

PRACTICAL SUPERSTITIONS: FENG SHUI IN ARCHITECTURE

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ABSTRACT

China has experienced rapid growth and as China grows, so does its global influence. Chinese culture can be seen in countries all over the world, and its influence is evident in various cuisines, languages, and even architecture. However, despite the global trend towards a more modern style, there are various elements present in Chinese architecture that allow it to stand out from the rest. Various real-life structures embody key beliefs of Feng Shui, which is both a theory and a practice for connecting the mind, body, and spirit to one's space or environment, anchored on the traditional Chinese worldview on the art of spatial alignment and orientation, and its relationship with humans and their environment. These architectural designs do not merely stem from cultural or ideological bases alone; they have practical, economical, and logical applications as well. These real-life examples highlight the practicality behind the practice of Feng Shui in architecture.

Keywords: *Feng Shui in architecture, Chinese culture, Chinese architecture*

The global influence of Chinese culture in architecture

In the last decade alone, China has experienced rapid growth in its economy and as China grows, so does its global influence. China's name gets featured daily on radio stations, newspapers, and even online web pages. Nowadays, it is impossible to talk about international trade and commerce without mentioning this country. Even in our everyday lives, it is seldom that we encounter products that do not feature “Made in China” tags in their logos. China has indeed taken center stage in various industries, so much so that it can be said that it is conquering the world by means of trade and commerce. However, China's influence is not limited to the export of finished goods alone. In fact, consumer goods are just one of the many Chinese exports that internationalization has brought about. The spread of Chinese goods brings with it many Chinese concepts, belief systems, and traditions as well—otherwise known as culture. Chinese culture can be seen in countries all over the world, and their respective influences make themselves known in various cuisines, languages, and even architecture.

Throughout the years, we have seen developments in architectural designs happening in different regions all around the world. From Classical architectural designs found in Ancient Greek structures to Romanesque landscapes featured in Italian complexes. We have seen building techniques and styles changing from era to era. As we acquire new technologies to build things bigger and more efficiently, we start to notice stark differences in overall aesthetics and design of these infrastructures as well.

However, a closer look into Chinese architecture will show us that despite the global trend towards a more modern style, there are various elements present in Chinese architecture that allow it to stand out from the rest. These elements continue to differentiate it from other architectural genres and form a branch of architecture that can be classified as being its own category altogether.

The Chinese have a strong network of philosophical ideologies that determine many aspects of their lives. These include decision-making, mannerisms, and even thought processes. As with any philosophical dogma, they have the ability to shape and condition one's perceptions and worldview. And for the Chinese, these beliefs quite literally are responsible for shaping up the world around them. One look at Chinese architecture and one will notice distinct characteristics that set it apart from other building styles. Chinese philosophies have helped shape the landscape of China both morally and architecturally. In this paper, we will be introducing Daoism as one of the major Chinese philosophical schools that helped give rise to this signature architectural style. We will also be tackling the theory of Feng Shui, in order to showcase the cultural explanations behind these structural decisions. This paper shall enumerate various real-life structures that embody key Feng Shui beliefs and further expound on its cultural foundations. After which, we shall proceed to listing down practical applications of Feng Shui as well. It is important to note that the basis of these architectural designs do not merely stem from cultural or ideological bases alone. They have practical,

economical, and logical applications as well. Throughout this paper and using various real-life examples, we hope to highlight the practicality behind the practice of Feng Shui in architecture.

Daoism

The first philosophy we shall tackle is Daoism, both as a philosophy and a religion. Daoism is one of the many schools of thought developed in Ancient China. Its history dates back to as far as 400 B.C.E. Some of its leading members include Yang Zhu (400 B.C.E.), Lao Zi (6th B.C.E.), and Zhuang Zi (300 B.C.E.). Daoism seeks to establish harmony with the natural world, as it emphasizes “going with the flow” or doing what is natural in accordance with the what is called the *Dao* -- which literally means “the Way” -- the cosmic force that flows through all things, and binds and releases them. The philosophy grew from a keen observance of the natural world, and the philosophy evolved from a belief in cosmic balance that is maintained and regulated by the *Dao*. Some of the general concepts of Daoism include: Observing nature, Dynamic balance, Continual cycles, and Non-action.

