

FENGSHUI: SCIENCE, RELIGION, SUPERSTITION, OR TRADE?

by *Yuanlin Guo*

Abstract. Fengshui (also called Chinese geomancy) is a pre-modern tradition rooted in Chinese civilization. Chinese civilization is pre-modern and practice-oriented due to the domination of political power in China. In contrast, Western civilization is modernized. It witnessed the development of religion in ancient times, and the growth of science through reason (logic) and experiment in modern times. It is both rational and transcendental. It seems that Fengshui is an intermediate between science and religion. It is not science although its focus is on this world, for it does not seek knowledge and truth. It is not religion although it is mystical, for it does not seek transcendence and good. It is not only superstition (or magic), but also a mystical trade that centers on secular benefits.

Keywords: China; civilization; Fengshui; religion; science; superstition; trade

INTRODUCTION

Fengshui (also called Chinese geomancy) is a pre-modern tradition rooted in Chinese civilization. On the one hand, it is neither modern science nor genuine religion. On the other hand, to a degree, it is not entirely irrelevant to them.¹ Without doubt, science and technology are widely accepted in the present society. Therefore, few people attempt to oppose science with Fengshui. On the contrary, the practitioners of Fengshui try their best to pretend that it is science or at least belongs in that realm. In particular, they claim that Fengshui is a combination of ecology, architecture, environmental science, and so on. Under these conditions, Fengshui as a “science” has been taught and researched in some universities. However, Fengshui is intrinsically different from science although it contains empirical elements, for science aims to understand the world and acquire truth through reason and experiment, whereas Fengshui does not center on knowledge or truth, but on utilitarian purposes through mysticism.

In essence, Fengshui belongs in the category of superstition or magic. However, most Chinese (especially Han Chinese) do not distinguish

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superstition and magic from religion. They resort to religions (e.g., Christianity, Daoism and Buddhism), magic and superstition for secular benefits although they do not have religious faith.² Fengshui aims to be practically useful and to help people gain secular benefits through mysticism, whereas religion aims at transcending the secular world and attaining good through belief (mysticism). For this reason, Fengshui may be called a mystical trade. Under the circumstances, Fengshui remains popular and prosperous in China after the Reform and Opening-up (1978) although it was suppressed and nearly wiped out during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976).

Fengshui originated in pre-modern Chinese civilization. Western civilization has been modernized through the development of Christianity and modern science. Chinese civilization originated and evolved in ancient China, mostly in isolation from other civilizations. However, Chinese civilization has been on the decline since Western civilization forced its way into modern China. On the basis of a comparison between these two civilizations, this article attempts to examine and explain how and why Fengshui is completely different from science or religion. It aims to establish the following conclusion: Fengshui as a mystical trade and superstition is obsolete and should be substituted by science and religion.

FENGSHUI AS A PRE-MODERN TRADITION ROOTED IN CHINESE CIVILIZATION

Samuel Huntington (1927–2008) was perhaps mistaken to view Chinese, Japanese, Indian, Islamic, Latin American, and, possibly, African civilization as alternative “civilizations” on a par with Western civilization, as manifest in his book (Huntington 1996). By contrast, Fukuzawa Yukichi (1835–1901) held that Africa was barbaric, and that China, Japan, Turkey, and so on were semicivilized (Yukichi 2017, 9). Thus, he claimed that Japan should eliminate its superstition (Yin and Yang, and the Five Elements), and that the Japanese should introduce Western civilization to Japan and substitute Japanese civilization with it (Yukichi 2017, 25). Furthermore, leading Chinese thinkers such as Luxun (Shuren Zhou, 1881–1936), Shi Hu (1891–1962), and Duxiu Chen (1879–1942) believed that traditional China was uncivilized.

In fact, Sinic civilization (tradition) is pre-modern, whereas Western civilization is modernized. In terms of chronology, technology, and institutions, they are entirely different: the former is an ancient, agricultural, and autocratic tradition; the latter is a modern, industrial, and democratic civilization. Modern Western civilization is based on ancient Greek civilization (being rational) and Christianity (being transcendental). For this reason, modern Western civilization is not only rational, but also transcendental.³ Its religion originated in ancient times, and science was

subsequently developed through reason (logic) and experiment in modern times. Accordingly, science is defined as modern Western science with its origin in modern Europe. Religion aims at understanding, transcending this world, reaching out to the world beyond and attaining good through belief (mysticism). Science aims at knowing the world and obtaining truth through reason and experiment.

In contrast, Chinese civilization is practice-oriented.⁴ It originated and grew in ancient China, mostly in isolation from other civilizations. Moreover, Chinese society has been centered around the political power of the emperors since the Qin Dynasty (221–206 BC). As the prominent historian Zehua Liu (1935–2018) put it,

The king's power dominated all aspects of the society, including the social resources, materials, and wealth. It also dominated agriculture, industry, commerce, culture, education, science, and technology, and the fate of every member of society. In a society ruled by the king's power, all people and materials were to some extent at the disposal of political power. All theoretical or actual care for the people was only a means to political ends. (Liu 2015, 22)

The political absolutism resulted in some very peculiar and cruel phenomena—the eunuchs, the foot-binding, and the imperial competitive examination: the former two harmed and even ruined the bodies of Chinese people; the latter controlled and destroyed their minds. These phenomena are almost exclusive to ancient China, and cannot be found in Japan, although Sinic and Japanese civilization are quite similar.

