

Kanyu (Feng-shui): A Case of Re-interpretation of the Spirit of Space

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Abstract. Being one of the most famous intangible heritage in architecture and urban planning, Kanyu, whose popular name is Feng-shui, worked in China traditionally as the spirit of space as well as architecture and currently as the substitute of "superstition". Nowadays, Feng-shui is facing two problems: one is the ideological matter in its birthplace, China; the other is the re-interpretation by modern scientific framework due to the international impact. Through the vicissitude of Kanyu in history, the paper tried to make transparency of how Kanyu worked as the intangible backdrop of Chinese cities, and how did it fade with the fading of traditional philosophical air since China involved in the intercultural context after 1840. Moreover, the paper discussed the re-interpretation of Feng-shui's original documents as the way to protect this intangible heritage to be part of living spirit of space.

Fengshui is the fading Landscape of Chinese Cities and Cultural Heritage Sites nowadays, however, traditionally, Chinese selected sites for structures of all types, such as graves, palaces, houses, even temples, basing on an organic view of the cosmos, which binds individuals, families and society to the past, present and future via this medium. In fact, Fengshui is one of the oldest and most famous intangible settings to China's architecture, especially its World Heritage Sites. From its rise to fall, it not only has permeated into the traditional architectural design in ancient China, but also has been working as a crystal ball to the change of cultural dimension since China has fallen into the intercultural context.

Definitions of Fengshui

Kanyu is the term always used in classical text instead of its most popular name, Feng-shui, as well as its other phrases: *Dili*, *Xingfa*, *Qingwu*, *Qinglang*, *Puzhai*, *Xiangzhai*, *Tuzhai*, *Yin-yang*, and all of those terms expressed the broad issues of the links between Chinese cosmology (heaven) and Chinese social reality (earth).

The modern definition of Feng-shui in China, about 2600 years later than the first one, is quite different. *Ci-hai*, one of the most important Chinese lexicons edited by a group of authoritative intellectual in China, defined this phrase as "a *superstition* in ancient China, according to which the surrounding situation of residences and graves can decide the fortune of the residents and the

offspring of the dead.”

However, being one of a few Chinese words in English, Feng-shui has many substitutes in western scientific work. The word “geomancy” is the most popular translation of Kanyu, which was used in Joseph Needham’s great book “Science and Civilization in China”(Vol 2, 359). Yet, many have found this obviously inadequate, suggesting instead “topomancy” (Stephen Feuchtwang, 1974:2); or “astro-ecology”, “topographical siting”, and “siting” (Steven J. Bennett, 1978:2); or “mystical ecology” (Ronald Knapp, 1986:108); or “natural science of the landscape” (Lars Berglund, 1990:240).

Compared with all the explanations above, the interpretation of Feng-shui in the Oxford Dictionary of World Religions is relatively more comprehensively following a western scientific way: “*Feng-shui is Chinese art or skill of geomancy. Taking account of the five elements and the two forces of yin and yang. The practitioners use a circular wooden plate on which the outline neo-Confucian cosmography is inscribed. They then determine the best site for buildings, graves, temples, etc.*”

The Brief Theories of Fengshui and the Wudang Architectural Group

The architectural group of Wudang Mountain was first built during Zhenguan Reign of Tang Dynasty(627-649) when Tang Taizong demanded to build Wulong Ancestral Temple. It was built followed the theories of Fengshui, therefore, its application is based on three premises (Yi Hongji, 2000:30):

- 1 certain structure locations are more favorable than others for a family;
- 2 these locations can be found with the way of Kanyu;
- 3 these locations must therefore be determined in order for benefits to redound both to those discerning them and to their descendants.

According the documents, followed these general Kanyu axioms, the two Kanyu interpreters of this great group, which were sent by the King, took more than 1 year to look for the *Xue, Long, Sha*.

The aim of Kanyu is to discover Xue, an analogous term meaning “lair”, “cave”, “hole” and used also for critical acupuncture points, where Qi concentrates. A good Xue must follow the character of Qi, which flows naturally from above to below, rather than obstruct it. Moreover, Xue is also a horizontal spatial composition encompassing significant surface features, and it exists at different scales to meet the different needs of the placement, such as graves, palaces, villages, and even whole cities. Generally, a Xue will be located at the converging focus of a clearly demarcated serpentine chain of hills or mountains.

