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From Earth's Veins to the Body's Meridians:
Classical Chinese Views of the Environment and Health

Place and Human Flourishing

I should like to begin with something from one of the major Western authorities on health:

"Whoever wishes to investigate medicine properly, should proceed thus: in the first place consider the seasons of the year ... then the winds, the hot and the cold ... also the qualities of the waters ... And when one comes into a city to which he is a stranger, he ought to consider its situation, how it lies as to the winds and the rising of the sun ... and also the ground, whether the city lies in a hollow, confined situation, or is elevated and cold".

These prescriptions for "whoever wishes to investigate medicine properly" were issued at the beginning of the Western medical tradition in a short text by Hippocrates entitled Ars, Waters, Places. The emphasis on the importance of place in the practice of the medical arts is common in ancient treatments of the topic. But rather than seeing this concern merely as an outmoded piece of folk science (as the physicians to whom I presented an earlier version of this paper did), we might more fruitfully understand it as an anticipation of the recent talk in medical and epidemiological discourse of the importance of "contextualizing the person" - but in this case a contextualization that extends beyond the community and social spheres to the biosphere and atmospheres that are the context for all human existence.

Although Hippocrates naturally saw place as an important conditioning factor for health, this connection became obscured  

in the Western tradition as philosophers and scientists became more interested in the abstract notion of space - and in the kinds of theoretical thinking that would eventually give rise to modern science and technology. Various forms of Platonism denigrated the ever-changing physical universe as verging on non-being by comparison with the intelligible realm of the eternal Ideas. With the rise of Christianity a certain reading of the Book of Genesis issued in calls to exploit to the utmost human “dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth”, which tended to drown out voices advocating conscientious stewardship of God’s creation.

In the natural sciences, the places that had been discussed by Aristotle were replaced by the absolute space of Newton and Descartes, and the human body’s close relations with place were disrupted when it became regarded as contingent res extensa along with the larger environment, which seventeenth-century science understood as “dead molecules in motion” 2. This “displacement” facilitated and encouraged increasing domination and control of the natural environment with the help of ever more powerful technologies. In the United States what amounts to an “eclipse of the body” is brought about by the rise of new forms of Christianity - what Harold Bloom calls “the American religion” in his book of that title. These new sects hark back to Gnosticism in holding the most important factor for salvation to be the individual soul’s direct relationship to its divine maker. If this is what many millions of true believers believe - that the body and the natural world (not to mention human community) play no part whatsoever in the drama of salvation - it is hardly surprising that concern for the natural environment has tended to be a low priority in this country 3.

Before the field of environmental ethics began to open up in the 1960s, Aldo Leopold had proposed in his book Sand County Almanac (1949) a radical extension of ethics and our understanding of community to include the land and soil on which human beings ultimately depend for their livelihood. As the years progressed, it became clear that traditional moralities, which dealt exclusively with relations among human beings, would have to be modified on the basis of a view that would include all natural phenomena as being deserving of moral considerability. Feminist philosophers with an interest in the environment pointed out the parallels between the human domination of nature and male oppression of women, while deep ecologists advocated a move beyond anthropocentrism to biocentrism. There have been calls for an overcoming of Cartesianism, with its dichotomy between soul and nature, in favor of a relational understanding of the self and a monistic view of the universe. Also for a shift to a worldview for which the locus of value was not transcendent but immanent in the natural world.

Instead of an ethics based on rights or duties, or couched in universal principles, we are encouraged to think in terms of a morality based on care, and to cut back on the search for universal rules in favor of paying close attention to the particularities of specific ethical quandaries and their contexts. Rather than envisaging natural phenomena distributed through a neutral Newtonian space, we now understand that organisms move and have their being in ecosystems, where changes in one part have repercussions in other - often seemingly unrelated - parts of the system. And now the idea of human ecology brings us back to the insight of Hippocrates concerning the importance for human health of place. This importance has recently come to be appreciated anew, as evidenced by the appearance of scientific journals like The Journal of Health and Place (founded in 1995) and Eco-Health (2004), as well as institutes at several major universities in this country which study “Health and the Environment.”

