
THE ESSENCE OF *KANYU* IN FENG SHUI AND THE TOMBS OF THE CHINESE EMPERORS

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ABSTRACT

Chinese geomancy is also known as Feng Shui. It is an ancient philosophical ideological system that uses interdisciplinary knowledge such as astronomy, geography, and anthropology to realize the “harmony between heaven and human”. At present, Chinese geomancy mainly focuses on urban construction, large-scale architecture, interior design, and applied research in the fields of ecological environment, but there is very little discussion on the location of the tomb of the ancient emperors. Based on the concept of *Kanyu* and the principles of Chinese geomancy, this article compares the location of the tombs in the Emperor Valley in ancient China and the Valley of the Kings in Egypt, combined with reflections on representational space in Eliade, Heidegger, Bachelard, and Lefebvre. It shows that the employment of *Kanyu* in the layout of the Emperors Tombs, there is a unity of ‘the representation of space’ with ‘representational space’.

Keywords: Emperor Valley of the East; Feng Shui; Tombs; Sacred Space; Eliade; Heidegger; Bachelard; Lefebvre;

Introduction

Chinese geomancy is also called Feng Shui and Xiang Di Shu (site investigation). According to the ancient Chinese, the orientation of human activity to space is of the utmost significance. It is the subjective evaluation system of the ancient Chinese natural environment, and it is also the theoretical basis for Chinese people to plan the layout of residential buildings during their life and the location and layout of tombs after their death. Chinese geomancy reflects the cosmology and values of Chinese people. It is regarded as the “fossil of life” of traditional Chinese culture. At the same time, it is also a practical philosophical theory that explains the relationship between ancient humans and their geographical environment. While many scholars in the past have considered it as a pseudo-science or superstition, but in recent years, more and more scholars are appreciating its value in such areas as urban planning, large-scale architecture, and interior design. But seemingly forgotten is its application to the location of tombs after death and the element of the sacred in connection with these locations. This article will explain its significance for the burial sites of the Chinese Emperors within the Emperor Valley. It will compare this with Egyptian burial practices in the Valley of the Kings of Ancient Egypt. And finally it will show that a consideration of Chinese geomancy when applied to death, tells us something about life and its relationship to the environment. It can demonstrate the significance of sacred space for contemporary humanity.

The Philosophy of Chinese Geomancy

Chinese geomancy originated in the very earliest periods of Chinese history. It can be seen in settlement sites in the Shang (商) and Zhou (周) periods (1600BC-256BC), it gradually spread throughout the Sui (隋) and Tang (唐) periods (581AD-907AD), it became well-established in the Song (宋) period (960AD-1279AD), and continued to develop in the Ming (明) and Qing (清) periods (1368AD-1911AD). Each historical period has its own approach, and it is only gradually that coherent systems or schools of geomancy form. Its most common schools are called the Mountain School (Luan Tou Pai) and the Regulating Qi School (Li Qi Pai).²

The term “Feng Shui” first appeared in Pu Guo’s (郭璞) “Book of Burial” (葬书),³ where it is said that (generally “positive”) energy (*qi*气) comes with the arrangement of a location with respect to wind and water. The task of the art of Feng Shui is to direct energy to remain in a house or a tomb by means of using either an existing or a created artificial landscape that allows air and water to ‘profit’ a location. The air uses wind to disperse, so a slow flow of vitality is directed so that the “qi” can continuously flow in and accumulate on a piece of land. This requires a very specific and auspicious location. This location must be able to contain the wind so that the “qi” flow does not dissipate, and water is used as a boundary “qi”, so that the “qi” accumulated in the burial site of the deceased can be retained.

The term *Kanyu* (**kān yú** 堪輿) when applied to Geomancy is very significant. The word “Kan 堪” contains various meanings. It can refer to the heavens, and the act of surveying. “Yu 輿” refers to the earth. So *Kanyu* in Chinese Geomancy refers to surveying the topography to choose a place that is conducive to living dwellings and burial sites. The “Chinese geomancy” is called “Feng Shui” which means “wind”: flowing air; “water”: the blood of the earth (the basic necessity for the growth of all things). The essence of geomancy is considered consistent with science, and it is considered as something necessary to achieve “harmony” between human beings and nature. To achieve this harmony, *Kanyu* employs astronomy, geography, and human science as its three scientific pillars. The unity of heaven, earth, and people is considered the highest principle, and has been a very important idea throughout Chinese history. There is an attention to the organic connection and interaction between human beings and nature, attention to the advantages and disadvantages of “Shape” (the visible) and “Qi” (the invisible), and the realization that they are mutually generated.

