THE USE AND ABUSE OF CHINESE CORRELATIVE THINKING IN FENG SHUI

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ABSTRACT

Feng Shui is a living tradition and one of the most urgent tasks is to bring Feng Shui into the 21st Century by “selecting the refined and discarding the crude” (取其精華, 棄其糟粕) in the practice of modern Feng Shui. My thesis is that both the “refined” and the “crude” are embedded in the two ways of thinking used in Feng Shui, namely causal and correlative thinking. How to identify when and where Chinese correlative thinking is used and how to think efficaciously instead of superstitiously will allow us to sort out the use and the abuse in Feng Shui, in order to restore it to its proper standing.

This paper will also examine how causal and correlative thinking are fused together in the practice of Classical Feng Shui, with an emphasis on causal thinking when used in Form Feng Shui and a preference for Chinese correlative thinking when used in Compass Feng Shui, in particular the Flying Star School (Xuankong Feixing Pai) as an example. The paper will conclude with an explanation of the meaning of the perplexing but popular Feng Shui saying, “Form Feng Shui without Compass Feng Shui is false (and) Compass Feng Shui without Form Feng Shui is dead”. (巒頭無假, 理氣無真)

KEY WORDS

Classical Feng Shui, causal and correlative thinking, Compass School, Flying Star

INTRODUCTION

Many people, including a good proportion of Feng Shui practitioners, are not aware that there are two ways of thinking we commonly use in the practice of Feng Shui, namely the familiar Western causal or logical thinking and the not so familiar Chinese correlative thinking. These two different thought processes are reflected in the two main schools of Feng Shui, namely the Form and the Compass Schools, which in Chinese are called Xingshi Pai 形勢派 and Liqi Pai 理氣派 respectively. This is particularly so with the Compass School, which has many methods and lineages, but less so with the Form School, which essentially has only one common approach.
"Xingshi" 形勢 literally means ‘form and configuration’, that is to look at the form of the smaller and visible parts in our living environment and see how they would relate to each other to form a larger configuration; that is, how the parts would group together to form a whole. This process is not unlike playing with children’s wooden blocks to form a recognizable structure.

Another Chinese name for the Form School is "Luantou Pai" 戤頭派, which literally means the ‘Mountain-Top School’. Why mountain tops? Because if we look at the tops of a range of mountains, we can see and follow their rise and fall to get an idea of how the topography of the land would behave visibly from one point to another.

Both these Chinese names implied that we would use observation and then analyze the appearance with logic to do our ‘Form School’ Feng Shui, and in the process, we are dealing with objects that are visible, they have shapes and forms and they are tangible. To these things that are manifested, and quantifiable, the Chinese would say they have "Xingqi" 形氣, or "Form Qi" as compared to the opposite, to things that are formless, invisible and intangible. These things that are un-manifested and not quantifiable; the Chinese would say they have ‘Formless Qi’ or just ‘Qi’. There is even a character for Form Qi 氣, written with a radical for "rice" 米 below a radical for "vapor" 氣, and another for the Formless Qi 炁, written with a radical that says "without" 無, above a radical for "fire" represented by four dots at the bottom of the character, even though they have the same pronunciation.

In Feng Shui when we use the term Qi, it is not some kind of energy or force as mistaken by many, instead it refers to both matter and its potential to become while remaining in its material state. In this sense, Qi is a continuum that links what is above (Heaven Qi), what is below (Earth Qi) and what is in us (Human Qi). We cannot speak about Form Qi without its Formlessness, nor can we speak about Formless Qi without its Form. To the traditional Chinese, both matter and potential are complementary opposites like Yin and Yang; one cannot do without the other when we speak about Qi in Feng Shui.

Since in Feng Shui we are dealing with both the form and the formless Qi in our environment, the term "Liqi Pai" 理氣派 for Compass School of Feng Shui becomes relevant. "Liqi" in Traditional Chinese Medicine has the meaning "to regulate the flow of the Vital Qi and remove obstructions to it". In Feng Shui the aim is similar, but it is not "Vital Qi" (Qi that keeps us alive) that we are concerned with here, but with the "Formless Qi" or just the ‘Qi’ of the environment. Thus "Liqi Pai" can be translated literally as "Regulating (Formless) Qi School" or alternatively "Formless Qi Pattern School", since the character "Li" 理 can also be translated as "pattern".

To regulate implies that we need to know what are looking at and how to keep things in balance. But one half of the the Qi that we are working with is intangible, it has no form, and it is invisible and not manifested, so how can we to this in Feng Shui? With the Luopan compass and with Chinese correlative thinking is the answer (Figure 1.).
CHINESE CORRELATIVE THINKING

According to Ames and Hall (1998), The Dominance of Correlative Thinking - Chinese philosophy:

“Correlative thinking, as it is found both in classical Chinese ‘cosmologies’ (the Yijing or Book of Changes), Daoism, the Yin–Yang school and, less importantly, among the classical Greeks…..is a species of spontaneous thinking grounded in informal and ad hoc analogical procedures presupposing both association and differentiation. The regulative element in this modality of thinking is shared patterns of culture and tradition rather than common assumptions about causal necessity.”