However, the more of these “new paradigms” I came across
in the literature, the more I kept thinking that I had seen them all somewhere before - in classical Chinese thought, where the individual’s relation to place is paramount. And since so many environmental problems have attained global proportions, and so demand global solutions, this provides a further reason for adducing ideas from Chinese philosophy in the present context. China is now a major contributor to local and global environmental problems, and there are many reasons for supposing that Chinese thought can contribute to the solutions. (Readers of Hölderlin and Heidegger will be familiar with the idea that a salvific force can emerge from the very locus of the danger . . .)

The Ancient Chinese View of the World

The “compare and contrast” method is helpful here, and the old joke is still telling - and worth telling: when a Western thinker is confronted with something unfamiliar, the question (stemming from ancient Greek philosophy) tends to be: “What is this?” When a Chinese thinker is in a similar situation, the question is rather: “How do we do that?” Chinese thought is nothing if not practical. - But I’ve just done something there that I always warn our graduate students in Hawaii, where cross-cultural comparisons are the norm, not to do - namely, to talk about “the West” and “the East,” or even “Asia” or “East Asia,” since so many different traditions and ways of thinking are embraced by such labels.

In very broad strokes, then: Whereas Western traditions have tended to understand the world as a collection of things or matter or substances or products, the East-Asian traditions understand it as a play of unfolding events, a field of energies or forces, a series of ongoing processes. And while Western thinking tends to favor dichotomies and dualisms (especially between this world and a world beyond), the Chinese tradition for a long time remained innocent of the idea of a transcendent realm (not to mention monotheism or any other kind of theism), hewing rather to a monism and a purely this-worldly focus.

Indeed a dichotomy that profoundly conditions our relations to the natural world is conspicuously absent from Chinese cosmology: the split between the animate and the inanimate. Of course the Chinese distinguish flora from fauna, and the mineral realm from the vegetal, but the underlying idea is that phenomena in all realms dissolve into and condense out of an all-pervading medium of energies known as qi.

These energies flow, like magnetic force, between two poles: one positive and active, known as yang, the other negative and passive and known as yin. Qi energy works along a spectrum from fast-moving and rarefied (as in the breath, which is invisible) to slow-moving and condensed (as in rock, which is visible and tangible). In fact we find something similar to qi at the beginning of the Western tradition too, in the thought of the Presocratic philosopher Anaximenes, for whom aer is “the underlying nature, one and infinite.” Like the Chinese qi, this one underlying nature, which is “always in motion,” is subject to two basic transformations of condensation (puknotés) and rarefaction (manotés): “Being made finer,” Anaximenes writes, “it becomes fire, being made thicker it becomes wind, then cloud, then (when thickened still more) water, then earth, then stones; and the rest come into being from these.”

The hard thing to grasp at first about the Chinese qi cosmology (unless you’re a Presocratic philosopher or a particle physicist) is its lack of substance. There’s no solid stuff, no matter, just forces or energies. For several centuries, however, it seemed to Western observers otherwise, after the discovery that the Chinese had a doctrine of the “five elements” dating back to the fourth century BCE, and which appeared to be a counterpart to the idea of the four elements (earth, water, fire, air) discussed by the ancient Greeks. But the analogy turns out to be misleading, since the Chinese name wuxing is properly translated “five goings,” “transitions,” or “doings.” On the Daoist worldview, the primal emptiness is constantly differentiating itself into the polarities of yang and yin energies, whose interplay gives rise to what we had better call the “fi ve

phases”. In a world of unceasing change, far from static elements forming the building blocks of the cosmos, Wu xing refers to the five phases of transformation through which the energies associated with the earth pass: namely-wood, fire, soil, metal, water.

An important early mention of the Five Phases comes at the beginning of a list of nine groups of things necessary for good government, where the five natural processes are immediately followed by a list of the five most important actions for human beings to perform. This is a central idea in Daoism: that human activities meet with success when they follow, and are in accord with, natural processes. The Five Phases are involved in several different kinds of cycles, the two most important of which are “mutual generation” and “mutual overcoming.” They generate each other in cyclical sequence:

Wood generates fire, bursting into flame.
Fire generates soil, reducing wood et cetera to ash.
Soil gives birth to metal, in veins of ore beneath the earth.
Metal gives birth to water, liquefying when heated.
Water generates wood, nourishing the growth of plants.

