CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Chinese feng shui is fast becoming a globally known and practised art of placement. Countless articles in newspapers and popular magazines have introduced it to the public, study centres and training courses proliferate and the internet abounds with feng shui homepages and references to the subject. The process of its introduction and spread first in the USA and shortly after in Europe is indeed remarkable; not even the western interest in Buddhism, which flourished in long periods of the twentieth century, can compare with this when measured in the number of book titles. From the first few titles being published in English in the 1980s, the feng shui book market boomed in the late 1990s and into the early 2000s. Today, several thousand popular titles are available in western languages, while spreading further; feng shui literature is now found in nearly all parts of the world.

Feng shui has been put to use in a wealth of popular pursuits, such as to redecorate or clean up homes for greater happiness, balance personality and interior design, improve career opportunities and work performance, focus on simple living, achieve harmonious relations with the environment or just install quick changes to increase the quality of life. Increasingly, however, feng shui has been applied professionally, such as to expand businesses, increase sales, improve the health and performance of employees, renew principles for architecture, better the performance of clinics and hospitals, treat illnesses in children's institutions and so forth.

Despite the great interest it has created in the western world, people tend to have only vague notions of its origin and meaning, and even less understanding of the controversial nature of feng shui practices in their home country. Obviously, this is not a manual of feng shui techniques but an effort to explain the feng shui tradition in its various aspects and contexts. The feng shui tradition is a piece of Chinese history, inseparable from Chinese cosmology and popular religion and deeply intertwined with the social and political processes of Chinese history. Many great Chinese

thinkers have written on the subject, though by and large being as sceptical and divided between believers and non-believers as Chinese society in general.

This does not mean that feng shui was unknown outside Chinese communities prior to the 1980s; the interest was limited to a few academic disciplines, mainly Chinese studies and anthropology. Several subsequent chapters in this book will show that feng shui had sparked off both curiosity and debate in the West since the mid nineteenth century, giving rise to a rich catalogue of interpretations.

Comparison with the spread of Buddhism may be instructive. While Buddhism gave inspiration to new philosophies of life (that is, in the realm of ideas), the interest in feng shui has been far more practical. Many users see in it simple techniques for achieving harmonious relations with the environment, for redecorating their homes, for curing various illnesses and ultimately for improving their lives. Yet this difference is not so pronounced in the respective uses of Buddhism and feng shui in their original Asian settings. On an everyday plane, people may leave philosophy to Buddhist monks and lamas and just ask from them simple advice on practical matters, just like how people approach a feng shui specialist. Similarly, taken in its entirety, feng shui has a large body of literature that connects with the entire range of Chinese cosmological thought as well as with popular religion and ancestor worship. Rather than the two traditions being radically different, this seems to indicate that their modern users, at least in the western world, tend to belong to different groups of people. Buddhism appeals, perhaps, more to those seeking spiritual depth and to academics; feng shui has a greater appeal to the everyday person. These differences may not persist; as new applications of feng shui unfold, new groups of professionals will take up the challenge to further develop and refine its tenets.

FENG SHUI AS POPULAR RELIGION

Feng shui differs substantially from world religions, enjoying continuous recognition and backing by state powers, perhaps even making up their ideological foundations. Feng shui is a broad contested field of knowledge and practice, consisting of several different elements. There is a large body of Chinese feng shui literature, which is rather diverse and for a large part belongs to a popular genre. There is a tremendous variation of practices, both historically and geographically, and many common uses of the feng shui tradition have little connection with the literature: Chinese popular religion has its own independent life. Then, of course, there are a great

number of feng shui practitioners, clients and believers, who constantly interpret and reinterpret feng shui in accordance with the context of their own lives. Most recently, an exploding number of western studies have added to the existing literature and introduced a range of novel ideas and applications. New schools of feng shui have sprung up, mixing elements of Asian philosophy and religion with western outlooks.

Feng shui has often been introduced as an exact system with consistent concepts and ideas. Hence, most of its modern users have the impression that it can provide definite solutions to common problems; yet nothing could be more mistaken. The standard considerations for placement in space are but a diminutive part of the entire tradition, which was never thought to work as independent of human agency. Chinese feng shui is of very little exactitude and a huge mass of subjective interpretation by a specialist or feng shui master. While a small collection of rules applies to all situations, the feng shui master may draw on the entire Chinese cosmology, on popular symbolism and on local lore in his interpretation of the specific situation. This is what has turned feng shui into such a powerful drift in Chinese history: any aspect of everyday life and common concerns may be connected with any strand of Chinese tradition by the skilful practitioner. Of similar importance is the fact that every single specialist, whether in China or abroad, tends to develop his or her own speciality and style. From the fact that feng shui cannot be applied independent of its subjective interpretation by a specialist, it follows that the personal encounter between specialist and client is essential to any remedy – it is its mode of operation. What will hopefully be made clear is that feng shui means different things in different societies and to different people.

