

feng Shui

J O N P U R O

Feng shui (pronounced “fung shway”) is the Chinese tradition of attempting to control one’s health, fortune, and future by placing and arranging living quarters, gravesites, physical structures, and interior objects to be in harmony with ancient beliefs about how humans and their environments interact. Based on ancient Chinese philosophical traditions, feng shui has developed for over two millennia to include knowledge, rituals, aphorisms, and superstitions from throughout China. As such, it is central to any understanding of Chinese cultural history, life, and psychology, as well as that of many other East Asian cultures that also practice Chinese feng shui.

Chinese Philosophy and Naturalism

Feng shui has its roots in the Chinese philosophical school of thought called the Yin-Yang School. During the Period of Warring States (403–221 B.C.E.), a turbulent period of Chinese history in the late Zhou dynasty (1122–211 B.C.E.), the principles of the six major schools of Chinese thought were established: Confucianism, Mohism, the Legalist School, the School of Names, Taoism, and the Yin-Yang School. The naturalistic Yin-Yang School, with its emphasis on the interdepen-

dence of humankind with nature, became one of the most influential schools of thought in Chinese culture. The school later formed the philosophical basis for feng shui as well as other aspects of Chinese culture, including art, marriage, politics, medicine (e.g., acupuncture), and other practices of divination (e.g., astrology and numerology).

Chinese philosophy is primarily rural in nature. Most Chinese were and still are farmers and thus have always been dependent on nature for their livelihood and preservation of their way of life. The agrarian life has been idealized by most Chinese schools of thought; it was viewed as simple, pure, and innocent, as opposed to the life of the urban merchant, who was frequently characterized as self-centered, greedy, and antisocial. Feng shui draws from this tradition and idealization of rural naturalism.

Reverence and respect for nature can also be attributed to the topology and climate of China. Farms were vulnerable to bitter cold winds and storms from the north, and frequent flooding of the country’s major rivers meant the people and their farms were vulnerable to water. Farms had to be located near rivers for supplies of water (particularly for rice farmers), but flooding could quickly destroy a farm. In this way, the majority of people in China felt dependent on nature to bring either prosperity or devastation and thus sought means to control it.

The Yin-Yang School

The Yin-Yang School, as its name implies, was based on the concepts of Yin and Yang, which are the two complementary opposites believed to underlie all of nature. Yin is negative, female, dark, cold, or passive; Yang is positive, male, light, hot, or active. All materials, vegetation, and animals have Yin and Yang, according to this philosophy, but each has more of one than the other and hence tends to be either more Yin or more Yang. These opposing characteristics are not statements of value or worth; rather, they describe the dualistic nature of reality, much like a scientist would speak of the positively and negatively charged poles of a magnet. Yang is not better than Yin or vice versa; they are to be understood as complementary and necessary properties of nature.

According to the Yin-Yang School, the complementary opposites of Yin and Yang originated in the tai chi, or the ultimate “oneness.” The unity of the tai chi is composed of the duality of the Yin-Yang, the duality of the Yin-Yang leads to “the four secondary forms,” the four secondary forms give rise to “the eight el-



The Tai Chi (“Yin Yang”) surrounded by the Eight Trigrams. (Courtesy of author)

ements,” and these eight elements lead ultimately to the complexity of all reality.

The philosophy of Yin-Yang is well over 2,000 years old. It plays a central role not only in feng shui but also in all aspects of Chinese life and the development of Chinese culture and science. The concepts of Yin and Yang were first used in Chinese astronomy to understand the movements and relationships of celestial objects (for example, representing Earth as Yang and the Moon as Yin). It was also used to explain natural phenomena, such as earthquakes. The pairing and interplay of opposites in the Yin-Yang School contributed to the underlying Chinese philosophy of harmony in all things and the moral teaching of moderation over extremism.

In the second and third centuries B.C.E., the Yin-Yang School incorporated the Theory of the Five Agents. This theory held that all changes in nature are predicated on the interaction of five “forces” or “agents” that compose all matter. These agents are not materials but are instead processes or properties of nature, similar to the “four elements” proposed by the Greek philosopher Anaximander. The agents (metal, wood, earth, fire, and water) interact in a way to produce change, and thus, changes to any substance can be predicted by its underlying dominant agent. As the five agents interact, more complex items are created, such as trees, mountains, and rivers. Change is always occurring as the five agents destroy and create each other in a cycle.