Any natural environment is constituted by the ceaseless self-generation of these five phases, and insofar as we develop a sense for how each gives rise to the next, we stand to benefit, in our concern to shelter and nourish ourselves throughout our own transformations, from harmonizing these with the perpetual changes of the natural world.

Thanks to the Chinese predilection for correlative thinking, the Five Phases were soon correlated with a large number of other phenomena: with the five viscera (Spleen, Lungs, Heart, Kidneys, Liver), the corresponding five constituents of the body (muscles/membranes, skin, pulse/blood, bone/marrow, flesh), the five tastes (sour, bitter, sweet, acrid, salt), the five kinds of creature (scaly, feathered, naked, hairy, shelled), the five measures (compasses, weights, plumblines, T-squares, balances), the five colors (blue-green, yellow, red, white, black), the five numbers (8, 7, 5, 9, 6), the five notes of the pentatonic scale, and so forth - to the tune of a hundred such sets of correlations!\

A second cycle involving the Five Phases, in which they “conquer” or “overcome” one another, was recognized on a different basis from the directions and seasons:

Soil overcomes water, by damming or absorbing it.
Wood overcomes soil, by digging with spade and plow.
Metal overcomes wood, by cutting with the blade.
Fire overcomes metal, by melting it to liquid.
Water overcomes fire, by extinguishing it.

By contrast with the purely natural generating cycle, this one reflects the practices of hydraulic engineering and irrigation, agriculture, carpentry, and metallurgy - all activities that intervene in natural processes in such a way as to direct them toward human purposes. An understanding of both these cycles of the Five Phases allows human beings to flourish by integrating or harmonizing their activities with them in the most creative ways.

This worldview is in sharp contrast to the kind of “productionist metaphysics” that has dominated so much Western thinking since Plato and Aristotle. I borrow this idea

6 Needham (1956: 2:255) suggests as another basis for this generation the way metal mirrors exposed to the night air attract or secrete “sacred dew.”
from Heidegger, who argues that we have been prevented us from experiencing things as things by this predominant understanding of everything present as an "object of production". This understanding has multiple roots: in one of the creation stories in the book of Genesis, God the Creator produces the world from nothing; according to the myth in Plato's Timaeus, the Divine Craftsman makes the soul and body of the universe from materials already to-hand; on Aristotle's account things are "formed matter." The combined power of these stories tends to prevent us from seeing how culturally conditioned the question is, when faced with things we want to understand: "How (or by whom) were they made (or produced)?" Such a question would never occur to a classical Chinese thinker, for whom the question would be: "How (or from what) did they grow?" (The answer to that, by the way, will also help answer the question "How do we cook it?") The mindset implied by the first question encourages technological manipulation of the world insofar as it already consists of things made, whereas the Chinese understanding, on which the power of transformation is inherent in the processes themselves rather than an external agent, is more conducive to respect and reverence for those processes and powers. A major theme in Chinese thought is therefore that of understanding "the propensities of processes" - whether in the art of warfare, or politics, or in the fine or martial arts - gauging the directions and strengths of the currents of events, so as to be able to influence them with minimal expenditures of force.

In Daoist terms that are especially relevant to the way we treat the environment, the idea is to understand the ways particular processes spontaneously unfold (this is called ziran), so that one can act in such a way as to derive benefit from the forces of heaven and earth while causing minimal disruption to them (what the Daoists call wuwei). This notion of wuwei provides a handy rule of thumb for appraising the effects of technology.

Imagine arranging various kinds of technologies along a continuum with wuwei at one end and its opposite (yuwei) at the other. At the wuwei pole would be windmills, sailboats, watermills, and the like: implements that make use of the natural forces of wind, water, and gravity without abusing or using them up. (When I position my sailboat in such a way that the wind fills its sails, this in no way reduces the amount of wind available for your boat.) Toward the other, interventionist end of the spectrum we would have set-ups like the nuclear power plant, which disrupts natural processes monstrously. Although uranium occurs and degrades naturally, the reaction that powers nuclear plants can only be achieved through highly complex technical procedures, and the plutonium waste generated thereby is toxic on a whole different scale (and timescale) from those of naturally occurring lethal poisons.

