

Feng shui in the Chinese cityscape: China proper and overseas

As the historical situation since 1949 has been radically different on the Chinese mainland and in the overseas Chinese lands of Hong Kong, Macau, Taiwan and Singapore, the respective uses of feng shui in these places shall initially be sketched separately. Much has happened in recent years, however: Hong Kong and Macau have been returned to China, and economic co-operation and integration between Taiwan and China tends to even out previous distinctions in lifestyle and culture. The great cities of eastern and southern China in particular increasingly resemble Hong Kong and Taipei in both commercial drive and architecture. Moreover, feng shui is again being integrated in the vibrant and universal Chinese urban culture along with quick business, intensive shopping, conspicuous consumption, going to temples and chatting on mobiles.

CITIES IN CHINA PROPER

Until just one or two decades ago, feng shui was little practised in Chinese cities. Already the modernization drive of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century and the foreign grip on Chinese education did much to repress common feng shui practices in the major Chinese cities, such as Beijing, Shanghai, Chengdu, Xian, Wuhan and Guangzhou. Both foreign and Chinese descriptions from the early twentieth century tend to indicate that feng shui was little used and feng shui masters were marginalized. Feng shui had mostly become a rural phenomenon, associated with backwardness and superstition (*mixin*). The new breed of western-educated Chinese scholars resisted it strongly, even to a point of being ashamed of it on behalf of their culture. Chinese sociologists like Fei Xiaotong, Godwin Chu and Francis Hsu, and philosophers like Feng Yulan, mainly saw feng shui as a rural phenomenon not worthy of much attention. There were exceptions. An interest persisted among those traditionally-minded scholars working in the fields of classical literature and philosophy, and books

on the subject were still produced up until the communist revolution. It was also evident that those privileged few who had access to burial in auspicious sites would maintain the tradition. Another exception related to internal geographical and cultural divisions. The south-eastern parts of China in particular (notably the province of Fujian, which is also known for its massive graves) appear to have held on to feng shui practices in both rural and urban areas. The coming of Communism in 1949 and the Cultural Revolution of 1966–76 added a new layer of criminalization and vicious punishments to both religious and folk-religious practices. The communist state cleansed the cities they controlled from all traditional culture and beliefs. Thus, from the 1920s and until the 1980s, feng shui was mainly a historical artefact, shunned as an unnecessary cultural burden in the modernization of the Chinese nation and repeatedly classified by the ruling authorities as a feudal superstition.

The urban feng shui revival of the 1980s to 2000s had dual sources: business and academics. Taking academics first (and leaving business until later), a great number of Chinese intellectuals, many of whom were quite young, reacted to the pursuit of wholesale foreign ideology and culture in the previous decades and thus began to explore their cultural roots. They were to some extent supported by the Chinese government, which attempted a modernization without westernization. Gradually, but persistently, new aspects of native Chinese religion, cosmology and culture were being revived, often in modern interpretations. For instance, Confucianism, *qigong*, clan organizations and clan halls, all kinds of divination, Buddhist and Daoist temples, family altars, ancestor worship, *Yi jing* and *bagua* studies are now part of public life again. China's economic success has certainly also boosted national self-assuredness and inspired new faith in those traditions that were previously associated with backwardness, such as Confucianism.

Today, massive environmental problems in China and a growing public concern in that regard have inspired new interest in ancient Chinese natural philosophy, particularly those thought systems professing harmony and balance (see Chapter 8).

Hence, a number of trends have contributed to a new academic pursuit of feng shui studies, although everyone must work with due caution because the subject remains controversial in the eyes of the state. Many young intellectuals have started dabbling with feng shui in a guise of modern science, drawing parallels to modern geography, human ecology, environmental philosophy, psychology, magnetism and much more. It is also evident that the strict censorship on all media favours these rationalistic interpretations

of feng shui over others. For instance, feng shui studies relating to *yang* dwellings (those of the living) may be fairly easily published, while feng shui studies relating to *yin* dwellings (those of the dead), which plays just as large a part of the feng shui specialists' work, are very difficult, if not impossible, to publish.

New debate

Since 1990, a steady flow of new books on feng shui have appeared in the Chinese bookshops (see Chapter 7), although with a temporary setback in the early 2000s when the government's campaign against Falungong spilled over to other parts of the religious book market. With the rapid economic integration with Hong Kong and Taiwan, books from these markets have been republished or copied in China, adding to a growing feng shui literature; today, these books are displayed openly in urban bookshops, in campus bookstalls and in airport kiosks alongside books on medicine, Chinese cooking and the Great Wall. Books on feng shui are also among the best-selling categories of Chinese books abroad, thus serving as a Chinese cultural marker despite decades of denigration.

Along with feng shui gaining a foothold among groups of intellectuals and manifesting itself in architecture and business, a public debate on the issue is currently unfolding, even occupying the central state-controlled media. One opinion poll among several pointed out that 39 per cent of the population now believes in feng shui (China Association for Science and Technology). The most eminent Chinese academics are divided on whether feng shui is 'science' or 'superstition'. Chen Zhihua, a professor of architecture from Qinghua University, stated that feng shui is no science – '[i]t only fills the wallets of some charlatans' – while in rural areas, feng shui gives rise to generation-long feuds: 'these are the tragedies of the Chinese nation' (*China Daily*, 15 September 2005). Another strong critic is Fang Zhouzi (Fang Shimin), China's foremost 'science policeman', who has made it his vocation to reveal pseudo-science, academic plagiarism and academic corruption in China. His point is that the Chinese are too easy to cheat since they lack 'the spirit of scepticism, rationality and empiricism' (*China Daily*, 18 August 2005). In his view, feng shui is simply pseudo-science without any backing in facts and driven by a rising commercialism in Chinese society that enables 'masters' of all kinds to bribe the media and even professionals to bolster their supernatural powers (his website (in Chinese): www.xys.org, last accessed 22 March 2008). On a similar note, a

renowned science-fiction writer warned in public that '[f]engshui is coming back in the name of science'.

