

China Behind Feng Shui—Ernst Eitel and *Feng Shui*

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This paper takes Chinese “Feng Shui” as a starting point to study German missionary Ernest Eitel’s writings on Feng Shui and to explore the Chinese images constructed by him in his writings. This study begins by analyzing the structure of Eitel’s work *Feng Shui, or, the Rudiments of Natural Science in China*, and the Chinese images that he constructed in his work. The study argues that, due to his multiple identities as a missionary, a believer in colonialism, an educator, and a researcher of culture, as well as the influence of what he saw and heard in China, Eitel, despite his exhaustive examination of Chinese Feng Shui culture, ultimately, due to his own biases brought about by his own experiences and cultural differences, produced a paradoxical discourse on Feng Shui: he understood it as a Chinese natural science system, but an unsystematic one. As a result, Eitel also built a contradictory image of the Chinese: they hold a belief in the “animism” and respect for ancestral observations of nature, which ultimately translates into a superstitious belief in nature and an ignorance of true science.

Keywords: Ernest Eitel, Feng Shui, Chinese images, natural science

Introduction

“Feng Shui” seems to be very familiar to Chinese: from choosing a hotel room to constructing a building, the Chinese must conduct detailed inspections—not just based on location, money, time, etc., but Chinese also check whether these plans are in line with “Feng Shui”. But if asked what “Feng Shui” is, the Chinese themselves may also wonder: whether it is a science, or just a kind of superstition?

This question was answered by a German missionary.

Ernst Johann Eitel’s book *Feng Shui, or, the Rudiments of Natural Science in China* combines his own life experience, discussions in Chinese classics and Western natural science knowledge to outline a concise and clear picture of “Feng Shui” in China; also, he sorts out the development process of “Feng Shui”. Eitel not only explains some complex principles of Feng Shui in detail, but also expresses his own views on Feng Shui; further, Eitel uses this book to construct an image of “China” that he considers; moreover, his descriptions still reflect a certain degree of influence derived from his missionary status and understanding of Chinese culture.

Here, this article does not tend to explore why Eitel chooses to study “Feng Shui” but to answer these questions: What does Eitel think of “Feng Shui”? How does he view “Feng Shui” and construct an image of China? At the same time, what led to the understanding of “Feng Shui” and the Chinese people that he presents?

Contents of *Feng Shui*

To answer the above questions, firstly we must conduct a general analysis of the content of the book.

Judging from the title, Eitel’s view on Feng Shui is very clear: Feng Shui is the germ of Chinese natural

science. However, at the beginning and end of the book, Eitel's definition of Feng Shui is somewhat contradictory. At first, he believes that Feng Shui is actually another name for natural science, and summarizes the four major components of the Feng Shui system. This seemed to be a positive evaluation; but at the end, he explains Feng Shui as a kind of misinterpretation of nature, thinking that "Feng Shui" is actually the Chinese people's blind exploration of the laws of nature relying on ancient traditions and abstract reasoning.

In the Introductory, Eitel points out that: Li, Qi, So, and Ying are the four major components of Feng Shui (Eitel, 2023, pp. 1-4). The second chapter, *The Laws of Nature*, is a discussion of Li, the principles ruling the nature. According to Eitel, the Chinese divide nature into two parts, namely heaven and earth, and there are three major views on nature. Then, Eitel discusses the influence of heaven and earth on people using the five stars and five elements (Eitel, 2023, pp. 5-10).

Chapter 3 is about So, which means numbers. From Eitel's view, the operation of all things in the world is carried out according to certain laws in the eyes of the Chinese, and these laws, namely Li, can be expressed in the form of numbers. Then, Eitel analyzes the Chinese Bagua, Ten Heavenly Stems, Twelve Earthly Branches, and Sixty Years, and their correspondence with the five stars and five elements. In Eitel's writing, the Chinese use numbers to quantify changes in nature, coming up with a way to combine the old and new number systems, which gives great complexity and certain sanctity to the Feng Shui system (Eitel, 2023, pp. 11-17).

In the fourth chapter, Eitel begins to discuss Qi, that is, the object directly controlled by Li and So (Eitel, 2023, pp. 18-21). The Chinese view nature as a living organism, capable of breathing. Breathing in nature, that is, Qi, is the force that drives living things to appear and move. Eitel actually transforms a Chinese myth to explain the Qi:

The heaven and earth were in chaos, like a chicken's rooster, and Pangu was born in it. Eight thousand years after, he divided the heaven and the earth. the clear Yang formed the sky, and the turbid Yin formed the earth...the Yin was connected to the Yang, and the vitality was distributed, which was the pregnancy and neutralization, and the emergence of a human being. (Xu, n.d.)

