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IS FENG SHUI A SCIENCE?

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Feng Shui for Enriching Lives

ABSTRACT

Many have questioned ‘Is Feng Shui a science?’ but have had little success in finding ‘proof’. Science itself has wrestled with the question of proof and an entire rigorous academic discipline of philosophy of science developed as a result. Rather than get drawn into this debate of proof, it is more appropriate to address the question by first asking ‘what is science?’

The Oxford English Dictionary suggests science is “a systematically organized body of knowledge on a particular subject”. Feng Shui has just such a systematic organized body of knowledge and by this measure is undoubtedly a science. It has its own knowledge system, its own way of understanding phenomena and its own ‘logic’.

For those who crave “proof” Western science answers many questions in connection with the organization and structure of the universe. As science has pushed the boundaries of knowledge, those self-same scientists who crave proof have had to accept the uncertainty of their findings. Quantum physics which is at the very core of western science remains notoriously uncertain in this regard.

In certain branches of science such as astronomy, experimentation is impossible and historically, observation has proved as difficult. Mathematical “proofs” eventually became validated through observation. Similarly, the discipline of Feng Shui is rooted in its own unique ‘mathematical’ formulations that provide consistent effective outcomes as evidenced through repeated observations. The science behind the formation and continued development of Feng Shui wisdom and the passing down through generations via the rigours of the master-disciple lineage system is an assured way to retain the wisdom’s integrity and authenticity. This suggests that Feng Shui is deserving of a place amongst the most highly revered scientific disciplines in the West.

KEY WORDS

feng shui, science, eastern logic, scientific method, mathematical, formulations, systems, theory, built space, master-disciple lineage system.

INTRODUCTION

What is it about science that is held in such high esteem? In the Western world, there exists a common belief that there is something special about science that lends a claim or a line of reasoning or a subject matter a level of merit or reliability. What is the basis for such blanket belief that something ‘backed by science’ is particularly well founded and perhaps beyond dispute? Has Science become a new faith rather than a method?

The Oxford English Dictionary (OED) gives a definition of science: ‘The intellectual and practical activity encompassing the systematic study of the structure and behaviour of the

physical and natural world through observation and experiment'. This does not satisfy the universality aspect whereby certain disciplines that involve the natural world where experimentation is not possible.

Most of us are familiar with the word 'science' from the development of the traditional sciences of biology, chemistry and physics, harking back to our schooldays. But do those that rely on science as a catch cry truly understand what it is that gave these disciplines their integrity? A commonly held notion is that there is a universal 'scientific method' for establishing matters of science, and it is one of hypothesis setting, experimentation, observation and validation. It is worth noting that among the traditional science disciplines, the natural science of Darwin and astronomy for example, were not subjected to such scientific method, nor is it possible to subject them to such testing.

It may be more useful to take the alternative OED's more all-encompassing meaning for science as 'A systematically organized body of knowledge on a particular subject'. Not only is the high regard for science seen in everyday life and the popular media, but it also is evident in the academic and scholarly world of political science, social science, economic science, etc., that have made their appearances in university faculties and syllabuses. For these non-traditional science disciplines to have gained similar credibility, have any scientific methods been used to establish these disciplines? In the early days of economics and social studies the former definition of a science would have been used to deride what are now widely respected disciplines. Conversely, the alternative OED definition is fully supportive of these endeavours.

Perhaps it is pertinent to ask: Has the discipline of the Chinese ancient wisdom of Feng Shui as it finds its way to the West over the past four decades been subjected to undue level of inappropriate scrutiny where these other disciplines have gained acceptance as 'science'?

SCIENCE AND THE SCIENTIFIC METHOD IN RELATION TO FENG SHUI

In the East, Feng Shui that is from a recognized master-disciple lineage tradition is respected as a matter of course because it is acknowledged and accepted as a time honoured cultural wisdom tradition that transcends generations and time. Nevertheless, if the wisdom knowledge of Feng Shui is to gain the respectability and credibility in the West, those of us trained and practiced in the original wisdom tradition must be proactive in taking steps to show the integrity of the fundamental principles and foundation systems of our practice.

