

Stephen Skinner, *Guide to the Feng Shui Compass: A Compendium of Classical Feng Shui*, Singapore: Golden Hoard, 2008, 448 pp.

### Ulrich Theobald

[Ulrich Theobald, Ph.D. (2009), is a lecturer for Chinese history and classical Chinese at Tübingen University. He has published on military labour, border peoples and Chinese empresses. His newest publication is a book on War Finance and Logistics in Late Imperial China: A Study of the Second Jinchuan War (1771-1776) (Brill, 2013). The traditional literature section of his online encyclopaedia chinaknowledge.de comprises bibliographic descriptions of a large number of traditional Chinese books on science and technology. Contact: ulrich.theobald@uni-tuebingen.de]

Stephen Skinner is probably the most important Western scholar taking the science of Fengshui seriously. In the past few decades he has made important contributions to clarifying the rather vague image from which Fengshui suffers in the West. He is publisher of virtually a whole library of books on many aspects of the field of “geomancy”, as Fengshui is often wrongly translated. His book on the Fengshui compass (*luopan* 羅盤, or, in older terms *shipan* 式盤) is a substantial addition to his oeuvre.

The *Guide to the Feng Shui Compass* offers a detailed description of all the many rings of *luopan* compasses, of both the major schools (the San He 三合 and San Yuan 三元 schools), and in respect to changes over time. Skinner undertakes an in-depth study on the relation between these rings and the most important phenomenon to which they are linked, namely the astronomical constellations. One of Skinner’s important conclusions is that the Chinese were able to use a minimal set of symbols and figures (an “alphabet” of c. 70 characters, p. 397) to identify very different aspects of time and space. These are basically the eight trigrams (*ba gua* 八卦), the sixty-four hexagrams (or a selection of them), the ten Celestial Stems (*tiangan* 天干) and twelve Terrestrial Branches (*dizhi* 地支), and the five Processes or “Elements” (*wu xing* 五行). With only these five sets the many different aspects or objects important in the art of Fengshui can be sited, like the Jupiter stations, the provincial divisions, the “monthly generals”, the “mini-seasons” (*jieqi* 節氣, otherwise called solar terms), and the lunar mansions.

The book begins with a definition of the term *fengshui* 風水 (literally “winds and waters”) and the reception of this discipline among modern scholars East and West. He then briefly explains a handful of crucial terms (like *qi* 氣, *xue* 穴, *sha* 砂, and *xiang* 向). The term *xiang* “facing direction of a building” is important for the use of the compass. In this context, *qi* is energy (Stephen L. Field, 1998, [www.fengshuigate.com](http://www.fengshuigate.com), therefore translates

*fengshui* as “qimancy”), *sha* are scattered mountains in the vicinity, and *xue* nodes of energy. Skinner then describes several types of *luopan* compasses, their rings and groups of rings (“plates”) and their meaning. The chapter “Structure of the Luo P’an” is particularly helpful to understand its general meaning and application. This is not the case for the very technical chapters about the individual San He and San Yuan rings. The large amount of rings makes it very difficult for a layperson to grasp their purpose, and Skinner only gives very brief explanations about their function (for instance, pp. 283, 299, 375). Instead of repeating several times that the magnetic pole has changed over the last 1,500 years, or showing the same ring once in white here, and again in black there (e.g. pp. 265, 286-287, 304-306), he might have been better to give an example of the concrete application of the *luopan* to demonstrate how the rings are used in practice. Yet, in its present shape, the book seems somewhat heterogeneous, with very basic information in the first two hundred pages, written in a smooth way that makes the essence of the topic easily understandable, and a highly technical part with an endless amount of detail, the meaning of which for practical application is not really made clear. On the other hand, the intricacy of the rings and their use shows that Fengshui can only be learnt in combination with long-term practice, and not from a book. The second part of the *Guide to the Feng Shui Compass* can therefore be seen as a handbook for the apprentice of Fengshui, with recommendations where and how to purchase appropriate *luopan* (pp. 90-96).

In his introduction to the topic Stephen Skinner takes up the cudgels on behalf of the scientific character of Fengshui, and defends it, for instance, against the *éminence grise* Joseph Needham who classifies it as a pseudoscience (1956, *Science and Civilisation in China*, vol. 2, pp. 346, 359-363). The most important argument employed by Skinner to support his “genuine-science” thesis is the use of the magnetic compass as the central part (the “Heaven Pool”, *tianchi* 天池) of the Fengshui compass. In this context he lays stress on the changing nature of the magnetic pole of the earth, which caused the creation of a new Heaven Plate after the Song period. Another, less explicit, argument is that a lot of rings are used to match up with astronomical constellations, which is, without doubt, scientific, in so far as stars and their positions in the celestial globe over time are real facts. Yet when it comes to the microcosm, and the landscape around a certain building, the arguments of hidden dragons and energy congregations (*xue*) are less convincing, not to speak of the relevance of the owner’s birthday for the auspiciousness of the site his house is to be built upon. I think that the art of Fengshui does not need any such a kind of perfunctory defence against “unscholarliness”. Skinner has proven that the Fengshui compass is such a complex instrument that it is not justified to brush aside Fengshui as pure superstition. It is probably this complexity that makes the scholarly

type of Fengshui (as opposite to popular “Fengshui”, with its fancy decoration of the building interiors) so attractive. The *luopan* is so complex that any astrolabe seems a mere toy in comparison. Just as the term “geomancy” is misleading as a translation of the word *fengshui* (p. 34), it is therefore far from adequate to translate it simply as “astrology”, as Derek Walters (2005, *The Complete Guide to Chinese Astrology*) does.