Positioned on the other side is a growing line of academics seeking new inspiration in Chinese tradition. Yu Xixian, a professor from Beijing University and among the first to study the subject, maintains it is a sound and integrated part of Chinese culture and points to its rising recognition in other parts of the world. Han Zenglu, a specialist on city planning, finds, with reference to Chinese history, that feng shui is the simple philosophy of living in harmony with your environment: 'Feng shui stresses balance and co-ordination in urban planning, ideal space between buildings and comfort of the dwellers – modern constructions often lack these qualities.' Still more academics challenge the official view on 'superstition'; for instance, Xie Jinliang, a renowned *Yi jing* scholar of Fujian University advised that his department at the campus had its gate changed to avoid trouble and improve performance – and the university government carried out the change.

The Chinese government has reacted with a mixture of dismay and pragmatism. Despite relatively easy access to book publishing, explicit reference to feng shui still tends to be discouraged in the public sphere and kept out of state institutions. Universities may be permitted to organize seminars on feng shui, such as when Beijing University in 1992 held a large symposium on feng shui studies (Wang Q. 1992), and professor Yu Xixian offered a lecture series at this university, obviously inspired by the great popularity of feng shui in the West. University professors may also engage in feng shui study tours to China for foreigners, or give lectures on the subject at home and abroad. Yet, when it comes to establishing it as a subject at campuses, the authorities stall.

In a much publicized case from 2005, the famous Nanjing University (Jiangsu province), in co-operation with the China Architectural Culture Centre, announced a feng shui training course (the first of its kind in China) to teach traditional architecture and ancient feng shui practices. Since both architects and property developers are in want of such initiatives, feng shui courses are becoming a lucrative market. Nanjing University immediately came under pressure from both public authorities and local media, however, accusing it of 'promoting superstition', and the university eventually denied its involvement. A range of sources, both public media and private individuals I spoke to in Nanjing, maintained that there was a tremendous interest in the course. In such cases, the will of the government is extended through the university party secretaries, who despite usually

giving in to the universities' desire for development still defend key policy issues.

Nanjing universities have been in the forefront of the feng shui revival in China. A young scholar of the Southeastern University, He Xiaoxin, in 1990 published a study, 'Exploring the Source of Feng shui', which received national recognition both because it was the first serious study published after 1949 and because of its novel interpretation and good quality. This small book is, in fact, among the books I have most often seen in the possession of modern feng shui specialists. Over the years, a circle of Nanjing scholars have established themselves in *Yi jing*, *bagua*, feng shui and other studies, for instance at the Yi jing Research Institute of the Nanjing University. Examples of the range of new feng shui books in China will be given in Chapter 7.

Apart from publishing books and articles, academics are increasingly active in lecturing and consulting on feng shui matters, though mostly for businesses. In want of feng shui masters with formal education and social recognition, many corporate executives turn to the universities for assistance in seeing feng shui, for instance among scholars in the fields of philosophy, ethics and religion. Some may find it tempting to supplement their income, and in the fastest developing cities the market seems insatiable. State units may also turn to university teachers for feng shui assistance, feeling more secure among academics than on the open market. A university professor whom I visited in Nanjing confirmed that he had frequent enquiries about the subject. He musingly expressed the use of feng shui this way: 'It is like prostitution – the government maintains it doesn't exist, but wherever you scratch the surface you will find it.'

Feng shui for business

While feng shui as an academic subject has been troublesomely pursued by a small avantgarde, the interest in it from Chinese business has been explicit and almost universal. In fact, the bigger the business, the bigger the interest. In the beginning, it was driven by overseas Chinese investors and returnees: Taiwanese, Hong Kong and Singaporean investors as a matter of course brought their own conventional feng shui considerations to China. When engaging in any large joint-venture operation (and later entirely foreign-owned operations) such as factories, businesses, shopping centres, hotels and housing complexes, they would demand the advice and approval of feng shui specialists; most often, they would bring in their own. The

Chinese government, denouncing feng shui in public, was put in a squeeze, but reacted pragmatically.

Today, even the official news agency, Xinhua, will quote feng shui specialists for saying that 'at least 70 percent of [Nanjing's] real estate projects are appraised by feng shui masters before the construction starts' (*Xinhua*, 14 September 2005). In the case of the southern cities of Xiamen and Fuzhou, the percentage is presumably much higher, and in Hong Kong it is a *sine qua non* (see below).

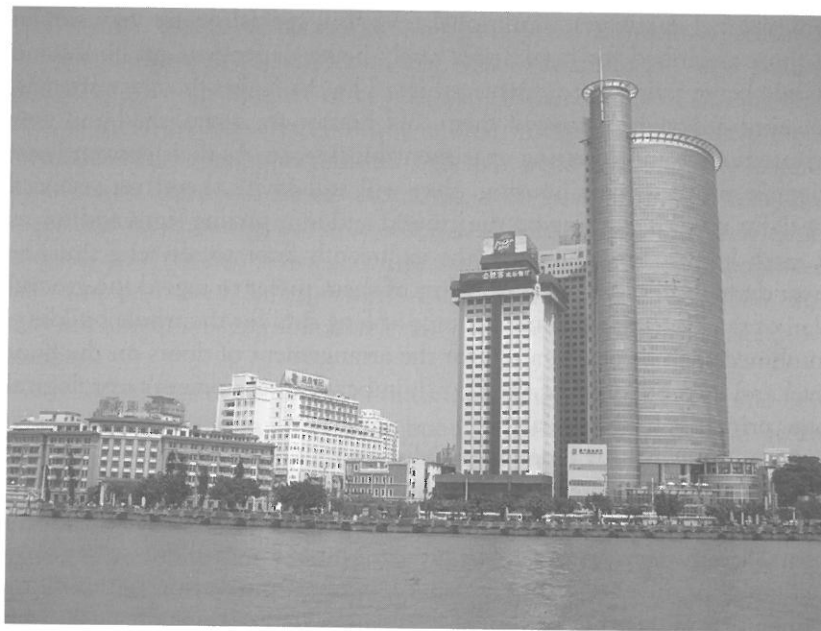


Fig 6.1 New office buildings towering above older ones quickly alter the feng shui situation in Chinese cities; here, at the waterfront in Xiamen, China. Photograph by Ole Bruun.

