

Feng Shui and Theory of Place: Navigating Chinese Traditional Cosmology in Modern Ecology

| Refan Aditya* |

*Center for Religious and
Cross-cultural Studies,
Universitas Gadjah Mada,
Yogyakarta, Indonesia*

refanadi06@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This article is a theoretical review on Feng Shui in ecological discourse. Even though Feng Shui has always been about environmentalism, nature, and the harmonisation of humans with their environment, discussions of Feng Shui in the context of modern ecological science are relatively rare, or at least less popular. This is because Feng Shui, in modern and urban society, is treated more as pragmatic measures than ecological knowledge. This research aims to provide theoretical insights that engage Feng Shui in the discourse of ecology and modernity by grounding it in the theory of place put forward by Brian G. Cambel. The theory of place postulated that place holds a particular meaning for ethical commitment for human-nature living. There are three approaches to place: phenomenology, bioregionalism, and cultural geography. This research argues that these three approaches provide a paradigmatic grounding for the critical relevance of Feng Shui in modern ecology discourse, regardless of its non-scientific and superstitious reputation.

KEYWORDS

Ecology; Feng Shui; Modernity; Theory of Place

INTRODUCTION

The very symptom of modernity in global ecological challenges is the disconnection between humans and nature. The advancement of science and industrialisation has accelerated the epistemic crisis of human relations with nature while strengthening the anthropocentric paradigm that presupposes human authority over nature. Nature is nothing more than a ready-for-hand object waiting to be exploited by the infinite desires of humans driven by capitalism. The supremacy and hegemony of modern science that have shifted the virtues of traditional cosmology have led to the oblivion of the ecological paradigm that puts humans in harmony with nature. Thus, it becomes important to bring up traditional knowledge systems within ecological discussions as a way to contend with the hegemony of modern science and address the challenges of modernity. Feng Shui is one of those traditional knowledge systems. Worthy of note, although dealing a lot with environmental treatments, the study of Feng Shui with ecological concerns is relatively new, at least as of the 1990s, since beforehand Feng Shui was more commonly studied as an applied

architectural science and the science of determining the location of graves (Chen & Nakama, 2004).

Feng Shui (風水) is an ancient Chinese knowledge system that has flourished for 3000 years. It deals with the proper way of measuring and considering geographical contours to determine where buildings or graves are best placed. Therefore, Feng Shui deals heavily with the spatiality of nature and the environment, and it features a concise illustration for the theory of place. The theory of place highlights that a place has relational characteristics that differentiate it from mere space. Space only shows the physical location of a place, just as a map or an atlas does. Instead of space, place has environmental and ecological characteristics such as so-called power-geometry and has a kind of agency and power in shaping the way people identify and relate themselves to where they live (Campbell, 2011, 2017).

This article places Feng Shui within the framework of this theory of place. Feng Shui cosmology explains that *Chi* (气), or the natural metaphysical energy that the traditional Chinese have believed until now, determines a virtuous life and prevents life from misfortune. Feng Shui principles guide humans to harmonise their environment or place with certain arrangements to gain maximum prosperity, health and good fortune. Through knowledge of the placement and arrangement of buildings and surroundings, the Chi energy can be fully absorbed and bad energy will leave. This is what makes Chinese places and architecture have a distinctive character that is different from the places of Europeans and other Asians. What is interesting about this Feng Shui cosmology is that, akin to Michael Northcott's concept of Gaia (Northcott, 2015), the concept of *Chi* is also understood as the driving force of life, which, although metaphysical and beyond the measurement of modern scientific instruments, has existential implications for human life. The fact that this knowledge system still persists today shows that Chinese modern people are not simply breaking away from the transcendent-metaphysical ancient knowledge system and entirely adhering to merely modern science.

Drawing on the theory of place, I argue that Feng Shui cosmology contributes to the criticism of the modern scientific paradigm that divides the natural and cultural and enriches the discussion on the theory of place in ecological studies.

RESEARCH METHODS

This research is qualitative research with the method of literature study. This research uses an ecological approach to explore Feng Shui more as a traditional popular discourse than a technical knowledge system. In particular, the theory of place is used as an analytical tool to explain Feng Shui within the perspective of ecology. By synthesising Feng Shui and the theory of place, this research seeks to provide theoretical insights that engage Feng Shui in the discourse of ecology and modernity. Due to the extensive nature of Feng Shui and its many schools and branches, I limited this research to Feng Shui as a traditional alternative to the modern scientific paradigm, dedicating the discussion around Feng Shui to the extent that it relates to the discourse of ecology.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Feng Shui Cosmology

Traditional Chinese believed that someone's fortune was to some extent determined by how one aligned oneself with nature and one's environment. The harmony between the movements of heaven (*tian*, 天), man (*ren*, 人), and earth (*di*, 地) was meaningful to the ancient Chinese. With the intuitive ability to read the harmony of heaven, earth, nature, and the environment, a Feng Shui master can tell whether or not a place is good to live in.

