**Harmonious spaces: the influence of Feng Shui on urban form and design**

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**Abstract**

This paper examines the influence of Feng Shui on urban form and spatial design at multiple levels: from the domestic spaces of the home, through commercial development projects, to the planning and building of cities. It contrasts the ancient power of China’s emperors to *directly* plan cities according to Feng Shui principles with its *indirect* influence today, underpinned by cultural and commercial drivers rather than the direct influence of regulation. Although ‘official’ adherence to Feng Shui seems less explicit than it once was, there are signs that it retains a place in the decision-making environment. The paper concludes by advancing a research agenda around the embeddedness of Feng Shui within the cultures of planning regulation and decision-making.

Key words: Feng Shui; China; urban form; design; regulation

**1. Introduction**

All societies leave an imprint on the world around them – clear expressions of the values that consciously or unconsciously shaped their built environments. Those values can be identified in the fabric of every city, every town and indeed any landscape that is a product of human contrivance. From the earliest totemic cultures to modern capitalism, belief systems play a vital part in the social production of space: be that a celebration of the divine, or hyper-consumption and conspicuous wealth. The core beliefs underpinning urban planning and architecture will determine the arrangement of a city’s principal artefacts: its streets, buildings, and its public and private spaces. Systems rooted in religious belief had a pronounced influence on the organisation of the classical city, frequently separating ‘divine’ from ‘profane’ space. Cities and buildings were also planned and designed in the past to celebrate power and military might; or to highlight the supremacy of the Church, creating a correspondence between physical and social space. Throughout history, human behaviour is characterised by habit transformed into habitus (Bourdieu, 2005), rooted in dispositions and beliefs. One well-known set of beliefs is that of Feng Shui.

Feng Shui originated in China many centuries ago and is strongly identified with Chinese philosophy, outlook and the way of life adopted by many people. It was used in the past by Emperors to locate auspicious sites for cities, palaces, and for their graves, and by ordinary people to arrange both the ‘dwellings for the living’ and the ‘dwellings for the dead’. Although it was banned in mainland China during Mao’s Revolution - being regarded as backward and a source of superstition - it remained popular in Chinese communities elsewhere in East and South East Asia and has more recently been embraced in Western culture as a guide for the organisation of domestic space.

This paper examines the impact that Feng Shui - as a belief system - has had on the production of space and the role that it still plays in organising built environments today. It aims to refresh the debate on Feng Shui and undertake a preliminary analysis of its pervasiveness in the built environment, through a review of existing literature. The paper also aims to advance a new agenda for the study of Feng Shui’s impact on cities, which is focused on the role played by regulators and regulation in formalising that impact through planning and design governance. The paper is organised in the following way: it begins by revisiting key literature on the cultural determinants of urban form, and the influence of social / planning values on the built environment. It then explores the origins, and traces the development, of Feng Shui. Thereafter, three sections of the paper explore the various impacts of Feng Shui on domestic, commercial and public space. These are followed by a consideration of regulation’s role in carrying forward broader social values and in potentially magnifying impacts at a project and policy level, possibly because of the commercial drivers behind adherence to Feng Shui values and also because those values have become culturally embedded within regulatory processes.

**2. Culture, values and the built environment**

The way we occupy the planet is value-driven, and this is expressed in the ways we organise space, plan and build cities and use resources. In this respect, our actions are guided by a ‘sense of place’ which is shaped by constant exposure to socio-cultural circumstances. According to Bourdieu the *habitus* – or dispositions - of people who occupy similar positions in social space is “very systematic: all the elements of his or her behaviours have something in common, a kind of affinity of *style*” (Bourdieu, 2005, 44); this *habitus* is not something intrinsically linked with individuals’ nature, but rather “the product of social conditions” (ibid, 45). Our everyday experience of social space generates an inclination to formulate certain expectations about the future which are aligned to our past and present position in social space (Bourdieu, 1990): the past influences our disposition to form knowledge and to act, including in relation to the built environment. As “social space tends to be translated, with more or less distortions, into physical space” (Bourdieu, 2000, 134), the way physical space is organised reflects social practices and differences. The way we model our space, from the intimacy of our houses to the shared dimension of the public realm, is dictated by our *habitus*, our internalised set of durable and socially-constructed values. There is, indeed, a strong link between the concepts of *habitus* and *habitat*: “the agent engaged in practice […] inhabits [the world] like a garment (un habit) or a familiar habitat. He feels at home in the world because the world is also in him, in the form of habitus” (ibid., 142-3). The *Habitus* shapes the *habitat,* and vice versa. Heidegger conveys a similar message: that there is an intimate link between ‘building’ and ‘dwelling’: “the erecting of buildings cannot be understood adequately in terms of either architecture or engineering construction, nor in terms of a mere combination of the two” (Heidegger, 1971, 159), rather buildings are the expression of an ongoing human experience, which are impregnated by memories and help people to relate to the world around them. They reflect the way individuals and the wider society both inhabit the world and understand it; they are erected in accordance to the specificity of a place and its inhabitants: both physical and human activities influence them. At their purest expression, building and dwelling are the same activity (ibid.).

