

Geomancy and Cities: A Preliminary Inquiry into the Origin of Chinese Geomancy and Its Application on City Locations in East Asia

YOON Hong-key
University of Auckland

Chinese geomancy, which has played a vital role in city planning in East Asia, has remained an enigma to Western sinologists. A Western scholar declared as recently as 1974, "If there is a subject which should have captivated Western sinologists, it is Chinese geomancy".¹ Chinese geomancy is generally known as "feng-shui (風水)" in Chinese, "pungsu" in Korean and "fusui" in Japanese. It is also known as "dili (地理)" in Chinese, the term for geography. In the past, geomancy has been understood by Western scholars to be "a simple superstition", "the rudiments of natural science of China" or "a quasi religious and pseudoscientific system of China". However, it is a system that can not easily be classified or labelled using any Western concept. In my view, it is not a clear cut superstition, religion or science, but an ancient Chinese system of divining locations comprised of all three. Therefore, Chinese geomancy may be defined as "a unique and comprehensive system of conceptualising the physical environment which regulates human ecology by influencing humanity to select auspicious environments and to build harmonious structures (e.g., graves, houses and settlements) on them".² The influence of geomantic ideas on East Asia is so profound that most of its cultural landscape, including cityscapes, is in one way or another influenced by the art. It is almost impossible to understand East Asian culture and landscape without appreciating the nature of geomancy and its impact on East Asian civilisation.

This paper is a preliminary inquiry into the relationships between geomancy and East Asian cities. It is a preliminary work for the following reasons: Firstly, this is my first paper focusing on the impact of geomancy on the city locations in East Asia. Most of my earlier works on geomancy have been on geomantic attitudes toward nature and geomancy as an art of city planning has only been on the periphery of my research interest. Secondly, geomantic texts explaining site selection methods and the geomantic quali-

1 Jacques Lemoine, "foreword", in Stephan D.R. Feuchtwang, *An Anthropological analysis of Chinese geomancy*, (Vientiane: Editions Vithagna, 1974), p. I.

2 Hong-key Yoon, *Geomantic Relationships Between Culture and Nature in Korea*, (Taipei, The Orient culture service, 1976), p.1.

ties of the traditional East Asian cities are difficult to comprehend clearly, as their expressions are often obscure, vague, mystic and sometimes outright confusing or contradictory. I was able to read only a small portion of the vast number of Chinese geomancy literature and my understanding of the classical Chinese geomantic textbooks is only partial. The translations of geomantic texts from the traditional Chinese source referred to in this paper are sometimes tentative and represent the general meaning of the text rather than a literal word for word translation. Thirdly I am most familiar with geomancy in the Korean situation, while much less familiar with that in Japan and China. Thus, my current investigation into the geomantic relationships between Chinese or Japanese cities represents my initial preliminary attempt. The aim of this paper is to point out the fact that geomancy which was originated by cave dwellers in the Loess Plateau, has been a key factor in determining urban locations and planning urban landscapes in East Asia. I will first present geomantic principles and my hypothesis on the origin of geomancy before examining the geomantic qualities of several East Asian cities.

Geomantic model (principles) for determining an auspicious city

An auspicious city site in geomancy is normally a flat basin having protective hills in the background and a useful watercourse (a river or a lake) in front. The following are the important points of geomantic principles (model) for determining an auspicious city site:

1. Surrounding landform:

- a) An auspicious site should have its back towards a hill, that forms the end of an undulating mountain range of a distant origin, called the main mountain (主山). Geomancers call this type of mountain range a “dragon(龍)” for it resembles the ‘Chinese dragon’ which is thought to be undulating and crawling like snake.³
- b) The background hill needs to be shaped like a horseshoe and have arms extending forwards on either side, as if to protect the auspicious site. The right hand arm of the background mountain is called white tiger (白虎) and the left, azure dragon (青龍).
- c) The most auspicious site at the foothill of the main mountain is known as geomancy cave (xue, 穴). A geomancy cave is not literally a cave, but an auspicious site where the palace or administrative headquarters should be built.

3 Xu Shanji and Xu Shanshu, *Dili-Renzixuezhishi* (地理人子須知: The Fact that All Human Descendants Must Know) (Hsinchu: Chulin shuchu, 1969) p.5.

- d) The front of an auspicious site should be an open space.
2. Water: There must be a watercourse (stream, river or lake) in front of the auspicious site. An auspicious watercourse should not form a straight line, but flow slowly in a meandering shape. This type of water flow gives the impression that it loves the auspicious site and is reluctant to flow away.
 3. Cosmological direction: An auspicious site should also face an auspicious direction; this is normally south as it allows the maximum amount of sunshine. This mystic direction can only be determined with the aid of a geomantic compass (佩鐵) by a geomancer. In the construction of palaces and other city structures, the choice of an auspicious direction is considered to be critically important. Geomancers say that no matter how auspicious the surrounding landform and watercourse may be, a wrong choice of direction can bring about great misfortunes to the place.

If a site is qualified in terms of the above three criteria, it will be a south facing site with a horseshoe shaped background hill and water nearby, with the size of the site being suitable for its purpose. Any such place is considered to be an auspicious site in geomancy because it is believed that vital energy (生氣) can be accumulated in such a site. Vital energy flows under the ground and can give birth to and invigorate living creatures, including humans. Thus, the aim of finding an auspicious site is to utilise the vital energy which is accumulated there. This evaluation is based on complicated geomantic principles recorded in various geomantic manuals and carried out by professional geomancers who may employ mystic and vague jargon to justify their choice of site. However, the traditional geomancers and geomancy text books generally agree that the three important factors in determining an auspicious site are the landform conditions, the availability of water and the cosmic orientation.

The obvious question now is to ask how these place evaluation principles or models developed into the art of geomancy before discussing their application in East Asian cities.

The origin of Chinese geomancy

In my view the above model for an auspicious site suggests that Chinese geomancy was first started by the cave dwellers in the Loess Plateau in their search for an ideal cave site. Subsequently, the geomantic principles regarding cave dwelling came to be applied to

choosing an ideal grave site, and even later it was used in choosing auspicious city sites, especially capitals. The following analysis and interpretation of geomantic principles and Chinese cosmology are the basis of my hypothesis on the origin of geomancy:⁴

Firstly, Landform conditions for an auspicious site (especially that of having its back towards a hill) in geomancy reflect an ideal site for preparing cave dwellings for the following two reasons: a) Loess cave dwellings had been the main dwelling form before the development of free standing houses in the Loess Plateau where the hearth of ancient Chinese culture is; b) The geomantic principle that an auspicious site needed to back onto a hill is much more critical and of practical importance for cave dwellings than for free standing houses.