Feng Shui has been around for more than 3000 years and has been used by the Chinese since the Zhou Dynasty (1100–771 B.C.), long before Confucius was born, and is still popular in Chinese society. Feng Shui teaching is mainly based on Taoism, yet it has been popular among the common folk in ancient China as an intuitive sense to determine living and burial places based on a given natural topography, resulting in different insights from one community to another depending on the natural landscapes in which they live. The knowledge of Feng Shui was first systematized in a manuscript called *Zang Shu*, a book about the burial of the dead, written by Guo Pu who lived around 276-324 AD. (Bruun, 2008). In the course of its development, schools and texts on Feng Shui emerged, and the symbols of dragons and tigers began to be sketched in the theory of landscape topography, such as in the *Han Long Jing* and *Yi Long Jing* manuscript, written by Yang Yun Song (approximately 840-888 AD) during the Tang dynasty (618-907). Then there is the *Qing nang ao-yu* manuscript that covers how to determine the *Xue* or dragon's lair, where the good energy is said to lie. The latter became the imperial Feng Shui text for a long time (Kustedja et al., 2012).

Etymologically, Feng Shui means wind and water. It is believed that these two natural elements determine the rise or fall of a Chinese civilization. Wind and water are also what fundamentally form mountains and rivers, nurture living things, and are essential for human life. Hence, the Chinese, from ancient times to the present, adhere to the principle of Feng Shui in determining a place to live, a building for business and its layout, and also a burial place for the dead.

Since the 1990s, studies on Feng Shui are not limited to the practical application of daily life but are increasingly involved in ecological discourse in response to environmental issues. Ke-Tsung Han (2001) suggests in *Traditional Chinese Site Selection-Feng Shui: An Evolutionary/Ecological Perspective* that Feng Shui applies ecological ideas to find the best places for people to live, similar to how modern evolutionary theory explains where humans choose to settle. In his article, Han provides a sound scientific for Feng Shui and demonstrate that it is not entirely superstition. Another research, Ju XU and Jones (2019), in their article *East meets West: On Feng Shui and Western Environmental Models*, compare scientific models of contemporary environmental theory with Feng Shui. They argue that although the validity of Feng Shui is not scientific and tends to be symbolic (metaphorical), the logic it draws on is linear and parallel to the logic and methods utilised by scientific models of contemporary environmental theory. Instead of contradicting each other, Feng Shui as an ancient eastern cosmology and contemporary environmental science (modern-western science) provide two perspectives that may complement each other. The advantages of traditional Chinese cosmology over the modern sciences are even strengthened by Xing Wa

(2019) in *Wuxing: An Investigation into the Interpretations of Traditional Chinese Cosmology in Contemporary China*, arguing that “science can be explained by traditional cosmology and that science only partially reveals the truth about the world, which traditional cosmology has fully explained”.

The foundation of Feng Shui cosmology is *Chi* (Qi), the metaphysical energy flow that underlies nature and life (Bruun, 2008). Ancient Chinese cosmology emphasizes the idea that Chi is spread by wind (Feng) and collected by water (Shui). In other words, Chi is the flowing energy carried by wind and water; carried by Feng Shui. To figure out a place with good Chi requires the reading of the movement of wind through the position of mountains (because it determines the flow of the wind) and water of a certain place (Cangianto, n.d). Chi is a unique Chinese concept that cannot be adequately translated into other languages. As such, the closest term is ‘flowing energy’ that cannot be seen, touched, tasted, or smelled. Chi itself is a vital concept in Chinese knowledge of ancient tradition. In ancient Chinese teachings on the anatomy of the human body, for example, Chi flows through acupuncture points, that is why Chinese cosmology views the pulse of nature as the same as the pulse of human life. Similarly, in building and arranging a house, a suitable arrangement in accordance with the direction, land contour, water, wind, and surrounding environment of a particular place will "grab" Chi, so that the abundance of Chi will bring health and strength to the people who dwell in it. The concept of Feng Shui is to look for a place where Chi is plentiful.

In Feng Shui cosmology, humans are part of nature and are also manifestations of the flow of Chi, like other beings in the universe. Chi, therefore, is a holistic concept that encompasses natural phenomena and human experience, which cannot be reduced to scientific language and concepts such as material energy (XU & Jones, 2019).

Chinese traditional cosmology explains that everything in the universe is subject to the laws of change generated by the balancing of Yin and Yang. Yin represents the energy of the universe that comes from the earth, while Yang represents the energy that comes from the sky. Yin's nature is cumulative, meaning it is always increasing and growing, while Yang is circular, meaning it is always circulating and moving energy. Ying symbolises the moon, women, darkness, and permanence, while Yang symbolises the sun, man, lightness, and transformation.