The term "Chinese correlative thinking" was first mentioned by Marcel Granet in his 1934 publication "La Pensee Chinoise" (Graham, 1989, p. 320). As A.C. Graham (1989, pp. 319-20) points out:

The Chinese cosmology which assumed its lasting shape by the beginning of the Han is a vast system starting from chains of pairs correlated with the Yin and Yang, branching out into fours and fives (Four Seasons, Four Directions, Five Colours, Five Sounds, Five Tastes, Five Smells…) correlated with the Five processes, and down through successive divisions correlated with the Eight Trigrams and Sixty-Four Hexagrams of the Yi. This scheme, in which to explain and infer to locate within the pattern, provides the organizing concepts of proto-sciences such as astronomy, medicine, music, divination and in later centuries, alchemy and geomancy.

In Compass Feng Shui, like the Flying Star and the Xuankong Dagua Schools, we often start with something that is measurable, like measuring the sitting and facing of a house, or the top of a mountain, or the direction of the coming and going of the water with a compass. This measurement is then correlated to a set of values and numbers to create a pattern language.
By interpreting the resultant pattern with a set of rules according to each school, we can get an understanding of how the invisible and the intangible are related to each other. With this insight, we can ‘read’ the Formless Qi by comparing it with the Form Qi, so the seen and the unseen, the form and the formless, the manifested and the un-manifested and so forth, relating to the complementary Yin and Yang, can come together, to enable us to find the in-between, or the Confucian Gold Mean (Zhongyong 中庸), that is appropriate to a given situation.

From this procedure, we can see both causal and correlative thinking are required to do an efficacious Feng Shui audit by integrating the form and the formless Qi together to obtain a holistic picture of the Feng Shui of a situation.

THE USE OF CHINESE CORRELATIVE THINKING IN FENG SHUI

The term "geomancy" as mentioned by A.C. Graham earlier is another term for Feng Shui. Compass Feng Shui, with a method like Xuankong Feixing 玄空飛星 or Space-Time (Xuankong) Flying Star, simply called Flying Star in the West, often starts with a compass measurement of the sitting and the facing direction of a house to represent directional space and its date of construction to represent time.

Figure 2 below is an example of a Flying Star chart for the entry floor of a house located in London and built in Period 8 (2004 -2023). The house is sitting on the East (East 2 or Mao Mountain 卯山) and facing the West (West 2 or You Facing 西向):

![Figure 2: Flying Star chart for the entry floor of a house located in London](image-url)
Let us examine the numbers located at the sitting palace (East) where the front door, or in Feng Shui term it is called the "Naqi Mouth" 纳气口, or an opening where the Qi is taken into the house, is located. It shows the numbers 4 to the left, 3 to the right, 6 in the middle with 9 below it.

Each of these numbers is correlated to a Trigram and they came about due to the "flying" of their "Stars" (another name for the Trigrams) according to the Luoshu sequence, which we will not go into since it is not that relevant to our discussions here, except to say that in each of the eight "palaces" or directions, there are 5 numbers composed of a Luoshu number (hidden), a Period number, a Sitting and a Facing number, plus a Yearly number shown below the Period number in bold.

4 to the left represents the number at the sitting direction and is correlated to the Xun Trigram, as can be seen from the Trigram Correlation Table shown below (Figure 3). It is associated with the image of gentle wind and wood, attribute-wise to penetration, animal-wise to a fowl, body-wise to the thoughts, family-wise to the eldest daughter, direction-wise to Southeast and Bagua colour-wise to white and so forth.

3 to the right represents the number at the facing direction and is correlated to the Zhen Trigram. It is associated with the image of arousing thunder, attribute-wise to action, animal-wise to a dragon, body-wise to the feet, family-wise to the eldest son, direction-wise to the East and Bagua colour-wise to green and so forth.

For the sake of brevity, I will concentrate on looking at the sitting and facing numbers only. The rest of the numbers follow suit in a similar manner when we do an audit and an interpretation of a Flying Star chart.