One of the poems included in an ancient Chinese classic, “The Book of Poetry” or “The She King (詩經)” suggests that loess cave dwelling was probably the earliest and the most common form of dwelling for the ancient Chinese in the Loess Plateau. The ancient poem that may indicate the development of geomancy by the cave dwelling builders goes:⁵

In long trains ever increasing grow the gourds.
When [our] people first sprang,
From the country about the Tseu and the tseih,
The ancient duke Tan-foo,
Made for them kiln-like cave dwellings,
Ere they had yet any house.⁶

4 My discussion here on the origin of geomancy is based on and developed from my earlier works: **Geomantic Relationships Between Culture and Nature in Korea**. The Orient Culture Service: Taipei, 1976, pp 279; “The Nature and Origin of Chinese Geomancy”, **Eratosthene-Sphragide**, Vol. 1, 1986, pp 88-102; “A Theory on the Origin and Development of Ancient Chinese Geomancy (feng-shui) (Lun Zhongguo Gudai Fengshui de Qiyan he Fazhang 論中國古代風水的起源和發展)”, [in Chinese with English abstracts] **Ziran Kexueshi Yanjiu (Studies in the History of Natural Sciences)** (Beijing, China), Vol. 8, no. 1, 1989, pp. 84-89; “The Principles and Origin of Korean Geomancy and its attitudes toward nature (Pungsu Chirisolui Ponjilkwa kiwon mit ku Chayonkwan)” (in Korean) **Hanguksa Shimin kangjoa (Lectures on the History of Korea for Citizens)**, vol. 14, 1994, 187-204; “Towards a Theory on the Origin of Geomancy,” **Environment and Quality of Life in Central Europe: Problems of transition: Proceedings, International Geographical Union, Regional Conference** (CD-ROM, ISBN,80-7184-153-6) Prague, 22-26 August 1994.

5 The She King, “Book I. Decade of King Wan, Ode III Meen (緜)” translated by James Legge, (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1960), p.437

6 The underlining is mine. Legge translated the Chinese word, Taohsueh (陶穴) as kiln-like huts and caves. I think that the word should be translated as kiln-like cave dwellings, for the caves in Loess Plateau used as dwelling are shaped like the traditional kilns in East Asia.

The plain of Chow looked beautiful and rich,
 With its violets and sowthistles [sweet] as dumplings.
 There he began with consulting [his follows];
There he singed the tortoise-shell, [and divined].
The responses were - there to stay, and then;
And they proceeded there to build their houses.
 (translated by James Legge, modified)

The above ancient song may suggest that the cave dwelling was an earlier form of dwelling than the free standing houses in the Loess Plateau. Cave dwellings were probably the most ecologically suitable adaptation to the environment for the ancient Chinese who lived there. As discussed in my earlier study, i) it is easy to construct with the minimum of tools and building material; ii) it is better insulated and warmer than a free standing house during winter due to the storage heater effect of the cave.⁷ Loess is a better insulator than rocks for it has more trapped air than rock. For these reasons, many millions of people are still using cave dwellings as their home.

Cave dwelling builders would often dig out loess hill slopes in order to make a cliff wall to hollow out a cave. Cutting out a square from the hill slope forms a small flat ground with cliff walls on three sides. In such cases, they have automatically created the walls on either side of the prospective cave dwelling forming the azure dragon and white tiger. The key geomantic principle of “backing onto a hill” is the most critical condition for an ideal cave dwelling. This is a reason why I conjecture that the development of geomancy is related to cave dwellers.

Secondly, the most auspicious site in geomancy is named “xue(穴)” which originally meant cave or cave dwelling (earthen room). Nowadays, in geomancy it is used to indicate any geomantically auspicious site. To the ancient cave dwellers of the Loess Plateau, “finding a cave” literally meant finding a cave or a site to hollow out a cave. Today the same phrase in geomancy, meaning finding an auspicious site may well be a carry over from the ancient practice of finding cave sites.

Thirdly, the age old Chinese cosmology supports the hypothesis that the geomantic principles were developed from the Loess Plateau. In the Chinese cosmology of the five

⁷ Hong-key Yoon, “Loess Cave-Dwellings in Shaanxi Province, China”, *Geojournal*, vol. 21, no. 1-2 (1990), p.100.

colours and the five elements, the South is represented by red and fire; the North by black and water; the East by azure and wood; the West by white and metal; and the centre by yellow and earth (soil). Each direction is also associated with a season: the East is spring; the West is Autumn; the North is winter; the South is summer; the centre represents no season.

It is not exactly known how those colours and elements came to represent their specific directions. However, one can easily notice that the attributes of the five colours and the five elements are closely associated with the environmental conditions of the four directions in northern China.

In northern China the winds from the South are normally warm and a house facing the South enjoys maximum sunshine. Therefore, assigning the “fire” element and the colour “red” to the south is logical. The North represents water, and its colour is black, as a house that is facing the North in northern China is shaded and cold. Black is the opposite of sunlight, while water is the opposite of fire since water extinguishes fire.

The East is associated with the Chinese word “ching青” which refers to both green and azure. The East is the direction of the sunrise that represents vitality and life, and the green colour also symbolises life. The East is assigned to the season of new life, the spring. The sun is the most critical factor in keeping the trees green. Therefore, assigning green or azure to the direction of the sunrise, the East is justified and appropriately represents the environmental conditions of northern China.

The fact that West is represented by white in colour and metal in the five elements is more difficult to justify. However, one can argue that the white colour might represent the silvery white sand of Western China, the perpetual snows of the high mountains, or the white stones and rock salt found on the surface of the Chinghai Plateau in the West. Logically, the attributes of the West should be the opposite of those of the East. The West is the direction of the sunset which represents the end of a day. West is the direction representing the final stage in the completion of a cycle. It is then logical for West to represent autumn, the season of yielding and harvesting the seeds. Weathered dead wood in an arid region is indeed white in colour and a pale face is the sign of sickness or lack of vitality. Therefore, it may be appropriate for the West to be represented by white. As for metal, perhaps it may be related to the fact that autumn seeds are often found in a hard shell. In this sense, the seed (fruits) and rock share the quality of hardness. Rocks were

considered to be metal or the source of metal in traditional China.