Thus, in Feng Shui cosmology, there is the concept of Chi Yin and Chi Yang, or Yin energy and Yang energy that explains the harmonious relationship between humans and nature. Feng Shui principles follow these natural laws to capture good energy that will ultimately improve the quality of life. Everything in the universe is the result of the reciprocal relationship between these two Chi energies, which are both opposite and complementary. The concepts of Chi Yin and Chi Yang are fundamental in Feng Shui cosmology. It manifests the idea that man and nature in a place are relational and should be in harmony. Hence, arguably, following Feng Shui principle means also following natural law in accumulating good energy, which eventually will improve the person's life and natural life cycle. (Lin, 2000)

Ancient literature on Feng Shui symbolises vegetation as the hair of the earth, soil as the flesh, water as the flowing blood, and land as the bones. Through these metaphors, Feng

Shui teaches to protect nature to improve the quality of the place. Feng Shui is the art of identifying the flowing, subtle energy that underlies nature and place and also the art of harmonising the proper energy of a place with the living beings, including humans who live in it.

The Separation of Man and Nature: The Beginning of the Crisis of Modernity

In *The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis* (1967) Lyn White, Jr. asserted that the relationship between humans and nature has shifted with the development of technology. The initial technology that influenced this change was agricultural technology. Man used to be a part of nature until, thanks to technology, he became the master of nature. This was influenced by the Judeo-Christian religious doctrine of teleology. Instead of being part of nature, this religious doctrine emphasises humans as part of the image of God. Hence, anthropocentrism, and the crisis it brings with it, can be ascribed as a derivative of this Judeo-Christian religious tradition.

In the same vein, Seyyed Hossein Nasr in *Man and Nature: The Spiritual Crisis in Modern Man* (1968) also pointed out that the root of the crisis suffered by modern man is the elimination of the metaphysical dimension from scientific discourse, making nature merely a dead-passive object. The metaphysical view presupposes that there is a sacredness contained in nature, so that we always consider it something that must be taken care of. Nasr termed this metaphysical knowledge "scientia sacra," or sacred knowledge. However, this metaphysical view is considered superstition in modern science, allowing humans to dominate nature and leading to an ecological crisis.

Carolyn Merchant, in *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution* (1982), explains that the degradation of the image of nature as the mother earth and the source of life that graces life force is the precedence of the ecological crisis of the modern era. In the name of civilization and progress, the mysterious forces that drive nature are cast out as ghosts. The insight into nature has become mechanistic based on the laws of physics, which are detached from the forces outside of scientific comprehension. This is why Merchant proclaims the death of nature at the hands of science.

In *We Have Never Been Modern* (1991), Bruno Latour dismantles the modern constitution's way of thinking that creates an imaginary category separating nature and culture, which then blurs the hybrid of the world. As a representation of the natural, which is imposed to be objective, modern science places supremacy on the human subject as the determinant of how nature should run according to the will of modern civilization. Nature is seen merely as a machine that works according to the laws of physics and can be modified and manipulated under the logic of modern civilization.

The above insights are a preliminary discussion of the environmental crisis that stems from the shift in human perception and attitude towards nature due to the development of modern science and technology. This discourse shows that the relationship between humans and nature, as well as the environment in which humans live, is always changing along with the demands of modernity and industrialism that take too much too soon, supported by religious justification, especially Abrahamic doctrines that portray humans as lords of nature rather than being part of nature. This attitude and mindset of modern man towards nature

with theological endorsement will eventually lead to how they treat a place as only a space. The distinction between place and space is at the heart of place theory, which I will explain below.

Feng Shui in the Theory of Place

As discussed above, Feng Shui cosmology is based on the metaphysical concept of Chi and the dualistic view of Ying and Yang. As a teaching, Feng Shui teaches the harmony and balancing of a place. According to the Chinese tradition, a good place is one that brings in a great deal of Chi energy, that is, a place that is configured according to the principles of Feng Shui. That is why Chinese buildings and houses have a different character from European houses, for example, because their perspective on nature and the environment is simply different. Feng Shui teachings take into account the bioregional features of each place. The concept of balance between Ying and Yang reflects their deep involvement in nature, especially in the ecosystem character of a place. The ancient Chinese would reckon with the natural factors in their environment before erecting buildings or houses.

There are two main schools in Feng Shui: the *Situation School* and the *Directions or Form School* (Lin, 2000). The Situation School is concerned with the quality of the geographical conditions and topographical character of a place, such as its physical features, which comprise the flow, direction, and position of a river with other elements, and the surrounding mountains and hills. This school takes into account the quality and quantity of Chi energy contained in natural elements, namely water, mountains, hills, and land locations of a place, as natural carriers, containers, and reservoirs of Chi; Yin and Yang embedded in natural elements. On the other hand, the Directions School emphasises more on the teaching of how to create harmony between place, people, and nature in an environment by configuring buildings or tombs according to the year of birth of the inhabitants. Thus, the Situation School represents the macro-management of the bioregion, while the Direction School tends to the micro-management of human purpose.