In China, so-called religion (Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism) has had to succumb to and serve politics since the Qin Dynasty. For instance, Chinese emperors destroyed Buddhism in 444, 577, 842, and 955, respectively, for they thought that Buddhist monks and temples, being great in number, had challenged their rule and made them uneasy. By contrast, Christianity, recognized as the state religion in the Roman Empire, dominated European monarchs in the middle ages. What is more, nowadays politics still obeys and serves Islam in the Muslim world. This stark contrast shows that political power dictates everything in China. Evidently, politics, especially Chinese politics, is secular and utilitarian. As a result, Sinic civilization lacks rationality, and is pragmatic and nontranscendental. According to Weber, it is very different from Western civilization:

To a striking degree they (Chinese forms of political and economic organization) lacked rational matter-of-factness, impersonal rationalism, and the nature of an abstract, impersonal, purposive association. ... Whereas Puritanism objectified everything and transformed it into rational enterprise, dissolved everything into the pure business relation, and substituted rational law and agreement for tradition, in China, the pervasive factors were tradition, local custom, and the concrete personal favor of the official. (Weber 1959, 241)

In no other civilized countries has material wealth ever been so exalted as the supreme good. (Weber 1959, 237)

Confucianism in contrast meant adjustment to the outside, to the conditions of the “world.” ... but the style of life thus achieved ... could not allow man an inward aspiration toward a “unified personality,” a striving which we associate with the idea of personality. Life remained a series of occurrences. It did not become a whole placed methodically under a transcendental goal. (Weber 1959, 235)

Therefore, Sinic civilization has neither given rise to an authentic religion (monotheistic religion) nor developed abstract reason (logic), without which modern science would not at all appear. Nevertheless, Fengshui as pre-science arises and grows from Chinese civilization. For Fengshui aims at approaching the world and gaining secular benefits through mysticism.

There was no independent science and religion in Chinese civilization. For everything was dominated by politics in traditional China. Knowledge succumbs to political power. The following axioms appear in *The Great Learning*, a Chinese classic:

Things being investigated, knowledge became complete. Their knowledge being complete, their thoughts were sincere. Their thoughts being sincere, their hearts were then rectified. Their hearts being rectified, their persons were cultivated. Their persons being cultivated, their families were regulated. Their families being regulated, their states were rightly governed. Their states being rightly governed, the whole kingdom was made tranquil and happy. (Zisi and Zengzi 2018, 87)

According to the above passage, investigation and knowledge serve thoughts, hearts, persons, and families, which then serve political power (states and the whole kingdom). In short, knowledge serves a political purpose, and hence it is subordinate to politics in Chinese civilization. Moreover, in order to control knowledge, rulers launched massive political campaigns. Some of the most notorious and influential ones are “burning books and burying Confucians alive,” “rejecting the hundred schools of thought and worshipping only Confucianism,” literary inquisition, the Anti-rightist Struggle and the Great Revolution in Proletarian Culture. As a result, Sinic civilization (tradition) tends toward anti-knowledge, or anti-science.⁵ As the well-known sayings go,

Laozi:

He (the sage) constantly (tries to) keep them without knowledge and without desire, and where there are those who have knowledge, to keep them from presuming to act (on it). (Laozi 2019, 9)

Confucius:

The people may be made to follow a path of action, but they may not be made to understand it. (Confucius 2019, 97)

Mencius:

Those who labor with their minds govern others; those who labor with their strength are governed by others. (Mencius 2018, 185)

Zhuangzi:

If we could renounce our sageness and discard our knowledge, ... good order would be universal. (Zhuangzi 1994, 161–65)

Laozi (ca. 571–471 BC), Confucius (551–479 BC), Mencius (ca. 371–289 BC), and Zhuangzi (ca. 369–286 BC), as founders of Taoism and Confucianism, have made a great impact on Chinese civilization. Their teachings reveal a tendency toward anti-knowledge or obscurantism. Even worse, Legalism publicly advocated a policy of keeping the people in ignorance (brainwashing the people).⁶ In extreme cases, political power determines “what is true” and “what is false” as the well-known story “Zhiluweima” (calling a stag a horse) shows. A ruler might deliberately misrepresent a stag as a horse, and distort facts at will for his political purposes. The circumstances contributed to the development of Fengshui because Fengshui is hostile to science and knowledge. As Weber put it, “For all natural scientific knowledge was lacking (in traditional China), partly as a cause and partly as an effect of these elemental forces: the power of chronomancers, geomancers, hydromancers, meteoromancers; and a crude, abstruse, universalist conception of the unity of the world” (Weber 1959, 227).

Worst of all, Yang Gongsun (ca. 395–338 BC) as a notorious Legalist dedicated his life to making the people ignorant, poor, abject and weak, and simultaneously killing those that are strong to empower the state. He claimed that the people are antagonistic to the state: if the people are strong, the state is weak; if the people are weak, the state is strong (Shangyang and Hanfeizi 1999). Therefore, Chinese governments have prohibited independent science and religion to enslave and rule the people. For science and religion would seriously undermine political power if they were independent of politics.

However, ancient China originated and developed Fengshui, a bizarre and mystical trade. Some scholars assert that Fengshui is a peculiar medley of science and religion. As Ernest Eitel (1842–1908), a German priest, put it,

In Feng-shui we have what may be called, from a Chinese point of view, a complete amalgamation of religion and science. Unfortunately, however, the religious element in Feng-shui was through the early disappearance of the ancient theism distorted into a form of gross superstition, half Tais-

tic, half Buddhist, and what I have hitherto, by a stretch of charity, called Chinese physical science is, from a scientific point of view, but a conglomeration of rough guesses at nature, sublimated by fanciful play with puerile diagrams. (Eitel 1873, 47)

According to the above quotation, Eitel held that Fengshui is neither science nor religion, but an amalgamation of superstition, guesswork and fantasy. In my view, it is more exact to conclude that Fengshui is an intermediate between science and religion.

Civilizations were largely separated by distance before Columbus (1451–1506). For this reason, Chinese civilization was independent of Western civilization in ancient times. However, Western civilization overpowered all other civilizations in the modern age. The West gave birth to most of the new ideas, creations, inventions, and innovations. The other civilizations have to learn from modern Western civilization. It seems that Western civilization has been the only creative and inventive one among all civilizations (or traditions) since the fifteenth century. As Weber put it, Occidental civilization led to rational, objective “progress” while Chinese civilization (tradition) preserved the inviolability of tradition and remained unchangeable (Weber 1959, 240–41).