The characteristics of the centre, yellow in colour and earth from the five elements can not be explained in the way the four directions are explained by citing the natural phenomena other than the loess, the yellow earth of North China. Unlike the European colour of yellow, the Chinese yellow is an earthy yellow, the colour of loess soil. When the Chinese word for yellow, “huang” and that for soil “tu” are combined, they form the Chinese term for loess, “huangtu”. This is a reason why I conjecture that the Chinese symbolisms for the centre in geomancy originated from the Loess Plateau.

Fourthly, the shape of the earth type mountain supports the hypothesis that Chinese geomancy originated from the Loess Plateau. In geomancy mountains are classified into five types. They are earth, fire, water, wood (tree), and metal types corresponding to the Five Elements Theory. Among these five types, apart from the earth type mountain (hill), all four have traditionally been explained through their shapes. A fire mountain is a mountain with a sharp pointed peak that is shaped like a tongue of flame; a water mountain is one of rolling hills shaped like rolling waves; a wood mountain is a highly projected mountain that is like a tall tree (Italian poplar tree); the metal mountain is a dome shaped mountain that is like a metal bell. We can observe these four types of mountains frequently in China, Japan and Korea.

The earth type of mountain has steep slopes and a flat top and its shape can not be explained with the analogy the way the other four types of mountains are explained. A well known traditional geomantic text book, *Dili-Renzixuezhishi* (地理人子須知: The Fact that All Human Descendants Must Know) argues that the shapes of the five mountain types in geomancy are the reflections of natural phenomena, and not the result of artificially or whimsically assigned names.⁸ However, the book does not describe the shape of an earth mountain by comparing it with the natural feature of its element, earth. The book stated that the earth mountain has steep slopes with a broad flat top, and is shaped like a storage house, a free standing screen or the Chinese writing character, “ji (几: study table)”:⁹

The earth type mountain is not easily found in other parts of China, but it is a com-

8 Xu Shanji and Xu Shanshu, *Dili-Renzixuezhishi* (地理人子須知), vol. 3, part12, p. 1.

9 Ibid., vol. 3, part 1, 3-4.

mon landform feature in the Loess Plateau and its shape can be explained better by relating it to the landform in the Loess Plateau. Loess is created by wind deposits and the fine particles of loess soil are extremely susceptible to soil erosion when it rains. The summer rain often causes serious land slides and soil erosion. Therefore, originally flat Loess Plateau was eroded and formed steep slopes with broad flat tops. Those who visit this area will realise that the typical earth type mountain is not an imaginary mountain shape but a common type of landform in the loess region. There are plenty of hills (mountains) with steep slopes and broad flat tops made of fine soybean flour like earthy yellow soil. Here we can see why yellow and earth are assigned to the centre, and why the earth mountain has steep slopes with a broad flat top: these may well reflect the environmental conditions of the Loess Plateau.

Based on the above discussion, we can hypothesise that the art of geomancy was first developed by cave dwellers in the Loess Plateau and the main principles of geomancy were developed from their experiences of searching for an ideal cave dwelling site. This art then came to be applied in the selection of city sites as well as grave sites, and was diffused to other parts of China and other nations in East Asia.

Tracing the use of geomantic ideas in ancient Chinese cities

A prominent Korean historian of geomancy, Yi Pyongdo once wrote that:

As a new dynasty succeed the existing one, the change of the dynasty name and the moving of the capital to a new site were often practiced in China and other East Asian countries. The Koryo and Choson dynasties of Korea were no exceptions from this.¹⁰

Yi Pyongdo has pointed out the fact that East Asian capital city sites have in most cases been considered for their geomantic conditions by their rulers and city builders in the process of their site selections. In the movement of capitals to new places in East Asia, city builders in the past carefully considered various factors. This fact is recorded in ancient Chinese historical documents. For example, The Book of Historical Documents, or The Shoo King (書經), includes in its Section of “The Announcement of the Duke of Shaou(召誥)” the following historical event leading to the early Chou

10 Yi Pyongdo, *Koryosidaewi yongu (A Study of the Koryo Period)*, p. 361

Dynasty period's selection of a new capital site:¹¹

Thence the Grand-guardian went before the Duke of Chow to inspect the localities, and in the third month, on the day Mow-shin, the third day after the first appearance of the new moon on Ping-woo, came in the morning to Lo. He consulted the tortoise about the localities, and having obtained favourable indications, he set about laying out the plans. On Kang-suh, the third day after, he led the people of Yin to prepare the various sites on the North of the Lo; and this work was completed on the fifth day, Kea-yin.

The day following, being the day Yi-maou, the duke of Chow came in the morning to Lo and thoroughly surveyed the plans for the new city. (Translation by James Legge)

In "the Book XIII. The Announcement Concerning Lo" of The Shoo King, we notice that "In the third month when the moon began to wane, the Duke of Chow commenced the foundations and proceeded to build the new city at Lo of the eastern States".¹² The Duke of Chow seems to have gone through the following process before the selection of the new Capital site.¹³

On the day Yih-maou, in the morning, I came to the city of Lo. I first divined concerning the country about the Le water on the North of the Ho. I then divined concerning the east of the keen water and the West of the Chien water, when the ground near the Lo was indicated. Again I divined concerning the east of the Chen water, and the ground near the Lo was likewise indicated. I now send a messenger with a map, and to present the divinations. (Translation by James Legge)

In the Book of Poetry or The She King (詩經), the following verse also suggests the practice of geomantic art, when the ancient Chinese were to choose a new capital city:¹⁴

He examined and divined, did the king,
About settling in the capital of Haou.

11 The Shoo King (書經), "The Book of Chow: Book XII. The Announcement of the Duke of Shaou (召誥)" translated by James Legge, HongKong: (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1960), pp.420-423.

12 The Shoo King, "The Book of Chow: Book XIII. The Announcement Concerning Lo". Ibid, p.434.

13 The Shoo King, "The Book of Chow: Book XIII. The Announcement Concerning Lo". Ibid, pp.436-437.

14 The She King, "Book X. Wan wang yew shing" translated by James Legge, (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1960), p 463.