The urban feng shui masters

It is well known from Chinese tradition that everyday people were served by specialists with little bookish learning and for a modest fee, while higher echelons of society went to masters with higher cultural level and literary skills; many such were found in Buddhist and Daoist temples (for an explanation of the geomancer-monk, see Yoon 2006: 182). Today, this pattern is quickly returning, the size of the specialists' fees alone creating

sharp distinctions. Several kinds of feng shui specialists offer their services in Chinese cities, at the same time belonging to different stages of a spiritual revival.

First of all, there is the traditional, village-type feng shui specialist practising for mainly the suburban population among which they live. Along with the immense urbanization process set in motion by the economic reforms, the feng shui men came to the city, where they kept practising the only profession they had ever known. Similarly, the urban sprawl constantly gobbles up old villages and neighbourhoods, which had their own conventional specialists. Traditional feng shui specialists are very similar to those described for rural areas, rarely being dependent on books and mainly being trained in apprenticeships. The challenges they face are new, however. Everywhere around them, old houses are demolished and new private houses and towering apartment blocks rise. As their conventional clientele move to new housing, they will still invite them; yet, when a specialist used to working on the ground and interpreting signs and forces at earth level is brought up to the eighteenth floor to see feng shui, he must develop new conceptions. Most of them prefer to regard the ground plan of the block as a common source of feng shui for the whole building, combined with a consideration for the arrangement of doors on the floor level and a comparison of the floor number with the owner's astrological data, primarily his birth date.

An example of this type of specialist and his work: in the outskirts of Xiamen on the Chinese south coast, my assistant and I found Mr Lu, after enquiring in a nearby temple. He is in his mid-fifties and moved in from a rural area twenty years ago. His present house is a small one-storey shop and dwelling in one, a conventional Chinese construction without any refinement. He used to be a rural geomancer, mainly seeing feng shui for graves, which he had learned from his father and grandfather. Today, he still works with urn-burial in rural areas, mainly for recent migrants who want a final resting place in their home villages. But the main part of his work is concerned with new housing, office desk arrangements and solving workplace-related problems. To Mr Lu, urban feng shui is essentially the same as rural. Most important is the main entrance: it must face right – which is south, southeast or southwest – and have the right forms around it, including the dragon and tiger, and the right elements identifiable in the right directions (north is water, south is fire, etc.). He confirms that the ground plan of the building determines feng shui and the upper storeys take it from that. In the city, other buildings in front do not matter, even very tall ones, if only the main entrance faces right. What cannot be, he says,

is a sharp corner pointing towards the entrance (*sha* position). Similarly, he depreciates telecom antennas in front of houses. What also cannot be is east overlooking west: if you look down upon the houses at the end of the street to the west, that is very bad – he shows a downward line with his hand and twists his face (this rule is obviously taken from rural feng shui in the Orientations School). According to Mr Lu, architectural style and rooftops (a concern of the higher classes of specialists) do not mean anything, as long as the roofs are not too pointed – this is bad for coming generations.

The other aspects of his work stem from the increasing competition in the job market and the ability of feng shui to adapt to any new circumstance. A growing number of clients want his assistance in placing their desk in the most auspicious position at their workplace for maximum performance and career opportunities. This new trend is presumably inspired by overseas Chinese business executives, who have long used feng shui specialists for choosing the best offices and best position for their desks, and has now trickled down to office staff. In addition, when employees fail to be promoted, suffer defeats at their workplace or are sacked, they may ask him to see feng shui in relevant places: offices, homes or ancestors' tombs.

Mr Lu belongs to the group of traditional feng shui specialists that have profited from the urban economic boom: his clients increase and he has even been invited to the Philippines for a job. Although he only receives new clients by word of mouth, he has had flaming red name cards printed that explicitly refer to his trade. When he goes out, he carries a briefcase with a huge Hong Kong luopan with thirty rings; yet his little house has no signboard. As he says, 'we have more freedom than ever to practise feng shui, as long as we don't get too boisterous'.

Another very common type of specialist in the city is the Buddhist or Daoist monk, having taken up feng shui besides his regular vocation. This tends to be controversial, although it is apparently consistent with Chinese history. Today, they are found in most of the larger temples and monasteries spread across China (see Fig. 6.2). An example, also from Xiamen (but it could have been Beijing, Shanghai, Chengdu or Guangzhou): we visit a large temple complex in the city with the specific purpose of tracing monks who practise. Several enquiries are futile, even met with disapproval; one monk takes us to the visitors' office, where a higher cleric carefully explains why feng shui is not supported by Buddhism. New temples may be oriented by feng shui specialists, but the art itself is not of the Buddhist literature and belongs to a lower level of learning. We are urged to leave.



Fig 6.2 Buddhist monk. Many Daoist and Buddhist monks actively engage in feng shui consultations for temple visitors, tapping into a booming market. Photograph by Ole Bruun.

Again we must scratch the surface; walking along the monks' living quarters, we meet and address an elderly monk. Hearing about our interest he first looks bewildered but indicates some knowledge on the subject. My assistant reacts quickly and asks if we can come inside to talk. Sitting in the monk's private chamber, sparsely but neatly furnished with bed, tea-table and chairs, bookshelf and TV, another layer of reality begins to unfold. He confirms his interest and starts explaining simple rules of feng shui as he has gathered it from classical literature, while writing excerpts from classics for us on a note-block. As common in China, he only reveals his own involvement much further into the conversation: he does actually see feng

shui for clients who come here to look him up. The conflict between his Buddhist vocation and practising the art of feng shui is elegantly resolved: he merely serves the community of Buddhist believers! Thus, going out on jobs several times a week, he is deeply involved in the new feng shui boom in Xiamen city, and so are, according to him, a couple of other monks at the temple; seeing feng shui is among the services that the temple can offer and which, in return, contribute to the rising wealth of the temples and their monks. He sees feng shui only according to the Jiangxi (Forms) School and does not use a compass, as he says he practices only according to the books. Clients come to the temple in growing numbers and from all sectors of urban society: private house-builders, people with relatives to bury, real estate agents and factory owners. The conversation goes on for much of the afternoon, and as we get better acquainted while drinking green tea from tiny cups, the monk turns to the subject of plagiarism and cheating: 'Too many Chinese feng shui scholars have a low level. They just copy books from Taiwan or Hong Kong to get famous and start making money. They are not respectable. It is like Falungong, you know, just a confused mixture of everything, and people are too easy to impress.' Before leaving, the kind monk presents me with a gift: two new books on feng shui that were given to him by the Chinese author.