A Typical Trigram Correlation Table with Associated Luoshu Number and Five Phase

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Trigram</th>
<th>Attribute</th>
<th>Animal</th>
<th>Body</th>
<th>Family</th>
<th>Direction</th>
<th>Colour</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6 Metal</td>
<td>Creativity,</td>
<td>Dragon &amp;</td>
<td>Head</td>
<td>Father</td>
<td>Northwest</td>
<td>Indigo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Heaven</td>
<td>Horse</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Wood</td>
<td>Arousing,</td>
<td>Dragon</td>
<td>Feet</td>
<td>Eldest</td>
<td>East</td>
<td>Green</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Thunder</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Water</td>
<td>Danger</td>
<td>Pig</td>
<td>Ear</td>
<td>Second</td>
<td>North</td>
<td>Black</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Earth</td>
<td>Steepling</td>
<td>Dog</td>
<td>Hand</td>
<td>Youngest</td>
<td>Northeast</td>
<td>Purple</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Silhouette</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Earth</td>
<td>Receptivity,</td>
<td>Horse &amp;</td>
<td>Belly</td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>Southwest</td>
<td>Yellow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Earth</td>
<td>Cow</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Wood</td>
<td>Simple</td>
<td>Fowl</td>
<td>Thighs</td>
<td>Eldest</td>
<td>Southeast</td>
<td>Scarlet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Wind &amp; Wood</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 Fire</td>
<td>Brightness,</td>
<td>Heron</td>
<td>Eye</td>
<td>Second</td>
<td>South</td>
<td>Crimson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dependence</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Metal</td>
<td>Joy</td>
<td>Sheep</td>
<td>Mouth</td>
<td>Youngest</td>
<td>West</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Joyous</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 3: Trigram Correlation Table

This is a very short table of correlations (Figure 3), which sometimes is also called an attribute or an association table. As we can see here, correlations can be very open-ended, one number or one "star", that is one Trigram, can be associated with many correlations. Which one to choose, to fit in with the situation, lies in the skill of a practitioner and that is where the use and the abuse of Flying Star Compass Feng Shui matters.
Apart from the Trigrams there are also other correlations, for example with the Yin and Yang attributes (See Figure 4 below) which we have correlated to the sitting and facing directions and also the Five Phase Correlations and Attributes, which are often used to work out what colour, shape and material to use and also with what type of Jie Hua 解化 "Cures" to suggest:

![Figure 4: Yin/Yang Five Phases Correlations](image)

To judge whether a combination of numbers is desirable or not, the numbers are correlated to one of the Five Phases and by considering their Five Phase relationship we can assign whether it is Ji 吉 (auspicious) or Xiong 兇 (harmful). For example, in this London house case, 4 is associated with the Xun Trigram and its attribute is Green Wood and 3 is also attributed to Jade Wood, and they are considered to be of the same kind. Their relationship would be considered auspicious if the numbers are timely, when out of time, they are considered harmful.

In Flying Star Feng Shui there is a rule in the Flying Star Classic, "Shen's Xuan Kong (Flying Star) Study" 沈氏玄空學 that says, "The sitting star "manages" health and fertility and the facing star "manages" wealth and officialdom". 4 is the sitting star and it is out of time in the current Period 8 (strictly speaking only 8 and 9 are timely in Period 8), so one could say that there is support for neither health nor fertility. 3 is the facing star and it is also out of time, so one could say that there is no support for wealth and officialdom as well. Not only that, the eldest son and the eldest daughter of the family will argue constantly because it is two Wood Phase out of time and they are like two sticks continuously hitting at each other with penetrating actions. As a result they will injure their feet and their thighs respectively and this will take place in the East and Southeast direction and so forth, if we read the correlations as though they would imply causation.

But the truth of the matter is, and as pointed out by Hall and Ames in their earlier definition for Chinese correlative thinking, the correlations are meant to be regulatory elements that use analogies and metaphors to differentiate and to associate. Correlation is not related to causation as in the case of logical/causal thinking. What we are using here are correlations of
Yin and Yang and the 8 Trigrams, to look at relationships between the dweller and the dwelling and to assign Ji-Xiong 吉兇 (auspicious and harmfulness) with the Five Phase relationships. These are all theoretical and conceptual in character, which would require our interpretations to make sense.

Therefore, before we can differentiate and make sense of a situation, we will need to associate or to connect these correlations to the physical environment and also to the human conditions and needs of the occupants, that is to integrate the Heaven Qi of the "Stars" (the Qi of the Trigrams) with the Earth Qi of the form and configuration of the environment and to the Human Qi of the occupants, before we can arrive at a reasonable “reading” of a given Flying Star chart.

THE ABUSE OF CHINESE CORRELATIVE THINKING IN FENG SHUI

However, when correlative thinking is taken in a wrong way, Feng Shui becomes superstitious to the non-informed and in many cases, gives rise to misuse of Feng Shui by some practitioners. A “classic” and an amusing example is to keep the toilet seat down, so our money would not be flashed down the toilet! You might think this is ridiculous assertion but the following passage from “Feng Shui Your Life” by James Barrett (2012: p199):

“To begin, you need to fully comprehend the toilet issue. As far as the drains go, the toilet is the most detrimental since it possesses the largest opening. In addition, the flushing mechanism creates a strong suction that pulls the energy downward and out of your home. Keeping the bathroom door closed and toilet seat down minimizes the loss of energy and money.”