The Daoist rule of thumb would suggest that the closer to the wuwei pole the technology, the greater the chances of its being favorable to human flourishing and the flourishing of the whole world in the long run - and vice-versa. But under what circumstances does the whole flourish? Since nature is not humane (as chapter five of the Daodejing reminds us), we need to protect ourselves against its lethal tendencies - but to what extent? A species' flourishing depends on its population relative to its environment and other species in it. Natural processes tend to prevent predators from eliminating their prey completely, and parasites from killing off their hosts. Since human technology has enabled the species to eliminate an amazing number of predators (in the wide sense that would include the tubercle bacillus and Ebola virus), our population now threatens to become too large in relation to the available natural resources. If, rather than accepting these limitations imposed by the cosmic context, we respond by resorting to technology that increases crop yields through genetic engineering, the Daoist would warn against a course of action.

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so disruptive of natural processes.

The Human Body as a Configuration of Qi Energy

The first great school of classical Chinese philosophy was built on the thought of Confucius, who viewed human existence as being played out in a space constantly traversed by the powers of Heaven and Earth. His focus, however, was very much on the human, and especially on the human being as a network of social relationships. For Confucius, an individual is first and foremost the son of these two particular parents, the brother of these siblings, the husband of this wife, the father of these children, the colleague of these co-workers, the subordinate of this manager, the supervisor of these interns, and so forth. Confucius is at the same time fully aware of a tendency in human nature toward selfishness, thanks to which we concentrate our sense of ourselves around a central point, and so he is constantly exhorting his students to open themselves up and extend their sense of themselves throughout the network of relationships. Being fully human for Confucius is to “love one’s fellow human beings,” by which he means: “Take as a model your love for your parents or children, and extend that as far as you can throughout the network of your relatives and acquaintances and people with whom you come in contact.” By the time one reaches the borders of the Middle Kingdom, one’s love will be fairly etiolated - which is fine, since the barbarians beyond the borders are barely human anyway.

The next wave of philosophers in China, the Daoists, are perfectly happy with this conception of the relational self, except that they think Confucius doesn’t take it far enough. For all the Confucian talk of the three spheres of Heaven, Human, and Earth, there is too much focus on the human: the network of relationships needs to be expanded to include the enduring context for any human society - namely, heaven and earth, the natural world as a whole, on which any living human body is dependent for its life. Further differences between Chinese and Western thought are exemplified in the very different images the two traditions have of the human body. In his Fabrica (1543), Vesalius represents the human body as an essentially muscled structure, a man of substance, which no doubt reflects the European emphasis on the human being as an agent capable of producing things from raw material. His Chinese counterpart Hua Shou represents the body more as a configuration of forces, a site through which qi-energies flow along specific courses, and exemplifying an understanding of the human being as a participant in the interactions among the forces of heaven and earth. The body so conceived is a microcosm of the larger world, a pattern of energies corresponding to the larger patterning that is the physical environment in which its activities take place. As such the body of the earth is animated by flows of energy that course along invisible channels corresponding to the “meridians” envisaged in the body by Chinese acupuncture. These channels within the earth are called its “lifelines.”

The Daoists posit correlations between the human body and the physical landscape, as well as with the political landscape of the state. The Inner Classic of the Yellow Emperor (Huangdi neijing), the oldest surviving Chinese medical text (dating from the 3rd century BCE), has this to say about the various parts of the body: “The heart functions as the prince and governs through the “soul”; the lungs are liaison officers who promulgate rules and regulations; the liver is a general and devises strategies.”

Various texts and commentaries in the Daoist canon provide detailed accounts of the inner landscape in terms of ancient Chinese mythology and yin-yang and Five Phases cosmology, accounts based on Daoist techniques of meditation and introspection. This is an illustration of “Inner Circulation” depicting the paths of the bodily energies through the inner landscape. That’s the cranium at the top and the spinal column down the right-hand side. At the top of the head are nine mountain peaks that represent the Nine Palaces of traditional Daoist meditation. A stream of “spirit-water” (shanshui) flows out of the mountains and all the way down the

10 ch. 8, cited in Schipper, 1993: 100.
spinal column. In the place of the eyes are the sun and moon, which also represent yang and yin energy.