Traditional Chinese books on Fengshui are not easily found. The most convenient is – apart from the ancient core texts *Zhaijing* 宅經 and *Zangshu* 葬書 – probably the (Qinding) *Xieji bianfang shu* (欽定) 協紀辨方書 (translated by T. F. Aylward, 2007, *The Imperial Guide to Feng Shui and Chinese Astrology*) from the Qing period, that is included in the imperial collectaneum *Siku quanshu* 四庫全書, and the quotations from the early Qing encyclopaedia *Gujin tushu jicheng* 古今圖書集成. Other collectanea like Li Guomu’s 李國木 *Dili daquan* 地理大全, Cheng Wenke’s 程文格 *Kanyu wu zhong* 堪輿五種 or Li Sizong’s 李思總 *Kanyu shiyi zhong shu* 堪輿十一種書 (all from the Ming period) are extremely rare. It would therefore be all the more interesting to know how to get access to the crucial texts *Luojingjie* 羅經解 by Wu Wanggang 吳望崗, *Luojingjie ding* 羅經解定 by Hu Guozhen 胡國楨 or *Dili bianzheng shu* 地理辨正疏 by Zhan Xinyan 張心言, both extensively used by Skinner. One might like to know which editions he used (modern reprints from Taiwan, or originals?), and in which collections the book might be found. Unfortunately, he does not mention anything about such matters, and simply providing the date of publication does not help much to localize a text. Contrary to Skinner’s statements in the bibliography (p. 435), the Fengshui section in the *Siku quanshu* is called *Xiangzhai xiangmu* 相宅相墓 “Evaluation of dwellings and gravesites”, and not *Kanyu* 堪輿. Most embarrassing for an educated geographer, as Skinner is, is the statement that the capital of the Qin and Zhou dynasties (in this order!), Chang’an (the modern Xi’an), was located where the River Luo pours its waters into the Yellow River (pp. 221, 223). One might also like to see a picture of or, at least get an impression of, the use of what Skinner calls the “cross hairs” (p. 91) attached to the outer rim of the *luopan* plate. The author stresses that the Western practitioner cannot avoid learning the set of characters used on the *luopan*, like those of the Stems, Branches and tri- or hexagrams, but what is the use of calling them an “alphabet”,<sup>22</sup> and

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<sup>22</sup> The idea to call the Celestial Stems and Terrestrial Branches a kind of alphabet is indeed not entirely new. Expert of ancient phonology Edward Pulleyblank observed that the twenty-two characters of the Stems and Branches had each a distinct pronunciation in Old Chinese (W. A. C. H. Dobson would say Early Archaic Chinese), and some of them might have been used as “phonograms” for numbers with the same or a similar pronunciation, see Edwin G. Pulleyblank, “The Ganzhi as Phonograms and their Application to the Calendar”, in: *Early China* 16 (1991), pp. 39-80.

further to add, by way of a demonstration of how a “Chinese alphabet” looks, a picture of a rubbing of an early Zhou period bronze vessel inscription (*Zhongfang ding* 中方鼎, in *Yin-Zhou jinwen jicheng* 殷周金文集成, no. 2785) that has nothing to do with the subject at all (p. 397)?

In conclusion, it can be said that the *Guide to the Feng Shui Compass* is another important contribution by Stephen Skinner to the demystification of Fengshui. One such example is Skinner’s deconstruction of the myth of the “magnetic spinning spoon” (p. 137) on the ancient *shi* plate that was created by Wang Zhenduo in 1948, and ever since has been uncritically copied, even by Needham (1962, *Science and Civilisation in China*, vol. 4, part 1, p. 266, Plate CXIV). Skinner clarifies needle naming (p. 60), the correct use of the 365.25 day-degree lunar mansions ring (p. 320), and even makes suggestions how to correct the *luopan* plates to bring them into line with the present state of the magnetic declination (pp. 75-78). Skinner shows that Fengshui was—and is still—an integral part and product of the Chinese concept of the universe, and has developed an extremely elaborate system of all-encompassing correlations. Recent trends and research in the West have shown that it is not justified to simply condemn acupuncture or homoeopathy as non-scientific practices. Even the great forerunners of “scientific enlightenment”, like the physician Robert Fludd or the astronomer Johannes Kepler, dedicated a substantial part of their work to “unscholarly” methods of epistemology, and interpreted the world in terms of analogy (for instance, the ratios of the planetary orbits and musical harmonies) instead of the Aristotelian—and Kantian—singularly *causa efficiens* (Rudolf Haase, 1998, *Johannes Keplers Weltharmonik*). In this sense, Skinner’s book on the *luopan* has made important contributions to the rehabilitation of the art of Fengshui.