THREE THEMES

Three broad themes have guided the creation of this book. These are the common interest in Chinese culture in the West, the fragmentation of ideology and everyday life and the tendency towards religious or spiritual revival in the world today. They are briefly discussed below but remain explicit throughout those parts of the book dealing with feng shui in contemporary society.

First of all, a genuine interest in Chinese culture and society has persisted from the earliest contact; in fact, from antiquity, when civilization in Europe and the Mediterranean became aware of China. The nature of this interest has changed tremendously over the centuries, expressing the internal processes of development in the West as much as China's own

course of development. It seems fair to say, however, that for a very long time China has stood out as the major alternative to civilization in Europe, primarily due to its formidable size and historical continuity. In terms of language, philosophical traditions, technology and organization of society, China represented a unique and separate formation, which both wondered and inspired western observers. Intensified in the recent centuries, however, China has stood out as both the positive and the negative example of a range of issues such as the secular state freed from the church, early technological advances, collectivism, socialism, human rights issues, economic stagnation, cultural conservatism, Marxism, unprecedented economic growth, etc. Each era has viewed China differently, and quick changes have followed ideological currents in the West. How the interest in Chinese feng shui fits into this picture will be taken up in Chapter 7.

The second broad theme indicated above is of an equally complex nature. With the coming of industrial society and modernity, and work processes becoming increasingly specialized, people were drawn away from small communities with intimate contact into cites with entirely new lifestyles and social relations. Thus, from lives in organic units with a great measure of coherence, people experienced a growing fragmentation of both their working and social life. That was already the theme of early sociology, vividly represented in the writings of Max Weber, Emile Durkheim and Georg Simmel in the early twentieth century. With the coming of the post-industrial or 'post-modern' society, these processes were further accelerated, and did so to an extent challenging human biology: individual work procedures are atomized to an extent that the individual cannot see the meaning of the whole, social life is further fragmented with the ongoing rupture of conventional family and morality is divorced from everyday life and monopolized by experts (Bauman 1995): in sum, 'life in fragments'. The new knowledge society, which all nations now compete to install in order to gain comparative advantages, further demands flexibility and creativity within still smaller segments of ever larger manufacturing, service and entertainment machines. As human beings, however, we are not merely passive subjects in this vast drama of revolutionizing everyday life, but persistently strive to hold on to meaning, values and people. When old forms of social life break up, new ones are established; when conventional outlooks are swept away, people search for new overarching perspectives to be able to sense connectedness.

The third broad theme may be said to follow logically from the second, but consists of many different elements without clear consistency. There is a growing sense of spiritual revival in the world today, expressed

both in the backing of world religions and in a vastly growing significance of new independent churches, non-institutional religion and spontaneous religious movements, although Europe may be an exception (Casanova 2003). Fundamentalist religion has caught the interest of the media, but a more common characteristic is perhaps that this new religiosity is turned against simple rationality – understood as scientific rationality applied to everyday life (scientism) – and very often against modern education. Important writers from diverse fields such as philosophy, science and sociology have noted this: a return to 'reason' as opposed to technical rationality (Stephen Toulmin), the need for new perspectives that allow unity (David Bohm) and the general orientation towards de-secularization – that is, the returning prominence of religion (Peter Berger).

These three themes, as merely outlined above, are, of course, not randomly selected in the vast literature on recent changes in the human predicament. They are, in fact, what we see as the main impulses in the formation of feng shui as a global current of thought and practice. On this background, it is my sincere hope that this book will contribute greater knowledge about feng shui as well as meet the general interest in Chinese culture and thinking.

WESTERN RECEPTIVENESS

Learning about our adoption of feng shui is also learning about our selves. The following pages will be dedicated to establishing a frame of meaning for the rise of feng shui in the western world. Readers unconcerned with this question may simply jump to the core chapters of the book.

Since the West has known Chinese feng shui for at least a century and a half, but has only adopted it during roughly the last two decades, it is straightforward to consider changes within western societies as instrumental. These changes concern both the place of religion in, and the structure of, our societies. Since Christian churches previously functioned as the main bulwark against other religions as much as against all those currents of 'heretical' belief and popular magic previously termed 'superstition', when encountering Chinese feng shui in the mid nineteenth century, western missionaries, administrators and sojourners consistently used that label. The Christian churches were already under pressure from modernity, but social and political forces in the industrial society that had developed since have effected their further retreat from public and daily life. Today, there is still some correlation between formal religion and new currents of belief: feng shui is apparently strongest where Christianity is weakest, such

as in US coastal cities as opposed to the mid-west, and in northern Europe as opposed to southern Europe. Similarly, feng shui tends to be stronger in Protestant communities than in Catholic communities, the latter often having a stronger sense of personal affiliation to the church.