This part discusses Feng Shui in the frame of the theory of place. The theory of place postulated place as nature in a sense that it is intertwined with human living and is holding particular meaning for ethical commitment. Discussing *place* as a philosophical concept that is different from the concept of *space* must first take distance from the common sense of it, such as place as a geographical location that indicates the physical location of a place among other places, or merely, in Kantian terms, as an a priori category in the mind that is transcendent and purely conceptual. The place in this discussion is not in this sense. There are three approaches to place: phenomenology, bioregionalism, and cultural geography. The first is phenomenology.

Phenomenology

In the phenomenological approach, the place that is discussed is place as, in Edmund Husserl's term, the life world (*Lebenswelt*), where humans, in Martin Heidegger's term, are *being* and *becoming* (Heidegger, 1996). Being and becoming can have a wide range of meanings, such as being with other humans and in the environment (the world). This entanglement of human beings with their world is reciprocal, meaning that they mutually

influence, shape, and care for each other. Humans, thus, have always been *being-in-the-world*. A person derives his or her selfhood and identity from the place where he or she was born and lives. Likewise, a community's collective memory of its place makes it sacred and then shapes its collective identity, so the grabbing of a forest belonging to an indigenous community by a mining company, for example, not only threatens the existing ecosystem but can also threaten their identity. Place matters to the extent that it is interpreted and gives meaning to human life. That is the difference between place as an existential concept and space as a merely positional, physical concept.

Place, according to Brian G. Campbell (2017), has relational characteristics that distinguish it from other places. Unlike the concept of space, which only shows an abstract, empty, and undifferentiated physical location, the concept of place shows a familiar, intimate, meaningful, and existential relationship between humans and their environment. Yet, progressive thinking of modernity is blind to looking at place in that way.

In the history of western civilization, it is the concept of space that has been treated more than place because modern science does not consider a place as a place but as a space. Just as maps show the earth's surface from above, the way science represents space ignores the diversity of bioregion and *power-geometry* underlying in each place. Space is ontologically more objective and categorically more universal. In science, space, as an objective and abstract category, is treated as central rather than place. Thus, space is ontologically separate and not constitutive of human identity/self.

Feng Shui insights presuppose an awareness of the surrounding environmental circumstances, topography, and natural phenomena. As described, the purpose of Feng Shui practice is to seek balance with nature through the identification of Chi energy to accelerate the well-being of life. The premise that human beings have always been in an intimate and intersubjective place, while being shaped and a part of it, is nothing but a prerequisite for the realisation of Feng Shui principles. In other words, Feng Shui has a lot to do with place by virtue of its existential relationality. The signals that are commonly associated with misfortune and distress in life thus stem from the disharmonious relationship between people and their environment. Typically, for severe cases, Chinese people, even those who are relatively modern, will approach a Feng Shui master to consult on the living situations of their place or to find the best location for the family tomb and wish for his/her advice. With his or her extensive knowledge, the Feng Shui master will diagnose and prescribe based on the living place. Even in Feng Shui analysis, the time, date, and year of birth provide information on how a person aligns with the characteristics of their place, transforming it into a very personal personification of self. In other words, Feng Shui is a medium of self-personification, as a way of expressing oneself in one's place (Kustedja et al., 2012). Hence, Feng Shui turns a place into an egocentric universe. At the very least, Feng Shui will be an alternative for modern Chinese people beside modern options, such as professional architects who are more based on mathematical principles and functionality.

Bioregionalism

After pointing out the difference between the concepts of place and space in the light of phenomenology, Campbell provides an overview of another approach to understanding

place, namely the bioregionalism approach. While phenomenology emphasises more on intersubjective-existential relations between humans and the world where they live, the bioregionalism approach addresses more the authenticity of the ecosystem character of each particular place, which includes climate, seasons, land contours, river flow, local plants, and animals. The essential quality of a place from the perspective of bioregionalism lies in the given ecosystem pattern that distinguishes it from other places. Thus, the identity of a place is based on the natural boundaries and peculiar environment of the bioregion rather than being attributed to the community that inhabits it. Bioregionalism emphasises that a place, along with its particular natural network pattern, has its own distinctiveness apart from human awareness of it.

Bioregionalism considers place, with its natural features, as a living thing that has always been alive and life-giving, and it is place that models the lives of the living things that dwell in it. Following Sale, Campbell argues:

“Bioregionalism is superior because nature itself serves as the model for human civilization and the source of human values. Together, phenomenological experience and disciplined scientific study reveal the underlying natural laws of a place, which are the key guide for our social, economic, and political systems. Of course, this argument rests on the assumption that there are underlying natural laws, and moreover that healthy ecosystems tend toward the sort of qualities like equilibrium and unity that translate well into social policy.” (Campbell, 2017).