Eitel notices the difference in the Qi that formed the heaven and the earth: the former is light and pure, generating everything; and the latter is heavy, gross, and cognizable, guiding the growth and decline of everything. The Qi not only combines with the five elements to form the twenty-four solar terms used by the Chinese to divide the year, but is also hidden in the mountains and rivers. Finally, Eitel believes that if one wants to take the advantage of Qi, he needs to hire a Feng Shui expert and listen to his advice.

The fifth chapter, titled *The Forms and Outlines of Nature*, is actually the visible manifestations of Li, So, and Qi, which can be seen in the position and shape of mountains and rivers, the contours of peaks and the direction of water. At the end of the chapter, Eitel points out that Chinese Feng Shui shows people the laws of nature, also guides people to change nature to serve themselves; however, transforming nature requires great courage, energy, and foresight (Eitel, 2023, pp. 22-23).

The Presence of Feng Shui

Shown by the content and chapter organization, Eitel indeed tries to build Feng Shui from trivial knowledge points in the Chinese classics into a complete system: starting with the abstract Li and ending with the specific Ying, and with the interpretation of the five elements and yin and yang, which provide theoretical support for the "Feng Shui" system; in addition, Eitel also uses concepts from natural sciences derived from the West, such as electric current and twelve constellations, to explain the Azure Dragon, White Tiger, and the Chinese Zodiac.

However, just like Eitel's inconsistent views, Feng Shui in his writing not only presents a scientific side, but also a pseudo-scientific side, which is expressed through the following means:

First, Eitel explains the content of the Feng Shui system as a commonsense. He thinks the seemingly complicated terminology is just an alternative expression of daily observation. Eitel cites his experiences while living in Hong Kong, emphasizing that Chinese people insisted that Westerners are Feng Shui masters; but what Westerners do was just based on commonsense, like avoiding decaying rock during construction. The Chinese think sharp bends in water flow are places with bad Feng Shui. However, even judged by common sense, accidents are indeed prone to occur in sharp bends, such as floods, capsizing, etc. In this way, Feng Shui only touches the very surface laws of nature, that is, the manifestations, but it does not conduct in-depth research on the laws themselves.

Secondly, by using Feng Shui to mythicize the commonsense, the Chinese developed Feng Shui into a "black art" (Eitel, 2023, p. 2) and used it to make money. Eitel mentions the key to this "black art": people only know the names of the terms in Feng Shui, but they know nothing about the connotation of the terms and the connections between the terms and real life. It is precisely because of the ignorance that Feng Shui masters are able to predict natural phenomena in their own way, even if these predictions are not necessarily accurate (Eitel, 2023, p. 17). And it will be hard for people to predict Feng Shui by themselves, they rather choose to pay a Feng Shui master to help (Eitel, 2023, p. 21).

Finally, although not specifying it directly by Eitel, through some objective records of experiences, Feng Shui has become a political method, declaring its authority externally to block communication, and suppressing political unrest internally. Eitel first expresses confusion: From building houses, tearing down walls, and erecting flagpoles, to building railways and mining mines, everything foreigners do in China seemed to be hindered by "Feng Shui"; and in Hong Kong building roads was banned by Chinese officials on the grounds of Feng Shui. Then, he points out:

Surely there must be something in Feng-shui, if it drives the lowest classes of Chinese to commit a foul murder, and is eagerly availed of by ministers of state, as a satisfactory excuse for their own unwillingness to further the progress of trade and civilization. (Eitel, 2023, p. 1)

Feng shui has been used by the Chinese to become an excuse for crime, a reason to refuse trade, and even civilization. Feng Shui is not only used by officials to declare their authority to foreigners, but also one of the means by which China declares its authority to the Western world; the political status of Feng Shui is also very obvious: the Chinese government suppresses domestic unrest by digging graves, or deliberately selects a port with extremely bad Feng Shui as a port for foreign trade to suppress foreign trade.

At this point, the question of how Feng Shui is presented has been answered: through a series of specific examples, Eitel presents Feng Shui as a bud of natural science, which is based on common sense, poorly understood and used to make money, resist cultural exchange, or suppress unrest.

Chinese Images Behind Feng Shui

By observing and depicting how Feng Shui is applied, Eitel also presents his views on the ignorant Chinese.

