

Special Feature

The Recognition of Geomancy by Intellectuals during the Joseon Period

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Introduction

The Korean typical traditional sciences that have existed until the present day primarily consist of astrology, geomancy and Chinese medical science. Astrology deals with the heavens (time); geomancy, the land; and Chinese medical science, human beings. Thus, they can be divided into three bases: the heavens, the land and human beings. The hierarchy of their influence over modern society is, in order, Chinese medical science, geomancy and astrology. Among them, geomancy is a traditional science that has exerted a stronger influence on Korea than on China or Japan among the three East Asian countries.

Geomancy is a kind of traditional technology that prevents calamity and pursues fortune by grasping and orienting the stream of *Jigi* (地氣, the vital energy of underground). This is a result of wisdom acquired empirically while human beings have been living together with nature. The term for geomancy literally means “wind and water.” In past agrarian societies, stopping wind and securing water were crucial to the daily lives and survival of human beings. Geomancy developed in order to solve such basic problems of life. Later, on the basis of the theory of *Yin-Yang* (negative and positive), the five primary elements in ancient China and the principles of *Juyeok* (Book of Changes) that was the natural philosophy of the East, geomancy was provided with rather a delicate and theoretical system.

Geomancy, which originated and was developed in China, was transmitted to the Goryeo dynasty after it succeeded the Kingdom of Unified Silla which had existed at a time of frequent cultural relations with the Tang dynasty. A Buddhist monk, Doseon, played a great role in diffusing geomancy, which was accepted mainly by the royal family, the nobility and local powerful families. Wang Geon, the founder of the Goryeo dynasty, took advantage of geomancy politically and justified the foundation of his kingdom. This is demonstrated in *Hunyo sipjo* (The Ten Articles of Instruction), which says, “Royal rule was achieved with the help of mountains and streams of the Three Han.” Also, a Buddhist monk, Myocheong, took advantage of geomantic prophecy and argued for the transfer of the capital to Seogyong (Pyeongyang of today), even leading a revolt. Thus, geomancy had exerted a political influence together with Buddhism throughout the Goryeo period.

When the founder Yi Seonggye rebuilt the Joseon dynasty and selected the site of the capital, he also took advantage of geomancy. To establish the legitimacy of the Joseon dynasty, it was, above all, an urgent task to quit

Gaeseong, the capital of the Goryeo dynasty and to construct a new royal capital. In this process, many sites were proposed for the royal capital and arguments were developed for choosing the most suitable site. In particular, an argument over the position and direction of the royal palace between Jeong Do-jeon and Saint Muhak is recorded in an unofficial history. At that time, Saint Muhak argued that the palaces should be oriented with Mt. Inwang as a basic mountain according to the topography of Hanyang (Seoul of today). In contrast, Jeong Do-jeon argued that the palaces should be built facing south with Mt. Baegak as a basic mountain because the king should manage the administrative business facing south. Eventually, Gyeongbokgung palace was erected with Mt. Baegak as a basic mountain following the argument of Jeong Do-jeon. Thus, geomancy exerted a great influence on the selection of the royal capital and the placement of palaces.

Later, further geomantic discussion about the transfer of the capital rarely appears in history except for that of Gyoha during the period of King Gwanghaegun. However, besides selecting the royal capital, geomancy has been used in a variety of aspects of daily life such as selecting the sites for either royal tombs or private tombs of the nobility or common people, not to mention selecting the location of towns, town-planning, and selecting sites for houses. Geomancy came to permeate areas of daily life in contrast to its political use during the period of Goryeo.

Toward the latter period of the Joseon dynasty, civilians had a strong tendency to deify geomancy. In particular, while tomb-related geomancy on behalf of the deceased was a widely-recognized social practice, it also caused many problems. There were frequent lawsuits related to the sites of ancestral tombs. Such acts as secret burials at another's ancestral graveyard or forced occupation of graveyards became serious social problems. Confucian scholars placed the blame squarely on geomancy for these problems.

As is often seen in the scientific tradition of the East, geomancy involves both a rational attribute based on empirical knowledge and a mysterious attribute that is hard to prove empirically. Formation of empirical and scientific theory through long interaction with the natural environment was not foreign to Confucian scholars of the Joseon period. However, the mysterious attribute that was remarkably represented by the theory of fortune and misfortune wasn't easily accepted by the Confucian scholars of Joseon. Nevertheless, geomancy was acceptable to Confucian scholars when it emphasized a moral norm like "filial piety." In order to bury the ancestral corpse comfortably, it was difficult to repudiate geomancy which was the

the sole method of reading the land at that time. Consequently, the Joseon dynasty viewed geomancy (geography) as an important technology and constructed the royal tombs based on it. Confucian scholars also followed the theory of geomancy when choosing the sites of ancestral tombs.

This paper aims to review the history of the practice of geomancy during the Joseon period based on this critical perspective. Reviewing intellectuals' perception of geomancy during the Joseon period, this paper will try to grasp concretely how geomancy functioned in society at that time. To explain the peculiarities of geomancy during the Joseon dynasty, it will be helpful to review how heretical geomancy was nevertheless recognized by intellectuals in Joseon society where Neo-Confucianism was a fundamental basis of social management.

The Characteristics of the Theoretical Structure of Geomancy

The theoretical structure of geomancy shown in traditional geomancy books is divided into four aspects: the theory of mountains, the theory of auspicious sites, the theory of topography, and the theory of water. Also, they are often divided into three further theories: geomantic topography, principle and material force, and material shape. Choi Chang-jo, who tried to arrange geomantic thought from the viewpoint of modern geography, divided the theoretical structure of geomancy largely into an energy-feeling system and a theoretical system of empirical science. The energy-feeling cognitive system takes the feeling of the energy of the land as its core and includes the theory of (ancestors and descendants) feeling the same energy, the theory of the owner's fortune and misfortune and the theory of appearance. It has a strong mysterious attribute that is hard to understand rationally. The theoretical system of empirical science consists of the empirical knowledge of the land that has been accumulated and includes observing mountains, embracing winds, getting water, determining propitious sites and finding direction (Choi 1984).

