

Hong-key Yoon, ed. P' ungsu: A Study of  
Geomancy in Korea. SUNY Press, 2018.

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## Hong-key Yoon, ed. *P'ungsu: A Study of Geomancy in Korea*. SUNY Press, 2018.

BOOK REVIEW BY OLE BRUUN

**I**N this impressive new book, Hong-key Yoon and a select team of Korean academics have gathered a comprehensive and interdisciplinary account of the role and development of *p'ungsu* (geomancy) in Korea. Spanning a range of disciplines, including cultural and historical geography, environmental science, architecture, landscape architecture, religious studies, and psychology, it is undoubtedly the most exhaustive work on geomancy in Korea to date and among the major works on geomancy in general. The book consists of seventeen chapters and is divided into two parts: "Toward a History of Geomancy in Korea," and "Selected Topics in Korean Geomancy." The first part is authored by Yoon, while the second part has nine different chapter authors. A rich collection of photos, figures, maps, and plans illustrate the text and give the book an attractive appearance.

The first part of the book is devoted to Yoon's work on the history of geomancy in Korea, including a periodization of its uses and development, government approaches to geomancy, major uprisings related to geomancy, and its role in environmental management. Chapter 2, titled "The Eight Periods in the History of Korean Geomancy," documents its social and cultural history to the present, including how it was accepted, adapted to Korean circumstances, and practiced by Koreans after its introduction from China. Chapter 6,

on the principal characteristics of Korean geomancy, is thought-provoking and somehow departs from other parts of the work, which mostly evaluate it as human ecology. This chapter shows that a key characteristic of Korean geomancy is an obsession with practicing grave divination, even to the point where it has created numerous social problems. The construction of massive royal tombs ousted both Buddhist temples and commoner's graveyards from auspicious sites and often modified the natural environment. However, common people's passion for auspicious burial sites had even worse consequences, as it resulted in countless local disputes that caused injury and death. Such fanaticism was also well known in China and included the excavation of graves for reburial, as reflected in historical documents from the Chosŏn dynasty. Yoon quotes a contemporary scholar who states that it had turned into such a problem that half of the court cases were due to these local disputes, pushing the government to introduce regulations (p. 101).

The concise but very interesting chapter 3 deals with historical social movements and political contestations in which geomancy has played a prominent part. A primary example is that of the twelfth-century Buddhist geomancer-monk Myoch'ŏng who, as part of a rebellion against the central government, used geomantic political rhetoric to persuade the king to move the Ko-

rean capital to Sögyöng in the northwest, arguing that its geomantic energy was rising while that of the capital was dwindling. Nevertheless, the odds were stacked against him and Myoch'öng ended up losing both the battle and his life. Geomancy has continued to influence Korean politics, however, and auspicious grave positioning has been a recurrent theme in presidential elections.

A number of interesting chapters on various aspects of Korean geomancy follow in the second part. Several chapters draw on the same ecological approach to examine historical water management schemes in water deficient areas, the geomantic significance of groves in traditional settlements, geomantic principles of site selection in traditional Korean architecture, and geomantic aesthetics in the construction of traditional Korean gardens. Other chapters in the second part deal with geomantic landscape modifications, and the historic interrelationship between geomancy and Buddhism and also between geomancy and Confucianism. The chapter that most decisively parts with the ecology approach looks into how deep psychology may interpret Koreans' desire to obtain auspicious geomantic sites, not only for their own dwellings but also for those of their ancestors. Cheol Joong Kang shows, by means of Jungian psychology, the origins in the geomantic division between the four quarters, four seasons, four animals, and so on that influence human beings, and that this represents not only an unconscious fact, but also a conscious and differentiated totality that adds up to harmony and perfection in the auspicious geomantic site. This is combined with the circular form that naturally arises around a dwelling and which is represented on the geomantic compass, a circle at the same time having divine meaning and being a symbolic representation of the human psyche, such as in the mandala. Thus, the auspicious place is not only a symbol of wholeness, but as much a representation of the self, consisting of both the nucleus and the whole psyche. The really interesting aspect of this interpretation is that the auspicious place replenishes, adjusts, and supplements people's whole psyche, and does so in the context of a world (or a culture?) "that does not value their inner life" (p. 307). I believe this interpretation can explain at least in part why geomancy has continued to thrive in East Asia.

Although Yoon and his colleagues explicitly write for an academic audience and emphasize that this is a work of rigorous scholarship, at the same time they acknowledge that Korean intellectuals tend to dismiss

the subject. A curious aspect of geomancy studies in Asian countries since the late nineteenth century and up until recently is that they primarily were conducted by outsiders, while most local scholars have felt uncomfortable with the popular tradition. The overall purpose of the book may at the very least be to raise the standing of geomancy, and possibly feed into a modern or post-modern Korean identity.