Below the head is the heart, attended by the Herd Boy of Chinese astrology holding the Northern Dipper. Below that are the kidneys, attended by the Weaving Girl of Chinese astrology, sitting at a spinning wheel from which a current of energy flows up to the trachea (represented by a twelve-storied tower holding “secret explanations”). The heart is the seat of fire and the kidneys are the seat of water in the Five Phases system, while the groove of trees beside the Weaving Girl represents the phase of wood. The lungs, associated with metal, are referred to in one of the nearby inscriptions. The bottom third illustrates the lower torso, dominated by the figure of an ox plowing the soil (the fifth phase), representing the most powerful energies that animate the body. Below the ox a boy and girl operate treadmills that drive the waters at the bottom of the spinal column up through the fires below the alchemical vessel of the lowest and most important “cinnabar fields” (dantian). From this vessel the fire ascends the spinal column to unite with the “spirit-water” in the cranium. This is one of many examples from the Daoist tradition where the imagination opens up inner landscapes and initiates an interplay between outer and inner spaces.

There is also an important temporal dimension to our relations with the places we inhabit. As the seasons proceed, the cosmic qi alternates between yang and yin: yang qi is in the ascendant from the beginning of spring and reaches its highest point in midsummer; it then diminishes as the yin qi begins to increase, which peaks at the winter solstice. It will obviously make sense to try to harmonize the currents of qi in one’s body with the larger ebbs and flows beyond, and the Inner Classic recommends precisely this, in conjunction with four of the five viscera from the wuxing system. A contemporary scholar of Chinese philosophy has summed it up as follows:

“The measures good for one’s health ... are the measures one is moved to take when one understands how the seasons act on the body. ... Man is in spontaneous interaction with things, but responds differently according to the degree of his understanding of their similarities and contrasts, connexion or isolation. ... To know how things compare and connect, in particular whether in connecting they support or conflict with each other, ... is to know their patterns (li) and the Way which unites them all” (Graham, 1989: 355-56).

It is on such grounds that a fuller awareness of the relations between our own energies and those of our physical environment will be conducive to our flourishing.

For an individual to flourish, on this worldview, it is necessary to harmonize the energy flows that constitute the human body with the larger patterns of energy that make up the physical environment. Certain places and kinds of terrain, owing to the nature of the energies coursing through them, will not be conducive to the flourishing of certain bodies, while other places with different energies will enhance wellness and vitalize one’s activities. But in cases where the particular individual is likely to flourish in a particular environment, this will happen only when the flows of energy between the body and its surroundings, as well as those within the body, are open and not blocked. (It is a major task of Chinese medicine to free up such blocks in order to restore balance to the internal flows of qi and harmonize them with the environing patterns of energy.) In other words, it’s not enough simply to be in a place: one has to be awake, open to it and aware of its propensities, in order to thrive. And the science that instructs us on how best to achieve optimal performance goes by the name of fengshui, which means literally “winds-waters.”

Fengshui as Practical Environmental Science

From its beginnings in China, which are (appropriately) shrouded in mystery, the phenomenon of fengshui has been
consistently duplex, comprising a solid, down-to-earth form of environmental science and at the same time a pseudo-scientific, mystificatory set of practices designed to separate the rich and gullible from at least some of their largesse. The currently fashionable Beverly Hills version of the latter, by virtue of which one pays practitioners large sums of money to align one’s twenty-thousand-dollar coffee table with one’s fifty-thousand-dollar sofa, does indeed have sources in ancient Chinese practices of “geomancy.” But according to the practical scientific version of fengshui that arose at the same time, the solution is much simpler and cheaper: simply get rid of the coffee table and sofa altogether, and any other junk that’s interfering with your relations to the powers of heaven and earth.