The observation of nature stresses that a lot of lessons can be learned from the different patterns present in our universe. By observing the natural world, we become more aware of our surroundings, as well as the people in it. Dynamic balance acknowledges the inherent balance that exists in nature. This could be referred to as the Universal Dao. Man has a responsibility of harmonizing and maintaining such a balance in the world; for

going against this Dao could lead to various natural consequences. The Yin and Yang symbols represent this natural balance in the world. Continual cycles highlight the circularity of our experiences. Nothing in this world stays dormant. Change naturally follows a pattern of changes. This concept is also seen in Yin and Yang's symbol. Non-action, on the other hand, refers to an "action without doing." It believes in allowing the universal Dao of life to flow without disruption. It is portrayed in the water-like movement of the Yin and Yang elements.

Yin and Yang

The Yin-Yang represent the repeated coming and going of the two opposing forces. These two forces are constantly changing and represent the ability of things in nature to transform to its opposite force, and revert back again. The two forces exist together at all times and represent balance in our day-to-day lives. Yang stands for light, while Yin stands for darkness. This philosophy teaches us that at any given point in life, there will always be two opposing forces that contradict yet complement each other. One cannot survive without the other. This balance forms a crucial part of our universe. In nature, we are able to see how these ideologies play out. Morning represents Yang, while night time represents Yin. Sunlight represents Yang, while shadows represent Yin. Every force that we find in nature can be classified as either Yin or Yang. It is possible to have a situation wherein the Yang overpowers the Yin or vice versa. And in these scenarios, it is advised that one

counteracts this imbalance by adding the opposing force into the mix. This same concept applies to architecture.

Feng Shui, or “wind-water” as translated in English, is both a theory and a practice for connecting the mind, body, and spirit to one’s space or environment, anchored on the traditional Chinese worldview on the art of spatial alignment and orientation, and its relationship with humans and their environment. Its philosophy is heavily linked to architecture, living, habitat placement, and even divination. It links the destiny of humankind to the environment. Wind and water create the rhythms for the environment, hence the name Feng Shui. It is believed that when there is good rhythm between wind and water, it results in a good environment, which then ultimately leads to good health, wealth, and happiness of the environment’s occupants.

Architects want to ensure that the structures they design will withstand the forces of nature; but at the same time look aesthetically pleasing. Designing structures in accordance to Feng Shui deals with taking note of which forces exist in abundance in one’s chosen building site and finding ways to neutralize the imbalance that occurs. Oftentimes these solutions feature a list of practical aspects to back them up as well. Feng Shui is used to facilitate the flow of energy or *Chi* in one’s space or environment. It is the animating life force present everywhere and in everything -- in our homes, in our surroundings, in nature, and in all people. The purpose of Feng Shui is to free the flow of *Chi*, by tapping the

positive *Chi* energy to the maximum, in order to remove or disrupt any obstructions.

Now we begin looking at examples of modern-day infrastructures that have integrated Feng Shui into its design blueprint, in order to ensure the balance between the forces.

Hong Kong

The Hongkong and Shanghai Banking Corporation (HSBC) Headquarters in Hong Kong is a prime example of classic Feng Shui. The structure is considered to be in an auspicious location, as it is protected by both the mountain behind and the open area of Statue Square in front. The two buildings at its sides also serve as protection, as they represent the hills of the Azure Dragon and the hills of the White Tiger. Looking down towards the harbor of Hong Kong from the mountainside, five main roads flow down and the longest one, Garden Road, leads towards the headquarters. These five main roads are said to be like the veins of the dragon, and the headquarters is located near the longest vein in the flow of energy. Businesses are said to prosper if they are located near the longest vein but more importantly, the interior form of the business' location or building should adhere to the proper Feng Shui standards in order to further welcome prosperity. However, the HSBC Headquarters has undergone a lot of renovations which is believed to have led to many leakages of *Chi*. This is because holes and gaps are created both in and outside the of the building, and so the energy cannot maintain a constant and long-term flow.