A civilization encompasses cultural factors (values, beliefs, and modes of thinking), system factors (norms, institutions, and social structure), and material factors (technology, machines, and production). Chinese civilization has been learning from Western civilization since the latter was introduced into modern China. Meanwhile, however, it has been opposing Western civilization. The Westernization Movement (1861–1895) and Deng’s China learnt science and technology from the West; the Boxer Rebellion (1899–1901), Mao’s China and contemporary China opposed the West. In particular, the Boxer Rebellion was a movement against Western civilization (especially Christianity), guided by Chinese superstition and magic including Fengshui. Overall, Sinic civilization accepts the material factors of Western civilization, but rejects other factors (with the exception of Marxism). Consequently, Fengshui remains popular and prosperous so long as political powers do not exert firm control over it.

Modern Western civilization has made a great impact on other civilizations since the Renaissance. Under such circumstances, Francis Fukuyama (1952-) argued that all civilizations would adopt Western liberal democracies as the end state of the historical process (Fukuyama 1992). In the nineteenth century, the German thinkers Marx (1818–1883) and Engels (1820–1895) predicted that the history of mankind would end in communism, a Western ideology and institution. They wrote, “Just as it (the bourgeoisie) has made the country dependent on the towns, so it has made barbarian and semi-barbarian countries dependent on the civilized ones, nations of peasants on nations of bourgeois, the East on the West” (Marx

and Engels 2003, 305). The German philosopher Hegel (1770–1831) said, “The History of the World travels from East to West, for Europe is absolutely the end of History, Asia the beginning” (Hegel 2001, 121). Historically, pre-modern Chinese tradition has been declining since the Opium War (1839–1842). In the future, it might be replaced by the modern civilization. If so, Fengshui would disappear and be substituted by science and religion.

FENGSHUI: NOT A MODERN SCIENCE, BUT A MYSTICAL TRADE

It is well-known that Fengshui as pre-science is not a modern science.⁷ For instance, Joseph Needham (1900–1995) classified it as divination, which is among pseudo-sciences (Needham 2005). Furthermore, Shen Li (1946–), an influential contemporary Chinese researcher working on traditional Chinese “science” and “religion” (including Confucianism), holds that Fengshui belongs in the category of superstition or magic (Li 2019, 709–14). Although Needham and Li believed that there was “knowledge” similar to natural science in pre-modern Chinese civilization (tradition), it seems to me that the “knowledge,” arising from traditional China, is different from modern science. In fact, the two paradigms are as incommensurable with each other as that of Aristotle’s physics with that of modern physics.

For this reason, some scholars thought that there was no science in ancient China. For example, Youlan Feng (1895–1990), a leading Chinese philosopher, published an article in 1922 and wrote, “At the end of this paper I shall venture to draw the conclusion that China has no science, because according to her own standard of value she does not need any” (Feng 1922, 246). Likewise, Shuming Liang (1893–1988), a leading Chinese scholar, claimed that there was no science in ancient China (Liang 2016, 254). As a consequence, “science” and “democracy” became the two prominent catchwords of the May 4th New Culture Movement (1917–1927) in China.

It is little wonder that traditional China lacked “science” and “democracy,” both of which stemmed from the West. Science is based on logical deduction and reason, which are deficient in Sinic civilization and traditional China. Euclid’s (ca. 300 BC) *Elements of Geometry* logically deduces an abstract system from a few premises and concepts. In a formal and cognitive respect, it is imitated by Newton’s (1642–1727) *Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy* and Einstein’s (1879–1955) *Theory of Relativity*. The *Elements* has such a dominant and profound influence on Western civilization that Spinoza (1632–1677) formulated his great philosophical work *Ethics* (Demonstrated in Geometrical Order) in a deductive system, which consists of definitions, axioms, postulates, propositions, demonstrations, corollaries, and so on (Spinoza 2001).

In contrast, there is a lack of deductive reasoning in traditional Chinese classics. For example, the *Nine Chapters on the Mathematical Art* (*Jiu Zhang Suan Shu*, around the first century CE), the greatest representative works of the Chinese mathematical tradition, are not a deductive system, but collections of practical problems and problem-solving operations. Hence, Weber pointed out that “thus a juristic, theological, and philosophical ‘logic’ failed to develop (in Chinese civilization)” (Weber 1959, 150).

Fengshui is not based on logical deduction and reason, but on vague, intuitive, and illogical theories of Qi, Yin and Yang, and the five elements (agents), which constitute important parts of Chinese traditional culture. These theories are similar to ancient Greek philosophy: Anaximenes (ca. 585–528 BC) viewed air as the primary substance out of which all things arise; Empedocles (ca. 490–430 BC) asserted that all things are composed of the four primary elements (air, water, fire, and earth), which are caused by two forces (Love and Hate, or Harmony and Disorder) to intermingle and separate. No doubt, these ancient concepts and theories are not scientific due to being highly ambiguous and inexact. It is impossible to test, confirm or falsify these theories. It is noteworthy that the theory and practice of Fengshui is based on the *Zhouyi* (Book of Changes). However, its statements, explanations and conclusions are so obscure and inexact that they are not testable or falsifiable.

Take Qi, for example: Qi as the most fundamental concept is the ontological core of Fengshui. However, we do not know what Qi is precisely. It might be material or spiritual; it might be organic or inorganic; it might be subjective or objective. According to a Fengshui master,

Qi is the Chinese word for “energy.” Everything animate and inanimate, real or conceptual, has *qi*. Different people have different *qi*. Each kind of animal has its own kind of *qi*. A nation has its *qi* and a religion has its *qi*. There is roadway *qi*, rock *qi*, locational *qi*, and vocational *qi*. There is soft-yin *qi* and hard-yang *qi*. There is children *qi*, male and female *qi*. Each item of food has its unique *qi*. To identify the *qi* of anything animate or inanimate, real or conceptual, is to understand its essential nature. *Qi* is the Isness of whatever is – the essence of the thing or situation. If your goal is good health and success in all areas of your life, there is no other concept more important than the study and understanding of *qi*, and how *qi* flows.⁸

In the above excerpt, it is wrong and misleading to identify Qi as “energy,” a scientific concept. “Energy” has been defined, quantified and formulated mathematically (e.g., $E = mc^2$). We clearly understand its connotations and denotations. However, we do not at all know the connotations and denotations of Qi. Clearly, it is impossible to define and quantify Qi in Fengshui. Qi was generally considered as the most fundamental reality for Chinese people in ancient times. Accordingly, a scholar from Taiwan coined two terms: “Realism of Qi” and “Natural Qi-ism”. He wrote:

According to the imagination of Christian culture, the omnipotent Creator created the world by natural laws in six days. Likewise, according to the imagination of the Sinic culture of qi, the universal dynamic qi constantly moves and constitutes all the things we see. Compared with the Creator as first and final cause, we may say that Natural Qi-ism stresses the “efficient cause” of the universal dynamic qi. (Hsu 2016, 92)

From a philosophical perspective, however, Youlan Feng held that Qi is indescribable, unspeakable and inconceivable because it has no nature (Feng 2019, 223). To sum up, Qi is not identical to “energy” in modern physics although we do not know what Qi is.

