The significance of geomancy in understanding *T'aengniji*∗

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**ABSTRACT**

In the beginning of the 20th century, Yi Chung-hwan's (1690-1756) *T'aengniji* was introduced as being the first Korean book on human geography. In contrast to other features of *T'aengniji*, the inclusion of geomancy has often been regarded by scholars as a weakness which lowers the standing of *T'aengniji* as a modern geography book. Some warned that *T'aengniji* should not be read as a book on geomancy; others either defended its inclusion pointing out scientific reasoning behind the geomantic terms employed or belittled the importance of geomancy saying that it was included merely for attracting readers.

This article aims to evaluate the significance of geomancy in *T'aengniji*. This will contrast with the previous evaluations, which had been based often on modern academic points of view. This study will evaluate that geomancy was one of the most important aspects of Yi’s philosophy by discussing how geomancy was introduced as a vital factor in *T'aengniji*, how often geomantic statements were made and how seriously geomantic interpretations were referred to.

Yi Chung-hwan’s (1690-1756) *T'aengniji* is regarded as the most important Korean classic on selecting desirable living sites in Korea.1 After its completion in the early 1750s it had been widely read by being hand copied until the beginning of 20th century, when it was first printed. Presently, more than eighty different hand-copied *T'aengniji* manuscripts are kept in public and university libraries in Korea alone.2 The number of the extant hand written manuscripts of *T'aengniji* exceeds that of any other kind of manuscripts found in Korea. This confirms that it had been one of the most widely read Korean treatise.

*T'aengniji* is made up of four sections: “Introduction”, “Discourse on the Eight Provinces”, "Discourse on the Selection of Livable Places" and “Conclusion”. New titles were often given to *T'aengniji* as it was copied, because it examined a diverse range of topics. There are more than twenty different titles of the manuscript. No other writings in Korea show such a variety of manuscripts and titles.

The importance of *T'aengniji* started to be publically revealed when it was printed for the first time in Korea in 1912. In his preface, Ch'oe Namsŏn introduced it as being the first Korean book on human geography.3 Ch'oe’s view had been generally accepted among scholars. Some scholars, however, came to claim that *T'aengniji* is more than


1 This article uses the Kwangmunhoe version of *T'aengniji* as the text. This is because the version is the first printed version in Korea and has been used as the text in most translations that have been rendered so far. They include the translations by Yi Ilsoeng (1971), Yi Yong'ak (1975), Ch'ong Yong'ak (1977), Ch'a Ch'angyong (1994), Hŏ Kyŏngjin (1996, 2007), Yoon Inshil Choe (1998) and Yi Minsu (2005).

2 There are also privately owned *T'aengniji* manuscripts and some of them are on internet sites, for sale.

3 Ch'oe Namsŏn, Editor's note, Yi Chung-hwan, *T'aengniji*, Seoul: Chosŏn Kwangmunhoe, 1912.
geographical literature. Hong Isŏp initially classified *T'aengniji* as a book on geography. Later, Hong proposed that it could also be read as a book on history and political psychology. Other scholars argued that “*T'aengniji* was not only a book of geography but also one of philosophy and thought”. These views were highlighted in Han Ugún’s opening speech of Chindan Academic Society’s 18th symposium. In the speech, he introduced *T'aengniji* as a masterpiece of human geography of the late Chosŏn dynasty and an important source of information for understanding the political and economic history of that time.

While scholars of various academic fields agree to accept *T'aengniji* as a fine piece of writing with excellent view points, its inclusion of geomancy has often been controversial. Ch’oe Namsŏn acknowledged the inclusion of geomancy in *T'aengniji* but suggested that its geomantic content should not be regarded as superstition as there are reasonable points in it. Hong Isŏp initially defended the inclusion of house geomancy saying that this has not marred *T'aengniji* at all. He argued that Yi Chung-hwan’s thoughts were the product of his time. He later argued that it should not be read as a book on geomancy, although it had been read as such. Hong argued that what Yi Chung-hwan wanted to convey was his thoughts on the social economy.

Yoon Hong-key viewed the inclusion of geomancy as one of the weaknesses of *T'aengniji*. The inclusion of geomancy is considered to be the main reason why Yoon criticised *T'aengniji* of the [environmental] deterministic idea, which is regarded as an outdated concept in the relationship between humanity and environment. However, he accepts its inclusion in *T'aengniji* on the grounds that the geomantic conditions contained in *T'aengniji* seem to have some scientific basis. For example, Yi Chung-hwan's recommendation of open plains as an ideal geomantic condition "is explained by the fact that open areas provide vast cultivable land," and Yi's comment on the colour, compactness and texture of soil can be regarded as indications of soil fertility.