Archer (2005, 431) points out that “built environment and habitus mutually sustain each other, but neither has absolute control over the other”: both can evolve to adjust to changed circumstances. Indeed, the habitus is not static but changes constantly; it is the product of history. In a similar vein, Lefebvre (1991) highlights that an existing space might be used in different ways to its initial purpose; what is important are the social relationships that shape a space: “(social) space is a (social) product” (ibid, 26). Asserting the social production of space means that “every society […] produce a space, *its own* space” (ibid, 3, emphasis added). Therefore, not only are cities more than a collection of buildings and people in space, but also they are produced through history; not through a simple sequence of historical events, but through “forces of production (nature; labour and the organisation of labour; technology and knowledge” and “relations of production” (ibid, 46).

Belief systems also play an important part as a force of space production; the evolution of these systems though time is directly reflected in the nature of space, produced by men and expressing their personal values. Ancient Greeks, for example, are acknowledged as the inventors of democracy, and their belief in democracy is reflected in the organisation of their country: a constellation of *poleis*, which varied in size and were all independent. The Athens of the fifth century BC – although bigger and wealthier than other *poleis* – did not dominate or become the capital of a unified state; all Greeks, including Athenians, supported this model as the “natural and right unit for human society” (Hall, 1998, 37). Although “the *polis* was originally the result of geography […] the system was the product not only of geography but also of culture” (ibid, 36). Greeks’ system of values and priorities was reflected in the way their cities were laid out and used. Ancient cities had their own “spatial practice”, they “forged” their “own – *appropriated* - space” (Lefebvre, 1991, 31). Magnificent public buildings and spaces were built in prominent sites whilst denigrated private dwellings occupied the remaining space: in classical Greece, indeed, “domestic affairs counted for less than political, social and religious life” (Wycherley, 1949, 177 as quoted in Hall, 1998). The dominance of the idea of democracy is evident within the organisation of the *polis* itself: the *agora* - the place where people met – became the centre of Athens’ life, replacing the *acropolis* and its temples when democracy became the way of governing the city (Hall, 1998).

Even a cursory glimpse at urban history will show that when there is a change in society, or in the “mode of production”, a “fresh space is generated”: “a space which is planned and organized subsequently” (Lefebvre, 1991, 47). The middle ages, for example, produced cities that “clustered at the foot of a great castle or church” (Abercrombie, 1943, 48) reflecting the feudal mode of production, and the dominance of landlords and ecclesiastic institutions over the rest of the population. Religion was at the centre of medieval people’s life and shaped their culture; to glorify God they erected magnificent Cathedrals and austere monasteries that still remain as the signposts of those societies. Renaissance society, on the contrary, emerged from the dissolution of the feudal system and the rise of the trading bourgeoisie; its space was the product of a specific ‘spatial code’ resulting from this passage to a different ‘mode of production’ (Lefebvre, 1991, 46). Renaissance Florence enhanced its fabric to commemorate its accomplishments; Florentines “regarded building as the sign of a great man” (Hall, 1998, 70): the innovative ideas of the Renaissance, which placed ‘men’ and not ‘God’ at the centre of the Universe, were expressed through its own spatial language. A series of ‘palazzi’ were erected for its most prominent people and relevant institutions; “façades were harmonized to create perspectives; entrances and exits, doors and windows, were subordinated to façades – and hence also to perspectives; streets and squares were arranged in concord to the public buildings and palaces of political leaders and institutions” (Lefebvre, 1991, 47). This correspondence between physical and social space can be observed in different eras and cultures. Throughout the world we can still witness the signs of how cultural values are transposed onto urban and architectural space.

**3. The origins and development of Feng Shui**

Feng Shui is a system of thoughts which aims to select favourable sites to position cities, buildings and graves in a harmonious relationship with their environment. It is deeply rooted in Chinese culture; it was – and remains – an essential part of traditional Chinese way of life and was used not only for site selection and building orientation, but also to choose a favourable day to get married and even a name for a child (Xu, 1998). The term Feng Shui (which literally means ‘wind’ and ‘water’) was first mentioned in the ‘Zang Jing’ (The Book of Burial), written during The Eastern Jin dynasty (317-420 A.D.), but records of its practice go back further in time. Its basic principles “have their roots in remote antiquity” so that “it would not be exaggeration to say that […] the history of the leading ideas and practices of Feng Shui is the history of Chinese philosophy” (Eitel, 1984, 51, as quoted in Bruun, 2008).