Some ambiguous concepts such as aether, caloric, and phlogiston had been proposed in ancient or modern physics. However, they were discarded as physics developed. For physicists could neither find them through experiments, nor confirm or falsify the theories pertaining to them. Naturally, those theories have been replaced by more perfect ones because the latter could better explain the world. By contrast, “atom” has been transformed from a vague philosophical concept to an exact scientific one. Leucippus (a contemporary of Empedocles) and Democritus (ca. 460–370 BC), both ancient Greek philosophers, claimed that all things consist of atoms moving in a void. Dalton (1766–1844), father of modern atomic theory, revived ancient atomism on the basis of experiment, and stated that elements are composed of atoms. Rutherford (1871–1937), Bohr (1885–1962), and other scientists researched the structure of the atom. Quantum mechanics gives quantitative accounts of the behavior of electrons (subatomic particles). Thus, “atom” is a very clear and exact concept in present-day science.

A concept is either discarded or developed into a genuine scientific one in the realm of science. However, it is not so in Fengshui. For example, Qi, the core concept of Fengshui, has been made increasingly obscure, general and universal although it has a longer history than “atom”. Why are science and Fengshui radically different? The reason is that science aims at knowing the world and searching for truth through experiment and theory. Scientific theories have to be clear and exact through definition and quantification in order to be confirmed or falsified. On the contrary, Fengshui is for utilitarian purposes through mysticism: its practitioners go for unjust commercial interests, the kind of money-making not through hard work but through drivel, a boast or a swindle; clients fall for the hope of attaining wealth, status, fame, honor, health, success, procreation, happiness, longevity, and prosperity without laboring for them. Thus, Fengshui is a mystical trade that makes use of mysticism. Eitel called it a “black art”—“but the fact is, the Chinese have made Feng-shui a black art, and those that are proficient in this art and derive their livelihood from it, find it to their advantage to make the same mystery of it, with which European alchemists and astrologers used to surround their vagaries” (Eitel 1873,

2). That is to say, Fengshui is a black trade (art) that utilizes mystery—in brief, a mystical trade.

“Mysticism” (or “mystery”) means that which is difficult or impossible to understand or explain. In other words, it is unclear, inexact, indescribable, unspeakable and inconceivable. As a result, it is impossible for us to test, confirm, or falsify theories of Fengshui. For example, railways and telegraph, which are products of Western science and technology, were resisted and sabotaged by some Chinese people in the late nineteenth century because they claimed that railways and telegraph would ruin the Fengshui of the Qing court.⁹ Nowadays, most people believe that the claim of those Chinese people is wrong and has been falsified. However, those Chinese people might have said that their claim was right and had been confirmed, since the Qing court was overthrown in 1911 after railways and telegraph had ruined the Fengshui of the Qing court. For this reason, there has been little conceptual and theoretical development or progress in Fengshui in over 1,000 years. In short, Fengshui and modern science are incommensurable because the former is a mystical trade for the sake of secular benefits.

However, some scholars hold that Fengshui is a synthetic science that consists of environmental science, geography, ecology, architecture, and so on. They approve of Fengshui because it contributes to environmental conservation and harmony between human beings and nature (e.g., Wang et al. 2017). This viewpoint is implausible although some empirical elements of Fengshui could be incorporated into ecology, architecture, environmental science, and so on. Despite having developed and popularized Fengshui, China has not been able to prevent deforestation and destruction of its environment. A researcher working on Fengshui drew the following conclusion:

As a medium of expression, this holistic tradition may work both in favour of development at the expense of the environment and against environmental degradation. So far, however, fengshui as practised in the People's Republic has encouraged the former rather than prevented the latter. (Bruun 2011, 232)

In particular, the environment has become worse in post-Mao's China, where Fengshui has been reinstated and popularized, as opposed to Mao's China, where Fengshui as superstition was prohibited. For Fengshui as a mystical trade is not for protecting the environment, but for gaining secular benefits.

What is more, some researchers or practitioners of Fengshui claim it to be a “scientific” attempt in order to promote the vague and false impression that Fengshui is among modern science. For example, a researcher into Fengshui wrote, “Moreover, traditional *fengshui* is an attempt to relate empirically based structures to feeling/aesthetics in that structure

is necessary for dwelling sites but positive feeling must also be incorporated for a positive outcome. Thus, *fengshui* could be seen as an early attempt at humanistic science” (Paton 2007, 439). It is perhaps very difficult for us to understand what exactly the author aims to express. However, by using the ambiguous phrase “an early attempt at humanistic science,” he relates Fengshui to science. In fact, his argumentation shows that Fengshui is not related to modern science, but to humanities or humanistic study, which does not accord with the paradigm of modern science.