This came about because water is often correlated to wealth and associated with the flow of Qi in Feng Shui, but correlation does not imply causation. Water is used only as an analogy or a metaphor for wealth and the flow of Qi. We must not take this on face value and think that our money would literally flow out of the house and down the drain, if the bathroom door is open and the toilet seat is not down.

In the case of the London house mentioned above, the previous Feng Shui consultant engaged by the couple who owned the house, actually did say to them that they will argue and that they will suffer a loss of wealth and health if they did not move out of their house or buy the "cures" that he had in his shop! The owners were quite upset and I was called to give a second opinion.

THE FUSION OF CAUSAL AND CORRELATIVE THINKING IN FENG SHUI

Traditionally, the proper way to do a Feng Shui consultation would not start with a compass reading to plot a Flying Star chart because in Flying Star we are mainly dealing with the intangible and formless Gua Qi of the Stars or the Qi of the Trigrams with correlations, which can be attributed to countless attributes and associations.
Instead it is best to start with the Human Qi. By asking questions, we can find out the fears and longing of the occupants and their needs. This is the best approach because the Chinese believed Man and Nature are inseparable, as expressed in the philosophical saying "tian di ren he yi" 天地人合一, or the Oneness of Heaven, Earth and Man (Figure 5).

Not only Man is a part of Nature and his living environment, Man is also a link between Heaven above and Earth below\(^1\). This link becomes "the light at the end of a tunnel" that we can aim for to find our way out.

![Figure 5: The Oneness of Heaven, Earth and Man.](image)

Therefore, by knowing the human needs and the concerns of the occupants and their potentials to become, that is knowing their Human Qi, we can link the intangible and formless Heaven Qi with the tangible with form Earth Qi to know the Feng Shui of a place and work out how to "hasten the auspicious and avoid the harmful" (ju ji bi xiong 趨吉避凶), which is the main task of a Feng Shui consultation.

It turns out with the London house example mentioned earlier, that the couple who lived there had been married for 30 years. They were not worried about arguments and conflicts. As they said to me, "Which couple of long standing doesn’t have them"! They were not concerned with wealth either because they had already made it. They were more concerned with how to re-organize their house now that their two children had grown up and left home, what to do with their three-story house and garden, so they can continue to pursue their hobbies (painting and Yoga) in retirement, while still having a place for the children when they come back to stay with their own family. Is their studio in the house still in the right place and how to re-organize the space so the house would not feel too big and unmanageable for them?

\(^1\) According to Dr. Thomas In-Sing Leung in the English Abstract of his 哲學論壇:

"This divinity and human spirituality are in one same body, so human beings have the noumenon of universal nature. It is not only the syncretism of heaven and human, but also the syncretism of heaven, earth and human. These three parts have bit points and features respectively, they interactive with each other in the form of family relations, they promote endless creation of heaven and earth, which is the Chinese philosophical concept of the trinity".

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It also turns out that the form of the house, and in particular at the entrance foyer, is very attractive and pleasant, with both an outer Mingtang (Bright Hall or open space) and an inner Mingtang to gather the Qi as people come in and go out of the house, so in Flying Star terms, the good form of the environment has prevented the bad potential of the Stars to exert their harmfulness.

Without sorting out what needs to be done and the physical form and configuration of the house, the Flying Star chart with its myriad of correlations and associations would be extremely difficult to untangle.

In short, we need to know what is above (the intangible and formless), what is below (the tangible with form) and what is in us (our needs and concerns) to do a Feng Shui consultation comprehensively, and we should start with the human concerns. This is the San Cai approach used in some form or another by most traditional practitioners (Figure 6). (Please refer to the San Cai Methodology below put together by the European College of Feng Shui in Berlin)

![Figure 6: The San Cai Methodology for Feng Shui Analysis and Planning](image)

**CONCLUSION**

When a Feng Shui practitioner uses correlative thinking with a causal intention, it often leads to unrealistic hopes and irrational fears. The way to avoid this is to make sure that we have a good grasp of the form and configuration of the environment and the human needs, before we venture into the correlations (Figure 7). An experienced practitioner knows correlative thinking is only half of an equation, using one side of the brain without the other. Correlative thinking needs logical reasoning to make the Yin and the Yang come alive and Compass School needs Form School Feng Shui to make sense of a situation. Hence the saying, “Form Feng Shui without Compass Feng Shui is false (and) Compass Feng Shui without Form Feng Shui is dead”. (*Luan tou wu jia, li qi wu zhen* 歪頭無假, 理氣無真). Both the Yin and the Yang of the Form and the Formless are needed to do holistic Feng Shui.
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