One of the earliest indications of an awareness of fengshui principles comes from a story concerning Meng Tian, the Qin Dynasty general who supervised the building of the first part of the Great Wall of China in the third century BCE.11 Thanks to its following the contours of the terrain, the Wall is traditionally seen as resembling a great dragon, which is an image that comes to refer in fengshui to any important topographical formation.

In 210 BCE, upon the death of his patron the first Qin Dynasty emperor, Meng fell victim to a dastardly political plot (fomented, as such plots usually were, by the imperial eunuchs) and was ordered to commit suicide. On hearing the news, he is said to have cried out in uncomprehending lamentation over this cruel stroke of fate. But then, on reflection, he said gravely: “I am guilty, and assuredly should die. ... A moated wall of more than 10,000 leagues; in the course of this work I cannot have avoided cutting through the earth’s veins [di mo]: this is my guilt.” He thereupon swallowed a lethal dose of poison.12 It is hard to imagine CEOs of contemporary construction projects, who rarely even try to work “in accordance with the configurations of the terrain,” being subject to such pangs of conscience for violating the earth.

The mo of di mo (“earth’s veins”) corresponds to something in the human body like veins, or arteries, or pulses, but more closely to the acupuncture meridians, insofar as no physical “envelope” for the flow is perceptible. General Meng’s concern for respecting the earth is often echoed in the Ming period, which saw a special flourishing of garden culture in China. Fear of damaging the “earth’s veins” fueled opposition to gypsum mining in Taihe county in the fourteenth century, and the government prohibited the digging of ponds in Nanjing “lest they damage the qi of the earth in the imperial capital”13. The sixteenth-century author of the Nongshuo (Talks on farming) writes eloquently of “energy arteries running within the earth” and how “earth and bone are like the arterial system of the human body which carries the energy-blood.”14 When the body is understood as an organism within the larger organism of the environment, its various energetic pulses (mo) correspond to the dynamic configurations referred to as the earth’s “veins,” or “lifelines” (shi).

Central to a text from the third century known as the Book of Burying by Guo Pu (the earliest classic of fengshui) is the idea that certain places are blessed with flows of especially vitalizing energy known as shengqi (“vital breath,” “life energy”), which is a phase of the larger circulation of cosmic energies: “When the ch’i of yin and yang breathes out it is wind. When it ascends it constitutes the clouds, and when it falls it is rain. It travels on and in the ground and becomes vital ch’i. Vital ch’i travels on and in the ground and engenders the myriad things.” Vital qi is further subject to the forces of wind and water. “The [Burial] classic says that ch’i rides the wind and disperses. When bounded by water, it halts.”15

Water molds the natural environs from the outside in obvious ways, primarily through watercourses’ cutting into the

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11 Cited from the Shiji (Records of the historian), in the Cambridge History of China, 1:62.
14 cited in Hay, 1985: 42.
earth, but also through precipitation’s sculpting over time the shapes of mountains. Winds, too, move earth, if not mountains, over the long term, in ways less obvious than waters since the movement of air is itself invisible, becoming perceptible only through its effects on water, vegetation, and loose soil. But *fengshui* is concerned with winds and waters in a deeper sense too: with the invisible “breath of the earth” mentioned above, and with the “flows” of *qi* beneath the earth that were thought to be responsible for the formation of minerals (Needham, 1970: 3:637, 650).

The quality of a place, according to the *Book of Burrying*, depends on the local flows of earth-energy (along *shi*, which François Jullien translates in this context as “lifelines”): “The vital breath circulates along the lifelines of the terrain and is concentrated at the points where they come to an end.” On the *fengshui* understanding of a landscape, *shi* refers to both the “veins” of earth through which the *qi* flows and also the “skeletal structure” or “spinal column” of the terrain. In order to perceive the dynamic configurations of a landscape, it is necessary to gain some distance for a broader perspective, or else to consult an appropriate masterpiece of Chinese landscape painting, the primary principle for which was to “achieve the *shi*” of the landscape (99).