Thus, there is both a rational element and a mysterious element mixed in geomancy which lacks a consistent theoretical system. In *Cheongogyeong* (青鳥經, The Geomantic scripture of Cheongo) and *Geumnanggyeong* (金囊經, The Geomantic scripture in the golden bag) which are accepted as earlier scriptures of geomancy, most theories are described in obscure metaphors. They involve mysterious content to the degree that Confucian scholars who

pursued rational and practical ethics might accuse them of heresy. When geomancy is seen from the viewpoint of the technology of observing the land to find a propitious site, the empirical scientific theories related to observing mountains, embracing winds, getting water, determining propitious sites or finding direction constitute content which Confucian scholars can readily accept. In terms of modern geography, they correspond to the location theory of houses or the location theory of tombs, so it is unnecessary to throw away the methods and techniques that were used to find propitious sites.

One problem, however, is the theoretical system based on the “feeling the same energy” theory. In *Geumnamgyeong*, which was seen as the most important scripture of geomancy during the Joseon period, the theory of feeling the same energy comes foremost as follows:

A burial is to receive live energy and five energy flows under the land. A human being receives his body from parents and if the remains of parents get energy, descendants will get a benefaction. (Gwak Bak, *Geumnamgyeong*, Chapter of Feeling)

According to the scripture, in case of feeling energy, fortune or misfortune comes to human beings. If the copper mountain collapses in the west, the mysterious bell in the east will ring. If a tree blooms, grain will shoot out in the room. (Gwak Bak, *Geumnamgyeong*, Chapter of Feeling)

The theory of “feeling the same energy” is called the theory of *chinja gameung* (children feel the vital energy of parents) which constitutes a theoretical basis for geomancy of tomb when selecting a burial site. As parents and children have the same energy, if the ancestral corpse is buried at a propitious site, the good energy the remains of parents receive will be transmitted to children, who will become fortunate as a result. Such an explanation based on the theory of feeling is not strange to Confucian scholars who are accustomed to relative thought such as *cheonin gameungnon* (the theory that the heavens and human beings feel each other). It is not the theory of ‘feeling the same energy’ itself, but the theory of fortune and misfortune on which it is based which constitutes the problem.

The so-called theory of fortune and misfortune goes beyond “feeling the same energy” to directly connect the everyday life of descendants with the goodness and badness of burial sites. Beyond the scope of metaphor, it connects the concrete aspects of fortune and misfortune; therefore, its expression is quite provocative. The following is a passage related to the theory of fortune and misfortune in one of the earlier scriptures of geomancy, *Cheonggyeong*.

As a mountain likes to meet and water likes to be clear, there will be honor nearby and abundant wealth if a mountain is met and a watercourse winds. If a mountain is closed and water flows by, a king will be caught and become a slave and feudal lords will fall. If mountains bow deeply and gather, and a watercourse meanders, descendants will be extremely prosperous.

If a mountain runs away and water flows straight, one will be a slave. If water is abundant east and west, wealth and treasure will be boundless. If a watercourse winds sideways three times and straight four times, one's official post will be elevated much higher. (*Cheongogyeong*)

Thus, even the earlier scripture suggests the aspects of fortune and misfortune quite concretely. It doesn't simply describe the content of being fortunate or suffering harm but is describing matters as if there is an omen in reality such as "One will be caught as a captive or will be a slave and hang on relations." It can be seen that geomancy surpasses the function of the technology of observing the land simply to find a propitious site and assumes the character of changing one's fortune related to human business. Consequently, not merely selecting a propitious site, but arranging to become fortunate, becomes an aim of geomancy.

In *Myeongsannon* (明山論, The Theory of noted mountains) which was a subject of the civil service examination during the Joseon period, the theory of fortune and misfortune is reviewed. A typical instance is as follows:

A site thinks highly of getting a mountain. If it doesn't get a mountain, it won't get energy. A site thinks highly of getting water. If it doesn't get water, it won't become fortune. Direction thinks highly of looking at a mountain. If it is backed by a mountain, fortune won't be brought. Direction thinks highly of looking at water. If it is backed by water, profits won't last long. To get both a mountain and water will cause riches and honor of descendants to continue for a long time. (*Myeongsannon*, Chapter of Two energies)

As can be seen in the above quotation, the way of finding a mountain and water is connected with fortune and misfortune. This shows that the theory of fortune and misfortune is immanent in the foundation of geomancy. *Jirisinbeop* (地理新法, New geography), written by Ho Sunsin from the viewpoint of the theory of principle and material force, was one of the four subjects in the civil service examination during the Joseon period. It describes the theory of fortune and misfortune very remarkably as follows:

The reason geomancy is used by people is that its influence on people's good and ill luck and fortune and misfortune is quite enormous. As for efficacy of medicine, its good and harm is just related to a person. As for correctness of divination, its good and harm is just related to only one thing. As for correctness of physiognomy and fatalism, their good and harm is just related to satisfying one's curiosity. However, as for the influence of geomancy on people, if it is correct, its auspiciousness and fortune will be enough to glorify a family. If it is false, its calamity will be enough to destroy a family. Considering this situation, how dare we say geomancy is a matter of little importance and that we can dispense with good geomantic technique! (Kim 2004)

Furthermore, *Geumnamgyeong* says, "As fortune or misfortune appears in less than a day, a person of virtue should take a divine thing and change his fate" (Gwak Bak, *Geumnamgyeong*, Chapter of Mountain topography) and makes a revolutionary assertion that fate can be changed by geomancy. As the fate of all things under the sun including human beings has been decided by the heavens, common Confucianists cannot accept a change in fate at all. To deny the inevitability of inborn fate and to actively accept the mutability of fate is analogous to a revolutionary thought. Because of this attribute, geomancy has also functioned historically as an ideology to justify surname-change revolutions. King Wang Geon, the founder of the Goryeo dynasty took advantage of geomancy as an ideology in founding the nation and the first king of the Joseon dynasty, Yi Seonggye, also used the geomantic ideology earnestly.

The revolutionary character of geomancy that 'a person of virtue should take a divine thing and change his fate' resulted in more public indulgence in the theory of fortune and misfortune. As the fate of human beings is alleged not to be inborn but changeable, it is natural to a certain degree that people should earnestly try to change their fate. To change misfortune into fortune, people took advantage of geomancy assiduously. It was common to find a famous geomancer and a propitious site by paying a lot of money. Such a phenomenon prevailed during the period of Tang and Sung in China. Therefore, books on geomancy in later days came to put a more emphasis on ethical character. It was so-called *sojugilbyungnon* (所主吉凶論, theory of owner's good or ill luck) that was suggested in *Injasujjabhyojiribak* (人子須知資孝地理學, Geography of filial piety essential to human beings) by brothers Seo Seon-gye and Seo Seon-sul during the early Ming dynasty.