A third type of urban specialist is the academically trained 'feng shui professor', either working independently on the market as a sideline to his university position or full time. These are growing rapidly in numbers but tend to remain in a dubious situation. As noted above, many renowned university professors in architecture, philosophy and the arts receive enquiries from potential clients who prefer them to unconvincing specialists readily available 'on the market'. Some decline, others give in and still others decline formally but accept privately. An example from Shanghai: a history professor having published on Chinese natural philosophy was contacted by several housing developers in the early 1990s in order for him to provide them assistance in 'placing apartment blocks so as to make people feel comfortable'. He did so according to very common rules of feng shui, as he knew from the literature, and the clients were satisfied. With the Shanghai construction boom setting in, he was drawn into new projects, soon working for overseas investors who found it more convenient to use a local feng shui master instead of constantly bringing in their own. Having started early, he has built up his reputation as a scholarly trained feng shui professor, making a far better income that way. He holds on to his professorship, however, both for job security and for the prestige drawn from it.

Many other specialists claiming to be academics have lesser formal education, if any at all. They belong to the budding undergrowth of feng shui specialists with some measure of formal education but rarely higher degrees. They work entirely according to market conditions, providing assistance for anyone willing to pay, and the market is generally good: some specialists are known to charge several thousand yuan per hour, and the most famous much more. The modern feng shui scholar epitomizes the ambiguous position of feng shui between academic learning and popular religion, between official denigration and private use. He is a striking continuation of Maurice Freedman's depiction of the classical geomancer as a dubious figure with some academic training but without formal position, perhaps an exam failure or mid-term dropout, thus occupying a middle ground or mediating between the scholarly elite and the everyday person.

Yet another category consists of the Taiwanese and Hong Kong professional feng shui specialists, who have moved to Shanghai, Beijing and other cities to take part in China's economic success and who are generally believed to be more authentic than many native and more recently trained men. Several originally came with the overseas investors they worked for, and decided to move over permanently to exploit their advantage.

Architecture and construction

The interest in feng shui that developed in many departments of architecture and architectural firms in the Euro-American world since the 1980s quite naturally encouraged Chinese architects and housing developers to take their own cultural heritage more seriously.

Today, construction companies, housing developers and real estate agents all over China pay attention to feng shui as a matter of course – and many have a craving for better knowledge and training courses for their employees. In their line of business, the wishes of customers and clients are decisive: developers must be prepared, in any situation, to account for the feng shui situation of new premises if clients enquire, and make amendments upon demand. To further explore this aspect, we paid a number of visits to real estate agents. An example: in an office tower on the seaside of Xiamen, we entered the spacious hall of a major real estate agent. The great reception hall where they seat clients around low tables has a huge seaside glass wall with a view towards the beautiful Gulangyu Island. All furniture and equipment, it turns out, is laid out by a feng shui master according to the Five Elements. According to Chinese custom, we only gradually receive the information we need, but the senior staff member

that we are referred to is very friendly and, in fact, genuinely interested in what we are doing. She explains that the company owner is a firm believer in feng shui and takes all possible measures. Accordingly, the company has long wanted to increase their expertise on the subject because an increasing number of clients express that sort of consideration. As the staff member explains, however, clients are very different: when rural people get rich and move into the city, they naturally want their houses to have right feng shui and therefore employ specialists to check it. The wealthy businesspeople are another group, of which 99 per cent ask for good feng shui for the sake of their business, and most of them also bring their own specialists when investing in property or construction. But it depends very much on people's background and education. People from certain local areas with great feng shui traditions pay greater attention than others. Well-educated people will not refer explicitly to feng shui, but will still want a nice environment with a good view, etc. And nobody will want to live on a former graveyard or where public toilets have been placed. Similarly, temples and gardens are supposed to attract good feng shui, and all want to live around them, whether or not they refer it to feng shui. Being in contact with people from all walks of society, the staff member can tell us of many clients' interpretations of good feng shui. Some come from humble backgrounds and want to live modest lives, for which reason they may not want perfect feng shui: one client thus asked the specialist to lay out his house with one degree variation from the perfect orientation.

TAIWAN AND HONG KONG

While general religion was discouraged and later prohibited in mainland China, it took a different course of development in the overseas Chinese territories.

In Hong Kong in particular, feng shui assumed the role of native Chinese religion as opposed to foreign influence and Christianity: it became an element in a Chinese identity in relation to the European elite. It was seen all over China that local Chinese reacted to the construction of railways and telegraph lines when under foreign domination, in many cases encouraged by the Chinese gentry. Under native Chinese government, these protests were quickly muted in mainland China, however, even in cases with far greater interferences with landscapes associated with the Dragon and Tiger. In Hong Kong, the ruling British authorities at an early date showed sympathy towards native religion, quite in accordance with the imperial policy of respect for ethnic identities and religious beliefs in all parts of the

empire. From the correspondence of some early colonial administrators, it appeared like a relief that the true belief of the native Chinese could finally be identified, after a long period when the Chinese pragmatic and eclectic relation to religion had baffled foreigners.

From about the late nineteenth century, the British administration in Hong Kong paid out considerable amounts in compensation to local Chinese who felt their feng shui was being obstructed by new public constructions such as roads, bridges, office blocks and housing.