There are Four schemes in Chinese geomancy. The first is called ‘looking for the Dragon (龙) Vein’. In his book “Shaking the Dragon”, Yang Junsong specifically discusses the situation of mountain ranges, which he describes rolling mountains as “dragon veins”. These ranges which involve “mountains, mountain ridges, peaks, and mountain chains” should undulate continuously and vertically from east to west, just like the “dragon” in the myth, where the changing directions, the topography, the changes of direction of the mountains are represented both physically

and mythically. There is a process involving finding the main chain of undulating mountains to serve as a back-drop or what is called ‘ancestor mountain’, and naming them according to their characteristics.

The second is called ‘looking for the target points (Xue 穴). The ancient Chinese believed that astrology corresponds to the formation of the mountains on earth based on the Eight Diagrams.

The third involves ‘Looking for the branch mountains or spurs (Sha 砂)’ This is self explanatory and involves looking for the positions of ridges or other tall objects around the main mountain range. They create a sheltered spaces. Both “Sha” and “Dragon” refer to mountain bodies, but the difference is that “Dragon (Main Mountain)” is like “Master” and “Sha” (branch mountains, spurs or other tall objects)” are like “servants” (they are important for resisting flooding and preventing strong winds).

The fourth or Water system (Shui 水) is closely related to dragon veins, and it is believed by scholars that “good places cannot be without water.” Therefore, in Chinese geomancy, we usually look at water systems first and then look at mountains, and pay special attention to the quality and shape of the hydrologic system. “Water observation” refers to observing this system (paying close attention where the water enters and where the water exists a specific site) in relation to the mountain topography.⁴

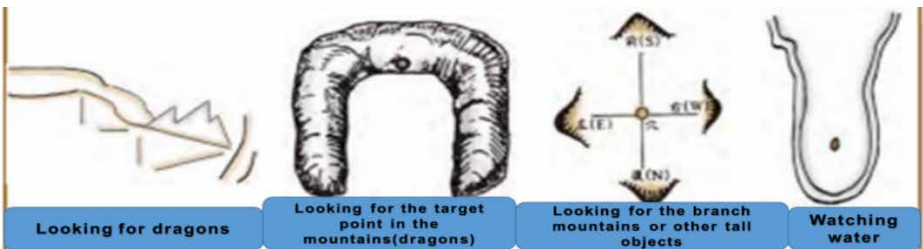


Figure 1. The four formulas of the topological pattern of Chinese geomancy²

Orientation (Xiang 向) is also important. It refers to means direction, orientation, and generally refers to the direction perpendicular to the location of the building base point. Therefore the basic tools for selecting the location of tomb spaces in Geomancy are the compass (also called a needle plate) and the Ding Lan ruler.⁵

The Emperor Valley of China and Valley of the Kings of Egypt

The Guanzhong area of Shanxi is called the “Emperor Valley of the East”, where 72 Chinese emperors are buried. From the four formulas of the topological pattern of Geomancy to analyze the site selection of 72 emperors’ tombs in the Guanzhong Plain, Shanxi province, China: (1) From the perspective of the choice of the Dragons Vein 龙 (the main mountain range), the Qinling Mountain Range is the middle mountain range of the three major mountain ranges in China. It is located in the center and is in the middle of the five elements; (2) From the perspective of Sha 砂 (surrounding auxiliary mountain ranges or spurs), the mountain on both sides is lower than the main mountain range, surrounded by triangles, and the layout of the blue dragon and white tiger has auxiliary functions; (3) From the perspective of Shui 水 (water system), the incoming water is the Yellow River, and the outgoing water is the Yangtze River. The two major water systems are China’s main water systems, which meet in the Guanzhong Plain of Shaanxi, and there are many side branch water systems; (4) From the perspective of Xue 穴 (the target point where the mausoleum was built). It involves aligning the layout of the tomb with the positions and movement of the stars. The first of nine stars, the Alpha Ursae Majoris (also known as Kuixing in the nine-star map) is a class A star in Ziwei Doushu (紫微斗数). It is a star of wisdom and auspicious, symbolizing power and wealth.