Sojugilbyungnon emphasizes ethical character on the basis of famous phrases in *Juyeok*: "There are surely happy events at the house which accumulates virtue while there are surely disasters at the house which

accumulates vices" (*Juyeok*, gwon2, Trigram of gon). It is a theory that, however propitious a site one gets, one cannot be fortunate if one performs evil deeds. Likewise, whatever bad site one gets, one can be fortunate if one performs good deeds. At this point, geomantic theory seems to make no sense.¹ Geomancy will play nothing more than a supplementary role in ethical norms. However, it must be seen that *sojugilbyungnon* is not a core theory of geomancy but a kind of normative theory suggested in response to the situation of social vice caused by "the theory of fortune and misfortune" that prevailed. The following tale is an example showing the emphasis given to ethical characteristics by geomancy.

Park Sang-ui, who was a well-known geomancer during the period of Joseon, made a trip one day. It became dark on the way. He stayed for the night at a house where a bachelor and his old mother were living. Seeing the old mother cook rice out of a goblin pot, Park Sang-ui asked why. She said that it was because of her dead husband's request. He appreciated her hospitality and left the house after selecting a burial site propitious enough to produce ministers. Ten years later, he happened to pass the village again only to fail to find the household for whom he had selected a propitious site. The family had already been broken up. He wondered and asked a neighbor in the village. The neighbor said that the bachelor's father had committed a murder while alive; accordingly, the family couldn't be fortunate because of such evil deeds. (Jang 1995)

The Recognition of Geomancy by Earlier Confucianists

Neo-Confucianism was the dominant principle of social management during the Joseon period. Accordingly, from the viewpoint of mainstream Confucianism, geomancy couldn't help but be a heretical science. Moreover, if the irrational content of the theory of fortune and misfortune dominated geomancy, it seems that there would be no room in which rational Confucianists could accept it. Consequently, the argument about whether to

1. Emphasizing ethical characteristics in geomancy gives rise to a paradox that threatens the foundation of geomancy. However, human beings cannot perform good deeds consistently throughout their entire lives. Therefore, according to the view of harmony among the heavens, the earth and human beings, intentionally trying to accumulate good deeds, to 'take a divine thing and change fate' aggressively and the supplementation of insufficient good deeds with the energy of the land can be a solution to that question (Choi 1990:106).

accept geomancy or not continued consistently throughout the Joseon period. What intellectuals of Joseon mentioned most in this process was the geomantic discourse of Jeongja (程子, Jeongyicheon 程伊川) and Chu Hsi (朱熹).

In Joseon society, where the Neo-Confucianism of Chu Hsi was the dominant thinking, the geomantic discourse of Jeongja and Chu Hsi played an important role as a kind of guidebook to geomancy. It was the theory of geomancy of Jeongja and Chu Hsi that was presented as the foundation of whether to accept geomancy or not. Thus, it had a great influence on intellectuals. Therefore, before reviewing the recognition of geomancy by intellectuals of Joseon, it is necessary to review the theory of geomancy of Jeongja and Chu Hsi.

The Recognition of Geomancy by Jeongja

Jeongja described the contents related to geomancy in *Jangnon* (葬論, Theory of burial) as follows:

To select a burial site is to decide if it's good land or bad land and not to presume fortune or misfortune, geomancers say. If the land is propitious, the ancestral spirit buried there will be comfortable and descendants will also be prosperous. It has the same reason: that stems and leaves will be luxuriant if the roots of a tree are earthed up. If the land is bad, the contrary will be true. Then, what is so-called 'good land'? The proof is that the color of the soil should be colorful and bright and the vegetation luxuriant. Father, grandfather, son and grandson have the same energy. If ancestral bones are comfortable, the descendants will also be comfortable. If not, the descendants won't be, either.

As can be seen in the above quotation, Jeongja denies the theory of fortune and misfortune of geomancers. But he doesn't deny geomantic theory. He basically suggests the choice of the site should be made because there are good or bad sites. To select sites carefully is the cardinal point and the reason for the existence of geomancy. Also, he accepts even the theory of 'feeling the same energy' that is an important theoretical basis of the geomancy of tombs. He argues that if ancestral bones are buried at a good site, descendants will be comfortable. Judging from examining the color of soil and then fortune-telling, it can be seen that he maintains the viewpoint of the theory of geomantic topography rather than the theory of principle and

material force based on direction. Together with this geomantic viewpoint, he suggests “five anxieties” as considerations in site selection. They are also frequently quoted by Confucianists of the Joseon period.

The five anxieties must be refrained from in the future: not to bury a corpse on the road; not to bury a corpse under the castle; not to bury a corpse in the ditch or pond; not to bury a corpse on the site taking propitious energy; not to bury a corpse in the vicinity of rice paddies or fields. (Jeongyicheon, *Jangnon*)

The five anxieties Jeongja suggested are very much commonplaces. They are not difficult and mysterious terms of geomancy. A person capable of rational thinking can understand them. This caused some Confucianists to argue that Jeongja didn't believe in geomancy and that even his saying, “If that side is comfortable, this side will also be comfortable” was not a geomantic expression but only a expression of feelings. Presumably, Jeongja didn't accept geomancy but denied it.

The Recognition of Geomancy by Chu Hsi

Considering that the Neo-Confucianism of Chu Hsi was a dominant thought in Joseon society, the theory of geomancy of Chu Hsi exerted an enormous influence on intellectuals. Chu Hsi had a profound knowledge of geomancy and left detailed writings on geomancy, which is evident in *Sanneunguijang* (山陵儀狀, The Documents about the Royal Tomb) submitted to Emperor Gwangjong in 1194. The core excerpt is as follows:

To bury a corpse means to hide bones carefully. That is, it means to take good care of ancestral bones. When burying ancestral bones, descendants should be prudent and make the bones comfortable with sincerity and benevolence. It is exactly an everlasting true tactic. If the bones are taken good care of and the spirit becomes comfortable, descendants will be prosperous and sacrificial rites will be continued. This is just a law of nature. If the burial site isn't selected carefully and the soil is bad, water, moles, crickets, ants or wind will infiltrate into the tomb. Then, the bones and spirit will be uncomfortable, causing such a calamity, death or a misfortune that the family line will break. It must be a very frightening matter.

