

# ‘Li’ Ancient Rites and the Ceremonial Origins of Fengshui

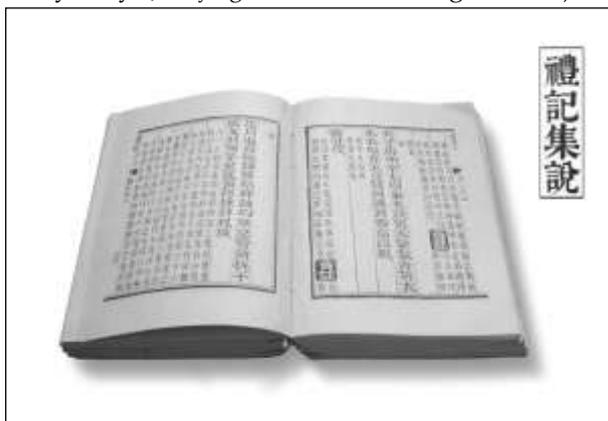
Tyler J. Rowe BTCM-Acu BTCM-Chm Dip-Tn CertIV-Fs Cert-CA Cert-ONM

Long before the birth of *Fengshui* as we know it, in the upper antiquity of Chinese history, there existed a kind of ‘proto-*fengshui*’ that was to guide the development of Chinese Metaphysics for centuries to come. These practices were governed by 礼 *Lǐ* ‘Rites’, Confucian ceremonial customs and ancient rituals, founded in the 周礼 *Zhōu* Dynasty (1045 - 256 B.C.E). Recorded in three key classic texts, many of these conventions and protocols were applied to city and imperial design as well as everyday living. Analysis of the concept of *Li* and the textual traditions involved can shed light on a number of important areas of contention in modern of *Fengshui*. This article will investigate the classical literature to gain better understanding of some of the underlying theories, their beginnings, development, influence and finally, reveal their practical applications today.

To begin, let us look at the *Li*. A product of the 儒家 *Rújiā* ‘Confucian School’ of thought, these can be considered the ‘human’ component of the classical 三才 *Sāncái* methodology of Heaven-Earth-Humanity. Specifically, a set of rules, created by man, governing the proper relationship of ourselves to heaven and earth. This was said to follow a natural hierarchical order of knowing what is appropriate conduct in any given situation and when to apply this. The aim of these rites was to create social balance through morals - respect, humility, propriety and restoring a primitive simplicity of the past. They came about in a period of unrest, when people were increasingly turning away from their government and were born out of a need to restore harmony and re-establish unity amongst a disparate people. Chiefly based around common sense appropriate to the era, and self control, these principles were said to be the innate expressions a mind sensitive to truth and the deeper meaning of things. The product was not an inflexible ideal but a constantly modified, man-made, ethical flow that changed with the times. Of particular importance in the current context is that they were also perceived a way to transform a sometimes dangerous world at the whim of divinities, ghosts and spirits - an attempt to organize and domesticate all under heaven, through human ritual.

The Three Rites Classics of Chinese Literature are the primary sources for information on *Li*. Scattered amongst them are the first laws governing building design and arrangement as well many other related topics. The oldest of these is the 仪礼 *Yǐlǐ* ‘Ceremony and Rites’. Attributed to the 周公 *Zhōu Gōng* ‘Duke of Zhou’ (of 易经 *Yìjīng* ‘Classic of Changes’ fame), the text contains descriptions of ceremonies concerning a low level aristocrat of the *Zhou* era, a 士 *Shì* ‘Scholar-Gentleman. Included in its 17 chapters are a host of rituals, adorned with layers of symbology, dealing with ‘Ancestor worship’ - funerals, mourning, burial and sacrifices, amongst other things. What has survived to today is probably only a fragment of a much greater volume.

The next of the trilogy to consider is the 礼记 *Lǐjì* ‘Record of Rites’, authorship ascribed to 孔子 *Kǒng zǐ* ‘Confucius’ himself (also of *Zhōu Yì* ‘Changes of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Dynasty’ / *Yìjīng* ‘Classic of Changes’ fame). It boasts what is certainly the most comprehensive supply of data on the *Li*, with 49 chapters of definitions, rules, uses, prescriptions, anecdotes explanations and discussions on the subject. In the midst of this lies some of the earliest information on Chinese cosmological theory, astronomy, geographical orientations and the monthly ordinances of the Emperor with regard to the initial incarnation of the 明堂 *Míngtáng* ‘Hall of Light’ or ‘Bright Palace’ elaborated upon below. The work has no clear structure and was possibly a compendium formed from a variety of sources at different times, once destroyed then reassembled by scholars at a later date.