The tortoise-shell decided the site,
And king Woo completed the city.
A sovereign true was king Woo!
(translated by James Legge)

The above records do not indicate what types of landform and facing directions were preferred by the ancient capital builders. They do, however, suggest that they chose auspicious capital locations through a form of divining sites that may have developed into Chinese geomancy as we know today. Before the invention of the compass for divining sites in geomancy, the tortoise-shell was used for the same purpose. The present form of geomancy is after all a form of divination of locations placing emphasis on certain landform characteristics (model) and the cosmic directions of localities.

From ancient time onward, geomancy seems to have played a critically important role in the formation of cultural landscapes in East Asia. To the every day life of people in East Asia, the art was used in the selection of their house sites and grave sites. For the rulers of a nation and administrators of a region, an important use of this art was in the selection of city sites. Therefore, use of geomancy for city site selection constitutes only a small portion of the wide application of geomancy.

Dili-Renzixuezhī (地理人子須知), A Ming Dynasty Geomantic Manual's Interpretations of China's Past Capitals

The ancient Chinese classics on geomancy such as *Qingwujing* (青烏經) and *Jiangjing* (葬經) do not discuss the geomantic qualities of any particular city locations in China or elsewhere. However, *Dili-Renzixuezhī*, a popular geomantic manual published in 1564 during the Ming Dynasty has a chapter devoted to the geomantic appreciation of important Chinese cities.¹⁵ I will now attempt to introduce the main points of the geomantic evaluations of Chinese cities in the manual before reviewing them.

In geomancy Kunlun Mountain in Western China was considered the origin of the world mountain system and the backbone of the world. From Kunlun, the four branch dragons (mountain systems) were developed and stretched out into the four directions of

15 This book was written by twin brothers, Xu Shanji and Xu Shanshu who started studying geomancy for more than 40 years after their father's death.

16 Yang I, *Han Lung Ching in Ti-li Cheng-tsung*, edited by Chang Kuo (Hsin-chu, Taiwan: Chulin shuchu, 1967) p. 1.

the world.¹⁶ The branch that came into China was known as the southern dragon (mountain range) of Kunlun. China's mountain system is again divided into three main trunk lines: the North, South and Middle dragons (mountain ranges). Along these three mountain ranges, China's important past capitals are located. Between the land divided by these three main mountain systems of China the two major river systems, the Yellow river and the Yangtse River flow and collect water from their catchments.

The popular geomantic textbook, *Dili-Renzixuezh*i argues that choosing an imperial capital in an auspicious site is of utmost importance, for it is the greatest place on earth and the pivot of all directions from where all subjects are governed by officers of various ranks, and the outlying barbarians are managed.¹⁷ The book also states in the section entitled "Imperial cities correspond to the equivalent heavenly constellations" that an imperial city should be built on a place where its landscape reflects the constellations above and has the royal energy of the proper dragons (mountain ranges) gathered below (on earth).¹⁸

The above discussion in the geomantic textbook represents the Chinese view on the function of the imperial capital. The emperor is the Son of Heaven, and the imperial capital on earth should be located on a central location which mirrors the imperial constellations from the centre of heaven. The above discussion in *Dili-Renzixuezh*i also reflects the well known Chinese view that the world is divided into the two parts: China, and its surrounding barbarian lands. China proper was civilised and governed by Chinese officers who were appointed by the emperor. The non-Chinese who were barbarians had to be managed (controlled) effectively so that they would not cause disruption. The commanding headquarters of this utmost important task is the imperial capital and so finding an ideal capital site corresponding to the heavenly one is the paramount geomantic task.

As geomancers review the geomantic qualities of China's capital locations through time, they argue that imperial capital sites were found along the three main Chinese dragons (mountain ranges). Those capitals which were located in the correct vein of the proper dragon with the corresponding geomantic landscape (surrounding landform) to the heavenly one would enjoy ruling the world for many generations, while those that were not perished quickly: the fate of capital cities in history were clear evidence of the

17 Xu Shanji and Xu Shanshu, *Dili-Renzixuezh*i (地理人子須知) vol. 1, part 2, p. 5.

18 Ibid.

effectiveness of geomancy.¹⁹

Now, let us review the geomantic textbook's evaluations (praise) of China's imperial city locations found along the three Chinese dragons (mountain ranges): the Northern Dragon, the Central Dragon and the Southern Dragon:

a) The imperial capital Cities located in the Northern Dragon

The geomancy manual, *Dili-Renzixuezh*i comments on the northern dragon first, probably because Beijing, the Capital of China was in the territory of the northern dragon. The manual states that the northern dragon has Yanshan (燕山 : Swallow Mountain), an ancestral mountain of Beijing. It is called Yanshan, because a mountain range that is shaped like a swallow ends there.²⁰ The main points of the manual's description and justification of the geomantic landforms of Beijing is summarised as follows:²¹

Geomancer Yang said that Yanshan has the geomantic configuration of the supreme heavenly city. This is the proper auspicious site of the northern dragon. This mountain range started from the middle part of the Kunlun Mountain (of West China) and ran several thousand ri (1ri=0.5km) to reach the gate (The First Eastern Gate of the Great Wall of China ?). It crossed the Pohai Sea and stretched out first in a zigzag shape to the Eastern barbarian land and then stretched out about 10 thousand ri to reach Yanranshan (燕然山). After the mountain range entered into China, it formed Yanyun (燕雲: Beijing(北京) and Datong(大同)). It extended itself again several hundred ri and formed Tianshoushan (天壽山) Mountain before dropping its height to the level of a plain that is a thousand ri wide. ---The Yellow River forms the (waist) belt (for Beijing) and the Yalu River flows around the back of Yanranshan Range.---



Figure 1: A Geomantic Map of the City of Beijing and its surroundings (from Xu Shanji and Xu Shanshu, *Dili-Renzixuezh*i vol. 1, part 2, p. 7).

19 Ibid., p.4.

20 Ibid., vol.1, part 2, p.7.

21 Ibid.

Evaluating the geomantic quality of Beijing, the mountain range (dragon) behind the city stretches out long and the beautiful geomantic landscape reaches its zenith at the main dragon. It becomes the meeting point of mountains and rivers. The Yellow river became its waist belt and Tianshoushan (天壽山) became the background folding screen where the Yalu River stepping behind it and Heshi (喝石) locked its gate securely. Therefore, it is the best place in accordance with geomantic principles.