One who selects a burial site should examine the following carefully: whether the mountain range behind the tomb is hard or soft; whether wind

and energy is gathered well or dispersed; how deep or shallow water and soil are; whether the area of the hole that bones are buried is straight or leaning; whether it is a propitious site or not as a whole. Later on, it will be possible to estimate whether the site is propitious or not. Those who insist that the burial site should be selected according to the surname of the emperor should be made to select a propitious site following the above five criteria. (Kim 1998:24-29)

Chu Hsi also followed the theory of Jeongja, “If that side is comfortable, this side will also be comfortable.” Basically, he recognizes the theory of feeling the same energy. However, unlike Jeongja, he expresses the precise methods for selecting sites in geomantic terms. Jeongja suggested the concrete methods in “five anxieties,” but he didn’t use geomantic terms. Chu Hsi advanced a step forward and suggested the methods based on the fundamental geomantic theory like gathering and dispersing. As for the methods of selecting sites, Chu Hsi mainly follows the theory of geomantic topography and denies the theory of principle and material force (理氣論) based on direction.

The Recognition of Geomancy by Intellectuals in the Period of Joseon

The Aspects of Existence and Function of Geomancy in Joseon

As mentioned above, the Joseon dynasty was founded by taking positive advantage of geomancy. Despite overt claims to have established a Neo-Confucian society, it was a nevertheless a product of accepting the positive revolutionary thought of geomancy, “to take a divine thing and change one’s fate.” Therefore, the transfer of the capital from Gaeseong, where the geomantic energy related to the sovereign had declined, to Hanyang (Seoul of today) was pursued very urgently. In this process, geomancy played an important role, which is confirmed through the records of *Joseonwangjosilnok* (The Veritable Records of the Joseon Dynasty).

Geomancy of the early Joseon dynasty was accepted positively from the national point of view and, afterward, came to be fixed as a new system. That is, an exclusive official post was established while geomancy was being used in the construction of the royal capital and royal tombs. *Gwansanggam* (The Office for Observation of Natural Phenomena) included both a teaching professor and a teaching instructor of geomancy who took charge of

practical affairs and education (*Gyeongguk daejeon*, gwon3, Code of *yejeon*). In particular, as the scrutiny of royal tombs was treated as important national business, the King directly suggested his opinion more often than not.

During the reign of King Sejong, subjects derided geomancy for its absurdity that “fortune and misfortune derives from good or ill luck of the burial sites of ancestors or the direction of houses.” King Sejong retorted to such an argument, saying that King Taejo and King Taejong also took advantage of geomancy when constructing the new capital and royal tombs; even famous Confucianists, Jumungong and Chaegyotong had decided their own burial sites when dying. Also, when Yi Yang-dal and Choe Yang-seon argued over blocking a path consisting of 12 courses at the royal tomb Heonneung, King Sejong directly gave a lecture against the opposition of subjects (*Sejong sillok* 15/ 7/ 7, vol 3, 489). Saying that all the theories of geography could neither be believed nor completely ignored, stressing that ranges and shapes in geography should be scrutinized minutely because of its complication, and indicating that former kings had used geography when deciding on the capital and royal tombs, King Sejong had Confucianists study and reveal the point of geography (*Sejong sillok* 15/ 7/ 10, vol 3, 490).²

In particular, in many cases problems related to royal tombs were solved according to the theory of geomancy. Most Confucianists had ill feelings toward this custom. Though subjects asserted the absurdity of geomancy in relation to the transfer of a royal tomb during the reign of King Myeongjong, the King rejected the suggestion, saying: “Though geomancy may be incredible, good or ill luck should be distinguished” (*Myeongjong sillok* 14/ 4/23, vol 20, 511). Moreover, in the process of deciding the burial site of the Queen’s agent, King Seonjo said to subjects attacking geomancy for its absurdity, “When the technique of geography is accustomed to astronomy and observation of energy, it will master the delicacy of the contiguous line of a stratum.” He bravely revealed his mastery over geography (*Seonjo sillok* 33/10/10, vol. 24, 134).

However, the mysterious character of geomancy was hard for realist Confucianists to accept easily. Though it was nationally established both as a technology and as a regime, and played an important role, the theory of geomancy couldn’t be easily accepted by Confucianists. This was reflected in

2. Here, geography means geomancy. In Joseon, geomancy and geography were used as synonyms and, afterward, a coined word, *pungsujiri* (geomancy+geography) appeared.

the acceptance of geomancy by schools.³ It seems that the theory of principle and material force that was more aligned to the theory of fortune and misfortune was harder to accept than the theory of geomantic topography.

In relation to the theories of the two schools, Jeong Gu said, “Geomancers consider it very important to investigate the following: the situation of a host and guest bowing to each other; the situation of a tortoise, Chinese phoenix, dragon and tiger; the situation of gathering and dispersing; the situation of being gathered smoothly and closed tightly. Also, geomancers refer to the cardinal principle by means of the eight trigrams and the sexagenary cycle and decide the pictures of right and reverse and good or ill luck by finding direction and pro or con.” In particular, he argued that the geomancy of Chu Hsi was applicable to the theory of geomantic topography and that Chu Hsi didn’t accept the theory of directions (*Seonjo sillok* 33/ 9/ 4, vol. 24, 122). It can be seen that even geomancers at that time took the theory of geomantic topography more seriously than the theory of direction because the latter was strong in the mysterious theory of fortune and misfortune.

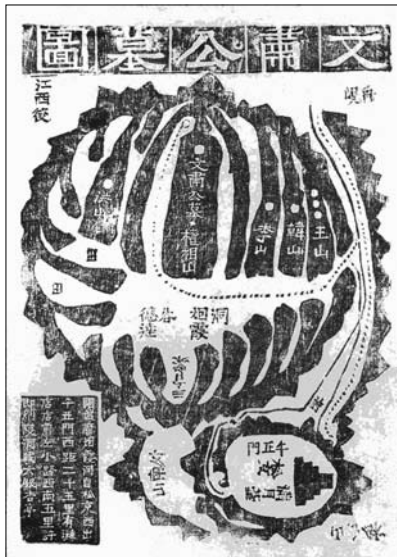
Meanwhile, even general Confucianists who didn’t practice geomancy showed a different geomantic custom from their outward insistence. That is, while criticizing the mysterious character of geomancy, they followed the theory of geomancy in selecting the burial sites of their parents. To practice the ethics of “filial piety” emphasized in Confucianism, it was natural that they should bury the bodies of their parents at propitious sites. Geomancy was simply a technology that decided propitious sites. It was an awkward dilemma to criticize geomancy outwardly but to follow it internally. At this point, a peculiar aspect of recognizing geomancy by intellectuals of Joseon appears.