Firstly, the ignorance of the Chinese people is reflected in the fact that Feng Shui has not developed into an independent science due to their own "adherence" to tradition.

Eitel thinks that natural science in China has never appeared in a "technical, dry and matter-of-fact form",

that is, natural science in China has always been mixed with other content or served other purposes. Furthermore, he emphasizes that the reason for this is:

Chinese naturalists did not take much pains in studying nature and ferreting out her hidden secrets by minute and practical tests and experiments. ...but with very little actual knowledge of nature they evolved a whole system of natural science from their own inner consciousness and expounded it according to the dogmatic formula of ancient tradition. (Eitel, 2023, p. 2)

The Chinese also blindly adhere to ancient research traditions and lack the spirit of progress and innovation, which seems to be the factor that Eitel is more concerned about:

The Chinese...are rather perplexed by the discrepancy, but caring less for accuracy and more for ancient tradition, ignore the actual discrepancy, and still represent the twelve signs, not as they appear now, but as they appeared to their ancestors two thousand years ago. (Eitel, 2023, p. 6)

That ancient system of diagrams...makes no allowance for the influence of the five planets...Consequently the philosophers of the Sung dynasty finding the old system to clash with their popular views of astronomy, but having too much reverence for the sacred rust of antiquity to discard it altogether, retained the old diagrams, but worked them into a system... (Eitel, 2023, p. 13)

In Eitel's eyes, there is a causal relationship between the lack of rigorous and meticulous quality and the shortcomings of sticking to tradition: Chinese people regard tradition as something that cannot be violated, so they often ignore the examination of the actual situation, or forcefully use tradition framework to explain reality. Referring to traditional research is good, but the Chinese are so obsessed with tradition that the development of "Feng Shui" has stagnated in a cyclical situation.

Secondly, the ignorance of the Chinese people is also reflected in the distorted "animism" in Feng Shui, finally shaping it into a superstition.

The ideological origin of Feng Shui, according to Eitel, is the Chinese people's admiration for the divine power of nature. According to Eitel, it is not only an important part of the Greek spirit, but also one of the important prerequisites for the emergence of Western natural science:

What has so often been admired in the natural philosophy of the Greeks—that they made nature live; that they saw in every stone, in every tree, a living spirit; that they peopled the sea with naiads, the forest with satyrs...is equally so a characteristic of natural science in China.

...yet I say, would God, that our own men of science had preserved...that sacred awe and trembling fear of the mysteries of the unseen, that firm belief in the reality of the invisible world and its constant intercommunication with the seen and the temporal, which characterize these Chinese gropings after natural science. (Eitel, 2023, pp. 2-3)

The Chinese regard nature as a being with a soul and life; and precisely because nature is "living", its various components will exert an influence on other parts: "They see a golden chain of spiritual life running through every form of existence and binding together, as in one living body, everything that subsists in heaven above or on earth below." (Eitel, 2023, p. 2).

In that case, the Chinese connect the sky and the earth, connect mountains and rivers with celestial phenomena, and connect the location of cemeteries with the fate of living people; Feng Shui is the theory that explains these diverse connections.

It is not difficult to see from this that Feng Shui has a strong "animism" color. In 1871, Edward Tylor proposed the concept of "animism", defining it as a belief about nature, and appeared in a variety of doctrines, including:

An idea of pervading life and will in nature far outside modern limits, a belief in personal souls animating even what we call inanimate bodies, a theory of transmigration of souls as well in life as after death, a sense of crowds of spiritual beings, sometimes flitting through the air, but sometimes also inhabiting trees and rocks and waterfalls, and so lending their own personality to such material objects... (Taylor, 1871, p. 260)

It is worth noting that Taylor uses doctrine here instead of rule to describe the embodied form of animism. This shows that he actually regards it as a belief in nature with religious overtones.

Feng Shui, as a system originating in ancient times, naturally embodies characteristics of “animism”; however, in Eitel’s view, the “animism” in Feng Shui has not disappeared with the passage of time, but with the belief in nature with religious overtones disappeared, “animism” in Feng Shui was twisted into a kind of superstition. The Chinese make random guesses about nature and use Feng Shui to lend validity to their guesses, interpreting phenomena as being in or out of line with Feng Shui, with the explanation of interconnection in nature. It is because of the disappearance of this religious belief that the Chinese have never been able to rekindle their devotion to the power of nature, and they have also lost the spiritual motivation to develop real natural science.