Despite the manual's praise and justification of the geomantic quality of landforms around Beijing district, the city is located on flat land, not a basin surrounded by hills on three sides. The background mountains of Beijing are too far from the city and with no surrounding mountains shaped like a horseshoe, its landform is not geomantically ideal. In an attempt to explain the geomantic quality of Beijing, one may wonder whether it is related to the fact that the city site was chosen by the Manchu and Mongol conquerors who were nomads, not by the Hans who were sedentary farmers. To the nomads the flat grass land was perhaps most desired and their choice of present day Beijing as their capital might reflect more of their nomadic origin than any geomantic consideration. The geomantic model suggested above does not seem to have been applied in the selection and planning of Beijing City. In my view the site of Beijing was later arbitrarily justified geomantically by the Han-Chinese geomancers.

The geomantic landform condition of Beijing has been artificially enforced by creating a background hill. Behind the imperial palace, the Forbidden City, there is an artificially created mountain, the Jingshan (景山). This mountain seems to have been created to function as the protective main mountain (主山) or placenta (胎) hill for the geomancy cave (穴), namely the palace and the city itself.

The creation of Jingshan (景山) Mountain was initiated by the Jing (金: a Manchurian Dynasty) during the 12th century by piling up the soil (excavated earth) that resulted from the creation of an artificial lake near their palace.²² In the 13th Century during Emperor Kubilai Khan of the Yuan (元: the Mongol) Dynasty, this area became the centre of the city and became the back garden of the palace. During the 15th Century, when the Ming Dynasty rebuilt Beijing as its Capital, this artificial mountain was greatly enlarged

22 Beijing Luyu shuche (北京旅游手册) 北京出版社, 1980, p. 56

to its present day size and shape.²³ Presently the mountain is 43m high with a hiking route to its peak from all four directions and has five pavilions with Wanchunting (萬春亭) as the central and largest one.²⁴ The well balanced and symmetrical shape of the artificial mountain with the highest peak in its centre is obviously a geomantic arrangement and is placed directly behind the palace. At least the Ming dynasty's enlargement of this artificial mountain to its present size and the building of the palace right in front of it was clearly the result of geomantic consideration. For the Ming dynasty rulers their original capital, Nanjing had a natural mountain behind its palace. The Ming rulers who moved the capital from Nanjing to Beijing knew well that an auspicious site (palace) needs to back on to a hill behind. In Beijing the flat land with no mountains behind the Palace perhaps compelled them to build up the artificial background hill.

The geomantic manual, *Dili-Renzixuezhishi* presents a map of the surrounding environs with the key mountains and rivers of Beijing to illustrate Beijing as a geomantically fit auspicious capital site. When we compare the geomantic map with a contemporary map, the surrounding landform of the city with Tianshoushan (天壽山) Mountain and Yanranshan (燕然山) Mountain in the background and three rivers each on the left and right of Beijing City represents a much distorted and exaggerated view. In reality, Beijing city is situated on a plain and does not have the geomantically required landform to be an auspicious capital site.

b) The imperial capital Cities located in the Middle Dragon (geomantic mountain range)

Dili-Renzixuezhishi discussed the ancient capital cities along the middle dragon in two parts: the first was on Changan and other ancient capital cities in the Guanzhong (關中) basin and the second was on Luoyang in the south of the dragon, namely the south of Chinling Mountain range. I will first summarise the text book's discussion on Changan and other cities in the Guanzhong Basin. The book states:²⁵

The middle dragon is in Guanzhong which has Feng (豐), Hao (鎬), Hanyang (咸陽) and Changan (長安). --- Geomancer Yang commented that Changan is the best site of the middle range dragon. Its dragon originated from the Kunlun Mountain and passed through the Black River (黑水) and joined the Western River (西河).

23 Ibid. p.57.

24 Ibid., p.59.

25 Ibid., vol1, part 2, p.8

The mountain range then rose to form Hengshan (橫山) as its ancestral mountain and eventually reached Yongzhou (雍州: which means Guanzhong) where early Chinese capitals were located. ---Guanzhong is enclosed by rugged mountains in four directions--- Guiwen xiangong (桂文襄公) said “(Guanzhong is protected by (fence like) mountains in four directions and it is the supreme location of the world.

From the above summary, we can notice the geomantic evaluation of the landforms surrounding the flat basin of Guanzhong by the twin geomancers as an exceptionally auspicious place with a proper dragon (mountain range) originating from the proper source. The mountain ranges surrounding the basin originated from the backbone of the world, Kunlun Mountain, and protected the basin by encircling it with rugged mountains. Among the locations of the past capitals in the basin, Changan that had been the capital of China for more than 500 years was considered to be the most auspicious capital site in the region.

The book then described Luoyang as the next best place for a capital in the middle dragon region as follows:²⁶

The next best place of the middle dragon is (the city site of) Luoyang (洛陽). This place encounters Yiguan (伊關) in the front and backs toward Mangshan (邙山) Mountain in the background. To the left of the city there is Chanshui (塵水) River; to the right, Jianshui (澗水) River and to the centre, the Luoshui (洛水) River flows through the middle in the shape of the Hehan (河漢: the Han River?). This is the (auspicious) geomantic landscape (corresponding to the heavenly constellation) of Ziweiyuan (紫微垣).

The above description of Luoyang’s geomantic quality is much more reasonable and realistic than those of Beijing and Changan. In my view Luoyang in the South of the lofty Chinling Mountain is in fact better in terms of its geomantic qualities of the surround-

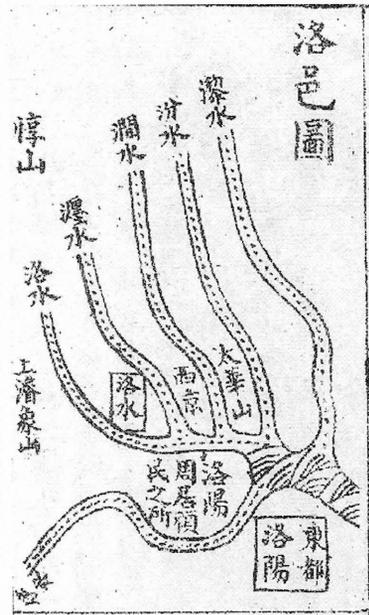


Figure 2: A Geomantic Map of the City of Luoyang and its surroundings (from Xu Shanji and Xu Shanshu, *Dili-Renzixue* vol. 1, part 2, p. 9).