3. Geomancy that was established in *Jangseo* by Gwak Bak was later divided into two schools. One is the theory of geomantic topography by Yang Gyun-song which emphasizes topography and geographical features and grasps the interrelationship of mountains, holes, sand and water. The other is the theory of principle and material force which began in Fújiàn, China, became popular due to Wanggeup in the Chinese Sung period, and emphasizes planets and divination signs (March 1986).

Figure 1 Geomantic Map of the Situation of a Village by Geomancy of House
(Collection of the Seoul Museum of History)



Figure 2 Geomantic Map of an Ancestral Graveyard by Geomancy of Tomb
(Collection of the Seoul Museum of History)



The Recognition of Geomancy by Intellectuals in the Period of Joseon

The Negative theory of geomancy

As the intellectuals in the period of Joseon were well grounded in Confucian attainments, it was not easy for them to accept geomancy which was a kind of conjury. Accordingly, scholars who denied geomancy exceeded in number those who accepted it. Mostly, they attacked geomancy for its mysterious character. There was a stronger rejection of the geomancy of tomb connected with the theory of fortune and misfortune rather than the geomancy of house. They also tried to find the rationale for rejecting geomancy in the discourse of famous Chinese Confucianists.

1. Geomancy of Eo Hyo-cheom

Eo Hyo-cheom (1405-1475) was a representative scholar in the first part of the Joseon period. When there was a discussion of whether an artificial hill should be erected inside the capital and watercourses be protected from the viewpoint of geomancy, or a discussion by Yi Hyeon-no that Cheonggyecheon should be dredged for clear water during the reign of King Sejong, Eo Hyo-cheom, who was an official of *Jiphyeonjeon* (a royal research institute under King Sejong), denied the theory of fortune and misfortune, saying: "Even Sama Ongong, Jeongja and Chu Hsi said that it is natural to bury the body at a propitious site but they never agreed on the theory that fortune or misfortune depends on geography." He also argued that the fortune or misfortune of a state should depend not on geography but on Heaven's decree and people's minds. In actual practice, however, he buried his parents at the family graveyard and he himself was buried at the foot of Gwangnaru (*Gukjo bogam*, vol. 7, the 26th year of King Sejong).

2. Geomancy of Seo Geo-jeong

Alongside Eo Hyo-cheom, Seo Geo-jeong (1420-1488) was also a representative scholar during the first part of the Joseon period. He said, "The theory about mountains and water began in the Later Han dynasty of China. The theory was followed by Cheongoja, Dogan and Gwak Bak; Yang Gyunsong in the period of Tang; Ho Sunsun in the period of Sung. All of them are not worth being mentioned. As this theory decides on good or ill luck of descendants by means of the good and bad of direction, mountain and water, it is a far-fetched and complicated interpretation. However, many people of later days were intoxicated by such conjury: some of them didn't

bury the bodies of their parents for a few years; others dug out their ancestral tombs and removed the bodies from one grave to another repeatedly. Nevertheless, they couldn't be blessed and were followed by unexpected calamities.”(Yi Yu-won, *Limba pilgi*, gwon16, Chapter of *munbeonjjjang*, Pungsu). Seo Geo-jeong denied not only the previous scriptures of geomancy but also the theory of feeling the same energy and fortune and misfortune.

3. Geomancy of Lee Hang-bok

Yi Hang-bok (1556-1618), who rejected geomancy, was a representative scholar in the middle period of the Joseon dynasty. When a conjurer Yi Eui-sin proposed to King Gwanhaegun that the capital should be transferred to Gyoha, Yi Hang-bok vigorously opposed the proposal, saying that there had been historically few examples of fixing the capital by geomancy and that *Jigisoewangseol* (the theory that the rise and fall of the royal capital depends on geographical conditions) was false and unbelievable (*Yeollyeosil gisul*, gwon7). When he was young and read through books on geomancy, he viewed them as groundless reports and ignored them. He said, “Geomancy is nothing more than the situation of bowing to each other between a host and a guest and the features of a black tortoise, Chinese phoenix, blue dragon and white tiger. The methods of gathering and dispersing, meeting and parting, melting and freezing, closure are also considered. There is only either humaneness or heartlessness.” Speaking of the direction of the eight trigrams and the sexagenary cycle and the theory of obedience and disobedience, he rejected them as unreliable ones that were established in later days (Yi Yu-won, *Limba pilgi*, gwon16, Chapter of *munbeonjjjang*, Theory of burial). Accordingly, he argued that it would be of no help to move a house or escape from a bad direction for the purpose of preventing calamity. It can be known that as he criticized the geomantic theory of fortune and misfortune on the basis of understanding geomancy itself, he put an emphasis on the criticism of the theory of direction rather than that of geomantic topography.

4. Geomancy of Jeong Sang-gi

Jeong Sang-gi (1678-1752), a scholar who, academically, pursued the importance of practical learning in the later Joseon period, is well-known for his epoch-making *Donggukjido* (Map of Korea) in the history of Korean maps. Seeing evil social customs caused by geomancy, he expressed his opinion: “As geomancy concludes that a good person can attain a propitious site, good or ill luck actually depends not on soil but on the Heavens.” He denied the

theory of fortune and misfortune of geomancy based on *sojugilbyungnon*. In particular he pointed to the theoretical paradox of geomancy.

Also, he bravely denied the theory of Jeongja, “If ancestors are comfortable, I’ll also be comfortable.” As flesh and bones have been already separated and energy and veins can’t be connected each other, it is impossible that rotten bones will have an influence on the security and the good or ill luck of descendants. Thus, he completely ignored the theory of feeling the same energy. Moreover, he made an alternative plan to correct a chronic evil custom of geomancy: not to rely on geomancers but to collect various opinions and then construct an unnamed royal tomb by way of showing an example, to burn all the books on geomancy, and to prohibit the conjury of geomancy (Jeong Sang-gi, *Nongpomundab*, Prohibition of Geomancy).

