

6 January 1973

Dear Harold:

I return the enclosed so you'll know what I'm talking about. What you heard as bunk she appears to be a badly mispronounced version of feng shui (pronounced fung shway) which means literally wind and water and actually refers to the lucky or unlucky omens connected with any place and which you have translated with considerable accuracy as vibes. Could be that Dr. Alvarez used a Cantonese pronunciation, although I've never heard what that would be.

There used to be a Dr. Walter C. Alvarez who wrote a widely syndicated medical advice column used nationally in many newspapers. I have a strong impression that he died some years ago (which ended the column) and suspect this Alvarez might be his son. I am reasonably certain that the columnist was the brother of Dr. Luis Alvarez of the UC nuclear setup. The columnist was married to the sister of a good friend of ours, a U.S. Diplomat in China who wound up as George Marshall's chief liaison officer during the ill-fated truce sequences between the Nationalists and the Communists after World War II. It was he who told me of Marshall's description of Chou En-Lai as "the ablest negotiator I ever met." Our friend died in San Rafael several years ago of cancer.

Back to feng shui, which is a term that includes all the regulations and inhibitions of Chinese geomancy. These determine the exquisite balance you see in idealized Chinese landscapes and which profoundly affect Chinese architecture through insistence on balance and suitability to the environment.

The folklore is full of good and evil spirits and ways to encourage the one and ward off the other. Of course this doesn't square with dialectical materialism, so now presumably is not spoken of, but the results remain the same.

The city gate towers of Peking were a uniform 110 Chinese feet high for the simple reason that evil spirits were well known to be incapable of flying higher than 100 feet, whereas good spirits can fly at any altitude. All Chinese courtyards had a solid screen inside the front gate to stop evil spirits. And many front doors had a small mirror placed over their outer face in the faith that if an evil spirit were hanging around waiting for a chance to get in he would see himself and be frightened off.

A house with good feng shui faces south and, if not south, square with some point of the compass. It should have some natural protection against ~~maxaxingz~~ evil influences in some natural feature such as a large rock, ancient tree, or uncommon growth such as a wisteria vine.

The feng shui here, for instance, must be pretty bad. The house does not even face straight east. Evil spirits can come right up Homestead Valley and there is nothing to stop them if our three cats are all off hunting or otherwise neglecting their duties as guardians against evil spirits. The one protection ~~max~~ we have is Angel Island, sitting five miles away in the middle of the bay and a bulwark against any flights originating from the vicinity of the Tribune Tower in Oakland.

Feng shui also includes what you infer, the vibrations of a place. If a murder were committed in Peking when we were there -- they were rare -- the house could be empty for a long time thereafter because the feng shui would be considered bad, regardless of its physical characteristics, simply because feng shui MUST have been involved in the murder.

In 1937 we were living in a foreign-style house where the feng shui was not even mentioned, it was so hopeless. It was unbalanced, had two stories (dangerous) and it's only redeeming quality was a small brick structure behind a pool in the garden which could, conceivably, discourage any halfhearted evil spirit who might be thinking about coming in through the french doors into the dining room.

In this less than favorable situation we had contracted with a local workman to build us a dog and cat house. We had two dogs and at least five cats at the time, and spent a good deal of time planning this structure. It was to be a little Chinese compound, with a main hall on the north, ~~x~~ wings on the east and west, and, of course a front gate on the south of the courtyard which was enclosed by a wall about a foot high.

The workman came to build it the day the Japanese attacked at Marco Polo Bridge outside Peking, and he worked steadily laying his bricks and tile all through about two weeks when the Japanese were bombing and strafing all around until the local Chinese garrison fled to the hills and the Japanese took over the city. He never even looked up.

When it was done, it was a thing of ~~brass~~ beauty, with the three buildings nicely plastered outside, with proper tiles on the roof, and even a street sign outside the corner of the wall denoting the intersection of Oxbone Blvd. and Fishhead Alley -- in Chinese, of course. At this point the workman put his foot down and decreed that the animals could not be allowed to move in until a certain day when the signs were right. Otherwise the feng shui would be loused up and anything could happen. He was very serious, and so were the servants, so everyone dutifully waited until the right day before the grand opening.

A year or so later, when we had to move because the rich Chinese who owned the place decided he wanted it for someone else, we had the dog and cat compound torn down and rebuilt in the garden of the next house. By this time the Japanese were firmly ensconced in the city, and the Japanese press officer, a Capt. Takata who was a Columbia U. graduate and very homesick for both Japan and the United States, took a tremendous fancy to the animal compound, photographed it from every possible angle, became the personal friend of all the dogs and cats, and warmed up amazingly. Up to the time he had seen it he had been very stiff and reserved. But once he had seen it and realized that we had had it built as faithfully as possible to Chinese standards, he became a most warm and faithful friend. When I was stuck in Shanghai after Pearl Harbor he actually came down once and even looked me up to see if I was getting along okay. He was shattered to hear that Jenifer was caught in Manila, and I have no doubt put in a word at the right places which helped get her back in time for us to be repatriated together.

So much for the importance of feng shui.