The 周礼 *Zhōulǐ* ‘3<sup>rd</sup> Dynasty Rites’ is the final apex of the triangle and perhaps the most informative on the current theme. Also legendarily accredited to *Zhou Gong* ‘Duke of Zhou’ and later edited by 刘歆 *Liú Xīn*, its six sections each detail a different government domains named after heaven, earth and the four seasons. The purpose was to outline all of the administrative affairs and policies of the royal state, but within its pages are passages on interpreting the dreams of the monarch, complex geometry, astral symbolism and most significantly, methods for divining the location of capitals along with the first doctrines

of architecture and disposition of structures - city layout. The guidelines of the Winter Offices - subtitled 'Overseer of Public Works' were lost to history and replaced early on by *Liu Xin* with a similar document the 考工记 *Kǎogōng jì* 'Record of the Scrutiny of Crafts'.

Early Chinese notions of ancestor worship, as illustrated in texts such as the *Yili* 'Ceremony and Rites', encompassed three generations on the side of the patriarch -

考，祖，曾祖。

"[Deceased] Father, Grandfather, Great Grandfather"

- *Yili*, chapter 16 (Rite of the Lesser Sacrificial Food Offering)

A supreme ancestor, the founder of a family line, may also have been honoured. The ghosts of these predecessors were believed to have the ability to influence the life of their descendants to 'pull strings' from the spirit world and improve or worsen situations of living. To engage their help a 'care package' could be sent in the form of offerings of food or wine, precious objects, sacrifice and prayer - in a sense, making life in the netherworld more comfortable for the dead. This was usually conducted at a family altar, ancestral temple or gravesite.

It is commonly believed that one of the original methodologies of *Fengshui* was that of 阴宅 *Yīnzhái* 'Grave-sites' - so called for its use in determining suitable points to inter the bones of the departed. Whilst it is conceivable that this custom was precipitated by the cultural inclination toward ancestor worship, and at first glance may appear to be the same, the purpose and execution differ. The reasoning behind *Fengshui* burial is contingent upon the idea of 感应 *gǎnyìng* 'mutual resonance' - sympathetic vibrations pervading the 气 *qì* 'energy' field of the cosmos creating a persistent affinity of attraction between similar things (this is also how *fengshui* cures and remedies are said to work, by application of systematic correspondence and use of symbolic representation). This meant that there existed recognition that remains were linked to the living on some primordial level, a connection implying that if a late relation were to be buried in a suitably fortuitous location, the offspring may reap proportional benefits of health and prosperity in life. This of course opens the way to advantage in obtaining desirable entombment for not only the direct masculine line but any blood relation male or female, elder or younger. Hence it seems that a societal predisposition to ancestor worship may have inspired the first primal breaths of *Fengshui* but one is not necessarily analogous to the other.

Some of the first references to the importance of orientation in the siting of residences (for the living or dead) come from the *Liji* 'Record of Rites' -

故死者北首，生者南乡。

"Therefore the deceased have their heads [placed] to the north,  
the living look toward the south"

- *Liji*, book 9 (The Conveyance Rites) line 5

The directions were calculated by use of a 'gnomon' a vertical stake set in the ground from who's cast shadow throughout a day true north could be established. There are a number of similar quotes throughout the document, but this is perhaps the most concise and meaningful. The source goes on to mention that even in the age of the *Zhou* dynasty, this had been customary for some time. The model is liable to have naturally evolved out of the geography of China itself. Generally speaking, to the north (the Mongolian plains) higher latitudes and closer proximity to the pole, brings lower temperatures. In the south the opposite is true - the nearness to the equatorial tropics and the path of the sun, increases the heat. This did not (and still doesn't) apply to all regions under Chinese rule, but fits the majority enough to be considered universal. *Yin yang* theory (see figure 1.), associates the South with the midday sun, summer, warmth, light and the positive *yang* principle. All that is dark, the cold, midnight, winter and the north correspond to the *yin* negative principle.