Nonetheless, while Christian religion may be in the retreat, 'spirituality' appears to be on the rise. The emergence of feng shui in the West has followed that of a broad range of other religions, cosmologies and belief systems, which, according to some observers, is mounting to a spiritual revolution, a new age. Let's see what the sociology of religion can contribute to understanding this phenomenon.

Many writers have commented on the demise of religion in Europe, which shows in declining church attendance, membership and rites and even to the extent that the Christian god is dead (Bruce 2003). Most notably, a 'massive subjective turn of modern culture' is perceived as underlying a range of changes in our relationship with society and religion. It is a turn away from living according to prescribed roles, conventions and obligations, and a turn towards living by reference to one's own subjective experiences. Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead (2005) thus argue that people increasingly search for the heart of life, living in full awareness of one's state of being, something easily converted into useful experience and practice. They distinguish between two different life forms: 'life as', which indicates living according to the external roles and duties given by established religions, and 'subjective life', which means living according to the unique experiences of a new age, essentially becoming your own master. The subjective life form focuses on the individual state of mind, including feelings, passions, bodily experiences, inner consciousness, dreams and compassion. Along with these two life forms, very different understandings of the sacred emerge: while religion has a transcendent source of significance and authority to which individuals must conform, the new 'spirituality', although an ambiguous term, emphasizes the inner sources of significance and authority, allowing the individual to sacralize its own unique life experiences. The possible outcome is a spiritual revolution.

These changes are evident in the rise of feng shui in the West. Yet it is less evident that people give up established religion entirely for the sake of new spirituality. In the fast moving and rapidly fragmenting society, they may as well combine and contextualize them, there being no dilemma in both going to church and using feng shui for spiritual home improvement.

Many important writers have emphasized that religion is on the rise globally. Starting with Samuel Huntington's concept of the 'clash of civilizations' along lines of religion (1993), more recent writers link the

growth of religion to the effects of modernization – that is, as a counter-current to fragmentation. For instance, Peter Berger (1999) uses the term 'de-secularization' as the outcome of a shattered modernity. Modernity had certain secularizing effects, but on the individual level, religious beliefs and practices lived on and now take new institutional forms. Berger argues that apart from a global elite culture which adheres to secularization, the secularization thesis was false, and experiments with secularized religion have generally failed: the world is experiencing a religious revival of colossal dimensions. As modernity tended to undermine the taken-for-granted certainties of everyday life, religious movements promised new overarching perspectives, while 'dripping with conservative supernaturalism'.

Another relevant perspective is that of José Casanova (1994), who argues that the differentiation and increasing complexity of the modern society drives religion away from the central stage without, however, driving it away as such. Instead, centralized and controlling religion is giving way to religious pluralism, with many new groups competing for public attention. In that sense, religion has been privatized and differentiated, with a ready market of spiritual consumers zapping between new and trendy options.

Much international attention is devoted to the role of religion in the Middle East, while religion in other places is simultaneously neglected. Today, most developing countries across the world have powerful new religious movements (China included) that gather people locally while addressing issues like social differentiation, unemployment, meaninglessness, modernity and globalization. In the broadest sense, the sociology of religion ought to be less concerned with the decline of old congregational religion and more sensitive to new forms, whether individual, communal or transnational (Casanova 2003: 27).

So what are the societal conditions for the growth of new spirituality, including feng shui? Certainly, relentless and pervasive changes now occur in all societies across the globe, uprooting traditional life forms and identities and reaffirming the 'subjective turn'. Let us see how a selection of prominent sociologists from across the West depict these changes.

For the German sociologist Ulrich Beck, one of the most profound changes is individualization, now no longer a choice but radically institutionalized as a condition of society. He distinguishes between the first modern period up until World War II and the present 'second modernity'. In the first modernity, people were set free from repressive social structures and religious dogmatism and integrated into new collective life forms such as class, nation state and nuclear family. In the second modernity, however, previous social structures dissolve. New radical demands are put on

the individual in education and career, to the extent that the ideal working subject is the unrestrained, fully mobile single. Yet Beck describes the 'self-culture' of the second modernity as one of considerable control and standardization through market forces. A massive responsibility for global risks are placed on the individual, forming a series of risky freedoms, a privatization of collectively produced risks, where the individual is constantly required to find personal solutions to systemic contradictions, such as between family and career. He phrases these conditions as the 'risk society'. Beck argues that in order to avoid insecurity and compulsory choice, people increasingly enroll in closed subcultures, radical political groups or new religious movements, which may provide ready-made solutions to existential problems (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002: 92ff.).