Unfortunately, some works and viewpoints might be misunderstood to affirm that Fengshui belongs in science, as shown by the following paragraph:

A number of the early European commentators on fengshui thought of it as a type of scientific endeavour. de Groot (1912) dubbed it a quasi-science, but Eitel (1873, 2–3), in particular, considered it a natural science, and his monograph on it was subtitled, ‘the Rudiments of Natural Science’. (Paton 2021, 1371)

Apparently, the above paragraph might mislead readers. First, de Groot and Eitel used the term “science” to refer to knowledge rather than modern science. Second, Jan de Groot (1854–1921), an anthropologist and sinologist from the Netherlands, regarded Fengshui as charlatanism: “Being a quasi science, it is practiced as a quasi science, that is to say, as charlatanism” (de Groot 1897, 938). Moreover, he asserted that Fengshui is in reality a ridiculous caricature of science: “Nature having never been studied in China in a scientific manner, Fung-shui is not based on any sound ideas acquired by an experimental and critical survey of the heavens and the earth. ... Fung-shui is a mere chaos of childish absurdities and refined mysticism, cemented together, by sophistic reasonings, into a system, which is in reality a ridiculous caricature of science” (de Groot 1897, 937–38). In fact, it follows from the following quotation that de Groot stressed that there was no science in traditional China:

So nobody in China, has ever thought of studying Nature in that independent matter-of-fact way which alone can reveal to man the secrets of the Universe; nor have the Chinese tried to make instruments to aid them in the contemplation of the canopy of heaven, the study of the atmosphere, the laws of gravity and hydrostatics. Instead thereof, they have blunted their wits upon conjectural theories, evolving an entire system of natural science from their religious superstitions with respect to the dead in connection with a few rough guesses at Nature occurring in the Classics; the product being a monstrous medley of religion, superstition, ignorance and philosophy, more strange than was ever hatched by the human brain. (de Groot 1897, 1051)

According to de Groot, nobody studied Nature in a scientific manner in ancient China where the entire system of natural science was “a monstrous

medley of religion, superstition, ignorance and philosophy". That is to say, he held that science did not exist in traditional China, and hence he used the term "science" to refer to a specific type of knowledge.

Third, Eitel did not consider Fengshui (so-called "Chinese physical science") as modern science. He wrote, "practically speaking it is simply a system of superstition" (Eitel 1873, 2); "What I have hitherto, by a stretch of charity, called Chinese physical science is, from a scientific point of view, but a conglomeration of rough guesses at nature, sublimated by fanciful play with puerile diagrams" (Eitel 1873, 47). He held that based on guesswork and fantasy, Fengshui (so-called "Chinese physical science") was not science from a scientific point of view. As he put it, "the whole system of Feng-shui may contain a bushel of wisdom, but it scarcely contains a handful of common sense. ... The system of Feng-shui, therefore, based as it is on human speculation and superstition and not on careful study of nature, is marked for decay and dissolution; ..." (Eitel 1873, 50). What is more, Eitel stressed that Fengshui was a "strange medley of superstition, ignorance and philosophy" (Eitel 1873, 46). In a word, both de Groot and Eitel claimed that Fengshui was not modern science, but a monstrous medley of religion, superstition, ignorance and philosophy. Their works and viewpoints might have been misunderstood in some cases. Perhaps, readers have been misled.

This claim, that Fengshui is identical or relevant to science, has been convincingly refuted and attacked by Shen Li and another scholar. Li drew the following conclusions from his investigations and analysis: Fengshui is a magic, invented in the Song Dynasty (960–1279); Before the Song Dynasty, "Fengshui" as a phrase did not refer to geomancy, but to edema caused by nephropathy; the author of the *Book on Burial* was not Pu Guo (276–324, in the Jin Dynasty) because it was written in the Song Dynasty;¹⁰ the theory of Fengshui, based on *Book on Burial*, was opposed by some Confucians even in the Song Dynasty because it was ar-rant nonsense, being false and self-contradictory; thus, Fengshui belongs in superstition as physiognomy and fortune-telling do (Li 2019, 709–14). No doubt, these conclusions are reasonable and well-grounded. Besides, another scholar deemed Fengshui to be nonscientific because Fengshui lacked at least 33 of the 36 properties of science that he listed to demarcate Fengshui from science (Fernandez–Beanato 2021, 1333–351). In a word, Fengshui does not belong to science, but to magic or superstition.

If Fengshui belongs in the category of magic, it is a pseudo-science or pseudo-art. James Frazer (1854–1941), a well-known Scottish anthropologist, divided magic into the theoretical and the practical. He regarded theoretical magic as a pseudo-science, and practical magic as a pseudo-art, including positive magic (or sorcery) and negative magic (or taboo) (Frazer 1990, 20). Thus, he concluded, "In short, magic is a spurious system of natural law as well as a fallacious guide of conduct; it is a false science as

well as an abortive art” (Frazer 1990, 11). Bronislaw Malinowski (1884–1942), a well-known anthropologist, accepted Frazer’s view that magic is a pseudo-science. He wrote, “Thus both magic and science show certain similarities, and, with Sir James Frazer, we can appropriately call magic a pseudo-science” (Malinowski 1948, 67). It should be pointed out that Frazer and Malinowski meant not modern science but knowledge (even the primitive knowledge of savage man) when using the word “science” (Malinowski 1948, 67).¹¹ Therefore, according to Frazer and Malinowski, magic is not only a pseudo-science, but also a pseudo-knowledge. It further follows that Fengshui as magic is both a pseudo-science and a pseudo-knowledge.

In sum, as Weber put it, science arose only in modern Western civilization:

Occidental natural science, with its mathematical foundation, is a combination of rational forms of thought grown on the soil of ancient philosophy and the technical “experiment” which originated on the soil of the Renaissance. The specifically modern element of all naturalistic discipline did not first develop in the field of science but in art. The “experimenting,” great art of the Renaissance was the child of a unique blend of two elements: the empirical skill of occidental artists based on craftsmanship, and their historically and socially determined rationalist ambition. They sought eternal significance for their art and social prestige for themselves by raising art to the level of “science.” The latter point was specific to the Occident. (Weber 1959, 150–51)

By contrast, Chinese civilization failed to develop rational science for lack of rationality and transcendence. Modern Occidental science has all the most important characteristics: reason, experimentation, and quantification. On the contrary, Fengshui, originating in ancient China, lacks these characteristics. Fengshui and modern science are incommensurable because they belong to different traditions and paradigms. Fengshui contains empirical elements, but it is highly ambiguous and rarely quantified. Modern science, as universal and systematic knowledge, pursues knowledge and truth through reason and experiment, whereas Fengshui, as pseudo-science and local “knowledge” (pseudo-knowledge), seeks secular benefits through mysticism. By the same token, Malinowski distinguished science (knowledge) from magic as follows:

Science, even as represented by the primitive knowledge of savage man, is based on the normal universal experience of everyday life, experience won in man’s struggle with nature for his subsistence and safety, founded on observation, fixed by reason. Magic is based on specific experience of emotional states in which man observes not nature but himself, in which the truth is revealed not by reason but by the play of emotions upon the human organism. Science is founded on the conviction that experience, effort, and reason are valid; magic on the belief that hope cannot fail nor desire deceive. The theories of knowledge are dictated by logic, those of magic

by the association of ideas under the influence of desire. (Malinowski 1948, 67)

According to the above paragraph, Malinowski thought that science or knowledge (its object being nature) is based on observation, experience, effort, reason, and logic, whereas magic (its object being an individual person) is founded on emotion, hope, desire, and association. This distinction could also be applied to science and Fengshui because Fengshui is part of magic. However, Malinowski ignored the fact that magic (including Fengshui) is ambiguous and mystical, whereas science, especially modern science, is not. In short, Fengshui and science, paradigms of which are incommensurable, are incorporated each in a different tradition and civilization. As a result, modern science has produced and promoted modern technology and industry, and greatly transformed the world, while Fengshui was, and is still a mystical trade on the basis of profane purposes, deception, and mysticism.

FENGSHUI: NOT A RELIGION, BUT A SUPERSTITION OR MAGIC

Mu Qian (1895–1990) held that Sinic civilization was unable to produce Western science and religion because according to traditional Chinese viewpoints, there is not an absolute objective world, that is, the world is not completely independent of human beings (Qian 2011, 133). By contrast, Western civilization pursues a transcendental, general, universal, abstract, logical, rational, harmonious notion, on which science and religion are based (Qian 2011, 205). Furthermore, he argued that religion had been incorporated and assimilated into politics in China since the Shang Dynasty (1600–1046) (Qian 2011, 42–43). Therefore, the ancient Chinese believed that there was only one world (this world), while Westerners think that there are two opposite worlds (this world and the Kingdom of Heaven) (Qian 2011, 17). In short, there was no science and religion in traditional China. For Sinic civilization is based on “unity of subject and object (unity of heaven and man),” a point of view in which man is an integral part of nature.

Likewise, Zehou Li (1930–2021) claimed that traditional China had not developed science and religion. In ancient times, the Chinese people did not consider nature objective, but believed in “unity of heaven and man.” He further proposed that Sinic civilization was derived from magic (Li 2017). What is more, Frazer concluded that the “civilized races of the world” had passed through an Age of Magic. As he put it,

But if in the most backward state of human society now known to us we find magic thus conspicuously present and religion conspicuously absent, may we not reasonably conjecture that the civilised races of the world have also at some period of their history passed through a similar intellectual phase, that they attempted to force the great powers of nature to

do their pleasure before they thought of courting their favour by offerings and prayer— in short that, just as on the material side of human culture there has everywhere been an Age of Stone, so on the intellectual side there has everywhere been an Age of Magic? There are reasons for answering this question in the affirmative. (Frazer 1990, 55)

Frazer further drew another conclusion that magic paves the way for and is also slowly displaced by religion and science. He wrote, “For as time goes on, the fallacy of magic becomes more and more apparent to the acuter minds and is slowly displaced by religion; ... then magic, ... by investigating the causal sequences in nature, directly prepares the way for science” (Frazer 1990, 90–92). In other words, Frazer stressed that magic had evolved into religion and science in a number of civilizations, especially in Western civilization. However, Zehou Li believed that magic had developed into rite, which further grew into politics and ethics, superseding religion and science in Chinese civilization (Li 2017, 13). That is to say, he thought that ancient Chinese history lacked the religion and science period although it had the magic period. What is more, Leon Vandermeersch (1928–2021), a French sinologist, claimed that Confucian ceremonies and rituals had completely substituted religion with social rites and customs, so that there was hardly a notion of religion in the traditional Chinese language (Vandermeersch 2019, 89). Thus, in his view, the consciousness and dimension of religion was erased and replaced by divination in Sinic civilization (Vandermeersch 2019, 2). Similarly, Sir John Barrow (1764–1848) asserted that there was no religion in traditional China. As he put it,

From the short view I have here taken of the different sects, I think it may justly be concluded that the primitive religion of China no longer exists, or exists only in a corrupted state; that there is at present no national nor scarcely a state religion; and that the articles of faith are as various as the modes of worship; in all of which the people appear to be rather actuated by the dread of evil in this life, than by the fear of punishment in another: ... for a Chinese can scarcely be said to pray; he is grateful when the event proves favourable to his wishes; petulant and peevish with his gods when adverse. (Barrow 2010, 486)

From the above quotation, it follows that a Chinese would rather believe in magic than in religion. In general, a Chinese neither believes in another life, nor acts from the love or fear of gods. On the contrary, he always believes in this life, and persuades or compels “gods” for his profane purpose. Therefore, his behavior accords with magic rather than religion. Frazer drew an important distinction between magic and religion: religion pleases spirits; magic compels or controls them. He wrote, “It is true that magic often deals with spirits, which are personal agents of the kind assumed by religion; but whenever it does so in its proper form, it treats them exactly in the same fashion as it treats inanimate agents, that is, it

constrains or coerces instead of conciliating or propitiating them as religion would do” (Frazer 1990, 51). According to the distinction, magic is more prevalent and influential than religion in Sinic civilization.

Moreover, Weber stressed that “the private need for advisory cure of soul and religious orientation remained on the level of magical animism and the worship of functional deities” in China (Weber 1959, 165). In other words, Chinese civilization did not give rise to authentic and independent religion, but developed magic. On Chinese magic, Weber wrote,

In China, where the state cult also took no note of individual distress, magic has never been displaced by a great prophecy of salvation or by an indigenous savior-religion. (Weber 1959, 224)

This Chinese “universist” philosophy and cosmogony transformed the world into a magic garden. Every Chinese fairy tale reveals the popularity of irrational magic. (Weber 1959, 200)

In general, one may say that every sort of rationalization of the archaic empirical knowledge and craft in China has moved toward a magic image of the world. (Weber 1959, 196)

According to Weber’s viewpoint, magic shows an outstanding characteristic of traditional China. In my opinion, Fengshui relates to or belongs in magic because its aim is to influence and control nature and gods in a mystical manner. As two scholars put it,

Thus, *fengshui* approaches magic, when magic is defined as an attempt to control natural forces (Malinowski 1948). *Fengshui* and magic come close when the practice of *fengshui* involves altering physical and built environments so as to render them more auspicious, that is, there is an attempt to exert human influence on the working of the universe in order to affect the course of one’s life. (Teacher and Chow 2000, 312–13)

In particular, de Groot regarded Pu Guo as a magician. He wrote, “His geomantic skill savours of witchcraft, and the records represent him in fact as a cunning magician” (de Groot 1897, 1001–02). Therefore, Fengshui, deriving from magic, is a remnant of magic. Furthermore, it is possible that Sinic civilization was derived from magic, which was a distinctive part of traditional China.