Although there is no agreement on its origins – with some arguing that the worship of dead ancestors in ancient China is at the roots of Feng Shui practice (De Groot, 1897), and others, more recently, suggesting that it originated from early Chinese cave dwellers in search of an ideal site (Yoon, 2006) – it is generally accepted that ancient Feng Shui was not separable from cosmology and divination practices. Bruun (2008, 11) highlights that “the further we go back in Chinese history, the less Feng Shui becomes separable from general cosmology such as that contained in Daoism and expressed in imperial divination”. Daoism[[1]](#footnote-1) incorporated a series of features of ancient Chinese religion from which Feng Shui draws, including nature and ancestor worship. For the ancient Chinese, everything in nature was a living organism, and the universe and nature were considered as animistic powers for generating qi[[2]](#footnote-2) - ‘vital force’ or ‘cosmic energy’ (Lip, 1995; Adler, 2011). Ancestor worship was a way for the Chinese to pay respect to ancestors. It was believed that the spirits of the deceased would influence the fortunes and future of their descendants and from the time of the Western Zhou Dynasty (around 1122 B.C.) great care was taken in the choice of burial places and in the orientation of the deceased, with heads always facing the north (Eitel, 1973). The worship of ancestors links closely to Confucianism[[3]](#footnote-3) (Weber, 1951) with its concern for social order and hierarchy – a concern shared by Feng Shui.

Ancient knowledge of Feng Shui was also influenced by the observation and interpretation of astronomical and natural phenomena. Inscriptions on bones and tortoise shells from the Yin Shang Dynasty (1766-1122 BC) demonstrate that people at that time were already observing wind orientation and considering cardinal directions (Wei, 2002) in an effort to survive in an agrarian society with low agricultural productivity (Sun et al, 2014). When the ancient Chinese settled along the Yellow river four millennia ago, they found that areas backed by mountains to the north and facing a source of water to the south offered protection from cold northerly winds whilst maximising exposure to sunlight (Zhang, 2015). They then sought similar configurations in other locations. They also observed the regularity of patterns in the universe – the cycles of day and night, changes of seasons, movement of stars and so forth - and linked universal patterns with the working of nature, by assigning numerical value to everything observed[[4]](#footnote-4) (Lip, 1997). The ancient Chinese sought harmony with universal patterns, in the heavens and on the earth (Bramble, 2003). Alignment with these observations became the basis for different schools of thought; Bruun (2008, 100) points out that “from at least the time of neo-Confucian synthesis, several interpretations of Feng Shui have competed in China, giving rise to separate ‘Feng Shui schools’”. The two main ones were the ‘Form School’ – which linked the analysis of landform to the identification of an auspicious site – and the ‘Compass School’ – which focused on cardinal directions and time. However, it seems that these two Schools never completely ignored one another, but selectively emphasised different principles, and, even today, Feng Shui specialists combine ideas from both Schools in their practice (Yoon, 2006).

Whilst cosmology, the observation of astrological patterns and the investigation of the landscape came together to provide the foundation of Feng Shui, it is the former, and in particular divination rituals and ancestor worship and interrogation that had a determining role in spreading Feng Shui-related practice. From the Shang dynasty (ca. 1600 – ca. 1050 BC) kings would receive advice through bones and shells on a variety of matters, including building projects. As Steinhardt (1990, 5) highlights: “before laying the foundation for a new city, heaven had to be consulted”. These rituals were “increasingly popularised, siphoning down from the royal court to the lower echelons of Chinese society” (Bruun, 2008, 11) and were “eventually adopted as the practice of commoners” (ibid. 15). Even today, the Yi Jing (The Book of Changes) – which constitutes the higher manifestation of divination procedures – remains central to Feng Shui practices (ibid.).

Several emperors promoted the development of Feng Shui: its systematic application started in the West Han Dynasty (206 BC), prospered in the Tang (618-907 AD) and Song (960-1279 AD) dynasties, and reached its peak during the Ming dynasty (1368-1644 AD) (Zhao, 2011). Feng Shui gave an accepted rationale to emperors’ decisions and adherence to its principles was thought to guarantee an enduring and stable government. Indeed, not only did it give practical guidance on the choice of auspicious locations and the design of buildings - that brought powers from the universe (from Daoism) (Yoon, 2004) - but it also offered ideological guidance on how to construct social hierarchy and respect for one’s country and authority (from Confucianism) (Webber, 1951). Emperors used Feng Shui principles to position graves, design and orientate buildings, including their palaces, and even to locate cities. Ordinary people followed suit, building their own homes and positioning their ancestors’ graves according to the same principles. The principles became widely applied as Feng Shui was believed to support basic aspirations: living in peace, family well-being, and avoiding illness and personal mishap (Gao, 2004).

