

FENGSHUI AND THE ENVIRONMENT OF SOUTHEAST CHINA

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Abstract

Literally translated as 'wind and water', *Fengshui* has been used as a special and important tool to harmonize people with their built environment and with the surrounding natural world. By examining some aspects of *Fengshui* as it was employed in traditional villages in southeast China, this paper aims to explore how *Fengshui* influences the interactions of Chinese people with their natural world. It focuses on two aspects of the employment of *Fengshui* in the outer spaces of villages in Southeast China: site selection and the entrance organisation. The methodology employed in the research involved both field investigation and archival study with a special emphasis on the historical records of family trees in the villages of Southeast China. Some modern psychological and architectural principles are borrowed as a frame of reference for analysing the *Fengshui* models. This analysis concludes that *Fengshui* satisfies not only physical needs, but also environmental, psychological and aesthetic ones. It demonstrates one of the most distinctive and sensitive treatments to aspects of the natural environment and landscape. It has been able, therefore, to improve the quality of the environment.

Key words: *Fengshui*, environment, landscape, Southeast China

Introduction

Fengshui can be roughly translated as 'wind' and 'water'. In China, it has been thought to form the basis of human relationships with the built environment and with the surrounding natural world. It can be described as a traditional divination system which embodies ancient Chinese philosophy, science, and aesthetics and which has been applied to settlement design, architecture and the living space of Chinese housing and villages. There has been a firmly held folk belief among Chinese people that orientation, layout and the performance of appropriate actions at the critical time, will ensure health, good fortune, well-being and prosperity.

The problem with *Fengshui*, however, is that it cannot be readily classified as science, or art, or religion. Although aspects of it are founded on shrewd common sense and actual observation, much of its theory is drawn from Chinese philosophy and religious belief and an element of arcane superstition cannot be ruled out. For many years *Fengshui* was not considered to be a suitable subject for academic investigation. The reason was variously historical and political, but even in the immediately relevant field of built environmental study it has been effectively ignored.

Since the late 1960's the impact of Western civilization and technology has extended globally. As it has done so more and more Western scholars have sought deeper or different understandings of human beings. Such increased awareness has grown alongside a concern for environmental resources and ecological issues. The relationships between human and nature and between the built environment and human behavior have assumed an increasingly important role in a wide variety of disciplines including architecture and planning, anthropology and sociology, and psychology and geography. Amongst the many approaches to the complexity of people/environment relationships, a concern with harmonious living has led to the Western exploration of Eastern religious and philosophical traditions. Chinese *Fengshui* is one of these.

However, most of the recent interest in *Fengshui* has been generated in consequence of 'fashionable' design-inspired commerce and publishing. In the popular Western view, it is an easy target for ridicule or satire as well as a seductive vehicle for the practice of interior design. With relatively few exceptions, for example Fuechtwang (1974), Lee (1986) and Ruitenbeek (1993), its treatment—like its popularity—tends to the shallow. Western understanding of it is therefore probably distorted. Yet *Fengshui* has been practiced in China since early historic times and has roots that reach back to prehistory. As many scholars have indicated, *Fengshui* connects directly with Chinese folk beliefs, with the great Chinese religions and philosophy, with Chinese science, and with Chinese cosmology (e.g. Eitel, 1873; Feuchtwang, 1974; Lee, 1986; Ruitenbeek, 1993; He, 1998). It has been profoundly important in the development of both formal and vernacular architecture and environment and in consequence, it has inscribed the Chinese environment with some of its most distinctive and sensitive elements.

This paper attempts to analyse how *Fengshui* influenced the environment of traditional villages, with particular references to the *Huizhou* area of *Anhui* province and *Jiangxi* province in Southeast China. It focuses on two aspects of the employment of *Fengshui* in the outer space of village in Southeast China: site selection structured by an ideal *Fengshui* model and the entrance organisation for the whole village according to *Fengshui*'s principle 'water-mouth'. The methodology involves analysis of *Fengshui* texts and rules, field investigation and archival study with a special emphasis on the historical records of family trees in the villages of Southeast China. Some psychological and aesthetic principles are borrowed as a frame of reference for analysing the *Fengshui* models. The analysis aims to discover and delineate certain constant themes of likely relevance to *Fengshui*. On the basis of this analysis, it might be possible to conclude that *Fengshui*, such a seemingly irrational phenomenon, has the potential of giving effective meaning to the environment, and of emphasising the psychological needs of those for whom dwellings are built. All of these will be helpful for a better understanding of *Fengshui* and its employment in today's urban context.

The Background

As Knapp (1986:21) confirms, vernacular dwellings in China are found clustered in nucleated settlements or located individually among the fields and mountains. Such places are clearly not only for dwellings but also for agriculture. The agricultural environment means that the Chinese rural population, mostly of peasants, is vulnerable to nature. The fate of humans is inextricably bound up with the whims and cycles of the forces of nature (or, in China, Heaven and Earth), such as weather, sunlight, fertility of the land, floods and the accessibility of water. Acutely conscious of these natural forces, Chinese peasants built up their dwellings with purposeful efforts to follow cosmic patterns. Such cosmic patterns can, they believe, protect them.