5. Geomancy of Lee Ik

Yi Ik (1681-1763) was a scholar of the Practical Learning School who, together with Jeong Yak-yong, criticized geomancy on the basis of a broad investigation into geomancy. Basically, he criticized the theory of feeling the same energy that had been suggested as a basic theory in such geomantic scriptures as *Cbeongogyeong* and *Geumnanggyeong*.

According to the conjury, it is said that just as roots of a tree can receive the energy of soil and then flowers and fruit can flourish, so an ancestor’s virtue can be transmitted to descendants when the ancestral body is buried at a mountain and the remains get the energy of soil. However, even though sons may attain the energy, can it be handed down to far offspring? ... But as a father or a son has his own different body, energy cannot be transferred. Therefore, even though the father has a full stomach, the son may be hungry; even though the father feels warm, the son may feel cold. Though a hurt of a finger doesn’t make us feel painless, we can be free from the pain with the hurt finger cut off. The same is true of the father and the son who have individual bodies. Even when a son lives under his paternal roof, the good or ill luck of the father or the son can’t be consistent. Needless to say, the spirit of remote ancestors can’t influence it (Yi Ik, *Seongbo saseol*, gwon10, Chapter of Human Affairs, Scriptures of geomancy).

Thus, he completely denies the theory of feeling the same energy. In particular, he denied even the theory, “If the spirit of ancestors is comfortable, descendants will also be comfortable” that, significantly, Jeongja and Chu Hsi had accepted. Recognizing that the ancestral spirit couldn’t have been connected with the good or ill luck of descendants in many cases, he

vehemently disparaged the theory of feeling the same energy (Yi Ik, *Seongbo saseol*, gwon9, Chapter of Human Affairs, Geomancy). Though he discredited the geomancy of tomb, he had a broad knowledge of the geomancy of house. Dealing with the method of conception and the method of proper stipend by Gamyeoga, he expressed the theory of direction of geomancy, saying: the direction water is situated near should take a lower position; the direction mountains are situated near should take a higher position (Yi Ik, *Seongbo saseol*, gwon3, Chapter of heaven and earth, Techniques of geomancers). He also praised the geographical auspiciousness of the capital, Hanyang (Yi Ik, *Seongbo saseol*, gwon3, Chapter of Heaven and Earth, Capital Hanyang).

6. Geomancy of Park Ji-won

Park Ji-won (1737-1805) was a representative scholar who decried the evil influence of geomancy together with Park Je-ga. The following is a representative critique of tomb geomancy.

It is a long time since public morals were vitiated, the family line became estranged, family members didn't live under the same roof and eat the same bread with one another and they didn't borrow grain, linen and silk or household utensils. To make matters worse, the geomancy that a propitious mountainous region may bring forth fortune or misfortune exceeds filial piety, fraternity, harmony and reciprocal belief. Consequently, how miserable it is to make a separate tomb at another site!

Moreover, there occurs frequently a lawsuit over a burial site and a quarrel over trees of the graveyard. The wicked and enemies appear in the family. It is lamentable that there are few families to follow the custom of mass graves.⁴ If only people don't forget their origin and try to think over the minds of ancestors, there is no doubt that all ancestors will be eager to have their own numberless descendants and live together with them for generations. (Park Ji-won, *Yeonamjib*, gwon1, Record of Yeongsam)

4. As to mass graves, Jeong Yak-yong said, "There is a practice of mass graves in 'Gain' *Jurye* (the Book of Rites) by means of ancestral memorial rites. An official took charge of graveyards of the country, advised people to follow the custom of mass graves and controlled prohibitory creeds and frequency. The government gave people graveyards which were not violated. People didn't make private tombs. When a person died, the body was carried out of the north gate and buried at the north. After ages, the law was preserved and was called *bukmang* (a region of many tombs). Therefore, burial sites were not selected" (Jeong Yak-yong. *Gyeongse yupyoo*, gwon8, Officials of the land, System of the land 11).

Park Ji-won criticized that the custom of mass graves in ancient China were no longer found in the Joseon kingdom but the custom of single graves which necessitated locating a propitious site according to geomancy was prevailing.

7. Geomancy of Jeong Yak-yong

Jeong Yak-yong (1762-1836) was a representative realist who studied geomancy extensively in the latter period of Joseon. He clearly distinguished geography from geomancy. He defined “geography”, which was generally used as a synonym of geomancy, as the study of mountains, streams, division of villages, rooms for night duty, products, royal chambers, costumes, customs and the like. It is natural that he who thought highly of an academic tradition of seeking truth derived from facts would ignore geomancy. In particular, in the latter period of Joseon, geomancy of tomb became corrupt, and various lawsuits of graves occurred frequently as a significant social problem. Seeing such a social situation, he himself combined the famous theories on geomancy by the past people and published *Pungsujipui* (風水集議, Collected Works of Pungsu).

In *Pungsujipui*, Jeong Yak-yong reviewed the geomancy of famous Chinese Confucians and supplemented with his opinion. He commented that Jang Whoenggeo, Sama Ongong and Yi Jeong had regarded geomancy as “completely lacking in righteousness.” In particular, he commented that even Chu Hsi who had allegedly believed geomancy had denied it. That is, Chu Hsi quoted the words Jeongja used in his prior argument and Chu Hsi mentioned geomancy only out of human feelings. In addition, other dubious words related to geomancy are similar those in Taoist *Chamdonggyejubae* (參同契註解, Annotation of *Chamdonggye*) and do not reflect his own thinking.

Jeong Yak-yong’s criticism of geomancy focused primarily on geomancy of tomb. In particular, the “theory of feeling the same energy” which encompasses the most mysterious aspect of geomancy of tomb was hard for him to accept. “However propitious a site the dried and twisted bones inside the tomb have occupied, how can they bring forth good fortune to descendants?” (Jeong Yak-yong, *Simunjib*, gwon 11, Discourses of Pungsu 1). He basically denied the theory of feeling the same energy, that the ancestral bones could influence the fortunes of descendants.