Whilst in ancient China the main drivers of the development of Feng Shui practice were the emperors, the revival of Feng Shui and the expansion of its practice in modern society are mainly linked to commercial forces. This is evident in Hong Kong and other Chinese territories. In mainland China, Feng Shui was until recently quietly practised in rural areas but abandoned in towns and cities, where it was associated with “backwardness and superstition” (Bruun, 2008, 118) and was banned by the central Government. On the other hand, in places such as Hong Kong, Taiwan and Singapore, it retained its broader influence (Mak and So, 2011). “In Hong Kong in particular, Feng Shui assumed the role of native Chinese religion as opposed to foreign influence and Christianity: it became an element in a Chinese identity in relation to the European elite” (Bruun, 2008, 129). The acceptance of Feng Shui by the British Government, combined with a concentration of Chinese business activity in the territory, provided a perfect incubator for Feng Shui practices and today “most, if not all, businesses adhere to the principles of Feng Shui. Banks, airlines, telephone companies, shopping centres, hotels and so forth will all have regular Feng Shui checks and spend large sums of money to accommodate recommendations” (ibid, 140). Housing developers also take Feng Shui into account: studies on the housing and land market in Hong Kong and Taiwan show that Feng Shui is a significant factor in consumers’ housing choices and that homebuyers pay more for housing with ‘good Feng Shui’ (Tam et al., 1999; Wu et al., 2012).

In mainland China, Feng Shui is regaining some of the ground it lost during the Mao years. Since the 1980s, “interest in (Feng Shui) from Chinese business has been explicit and almost universal” (Bruun, 2008, 122). Consumer preferences are impacting on housing choices to such a degree that ‘superior Feng Shui’ has now become a key marketing tool and claim. “Today construction companies, housing developers and real estate agents all over China pay attention to Feng Shui as a matter of course” (ibid., 128).

Feng Shui has evolved into a powerful urban force not only in China and in other modern Asian societies (in Korea, for example, Feng Shui is still part of everyday life; Yoon, 2006); it has also entered the Western world. Feng Shui principles have inspired and guided architectural projects all over the world. From offices to restaurant and hotel projects, its use has increased during recent decades (Bonaiuto et al, 2010) and it is “fast becoming a globally-known and practised art of placement” (Bruun, 2008, 1). However, whilst in China Feng Shui “merges with ancestor worship, burial customs and beliefs in ghosts and spirits; in the west […] it grew in an ambience of ecology, environmentalism, new age religion, psychology and design” (ibid, 193). When Feng Shui was transported to Western societies, it underwent a radical transformation, generally moving indoors and finding its strongest foothold in private and domestic life (ibid.). The most common application of Feng Shui is to the interior design of homes, where it aims to “stimulate success, health, wealth and happiness” (Brown, 1997, 5). Its application to garden design is also common, whilst the use of Feng Shui for business is a fast growing area: both small companies and big multinationals increasingly apply Feng Shui principles to “expand business, increase sales, [and] improve the health and performance of employees.” (Bruun, 2008, 1). This application is the one that “borrows most directly from Chinese Feng Shui” (ibid, 167) whereas the Western rescaling of Feng Shui to domestic space would appear to link predominantly to lifestyle choices.

Although Feng Shui has adapted to modern times, its principles are rooted in traditional Chinese culture, its cosmology and worship practices, its attitude towards nature and the built environment (Mak and So, 2011) and, ultimately, its values. Through Feng Shui, Chinese culture has become instrumentalised, providing the solutions for old and new human demands, and imbuing the built environment with specific meanings. These values and meanings can be read at different scales, from the larger scale of the city – across which emperors projected their power - to the more intimate scale of the dwelling – where common people transfer their *habitus* to their *habitat*. This paper will now examine these scales more closely with the aim of understanding the continuing and current influence of Feng Shui.

**4. The domestic spaces of Feng Shui**

According to Knapp (1999, 29) “it is the application of Feng Shui practices by common people in determining auspicious sites for new or renovated houses that reveals most clearly the deeply rooted nature of this quest for spatial harmony”. Feng Shui’s principles have been widely adopted by ordinary people in the past; for farmers “it was an integrated element in popular cosmology and religion” (Bruun, 2008, 50) and it was such an important part of their life that “they often gave up even their meagre resources to gain the benefits that it might provide” (Knapp, 1999, 29). The impacts of Feng Shui on domestic space can be seen throughout China, in both rural and urban areas. Different interpretations of Feng Shui are evident in rural areas, where village communities relied on different Feng Shui Schools to shape their domestic space. In areas where the ‘Form School’ was predominant – in the more mountainous areas of the south and west of China - houses were placed according to important geographical features (including hills, water and other buildings). In areas where the ‘Compass School’ prevailed – in the lowlands - buildings were placed according to beneficial orientations (Bruun, 2008). The latter gave rise to “more orderly and predictable” settlements, planned with “less improvisation” (ibid, 63) and comprising houses generally orientated towards the south.