The condition of small-scale agriculture also encouraged peasants to reside clustered with the same patriarchal clan. Lineage organisation dominated almost every aspect of villagers' lives. Chinese villagers shared not only ancestors but also dreams of prosperity of clan population, abundance of wealth, and good fortune in the Royal

Examination. Searching for protection and good fortune is the central task of *Fengshui*. Therefore, *Fengshui* has been communicated from site selection to spatial organisation in these vernacular villages.

Physical environments and cultural landscapes are extremely diverse in China. Vernacular villages, therefore, differ from one district to another. This has brought varied application of *Fengshui*. Different principles were used according to local physical environmental conditions and cultural context. Generally speaking, in the better-watered and topographically more irregular South, although both the Form School and the Compass School were utilised people paid more attention to the forms of topography. By contrast, in the dry and cold North plain, except for some basic principles of the Form School, people predominantly employed principles of the Compass School such as the Eight Trigrams principles to their house.¹

In the *Huizhou* area, undulating hills and rivers are abundant and provide a good geographical base for *Fengshui*'s practice and development especially the employment of the Form School. After the *Ming* Dynasty (1368-1644 AD), both Buddhism and Taoism became the popular religions in this area. These two religions enhanced *Fengshui*'s popularity. In the meantime the area was deeply influenced by Neo-Confucianism which advocated the study of natural phenomena and which was much concerned with the siting and construction of suitable ancestral tombs. Some of the representative characters of this Neo-Confucianism, like *Zhu Xi* (1130-1200) and the brothers *Cheng Yi* (1033-1107) and *Cheng Hao* (1032-1085), even made a great contribution to the development of *Fengshui* theory (*Er-cheng quan-shu*, Song, c. +1110, *Hui-yan xian-sheng zhu-gong wen-jì*, Song, c. +1200). Their writings were often quoted in later *Fengshui* texts to show that *Fengshui* was approved by the orthodox. Apart from these three orthodox religions, Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism, there also existed unorthodox religious practices and folk beliefs in spiritual beings such as gods, ghosts and ancestors. Furthermore, a distinguishing feature of the area is that the above sets of religious beliefs existed and tolerated each other at the same time, despite conflicts and disagreements over religious principles. Such tolerant 'soil' helped *Fengshui* to become firmly established and to penetrate the whole rural community. In turn, it was such a physical, social and cultural background that has developed the principles of *Fengshui*.

In this area, villagers also resided clustered with the same patriarchal clan. Lineage organisation played significant part in the whole village. To some extent, the document of family trees of clans is a key record of the history of a village. From these documents, it was found that most villages were built by consulting a *Fengshui* Master from site selection to spatial organisation, and that these villages display outstanding features of harmonization with nature. It was also found that such features bestowed on the villages an identity and the spirit of a special place (*Genius Loci*). We discuss site selection first.

Site Selection: An Ideal Model

From the viewpoint of Western modern scholars, there are two ways in which the effect of the site on buildings can be considered. The first would deal with the physical nature of the site - its slope, type of rock or soil, run-off, vegetative cover, microclimate, and so on; the second would consider the symbolic, religious, or cultural values of the site and their consequences (Rapoport, 1969:74). To some extent, *Fengshui* attends to both of these ways. But whilst examining physical nature, it also aims to find symbolic meanings. *Fengshui* believes that certain locales are more favorable than others not only because of their natural quality but also their symbolic power that could bring auspiciousness and good health.

The basic idea of site selection by *Fengshui* lies in the principle of 'induction' and the belief that human events and natural process (terrestrial and celestial) interact with each other. Terrestrial and celestial *Qi* integrates a unity associated with *Yin* and *Yang* that is vital to everything.

Qi is a significant concept in Chinese thought (He, 1998: appendix I). It can be translated as breath, or energy (for more details see Palmer, M. 1997:52). Generally speaking, it has a close relationship to life. For instance, *Qi* in human bodies brings energy and keeps people alive. *Qi* in earth maintains all living beings. In order to induce the beneficial *Qi* into human dwellings, the first rule is to find a place in which the most *Qi* is accumulated. The Form School of *Fengshui* considers mountain dragons, surrounding hills, water-courses, spots and directions as the most important terrestrial and celestial elements for human dwellings because these elements symbolize

both terrestrial and celestial *Qi*. Altogether, these elements comprise the basic concepts of the Form School and are known as the 'Five Fengshui Esoteric Teachings' or 'transmitted teachings' which govern the choice of the site (*Di-li wu-jue*, *Qing* Dynasty). By analysing *Fengshui* texts, these five Esoteric Teachings are summarized as follows.

The first of these 'Esoteric Teachings' is called 'Seeking the Dragon': The Dragon (*long*) represents the whole location of the site but refers particularly to the mountain ridges and land formations. In a mountainous area, the dragon is of great importance and receives more attention than any of other elements, as it symbolises the forces of nature (Fuechtwang, 1974). It is claimed to either make or destroy men's fortune. In general, *Fengshui* views the ridge or vein of the hills as a dragon. If they have a 'good' undulating profile, they will be—like a good dragon—full of living breath *Qi*. They imply, too, the solidity and stability of the hills. In addition, *Fengshui* views the soil as the flesh of the dragon; rocks as the dragon's bones; and grass as the dragon's hair. If the proportions of the flesh, bone and hair are comparable to those possessed by a human being then the hills are properly formed and favorable. For easy judgment, many *Fengshui* manuals classify different mountains into Nine Stars according to their shapes and situations (Fig. 1).