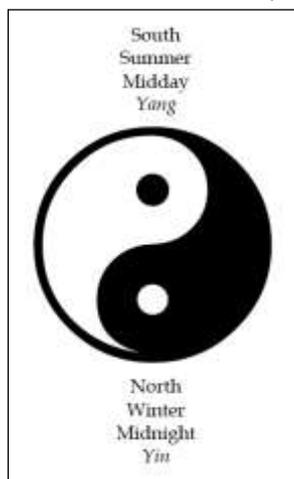


FIGURE 1 - YIN YANG

This became the basis of classical *Feng shui* sitting and facing directions - traditionally it was considered most fortuitous to build all houses to face the South. It is important though to look beyond the compass direction to the truth behind what is being said here. The essence is that the living should look toward the *yang* and the dead *yin*. If the topography suits, this can be actual 'due south', but if not, facing 'south' may be another direction altogether. The imperative is to look toward life, wherever that issues forth, and to back oneself to death.

The site for Chinese capitals of antiquity were originally chosen according to various methods of divination conducted by the Royal Auger or the Emperor himself, as detailed in the *Zhouli* '3<sup>rd</sup> Dynasty Rites' -

國大遷、大師，則貞龜。

"In State [sanctioned] major relocations [of the capital] the Grand Diviner, follows the auguries of the tortoise."

- *Zhouli*, book 2 (Terrestrial Offices) chapter 24

Divining the location was done by means of one of three methods popular at the time - 'Scapulomancy' where predictions were recorded by interpreting vertical cracks formed in the shoulder blades of oxen, created by placing heated rods into pre-carved holes; 'Plastromancy' a similar process that used instead the underbellies of tortoises; and 'Milfoil' another name for casting stalks of the yarrow plant. This last was of course the traditional method for consulting the *Yijing* 'Classic of Changes'. In fact three 'Changes texts' were referred to, of these only the *Yijing* 'Classic of Changes' (more correctly called the *Zhouyi* 'Changes of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Dynasty' when the ten wings attributed to Confucius are included) survives to today. The other two comprised of different names and arrangements for the trigrams - the 连山易 *Liánshān yì* 'Linked Mountains Changes' and the 归藏易 *Guīcáng yì* 'Return to the Contained Changes' they both preceded our current text, but have since been lost.

The convention dictated that from these three different oracular methods advice was to be taken on the timing and placement, leaving the selection mostly to fate. While it is reasonable to assume the local landscape would have been taken into account once the site was located, there seems little evidence to support the siting was a direct consequence of *Fengshui* considerations. The four great historical capitals *Beijing*, *Nanjing*, *Luoyang* and *Xian* were all reputed to have been situated such for auspicious positioning, but this was likely a mere retrospective addition of the principles and fitting of theory to the existing narrative in the hopes of securing deeper respect and support for the nation, its past decisions and cultural sciences.

The cosmology of imperial Chinese city design is also best documented in the passages of the *Zhouli* 'Rites of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Dynasty', it states -

匠人营国。方九里，旁三门。國中九经九纬，经涂九轨。

"Craftsmen construct the state capital. A square of nine *li*, each side has three gates. Within the capital are nine central (north-south) thoroughfares and nine transverse (east-west). The main thoroughfares are nine [chariot] tracks in width."

- *Zhouli*, book 6 (Winter Offices) line 72

This statement is amongst the first recorded instances of civil planning. It follows an ancient mapping convention used by Chinese geographers, the 九宫 *Jiǔgōng* 'Nine Palaces'. The method is said to be conceived by 大禹 *Dà Yǔ* 'Yu the Great', founder of the 夏 *Xià* '1<sup>st</sup> Dynasty' (2100 - 1600 BCE). He originally utilized the nine squares to divide up the (assumed) continents of the world and the provinces of China by its nine key rivers. In the *Zhou* dynasty it became the basis of the agricultural unit as the 井 *Jǐng* 'Well' field system, (the name taken from the character - see figure 2.). Eight families would each farm a portion of land, surrounding a ninth that would house the community well. The soil from this communal plot was worked on together and the produce paid to the empire as taxes.