The Valley of the Kings of Ancient Egypt is located in an uninhabited limestone valley not far from the ruins of Thebes, the ancient Egyptian capital. Under the cliff is the place where the pharaohs were buried during the New Kingdom period of ancient Egypt (from 1570 to 1090 BC). It used to be a majestic tomb complex, with more than 60 emperor tombs, burying 64 pharaohs from the 18th to the 20th dynasty of Egypt. From the four formulas of the topological pattern, we can analyze the site selection basis of the Pharaoh’s tombs in the Valley of the Kings in Egypt as follows: (1) From the selection of the Dragons Vein 龙, the main mountain range of the Valley of the Kings chooses the pyramid-shaped peak Al-Qurn on the west bank of the Nile. (2) The surrounding mountains (Sha 砂) are lower than the main mountain range, which has the function of embracing and concealment. (3) From the view of water 水 (peripheral water system), the Nile water system in connection with the position of the mountains symbolically forms the boundary between

life and death. (4) From the perspective of Xue 穴 (the place where the target mausoleum was built), from the satellite image, the shape and position of the first star in the nine-star map of Geomancy is the same. Also known as Kuixing (魁星) it is the main star in Ziwei Doushu (紫微斗数). It is a star of wisdom and auspiciousness, and it also symbolizes power and wealth. So the features in the Nile Valley are very similar to the Chinese Emperor Valley.

The Significance of Sacred Space

The emperors are considered witnesses to human history, and the spatial locations of palaces, cities, temples, and tombs built during their reign are all comprehensive cultural manifestations of cosmology and philosophy from a certain period time. But what does this mean for contemporary humanity? Today we have been conditioned to see space much differently.

The scholar who systematically analyzed the concept of sacred space in earlier civilizations is Mircea Eliade. He regards the non-homogeneous spaces constructed through symbols and architecture as special places that can connect to the sacred world, which was more primordial than the profane world in which people lived, and was the source of its existence. The purpose of myth and religion was to reenact the myths of the primordial sacred space so these repetitions could renew the profane world. Mircea Eliade believes that pre-modern people, which he called “homo religious,” generally lived in a sacred universe.⁶ For them, the universe has a religious dimension. This religious experience is closely related to the myth of the origin of the universe: the creation of the world means the emergence of reality, which is “the irruption of the divine into the earth”; the creation of the world is a great “theophany,” (an expression of the order of the deities) and the ‘showing’ of this order is called a “hierophany” through which the sacred manifests itself to an individual or group.⁷ With the eruption of the sacred reality, the space of the universe is established, given form and order, and sanctified to become the “world” in the true sense. This suggests the importance of human dwelling.

Homo Religiosus lives in an open cosmos and is in turn open to the world. “This means (a) that he is in communication with the gods; (b) that he shares in the sanctity of the world. That religious man can live only in an open world, we saw when we analyzed the structure of sacred space; man desires to dwell at a center... His dwelling is a microcosm; and so too is his body. The homology house-body-cosmos presents itself very early.⁸

This connection between microcosm and macrocosm with the dwelling is also investigated by others. One philosopher who develops an approach very similar to the idea of *Kanyu* is the German philosopher Martin Heidegger. Feng Shui recognizes the unity of heaven, earth, and human beings. Heidegger speaks of the Fourfold. Heidegger in his essay “Building, Dwelling, Thinking” reflects on the connection of building, and dwelling. He contends that the human capacity to dwell comes prior to building. This dwelling involves the interconnection of earth, sky, the divinities and the mortals. This is what he calls the “Fourfold.” Significant here, is the idea of death that accompanies being mortal. Heidegger writes:

The mortals dwell in that they await the divinities as divinities. They keep hope in the divinities that which is un hoped for. They wait for signs of their arrival and do not mistake the signs of their absence. They do not make their gods for themselves and they do not worship idols. In the very depth of misfortune, they wait for the withdrawn salvation. The mortals dwell in so far as they direct their own being, that they are capable of death as death, and they are able to use this capacity in order to have a good death. Leading the mortals to the nature of death in no way means to make death, as the empty Nothing, the goal; it also doesn’t mean to darken *dwelling* by blindly staring at the end.⁹

We do not dwell because we build, we build because we dwell. Our building gives us the site which brings the fourfold together. Heidegger

uses the example of the bridge, but you can see, that the tomb of the emperors in Feng Shui also brings together earth, sky, the divinities and the mortals in a very clear way. It is not only an establishing but also a form of guarding.