Jeong Yak-yong also criticized the ‘theory of direction.’ He said that to divide a calamity from a good omen according to direction was nothing more than delusion (Jeong Yak-yong, *Simunjib*, gwon 11, Discourses of Pungsu 2). In particular, in critiquing the geomancy of bringing a fortune, he indicated

that “Why does the geomancer who knows a propitious site that may bring a fortune accept payment to give the site to another person?” (Jeong Yak-yong, *Simunajib*, gwon 11, Discourses of Pungsu 5) He described the situation that geomantic evil caused such serious problems concerning tombs as follows:

Because of geomancy, there are few empty gravesites at the mountains. Recently, people make graves by preparing holes separately on the plains. It is a big problem that as fertile fields and lands have become a feudal territory, the country has been diminished in size day by day. When measuring the land, the boundaries of graves of the gentry change into wasteland. The situation should not be accepted by a good-hearted chief magistrate. (Jeong Yak-yong, *Mongmin simseo*, gwon 4, Six articles of Ministry of Taxation, Land policy)

There was also a criticism about geomancy of house made alongside that of geomancy of tomb. It was related to the problem of deciding the site of a town. Though the sites of villages at the seaside should be selected from the viewpoint of national defense, Jeong Yak-yong criticized the situation that such sites were decided by the geomantic theory of mountains and water (Jeong Yak-yong, *Gyeongse yupyo*, gwon 2, Board of Public Works 6). Moreover, he suggested that geography and astrology at the Office for the Observation of Natural Phenomena should be abolished and technocrats in charge of them should not be chosen again (Jeong Yak-yong, *Gyeongse yupyo*, gwon 1, Ministry of Personnel 1).

The Positive theory of geomancy

In the Joseon period, intellectuals accepted geomancy focusing on geomancy of house rather than that of tomb. It was because geomancy of house had a less mysterious character than that of tomb. Various texts demonstrate that the theory of geomancy was employed frequently in selecting sites for cities, villages and houses. In particular, *Salimgyeongje* (Farm Management) by Hong Man-seon (1643-1715) in the latter period of Joseon contained a description of *bokgeo* (finding a propitious dwelling site) in its first chapter. Such theory of geomancy of house was exhaustively examined in *Jungbosalimgyeongje* (Farm Management Enlarged with Supplements) and later in *Imwongyeongjeji* (an encyclopedic work on agriculture). Also, Lee Jung-hwan wrote *Taekniji* (Topography of Selecting Villages) taking geomantic elements into consideration, which was used as a textbook on geomancy of house among civilians. This paper reviews the recognition of representative scholars who accepted geomancy positively below.

1. Recognition of Geomancy by Yi Deok-hyeong

Yi Deok-hyeong (1561-1613) whose pen name was Haneum and who was once the prime minister in the middle period of the Joseon dynasty is known to have been a representative scholar who accepted the theory of divination based on topography. In response to a question, “How can geography be believed because it seems to be so vague?” he said, “There has already been astronomy. Why not geography? As there is no person of insight, it is impossible to understand it. Speaking of discourse on high mountains I have read that an ancestor of my wife possessed, the statement squares with the facts miraculously over several decades. Therefore, it is hard to say that geography has nothing to say at all” (Yi *Jukchangbanbwa*). Evidently, he accepted even the theory of fortune and misfortune in geomancy.

2. Geomancy of Yun Hyu

Yun Hyu (1617-1680) who was a leader of the Southerners (one of the four political factions during the second half of the Joseon dynasty) in the middle period of Joseon was a representative figure who accepted the validity of geomancy. He accepted even the theory of feeling the same energy in geomancy, saying: “I have read the theory of geomancy by accident and I think the theory of yin and yang and geomancy makes sense. While stars are shining along constant longitude and latitude, soil and fields spread between mountains and water, the energy of yin and yang gathers, the climate changes, human beings and all nature are born and grow and even ghosts are living together there, there are certainly existing ups and downs, changes of news, good or ill luck, calamities and good omens. Then, in the process light and dark, and this side and that side are responding to one another, it will not be groundless that if mountains and streams are beautiful, there will be many figures; if ancestors are comfortable, descendants will also be comfortable.” (Yun Hyu, *Baekho jeonseo*, gwon 33, Literary miscellany, Record of *gyeongsin*). His theory was based on the geomantic theory of Chu Hsi. He argued that in those days the prevalence of geomancy had been caused by public opinion and reason.

3. Geomancy of Song Si-yeol

Song Si-yeol (1607-1689), who is viewed as a follower of Chu Hsi, was a figure who accepted the validity of geomancy. His geomantic theory was wholly based on that of Chu Hsi. He quoted *Sanneunguijang* of Chu Hsi, saying: “If the remains of Suhwang (Emperor Hyojong of the Sung dynasty)

are made comfortable, the royal shrine of ancestors and sovereignty and the people will be fortunate.” He expressed his opinion that not geomantic theory but filial piety mattered (Song Si-yeol. *Songja daejeon*, gwon 15, Memorials). Accordingly, the mysterious aspects of geomancy were nothing more than supplementary.

Song Si-yeol also said, “Though the theory of Gamyeo seems vague from the viewpoint of ignorant people, it is not unreasonable.” He indicated that Chu Hsi had also mastered even deep and minute parts, and accepted geomancy of tomb positively (Song Si-yeol. *Songja daejeon*, gwon 18, Memorials). In particular, he himself suggested a geomantic opinion that if a royal tomb were excavated too deep, it would be hard for the tomb to be protected by soil because the mountain was wholly cut off. Also, he argued that not only royal tombs but also the ancestral graveyard of the nobility should be constructed according to geomancy. He warned against the excessive dependence on the theory of fortune and misfortune while following the opinion of Chu Hsi (Song Si-yeol. *Songja daejeon*, gwon 103, Letters, Reply of Yun I-hwa).

4. Geomancy of Yi Jung-hwan

Yi Jung-hwan (1690-?) was a representative scholar who canvassed the theory of geomancy of house in the latter period of Joseon. In his *Taekniji* (Topography of selecting villages), he emphasized the importance of geomancy as the primary element of selecting a propitious site to inhabit. Reviewing minutely the geomancy of village and discussing the geography of a village, he put an emphasis on, first, the exit direction of watercourses, next, the shape of a mountain, the color of soil, an opponent mountain and an opponent river (Yi Jung-hwan, *Taekniji*, Generalities of selection of dwelling sites, Geography). The six principles he suggested were recognized as a model of selecting villages by scholars of later generations. Yi Gyu-gyeong adopted them wholly in his writing on geomancy of house (Yi Gyu-gyeong. *Oju yeonmun jangjeon sango*, Discreet explanation of geomancy of house).