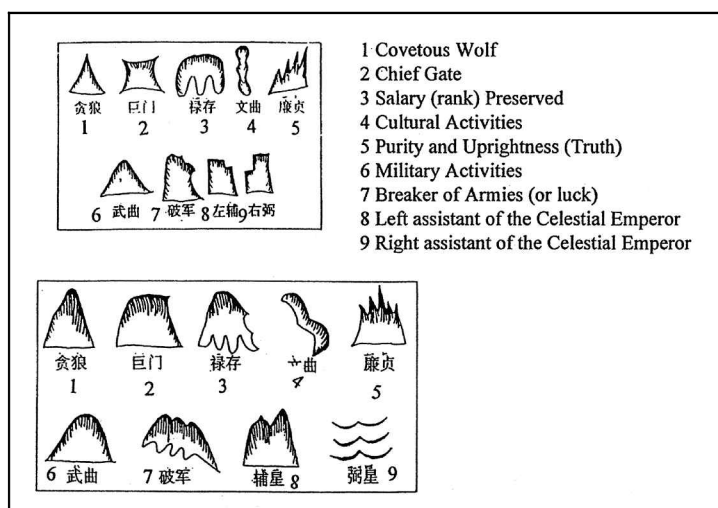


Fig. 1 Nine Stars and Shapes of Mountains

Source: *Di-li da-quan* & *Yin-yang er-zhai quan-shu*, *Qing* Dynasty

The second 'Esoteric Teaching' is called 'Observing the sands': Sand (*sha*), of course, means earth or alluvium. In *Fengshui* it symbolises the surroundings or neighbouring environment of the site and especially the presence of any distinguishable shape in the contours of the earth or in the banks of gullies and watercourses, or even in the shape of particular large boulders. There are many ways to observe the sands. First, they should be distinguished from the dragon hills surrounding the site, for the dragon is the principal host while the sands are secondary; clearly they will never be higher or bigger than the dragon. There are, besides, many other common and detailed standards by which to judge sands, for example, sand that is round, regular and full in shape is considered likely to bring fortune, while sand that is irregular and defective will do the opposite. Second, the sands to the right of the site (or in the west) should be slightly lower than those to the left of the site (or in the east) (Fig. 2). Third, the sands may be classified by various star symbols according to the shape or profiles of the hills to which they belong. For instance, the star of Fire represents sands that have a sharp and cutting edge like flames, while the star of Wood represents those bold and straight like a trunk of a tree. Those which are smooth and round are symbolised by the star of Metal, whilst those which have an undulating wave-like pattern are represented by the star of Water. The star of Earth represents sands that have a square shape contour (Fig. 3). Once the quality of the sand has been determined and classified accordingly, the relationships between sands and other factors of the site can then be assessed according to the principles of the production or destruction of the Five elements. (Sometimes the Five elements are translated as the Five Phases).

'Looking at the water' is the third Esoteric Teaching. Water (*shui*) depicts all watercourses and concentrations of water near the site. It

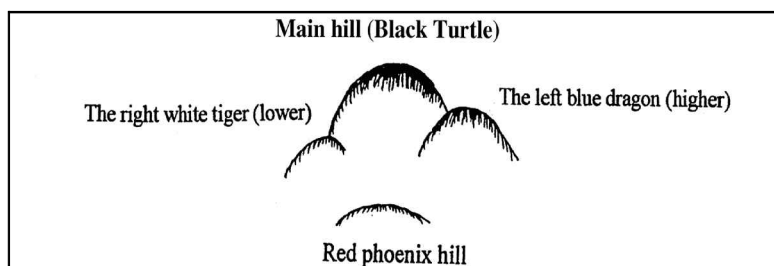


Fig. 2 The Relationship between the Right Sand Dunes and the Left Sand Dunes

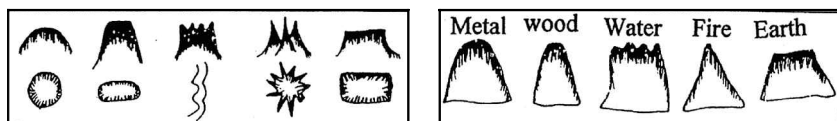


Fig. 3 The Five Elements and the Shapes of Sand Dunes
Source: *Di-li zhi-zhi yuan-zhen* (Qing Dynasty)

is also an essential element for site selection. *Fengshui* principles focus largely on what is called the ‘water-mouth’; that is, the point at which the watercourse flows into the area of the site, and the point at which the watercourse leaves the site. The first water-mouth where the watercourse flows into the site should be in an open space in order to receive living breath. The second water-mouth (*shui-kou*) where the watercourse leaves the site should enclose the site in an ‘embrace’. *Fengshui* tradition has generally paid more attention to the second one that has come to represent the concept of the water-mouth. The site should also be in the inner part of the bend of a watercourse meander, thus ensuring site enlargement by deposition. Location in the outer part of the bend, of course, threatens site erosion. Finally, the physical qualities and configurations of the watercourse itself are considered. Ideally, it should be in a situation which is beautiful (*mei*), luxuriant and elegant (*xiu*), and pure or simple (*chun*), thus bringing good fortune. Otherwise, the situation would be less than ideal and might be described as confused (*bo-za*), chaotic (*cuo*) or muddy (*ni* or *zhuo*). In addition, in flatlands or lands abounding in rivers and lakes, water becomes the most important factor and possesses the status of a water ‘dragon’ like the mountain ‘dragon’ in a mountainous area.