Taiwan

In early 2000, both Taiwanese and foreign media reported an incident relating to the upcoming presidential election, in which two candidates got entangled in a fierce feng shui dispute. Lien Chan, the official presidential candidate of the Nationalist party, had hired a master of various spiritual arts to check out his feng shui, including that of his family grave in Yangmingshan, the hills outside Taipei. At inspecting the gravesite, this master, who obviously had done some investigation beforehand, detected a 'black miasma, an unwholesome and foreboding atmosphere' emanating from a particular nearby tomb. This tomb happened to belong to the family of James Soong, a breakaway Nationalist candidate who had achieved great popularity among Taiwanese voters, presumably surpassing that of Lien Chan. The master reportedly had placed nine iron nails around the Soong family's tomb, nine being the sacred cosmological number and iron commonly believed to expel evil influences. A public exchange of statements quickly developed into a series of mutual allegations. Mr Soong's camp accused Mr Lien of thinking only about his own good fortune and not that of the whole country. There followed attacks on the financial dealings of the two families, those of Mr Soong relating to property deals in the USA and those of Mr Lien relating to embezzlement of Japanese assets after World War II.

The Democratic Progressive party candidate Chen Shui-bian, who won the election and thus ended fifty years of Nationalist party rule in Taiwan, wisely stayed clear of the row between the Nationalist party candidates. With only 39 per cent of the vote, the rift in the old party facilitated his presidency. Ironically, after winning the presidency, Chen Shui-bian apparently began consulting a famous feng shui master; up to the next election in 2004, he sought advice on his attire and position when addressing the public (*Taipei Times*, 6 June 2004).

The master who performed the inspection, Li Jian-jun, also attracted attention. Being a self-taught ex-mainlander who claims to have magical powers of *qigong* and who soon after the incident published a book in the USA, he himself embodied the clash between traditional beliefs in incomprehensible cosmological forces and modern scepticism towards scores of Taiwanese practitioners with dubious backgrounds. Many are accused of economic opportunism and swindling.

Right up to the election in 2004, a range of feng shui masters and other diviners appeared on TV to comment on the chances of each candidate: Chang Hsu-chu made a prediction in favour of Guomindang with a view to the favourite position of their family graves, but saw signs of a rift between the two candidates in the form of cracks on the paved ground around the Soong family's tomb; furthermore, the putting for sale on the internet of president Chen's family houses in Tainan 'could trigger negative consequences'. Jenny Lin, a physiognomy diviner, saw the birth signs of the Guomindang candidates being out of favour while reading the character of the two candidates by means of their faces, lips, chins and noses; she suggested that both candidates moved the bags under their eyes and treat bad teeth, as 'both features foretell troubles with friends and subordinates'. A *Yi jing* diviner and head of the Chinese Fortune-telling Research Association, Chang Chien-chiu, observed that the *Yi jing* heralded drastic changes for Taiwan that year (*China Post*, 17 March 2004).

The theme of the 2000 incident is itself noteworthy: Chinese history has countless reports on emperors who felt threatened by rebel leaders or extraordinarily successful individuals, and thus moved to demolish their ancestors' graves in order to stamp out opposition; one such case was the demolition of those of the Taiping rebellion leaders (R. Smith 1991: 157). Traditionally in China, destroying people's graves was a privilege of the ruling authorities; among everyday people it was considered a most horrible offence, and according to the Qing dynasty penal code resulted in capital penalty.

As opposed to China proper, where all religion became a political issue after 1949, and Hong Kong, where feng shui in particular became a vital aspect of Chinese identity, in Taiwan a rich and complex religious life has continuously been adapted to modern life in country and city without much state interference. While in China, chairman Mao incriminated all religion (while secretly consulting diviners himself), the Nationalist leader Chiang Kai-shek openly used them and presumably had his own feng shui consultant. When withdrawing to Taiwan, both the Nationalist

leaders and a range of practitioners brought their religious perspectives with them.

Today, there are three large religious traditions in Taiwan, namely Buddhism, Daoism and Christianity, but a wealth of other religions and Chinese classical teachings contribute to the diversity. Temples abound, honouring the Buddhist and Daoist pantheon, often in a mixture, as well as local city and neighbourhood gods; on average, there is a temple for every 1,500 people. The Chinese traditional festivals of New Year, Festival of the Dead (Tomb Sweeping), Dragon Boat Festival and Mid-Autumn Festival, as well as a range of local ones relating to specific gods and events, are part of public life. As in China before the communist revolution, popular religion is integrated with family life. There are family altars in most homes, honouring family gods and ancestors, and common ancestor worship includes offerings and the burning of paper money. Charms and mirrors against evil spirits are common, pictures on front doors tend to the good luck of the family, lucky seals help in business and a range of Chinese rituals are upheld. An amazing range of fortune-telling is practiced, inspecting hands, faces and ears or using sticks, cards, horns or various other objects, which are drawn or tossed. Taiwan is the perfect example of complex religious traditions not being thwarted by modernity, but in fact thriving on its wider distribution of wealth (Clart and Jones 2003). An exhibition on Taiwanese folk-cultural artefacts held in Taipei in 2005 encapsulated the religious mood on the island state in the title 'Pursue Good Fortune and Ward Off Evil'.

Feng shui forms a natural part of all this, being practised in rural villages as much as in the modern city environment. To an extent hardly seen elsewhere, it penetrates every aspect of life: people will see to the proper outdoor and indoor feng shui of their homes to secure their lives in all aspects; countless charms, figures, flowers and other items will prop up the *qi* or expel evil inside; offices and workplaces are rearranged for auspicious influence on people's careers; businesses, big and small, will regularly have experts checking and correcting their feng shui; investors demand feng shui considerations in every undertaking; politicians place their offices and headquarters in surroundings that may bring luck to their campaigns; and housing complexes, towns and cities are judged according to their feng shui. The uses are boundless, and practising the art of feng shui has become entirely commercial.

