De Qi ‘Obtaining Qi’

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There is an assumption made in Fengshui practice that all sites consulted on inherently ‘have
shengqi’ to work with, but do they? This may not always be the case. There are certain base
requirements outlined in the earliest classic text that clearly show what is initially needed to De Qi
‘Obtain Qi’ before one even begins trying to manipulate its flow and nature.
In Fengshui there are many ways to attract 生气 Shēngqì ‘Generating Energy’ and deflect 殺气 Shāqì ‘Noxious Vapours’, countless methods to direct and enhance the movement of qì, as well as
numerous ways to find where it accumulates in its greatest concentrations. There is however, only a
very short list of five prerequisites to establish the presence of qì onsite in the first place. This
catalogue of conditions is drawn directly from the 葬书经 Zàngshūjīng ‘Book of Burial Classic’ by 郭璞
Guò Pú (276-324 C.E.). As the original source of all 形势派 Xíngshìpài ‘Form & Force School’ theory,
written by a master who is arguably the grandfather of all Fengshui, its wisdom is irrefutable. All
other theories born since can be considered merely footnotes to this fundamental manuscript.

THE ZANGSHU

The Zangshu itself is based on an earlier text and contains many of the former book’s passages
Qīngwū Xiānshēng ‘Blue Raven Esquire’ has been since lost, and now only lives through Guo Pu’s
writings. Guo Pu himself was an enigmatic figure and many great stories abound of his colourful life
as a diviner, astronomer, geographer and scholar. In his time he authored and edited many books, but it is the Zangshujing he is most
known for in the study of Fengshui.
The book is made up of three parts - the inner, outer and
miscellaneous chapters. This arrangement was formulated by later scholars and it is suggested that the material from the first section is the
most authentic and less so in the second and third - which may indeed
be the compilations of later authors. There have been many annotations
and commentaries added throughout the dynasties since its first edition.
Although the title Zangshujing translates as the ‘Book of Burial Classic’ it
 can in fact be thought of as ‘The Book of Auspicious Siting’. The
methods it puts forward on gravesites were identical to those used in the
siting of houses – being that, if it’s good for the dead, it must be so
for living. It also contains the first record of the name Fengshui ‘Wind
and water’ and holds the impressive vintage of being the oldest
complete manual for its practice.

DE QI

The term 得气 Déqì ‘Obtain qi’ is borrowed from Chinese Medicine. In Traditional
Acupuncture practice it indicates the arrival of qi at a 穴 Xué ‘[Acupuncture] Point’, the dull heavy
sensation felt after the initial needle insertion. The word Xue can also mean ‘hollow, cave, spot, node
or lair’. In Fengshui this refers to the most auspicious location for constructing a dwelling within a
given site (sometimes called the ‘Dragon’s Lair’), and Deqi applies to the arrival of Shengqi at this
point. Applying the 罗盘 Luòpán with its many compass based methods before determining whether
qi has first been obtained is both incorrect and pointless.

GUO PU’S 5 CONDITIONS

This paper will translate key passages from the text and consider their possible
interpretations and applicability. From this a handy ‘obtaining qi’ checklist for immediate and easy
use in the field can be created. As analysis of the landscape is always the dominant approach in the
Classical Fengshui model, all five are conditions of form. Guopu supports this theory when he teaches
that underground internal qi is condensed by external superficial forms - allowing the practitioner to
‘see the qi’’. Each of the five conditions is confirmed by a series of references from the most important
Inner Chapters and cases where relevant.
1. **山 Shān ‘Mountain’**

   丘垄之骨，冈阜之支，气之所随。
   Qiūlóng zhīgū, gāngfù zhīzhī, qìzhī suōsuì.
   “The bones of hills and ridges, the branches of mounds and embankments, qi follows these.”
   - *Zangshuijing*, Inner Chapter, line 9

   经曰，地有吉气，土随而起
   Jīngyuē, dìyǒu jíqì, tǔsuíěrqi
   “The Classic says, when the ground has auspicious qi, the landscape conforms resulting in rising upward”
   - *Zangshuijing*, Inner Chapter, line 37

   气以龙会
   Qìyǐ lónghuì
   “Qi is [present] because of [mountain] dragons assembling”
   - *Zangshuijing*, Inner Chapter, line 51

   These statements illustrate how mountains both mutually collect qi, and how their physical presence indicates its gathering under the surface. They are in fact fundamental to the natural qi cycle (see below) and without them there is no initial focus for the qi to begin its journey that ends in an auspicious site and dwelling. This suggests that sites with no natural hills or peaks in the vicinity may not obtain qi. Of course in the urban environment, large buildings are often considered analogous to mountains and while this may be true, there effect at collecting qi would always be inferior, though perhaps still necessarily usable.

