



A Secret of the Chinese Heart: Fengshui

Where is your ideal home? When shown pictures of differing landscapes such as tropical forests, deserts, grasslands, or forests and asked to choose a place to live, most people, hailing from different cultures and ethnic groups, would choose the picture of grasslands, in East Africa. Some consider this as indirect proof that humans originated from Africa. The love of the land and the adaptation it required became encoded in our genes, so that whenever we are shown pictures of our original homeland, we identify with it.

Of course this is only theory, and speculative at best. But it seems that some people's choices of living environments are closely linked to where they came from. This idea of environment having a direct effect on the health and prosperity of those living in it is a common theme found in many cultures throughout the world. But has been raised to its highest form of practice by the Chinese, through [Fengshui](#) (pronounced feng shuway).

[The pulse of Beijing: Fengshui](#)

[Beijing has always been considered an ideal selection for the nation's capital according to Fengshui theories. It is a city surrounded by a series of mountains - the number one criterion for good Fengshui.](#)



So what is the most ideal Fengshui for Chinese? According to Professor Yu Kongjian from [Peking University](#) who has been investigating the issue, the ideal Chinese home would be located in front of mountains, facing water, near a plain, hugged by hills on the left and right sides, and small hillocks in front, "bowing" to the house. This kind of location in Fengshui terminology is described as black [dragon](#) (qing long) on the left, white [tiger](#) (bai hu) on the right, red bird (zhu que) in the front, and tortoise (xuan wu) in the back. Each of these animals is a Taoist guardian for the four directions of east, west, south, and north. The most distinctive feature of the ideal living space for Chinese is the need to be surrounded by mountains.

This tendency to be hidden and enclosed, like the typical [Beijing](#) quadrangle households, a traditional, residential compound with houses around a courtyard, is opposite to that of the splendid and somewhat showy western castle style, which values the location of commanding height.



According to Professor Yu Kongjian, the reason for these differences is the Han Chinese originated and developed in the Guanzhong Basin in northwest China's [Shaanxi Province](#) when Chinese culture was in its formative stages. The image of a basin was deeply rooted in the ancient Chinese mind. Westerners, on the other hand were likely influenced by mountainous Greek landforms.

It isn't unusual for architects to encounter Fengshui issues when working in China. The most classic example is the so-called "Fengshui incident" famous architect Bei Yuming met when he designed the [Hong Kong](#) Bank of China Tower in the 1980s.

After Bei drew the blueprints for the 351-meter tall, 70-story structure, officials at the Bank of China expressed some concerns. It seems the side of the building had many large X-shaped steel frames. The X-shape is a symbol of bad luck in Chinese culture as it is used to mark the names of criminals who are to be executed.



Bei delicately hid the X-shaped steel frames. The outer parts were changed to a shape more like a swastika, a symbol that, although it gained a bad reputation in WWII, has auspicious meanings in [Buddhism](#).

Bei had vividly described the building as looking like bamboo shoots after a spring rain, but when it was finished it caused quite a debate. Fengshui masters said that the sharp-angled building is more like a sword with many blades. The people in the buildings opposite these blades may have felt very uneasy.

This story may sound superstitious from a scientific perspective, but Fengshui theory is not just superstition when looked at from a cultural and aesthetic angle. Scientifically the X-shaped steel frame is rational and solid. The X-shape may also look beautiful from a general artistic view, but this view doesn't take into account the cultural and symbolic meanings it may carry for the culture in which it is built. It could be said that Fengshui balances and amends science from a cultural angle.

Many people are amazed by the beauty and symmetry of Chinese villages. This beauty comes from the careful construction and placement of buildings through Fengshui. Although the main purpose of Fengshui is not the pursuit of beauty, it has practically become an aesthetic criterion for most Chinese construction.



Because it takes into consideration the cultural sensitivities of the area, Fengshui can have pacifying effects. Science may not see sword-blades in the Bank of China Tower in Hong Kong, but the psychological associations made from the shape, size and location of structures may not be a matter of science. Psychologically, facing a huge, shining, sharp-angled thing everyday may cause some tension. Fengshui provides the solution to this problem.

Some books about Fengshui debase it as a trick. Many try to justify Fengshui by relating scientific elements to Fengshui theory. However, since Fengshui does not use scientific methods, it is not quite possible to judge its results scientifically.

The way Fengshui works may be difficult to explain, but to many Chinese, and a growing number of followers in other countries, its effects are obvious.

Modern science, specifically the logical and fact-based system in exploring, understanding, and altering nature, cannot explain the functioning principle of Fengshui theory, but this does not imply the theory is not functioning. Traditional Chinese medicine has been curing disease for thousands of years and its effects are substantial, yet science can not always explain how it works.

Though tagged as "unscientific", Fengshui manages to produce results, at least in aesthetic and psychological terms. Fengshui has its own rhyme, reason and charm which is why it continues to survive in China - as a special secret deep in people's hearts.

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