him rather than to focus on ourselves and our own prosperity. The universe then bends toward a wise and merciful Creator who is worthy of our worship, for His own sake, rather than toward (or away from) the good of whoever happens to live or work on a particular site.

This personal vs impersonal nature of creation shows up in another major difference. Feng Shui sees the world as infused with energy and forces that create positive and negative space, space that is harmonious and good or space that saps energy and creates negative emotions and outcomes. The Bible treats the created world as a place where natural forces are in play, under God’s sovereignty, but harmony and positive feelings are a result of being in right relationship with the Creator God Himself, not with the forces of nature. It is not so important where a house is located and how it is oriented, as it is whether the inhabitants are oriented on God through faith in Jesus Christ. The positive outcome is not so much a matter of prosperity and peace for the individual, as it is a right relationship with others in the world. The peace of Christ, in the hearts of His people, leads to peace-making and reconciliation in the larger society, as His people interact with a world in desperate need. God’s people point to Christ and His work on the cross as the source of peace, in their own hearts and homes, not to where their house is located, or how it is oriented, and decorated. They can say that there is hope, in a personal relationship with Christ who loves all humanity, not in orienting one’s environment in certain ways. A life in harmony with the God of nature is altogether more satisfying than a life in harmony with the impersonal forces of nature.

The Bible points to a coming time when God “will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and there will no longer be *any* death; there will no longer be *any* mourning, or crying, or pain.” (Revelation 21:4). This world is passing away. Its injustices and pain have a moral cause—sin against God—and a moral solution—the grace of God given to us through the finished work of Christ on the cross. Rather than calling us to make our lives on this earth harmonious and comfortable through alignment with nature, God calls us to give ourselves to Him, in faith, knowing that our real hope, our eternal home, is with Him and His Son, Jesus Christ, who Himself will “make all things new” (Rev. 21:5).

Notes

¹ Paton, Michael John. *Five Classics of Fengshui: Chinese Spiritual Geography in Historical and Environmental Perspective*. Vol. 110. Boston: Brill, 2013, 4.

² Short, John Rennie. *Alternative Geographies*. London: Routledge, 2000, 65.

³ J. Needham in *Science and Civilization in China*, 388, cited in Paton, 4.

⁴ Paton, 4.

⁵ Short, 66.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ “Taoism” in the Ancient History Encyclopedia, www.ancient.eu/Taoism

⁸ Short, 66-67.

⁹ Bruun, Ole. *An Introduction to Feng Shui*. Introduction to Religion. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008, 106-107.

¹⁰ “The Official History of Rock, Paper, Scissors” at the World Rock Paper Scissors website, www.wrpsacom.

¹¹ Bruun, 100.

¹² Paton, 5; Oliver H. M Yau, “The Key Components of Feng Shui and Their Implications for Marketing” in *Psychology and Marketing*. (Wiley: 29:7 July 2012, 479-487) accessed on EBSCOHOST.

¹³ Short, 67.

¹⁴ Bruun, 118.

¹⁵ Short, 68.

¹⁶ Yau, 2012.

¹⁷ “What is Feng Shui,” Fend Shui Society, accessed November 24, 2019, <https://www.fengshuisociety.org.uk/history-of-feng-shui/>

¹⁸ “The ‘Dragon vein’ decides the Feng shui good and bad, Qingming festival will arrive,” Steemit, accessed November 24, 2019, <https://steemit.com/culture/@c136/the-dragon-vein-decides-the-feng-shui-good-and-bad-qingming-festival-will-arrive>

¹⁹ Michael Y. Mack and Albert T. So, *Scientific Feng Shui for the Built Environment: Theories and Applications*, (Hong Kong, Univ. of Hong Kong Press, 2015), 78.

²⁰ Yau, 2012.

²¹ Mack and So, 80.

²² Ibid.

²³ Yau, 2012.

²⁴ Mack and So, 81.

²⁵ Books explaining this new and popular version of Feng Shui include Tisha Morris, *Decorating with the Five Elements of Feng Shui* (Llewellyn Publications, 2015); Cathleen McCandless, *Feng Shui that Makes Sense: Easy Ways to Create a Home that Feels as Good as it Looks* (Two Harbors Press, 2011); and Karen Kingston, *Clear your Clutter with Feng Shui* (Harmony, 2016); amongst many others.

²⁶ A separate 4-page Profile has been published related to this subject: Marcia Montenegro, “Astrology,” *Profile Notebook* (Arlington, Texas: Watchman Fellowship, Inc. 1994-2019). A complete collection of Profiles (over 500 pages) is available at www.watchman.org/notebook. This Profile is available at: <http://www.watchman.org/profiles/pdf/astrologyprofile.pdf>

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