Urban houses in China have, at times, also expressed “elements of their [occupants’] religious and cosmological beliefs” (Knapp, 2005, 16). In Beijing, for example, the traditional courtyard house was once “the basic unit of the city” and “almost everyone […], from the emperor to the common people” resided in one (Xu, 1998, 272). Their layout was guided by both the ‘Form’ and ‘Compass’ Schools to the extent that they represented “[…] a physical embodiment of the ideal Feng Shui model of landforms” (ibid, 273) - used to design cities – and also displayed the influence of the Compass School in their orientation and position (ibid.). This layout was not a peculiarity of Beijing. Rather, courtyards were used throughout China in both small houses and bigger dwellings (Knapp, 2005).

**{Insert Image 1 here – courtyard houses in Ping Yao}**

Social class differences were, however, manifest. The use of materials, colours, shapes and the symbolic use of numbers were regulated in a hierarchical way through a set of building codes established within the Zhou li (Rites of Zhou), an ancient ritual text considered central to Confucianism. These regulations were followed rigidly in every dynasty in ancient China (Yu, 2007). Misusing superior decorations on ordinary buildings was considered a serious arrogation of power, and was strictly prohibited. For example, only the buildings designed for the emperors could use gold, yellow, double-eave, dragon pattern and the number nine. Moreover, whilst middle and upper class people usually built private gardens - carefully considering the arrangement of furniture, plants, bridges and rocks - the lower class, who seldom had as great a range of options for changing their environment, often used decorative objects instead (Sun and Sun, 2007).

Evidence of Feng Shui’s domestic imprint is today being erased from much of China as a result of rapid urban growth and development. Both traditional villages and houses are disappearing. The former “tend only to survive in the poorest regions, where little industrial and urban development takes place” (Bruun, 2008, 63) whilst in cities the great majority of traditional courtyard houses have been lost to redevelopment; in Beijing for example, only very few remain (Lo, 2010). This does not mean, however, that respect for the principles of Feng Shui has completely disappeared. The values that produced distinct building forms in the past are still strong in many areas. Indeed, “[…] having a specialist to ‘see feng shui’ on the building site is an essential aspect of building activity in rural China today as much as in the preceding several centuries” and recently Feng Shui “has re-emerged in public in towns and cities” (ibid. 118). Research has suggested that a great many people in China and other Asian countries consult Feng Shui experts to create comfortable living quarters (Mak and Ng, 2005), alleviate psychological anxieties (Tam et al, 1999; Tsang, 2004) and to generally “pursue worldly benefits and avoid misfortunes” (Knapp, 1999, 29). In the same rural areas, people still search for auspicious locations for their houses and graves and, in villages, traditional houses respecting Feng Shui principles are still built. One consequence of adherence to Feng Shui principles, coupled with the growth of middle-class wealth and taste, is that coastal homes are becoming ever bigger and grander: “in the coastal areas in particular [private houses] may rise to spectacular proportions and grandeur” (Bruun, 2008, 61); Feng Shui here is itself “a motivating force for building new houses as many people […] think that other families building bigger houses will threaten their own life if they do not follow suit” (ibid., 62).

**5. Feng Shui and commercial space**

Although business interest in Feng Shui is manifest across China (Bruun, 2008), nowhere is its impact on commercial space more evident than in Hong Kong where it has become an integral part of commercial life, with Feng Shui consultants now “involved in virtually every project” (ibid., 139). They are often consulted on site location, the arrangement of buildings relative to others and on aspects of architectural design. Even amongst foreign companies, “there are very few so foolish as to ignore [Feng Shui] in their dealings” (Emmons, 1992, 49; see also Hobson, 1994) largely because of the adverse reaction that ‘bad’ Feng Shui can provoke. Emmons (1992, 40) points out that “[…] whenever construction is attempted in any part of Hong Kong […] it risks opposition on grounds of disturbed Feng Shui” with ill-judged projects often being paused and facing costly delays because of local concern[[5]](#footnote-5) (Hobson, 1994). But whilst an interest in Feng Shui may sometimes be pragmatic on the part of developers, reducing the risk of conflict, it is also seen by many as a means of elevating property values and increasing profit (Bond, 2008; Yau, 2012). The future occupants of offices and homes take Feng Shui seriously and will pay more for good Feng Shui. This shapes the market and the behaviour of development companies and their contracted architects and urban designers.