Due to the influence of magic, gods are neither independent of, nor distinct from human beings in Chinese civilization. The scholar Chenshan Tian (1946-) concluded that Tongbian (Continuity through Change) is a Chinese strand of thought. He drew seven statements representative of the strand on the basis of *Yijing* (the *Book of Changes*), the fourth statement of which is “a fundamental claim that Shen (神) is not a god, and that it depends on humanity” (Tian 2005, 29). He came to the conclusion that “Shen was an ancient expression suggesting a kind of continuity between the sky, the earth, and humanity” (Tian 2005, 29). Tra-

ditional Chinese neither thought that there were independent gods, nor differentiated gods from human beings. They worshiped gods as well as dead (or living) persons for utilitarian purposes, as most Chinese people today still do.¹² There is no authentic religion without an independent god. Thus, it is generally acknowledged that Chinese civilization has not produced science and religion, but superstition and magic, including Fengshui.

Evidently, magic tends to the utilitarian and concrete, while religion tends to the transcendental and abstract. Fengshui does not belong in religion, but in magic. Thus, the aims of Fengshui and religion are different although their approaches appear similar. Religion aims to understand and transcend this world, to reach out to the world beyond and to attain good through belief (mysticism). Fengshui aims to approach matters in the world and gain secular benefit through mysticism. In general, a believer in Fengshui does not believe in an afterlife. According to the theory and practices of Fengshui, one should build good tombs for one's deceased parents so that he can obtain wealth, fame, status, health, happiness, success, longevity and so forth without hard work. For this purpose, the afterlife of the dead does not matter at all. As a Fengshui researcher put it,

All significant human values are firmly placed in a this-worldly context and human satisfaction is pursued unwaveringly, preferably enjoyed through a prolonged life. Accordingly, fengshui thought cares little about the afterlife, except for making the best of the departed. Ancestor worship is a different tradition, which fengshui cosmology may draw on, but the practice of ancestor worship is not an aim in itself since the well-being of ancestors is essentially unimportant. It is only when the unhappiness of the dead has a direct bearing on the life-course of the living that fengshui advises action to be taken. (Bruun 2011, 221)

Therefore, Fengshui belongs in superstition or magic by virtue of not being transcendental. Similarly, Eitel stressed that Fengshui was a type of superstition because its religious element had been distorted into a form of superstition. He wrote, "the religious element in Feng-shui was through the early disappearance of the ancient theism distorted into a form of gross superstition, half Tauistic, half Buddhistic..." (Eitel 1873, 47). By comparison, Daoism, as China's indigenous polytheistic religion, attaches much more importance to this world than to an afterlife. It pursues personal immortality by attempting to create pills of immortality, to cultivate vital energy, and to do other mystical things. It does not appear to be an authentic religion. As Weber put it, "Despite the interest in immortality and in rewards and punishments in the beyond the Taoist retained a worldly orientation like the Confucian" (Weber 1959, 205). In general, there is only the concept of this world in Sinic civilization, where the other world is a copy or an extension of this world.¹³ For this reason, Vandermeersch stressed that Sinic civilization is not transcendental, in

contrast to Western civilization, where the other world is viewed as transcendental and completely separate from this world (Vandermeersch 2019, 94). Likewise, Zehou Li asserted that religion was not formed in traditional China because most Chinese had disregarded the other world and centered around this world (Li 2017, 134–35).

In brief, there was no authentic and independent religion in traditional China. In connection to this, Weber wrote as follows:

Chinese language has no special word for “religion”. ... The official Chinese name for Confucianism was “doctrine of the literati”. (Weber 1959, 144)

Allowing for reservation with regard to Taoism, no powerful priesthood has ever existed so far as is known historically. Above all, there were no independent religious forces to develop a doctrine of salvation or an autonomous ethic and education. (Weber 1959, 142)

Most Chinese (especially Han Chinese) do not distinguish superstition or magic from religion. For the most part, the Chinese do not have a religious faith. However, they utilize religions (e.g., Christianity, Daoism, and Buddhism), magic and superstition for their usefulness. They often “look at Fengshui” (i.e., to determine when and where structures should be built according to the theory of Fengshui) before building houses or digging graves, in hopes of bringing good fortune. A woman might either see Fengshui, or pray to God, Buddha, Guanyin, or Laozi if she is concerned about her fertility. A man might do the same if he fails in his business. In fact, Buddhist monks often run shops to make money near their temples and even force travelers to purchase goods in contemporary China. It is not rare that practitioners of Fengshui and religion make money by deceitful methods in China. Chinese people are credulous in any magical swindle although many scholars view witches (wizards), geomancers and so forth as “swindlers.” As Weber pointed out, “The preservation of this animistic magic explains the great credulity of the Chinese” (Weber 1959, 233).

Therefore, most Chinese people attach more importance to usefulness than to religion, superstition or magic themselves. They use Fengshui merely as an instrument for gaining benefit and preventing harm. In particular, when confronted with a superhuman controlling power, they would resort to religion, superstition or magic, and utilize Fengshui. Consequently, Fengshui will flourish in China as long as it is neither restrained and attacked by politics and ideology, nor superseded by science and religion.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Fengshui is a mystical trade for utilitarian purposes. It is a remnant of magic, from which Sinic civilization stemmed. Thus, it is completely different from science and religion. These differences can be

Item	Civilization	Times	Object	Approach	Purpose	Characteristics
Fengshui	Chinese	Ancient	This world	Mysticism through controlling gods	Worldly benefit	Mystical, secular, worldly, fanciful, ambiguous, pragmatic, and untestable
Science	Western	Modern	This world	Experiment and reason	Knowledge and truth	Rational, exact, empirical, and testable
Religion	Non-Chinese	Ancient	Afterlife and otherworld	Belief (mysticism) through pleasing gods	Virtue and good	Transcendental, otherworldly, and mystical

summarized in the following table. The table should be put here and named "Table 1".