The fourth Esoteric Teaching is called ‘pointing out the spot’. Literally, ‘spot’ (*xue*) means ‘pit’ or ‘lair’, but in *Fengshui* the dragon ‘pit’ indicates the spot of the site. In practical terms, the spots are the most difficult to assess and this has led to the famous saying ‘to find the dragon is easy, the difficulty is to find the *xue* (Spot)’! In general, the spots should ‘rest’ on the hills (the so called ‘black snake’ behind or to the North). There should be a number of small hills respectively on the right and left of the site (the so called ‘blue dragon’ left and ‘white tiger’ right). Usually, the spots of villages and cities should be in a wide and flat situation in rectangular shape (its longer side pointing east-west and shorter side pointing south-north),

and with the 'red phoenix' hills in the front of the site, far away. The foundation should also be in the central part of the dragon mountain, avoiding both the head and tail of the dragon.

The application of these four Esoteric Teachings constitutes, in effect, a thorough site survey, determining the suitability of an area for building. Finally, the orientation of buildings is assessed through the fifth Esoteric Teaching, 'Deciding the orientation'. Orientation (*xiang*) means literally the direction to be faced by buildings on the site. If the other four factors satisfy *Fengshui* principles, then *Fengshui* experts will decide an ideal and final orientation of individual buildings, using a compass or, alternatively, another set of *Fengshui* principles of the Compass School. Afterwards a map of the whole situation of the village or city will be produced. In traditional China, site selection is always conducted through these five different steps. No Esoteric Teaching is ever considered individually; all of them form a single process and are always used in relation to each other. It also shows that both the Form School and the Compass School are applied in practice.

Usually, the landforms as illustrated in Figure 4, are assumed to be the ideal model. This is a slightly elevated place with a range of undulating hills at the back (north), symbolically known as 'the black turtle'. The hills on the east or left, known as 'the blue dragon' nestles gently with the hills on the west or right, known as 'the white tiger', with their bodies curving gently towards each other to form a horseshoe, or armchair shape. Hills on the west should never be higher than the one on the east. In front of the site (south), the presence of low and level hills, known as 'the red phoenix' enhances

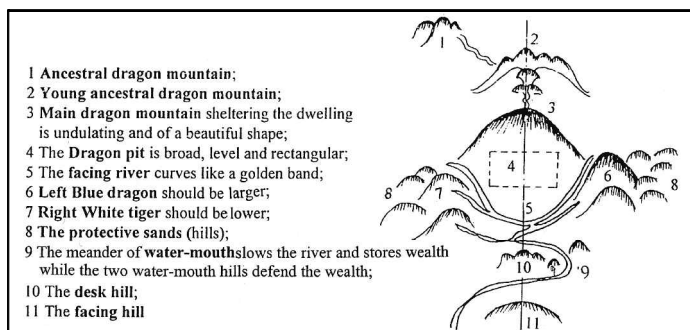
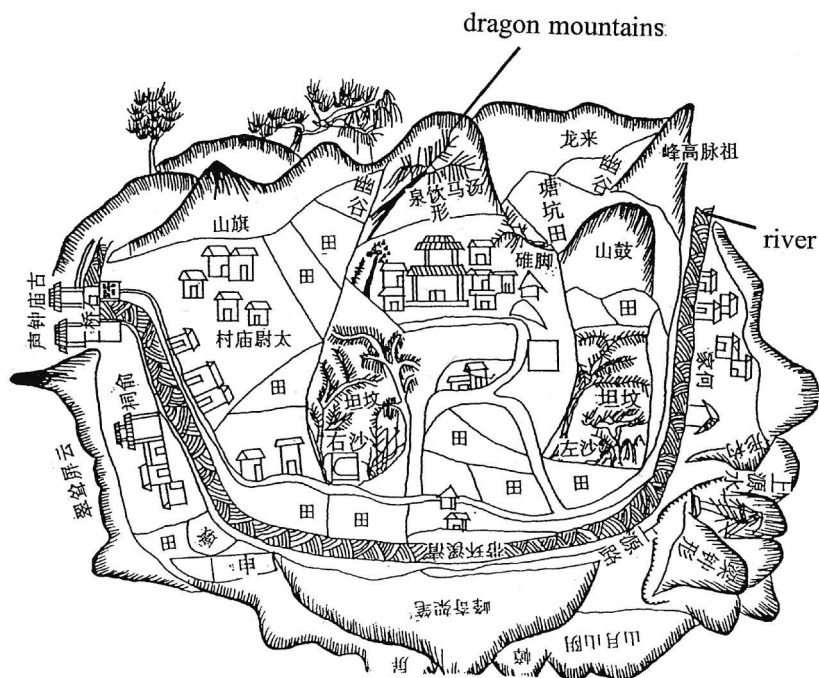


Fig. 4 The Ideal *Fengshui* Model of Landscape

Fengshui texts always convince people to make modifications if the situation of a site is not as the ideal model suggested; otherwise it would cause problems to human beings. The authors' field investigation and archival study of villages in the *Huizhou* area during the 1980s discovered a typical pattern of outer space of these villages as Figs. 5-7 show. The investigation also found that many maps of villages, like Fig. 5, were drawn by *Fengshui* masters or experts when the site had been identified by them. Therefore, it is inferred that this typical pattern follows the ideal *Fengshui* model. In other words, it is possible to say that the ideal *Fengshui* model structured the landscape and the relationships between people and the environment of these villages.