At the high and hollow atrium which serves as the entrance of the building, giant reflective mirrors on top reflect the sunlight right down to the main floor or the *Ming Tang*, where energy is supposedly collected. The open space invites wind and positive *chi* inside. The glass ceilings also act as an “energy filtration system”, where it is used to concentrate the energy or light in the *Ming Tang*. However, the energy cannot really be contained because of the open space, where the energy just travels through one side of the building to the other. The escalators that lead to inside of the buildings are placed at a scissor-like angle, which is believed to prevent wayward evils spirits from going inside the building. Two bronze lions are also placed to serve as a preventive measure against *shar chi* 殺氣 or negative energy.

At the building’s rooftop, cannon-like structures are mounted towards the nearby Bank of China tower. These are said to protect them from Bank of China’s bad Feng Shui and deflect any evil energy right back at the rival bank.

Given the example of the HSBC Building, we see a clear representation of Feng Shui influencing the overall structure of buildings in Hong Kong. Another thing that we should note in this example is that the elements of Feng Shui present in the building have various practical applications as well, and do not mainly stem from superstitious beliefs. The good Feng Shui attributed to the HSBC building mentioned the presence of natural barriers such as mountains that shield it from enemies. These “shields” represent a protection from natural elements such as wind and rain. The

presence of such natural barriers helps limit the drag and impact felt by the building itself during times of typhoons. Open spaces found throughout the building, on the other hand, encourage the circulation of fresh air. Scientifically speaking, fresh air has been cited as having positive health benefits to one's body. This could help improve the overall well-being of their employees, and even allow them to stay alert and productive. Meanwhile, the holes and gaps found in its lobby have been named bad Chi because this can be taken as a weak structural base. And in architecture, it is always important to have a stable base by which to build one's structure.

Beijing

The Forbidden City, or what is now called the Palace Museum, is located at the north of Beijing and south of the Great Wall. Built and completed in 1421, the Forbidden City is a great example of ancient Feng Shui. Beijing itself is known to be one of the ancient Chinese locations with the best *Chi*, with the Forbidden City at its center.

The overall architecture of the Forbidden City aimed to express the complementary relationship of Heaven and Earth. At the heart of the Forbidden City is the Emperor's Throne, where both Heaven and Earth are believed to meet. It was also aimed to reinforce the idea that the Emperor is the Son of God and shall rule the nation forever. This ideology is expressed all throughout -- one prime example would be the color of the tiles, Imperial Colors red and yellow, which are seen exclusively in the Forbidden City.

The whole layout of the Forbidden City strictly follows the principles of Feng Shui. It is laid out along a north-south axis, representing the balance of yin (north) and yang (south), in order to bring universal harmony. Buildings were built in accordance to a symmetrical arrangement, wherein each building or space has a complementary component, and each side of the north-south axis complements the other. This arrangement is fully seen and expressed in the courtyard complex. With the Forbidden City being very prone to fire due to the wooden structures, carved dragons were situated on rooftops to protect the buildings, as they are believed to attract clouds and water.

In terms of practicality, the symmetrical structure of the Forbidden City made its base sturdier and easier to build and maintain. As mentioned earlier, the wooden structures made the place very prone to fire. Having similar structures all throughout the Forbidden City allowed for quicker maintenance times because design patterns would be relatively similar wherever you went. Also, the presence of open spaces and courtyards offered easy escape routes for emergency scenarios.

Shanghai

Shanghai itself is known to be a prosperous hub for foreign trade because of its unique location and special *pinyang long*, or “flat land with water dragon” type of Feng Shui. Unlike other major in-land cities such as Beijing and Chongqing that have the support of the mountains at the back and a *Ming Tang* or energy

basin in front, Shanghai is a coastal city on a flat plain, surrounded by many lakes and rivers and embraced by the sea. The Shanghai World Financial Center, known as the “Bottle Opener” for its tapering shape and gaping center at its tip, uses a combination of the square earth and round heaven cosmological symbolisms. The original design of the building by the Japanese Mori Group had a circular aperture at its cap, in order to represent the cosmological symbols. It also allowed the wind to pass through, limiting the drag on the building. However, the design became controversial since the aperture looked like the Rising Sun of the Japanese flag. Although a footbridge was later added to break the circular form, the aperture was then significantly altered to form a trapezoid. As the tower ascends into the sky, the square prism is used to represent the earth and the two cosmic arcs that intersect it are used to represent the heavens. As the two realms interact, it gives rise to the building’s form, as it carves a square portal at the top. This gives balance to the structure and joins the two opposing elements -- heaven and earth.