Building erects *locations* that make a site of the Fourfold. Out of the Onefold, in which earth and sky, the divinities and the mortals belong to each other, *building* receives the directive for its erecting of *locations*. out of the Fourfold, *building* takes over the measurement for all the gauging and every surveying of the *spaces* that are, in each case, made room for by the *locations* that have been founded. The buildings guard the Fourfold. They are things that in their own way spare the Fourfold. To spare the Fourfold, to save the earth, to receive the sky, to await the divinities, to lead the mortals, this fourfolded sparing is the simple nature of *dwelling*. In such a way, genuine buildings share *dwelling* in its nature and enclose this nature.¹⁰

The French philosopher Gaston Bachelard attempted to develop a phenomenology of the relation of the poetic imagination to space. He draws from the space of the house with its various rooms – the attic, the cellar, the living room – and points out the qualitative difference of spaces, which Eliade connects with archaic man. Bachelard distinguishes his approach from the archetypal psychology of Jung.

The poetic image is not subject to an inner thrust. It is not an echo of the past. On the contrary: through the brilliance of an image, the distant past resounds with echoes, and it is hard to know at what depth these echoes. will reverberate and die away. Because of its novelty and its action, the poetic image has an entity and a dynamism of its own; it is referable to a direct ontology. This ontology is what I plan to study.¹¹

We can see the construction of the emperor's tombs in a way similar not only to Eliade, but also similar to Bachelard's poetic imagination. Through the creation of sacred space, we create a connection or a reawakening of the past within the topology of the present. We create a

sheltered environment that maintains a relationship to eternity.

Bachelard resists a merely psychological interpretation of space as being too reductive. It loses the phenomenological aspect of “exaggeration.” This means that the dialectic of inside and outside is reversed and the space we inhabit appears within our consciousness. This function of the imagination in space shows the power of space to create a connection with something eternal.

And so in a sense the tomb is the creation of an eternity. A resistance against the dangers of time and change. Referring to a short story by Edgar Allan Poe, “The Fall of the House of Usher” Bachelard writes:

Meanwhile, consciousness increases; not, however, in relation between human beings, upon which psychoanalysis generally bases its observations. For it is not possible to concentrate on human problems in the face of a cosmos in danger. Everything lives in a sort of pre-quake, in a house about to collapse beneath the weight of walls which, when they too collapse, will have achieved definitive burial for a dead woman. But this cosmos is not real. As Poe himself said, it is a sulphurous ideality, created by the dreamer with each new wave of his images. Man and the World, man and his world, are at their closest, it being in the power of the poet to designate them to us in their moments of greatest proximity. Man and the world are in a community of dangers. They are dangerous for each other. All this can be heard and pre-heard in the sub-rumbling murmur of the poem.¹²

Here the imaginary space is still not the real space. Our representational spaces connected to our dreams is different than the representational space that we find in the sciences. But what if the two can be brought together?

This relationship of representational spaces to representations of space are also taken up by the French philosopher Henri Lefebvre who distinguishes the representation of space which is associated with scientific thought, with representational spaces which symbolically project space and its meaning and often provides a resistance to modernity:

Whether the East, specifically China, has experienced a contrast between representations of space and representational spaces is doubtful in the extreme. It is indeed quite possible that the Chinese characters combine two functions in an inextricable way, that on the one hand they convey the order of the world (space-time), while on the other hand they lay hold of that concrete (practical and social) space-time wherein symbolisms hold sway, where works of art are created, and where buildings, palaces and temples are built.¹³

Reflecting on death Lefebvre writes:

Lastly, death must be both represented and rejected. Death too has a 'location', but that location lies below or above appropriated social space; death is relegated to the infinite realm so as to disenfranchise (or purify) the finiteness in which social practice occurs, in which the law that that practice has established holds sway. Social space thus remains the space of society, of social life.¹⁴

Lefebvre's interesting observation concerning the possible unity of representational space and the space of representation in Chinese thought, points to the idea that in *Kanyu*, the architect must place the tomb must be situated securely in relationship to a real cosmos to prevent the collapse of memory and the collapse of the cosmos itself.