Does this mean that we have to do it according to Western worldview that Feng Shui is a science? Possibly, but this would subject Feng Shui theories and systems to the rigours of scientific method. But what is the special scientific method to be? This dilemma had to be faced by the social sciences in the West.

In more recent years the advent of atomic science/quantum physics has caused serious revisits into what is this thing called science. We should begin by better appreciating what science is by first dispelling the myths of the nature of science (McComas 1996; Science Learning Hub 2017). Then look towards Chalmers (2013) recent revisited philosophy of science textbook to address the changing nature of science to better understand and formulate a 'scientific method' appropriate to Feng Shui.

The idea that makes science so special is that it is derived from facts rather than being based on personal opinion. The question then is to qualify the facts. Is this possible when there are such different cultures, languages and worldviews? The task of formulating what is to be regarded as an acceptable 'scientific method' to substantiate 'facts' to pass the rigours of 'Western' science for an eastern discipline such as Feng Shui is a challenging feat indeed.

Some have questioned the validity of doing so. The Nobel Laureate Sir Peter Medawar (Medawar 1981, 1984) admits to the limits of science, siding with the conclusion of Bertrand Russell and Karl Popper there is no scientific method, and that science does not yield absolute knowledge. This has been supported by the work of others (Carey 1994; Gibbs & Lawson 1992) who have studied scientists at work. They have shown that no research method is applied universally. Medawar also states that ‘Indeed, scientific theories are more removed from direct sensation and perception (more abstract) and hence are more culture specific’. Paul Feyerabend pointed out that any form of knowledge makes sense only within its own cultural context (Feyerabend 1987). Feist (2006) points out that science requires beyond just careful observation, pattern recognition, hypothesis formation, and hypothesis testing (where possible), but also language, mathematics (including other cultural equivalents such as found in Eastern science/logic), some form of measurement, tools and technology that measure these units, and finally explicit knowledge of principles discovered prior. Feist noted that these things first appeared together in cultures four or five thousand years ago.

In other words, there appears a natural propensity for the human brain through long evolutionary, historical, and cultural processes to evolve cognitive processes that make practical sense of our world and more importantly to come up with ways to improve our lives (in whatever form and context that has taken humankind).

As a practitioner trained and apprenticed in the original wisdom tradition having seen the immense benefits that Feng Shui can bring changes to human circumstances, I take on Feist’s point of the evolution of cognitive human minds in the development of a knowledge like Feng Shui. The first indication of Feng Shui came about in the early days of an agrarian society about 5000 years ago to make active sense of our environment and better survive the elements and has evolved to the sophisticated systems that are practiced today to better enhance our lives.

We need to perhaps remember that prior to Western academics narrowing their endeavours to ever more specialized disciplines, all scientists were first and foremost philosophers. “Science” without a philosophical underpinning is a sterile and empty discipline.

FENG SHUI AS A SCIENCE

As wisdom holders of Feng Shui in today’s world we have to acknowledge that in order to make accessible Feng Shui’s marvellous benefits, we need to demonstrate Feng Shui has a certain level of cognitive coherence with the Western world. Although science did not develop in the same manner in Eastern societies, traditional knowledge such as Feng Shui has its own valid tradition. It has a systematic organized body of knowledge. It has its own knowledge system, its own way of understanding phenomena and its own ‘logic’, and thus its own cognitive representations of reality. This aligns perfectly with the OED definition.

This article is not meant to nor can it give conclusive evidence that Feng Shui is a science. However, when world-renowned scientists (Medawar 1981, 1984), experts in the philosophy (Chalmers 2013) and psychology of science (Feist 2006) who present science (any knowledge or subject matter that is acknowledged as a science) as a dynamic and fluid method of systematically gaining knowhow of the world that can satisfy humankind’s enquiring mind at one end and provide usefulness to humankind at the other, we can safely draw parallels that Feng Shui can be said to be a science of having evolved from careful observation, pattern recognition, hypothesis formation and back to careful observation and in this cyclic process the fundamental principles, theories and systems of Feng Shui that we see today. In addition the establishment of a body of knowledge it requires also language, mathematics, some form of

measurement, tools and technology that measure these units, and finally explicit knowledge of principles discovered prior.