Yoon makes a strong point about translation as an interesting aspect of the discussion on how academic *p'ungsu* differs from commonly practiced forms. The Chinese "feng shui" has now become a commonplace term for what was initially perceived as geomancy in the international literature, akin to certain forms of Arab or European divination. However, for various reasons this term may not be appropriate. First, feng shui is only one among many Chinese terms for this tradition, apparently of a more recent date, and according to my own experience from Chinese rural areas it may not even be the most common term. Second, it focuses attention on the specific Chinese forms, while the important work of Yoon and many others has proven that Korean, Japanese, Vietnamese, and even Southeast Asian societies have developed their own independent varieties. Last but not least, many academics believe that the term "feng shui" has been compromised by the succession of popular manuals and self-taught experts that have appeared since the 1980s.

However, these social processes of adaptation and translation have a tendency to take on a life of their own. For instance, the rise of both academic feng shui studies and popular practices in the Western world provided powerful new backing to the modern form of feng shui in China, particularly against the backdrop of the authoritarian state's categorical rejection of popular religion. Moreover, the Western interest in feng shui provided new material for contemporary Chinese identity-building and even tourist promotion, which could be exploited by state agencies. Although the popular practice of feng shui has given rise to many new and perverted forms that may be seen as misrepresentations of the "true" art, and no less so in Asia than in the Western world, they still form part of the "globalization" of feng shui, which I believe Yoon and his colleagues also include themselves in. But this is a double-edged sword: popular forms of geomancy both generate public interest and at the same time discredit it as an academic subject. Although I fully agree with Yoon that "geomancy" is a better generic term, we should take great care that

academic work is not being used to legitimize such top-down state regulation of popular culture and interference with religion, as has been a recurrent trend in China for over five hundred years.

The overall perspective chosen for the book mostly follows that of Yoon's previous work on human ecology. Yoon argues that geomancy cannot be classified as a superstition, religion, or science, because it does not fit comfortably into any of these Western categories, nor can it be understood properly using conventional Western notions. In a bid to define geomancy, Yoon suggests "a unique and comprehensive system of conceptualising the physical environment that regulates human ecology by influencing humans to select auspicious environment[s] and build harmonious structures such as graves, houses, and cities on them" (p. 373). Yoon further notes that given the way it is practiced and perceived by the public, geomancy definitely includes a range of "superstitious" elements. Yet it should not be discarded as a simple superstition, since it contains "a complicated and sophisticated body of environmental ideas and knowledge covering valuable ecological wisdom of premodern times" (p. 373). For the non-Asian reader, however, this may sound like the Oriental Wisdom literature that Yoon so vigorously refutes.

A narrow definition of geomancy, whether in general or referring to a specific country, may run into a host of problems. Many previous attempts—from those of sinologist J.J.M. de Groot and the missionary E.J. Eitel onward—have fallen short of covering its countless facets. Contrary to Yoon's interdisciplinary intent, a narrow definition may in fact justify the appropriation of geomancy studies by a certain discipline, in this case that of human ecology. As an anthropologist I would rather leave the power of definition with those people most actively involved, arguing that geomancy is what its primary users, practitioners, and chroniclers make it to be, that is, a living and highly dynamic tradition. Strict conceptualisations are born out of those academic disciplines that traditionally have researched geomancy, but they vary fundamentally from religious studies to anthropology to human geography, and so forth.

In support of his human ecology perspective, Yoon points to a range of scattered historical sources that indicate that kings and royal ministries have ordered pine trees to be planted, patches of forest to be protected, or people to be barred from collecting timber and firewood, all for the protection of geomantic influences

on palaces, royal tombs, and the capital city. Similarly, when common people save a few trees around a family grave "as a final effort to save its auspiciousness," Yoon argues that "these small graves with nearby trees are monuments of the common people's endeavor to keep the land auspicious and the signs of positive geomantic impact on Korean environmental management" (p. 85). I take it to mean that when people fell the forest but keep a few pine trees around a grave—and certainly not in front of it—geomancy induces sound environmental management! Challenging the notion that geomancy is inherently oriented toward a harmonious relationship with the physical environment, many observers have described the devastating impact that pompous elite graves or excessive numbers of small family graves may have on mountain forests and hillside vegetation. Trees protecting one grave may block the geomantic influence on the grave behind it, and the compromise is often no trees at all. It is not without reason that state administrations across the East Asian region have attempted to regulate grave construction or enforce cremation.

Even if it were true that "people were very enthusiastic about conserving vegetation in auspicious places" and that this "contributed to the Koreans' harmonious relationship with nature" (p. 87), you cannot brush aside the geomantic taste for dressed-up landscapes, advice for establishing artificial hills and scenery, and preferences for certain types of vegetation, almost like the re-creation of a painting—such as when Yoon quotes a seventeenth-century source for advising the planting of weeping willows to the east of a house and green bamboo to the west of the house in order to create wealth and prosperity. These patterned uses of vegetation around houses and graves illustrate well how any user of geomancy will establish a small self-centered entity to tap into natural and cosmological forces. It is difficult to ignore the conflict between geomancy's anthropocentric outlook and the common vision of ecology, which values interactions among all organisms and their environment, thus studying the full scale of life processes. Concepts of biodiversity, wilderness, and ecocentrism have no place in geomancy.

Nevertheless, *P'ungsu: A Study of Geomancy in Korea* is an invaluable resource in the study of geomantic traditions in the Asian world, and in the true interdisciplinary spirit in which it was written I believe scholars and laypeople from all disciplines and persuasions can benefit from reading it.