Source: The Historical Records of the Family Tree of the *Fang* clan in *Huizhou*
of *Anhi* province, *Qing* Dynasty
(Traced by Xiaoxin He)

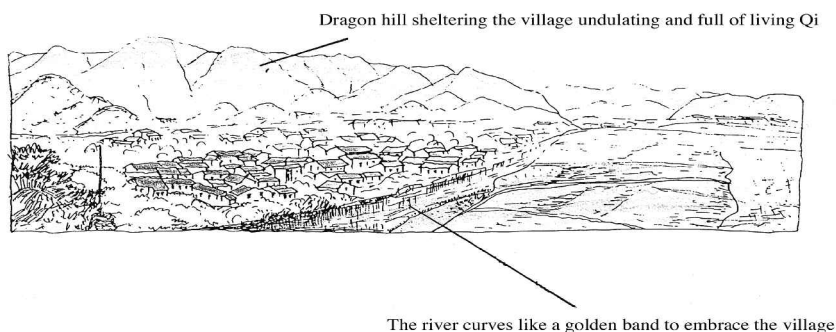


Fig. 6 *Chenkan Village in Huizhou of Anhui Province*

Based on Photo by the Department of Architecture of Southeast University, China
(Drawn by Xiaoxin He)

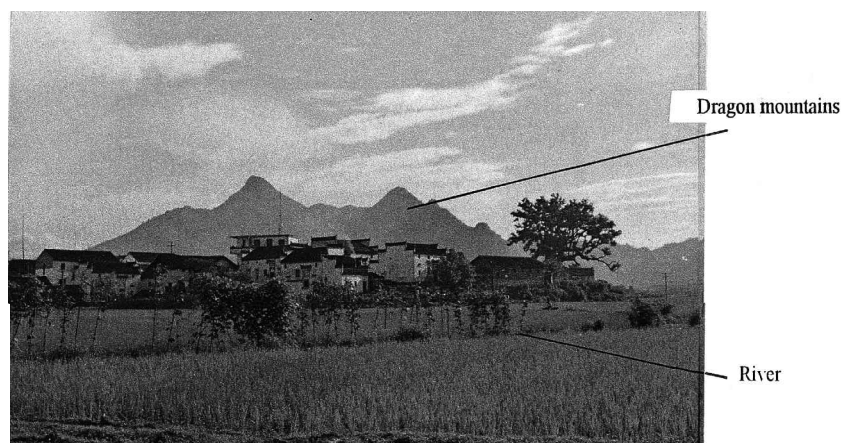


Fig. 7 *Fuchun Village in Jiangxi Province*

(Photo by Xiaoxin He)

An analysis of this ideal model indicates its environmental reasonableness, and reinforces the argument that *Fengshui* is not just based on superstition but has absorbed numerous pragmatic and scientific values. First, it satisfies the physical needs for dwelling. As Figure 8 demonstrates, this kind of site can receive maximum insolation whilst being sheltered from the effects of cold winds. The site, 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. The outer bank, by contrast, is not favored since erosion would be active there. But the meaning of this model extends beyond

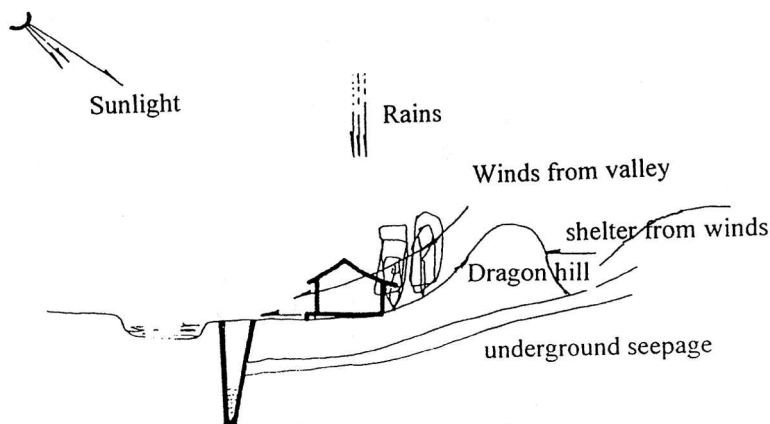


Fig. 8 The Analysis of Ideal *Fengshui* Model

natural physical satisfaction. As far as possible it also satisfies the need for security since the dragon hills provide a defense for the whole village whilst the smaller hills guard the site from the left and right. The river meander, embracing the site, also adds to the general sense of security and enclosure. Second, from the aesthetic point of view, the model offers the best balance of landscape elements. The gentle curve of the meander, in particular, corresponds with ancient Chinese aesthetic standards. Third, the model embodies the physical expression of the ancient Chinese cosmological concept of the four orientations: 'the left is the blue dragon (East), the right is the white tiger (West), the back is the black tortoise (North), and the front is the red phoenix (South).'