26 Ibid, pp.8-9.

ing landforms than the Guanzhong Basin. The authors of the geomancy manual, Dili-Renzixuezhī argued that Luoyang is located in the central part of the world and thus it becomes the belly part of the great dragon.²⁷ This comment represents the twin brothers' rationalistic understanding of the geopolitical position of Luoyang as the central location of China's territory during the Ming Dynasty. Geomancer Zhang Ziwei (張子微) praised Luoyang as an auspicious location having the geomantic landscape of a flying dragon.²⁸

c) The imperial capital Cities located in the Southern Dragon (geomantic mountain range)

The Southern Dragon was the last one of the three main dragons in China and its most important capital site is Nanjing. The following is a summary of some important points on Nanjing's geomantic quality as discussed in Dili-Renzixuezhī:²⁹

Jinling (金陵: Present day Nanjing) is in the southern dragon range. --- Earlier geomancers commented that the geomantic landscape of Nanjing is of the same quality as that of Luoyang. --- Geomancer Liao (廖) commented that the geomantic landscape of Nanjing is the same as that of Luoyang and it will become the Bell Land (important land ?) of royal energy (王氣). --- Xiao Peheng (蕭伯衡) commented that the earthly vein (mountain range) of Jingling (Nanjing) extends itself several hundred ri along the Jiangjang (長江: Yangtze River) to the opposite direction of its water flow from the south-east direction before stopping itself. The landscape of the end of the mountain range is like a harmoniously crawling centipede ---

Only Nanjing fits comfortably into the geomantic model suggested above by having horseshoe shaped surrounding mountains around the city. Even with the geomancer's elaborated justification, the other cities such as Beijing and Changan discussed in the manual accompanied by geomantic maps do not fit comfortably into the geomantic model (principles) presented earlier. These cities are river centred locations rather than having protective hills in the background (i.e., the northwest direction).

An appreciation of East Asian city sites in terms of geomantic model (principles)

27 Ibid., p. 9.

28 Ibid.

29 Ibid., p. 9.

1) Cities that fit in the ideal Geomancy model in terms of their surrounding landform - Seoul, Kyoto and Nanjing

Seoul:

The original site of Seoul was obviously located in a geomantically auspicious site. Kyongbok Palace (景福宮) is located in the “geomancy cave” of the city, according to the geomantic model presented before. The original city is surrounded by mountain ranges, especially its Northern end. Pukak (北岳) Mountain is the Main Mountain or the Black Turtle of the city. From there a mountain range lies in an arch flanking both sides of the city. Inwang (仁旺山) Mountain is the range which encircles Seoul on the right side of the Main Mountain, becoming the White Tiger of the city. Naksan (駱山) is the hill which encircling Seoul to the left, the Azure Dragon. Namsan (南山), the South Mountain becomes the Peace Mountain of Seoul, and Kwanak (關岳山) Mountain is the Facing Mountain. Therefore, these two mountains become the Red Bird of Seoul. A long mountain range behind Pukak Mountain represents the ancestral mountains of the Main Mountain. Seoul has a relatively large basin which becomes the Bright Yard of the city located between the Main Mountain, Azure Dragon, White Tiger, and the Peace Mountain. Small streams from the nearby Main Mountain flow into the centre of Seoul, while the large Han River (漢江) flows in front of the city.



Figure 3: A Choson Dynasty Topographic Map of the City of Seoul (from Kim Chongho, Taedong Yojido, 1861)

With such a situation, Seoul has highly auspicious geomantic harmony. As many geomancers have noted, it is certainly one of the most qualified capital sites of Korea. Within the naturally formed geomantically harmonious landscape, the Choson dynasty

has developed a city of balanced size which fits well into the basin. On the ridges of the mountain range that surround Seoul, the city wall was built to define the city boundary and complete the city landscape.

Kyoto:

Kyoto is in a large basin surrounded by mountain ranges shaped in a horseshoe. In my view the Kyoto Basin is almost a textbook example of an auspicious site according to the geomantic model. In fact, we know that before the construction of the new capital in the Kyoto Basin in 793, the Court consulted geomancers and the then Minister for Home affairs, Wake no Kiyomaro made sure the situation of Kyoto was in accordance with geomantic requirements for an auspicious site.³⁰ However, I have not seen any literature evaluating the geomantic quality of the landform around Kyoto using the geomantic concepts and the model of an auspicious place. The following is my interpretation of the geomantic harmony of Kyoto, based on the geomantic model of auspicious site presented earlier. The ancient Japanese geomancers and the city builders of Kyoto must have taken the lofty Hiei (比叡山) Mountain as either an ancestral mountain or the main mountain for the capital city and Funaokayama (船岡山) Hill as its entrance head (入首).

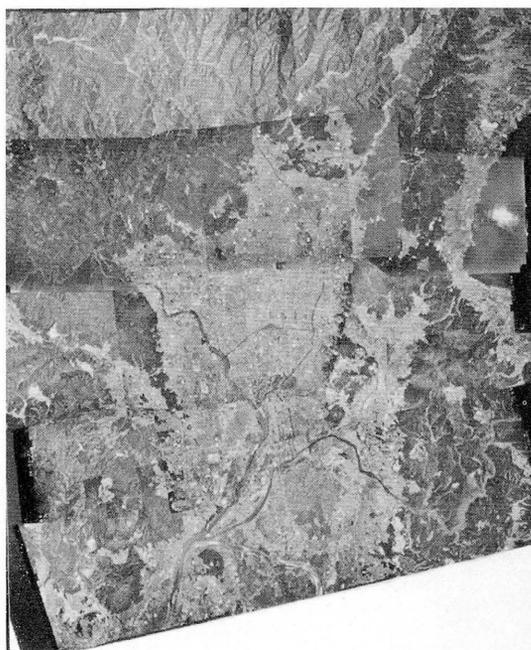


Figure 4: An Aerial Photographic Mosaic of the Kyoto Basin

30 George Sansom, *A History of Japan to 1334*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press), 1958, pp. 99-100.