Coupled with this recognition of change as the only universal constant, a key ancient text of the Yin-Yang School, the *I Ching*, or *Book of Changes*, stated that these changes follow a pattern. The *I Ching* taught that eight trigrams, each made up of three solid or dashed lines, could be used to predict change. This became a very popular method of fortune-telling and is still used today. The eight trigrams originated in the Shang dynasty (approximately 1766–1123 B.C.E.) practice of divination using tor-

toiseshells and bones. Shells or bones were heated until cracks began to appear, then the fortune-teller would “read” the cracks to see the future. The trigrams were an attempt to copy this practice, and they are used to assist the feng shui expert in divining a person’s future.

Despite the occultist practices that grew out of the Yin-Yang School, this school of thought was central to the later development of Chinese science. The naturalism of the Yin-Yang School and feng shui, when they were developed over 2,000 years ago, was a kind of protoscience. Humankind and nature were viewed as interdependent agents, each affecting the welfare of the other. As such, humans could attempt to improve their lives by understanding and controlling their environment. Of course, the Yin-Yang School and feng shui were not true science, since there was no reliance on physical evidence to prove their contentions and especially since feng shui later came to employ occult rituals, supernatural forces, and superstitions in its practices, all of which are quite contrary to modern science. But the view that humankind could control its destiny by interacting with and using nature to its advantage was significant in its time. Due to the development of philosophy and naturalism, the ancient Chinese did not need to employ any divinities to explain the universe or for moral guidance, so the Chinese people never developed any dependence on gods or religion. For them, philosophy and naturalism filled all spiritual and moral needs.

The Practice of Feng Shui

Feng shui is an eclectic mix of naturalistic philosophy, environmental awareness, ancient astronomy and astrology, fortune-telling, magic, and folk traditions. The term *feng shui* literally means “wind and water,” and the emphasis on

The Chinese characters “Feng Shui” (“Wind and Water”).

living harmoniously with nature is evident in many feng shui principles, some of which are quite rational. For example, feng shui teaches that building a home on the south side of a hill is optimal. This is likely due to the fact that China is subject to bitterly cold north winds, so a home built on the south side of a hill would have natural insulation from those winds. Feng shui also teaches that a home should be placed midway up a hill, not at the base or the top. This is also logical given China’s topography: building one’s home at the top of a mountain often would expose it to the same frigid northerly winds, and building it at the base of a hill could bring disaster because of the oft-flooding rivers in China. From these logical foundations, however, feng shui has grown into a vast and complex tapestry of protoscientific or pseudoscientific theories, fortune-telling, and superstition.

The current practice of feng shui is the result of the fusion of the two primary feng shui schools around the third century A.D. One school, developed in Fukien Province, stresses the importance of direction. This so-called Fukien or Compass School of feng shui uses the ancient book of divination, the *I Ching*, to determine optimal geometric balance and placement. Building orientations may be classified by the Compass School as conforming to one of the eight trigrams (discussed earlier). The eight trigrams pertain to eight different directions on the compass (north, northeast, east, and so on). Each of the eight directions is said to possess characteristics that make cer-

tain activities in that location more or less favorable as compared with other locations.

The Compass School of feng shui also incorporated ancient Chinese astronomical knowledge. Thousands of years ago, Chinese astrologers developed techniques to view patterns and messages in the stars, Sun, Moon, and planets. The feng shui terms for the four directions of right, front, left, and back are taken directly from the Chinese astronomical terms for east, south, west, and north and are, respectively, the dragon, bird, tiger, and tortoise. The need for accurate identification of direction in feng shui was one of the primary reasons for the development of the compass in China.