A Taiwanese newspaper recently estimated that there are up to 30,000 feng shui practitioners in Taiwan, which is 1 for every 750 inhabitants, and their business is booming. Merely 3,000 of these are licensed, however,

seen as an indication that there are 'a lot of charlatans out there' (*Taipei Times*, 17 October 2004). Chang Hsu-chu, the chairman of the Chinese Geomancy Research Association and among the most successful masters with merits including the famous Taipei 101 tower, deplors the number of self-made experts and economic opportunists counselling people on the basis of reading a few books. There is intense debate on the authenticity of feng shui experts in Taiwan. Some argue that practitioners should have a basic education in classical literature, while others point out that feng shui was always taught with simple means within the master's own family. Similarly, it is argued that practitioners should be a member of one of the authorizing associations. Contrarily, scores of village geomancers practice in traditional ways just like in mainland China. The means of consultation is also debated, as some very successful and highly paid masters will give advice on the basis of telephone calls or ground plans sent by fax, while many traditionally trained masters will emphasize that the totality of the feng shui situation can only be sensed personally. There are Taiwanese who refuse feng shui altogether, and many scholars who consider it a superstition that should be kept out of academia. The huge number of both practitioners and clients testify to the fact, however, that in private homes, workplaces and businesses, feng shui considerations are commonplace.

Chang Hsu-chu, mentioned above, in an interview with *Taipei Times* confirms that the modern feng shui master in Taiwan deals with issues very similar to those of the traditional mainland Chinese master. People come with money problems, health worries and family issues. According to Chang, more and more people turn to feng shui to bring order and stability to their lives: 'We are like doctors. People come to us when they are sick. We don't give out medicine, but instead prescribe better living and working environments for our patients,' he says, and adds: 'The more complicated everyday life becomes the more people will turn to feng shui for their financial, physical and mental well-being' (*Taipei Times*, 6 June 2004). He devises a range of cures including rearranging furniture, moving beds and placing carved stone talismans or crystals at key locations. In contrast to the traditional practitioner, however, corporate clients now make up 65 per cent of his annual caseload: these clients have both the incentive and the financial means to ensure that the flow of *qi* is helping the company to prosperity. According to Chang, these clients may pay as much as NT\$ 30,000 for a single reading. The Chinese shortage of high-profiled masters often takes him to Shanghai, where the development of the city's business district keeps him busy. Another aspect of his work deserves comparison: he estimates that 75 per cent of his private clients are women, very similar

to what we have noted for Chinese rural areas and also quite in accordance with the experience of practitioners in Euro-American cities.

The role of feng shui in protecting the Taiwanese environment is much disputed. Like on the mainland, a range of younger scholars have interpreted feng shui in terms of ecology and environment, seeing in it an early Chinese contribution to the protection of nature. Those Taiwanese architects who integrate concerns for the environment in their designs have also contributed to a new understanding of feng shui as a Chinese conceptualization of the environment, for instance the famous Pao-teh Han, president of the Tainan National College of the Arts. Environmental organizations tend to think otherwise. Green Formosa Front, for instance, criticize the illegal construction of temples in mountainous regions believed to have auspicious feng shui, because they involve extensive felling of trees and thus cause soil erosion and landslides. Even more serious is the construction of tombs on mountains in order to provide good feng shui for the next generation; as de Groot noted for south China in the nineteenth century, they may leave entire hillsides barren since no grave can have trees right in front. In these cases, feng shui is jeopardizing the preservation of a healthy environment.

Like in the West, students of architecture and design begin to study feng shui to find ways to integrate it into their professional work, if not out of belief then at least to satisfy demands. University departments have begun to organize seminars or offer lectures for their students, of whom an increasing number write theses on the subject. For property developers as well as architect and interior design companies in Taiwan, respect for feng shui is a must. In any assignment, they will ask the client what kind of role feng shui will play and be prepared to have feng shui masters look over designs and blueprints at an early stage in order to accommodate their recommendations.

Taiwanese businesses provide a ready market; in general, the bigger the business the greater the role of feng shui. A high-profiled case occupied the media in February 1998. A China Airlines plane coming in from Bali crashed near Chiang Kai-shek International Airport, killing all of the 196 people on board. Among them was the governor of the Taiwanese Central Bank, Sheu Yuan-dong, and three other high-ranking bank officials. An article in the *Economic Daily News*, Taiwan's largest economic newspaper, reported that the accident was just another in a series of calamities and that the bank had been 'cursed' since it moved to new premises in 1994 (*Economic Daily News*, 17 February 1998). A number of bank employees had long complained about the bad feng shui of the new building, a

large square-shaped concrete construction facing right into the corner of the traditional-style National Theatre Hall. This is a taboo, and the employees maintained that this corner directed negative energies onto the bank. They backed their explanation by a range of facts: the construction company putting up the building went bankrupt, a worker fell from the building, a fire had occurred on the roof and, worst of all, the bank's former governor and a director had both died during their tenure. Several feng shui practitioners had been involved, but their recommendations were ignored by the bank.

While Taiwan's English-language media only selectively report on feng shui matters, the Chinese newspapers and magazines overflow with them; this only accentuates the argument made in the previous chapter, that those aspects of Chinese culture that may be branded as superstition by some tend to be ignored by Chinese intellectuals writing for a wider audience. Thus, many of the Taiwanese debates on the possible influence of feng shui on political elections, traffic problems, the fate of the country and so forth are for domestic consumption only. A recent case in point: after a series of bad traffic accidents, including plane crashes and the derailment of a train, the transport minister Lin Lingsan apparently sought the advice of a feng shui man, leading, for instance, to expensive changes to the Taipei Train Station's south gate. A feng shui master also appeared on national television proclaiming that the Transportation Ministry had very bad feng shui and a faulty *bagua* symbol on its premises. Other media commented that 'the more the ministry spends on feng shui the worse it gets' and eventually the transport minister resigned. His successor in 2006, Kuo Yaochi, stated that 'relying on feng shui is not helping us to solve the problem', while a weblogger commented that 'our feng shui is probably messed up because of Taiwan's corrupt officials'.