Evidence of a scientific method

Early writings in several Chinese classics dating from 2000 years ago (Paton 2013) and referring back further, gave accounts of the careful observations of the fortunes of people whose ancestral burial sites and homes were located on and surrounded by particular geophysical formations. Following upon those early books were many more texts and case studies written referred to by Mak (2007).

Feng Shui wisdom began from such observations and was built upon by looking for patterns that occur repeatedly and can be confirmed from a range of independent evidence. Patterns that are beyond coincidence then led to the formation of postulates and hypothesis. As Feng Shui is a natural science discipline, hypothesis testing is not possible and should be replaced by careful observation for event outcomes. This is not to say that sudden creative inspiration that provide insights leading to the development of a new theory or law outside of this scientific method is invalid. Not unlike the inspirational moment that led Newton to originate the Law of Gravity, the legendary sage Fuxi originated the Hetu grid that led to symbol of the Early Heaven Trigram that was instrumental in evolving the Later Heaven Trigram, which in turn helped the development of practical application of Feng Shui. Just as with early Western scientists, philosophy is at play.

A scientific body of knowledge

Feng Shui as a body of knowledge (Yap 2017, Yap 1985-2014) has its own language and meanings such as the 'Eight Trigrams', '64 Hexagrams', 'Early Heaven Trigram', 'Later Heaven Trigram', '24 mountains', 'Najia attributes', 'Five Elements', 'Heavenly Stems', 'Earthly Branches', and much more. It also has its own mathematics of Numerals 1 to 10, Five Element transformations, Luoshu, Hetu numeric configurations, Eight Trigram translocation, their energetic interrelations, associated meanings and outcomes. Measurements include quantitative and qualitative energetic relevance assigned to characters and symbols of the Trigrams, Numerals and Five Elements, 'Precious Jewel' and 'Emptiness Lines' of the compass directions, and length measurements. Separately, in parts and together they also form the fundamental principles and theories that form the various systems and schools of Feng Shui knowledge.

A CAUTIONARY NOTE ON CURRENT THEORIES AND PRACTICES

A major cautionary note here to be careful not to assume all written material on Feng Shui has been derived from a reputable source that has undergone some of the rigours of the scientific method mentioned above. As academics we know not to accept Wikipedia without critically examining its sources because the content has not been moderated or subject to normal academic rigour. It is no different with published material on Feng Shui where the clamour for knowledge has lead to suspect materials being accepted and published unquestionably.

Material presented could be based on inaccurate interpretations or insufficient knowledge leading to substandard information being perpetuated. As Feng Shui deals with energies and their impact on human lives, inaccurate information has potentially serious consequences as these energies can be very powerfully malevolent, just as they can be powerfully benevolent when practiced correctly.

Below are some of the reasons for wrong information being mistakenly accepted as truth and perpetuated:

- Early Chinese writing is more economical in the use of words. Often a word is used (instead of two in more recent centuries) which could be easily interpreted in a sufficiently different way to change the meaning of the context intended
- It is known (Yap 1985-2014) that some classics have incorrectly presented theory and its application with deliberate intention to mislead. This had been an unfortunate and unethical way of some of the old masters designed to protect their ‘intellectual property’.
- Even if the principles and theories revealed in the texts are accurate, often neither crucial secrets nor the subtleties of the practice would be revealed to the uninitiated reader and thereby a significant and important aspect of the knowledge remains missing
- The author in learning had mistakenly assumed material being presented is correct without necessarily questioning the source, or misunderstood the theory, system and / or its application and then unknowingly presented the incorrect knowledge.
- Knowledge can become corrupted as it has not been passed down in the appropriate way of the tradition of master-disciple lineage system

Because of the above reasons, there evolved many versions of the theories and applications of the various systems and schools. I am of the firm conviction that the tradition of master-disciple lineage system obviates the passing of inaccurate knowledge mentioned in the latter three circumstances above.