Finding the finest place with balanced Chi Ying and Yang is the main concern of Feng Shui. In determining this, a Feng Shui master would have to read the regional landscape, such as the contours of the land, the flow of rivers, and the weather patterns of a place. The best place is located between the green dragon, the white tiger, the leaning black turtle, and facing the red hong bird. What does that mean? In the Chinese myth tradition, the dragon is a sacred totem. The best energy, allegedly, is associated with the dragon's lair or *Xue* (穴). As such, the dragon here is referred to as the utmost portal to the auspicious-local Chi which stores wind or Feng and conserves water or Shui (Field, 2001). Where does the dragon dwell? It depends on other animals symbolising the surrounding landscape. The black turtle symbolises a backing mountain that is higher than the contours of the surrounding land. If a place is in a relatively plain, like an urban area, the black turtle can also symbolise taller trees or buildings. Then, to its left is the green dragon, which symbolises a sloping hill or land that is shorter but higher than the opposite land symbolised by the white tiger. And the red Hong bird symbolises the direction where the fortunate building is facing, pointing to the land that is lower than the other three constituents, typically illustrated with the ocean scenes. This symbolisation presupposes the idea that a landscape is an organic entity consisting of a group of living things.

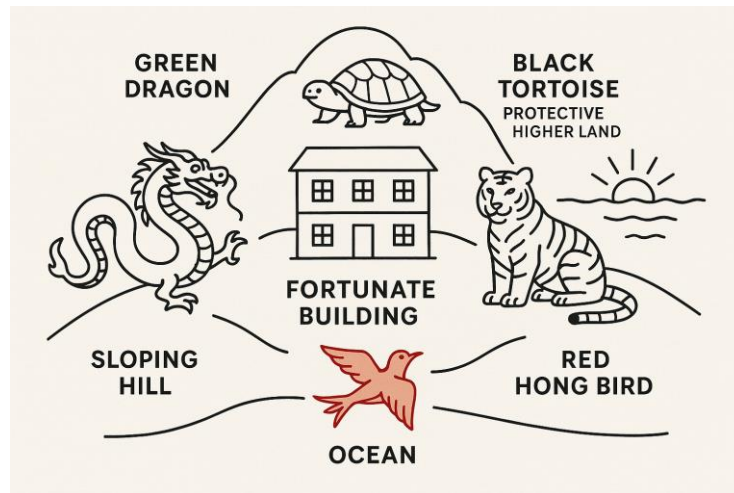


Figure 1. Ideal illustration of Feng Shui configurations with animal symbol

At the heart of finding the best Feng Shui configuration is determining where the Xue or green dragon is, as it represents the main conduit of vital cosmic energy (Bruun, 2008). The dragon is believed to be on a ridge with relatively sloped contours located on the east side, opposing the white tiger on the west side. On the north side is the black turtle, and on the south side is the Hong bird. If these formations are found and the surrounding plants flourish, then that is the presence of a true dragon, a place where Chi energy pulsates throughout the surrounding place. This popular Feng Shui insight is laden with this bioregionalist approach in the sense that every place has a given particular natural configuration to the extent that it requires an ecological epistemology as a mode of knowing to overcome the lack of ecological interest in the modern scientific paradigm.

This bioregionalism approach in Feng Shui is visible in the survey and analysis of the ecological structure of the environment in traditional villages. In their research, Bo-Chul Whang and Myung-Woo Lee (2006) conducted topographic mapping of several traditional villages and protected forests or green spaces in Korea using AutoCAD and ArcView. By reading the geographical landscapes of traditional villages that have formed organically and sustainably over a long period of time (at least date back further than 70 years and may be as old as 400 years), they modelled the ideal Feng Shui planning principles in eco-villages for the restoration of ecological spatial structure disturbed by village development, especially in modern villages. They figured out that the Feng Shui symbolic interpretation, like taking the symbol of a turtle as a model for the engineering of the woodlands and ponds as a buffer area, not to mention using the obscure idea of vital energy or Chi as a key term in finding the desired good arrangement, contributes to an ecovillage planning theory that could be rational planning for modern landscape ecology principles. From this research, they propose a principle of ideal landscape management, one that is only possible by paying attention to the bioregional character and distinctive topography of a landscape.