To determine the Xue, man must look for the “Dragon” first, which is called “Long” in Chinese. In Kanyu theories, only sinuous mountains leading to a Xue can be described as a dragon (Long), and the more extensive and complex the dragon’s form, the more complete the Feng-shui associations. The most important dragon (Long) in Kanyu is the Kunlun Mountain, which is in northwest China and is the birthplace of two main rivers of China. Kanyu interpreters attempt to link Long from this mountain through “grandparent” and “parent” mountains as they diminish in elevation and extant directly to a building site. In addition to the dominating serial Long, nearby topographical features called “local eminences”, or Sha, which include elevated ridges and watercourses.

The New Interpretation Of Fengshui with the case of Wudang Architectural Group

Since Fengshui has become the new fashion in the west¹, more and more Chinese intellectuals change consciously or unconsciously the attitude to this intangible heritage. The phenomenon can be explained in both modern architectural and cultural dimension with the case of Wudang architectural group.

Some scholars re-defined Wudang architectural group with the western theories of environmental science, environmental aesthetics, contextism, bio-architecture, and so on. Many principles of Kanyu in Wudang architectural group are also found fitting well into the framework of modern science.

- 1 Principle of integrity. A great emphasis is given to the environmental integrity in Kanyu practice. It means to consider the microenvironment in the context of the macroenvironment.
- 2 Principle of Adoption. Adoption of architectural measures suitable for different natural surroundings.
- 3 Principle of attachment to mountainous terrains and vicinity to water sources for good sunlight condition, good admission of summer breeze, good shielding of winter currents, good sewage system, the advantage of water-soil maintenance and adjustment of microclimate.
- 4 Principle of geological and hydrological preference. Kanyu theories show a strict and even fastidious choice in quality of earth and water. Kanyu practitioners believed that different earth and water quality has different impact on human.
- 5 Principle of Sitting north and facing south. Sitting north and facing south was traditionally a fundamental ingredient in properly siting dwellings, and it is employed widely throughout China even today. Such an orientation is a device for obtaining the best advantage of sun and wind.
- 6 Principle of eclecticism. Eclecticism in Kanyu means to use every thing to a certain degree that just ensures a harmony. Furthermore, centralization and uniformity are given emphasis.

Wuchang City: An Another Case of Fengshui's Decline and Reinterpretation

However, the re-defined Kanyu could be seen as the phenomenon of re-shaping the global cultures and identities. It could showcase from the case of Wuchang city.

Wuchang, like many other traditional cities in China, was originally developed from the idea of Fengshui, but when new cultural and political power step by step came into the official stage, Fengshui, the symbol of old identity, was doomed to disappear and Wuchang was doomed to change. During this process, a new metropolis, Wuhan, came into being and Wuchang became one of the three parts of this new metropolis for the functional requirement in 1927. Since then, thanks to 80 years' construction, Wuchang, a city enjoyed more than 1000 years' history, finally became a new town with modern atmosphere.

Generally, it could be divided into 3 steps that Wuchang city changed with the declining steps of Fengshui. First, the debate on Chinese and western cultures from the latter half of the 19th century served as the foundations for this

¹ There were 1204 English books on Feng-shui in the website of amazon.com and 632 English books as well as 347 German books in the website of amazon.de (May 8, 2005)

change.

Discussion on West and East Cultures: An old continental nation enclosed by oceans, plateaus and deserts, China had long enjoyed its prosperity and sense of superiority and condescendingly known little about the peripheral parts of the world beyond the stretch of this “central empire” before Briton knocked open its gate in 1840 with their rifles and cannons. Nevertheless, along with the opening up of the empire, the Chinese began to observe the outside world with new eyes and learn from the western countries. The government initiated a movement nationwide founding factories, reforming the education system and releasing newspapers. Such a movement to learn from the western countries is titled in Chinese history as *Westernization Movement*. The carrying out of westernized policies aroused nonetheless heated responses in China. Traditionalists argued that the essential means to govern a country does not base on skill but on morality, not on science but on spirit. But the reformists stood their ground in “beating the westerners with their own good methods” and called for “studies of the many western sciences in order to safeguard the traditional Chinese culture identity”. Zhang Zhidong, a famous minister at that time, released his discourse in May 1898, concluding the previous debates on Chinese and western cultures as well as proposing the theory of “Chinese Identity, Western Technology” (Feng Tianyu, 1994:161-168). “Chinese Identity, Western Technology” finally created a feasibly official mode. Under the banner of this mode, Western cultures set foot in the demesne of “Ying-yang” and “Wu-xing”, bringing impacts on “Chinese Identity” as well as “Chinese traditional sciences” and catalyzing their changes in its own course.