Everywhere in the Chinese-speaking world, feng shui-thinking has been most candidly applied by entrepreneurial groups. Very few large businesses have not, at one point, invited a feng shui specialist, and most of them do it regularly, either intentionally to improve their business or defensively to ward off bad luck or to oblige their employees. Large corporations and state organizations may even fight each other over feng shui issues, such as when the state-run Chinese Petroleum Company complained over the construction of a new metro-line, which involved the erection of two pillars in front of its headquarter main gate, allegedly because it would violate its feng shui and bring bad luck (*Taiwan Headlines*, 16 August 2005). Foreign companies have followed suit, first to adapt to local culture and later presumably driven by the new spiritual movement among trendsetting international

companies ready to experiment with any performance-oriented device, from crystal energy to Buddhism and meditation to astrologers and feng shui specialists. Foreign banks like Standard Chartered and Citibank have openly employed feng shui specialists in the design of their Taiwan offices and bank branches, including waterfalls, bamboo groves and special furniture to generate wealth, but as much to make offices more beautiful and comfortable (*United Daily News*, 21 February 2006).

Taiwan is where traditional Chinese feng shui first adapted to a city environment in new popular forms. While the old Chinese manuals were mostly concerned with the surroundings of the house, the layout of buildings and courtyards and a mostly rather sketchy distribution of rooms, Taiwanese feng shui masters and manual authors began to elaborate on the indoor placement of doors, windows, separating walls, screens, various furniture and flowers as well as on indoor directions and colours. An efficient publishing industry brought out both copies of classical Chinese manuals and new interpretations in endless numbers, supplying Chinese communities elsewhere.

The diversity of the forms of feng shui practised in Taiwan is as great as in the West. Some forms relate to the placement of buildings and objects alone. Other forms, for instance that practised by Chen Hsuan-yi, another famous expert and chairman of the Yi jing Association, focuses on the person and attempts the ideal balance with the natural surroundings in terms of light and colouring, while stressing the importance of keeping things green. Thus, by placing the person in nature, they accommodate the new craving for both better natural environments and the use of natural materials such as expensive hardwoods, polished stone and fine carpets.

A range of Taiwanese popular magazines and TV programmes deal with feng shui matters, either as their specialized topic or as regular features.

Hong Kong

Nowhere in the world is feng shui so intensely integrated into every aspect of social, religious and commercial life as in Hong Kong. This is where big business and globalization entwine with popular religion, fortune-telling and gambling: a living testimony to the endurance of traditional cosmologies throughout the process of modernization and beyond. Hong Kong architecture captures this mode of existence by combining pre-modern ideas with post-modern design.

Three important historical factors have spurred the intensification of feng shui in the former British crown colony as compared to China

proper: first of all, the inclination of the British government to take it seriously and accept it in public life; second of all, the predominance of a business-oriented Chinese community as opposed to an educated elite, which tended to distance itself from traditional beliefs in the modernization period; and finally, the continuous presence of foreigners making feng shui a vital aspect of a native Chinese identity. These shall be briefly described below.

It was only after the Opium War and the subsequent opening of Chinese ports to western interests that feng shui became generally known to foreigners. A striking fact is that during the first several decades of Chinese-western interaction in the treaty ports, and increasing inland missionary activity, feng shui was not commonly known among foreigners, and references to the subject are almost nonexistent. It was not until the late 1860s that a number of queries and small articles appeared in missionary journals and popular media, focusing on the possible meaning of feng shui (Bruun 2003: 42). In these years, things happened fast, and in the 1870s, everyone was intensely aware of the importance that the everyday Chinese attributed to feng shui. Much of the debate and controversy that the topic would subsequently cause, however, was centred in Hong Kong. Rising contradiction between colonial powers and the Chinese authorities as well as colonial rivalry among the western powers contributed to strained relations. Western industrialism, commercial vigour and military might was contrasted with Imperial Chinese economic stagnation and political decline. From this period stem the countless stories of Chinese resistance to railways, telegraph lines and building projects on grounds of severed dragons and obstructed feng shui. But as much as it may have expressed sincere concerns on the part of the local population, it became a language of resistance to western expansion and economic enterprise that contradicted native Chinese interests. It is interesting to note that while protests of railway building were at their peak, thousands of south-Chinese migrant workers flocked to the USA to work on its grand railway projects in the 1860s.

Christian missionary activity was the single issue that became a major controversy as much as a symbol of Chinese-western differences. Expanding rapidly into the interior and challenging both the authority and competence of local government, while different missionary denominations competed intensely among themselves, missionary societies were perhaps trying to gain abroad what they were losing at home.

Strong forces in Britain were against missionary activity in the colonies, and the Hong Kong administration pursued policies that avoided contradiction with the Chinese over issues of religion. At the same time, the new

social sciences rose in Europe and America, deliberately striving to explore and represent the marginalized in the new industrial society. The social sciences expanded to non-western societies, and many famous studies of Chinese culture and society from this period contributed to a burgeoning anthropology, decisively focusing on the lives and outlooks of the everyday Chinese. For instance, J.J.M. de Groot in the 1890s collected the material for his volumes on Chinese religion.

In terms of feng shui, the total effect of these diverse developments was that it was increasingly identified as the 'true religion' of the everyday Chinese, or at least a system to be respected and reckoned with in everyday interaction. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, when the reform movement gained force inside China, the outcome of the preceding decades' cultural conflict was astonishing: the Chinese imperial government commonly swept aside all obstacles to construction based on feng shui thinking, while the Hong Kong government had initiated a long tradition of paying out monetary compensation for public works interfering with the feng shui of local communities, a tradition that lasted until the very end of British rule in 1997.

The second factor mentioned above, that Hong Kong remained dominated by Chinese business families rather than members of the political elite, follows naturally from its location in the south coast. Contradictions between centralized political power in the northern-Chinese heartland and various cultural, ethnic and dialect groups in the south are as old as Chinese civilization itself. It remains a sensitive issue today, as the Chinese state strives to remove all local dialects from schools and public institutions. Today, it is evident that feng shui is much more openly used and frivolously treated by authorities in the south: graves are bigger and more pompous, feng shui specialists practise more liberally and architecture plays with new inspiration from feng shui. The business communities everywhere in the Chinese world inherently have fewer reservations to feng shui ideology than educated elites; it fits well with the aims of business.