Cultural Geography

The cultural geography approach emphasises the dynamic of the cultural and natural relationships of a place with other places, as well as with places in the context of modernity,

urbanisation and global capitalism. It is more concerned with the dependence of a place on complex political, economic, and social processes. The aim of cultural geography insight is to comprehend and respond to these processes. In contrast to the previous two approaches that emphasise the intense-existential relationship with place on the one hand and the distinctive characteristics of a place's ecosystem on the other, cultural geography illustrates that place cannot be taken for granted as completely natural with strict boundaries as bioregionalism postulated, nor as completely dealing with intimate, personal attachment with a given place while less concerned with the significance of other places as is understood through phenomenology. Cultural geography considers places in a pluralistic context, which means that every place is always interconnected and interdependent with other places in the wider context.

Place is defined not by its essential identity or boundaries but by the hybridity of the natural and cultural within it and its dynamic relationship with the wider, global context of place. A place essentially has multiple identities depending on its relationship with other places of which it is a part. Even within a place, there are coexisting identities that contest and compete for the meaning of place.

From a cultural geography perspective, it is necessary to consider the historical elements that shape a particular place. People who are divided into communities actively construct and reconstruct the history and identity of their place in response to the challenges of the global context, either in a complementary way or through contestation and negotiation. Despite engaging with the modernity and global context, the locality of place is not necessarily subsumed by the power of global discourse. Instead, cultural geography seeks to understand the process of glocalization as the dynamic process of a place (local) involving itself in global discourse to respond to globalisation. In other words, cultural geography wants to perceive a place within the framework of cosmopolitanism as a something agent-like that translates global discourse into its local context (Delanty, 2006).

“Cultural geography call us to think globally, but it is not enough to simply recognize that we’re all connected or that environmental issues affect the whole planet. Individuals and group exercise very different kinds of power over these global issues and changing patterns... Each place has an embedded “power-geometry”, which reflect and reinforces social difference like race, class, gender, and citizenship.” (Campbell, 2017).

Cultural geography pays much attention to the *power-geometry* of place rather than relying solely on romanticised feelings of nature in deep and intense personal connections to place. Using the phenomenological way alone to perceive nature and the locality of place makes material structures and processes in broader contexts, such as cultural flows and global political processes, go unnoticed. It is necessary to examine the power-geometry and the social and political relations of a place to understand its complexity. Cultural geography addresses the immediate, local aspect of place as dynamically situated within complex modern, global flows of culture and capital.

Although originally a traditional knowledge system, Feng Shui is something of a modern phenomenon. It has travelled from China to the globe, becoming an important,

practical knowledge for 'dragon's nest seekers'. The practice of Feng Shui is assumed to be universal and can be applied to any geographical setting. However, the enthusiasm for Feng Shui is most prominent in the business world, which prioritises maximising profits and minimising disadvantages through the proper configuration of buildings and rooms. Even the reading of business potential is also guided by Feng Shui. Indeed, Feng Shui has a deeper connection to the core of capitalism than it does to environmentalist activism (see Madeddu & Zhang, 2021). Nothing is wrong with that, as it demonstrates that an ancient traditional knowledge system has a long-lasting resonance with the modern and globalised world.

In a global, modern world, it is unrealistic to figure out the kind of place that Feng Shui idealises, because places have been so highly manufactured to the extent that the character of its locality has diminished, leaving it as nothing more than a mere space. It has so much to do with the politics of rationalisation that seeks to uniformise the environment under modern standards that are presumed to be universal and applicable for every place. In fact, behind it is a capitalistic endeavour to exploit nature by subjugating diversity. Examples of this can be seen in the logging of forests into palm oil plantations or the conversion of productive land into housing without considering the long-term effects on the broader environment.

Spatial planning that is based on the modern constitution and the pragmatic principle creates a landscape that condenses the separation of humans from the 'uniqueness' of nature, eliminating the power-geometric network of places. In other words, bioregional devastation of one place causes harm to other places, such as floods and extreme weather caused by deforestation and land opening. Humans no longer recognise geographical and regional characteristics and thus fail to tackle environmental problems.

The authority, be it the state or the stakeholder or both, with their capitalistic paradigm and pragmatic politics, is only able to treat the problem as an atomic issue of space, with less interest in the complexity of the geographical network of places. Arguably, through the perspective of cultural geography, the separation between the cultural and the natural framed by the modern constitution also extends to the deprivation of the relationship of places and subduing them as spaces that are valued only as capital assets.

Feng Shui insights in light of cultural geography account for a paradigm that presupposes a geometric relationship between places. From this perspective, the balance of a place's Chi depends on the balance of Chi in other places. Determining the best place is not merely based on certain geographical contours according to Feng Shui, which are nowadays difficult to find, both because people prefer to choose places that are near cities as their source of livelihood, as well as the massive topographical transformations that have occurred since the period of infrastructure development. Thinking in a Feng Shui way in this perspective, then, is more of a conservative stance that looks at the ecological sustainability of a place by preserving it from capitalistic measures. Therefore, civil agencies and pro-environmental political movements are critical in ensuring the sustainability of a place. Here, Feng Shui serves as an epistemic foundation to argue against political will that threatens biodiversity and accelerates the exploitation of nature, with the idea that there is a sacred energy in some places that ensures the sustainability of the broader surrounding environment. Thus, Feng Shui does not necessarily consist of hunting down the dragon and

transforming it into a living place but rather of nurturing the dragon, flowing Chi energy, as a guardian of the ecosystem.