MASTER-DISCIPLE SYSTEM FOR PRESERVING INTEGRITY AND AUTHENTICITY OF KNOWLEDGE

The one on one master-disciple lineage system is a very robust way to ensure the integrity and authenticity of any wisdom and practice. The student may choose their master, the master certainly chooses the student. The student is apprenticed to the master to learn the secrets of the knowledge and mentored in practice. A traditional ritual of the master receiving the disciple is an important part of acknowledging the seriousness and mutual respect of the relationship. During the life of the master – student relationship, the master ensures the student has acquired the knowledge and is practising correctly. The knowledge is very much alive in that new knowledge may be adopted and lesser effective ones replaced in the lifetime of each master. This is how knowledge evolves and becomes more relevant, its authenticity preserved and integrity of the knowledge gets passed on.

When the time is right often after a number of years when the Master deems appropriate, the disciple may eventually be ordained as a Master and is ready to similarly take on students and pass on the lineage’s knowledge. This method and the tightness behind the direct transmission of knowledge and practice ensure the wisdom becomes honed over generations and time.

MOVING FORWARD

There are many theories and systems of Feng Shui and it is important for this academic community to establish those that have ‘stood the test of time’. For all stakeholders interested in the integrity of Feng Shui, we should endeavour to establish consistent reproducibility in expected outcomes from Feng Shui’s theories and systems, within the limitations of each case

study of course as no one case study is identical. The prime reason may not necessarily be to prove validity of Feng Shui to the West. More importantly, to establish within our discipline which law, theory or system holds consistent to traditional built spaces. This is important because there exists variations in theory and practice between lineages and over time. Also as built space evolve with design and use preferences, the need to know how relevant the theories still hold. The key is to gather a statistically significant number of case studies in order that 'approximate truths' emerge (Chalmers 2013) and consistent patterns can be discerned in order to establish the potency and robustness of this wisdom tradition.

Chalmers (2013) and Medawar (1981) describes in depth that which constitutes scientific observation, pattern recognition and hypothesis formulation that I would encourage practitioners to follow where applicable in order enhance your own practice and together as practitioners demonstrate integrity and credibility in the wisdom tradition of Feng Shui.

In our endeavours to bring integrity to Feng Shui and our own practice, we need to remember to stand by the authenticity of our cultural tradition and practice. Throughout history cultures from around the world have developed different views and ways of living and interacting with their environment. Many are rooted in traditional systems of beliefs and practices, knowledge that embodies a wealth of wisdom and experience of the environment, gained over millennia from direct observations, and transmitted most often orally over generations. Do such wisdom traditions have to be subjected to Western science's scrutiny to validate its continued acceptance and practice by the original cultures? Or its usefulness disregarded in favour of Western scientifically proved alternatives or even worse totally abandoned altogether. Should we try to validate several millennia old wisdom tradition such as Feng Shui to a system (Western science) that has only been around for not much longer than four centuries? Feng Shui is just one such wisdom tradition that has managed to not only survive, but evolve and thrive in today's modern and sophisticated Eastern, primarily Chinese, societal environments, that has also found its way into the West in recent decades.

It is pleasing to note that the importance of such traditional knowledge e.g. for the protection of biodiversity and the achievement of sustainable development is slowly being recognised internationally (United Nations, 1992). This lends weight to the idea that that traditional knowledge also has a place in the world today alongside western science.

CONCLUSIONS

Whilst there may be a widespread assumption that only Western science holds the criteria to determine truth, this notion is being increasingly discredited in the West. To continue to allow Western science to impose its ideas and in some case outmoded methods on traditional knowledge and be the final arbiter of the validity of traditional knowledge and to establish what knowledge is worth of its name, risks the annihilation of an astonishing cultural heritage. This would negate any future prospect of discovering and enhancing knowledge for the benefit to humankind. To live and work in a conducive positive Feng Shui environment is to engender a very important balanced co-existence of peace and harmony among a world of increasing urbanization and the stress-related to urban living

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