   Historically this condition was considered so important in China that when the 故宫 Gùgōng ‘Imperial Palace’ was built in Beijing without the presence of a local mountain, the tremendous effort of creating the man-made ‘Coal Hill’ immediately behind the ‘Forbidden City’ was undertaken to satisfy this need.

2. **土 Tǔ ‘Soil’**

   土者，气之体，有土斯有气。
   Tǔzhě, qìzhītǐ, yǒutǔ sī yǒuqì.
   “Soil, it is the body of qi, where soil exists there is qi.”
   - *Zangshuijing*, Inner Chapter, line 18

   气行乎地中。
   Qìxíng hū dèzhōng.
   “Qi travels through the ground.”
   - *Zangshuijing*, Inner Chapter, line 20

   气因土行
   Qìyīn tǔxíng
   “Qi travels by means of soil”
   - *Zangshuijing*, Inner Chapter, line 49

   The second condition clearly is soil. *Shengqi* travels through the ground, not by means of underground rivers as a few somewhat misguided modern authors may suggest, but through the soil itself. It is not too subtly implied here that earth makes up the physical form (body) of qi and allows it to move. Therefore where there is no soil, there cannot be movement and thereby qi cannot be sustained.

   The concern here is with some styles of modern buildings that have no contact with the land due to high elevation, large cavity spaces underneath, or poor connection via a thick medium of concrete. In many cases the qi simply cannot travel to the structure and scientific research is beginning to uncover the problems for the occupants that can arise from this style of living, including depression, fatigue and infertility.
3. \textit{Huà} ‘Change’

The next concept is a more difficult one to grasp, perhaps because it is the least material of the group. After mountains have collected the \textit{qi} and soil has granted it movement, it is the next phase that stops and condenses it. This is change or transformation in the land. Most commonly this comes in the form of difference of elevations, but can be less obvious. \textit{Qi}, given the opportunity, will continue to move along through the earth unimpeded, this is of course unless it meets some variation in its path. Like an outcrop of rocks at a river back causing a small whirlpool, the \textit{qi} will be deflected from its path and coil around itself aside the terrestrial object. This is why the base of mountains were so popular with the ancients as locations for villages and communities. Like sediment collecting on a sandbar, \textit{qi} accumulates here. The same can be said for sites adjacent to even a small depression in otherwise featureless terrain. Other examples of changes that can induce this situation might be variations in soils, the beginning or end of a prominent land form or vegetation.

In new developments on continually flat sites, such as reclaimed farmlands, there can often be difficulty in determining the best site without merely relying on the compass. Directions and positions should only be used to activate the energies already present, so how to decide the best location? This is where change becomes particularly important. Any variable in these situations must be investigated, it may be the mildest of transformations from bordering ditch to tree-line that obtains the \textit{qi}.

4. \textit{Shuǐ} ‘Water’

The intimate connection between water and \textit{qi} is well known to anyone who has studied \textit{Fengshui}. It is no surprise then, that water is one of the five. The verses above may also be familiar,
they are some of the most famous in the Fengshui literature. Similar to ‘changes’ above, water can be a boundary to qi, a point where it pools. Water however has the characteristic of being able to retain qi like a battery holding a charge. It is the only place in nature where qi is stored undifferentiated.

It is true that qi also moves with water, more freely than soil mentioned above, but it does not necessarily scatter as water flows away. Think of it as the water is moving away, but not the qi. Qi is present wherever there is water to varying degrees, existing within the water and escaping only when the water changes state. The presence of water is the clearest indication of qi, but ‘artificial waterways’ the name commonly given to roads within the cityscape, do not carry qi the same as true water. Elemental water must be present to prevent the dispersion of qi accumulated through the above stages. This is highlighted in the Chinese notion of gardens, traditionally containing a minimum of 1/3 water and of course the contemporary fascination with water features in the home.

5. 生 Shēng ‘Life’

经曰，。。。内气止生。  
Jīngyuē，。。。Nèiqì zhǐshēng  
“The Classic says, … underground qi stopped generates life.”  
- Zangshuìjing, Inner Chapter, line 13

气以生和  
Qìyǐ shēnghé  
“Life harmonises because of qi”  
- Zangshuìjing, Inner Chapter, line 47

The final condition is an interesting one, in that while it is not an essential requirement for indicating qi has been obtained per say, it is perhaps the most obvious and important confirmation. Life is not a traditional feature discussed in Fengshui study of qi, but as living beings it is the ultimate result. If the goal of Fengshui is ‘fertility’ (in all senses of the term) then surely a flourishing of flora and fauna is the most convincing sign that the shengqi is ‘generating’ as it should. Wherever qi stops for long enough, growth is the inevitable result.