Of course, the great range of topographic conditions in Southeast China naturally militates against single pattern of siting because the hilly and watered areas are quite different environmental situations for the operation of *Fengshui*. However, it is clear that the above ideal model has been favoured by common rural Chinese people.

For example, in well-watered alluvial lowlands, if the back of the site is surrounded by a watercourse, the watercourse itself becomes the main dragon and is called a water dragon. Then the site assessment should follow the principles of the water dragon. As a classical text of the Form School, '*Di-li-wu-jue*' states: 'The mountain belongs to *Yin* while the land abounding in rivers and lakes belongs to *Yang*. Highland is *Yin* while flatland is *Yang*. The methods of look-

ing at it are different. For the mountain area, the site should be elevated with solid mountains to its back and lower and small hills in the front. But for the lowland the site should have lower and vacant land to its back and full block in the front. Mountains are the principal element in mountain areas and the back of the site must be high, while water is the principal element in flatlands and the back of the site must be low'. Therefore, in watered areas of Southeast China, such as *Jiangsu* and *Zhejiang* provinces, another ideal *Fengshui* model has been developed. This depends on watercourses at the back and facing streets. However, the water dragon model is still concerned with checking the whole situation of a site and the relationships between oncoming mountain dragons, sands and watercourses should be similar to the ideal model in Figure 4, even though the spatial scale of these relationships may be much more extensive. Most Chinese cities are in such situations. The ideal model is also applied in many Japanese villages and cities (Kalland, 1996, 1999).

When a site fell short of the ideal, several methods were used to modify the landscape to improve the relationships between people and the locations. For example, straight rivers and hills that threatened life and prosperity were modified by adding some man-made piles of earth or by plantations of trees that provide protection and shelter. Even particular buildings, such as pagodas, towers, bridges or dams might be constructed to balance the demands of the site. The details of such modifications have remained in many historical records of traditional cities, villages, and even temples (He, 1990). Once again, the aim is to give order to the landscape and to bestow on the Chinese landscape the homogeneous patterns which are one of its most remarkable characteristics, and which harbour for the Chinese a world of unique, auspicious, meanings.

The Organisation of the Entrance of the Village

It is instructive to consider aspects of village location and design from the ancient *Fengshui* perspective and from the modern viewpoint of environmental psychology. The terminology is radically different, but there is a surprising degree of accord in the underlying principles. Consider, first, the approach of *Fengshui* to the importance of the location and constructions at the 'water-mouths' (*shui-kou*)

a) *The location of the water-mouth (shui-kou)*

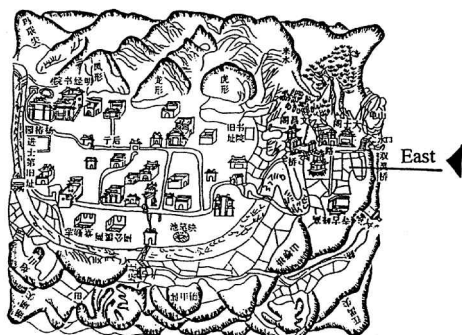
As mentioned above, initially, there are two kinds of water-mouth. One is located in the so called 'upper hand' of villages, where the river flows into the village, and the other is located in the 'lower hand', where the river exits the village. Because water was thought of as a metaphor for wealth, the place the river flows in should be in an open situation in order to receive living *Qi* or wealth, while the place the river exits the village should be in a 'closed' situation to retain *Qi*. Usually it is easy to keep the upper hand of villages in an open situation by not planting too many trees. So *Fengshui* paid much more attention to the 'lower hand' water-mouth to make sure the 'wealth' did not flow away. Gradually, the 'lower hand' water-mouth has come to represent the concept of the 'water-mouth'. It also serves as a metaphor for prosperity and the capacity to earn wealth for the whole village. The water-mouths discussed below in this paper are all the 'lower hand' water-mouths.

Places which are chosen as the water-mouth have similar geographical characteristics. Generally, they occur where the river breaches an arc in the mountains to give the appearance of two hills joined by a clear stream or river. Usually, the two hills are named the lion and elephant hills or the tortoise and snake hills. Together they give a protected appearance to the landscape. Because it exists at the exit of the watercourse from the site, the water-mouth often identifies the lowest point of possible foundation construction.