Just as the breath that animates the human body through bringing oxygen to the blood is invisible (the misty exhalations in cold weather being water vapor rather than air), so the cosmic breath animating the body of the earth can’t be seen, though it can be felt or otherwise sensed. The science of acupuncture, which is closely related to *fengshui*, has been slow to gain acceptance as valid on the part of practitioners of Western medicine. The main reason is that its background assumptions are so different, and there is also that fact that the

meridians through which the currents of *qi* flow through the human body are invisible, and Western researchers were looking for literal conduits such as veins or nerves.

This idea should, however, be less mysterious to Western physicists since the discovery of the earth’s magnetic field (the magnetosphere), whose energies flow along lines that are similarly invisible. Indeed the Chinese appear to have been the first to understand the phenomenon of magnetism, and texts referring to the “south-controlling spoon” - a piece of lodestone carved into the shape of the Northern Dipper (Ursa Major) - appear in China over a thousand years earlier than the first European references to the magnetic compass. These Chinese discoveries naturally took place within the context of *fengshui* (Needham, 1969: 71ff; 1962: 4/1, 229-334). It ultimately comes down to cultivating an openness, to acquiring a sense for the place, for the genius loci.

The Scholar’s Garden as Salubrious Site

I should like to conclude with some brief reflections on the classical Scholar’s Garden in China, since this magnific cent art-form is a veritable Gesamtkunstwerk that embodies almost all the themes I have discussed so far.

For over two thousand years the Chinese have expressed their admiration of landscape (the Chinese word *shanshui* means literally “mountains waters”) by creating landscape gardens designed to provide all the benefits of the greater “mountains and waters” within a smaller space-at first in gardens adjacent to the imperial palace, then typically in the garden adjoining the house of a *literatus*, a Confucian scholar-official. But wherever it was, the garden was a place of social and cultural interaction within a natural setting. The aim of the landscape garden was twofold: to create a microcosm of a natural landscape in the city, and to furnish it with places for social interaction, where the human constructions would be integrated into the landscape in a simple and harmonious manner.

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16 Needham (1959: 3:469) notes the parallel between the idea of *qi* animating the earth and Aristotle’s notion of the two terrestrial emanations (*anathumiasis*), one aqueous (*atmidolastera*) and one gaseous (*pneumatolastera*) (*Meteorologia, I, iv [341b6 ff.]*).
A basic premise of fengshui thinking underlies the development of the Chinese garden: since the human body is a configuration of the same kinds of energies that course through the natural environment, one's activities will be enhanced to the extent that one harmonizes the patterns of qi flowing through the body with the energetic configurations of the places in which one lives, works, eats, sleeps, and so forth. Thus when the Chinese build a landscape garden, the idea is not simply to create a place in which to relax and converse and enjoy aesthetic appreciation of natural phenomena such as rocks and vegetation. The point is to construct an environment where the flows and patterns of qi will have a restorative and invigorating effect on the well-being of its inhabitants. In the Chinese tradition rocks have always been revered as being especially powerful configurations of qi, in part because they are understood (on the kind of microcosm-macrocosm correlative thinking of which the Chinese are especially fond) as corresponding to mountains, and thereby reproducing on a smaller scale the vast telluric energies that thrust the earth high into the heavens. Indeed I think it is safe to say that no culture has been more given to petromania, or lithophilia, than the Chinese. (Even those words are too weak - and it's significant that they don't yet exist in the English language.) One indication among many of the Chinese obsession with stones is that at the height of the Song Dynasty, which produced some of the greatest landscape painting the world has ever seen, connoisseurs would pay higher prices for rocks than for the paintings.

Rocks are referred to both as "bones of the earth" and "kernels of earth's essential energies" and thus form both the general frame and the main focal points of the classical gardens of China. The more impressively shaped the rock, the more powerful the energies that it embodies. A scholar-official with the taste and means to furnish his garden with the right rocks is in the fortunate position of being able to create an environment that will promote the physical and mental health of its inhabitants.

For most of the rest of us, there is Voltaire's famous injunction to "cultivate our gardens." (It's a pity Voltaire wasn't writing in German, because then he would have exhorted us to build our gardens, which is more like what the Chinese do.) This injunction is beneficial when taken literally by people fortunate enough to have a garden, and metaphorically by the rest of us - as an exhortation to pay careful attention to and work toward restoring our physical environment to as healthy a condition as possible.