Of particular concern in the toxic world of today is the number of localities where nothing can grow. It is obvious that where life cannot survive, neither should humans. The same applies to populating mostly barren territory, previously only able to support specialised peoples in small numbers. There just isn’t enough qi to go around.

SUMMARY

Whilst not explicitly listed in this format within the Zangshuijing, these five conditions of Guopu can be summarised, in order, as such –

1. 山 Shān ‘Mountains’ collect qi
2. 土 Tǔ ‘Soil’ moves qi
3. 化 Huà ‘Change’ stops qi
4. 水 Shuǐ ‘Water’ holds qi
5. 生 Shēng ‘Life’ grows from qi

These five simple points drawn from this fundamental work can quickly and easily determine when a site should be selected or discarded. Unfortunately one or more of these parameters are often overlooked, and vast amounts of time and resources are potentially wasted searching for qi in the wrong places. Practical and effective systems like the one discussed here should be the primary consideration before beginning analysis, even for existing buildings. While they are difficult, if not impossible factors to change, they can be influenced by mindful application of classical Fengshui principles and traditional form school techniques.
COMPARISONS

Before concluding two other subsystems within the classical Fengshui knowledge base, warrant mention at this point. While they bear some similarity, as will be demonstrated, they do not however, amount to the same thing.

Practitioners of classical Fengshui could be forgiven for thinking Guopu’s conditions are one and the same as the 地理五诀 Dìlǐ Wǔjué – ‘Five Secrets of Earth Principles’. This ancient list describes the Classical model of a site, which many know simplified as the ‘armchair formation’ –

1. 龙 Lóng ‘Dragon’ vein, ancestral arterial ridgeline that feeds to the site
2. 砂 Shā ‘Sand’ local topography of land features including mountains
3. 水 Shuǐ ‘Water’ rivers, lakes and streams
4. 穴 Xué ‘Point’ hollow, cave, spot, node or (dragon’s) lair
5. 向 Xiàng ‘Direction’ the way a site faces

Parts of Guopu’s list are incorporated within the Wujue (‘mountains’ and ‘water’) but not all. This is because the topic of this article concerns only the factors present at #4 of the above list – the Xue ‘point’. It is a micro view covering further details of finding qi at this one aspect.

Likewise the familiar construct of the four animal spirit mountain forms - 青龙 Qīnglóng ‘Cerulean Dragon’, 白虎 Báihǔ ‘White Tiger’, 玄武 Xuánwǔ ‘Dark Warrior [Black Tortoise]’ and 朱雀 Zhūquè ‘Vermillion Sparrow [Red Bird]’ all fall within the scope of #2 Sha ‘Sand’.

The second contrast is with the natural cycle of shengqi in the environment. Master Guopu comprehensively, yet succinctly, describes it in the Zangshuijing thus –

阴阳之气，噫而为风，升而为云，降而为雨，行乎地中，而为生气。
Yīnyáng zhīqì, yīér wéifēng, shēngér wéiyún, xínghū dìzhōng, ér wéi shēngqì

“The qi of yin yang, exhales and becomes wind, rises and becomes cloud, drops and becomes rain, travels through the ground, and becomes shengqi”

-Zangshuijing, Inner Chapter, line 17

This bears a remarkable similarity to the precipitation cycle (whereby cloud is formed through evaporation of water sources, condenses and falls as rain to flow through rivers and streams to the sea, back to begin the process again etc.) and is often quoted as an early understanding of this science. However, it is not. It is in fact the process by which shengqi, and not water, is formed. As mentioned previously the two are very closely linked though, in fact qi is only able to complete this circuit via the transformations of water from state to state - where energy is released or reduced.

There is also understandably some overlap with Guopu’s five conditions. The five steps to the natural qi cycle include ‘soil’ and ‘water’ as well as occurring in greater concentrations in mountainous regions, but do not directly correspond to the smaller scale occurrences onsite at a dwelling specific to this piece.

RESOURCES


Paton, Michael [translator] (1995) ‘Towards a scientific understanding of fengshui: the Burial classic of Qing Wu Esquire, Secretly passed down water dragon classic and Twenty four difficult problems’ University of Sydney