5. Geomancy of Yi Gyu-gyeong

Yi Gyu-gyeong (1788-?) was a man of great erudition in the latter period of Joseon and wrote a voluminous book, *Oju yeonmun jangjeon sango* (Random Expatiations of Oju). Researching and investigating the literature of times past and present, he put abundant content in this book. He described a dialectic theory of such diverse subjects as geomancy of tomb and geomancy

of house related to selecting villages.

The scholars who denied geomancy in the latter Joseon period argued that Jangja (張子), Jeongja and even Chu Hsi hadn't accepted geomancy. In contrast, Yi Gyu-gyeong argued that they all accepted geomancy. Considering that Jeongja had preferred a site which had a fair wind, fertile soil, a situation of bowing roundly and no defects, Yi Gyu-gyeong concluded that Jeongja had followed the theory of geomancy. Also, considering that there was a theory of experiencing the good or bad of the land in the complete book of Jangja, Yi Gyu-gyeong concluded that Jangja had also accepted the theory of geomancy (Yi Gyu-gyeong. *Oju yeonmun jangjeon sango*, discreet explanation of Chu His's geomancy). At the same time, he praised highly as a model the method of estimating the good or bad of soil that Jang Hwoeng-geo had suggested.

He had a profound knowledge of geomancy of house related to selecting a village to inhabit. Following the tradition of *Taekniji* (Topography of Selecting Villages) by Yi Jung-hwan, he accepted geography (geomancy) as the primary element of selecting villages. Also, he classified and suggested sites to inhabit throughout the country according to their types. He made an on-the-spot survey of the ten beautiful places shown in Jeong's prophecies (鄭鑑錄) and estimated their practical geomancy.

Conclusion

Geomancy can be called the thoughts of geography or the land and a way of interpreting nature in a broad sense as to topography, climate, natural features, and the like in various nations of East Asia including Korea and China. As a traditional geographical science related to soil, with the system of *Juyeok* as its theoretical structure on the basis of the theory of Yin-Yang (positive and negative) and the five primary elements, geomancy is the technical observation of the land in order to pursue fortune and shun misfortune. Later, this was connected with the ideology of filial piety and shamanism and developed into an egoistic vulgar belief. However, it can basically be seen as a form of the thoughts of the land.

During the Joseon period, when establishing the capital at Hanyang (Seoul) at the beginning of the founding of the nation or constructing royal tombs, administrators took advantage of geomancy. Having been dispersed widely among the people, geomancy was used as an important means to

select housing sites, decide direction and choose burial sites for the dead. Geomancy was formed in China, transmitted to the Joseon kingdom and has been continued up to now.

This paper is no more than an initial study about the recognition of geomancy by intellectuals in the Joseon period. As Joseon society's principle of social management was Confucianism, the perception of geomancy, so-called conjury, was negative on the whole. The mysterious aspects immanent in geomancy itself provoked criticism by many Confucianists. However, in a Confucian society where the practice of filial piety was emphasized, burying one's ancestor's corpse at a propitious site was a filial duty and, therefore, there was room for geomantic theory to be accepted. In general, geomancy of tomb was accepted in relation to selecting a propitious site for a royal tomb, as was seen typically in the case of Song Si-yeol. However, such cases were rare and geomancy of house for selecting villages or dwelling sites was more broadly accepted.

Meanwhile, most Confucianists were negative toward geomancy. While they used geomancy in selecting the burial sites for ancestors, they didn't accept the theory of geomancy outwardly. Since the former period of Joseon, criticism about geomancy around constructing royal tombs had been raised. In the latter period of Joseon, abuses of geomancy became a serious social problem and criticism was focused on the theory of feeling the same energy or the theory of fortune and misfortune in geomancy of tomb. Realist scholars such as Jeong Sang-gi, Yi Ik and Jeong Yak-yong led such criticism.

This paper has tried to reveal the characteristics of the recognition of geomancy by intellectuals in the period of Joseon in relation to theoretical systems of geomancy. However, as this review has centered on certain distinguished scholars, surveys of the recognition of geomancy by various strata of scholars in the period of Joseon could not be done. This paper has not reviewed the peculiarities of the recognition of geomancy by well-known geomancers such as Yi Ui-sin, Park Sang-ui and Nam Sa-go. In future, it is expected that various aspects of geomancy including such problems will be reviewed.

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1. Historical Materials

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- Jeong Yak-yong. *Gyeongse yuipyo* (Designing for good government)
- Jeong Yak-yong. *Mongmin simseo* (Admonitions on governing the people)
- Jeong Yak-yong. *Pungsu jibui* (Collected works of *pungsu*)
- Jeong Yi. *Jangnon* (Theory of burial)
- Park Ji-won. *Yeonamjip* (Collected works of Yeonam)
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- Yi Ik. *Seongbo saseol* (Insignificant explanations of Seongho)
- Yi Jung-hwan. *Taekniji* (Topography of selecting villages)
- Yi Yu-won. *Imba pilgi* (Writings in Imha House)
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Abstract

Joseon was a society whose dominant principle of social management was Neo-Confucianism, therefore the perception of geomancy, which is the study of divination, was negative on the whole. The mysterious aspects immanent in geomancy itself provoked criticism by many Confucian scholars. However, in a Confucian society stressing the practice of 'filial piety', burying the corpse of one's ancestor at a propitious site was an obligation of the descendant. Accordingly, there was room in which the theory of geomancy could be accepted. Geomancy of tomb was mainly accepted in relation to the selection of royal tombs. Song Si-yeol was a typical case. However, these cases were rare. Geomancy of house, employed in the selection of villages or dwelling sites, was more favorably received. Nevertheless, most Confucian scholars had a negative view of geomancy. While they took advantage of geomancy in selecting propitious burial sites for ancestors, they didn't accept the theory of geomancy whole-heartedly. Since the former Joseon period, a criticism was raised about the theory of geomancy in relation to the construction of royal tombs. During the latter Joseon period when the vice of geomancy became a serious social problem, criticism of tomb-related geomancy was focused on the "feeling the same energy" theory or the theory of fortune and misfortune. Realist scholars such as Jeong Sang-gi, Yi Ik and Jeong Yak-yong led the criticism.

Keywords: geomancy, geomancy of tomb, geomancy of house, energy of the land, the theory of fortune and misfortune, 'feeling the same energy' theory