**{Insert Image 2 here – Repulse Bay}**

The Hong Kong skyline is punctuated with buildings that speak to the territory’s deep attachment to Feng Shui. A great many residential and commercial buildings have mid-height holes, including the famed ‘building with a hole’ in Repulse Bay, which was designed (like many others) “[…] with a large square hole in the middle to allow Qi to flow through” (Bruun, 2008, 139). In a city with an acute shortage of building land (and astronomical land values), it might seem remarkable that developers chose not to squeeze extra apartments into the void space, but the price commanded by good Feng Shui far exceeded the cost of leaving the hole. Similar holes can be spotted across mainland China, the Guangzhou Circle Mansion – shaped like a giant doughnut – being a particularly striking example: social values shape commercial decisions and design outcomes.

**{Insert Image 3 here – Guangzhou Circle}**

It is not only apartment blocks that are affected by Feng Shui. The Disney Corporation, for example, made several key alterations to the layout of its Hong Kong theme park, reorienting the main entrance by twelve degrees on the advice of Feng Shui consultants. Perhaps more famously, the design of the Hong Kong and Shanghai Banking Corporation (HSBC) headquarters paid careful attention to Feng Shui (Emmons, 1992) only for that Feng Shui to be disrupted by the arrival of the nearby Bank of China Tower. The latter was to become one of the city’s most notorious development projects. Its architect somehow avoided any consultation on issues of Feng Shui and designed a building with ‘X’ patterns on its sides, sharp edges and “two aerials on top, resembling the incense sticks burned for the dead” (Bruun, 2008, 139). The building drew sharp criticism and was accused of “upsetting the living environment and the people around” (Dan, 2006, no page number). Indeed, it caused such concern for the owners and occupiers of the adjacent HSBC headquarters that they placed two ‘cannons’ (actually service winches) on their rooftop, facing the Bank of China Tower, as a defence against its negative energy. On the hill behind the Tower, a number of occupants of the Governor’s House reported problems stemming from the same negative energy emanating from the building and eventually installed a fish pond as a means of dispersing and negating its impact. Great sums of money are often spent on either ensuring good Feng Shui or on dealing with design flaws. After taking advice from a consultant in the 1980s, the owners of the Hopewell Centre (again in Hong Kong) built a swimming pool on the roof of the building. The advice they had received was that because the building resembled a candle it was susceptible to fire risk. The rooftop swimming pool would eliminate that risk and reassure occupants (Hobson, 1994).

**{Insert Image 4 here – HSBC and Bank of China}**

**6. Feng Shui, urban planning and design**

It has been claimed that the impact of Feng Shui on Chinese landscapes and cities is so profound that “the use of land can hardly be understood apart from it” (Yoon, 2006, 4). In ancient China, the principal task of urban planning was to select an appropriate location for a city and, in relation to that task, Feng Shui has long been considered a “determinative factor” (Meyer, 1978, 139). It was inconceivable that city location would not respect Feng Shui. If it did not, the prosperity of the state, the rule of the emperor and the wellbeing of its citizens would all be placed in great jeopardy (Bramble, 2003; Yu, 2007; Steinhardt, 1990). The more important the city, the greater the effort expended on ensuring “its harmonious location and arrangement” (Meyer, 1978, 138). This was certainly true for the ancient capitals of Beijing, Nanjing, Luoyang, Xi’an, Kaifeng and Hangzhou. And beyond siting decisions, Mak (1998, 87) is able to show that “most of the major cities in China conform to the criteria of the ideal Feng Shui model”.

**{Insert Image 5 here – Ideal FS model}**

Their layout is set in relation to natural elements (such as mountains, water and empty spaces) according to precise rules, which follow those of the ancient settlers of the Yellow River. But the rigidity of adherence to dogma is disputed by Bruun (2008) who observes that contradiction of, or deviation from, principles was possible. The internal layouts of the first four capitals, for example – with their central palaces, city walls and gates oriented according to a north-south axis and streets arranged along a grid – followed the Zhou li (Rites of Zhou), which although sharing much with Feng Shui’s ‘cosmological order’, actually pre-dated it. Ancient Xi’an (the city of Chang’an), for example, was planned facing south, with its principal axis provided by a north-south street, and with east, west and south walls each having three gates. This gave the city conformity with Zhou li, only corrupted by its rectangular rather than square outer walls (Wright, 1977, cited in Bruun, 2008). Later cities replicated this feature, thus avoiding any challenge to the ‘imperial past’ and providing a form in which the emperor could “display his legitimized position as both ruler and guardian of traditions” (Steinhardt, 1990, 4).