Higashiyama (東山) Mountain range that encircles the Kyoto Basin is definitely the Azure dragon for the city while Nishiyama (西山) Mountain range is the White tiger. The Kamo (鴨川) River and the Katsura (桂川) River are the bright yard watercourses that were fed into Ohokura ike (巨椋池) Marsh land which has now disappeared. To the south of the Swamp land there were mountains in the distance that functioned as Red Bird (朱雀), namely the peace mountain or the court mountain.

According to the geomantic model, the Palace is located in the town somewhat further down from the auspicious cite, the geomancy cave (穴). In my view the locations of some Buddhist temples along the northern edge of the city might in fact be more auspicious geomantically than the present palace site. According to geomantic principles, it is not desirable to have any architectural structures in the vein of vital energy that runs from the main mountain to palace. The geomantic conditions of Kyoto landscape need to be examined in more detail through more field work and reading of historical documents.

Nanjing:

Nanjing was a capital city for several dynasties, the most important ones in terms of its city planning being the Wu kingdom during the 3rd Century and the Ming Dynasty during the 14th Century. The Wu kingdom's palace site and city planning became the basis for the later kingdoms of the Six Dynasties Period. The palace site backs onto a hill on the Northern side and occupies the middle of the basin. The geomancers who advised the city planning at that time must have taken the hilly land of Jilongshan (鷄籠山) Mountain or Fuzhoushan (覆舟山) Mountain as the main mountain in the North, Zijingshan (紫籠山), also known as Zhongshan (鐘山) as azure dragon in the East, and Qinliangshan (清涼山) Hill, also known as Shitoucheng (石頭城) Hill and is extended to the Tiger Mountain or Hushan (虎山) as white tiger in the West.³¹ Indeed, the protective arms



Figure 5: A Geomantic Map of the Nanjing Basin (from Xu Shanji and Xu Shan-shu, *Dili-Renzixue* vol. 1, part 2, p. 9).

31 Tongjixue Chengshiguihua Yanjiushi (同濟大學 城市規劃 研究室) edited, *Zhongguo Chengshi Jiansheshi* (中國城市建設史), Beijing, 中國建築工業出版社, 1982, p. 24.

on the Eastern and Western edges of Nanjing were so conspicuous and auspicious that the famous prime minister and military strategist of the Three Kingdoms Period, Zhugeliang (諸葛亮) commented that “(azure) dragon is hidden and crouching in Zhongshan, while (white) tiger is poised and crouching in Shitoucheng.”³²

The authors of *Dili-Renzixue* commented that Nanjing is truly a place deserving to be an imperial capital.³³ Geomantically speaking, the central locations of palaces during the Wu kingdom and others during the Six Dynasties Period are better than the later Ming palace in the 14th Century that was built at the Eastern end of the city. While Ming palace also backs onto a hill, geomancers of the Ming Court obviously interpreted the surrounding landforms of the Nanjing Basin differently to the previous kingdoms. The Wu and other kingdoms during the Six Dynasties Period took the Western slope of Zhongshan (鐘山) that is located on the Eastern edge of the basin as the azure dragon of the city and palace. However, the Ming geomancers must have interpreted Fuqishan (富貴山) Hill on the Western slope of Zhongshan or the Zhongshan Mountain itself as the main mountain of the city and thus the Ming palace was built backing towards it, although it is on the eastern edge of the city (and the basin). This interpretation might have been caused by the majestic position of Zhongshan in the region and the ill fates of the Wu and other kingdoms which had their palaces in the central location of the northern part of the Nanjing Basin. In my view, the Ming interpretation was a rather unorthodox view of the surrounding landform of Nanjing and did not really match the geomantic model of an auspicious site that was commonly accepted during the time.

2) Cities that does not fit into the classical models-Beijing, Changan Beijing

Geomancers justified its location and a popular geomantic manual claimed it as an auspicious site, although it does not fit into this model. Indeed, it has a modified landform; i.e., the creation of an artificial mountain behind the palace, as an attempt to make up for the geomantic shortcomings of the city.

Changan

On a grand scale Changan is naturally quite a good site as it is on a large flat basin. However, the immediate surroundings of the city are not good as the protective moun-

32 Xu Shanji and Xu Shanshu, *Dili-Renzixue* (地理人子須知) vol. 1, part 2, p. 9.

33 Ibid.

tains as they are too distant from the city site. The city is located in association with a river on a flat land with no immediately surrounding hills visible from the palace site.

3) The Choson Dynasty's choice of Seoul as its Capital: An Example of a New Dynasty builder's search for an auspicious capital site

Many kings and officials in China, Japan and Korea were very enthusiastic in shifting capitals to a new auspicious site. The process of making Seoul as the capital of the Choson Dynasty is an excellent example demonstrating how eager the rulers of a new dynasty in East Asia might have been in searching for a new capital site.

For the First King of the Choson Dynasty geomancy was an important factor to be considered in his choice of Seoul as the capital and the city was laid out according to geomantic principles. We can document this fact from the *Annals of King Taejo*. The following brief discussion on "the role of geomancy in the location of Seoul" is almost totally based on the historical records from *Annals of King Taejo*. The first and most comprehensive historical investigation into this topic was carried out by the Late Professor Yi Pyongdo.³⁴ Hong-key Yoon's brief study on this topic in English is included as a section in his book.³⁵ Based on my previous study, the following brief discussion attempts to highlight how seriously geomantic ideas affected the selection process of Seoul as the capital of Korea.

On the seventeenth day of the seventh moon, 1392, Yi Songge 李成桂, a general of the Koryo dynasty, took power in Songdo (The Capital of the Koryo Dynasty; present day, Kesong) and established the Choson dynasty. On the thirteenth day of the eighth moon, 1392, the king discussed with and ordered the Supreme Policy Council to move the capital to present-day Seoul.³⁶ This decree was pronounced within one month of his coronation. His great interest in moving the capital to Seoul was probably not only caused by the suitable geomantic quality of Seoul, but also the wide spread geomantic prophesy during the end of the Koryo dynasty predicting that the Tree-son(木子), namely Mr Yi (李) will be the new king at Seoul.³⁷ It is assumed that Yi Songge, the new

34 Yi Pyongdo, *Koryosidaewi Yongu* (A Study of Koryo Period) (Seoul: Asea Munhwsa, 1980), pp.348-411.

35 Hong-key Yoon, *Geomantic Relationships Between Culture and Nature in Korea* (Taipei: Orient Cultural Service, 1976), pp. 106-117.