The concept of Feng Shui forest, which is common in Hong Kong, South Korea, and Japan demonstrates the application of the cultural geography approach in Feng Shui. Feng Shui forests are patches of remnant natural forests that are managed based on traditional Feng Shui geomancy by a local community or indigenous residents with collectively agreed rules for protecting such forests. In other words, the Feng Shui forest is at once a constituent of local culture and ecological heritage that is essential to the community for its role in ensuring the cultural and natural conservation (J. Chen et al., 2020). In his research, S.Y. Li (2018) observed two Feng Shui forests in Hong Kong, Tai Om and She Shan Tsuen, and their guardian communities. He found that the guardian community of each forest has its mechanism for utilising and managing as well as developed their own distinctive style of Feng Shui forests. There has been a system of norms or customs that regulate the forest, not only to prevent the logging activity but also to ensure the geographical landscape is in accordance with Feng Shui principles so that the cultural geography and biodiversity in it are preserved (for a quantitative-statistical account of the significance of Feng Shui forests for the preservation of tree species and sufficient habitat to maintain regional biodiversity, see Hu, et al., 2011) as well as for the ecosystem functions such as enhancing water storage, filtering water, mitigating floods, and typhoon. These cultural norms then become part of a community-based forestry institution that fosters the preservation of Feng Shui forests. However, along with urbanisation and the increasing intensity of rural migrants, these norms are becoming less binding than before, making the supervision of Feng Shui forests loose and vulnerable to becoming capital assets to be exploited by oligarchic interests.



Figure 2. The landscape of a Feng Shui forest in Lai Chi Wo Village, Hong Kong. The forest grove on the hill overlooking the village from behind illustrates the Feng Shui forest configuration to blocking bad Chi and accumulate good Chi for the prosperous lives of the villagers.

Source: https://www.hku.hk/press/news_detail_20436.html

CONCLUSION

This article addresses Feng Shui within the framework of the theory of place in the discourse of ecology in the quest to overcome the epistemic crisis of the modern constitution. We have discussed how the modern constitution, epistemically, created the imaginary separation of culture and nature, to the extent that modern science has eliminated any kind of cosmologies, especially the local, traditional one, that committed towards the harmony of nature and humans. Feng Shui is one such traditional cosmology.

A key theme in ecological discussions is place. This research conceptually distinguishes place from space, emphasising the authenticity of place over the abstract concept of space. I argue that the theory of place proposes a perspective that is highly resonant with Feng Shui cosmology, which largely involves the configuration of place to cultivate the balance of nature based on the management of the cosmic energy Chi. Therefore, the most pertinent framework to engage Feng Shui in ecological discussions is the theory of place.

Here, the theory of place also reveals a further consequence of the modern constitution's epistemology of nature-culture separation, namely, the alienation of the power-geometry network that plays vital roles in ensuring the well-being of the places. Worthy of note, Feng Shui insights not only narrate the virtue of nature-culture relations epistemology or human-environment relations in a given place but also reveal the virtue of interconnectivity of places in the sense that Chi energy that inhabits a place determines the flow and harmony of energy in other places. By perceiving a place from the perspective of cultural geometry, Feng Shui cosmology is not necessarily intended to find a good flow of Chi energy for private and capitalistic interests alone but also serves as an ecological stand embodied in environmental activism or community forestry with the vision to maintain the longevity of the ecosystem and biodiversity of a place.

Feng Shui deals a lot with the management of Chi energy for living balance. Chi is an abstract metaphor for cosmic energy, which cannot be adequately explained by modern knowledge; however, its presence determines the integral quality of human interaction with people, nature, and the cosmos. Therefore, the theoretical elaboration of Feng Shui, although in some ways intersecting with physics, is of little interest to modern people since it is considered more as a metaphysical matter and beyond the scope of modern science. Yet Feng Shui somehow remains popular in the modern world because of its practical aspects rather than the theoretical ones. It is precisely because of this applied axiological facet that the other aspects, such as the ontological and epistemological ones laid out in Feng Shui's way of thinking, are less concerned, especially in environmental issues. For this reason, this article aims to provide the Feng Shui way of thinking as an epistemic mode to respond to issues of environmentalism, biodiversity, and climate crisis resulting from the modern scientific paradigm and capitalistic worldview.