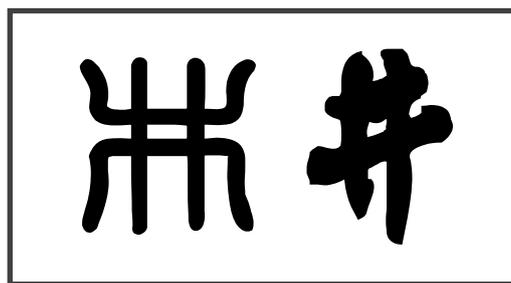


FIGURE 2 - 'WELL' PICTOGRAM & IDEOGRAM

This system came to be used, somewhat like the modern western convention of longitude and latitude, to demarcate not only open land, but urban areas too. The imperial capital was divided in this way by its overall dimensions, gates and roads. Within its footprint are ongoing repeated instances of nine squares within nine squares. From this it was easy to then locate the other buildings within, their relative auspiciousness measurable according to their position within the compound. These included the royal palace, ancestral halls, altars, markets, residences and storehouses.

The next logical step was taken when the nine squares were overlaid onto floor plans. This influenced the architecture of many classical dwellings with central courtyards surrounded by various rooms and halls. *Feng shui* masters also adopted this system for calculating various lucky and unlucky 'stars' in the 玄空飞星 *Xuánkōng Fēixīng* 'Flying Stars' technique. It is critical to remember that although the *Jiu gong* 'Nine palaces' is based on sacred numerology (the number 9), and cosmological form (square, earth)

it is a man-made mapping convention, not a natural distribution of energy. While it can be useful for arithmetical purposes, it cannot be considered representative of the flow of 气 Qi 'Energy'. The commonly adopted pie chart used by modern practitioners seems more appropriate in this case as it considers the qi arriving from the eight directions (four cardinal and four inter-cardinal) and condensing upon the spot.

One interesting earlier application of the nine squares being applied to the built environment was a sacred structure known as the 明堂 *Míngtáng* 'Bright hall' or 'Hall of Light'. Differing from the latter use of the term in *Feng shui* to identify the site a residence or tomb sat upon, (and later still, only the area immediately in front) this was the name given to the front hall, and the entire complex of a great temple observatory. This simple building was considered the point at which the emperor, son of heaven, communicated with the celestial vault above. Highly ritualised ceremonies were performed here to harmonise the seasons, vitally important in a crop dependant world. The emperor moved clockwise from room to room, reflecting the path of 北斗 *Běi dòu* 'The Northern Ladle' as it pointed to different directions through spring, summer, autumn and winter. This passage and the rites conducted along the way were known as the 月令 *Yuè lìng* 'Monthly Observances' and written in a chapter of the same name in the *Liji* 'Record of Rites' -

仲春之月，天子居青阳大庙。乘路，驾仓龙，载青旗，衣青衣，服仓玉。

"In the middle month of spring, the Son of Heaven occupies the Bright Blue-Green (eastern) [Hall] of the Great Temple. Rides in a carriage, drawn by dragon [horses], carrying a blue-green standard, wearing blue-green clothing with jade [pendants]."

- *Liji*, Book 6 (Monthly Ordinances) lines 10~12

This austere place of worship consisted of nine halls, five containing one shrine (the cardinal and centre directions) and four containing two shrines each (the inter-cardinal directions). The shrines housed thrones where the monarch could sit facing the appropriate direction each month of the year to perform the sacrifices. A circular space topped edifice where the necessary astronomical calculations could be made,

spring 4 == (wind) wood	summer 9 == (fire) S	transition 2 == (earth) earth
spring 3 == (thunder) wood	5 (centre) earth	autumn 7 == (marsh) metal
transition 8 == (mountain) earth	winter 1 == (water) N	autumn 6 == (heaven) metal

making a circle (representing heaven) over a square (representing earth). The four sided base of course followed the *Jiu gong* 'nine palaces' pattern, but in this instance each was associated with one of the famous 九星 *Jiǔ xīng* 'Nine stars' of the *Bei dou* 'Northern Ladle' and by virtue of that, completed a magic square known as the 洛书 *Luò Shū* 'River Diagram' (see figure 3.). This ancient mathematical construct has long been associated with the 后天 *Hòu tiān* 'Later Heaven Sequence' of the 八卦 *Bāguà* 'Eight trigrams', and it is from here that many of the concordances in the twelve services have their origins. Corresponding 五行 *Wúxíng* 'Five Elemental-Phase' colours, days, planets, gods, clothing, animals, smells, tastes, food, utensils, musical notes etc. are all applied in their governing timely direction.