36 Taejosillok (*Annals of King Taejo*), p.52.

37 According to Koryosa, a folk song saying "tree-son, which means Mr Yi will be the King," was very popular among soldiers and civilians including minors and adults. See Koryosa, vol. 54, p.34.

king whose family name was Yi must have desired to take advantage of this wide spread prophecy. By moving capital to Seoul he can convince people that the prophecy was fulfilled then and they had to accept his new dynasty, for he is indeed the Mr Yi who became King in Seoul.

After receiving a new proposal from an officer the king changed his mind and suddenly went to Keryongsan 鷄龍山, on the nineteenth day of the first moon, 1393, in order to examine the geomantic qualities of the place as a possible new capital site.³⁸

After five days of examining the place, King Taejo dropped his first plan for it was thought to be a better site in terms of geomancy than Seoul. He ordered the construction work for a new capital to proceed immediately at Keryongsan where the work progressed for about a year. However, all work on the Keryongsan site was suddenly suspended in the twelfth moon, 1393 due to a special report presented to the king by another officer. The report argued that the direction of water flow in Keryongsan was inauspicious according to the geomantic principles as discussed in a geomantic manual of the Song (宋) Dynasty. The King accepted the argument and ordered the work on the new capital site in Keryongsan to stop. Thus within one year, work for a new capital was started and dropped in two possible new capital sites.

The king then ordered his officers to search for better capital sites. Some officers recommended Muak 毋岳, situated near the present-day western outskirts of Seoul (around Yonsei University). The land was surveyed by the royal officers. After the king personally examined the area, it was rejected both by himself and the royal officers because of its small size and many geomantic deficiencies. After rejecting the Muak site (on the eleventh day of the eighth moon, 1394), the king again ordered the selection of a new capital site. Then, the officers of geomancy again recommended to the king present day Seoul as the new capital site.³⁹ On the twelfth day of the same moon, King Taejo and his officers went to the area of Seoul to survey it, and on the thirteenth day they observed the landforms in the area for possible geomantic harmony. Government geomancers advised the King that although Seoul had some minor deficiencies, it was still qualified to be capital. The king was pleased because he felt that there were no critical shortcomings in terms of geomantic harmony, and perhaps because of the enormous political gain by choosing Seoul as the capital, for it would convince the people that his government was

38 Taejosillok (Annals of King Taejo), vol.3, p.2

39 Taejosillok (Annals of King Taejo), vol.6, pp.10-11.

the legitimate successor of Koryo Dynasty by fulfilling the geomantic prophecy of “Mr Yi becoming the new King in Seoul.” Therefore, King Taejo again decided to select present-day Seoul as the new capital site.

After (present-day) Seoul was again chosen as the new capital site, the King then accelerated the planning and construction of the city, and later, on the first day of the ninth moon 1394, the king established the Bureau of Palace Construction in the New Capital (新都宮闕造成都監) and started the first stages of work including the work of preparing the sites for palaces. By the end of 1396 with more than 118,070 drafted labourers, construction work on the city wall with its gates and the other city buildings was completed.⁴⁰ Thus the long search and the laborious construction of a new capital came to an end.

Conclusion

Geomantic principles regarding city locations seem to have developed from the art of identifying favourable cave dwelling sites in the Loess Plateau. Observing the landforms surrounding traditional cities in China, Japan and Korea, it becomes apparent that numerous traditional cities in East Asia are located in geomantically auspicious places, while some cities are not.

In conclusion I wish to reflect on the fact that some prominent cities in East Asia such as Nanjing, Seoul and Kyoto are well fitting into the geomantic model of an auspicious site, while others such as Beijing and Changan do not. There may be no simple solution to how this fact should be interpreted. However, the following hypothetical situations and conjecture need to be considered in a future endeavour to explore this mystery further:

- a) The principles of the Chinese city planning and those of geomancy may have separate origins. The ancient cities that were developed before the formulation of geomantic principles were not chosen and planned in terms of geomancy. Geomantic principles were only applied in selecting and planning cities of later development, say, after the Han Dynasty or even the Tang Dynasty.

⁴⁰ Taejosillok (Annals of King Taejo), p.5.

- b) Although the site selection techniques for ancient Chinese cities were developed from geomancy, these principles may not have been applied universally. Geomantic principles regarding an auspicious site are basically for sedentary people of the Northern Chinese cave dwelling builders and farmers to whom a basin that is protected from the cold northwesterlies was of critical importance. Therefore cities that were built by the people of nomadic herder origin did not comply with the geomantic principles of landform. Cities in East Asia have a diverse origin and those built applying geomantic principles may represent only a type of its cities.
- c) The geomantic principle as we know them now is a product of evolution through time. There were many different types of geomantic principles with emphasis on different aspects of places. These principles often contradicted each other, and different geomantic conditions of cities in East Asia may represent these variant forms of geomancy practiced through varying times and places.

[Abstract]

Chinese geomancy has played a vital role in city planning in East Asia. The landforms surrounding many traditional East Asian cities and the city structure within it are clear evidence of practicing geomancy for city planning.

The traditional geomancers and geomancy text books generally agree that the surrounding landform conditions, the availability of water and cosmic directions are the three important factors in determining an auspicious site. Namely, an auspicious site is a south facing site with horseshoe shaped background hill and water nearby. This geomantic model seemed to have been started by the cave dwellers in the loess plateau in their search for an ideal cave dwelling site.

It is, however, a mystery that while many traditionally important capital cities such as Nanjing, Seoul and Kyoto are located in auspicious sites according to the geomantic model suggested above, other cities such as Beijing and Changan do not conform to the above suggested geomantic model. The cities that do not conform to the traditional model might be due to the fact that:

1. The principles of the Chinese city planning and those of geomancy may have separate origins and only some cities of later development, say, after the Han Dynasty may have been directly

under the influences of geomancy.

2. Cities in East Asia have diverse origins and the city sites that were chosen by the people of nomadic origin (e.g., Mongols) did not comply with the principles of Chinese geomancy.
3. The geomantic principles of the ancient Chinese are somewhat different from the modern ones, for they are the results of the evolutions from ancient times.