Feng Shui has become a popular traditional Chinese knowledge system around the world. However, Feng Shui practices are more popularly seen as a consulting service in determining the location of buildings or tombs. Discussions of Feng Shui in the context of modern ecological science are relatively rare, or at least less popular. This is because Feng Shui is treated as more pragmatic than ecological knowledge. However, Feng Shui itself has always been about environmentalism, nature, and the harmonization of human with his

environment. Therefore, this article confines itself to bringing Feng Shui into the ecological discussion within the framework of the theory of place as a theoretical basis for critiquing modernity, especially the modern science paradigm on nature and culture. This research suggests that Feng Shui, although more commonly perceived as pseudoscience and superstition and more commonly valued as a service commodity, provides critical insights into the modern world that separate humans from nature, as well as enriching the discussion of Feng Shui in ecological discussion.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

This article is a further execution of my final assignment for the course of Religion in the Anthropocene at CRCS UGM. I would like to thank Dr. Zainal Abidin Bagir for providing me with the ecological insights and valuable comments on the first version of this article draft.

REFERENCES

- [1] Bauman, W. A., Bohannon, R., & O'Brien, K. J. (2017). *Grounding Religion* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- [2] Bruun, O. (2008). *An Introduction to Feng Shui*. Cambridge University Press
- [3] Cangianto, A. (n.d.). Refleksi Spiritualitas Budaya Tionghoa dari Jaman Dahulu hingga Sekarang dalam Fengshui. Academia.edu.
- [4] Campbell B. G. (2011). "Religion and Ecology on the Ground: Practice and Place as Key Concepts" in Bauman, W. A., Bohannon, R. R., O'Brien, K. J. *Inherited Land: The Changing Ground of Religion and Ecology*. Pickwick
- [5] Campbell B. G. (2017). "The Power of Place" in Bauman, W. A., Bohannon, R., O'Brien, K. J. *Grounding of Religion and Ecology*. Pickwick.
- [6] Chen, B. X., & Nakama, Y. (2004). A Summary of Research History on Chinese Feng-shui and Application of Feng-shui Principles to Environmental Issues. *Kyusyu Journal of Forest Research*, 57, 297–301.
- [7] Chen, J., Lin, W., Zhang, Y., Dai, Y., & Chen, B. (2020). Village Fengshui Forests as Forms of Cultural and Ecological Heritage: Interpretations and Conservation Policy Implications from Southern China. *Forests*, 11(12), 1–15.
- [8] Han, K. T. (2001). Traditional Chinese Site Selection-Feng Shui: An Evolutionary Ecological Perspective. *Journal of Cultural Geography*, 19(1), 75–96.
- [9] Heidegger, M. (1996). *Being and Time: A Translation of Sein und Zeit* (Trans. Joan Stambaugh). SUNY Press.
- [10] Hu, L., Li, Z., Liao, W. B., & Fan, Q. (2011). Values of Village Fengshui Forest Patches in Biodiversity Conservation in the Pearl River Delta, China. *Biological Conservation*, 144(5), 1553–1559.
- [11] Northcott, M. S. (2015). *Place, Ecology and the Sacred*. Bloomsbury.
- [12] J. Xu and J. Jones. (2019). "East Meets West: On Feng Shui and Western Environmental Models", *ConRepos*.
- [13] Kustedja, S., Sudikno, A., & Salura, P. (2012). Feng-shui: Elemen Budaya Tionghoa Tradisional. *Melintas*, 28(1), 61–89.
- [14] Latour, Bruno. (1993) *We Have Never Been Modern*. Translated by Catherine Porter, Harvard University Press.
- [15] Li, S. Y. (2018). Community-Based Forestry and the Functions of Institutions: A Case Study of

- Fung Shui Forests in Hong Kong. *International Forestry Review*, 20(3), 362–374.
- [16] Madeddu, M., & Zhang, X. (2021). Feng Shui and the City: The Private and Public Spaces of Chinese Geomancy. In *Feng Shui and the City: The Private and Public Spaces of Chinese Geomancy*.
- [17] Merchant, C. (1980). *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution*. Harper & Row.
- [18] Stephen L. Field. (2001). In Search of Dragons: The Folk Ecology of Fengshui. In N. . Girdardot, J. Miller, & L. Xiaogan (Eds.), *Daoism and Ecology: Ways within a Cosmic Landscape* (pp. 185–200). Harvard University Press.
- [19] Wang, X. (2019). Wuxing: An Investigation into the Interpretations of Traditional Chinese Cosmology in Contemporary China. *Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology*, 20(2), 129–146.
- [20] Whang, B. C., & Lee, M. W. (2006). Landscape Ecology Planning Principles in Korean Feng-Shui, Bi-bo Woodlands and Ponds. *Landscape and Ecological Engineering*, 2(2), 147–162/
- [21] White, L. (1967). The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis. *American Association for the Advancement of Science*, 155(3767), 1203–1207.