Chinese civilization is practice-oriented due to its political power. It is not fit for the birth and growth of science and religion, but fit for the formation and development of Fengshui. In today's China, science is not yet an independent activity that pursues knowledge and truth, but instead it has to be subordinated to political power or economic benefits. The following slogans were and may still be very prevalent in China: "Saving the Nation through Science," "Science and Technology are the Primary Productive Forces," "Science and Technology must Serve Economic Development," and "Revitalizing the Nation with Science, Technology, and Education". Most Chinese people regard science merely as an instrument for practical purposes. Likewise, they view Fengshui as a pathway to wealth, status, fame, honor, health, success, procreation, happiness, longevity, and prosperity without hard work.

Sinic civilization is not otherworldly, but secular. It seeks "unity of subject and object (unity of heaven and man)" and therefore does not distinguish gods from human beings. There was no authentic religion in traditional China. Fengshui does not go beyond this world in spite of its mysticism. In general, the Chinese neither have religious faith, nor differentiate Fengshui from religion. They utilize Fengshui and religion alike to obtain secular benefits. Fengshui is an intermediate between science and religion. For it concentrates on this world through mysticism. However, it is not science although it centers on this world, for it does not seek knowledge and truth. It is not religion although it is mystical, for it does not seek transcendence and good. It is a mystical trade based on secular benefits. As a result, some people hope that Fengshui will eventually disappear and be superseded by science and religion.

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NOTES

1. Generally, the terms "science" and "religion" are ambiguous and indefinite in their meanings. Take "science" as an example: in modern Chinese, Marxist philosophy is classified as science (Kexue), whereas theology is not, for science always stands for the absolute truth. In German, however, both philosophy and theology are classified as science (Wissenschaft). Generally speaking, "science" can denote any of the following: academic research, knowledge, organized knowledge, empirical knowledge, local knowledge, universal knowledge, reason, truth, natural science, social science, humanities, or modern science. In this article, however, "science," different from "knowledge" or even "organized knowledge," mainly means modern science derived from European origins, such as classical physics, relativity and quantum mechanics, the paradigm of which is based on reason, experiment, and quantification; "religion" mainly refers to beliefs such as Ju-

daism, Christianity and Islam (monotheistic religion), in which gods are absolutely demarcated from human beings.

2. In Sinic civilization, the great tradition consists of Confucianism, Legalism, Daoism, and Buddhism; Fengshui, popular religion, superstition, and magic are among the little tradition.

3. In particular, Max Weber (1864–1920) claimed that capitalism had arisen only in rational and transcendental Western civilization in modern times. For example, he wrote, “It might thus seem that the development of the spirit of capitalism is best understood as part of the development of rationalism as a whole, and could be deduced from the fundamental position of rationalism on the basic problems of life. In the process Protestantism would only have to be considered in so far as it had formed a stage prior to the development of a purely rationalistic philosophy” (Weber 1999, 76).

4. For the Chinese practice-oriented views of science and their political grounds, see Guo and Radder (2020).

5. For instance, “the more learned a man is, the more reactionary he is” was a remarkably widespread slogan in Mao’s China.

6. The Han emperor Wu Di (156–87 BC) rejected the hundred schools of thought and worshipped only Confucianism. From that time until 1911, the orthodox ideology of China seemed to be Confucianism, but in essence it was Legalism. In other words, it was Confucianism with concealed Legalism in traditional China. In fact, emperors ruled their subjects by means of Legalism rather than Confucianism.

7. Michael Matthews examined the subject of Fengshui in great detail and argued that it is pseudoscience. See Matthews (2019).

8. This paragraph is quoted from the website: <http://abodetao.com/feng-shui-guidelines-to-energy-flow-analysis-what-is-qi-and-how-qi-flows/>.

9. Thus, Fengshui hinders the Chinese from developing and applying technology. As Weber put it, “The magic stereotyping of technology and economics, anchored in the belief and in the geomancers’ interests in fees, completely precluded the advent of indigenous modern enterprises in communication and industry” (Weber 1959, 199). Moreover, Weber held that the numerous technical inventions were of little use for economic purposes although defects of technical and inventive genius could not be attributed to the Chinese. He wrote, “The backwardness of mining, the failure to use coal for the production of iron ... were not due to lack of inventiveness. Fengshui (magicians) of all sorts, prebend interests—products of magic and the form of state—were the decisive factors” (Weber 1959, 296–97).

10. If the *Book on Burial* were finished by Guo, it would have been absolutely ridiculous and ironical that he was killed immediately after he buried his mother.

11. Moreover, Malinowski wrote, “Science, of course, does not exist in any uncivilized community as a driving power, criticizing, renewing, constructing. Science is never consciously made. But on this criterion, neither is there law, nor religion, nor government among savages. The question, however, whether we should call it *science* or only *empirical and rational knowledge* is not of primary importance in this context” (Malinowski 1948, 18). According to the quotation, it is evident that the term “science” is used not to refer to modern science, but to empirical and rational knowledge.

12. Without distinguishing gods from human beings and this world from the other world, most Chinese tend to worship a person, especially a living person such as an emperor or a great leader. On the one hand, it may lead to autocracy, despotism, authoritarianism, and totalitarianism because they worship rulers as gods. On the other hand, it is strengthened by the political absolutism where absolute political power determines everything. Under the circumstances, Chinese civilization substitutes religion and science (knowledge) with politics and ethics.

13. As a scholar put it, “Fengshui is really a case in point as it maintains no distinction between spiritual and mundane affairs or between personal and impersonal forces to be reckoned with” (Bruun 2011, 229).

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