



Book Review

Scientific Feng Shui for the Built Environment

Michael Y. Mak and Albert T. So, City University of Hong Kong Press,
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To many, Feng Shui is something mystical. If something cannot be explained in scientific terms, Feng Shui comes to rescue. To a certain degree, it is synonymous to superstition. This book by Dr. Mak and Dr. So sets out to bust this myth. This intention has been aptly spelled out in the title. The book has three parts: (A) Scientific Feng Shui (Chapter 2 to 5); (B) The Form School Approach (Chapter 6 to 11) and (C) The Compass School Approach (Chapter 12 to 17).

The main purpose of Part A is to put Feng Shui on a scientific footing as far as possible. The authors admit that without an approach relying on scientific methods, the study of Feng Shui would easily fall prey to superstition. The chapter on "Science and Feng Shui" begins with accounts of the philosophy of science and Chinese wisdom. Perhaps the differences between the Western and Eastern approaches to knowledge explain the philosophical emphasis of science and Feng Shui. The chapter ends with the observation of Western acceptance of Feng Shui knowledge. Chapter 3 "Scientific Methods and Feng Shui Study" outlines the various methodological constructs in the scientific research paradigm. The strength and weaknesses of these methodologies are also discussed. It is advocated that the study of Feng Shui is akin to the domain of soft methodologies such as naturalistic observation and case study; defining Feng Shui is no less difficult than studying it.

Chapter 4 pinpoints the importance of understanding the meaning of the terms used in Feng Shui study, in particular the intricacies and subtleties of many Chinese words in the Feng Shui language. With regard to the built environment, Feng Shui knowledge provides a holistic approach embracing ideas in Anthropology, Ecology and Architecture. In view of the complex philosophical constructs, the authors remind readers of the issues of terminology, translation and transliteration in studying Feng Shui. Through this introductory part, the authors highlight the fundamental differences between the East and West in explaining natural phenomena. Two major Feng Shui Schools/Approaches are introduced. Detailed treatment of the two Schools, Form and Compass, are provided in Part B and C respectively.

Part B is devoted to the Form School Approach. Chapter 6 gives a succinct account of the different cultural underpinnings of the East and West. The authors observe that the Western concept of architecture tends towards the 'reaching up to the heaven' approach. The Western architecture attitude to palaces and landscapes emphasizes the rigid structure in height and depth and the man-made environment in gardens, while Chinese architectural concepts tends towards harmonization of the built and natural environment. The Chinese architecture approaches to palaces and landscape stress the spatial relationship incorporated into the natural environment. It is argued that these traditional Chinese approaches to architecture originated in Feng Shui Knowledge, in particular from the Form School.

The fundamentals of the Form School are given in Chapter 7. Based on the Form School, the most predominant approach, Feng Shui models are to be constructed primarily of the physical configuration of the five Geographical Secrets (Dragon, Sand, Water, Cave and Direction) and the Four Emblems (Black Tortoise, Azure Dragon, White Tiger and Red Bird). The models are applicable in macrocosms and microcosms. Accordingly, outer and inner forms of dwellings are expanded to four design modules: surrounding environment, external layout, internal layout and interior arrangement.

Chapter 8 gives an excellent summary of the eight approaches discussed by various Feng Shui Scholars. The authors relate these approaches to contemporary Form School practices in architectural design and the built environment. Chapter 9 is an important chapter where the conceptualization of the Form School is presented. The four fundamental concepts of the Form School approach to building design are: Feng Shui Model, Parallelism, Form Design Modules and Feng Shui Design Criteria. Favorable and unfavorable conditions with regards to surrounding environment, external layout, internal layout and internal arrangement are particularly informative. For illustrative purposes, two Feng Shui villages in Hong Kong are examined in the light of the concepts of the Form School Approach. These examples, as presented in Chapter 10, exemplify the applications of the five geographical secrets and the four emblems theory. Apparently, the importance of having the right dragon, sand, water and cave is identified as being more significant than direction.

In Chapter 11, an example of a 6-star rated office development in Sydney is used to compare the concepts of Western sustainable design and Chinese Feng Shui. Harmonizing the built and natural environment underpins these two approaches. The prominent features in Chinese Feng Shui that map well with sustainability are the notions of balancing Yin and Yang, exterior and interior and the relationship between human and surrounding environment.

Part C (Chapter 12 to 17) details the Compass School Approach. In Chapter 12 and 13, the authors built connections between the Compass School and western philosophy in two aspects, numerology and modern physics. The Compass School appears to be more mystical than the Form School as it involves more philosophical concepts from Chinese beliefs in Tai Chi, Yin and Yang Theory, Eight Trigrams, Five Elements, etc. Two popular Compass School methods, the Eight Mansion and the Flying Stars are clearly explained in Chapter 15 and 16. In this connection, case studies both in Hong Kong and overseas are used to put 'theory' to practice. The authors state that "... To validate these methods scientifically takes time and requires substantial resources to unravel whatever fundamental physics lay behind them".

Feng Shui can be identified as the wisdom of ancient Chinese, harmonizing the built and natural environment. The nomenclature used is instrumental in a wider and easier acceptance by the general public. Notwithstanding, many of the features of the Form School Model echo well with good architectural practices for the comfort, health and safety of the inhabitants. Sustainability has been observed in the golden rule of 'live with what you have'. The notion of 'Qi' is interesting; although yet to be proved scientifically, similar propositions underpin many of the Chinese medicine practices.

Readers with Feng Shui knowledge would find this book informative. Inter-twined with discussions on Chinese civilization, Western and Eastern approaches to architecture, sustainability, numerology and cosmology, the body of knowledge on Feng Shui has been expounded lucidly in a scientific context. For readers of limited knowledge on Feng Shui, the authors have thoughtfully prepared an introductory chapter giving succinct information about the content and chapters arrangement. In addition, for ease of acquaintance with the key concepts and terminology used, a cursory read of the list of classical Feng Shui Terms is useful. The last chapter (18) points to future directions of scientific Feng Shui in the context of research and education for the built environment.

Overall, this is an interesting introduction to Feng Shui, a handy reference on the applications of Feng Shui concepts to the built environment and a thought-provoking read on a scientific approach to explain Feng Shui.

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