FIGURE 3. LUO SHU MAGIC SQUARE

This is possibly the first time the *Ba gua* 'Eight Trigrams' were used in such a way, and became the creative impetus behind many of the more recent *Feng shui* formulas that have their roots in these changing lines - such as 八宅 *Bā zhái* 'Eight Houses' and a plethora of 罗盘 *Luó pán* 'Chinese Compass' practices also. It does not however justify the simplified contemporary '3 Door Bagua' or 'Eight Life Aspirations' *Feng shui* invented by Thomas Lin Yun in America in the 1970's. Often inappropriately referred to nowadays as 'compass school', this speaks of 'romance', 'helpful people', 'fame' and other aspects never traditionally attached to the eight *gua*.

It likely clear now that the 'Rites' demonstrated in this triad of classical works had substantial influence on the formation of *Feng shui*. It should also be equally clear that these cosmological principles, whilst resembling *Feng shui*, are not. Perhaps we should see them as 'Proto-Fengshui'. This does lead us to be able to answer one question though - How old is *Feng shui*? Being that the processes outlined above are of Zhou '3<sup>rd</sup> Dynasty' origin (and we have decided, not *Feng shui*), the answer - not older than the 汉 *Hàn* '5<sup>th</sup> Dynasty' (206 B.C.E - 220 C.E), about 2000 years at most, significantly less than popular heritages given.

Knowing these important, but predominantly lost details, can help to better understand current practices of *Feng shui*, deepen our appreciation of what we have and show us directions it possibly could, (and also how it shouldn't) develop in the future. There are yet more gems hidden within the pages of these three weighty tomes that deserve our attention, just waiting for the right eyes and an open mind to uncover them. If you feel so tasked, good luck!

## References

- Biot, E [translator] (1851) 'Le Tcheou-Li ou Rites Des Tcheou' available online at - [http://classiques.uqac.ca/classiques/chine\\_ancienne/chine\\_index1A.html](http://classiques.uqac.ca/classiques/chine_ancienne/chine_index1A.html)
- Boltz, W. G. (1993) 'Early Chinese Texts: A Bibliographical Guide, Early China Special Monograph Series No.2' The Society for the Study of Early China
- Brunn, Ole (2003) 'An Introduction to Feng Shui' Cambridge University Press
- Field, S. (2008) 'Ancient Chinese Divination' University of Hawaii Press
- Gentz, J (2010) 'Living in the Same House - Ritual Principles in Early Chinese Reflections on Mourning Garments [in 'Ritual Dynamics and the Science of Ritual - Grammars and Morphologies of Ritual Practices in Asia, Section II - Ritual Discourse, Ritual Performance in China and Japan']' Deutsche Nationalbibliothek
- Legge, J. [translator] (1885) 'The Sacred Books of the East Vol 27 & 28 - The Li Ki (The Book of Rites)' available online at - <http://www.sacred-texts.com/cfu/index.htm#tcb>
- Liu An [translation Major, J.S.] (1993) 'Heaven and Earth in Early Han Thought: Chapters Three, Four, and Five of the Huainanzi' State University of New York Press
- Liu An [translation Major, J.S., Queen, S., Meyer, A., & Roth, H.D.] (2010) 'The Huainanzi: A Guide to the Theory and Practice of Government in Early Han China' Columbia University Press
- Meyer, C (2010) 'Interpretations of the Confucian Ritual ("li") in Chinese Scholarly discussions of the Eleventh Century [in 'Ritual Dynamics and the Science of Ritual - Grammars and Morphologies of Ritual Practices in Asia, Section II - Ritual Discourse, Ritual Performance in China and Japan']' Deutsche Nationalbibliothek
- Needham, J. (1971) 'The Science and Civilisation of China, vol 4 part 3: Civil Engineering and Nautics' Cambridge University Press
- Puett, M (2010) 'Ritualisation as Domestication - Ritual Theory from Classical China [in 'Ritual Dynamics and the Science of Ritual - Grammars and Morphologies of Ritual Practices in Asia, Section II - Ritual Discourse, Ritual Performance in China and Japan']' Deutsche Nationalbibliothek
- Soothill, W. E. (1951) 'The Hall of Light: A study of early Chinese Kingship' Lutterworth press - ABE
- Steele, J [translator] (1917) 'The I-Li or Book of Etiquette and Ceremonial' Probsthain & Co
- Swetz, F. J. (2008) 'The Legacy of the Luoshu' A K Peters
- Wright, A.F. (1977) 'The Cosmology of the Chinese City [in 'The City In Late Imperial China']' Stanford University Press