The second school of feng shui, from Kiangsi Province, was primarily concerned with shapes of landmasses and bodies of water. Associated with other practices that grew out of the Yin-Yang School, such as astrology, physiognomy, numerology, and acupuncture, this school of feng shui, often called the Form School, was a type of geomancy, which is the reading and interpretation of meanings from shapes and patterns in the physical environment. According to this school, different shapes and contours in the Earth are taken to mean different things. For example, a feng shui practitioner working on a home design or planning a gravesite may look at the surrounding hills to determine what animal or beast they resemble. A hill or a combination of hills might be seen to resemble a tortoise, tiger, dragon, snake, or phoenix. A dragon is usually considered optimal, since the dragon is seen as a fierce protector. However, a dragon could also be bad if a home or grave is placed near the dragon's mouth or tail. Near its mouth, the structure might get eaten; near its tail, it might be destroyed as the tail swings. The family inhabiting the house or the relatives of the deceased could experience bad fortune or even death because of the location of the house or the grave. A river nearby is usually viewed as good, since the river flow brings ch'i, but a

river might also be seen as resembling a dragon or serpent; placement of a structure near a river must also be done carefully so as not to harm the beast and not to place the structure near its tail or mouth. In *The Golden Bough*, James Frazer called this association of the properties of separate objects based on their similar appearance the "Law of Similarity." This law is common the world over and is the basis for many Western and Eastern traditions and folklore.

Another use of the Law of Similarity in feng shui is in the perceived connection between the appearance of buildings and any of the five elements. (See the earlier discussion of the five elements.) A building that is tall and thin (such as a tower), no matter what material it is made from, is called a "wood" type of building because of its resemblance to a tree. Such a building is said to possess the properties of the wood agent. A building that is flat and square is an "earth" type of building. There are also metal, fire, and water types of buildings. Each of these is said to react differently if placed within environments of different types, which may also be wood, earth, metal, fire, or water types. For example, a wood building placed in a fire environment will give more than it receives, as the environment takes from the building in the same way that fire takes from wood. Such a building would be deemed a poor place for a business because the business might lose money, and it would be better used as a school, hospital, or some other such function that gives to the surrounding community. Two adverse elements may also be neutralized with the use of a third "controlling" element.

The concept of ch'i is also central to feng shui. Ch'i refers to a hypothetical life force or energy that permeates all living and natural bodies: all animals, including people, have ch'i, as do plants, mountains, rivers, wind, the Earth, the Sun, the Moon, and the planets. Ch'i is viewed as a force that flows through the universe, thus connecting all living and non-

living objects. Ch'i, it is said, can be used for one's benefit, but it can never be controlled. The goal of feng shui is to use the Earth's ch'i to one's advantage. It is also the goal of feng shui to minimize the effects of *sha*, which is the term for the negative current that carries bad fortune and is seen as the opposite of ch'i.

The flow of ch'i is viewed in feng shui as vital to the well-being of one's home. Doors, hallways, gardens, and furniture all must be placed to provide for its optimal flow in order to prevent the disharmony that would result from holding ch'i in one place. According to Yin-Yang philosophy, blocking or preventing the smooth flow of ch'i is bad because movement and change are viewed as fundamental properties of the universe. Thus, interfering with this natural flow can be disruptive of the natural order and potentially disastrous. For example, feng shui teaches that a bed should be placed in a room so that it is not directly in front of a door and thus blocking the incoming ch'i energy. Mirrors are also viewed as being potentially powerful reflectors of this energy and thus must be placed so as not to concentrate ch'i into one area. There are many other such prescriptions for interior design and arrangement. Recommendations will often vary according to the feng shui practitioner, as the rules tend to be very general and subject to personal interpretation, but the goal is always the comfort, security, and prosperity of the dweller through the proper management of ch'i.

Finally, the feng shui practitioner might also employ any of the myriad Chinese folk rituals or traditional healing methods. For example, a

lucky charm or a bamboo flute may be placed in a particular location to ward off lurking evil spirits. Any of a number of folk adages might be quoted to justify this or some other recommendation. Various traditions, folk remedies, and superstitions from throughout Chinese culture have also been incorporated into feng shui's eclectic mix.

Feng shui is widely practiced today. Still popular in China, it has made its way throughout East Asia and is practiced in Singapore, Korea, Laos, Thailand, Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Japan. Recently, feng shui has made its way to the West and has become very popular among New Age enthusiasts. Books, TV shows, and Web sites attest to the efficacy of feng shui, expound its teachings, and sell an assortment of products and services purported to ward off bad luck and improve one's fortune.

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