However, Kanyu was still in its prevailing stage from 1840 onward to 1900. Common Chinese never changed their attitude towards Kanyu due to some theoretical debates. Not without hostility to western cultures, the majority believed such alien buildings compromised the local Feng-shui (De Groot, 1892-1910: 1029).

The city of Wuchang was still the classical example on Kanyu principles in this period, it was built along the Yangzi river, but closed by the city-wall. The Great change, however, was coming close it: the south center of *Westernization Movement* was kindled the city of Hanyang, which is on the other side of Yangzi river. Moreover, the Hankou, which has become the western concessions since 1861, has become a more and more important city in China.

New Culture Campaign. Chinese society changed rapidly from 1900 to 1950. During this period, China experienced the abolition of monarchism (1911), the Civil War (1937-1945) and the rise of Chinese Communist Party (CCP). It is also during these 50 years that the “New Culture Movement” came into being and had a wide spread. Because many intellectuals negated the value of traditional culture radically, many social customs began to transform. Kanyu was one of them. Liang Qichao, one of the most famous intellectuals at that time, once concluded the procedure of learning from western cultures with three stages: stage 1, the insufficiency in technology was recognized; stage 2, the insufficiency in laws and systems was recognized; stage 3, the insufficiency in culture was recognized. (Feng Tianyu, 1994:169) Following the light of this theory, some Chinese intellectuals rapidly began to recognize the “insufficiency in culture” and initiated the movement of “New Culture Movement” to spread western cultures to deeper and wider aspects. It is the “New Culture Movement” that devaluated Kanyu rapidly in Chinese society.

Firstly, Chinese intellectuals ascribed the poverty of the country to superstition and lack of western science, and Kanyu was a representative of those superstitious practices. Secondly, as one of the key achievements of the “New Culture Movement”, the discarding of the old Chinese written style (Wen-yan-wen) made a great obstacle to passing down Kanyu as well as other intangible heritage. Thirdly, because the “New Culture Movement” negated generally the traditional culture, the following generations showed a common doubt about traditional Chinese cultural values. It shook the basis of Kanyu radically.

During the 50 years from 1900 to 1949, the Wuhan City was born and Wuchang city became one of the three towns of this new large city. Wuchang began to change following the style of Hankou. In fact, Wuhan has twice become the capital of China. In the plan of the new leader, Mr. Zhongshan Sun, the City of Wuhan will be the most international city in the world.

Communism in China. On October 1, 1949, CCP declared the naissance of the People’s Republic of China. The new regime didn’t allow the existence of old ideas and tried hard to crush all the carriers of non-communist thoughts. It is during the period from 1950 to 1979, namely the first 30 years of its reign, that the government demolished traditional culture violently.

Fengshui was labeled “Trash of traditional culture” rightly after the founding of new regime. Even during the loosest period of CCP’s reign (1956, the Hundred Flowers Campaign), Kanyu was among the forbidden. During 1960s, “*the Socialist Education Movement*” (1963-1965) and “*the Cultural Revolution*” (1967-1976) led to the chaotic and extreme opinions among the new generations. The utmost denigration of traditional culture became a fashion. The bearers’ disappearance, such as the loss of architecture, books and experts, is an invaluable loss to Chinese new generations.

Fengshui, naturally, the bearers of Fengshui became the taboo. In the 1950s, the Wuchang City-wall began to be destroyed, and not only the whole city plan of Wuchang changed, but also the symbols of the Olds have to be disappeared.

Conclusion

The development and decline of Kanyu reflect not only the vicissitudes in the development of Chinese culture but also the integration of worldwide cultures. Therefore, it is necessary to use two eyes, tangible and intangible, to look at worldwide settings. Only had the intangible setting been paid enough attention, the original characters of our World Heritage sites could be indispensably preserved, the international network of heritage conservation could be a comprehensive system, and finally, the global cultural diversity can be preserved from generation to generation.

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