These approaches, lead us to the understanding that spatial representations involve a unified malleability, which presents different forms of expression through time. Our modern experience is removed from earlier experiences of space, so that different functions of space can be united together for the modern consciousness. The tomb as a historical site brings together different modes of representational space so that they can be seen within the same space and time. This points to the importance of the memories of historical existence. In some ways this is similar to Heidegger's idea of poetic dwelling.

This idea of *Kanyu* in Feng Shui, whether it is the spatial location of the palace and temple during the lifetime of the Egyptian emperor's tomb¹⁵, or the spatial relationship between the location of the tomb and the temple, the palace — the temple — the emperor's tomb constitutes a stable triangular spatial relationship. This can also prove that ancient Egypt has organically integrated the sacred factors of religion, the environmental factors of geography, and the location of space. Similarly, the tomb of Qin Shi Huang (First Emperor of Qin) in ancient China, from site selection, construction, to the structure of the tomb, embodies the balance of “heaven, earth and man”, and believes that the outlook on life of “immortality” is consistent with the outlook on the universe. Therefore, the tomb of Qin Shi Huang is consistent with the magnificent Xianyang palace built during his lifetime presents the corresponding relationship between the north and south meridians.

Although we live in a different historical time and spaces, when we are close to the tombs of the emperors, we can still feel the traces of history. When we read about such places or see images of them, we can little appreciate them, but when we stand in these spaces we experience complex psychological changes. Space is brought to us, is internalized within us, and communicates to us something of the past. It maintains the energy (qi) of the past. What has died is given life.

ENDNOTES

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² Li Chengzhi Li, Jia Huiru Jia, *Ancient Chinese Geomancy*, Kyushu Publishing Press, 2008, pp66-68, pp105-131.

³ Pu Guo, *Book of Burial*, Shanghai Ancient Books Publishing Press, 2015

⁴ Xiaojiang Zheng, *Chinese Mysterious Culture – Chinese Feng Shui*, Contemporary World Publishing Press, 2008, 198-199.

⁵ Da Lin, *Ancient Chinese Surveying and Mapping: Shaking the Dragon Scripture*, Shanxi Normal University Press, 2009, pp78 - 106.

⁶ Mircea Eliade, *The Quest: History and Meaning in Religion*, Chicago and London, the University of Chicago Press, 1969, 51.

⁷ “Homo religiosus” is a concept first proposed by Max Scheler. He summarized people’s general view of oneself as their “self-image.” He summarized five historical images of oneself in chronological order, “Homo religiosus, “Wisdom man”, “Craftman”, “Dionysus man” and “Creator” etc.

⁸ Mircea Eliade, *The Quest: History and Meaning in Religion*, Chicago and London, the University of Chicago Press, 1969, 172

⁹ Heidegger, “Building, Dwelling, Thinking,” 6. This version is translated by Adam Bobeck and can be accessed at: https://www.academia.edu/34279818/Building_Dwelling_Thinking_by_Martin_Heidegger_Translation_and_Commentary_by_Adam_Bobeck_

¹⁰ Martin Heidegger, “Building, Dwelling, Thinking,” 13.

¹¹ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*. translated from the French by Maria Jolas, with a new foreword by John R. Stilgoe. Boston: Beacon Press, 1994, xvi.

¹² Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 1994, 176.

¹³ Lefebvre, Henri. *The Production of Space*. translated by Donald Nicholson Smith. Cornwall: T.J. Press Ltd. 1991, 42

¹⁴ Lefebvre, Henri. *The Production of Space*, 35.

¹⁵ Zhao Feng Ma. *The Return of the Pharaoh: The Mysterious Ancient Egyptian Civilization*, Beijing Industry Press, 2014

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