**{Insert Image 6 here – map of Chang’an}**

Feng Shui increased its influence in the period leading up to the Ming Dynasty (Bruun, 2008, 33). The imperial capital was moved from Nanjing to Beijing, in part because of the improved Feng Shui that the latter location offered (Lip, 1997; Mak, 1998). Still, the Zhou Li retained its parallel influence and the planning of the new capital was ultimately guided by “two symbolic systems which are rather independent and sometimes in conflict with each other” (Meyer, 1978, 142). Interestingly, it has been claimed that the impact of Feng Shui on ancient urban design and planning has, to some extent, been exaggerated in modern analysis. Indeed, Bruun (2008, 31) suggests that, with regards to much earlier planning, “the application of Feng Shui may figure more in the retrospective writings of later scholars than in the original choice of a city site”, and it is “[…] only after Feng Shui is maturing in the Song dynasty that it is constantly applied to entire cities and the geography of China as a whole”.

But the evidence for Feng Shui’s overall influence is clear, even if different emperors and periods delivered varying degrees of compliance with its strictures. At Chang’an, Emperor Wen of the Sui Dynasty (581-618 AD) went to extraordinary lengths – levelling a hill and creating an artificial lake – to improve the city’s Feng Shui. Similar works were undertaken at Guangzhou during the Ming Dynasty (Liu, 1995; Zhou and Liu, 1999). And the works undertaken were seldom final: further changes (or relocations) were regularly carried out as astrological calculations changed. Adjustments to urban form were commonplace in Xi’an, Luoyang and Beijing, with buildings demolished, repositioned and rebuilt according to the cycles of Feng Shui (Tang, 2012).

The influence of Feng Shui on rural places may not have been so grand, but it was equally profound. There are roughly 2,500 protected villages in China (MOHURD, 2014), located in auspicious places and bordered by Feng Shui forests. These forests were commonplace in the landscape of ancient China, having been planted by villagers on the advice of Feng Shui Masters, often to compensate for landscape imperfections and particularly the absence of mountains (Coggins, 2012). Other influences include adherence to the *bagua* (literally eight symbols, trigram or inter-related concepts) which, for the design of places, could mean having eight elements – eight roads, for instance, radiating from a central feature. Examples include the ‘Eight Trigram Field’ in Hangzhou (set out between 1127 and 1279 AD) and the ‘Eight Trigram Village’ in Lanzxi (planned and built around 1340 AD) (see Chen and Wu, 2009, 1019). Outside of China, evidence of Feng Shui’s urban and rural influence abounds (Hong et al, 2007): Feng Shui (or *Pungsu*) was instrumental in the siting and planning of Seoul in 1395 (Yoon, 2006, 15) whilst Feng Shui (or *Fusui*) forests are also found in Japan, with good examples located around the Ho:go villages (*Ho:go* meaning to ‘embrace’ or ‘protect’) on Ryukyu Island (Chen et al, 2008).

**{Insert Image 7 here – Lanzxi}**

It is undoubtedly the case that Feng Shui’s influence at an urban scale has become more subtle and less obvious today than it once was (Yoon, 1982). Eastern cosmology has been eclipsed by external forces and by the modernisation of the Chinese state during the twentieth century. Western ideas, and Western natural science in particular, have provided China with a new cultural referent (Chen and Nakama, 2004) whilst Feng Shui became identified with superstition and ignorance in the early part of the twentieth century before being suppressed as a feudal practice during and after Mao’s Cultural Revolution (Bramble, 2003). Politics, science and cultural intrusion have conspired fundamentally to alter China’s relationship with its Feng Shui heritage. Where political influences have been less pronounced – for example, in Hong Kong – Feng Shui’s grip on urban planning seems to have retained much of its potency. As noted above, huge sums of money are often spent to correct disruptions to Feng Shui (Moore, 2010). But even in mainland China there has been a noticeable change of attitude towards Feng Shui. Cartier (2002, 1516) observes that “elites and bureaucrats are [now] concerned with Feng Shui in ways the same people would have once attributed (at least officially) to feudal peasant notions” (Cartier, 2002, 1516). That is not to say that Feng Shui has been restored to the status of planning principle, but rather that the link from Feng Shui, through regulation, to current planning and development outcomes is becoming more complex – and potentially more interesting.

**Conclusions: regulators, regulations and Feng Shui values**

The examination of Feng Shui’s three levels of influence suggests both a commercialisation of Feng Shui values in modern development projects and an extension of those same values into the regulation of city-building at the time of the emperors. Feng Shui’s influence is greater, at a *project level*, than it once was but that influence no longer appears pervasive at the level of urban planning or design. At a city or settlement scale, there is a legacy of broader influence but further influence is incremental, reflecting the objectives and values of private property developers and their domestic or commercial clients. It is easy to support this conclusion with references to official positions on Feng Shui, although some of these are ambiguous – as noted above.