The major natural topography of China contains a sort of checker-board of two intersecting sets of parallel mountain chains running from the Southwest to the Northeast and three parallel mountain chains from west to east, which means that in general topography is higher in the West and gradually becomes lower towards the East. The main rivers, therefore, flow from the West to the East and, usually, village water courses exit to the east, south, or southeast where the water-mouth will be sited. From the historical records of many Chinese villages, it seems that these sites were selected deliberately to reflect this generalisation, with the majority of them in the southeast. In terms of the Eight trigram of *Yi Jing* (The book of changes), Southeast is the *Xun* place, and is described as the 'throat' of the river and the 'lock' of the water mouth (Fig. 9 a, b, c.).



a. Source: the Historical Records of the Family Tree of the *Fang* clan in *Huizhou* of *Anhui* province, *Qing* Dynasty



b. Source: The Historical Records of the Family Tree of the *Hu* clan in *Huizhou* of *Anhui* province, *Qing* Dynasty



c. Source: The Historical Records of the Family Tree of the *Hu* clan in ancient *Huizhou* of *Jiangxi* province, *Qing* Dynasty

Fig. 9 The Location of A Typical Water-mouth: South, East and Southeast
(Traced by Xiaoxin He)

b) *Constructions at the water-mouth*

In *Fengshui* thinking the water-mouth serves as a metaphor for prosperity and the capacity to earn wealth. To retain this capacity, the lower water mouth should be closed in or 'locked' by additional constructions. These may be bridges, pavilions, dams, pools, cultural towers or Buddhist towers. The investigation of the *Huizhou* area showed that the most familiar method of securing the water-mouth is the construction of high cultural towers, pavilions, bridges and Buddhist towers. These have become the special architectural, human and cultural symbols which give a Chinese character to the landscape (Fig. 10, a, b).

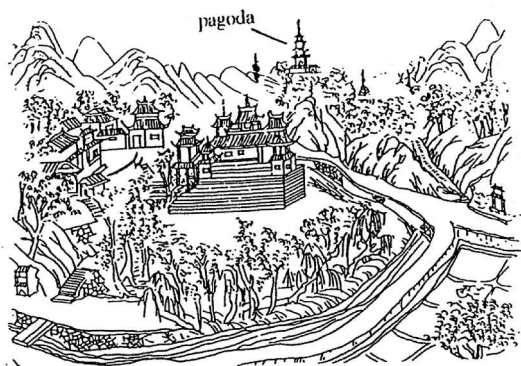
One of the most interesting constructions at the water mouth was found in the village of *Feng* in *Huizhou* area where they are called 'Heaven's door and 'Earth's gate' (Fig. 11). The archival study of the records of the village tracked down a detailed description of the reasoning behind the buildings and the fortunate outcomes that followed their construction. It is translated as follows:

The village had not been prosperous since it was founded in the *Yuan* Dynasty (1271-1368 AD). Later generations listened to the advice of a *Fengshui* master to build a wall around *Anren* bridge to symbolise the door to Heaven, and to construct a pavilion under the *Liren* bridge to symbolise Earth's gate. They were to be built, not merely for opera playing and the like, but as crucial elements in the destiny of the entire clan. Heaven's door is open to the village and its social morality; Earth's gate closes to keep its secrets in the village. Soon the village reached the heights of prosperity (The History Record of Family Trees of the *Feng* Clan in *Anhui* Province, *Qing* Dynasty).

As Figure 11 indicates, Heaven's door and Earth's gate define the outer space of the whole village. The naming of particular mountains, too, as 'tortoise', 'snake', 'lion', and 'elephant' adds further to the strong feeling of security and identity with the environment amongst the people there, simultaneously giving physical substance to religiously inspired feelings of auspiciousness and bad *Qi* of the villagers.

c) *Environmental Psychology*

It is possible to consider the water-mouth and the structures there from the viewpoint of modern environmental psychology as well as from the historical and cultural perspective of *Fengshui*. In modern



- a. Source: The Historical Records of the Family Tree of the *Minjin Reni* Branch of the *Hu* Clan in *Huizhou* of *Anhui* province, *Qing* Dynasty



- b. Source: The Historical Records of the Family Tree of the *Xian* Clan in *Huizhou* of *Anhui* province, *Qing* Dynasty

Fig. 10 The Construction of the Water-mouth in *Huizhou* Village of *Anhui* Province (Traced by Xiaoxin He)

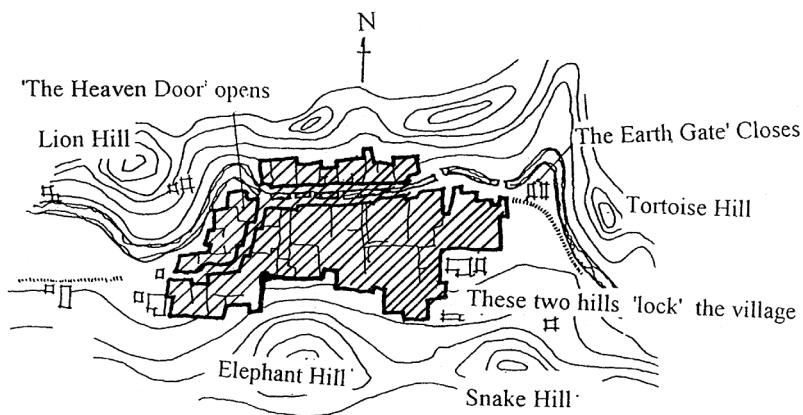


Fig. 11 Water-mouth of Heaven's Door and Earth's Gate in *Feng* Village of *Huizhou*

environmental psychology, too, considerable emphasis is placed on notions of security and relative prosperity (Lawrence, 1987). Buildings at the water-mouth, therefore, can be interpreted as 'closing' the site with a protective screen which, to the Chinese, implies the conservation of traditional culture and the protection of ancestral spirits. In these circumstances, even the 'Cultural Revolution' of 1966-78 failed to eradicate the deeply ingrained significance of such *Fengshui* principles. At the same time, the importance of the physical surroundings may suggest to Chinese peasants a deeply conservative and defensive outlook.