Another equally important aspect of Beck's work is the changing concept of nature. In the first modernity, nature was viewed instrumentally as a resource, separate from society. In the second modernity, however, one of the fundamental processes of change (along with globalization, individualization, a gender revolution and a new technological revolution) is the global ecological crisis, which has undermined the assumptions and the concept of nature of the old industrial society. Nature is politicized and becomes subject to debate: a new concept of nature and society as mutually dependent develops, while science loses its monopoly on truth and rationality. Ecology and feng shui fit in nicely here, attempting reinterpretation of the conventional nature–culture divide; several later chapters will deal with this.

The observations of the American sociologist Richard Sennett, like those of Beck, pinpoint the insecurities of fast-moving capitalism (1998). The conditions of time in the new capitalism, he argues, have created a conflict between character and experience, the experience of disjointed time threatening the ability of people to form their characters into sustained narratives. Demands of extreme individual flexibility – against the background of a hyper-dynamic job market and constant business restructurings for the sake of stock market indices – have created a generation of highly successful employees, yet with fragmenting personal lives and corroding characters. Uncertainty was known to previous generations, but today it exists without any looming historical disaster; instead it is woven into the everyday practices of a vigorous capitalism. Instability is meant to be normal, anxieties breed in the new capitalism and its victims cannot hold up their own lives as tales to their children as characters and ideals dissolve. In the culture of the new capitalism, Sennett (2006) shows that the individual must manage short-term relationships, constantly develop new talents and

learn not to dwell on past achievements as they are no longer honoured. It is a culture of pervasive consumption, far from setting people free.

Can we recognize the contours of short-lived cults as mere flickers on the spiritual horizon, before giving way to other even more radical aberrations from our common past? If so, it entails a more critical view of feng shui as filling the vacuum from the break-up of past ideals, values and institutions with a heedless search for quick changes and new potentials to fit in with the hunt for a consistent personal narrative, like the instant stimulation of a short-term relationship. As shown in Chapter 7, many feng shui manual authors advise cutting bonds to old objects, pictures, acquaintances, etc. As fragmented lives tend to be lived in episodes (in a series of unconnected events), currents of new spiritual inspiration may likewise form disjointed chance patterns. The rise of feng shui in the West may not be rationally explained, and nothing as yet indicates its enduring significance.

The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (e.g. 1999) also points out how our insecurity and vulnerability are the most painful features of contemporary life conditions: insecurity of position, entitlement and livelihood – and lack of safety of one's self and extensions in the form of family, neighbourhood and community. A number of constructionist sociologists, including British Stuart Hall, see our identities as ongoing and never completed constructions, always conditional and yet never in a proper fit with the conditions of life, never forming a totality. Identities operate across difference and as discursive processes requiring what is left outside in order to consolidate themselves. Perhaps playing with difference – radical difference such as feng shui – helps us to explore what we are (Hall 2004: 2–3).

Lastly in this tour of sociology, we shall pick a few points from the massive work of Polish-born Zygmunt Bauman. To him, fragmentation of meaning, identity and ethics present new moral choices. Far from pointing towards a care-free life, our modern predicament becomes acutely uncomfortable, as both meaning and identity only take shape as projects. In the post-modern society, Bauman uses the allegory of stroller, vagabond or tourist to depict the individuals' movement in space and time as fragmented into episodes. Expressive of common sentiments in a fast-moving world without givens, branded by uprooting, contingency and mass migration is the metaphor of human waste: 'wasted lives' (Bauman 2003a). Our search for meaning becomes still more acute and hopeless as we rise above nature, while our finitude becomes ever more visible and painful; from madness there is no escape but another madness. Knowledge of morality triggers the desire for transcendence, the search for transient life experiences stronger than

death (Bauman 2003b: 3). The main business of culture, Bauman states, is to supply ever new untried and un-discredited variants of transcendence strategies as its explorers stumble from one disappointment to another frustration: the trade in life meanings is the most competitive of markets!

Is this a fatalistic caricature of the believer of instant feng shui, having just stumbled upon it like a new brand on the shelf, or does Bauman here capture our joint predicament as victims of a grand techno-economic experiment, that of modern capitalism? Undeniably, leaving our roots, however frail, is facing us with unseen dilemmas of meaning. Individualization, mobility, the break-up of traditional family forms and the denying of formal religion (conventionally linked to family ritual) take away the meaning embedded in family life and ritual, and rules out the following of long-trodden life trajectories. We shall return to these perspectives in the last chapter.