The Chinese government, it seems, holds Feng Shui to be a superstitious and backward-looking practice, although this general view has been challenged in some places. Recently an official in Wuzhong was expelled from the Communist Party for sanctioning expenditure on a northward expansion of the city to the Yellow River, designed to improve its Feng Shui (Anon. 2015). Money spent on infrastructure was judged to have been wasted, being justified on no rational grounds. But such investments are not unknown in China (Levin, 2013) and national government itself has sent out mixed signals, for example by opening the 2008 Olympic Games at 8pm on the 8th August – holding that this timing would contribute to its success (Wu et al, 2012). There are also examples of urban planning and design practice being apparently influenced by ‘Chinese thought’ (Fang and Xie, 2008). In Shenzhen, the layout of the city’s new ‘Software Park’ appeared to pay homage to classical cosmology (ibid., 118) and in earlier periods of the city’s development, the creation of new axis corridors entering the city centre suggested a return to a ‘classical plan of capital cities’ (Cartier, 2002, 1523) which are themselves rooted in the principles of Feng Shui, as shown above. There is some evidence of adherence to principles that have been officially shunned by the government and no research has been undertaken on the associations and values that underpin new urban planning. On the other hand, particular projects – for reasons of commercial success – seem to bend towards Feng Shui principles. Residential developments in Shanghai (see Chen, 2006), the master-plan for Kangle County in Gansu Province (see Zhao, 2012), plans for a tourism resort in Qinghai Province (see Sun et al, 2014), and the design of a food market in Zhejiang Province (see Jiang, 2012) all respect Feng Shui. At the same time, Feng Shui has re-entered university curricula and there has been a proliferation of practitioners advising on how new buildings should - externally and internally - conform to its principles. But whilst there is some evidence of a return to city-wide influence, systematic evidence is lacking. We can of course infer that regulation of the built environment – that is, the decisions of public officials and regulators – is a carrier of underlying social values. Yet, the suspicion will surely remain that regulation is responsive to commercial interests at a project-level and Feng Shui has a piecemeal rather than pervasive influence.

There is a need for further investigation. In the case of the recent projects undertaken in mainland China and Hong Kong, there appears to be alignment between social and market values. The market is profit-seeking and Feng Shui seems to provide a means of increasing those profits because of the values and dispositions of clients. That is one perspective, which sees building regulators and planners as having a minimal role in development outcomes – essentially as bystanders. An alternative view is that regulators – and regulation – is inseparable from, and a carrier of, social values. This view leads to a number of questions: to what extent is Feng Shui embedded in regulation? Is that embeddedness, if it exists, primarily about achieving commercial goals (so ‘shallow’ in the sense of being simply aligned to market interests and values) or is it a product of ‘deeper’ cultural attachment (regulators operating in a decision-making environment in which Feng Shui is an integral part)? Continuing this line, is it possible to untangle commercial and cultural influences or are these aspects of the same value-set given Feng Shui’s pursuit of health, profit and happiness? In the ancient past, Feng Shui provided one individual – the emperor – with a framework for arranging urban space. Today, the channels through which values are expressed are part of a broader system of urban governance, embracing public planning and design regulation and extending to private interest and its power over development outcomes. Research into the continuing influence of Feng Shui on urban form must explore the embeddedness of this value-set in regulation, seeking evidence of deep and subtle (cultural) embeddedness reflected in particular planning outcomes and / or a shallower and pragmatic (commercial) embeddedness that delivers market values.

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**Word count: 8,311 (including references)**

1. Daoism is an ancient Chinese philosophy founded by Lao Zi (around 571 to 471 BC), which later became a religion (in 142 AD). It was developed from the Yi Jing (The book of Changes, around 800 BC) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Many cultures refer to the presence in the environment of a “supernatural electricity called ‘mana’ by anthropologists” (Emmons, 1992, 40) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. This philosophy, founded by Confucius (551-479 BC), taught people to follow a certain social order, assigning to filial piety and respect for the elderly a key moral role. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The earliest attempt of establishing this link is documented in the ‘Yi Jing’ (The Book of Changes), which is conventionally attributed to the first of the mythic rulers of China, Fu Xi (from the time preceding the Xia dynasty). It is also claimed that the book was edited by Confucius. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Bruun (2008, 45) however warns that the practice of opposing buildings and railway construction and mining operations on Feng Shui grounds in Hong Kong during the second half of the 19th century was a “convenient means of manipulating popular sentiments and particularly aggression towards foreigners” on part of the imperial Government. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)