The idea of erecting high buildings at the water-mouth can be interpreted as satisfying a psychological need identified by Gestalt psychologists to reorganise visual images in a search for symmetry and completion (Kanizsa, 1979). This is most apparent at the point where the river leaves the site at the lower of the two water-mouths and probably explains the tendency to focus more strongly on this site than on the 'upper' or entrance site. The high buildings constructed here have the effect of adding symmetry to the gap created by the river between the surrounding hills and effectively 'closing' it. This is, of course, exactly the same notion as that represented in *Fengshui* principle of balance and in the common aphorism that 'nature abhors a vacuum'. It is, therefore, quite commonplace to find, in the *Fengshui* writings and in the historical records of Chinese traditional villages, the observation that, 'all directions are surrounded by

hills . . . the only low situation is in the Southeast . . . Then listen to the *Fengshui* master and build a Buddhist tower to balance the landscape' (The Historical Records of the *Xiong* clan in *Jiagnxi* province).

In Western religious architecture the vertical dimension has always been considered of great significance pointing, as it does, towards Heaven (Fletcher, 1996). The function of structures in water-mouth, however, is threefold: first, to ensure cultural continuity and good fortune; second, to serve as a focus for conscience and sacred sentiment; third, to complete the aesthetic qualities of a carefully selected site.

The water-mouth structures also serve a more narrowly defined architectural purpose. They identify the entrance to the village in a clearly legible and unequivocal way. In addition, the tendency to group other buildings in the vicinity of the water-mouth creates an architecturally rich space which, together with the curve of the meander and the road into the heart of the village, serve to articulate the aspirations of the population. Moreover, the significance of the water-mouth is enhanced by the extent to which it serves as a centre for village activities and gatherings. There is no public square, or green meadow, in either rural or urban Chinese communities but the space created at the water-mouth serves an essentially similar function.

In its architectural totality, therefore, the aspirations embodied in *Fengshui* site organization coincide with Rudolf Schwarz's notion of a nested hierarchy of dwelling in which, 'we talk about landscape space and think of a house: the mountains are walls, the fields floors, the rivers paths, the coasts are edges and the lowest point in the mountain range the door' (Norberg-Schulz, 1971:28). In other words, many of the principles central to *Fengshui* are principles central to architecture everywhere.

Conclusion

It will be clear from the analysis of *Fengshui* experiences applied in the villages of the *Huizhou* area in Southeast China that *Fengshui* is an important and interesting phenomenon in rural Southeast China. Although its theory, based on the principles of *Yin-yang*, the Eight trigrams and the Five elements seems to conflict with scientific rationality, it appears to have worked effectively in the villages of Southeast China. It has been a significant power in shaping the landscape of vernacular villages in Southeast China. It has also given order and

special meaning to the environment there and has influenced the behaviour of Chinese people. Firstly, *Fengshui* has developed out of an intimate understanding of the need of Chinese village communities physically and psychologically, and the potential of Chinese physical environments. Second, through the organisation of village site and surroundings, *Fengshui* has brought feelings of security, well-being, and good fortune to generations of Chinese people, especially Chinese peasants. Thirdly, *Fengshui* demonstrates sensitive treatment to aspects of the natural environment. To some extent, *Fengshui* creates spirits of places with folk culture and broader cosmological thought that might be shared and valued by other religions and other cultures. In this sense, *Fengshui* might still be relevant in the present day when people face more and more environmental difficulties. At the same time, however, its powers should not be exaggerated. Its origins lie in the needs of earlier Chinese agricultural societies, and in today's circumstances its detailed imitation is probably both unnecessary and unwise.

In Southeast China, although the physical environments and cultural landscapes are diverse and different *Fengshui* schools were applied, there exists an ideal site model in most parts of the area. Physical elements such as mountains, rivers, trees, and buildings all convey special *Fengshui* meanings. In other words, the environment of Southeast China symbolized *Fengshui* principles, and in turn, this shared symbolic system made the environment of Southeast China meaningful for its dwellers and influenced the behaviour of these dwellers. The study shows that traditional worldview and folk belief provided a significant context for the understanding of the relationship between nature, culture and people.

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NOTES

1. There are two main *Fengshui* Schools: the Form school and the Compass school. The Form school is also known as the *Jiangxi* school after *Jiangxi* province where it was particularly strong. This school teaches that the power of the Elements and the planets of Heaven which influence human affairs are mirrored in the topographical forms of the earth. Thus, particular stress is laid upon the shape of mountains and the directions of watercourses, both of which are regarded as Dragons. The principal aim of the Form school, therefore, is to identify good dragons which are full of *Qi*, or Living Breath. The Compass school originated in *Fujian* province and therefore is sometimes called the *Fujian* school. It particularly emphasizes the principles of trigrams, the Branches, the Constellations, and so forth. In practice, it is frequently styled 'The Method of Temples, House and Dwellings'. It is also more attached to the use of the compass than the Form school.

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