The third factor mentioned was that the prolonged interaction between Chinese and foreigners in Hong Kong was strengthening Chinese cultural elements radically different from western culture. That cultural identities are generated in the interface between cultural groups – that is, in awareness of and conscious distinction from other cultural identities – is well known from the social sciences. It is as much accentuated by experience from contemporary world-wide migration, which shows that culture does not simply level out and globalize but remains an active force in creating new identities and new cultural hybrids. Feng shui is an aspect of local

identity and the connection between people and land in all Chinese rural areas, but in Hong Kong it has become more explicitly used to represent local communities in relation to a government administration based on an entirely different rationality.

Today, Hong Kong is not least famous for its skyline, each season adding new fabulous constructions, newer towering over older ones and each competing for auspicious feng shui like trees competing for sunlight in the jungle. The architecture is extremely varied and diverse, but with a distinct influence from the feng shui masters, who are involved in virtually every project. Sharp corners are avoided, many buildings have curved rooftops and silhouettes and each building is consciously located with an open view towards the waterfront or open spaces, as circumstances allow. Together with Shanghai, Xiamen and several other south-Chinese cities, Hong Kong has become a centre for post-modern architecture, with Chinese characteristics and older buildings giving way for new constructions at a rapid pace. Several commercial and residential buildings are among the tallest in the world, including Two International Finance Centre, Central Plaza, The Centre, Nina Tower I, One Island East, Highcliff, The Arch, The Harbourside, Bank of China Building and others.

Hong Kong's probably best-known building in relation to feng shui is the Bank of China Tower, which raised controversy when its design was released to the public and continuing many years after its completion in 1990. The building was accused of emitting negative feng shui energy over central Hong Kong due to its straight lines, sharp angles (concept of *sha*) and two aeries on top, resembling the incense sticks burned for the dead. In particular, popular legend had it that the building was deliberately designed in a blade-like shape to reflect bad feng shui to the Government House and its British administration. It is believed that willow trees were planted in the Government House Garden to deflect the 'secret arrows' from the building and thus block the ensuing bad luck. But also the surrounding towers were said to be affected since the Bank of China Tower was a deliberate design without feng shui considerations for its neighbours and was an act of mockery on the part of the Chinese state.

Another building, which became world famous for its feng shui-related architecture, was a large residential building complex in Repulse Bay, designed with a large square hole in the middle to allow *qi* to flow through. It is commonly known as 'the building with the hole'.

Feng shui is an integral part of everyday life in Hong Kong. Thousands of specialists practise freely for all classes and at all prices. Property buyers and estate agents consult specialists as a matter of course. Few buildings

projects do not have their ground plans and blueprints checked by a feng shui man. Everyday people use the specialists for the same purposes as do rural people in south China, while the wealthier tend to have their own personal feng shui advisors, just like the family GP. Book stores display endless Chinese and international volumes on the subject; for instance, a new variety of Hong Kong manuals deal with website and internet feng shui, giving advice on the right placement of your desk, chair, computer and other objects in order to increase the traffic to your own personal website or to have success on the internet. Feng shui specialists regularly appear on Hong Kong channels, from ATV or Phoenix TV, to give daily feng shui advice concerning building, burying, living, working, web-surfing and so forth.

Even Beijing's top executive in Hong Kong, Dong Jianhua (Tung Chee-hwa), who took over from the last British governor, Chris Patten, in 1997, was known as a staunch believer in feng shui. He refused to move into the old Government House on grounds of it having bad feng shui, and had his own expert pick another site for himself as well as for his government buildings – all despite the fact that Chris Patten had the building redecorated and furnished according to the advice of a feng shui specialist.

So great is the power of feng shui thinking in Hong Kong that it has become customary for international corporations to use specialists for all major constructions. Some great banks are even known to make feng shui forecasts for clients and investors on a yearly basis or in relation to big events, such as when China took possession of Hong Kong in 1997.

As an example among thousands, Disney officials in 2005 consulted Chinese feng shui experts before building Hong Kong Disneyland, making several changes to the original plan to accommodate their recommendations. Several such changes were tilting the site of the park several degrees to achieve the correct alignment in relation to the mountains behind and the water in front, setting up 'no fire zones' in kitchens to balance the Five Elements and choosing an auspicious date according to the traditional calendar for the grand opening.

Most, if not all, businesses adhere to the principles of feng shui. Banks, airlines, telephone companies, shopping centres, hotels and so forth will all have regular feng shui checks and spend large sums of money to accommodate recommendations. The Mandarin Oriental Hotel, for instance, one of the most exclusive hotels in Hong Kong, has all rooms furnished according to feng shui principles. In the lobby sits a small statue of a unicorn that chases away bad *qi*. Lion statues have been placed in the offices of

many of the hotel's corporate officers to catch money, and the placement of office furniture has been closely supervised. The hotel even boasts its own in-house feng shui master, Joseph Chau, who may assist corporate and individual clients.

Hong Kong has a number of famous feng shui specialists who practise widely across Asia and beyond. They have been trendsetters in a new Chinese post-modern architecture with soft edges, curved lines, waving roofs and other elaborate rooftop designs, such as now seen across Chinese cities from Hong Kong to Xiamen and Shanghai (see Figs. 6.3 to 6.5).



Fig 6.3 Feng shui-inspired, waving rooftop design on new apartment buildings in Xiamen, China. Photograph by Ole Bruun.



Fig 6.4 The postmodern architecture of South Chinese cities borrows considerable inspiration from feng shui doctrines, such as avoiding sharp corners and pointing shapes. Photographs by Ole Bruun.



Fig 6.5 Chinese property buyers viewing a model of a new housing complex. Property developers in most parts of China integrate feng shui considerations in planning and design and take great care to avoid unlucky symbolism (floor numbers with bad connotations are often left out). Photograph by Ole Bruun.