Much like the skyline of Hong Kong, Shanghai also adopts a similar approach to maintaining a steady path for the dragon to pass through the city. The practical application for this kind of design allows the wind to freely flow through the building; thus limiting the drag and pressure felt by the structure. As mentioned in an article, the inverted trapezoid design helps to reduce wind-induced roof pressure. This has real-time benefits for the building itself. The lessened roof pressure will allow them to save on

maintenance costs and it will help limit swaying during times of turbulent winds.

Singapore

Feng Shui is woven into every aspect of the Singapore life. The country is built on Feng Shui principles, as its energy is directed to attract smart, intellectual, and good business forces from around the world. Singapore has transformed into one of the fastest growing economies, and there is no doubt that businesses have been thriving ever since the country transitioned into modernity.

The Marina Bay Sands Area, situated at the heart of Singapore, has been called a hub of prosperity by Feng Shui experts. The landmarks in the area serve as the country's main tourist attractions. In fact, Feng Shui has long been said to influence the hub's overall prosperity. It is believed that as long as these landmarks prosper, the whole country will too. Marina Bay, Marina South, and Marina East all act as meeting places for the Western, Southern, and Central dragons -- "an auspicious place where dragons soar." The star of the show is Marina Bay Sands. Its three-tower structure represents luck, prosperity, and longevity. The huge infinity pool is believed to be the place where the dragons play in and drink from. On its right is the Singapore Flyer, a giant observation wheel, allowing its visitors to view almost the entire island of Singapore. It rotates clockwise and symbolizes a water wheel, ushering in positive energy contained in the Marina Barrage. On its left side is the Art Science Museum which is

structurally designed like a lotus flower in order to create stability for revenue growth. Across Marina Bay Sands is the mascot of Singapore, the Merlion statue, a mythical creature with a lion's head and the body of a fish, which is believed to be the protector of the country's prosperity and the guard that prevents bad *Chi* from entering. The position of the statute itself is "ruled by the Green Dragon which symbolizes increase in population," as it attracts luck and wealth, according to Feng Shui master Gwee Kim Woon. The Merlion sprouts water from its mouth, generating a constant flow of good fortune for the country. Some claim that being splashed by the water from its mouth brings good fortune, as the water comes from the Singapore River, one of the country's main water streams.

In terms of practicality, the Marina Bay Sands area is located in a very accessible part of Singapore that is close to many other attractions. This means that there will be higher foot traffic directed to this general area. And consequently, higher foot traffic could translate into higher revenue for businesses in the area. Singapore, in general, is surrounded by water on all fronts. This good Feng Shui comes in the form of maritime accessibility to trade. Because of their location, their country is already more accessible to other businesses and foreign trade. During hot seasons as well, the surrounding waterscapes in the area help neutralize the heat being experienced by people in the area.

In all these examples, we see the significant role that Feng Shui plays in determining the outward appearance and structural design

of Chinese infrastructures. In many ways, the Chinese buildings echo many of the philosophical concepts taught in Taoist beliefs. The Feng Shui that is embodied in these structures respects the universal Tao and the go-with-the-flow concept of Taoist ideologies. In order to achieve good fortune and good Chi, these buildings choose to go with the flow of nature, rather than go against it.

Through these given case studies, we see that the practice of Feng Shui is not only limited to a traditional loyalty to its teachings. Rather, it extends the customs and traditions from which it originates and reveals to us practical applications for its concepts. Perhaps this is the reason why Chinese traditions continue to live on throughout the generations. It is because despite the changes brought about by modernity, they maintain their sense of applicability and relevance. Much like the ever-changing Tao, architecture will continue to evolve. It will not be limited by the confines of its era. Yet in its evolution, architecture will continue to stay true to the universal Tao that all things come to be.

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