The Reasons Behind *Feng Shui*

We already know how Eitel describes Feng Shui in the book and how he constructs the image of the Chinese through Feng Shui. And China, in his writing, is also portrayed as an ignorant country that lacks scientific spirit. Now there is a question: Why did he study Feng Shui in this way and see a backward China from it?

To start, Eitel himself has a certain degree of colonialist beliefs, originating from his own experience and identity, and further influencing his discussion of Feng Shui.

In his other book, *Europe in China*, Eitel believes that Hong Kong has been built as a place to protect European interests in China and has become an example of free trade and humane government set by Britain for the Chinese (Eitel, 1895, p. 575). He further emphasized:

If we view the history of the China Trade from the standpoint of Europe’s relations with China, it is clear that the tendency, which God put into the movement that commenced at Canton two centuries ago and which resulted in the establishment of this British Colony, was the inchoative union of Europe and China, by the subordination of the latter to the former... (Eitel, 1895, p. 570)

From this, Eitel’s colonial ideas are fully revealed.

Although “Feng Shui” is about Chinese natural science, Eitel first tries to reshape Feng Shui with the concepts and systems of Western natural science. When he found that Western natural science could not fully explain Feng Shui, he denounces Feng Shui as a superstition and the result of the most basic observation of nature, in order to maintain the dominant discourse power of Western natural science. He actually reinterprets Feng Shui using colonialist discourse and used it as a contrast with Western natural science to highlight the importance and superiority of the latter.

If looking back at Eitel’s life, then it is not surprising that he has such thoughts. Born in Württemberg, Germany and graduating in 1860, he entered the Württemberg Evangelical Church and then went to Guangdong, China to preach. In 1870, he moved to Hong Kong and became the Inspector of School for the Hong Kong government. He is described as a pastor who is extremely passionate about preaching and a Sinologist who knows well about Chinese culture. Also, he did lots of pioneering work in the field of education while in Hong Kong (Sweeting, 2008). The identity of a pastor determines his Western-centric and dualistic view of China: not to

really study Chinese culture but to convert the Chinese thoughts according to the Christian; and as an educator, he has profound understanding of Chinese thoughts. The combination of the two creates the above discussion on Feng Shui.

Secondly, due to his own special identity and experience, although Eitel knows well about Chinese culture, some of his opinions are not very correct, which directly leads to his special views on Feng Shui and even the Chinese people.

According to a book called *The Book of Burial*, which states: “ ‘The Qi will disperse if it rides on the wind, and it will stop if it is bounded by water’ The ancients gathered it to make it not disperse, and moved it to make it flow” (Jiang, 1997, p. 349), the earliest meaning of “Feng Shui” is a practice of gathering Qi; and how to gather it involves some knowledge of physical geography. However, long before the term “Feng Shui” was coined, there were practices of “Feng Shui” in China, and their goals were surprisingly the same: to determine where people lived and were buried before or after death, the layout of their houses, and their construction in order to seek good fortune and avoid evil. Feng Shui is a set of theories about location selection and architectural design and construction (Jiang, 1997). Feng Shui has not served pure natural observation itself, but has always been used by people with a practical orientation. Therefore, the practice of Feng Shui focuses on intuitiveness and will naturally become a tool for others to make a living. Due to the practical orientation, Feng Shui is frequently used for other purposes, like fighting against things from the West such as railways, telephone poles, roads, etc., or governing the people and suppressing rebellions; Feng Shui can determine fate-related matters, so people choose to keep the Feng Shui system set by their ancestors for fear of making wrong decisions; Qi is so powerful power that Chinese people worship nature too much and even become superstitious. From the very beginning, Eitel’s understanding of Feng Shui deviated from the relevant records in Chinese classics. Therefore, his final negative opinion about Feng Shui and the Chinese people seems to be unrealistic.

Conclusion

Based on his own identity and experience, Eitel examines Chinese Feng Shui from the perspective of a Western natural scientist in his book *Feng Shui*, summarizes the four major parts and two dominant theories in the Feng Shui system, and tries to give a simple and complete system; however, Eitel’s presentation reflects the interweaving of science and pseudoscience, with pseudoscience as the main component; thus, he thinks that the Chinese adhere to tradition and are full of superstitions, resulting in an image of a backward and ignorant China. Eitel’s “Feng Shui” not only reflects his extensive but sometimes erroneous knowledge of Chinese culture, but also hints at his own colonial superiority as a Western missionary.

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