Yoon Hong-key’s interpretation that geomantic conditions in *T'aengniji* has some scientific basis is echoed in Kim Chŏngshim and Choe Young-jun’s statements on the topic. Choe argued that the terms that Yi Chung-hwan used in describing the conditions

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4 Hong Isŏp, *Chosŏn kwahaksa* (History of Science in Korea), Seoul: Chŏng-ŭmsa, 1946, pp. 250-251.
7 Han Ugún, "Kaehoesa (opening speech)”, *Chindanhapko*, vol. 69, 1990, p. 126.
8 Known as *P’ungsu* or *P’ungsuchiri* in Korean, Geomancy refers to the art of finding auspicious sites by evaluating surrounding mountains, water flows and the layout of places.
9 Ch’oe Namsŏn, op. cit.
10 Hong Isŏp, (1946), op. cit.
11 Hong Isŏp, "Yi Chung-hwan ǔi sahoe kyǒngjeron (Yi Chung-hwan's Socio-economical Perspectives)," *Yonsei ch’unch’u*, no. 116, 10 December 1957.
for habitable places do not have superstitious connotations. They denote firm land, quality water and open terrain, which are also presently required for a desirable house site.\textsuperscript{15}

Chŏng Tuhi (1988) acknowledged \textit{T'aengniji} as a geography book. On the other hand, he considers Yi Chung-hwan as an historian with an excellent appreciation of history\textsuperscript{16} and argued that geomancy was employed as a means, that is, “to draw public interest”.

I do not agree with Chŏng's view because his argument is not based on solid evidence and seems to have stemmed from his modern academic perspective. The present study attempts to understand the significance of geomancy included in \textit{T'aengniji} from Yi Chung-hwan's own viewpoint rather than from that of a particular modern academic discipline.

\textbf{PRIORITY, WIDTH OF COVERAGE AND WEIGHT THAT GEOMANCY RECEIVES IN \textit{T'AENGNIJI}}

In my opinion geomancy is one of the most important ideas that is contained in the book.\textsuperscript{17} This is based on the fact that geomancy is introduced as the foremost condition for a desirable living place and it is widely and seriously covered in \textit{T'aengniji}: geomancy is placed first when the four criteria required in selecting desirable places are discussed. "Discourse on the Selection of Livable Places" begins with an introduction as follows.

\begin{quote}
In the selection of a place to live the first consideration should be the geomantic conditions of the place. The other factors to be taken into account are: livelihood, social atmosphere and natural scenery.\textsuperscript{18}
\end{quote}

After the completion of the introduction, a detailed discussion of the four criteria starts with the “Geomancy” section.

Geomantic discussions or descriptions are not confined to the "Geomancy" section. Places are also evaluated based on geomantic qualities in "Discourse on Eight Provinces" and "Discourse on the Selection of Livable Places", particularly in the ‘Scenery’ section. In fact, a geomantic tone prevails in most parts of \textit{T'aengniji}.

The way geomantic discussions and interpretations are carried out is diverse. They range from the whole country level down to an individual mountain or village level. "Discourse on Eight Provinces" begins with explaining how the Korean peninsular is geomantically related to the Kunlun Mountains, which ancient Chinese considered to be the backbone of the world.

A branch range of the Kunlun Mountains extended to the south of the great desert and formed Mt Yuwulu in the east, ending abruptly, to form the Liaodong Plain. Over at the other end of the plain, the mountain range rose again to form Mt Paektu which is called Mt Buxian in \textit{Shanhaijing} (The Book of Mountains and Seas). The mountain range ran 1,000 \textit{ri} to the north, between the two rivers, and moving toward the south it made up the Ninggu Pagoda.\textsuperscript{19} A mountain range which extended behind became the head of all Korean mountain ranges.

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{15} Ibid.
\bibitem{17} Yoon, Inshil Choe, \textit{op.cit.}, p. 115.
\bibitem{18} Yi Chung-hwan, \textit{T'aengniji}, Seoul: Chosŏn Kwangmunhoe, 1912, p. 42.
\bibitem{19} A place in Jilin Province, Manchuria, where six brothers of the first Qing emperor resided.
\end{thebibliography}
This has often been the way traditional scholars and geomancers described the physical geography of the Korean peninsula. The description of the prominent mountain ranges as "extending" and "forming" mountains and plains is a geomantic one.

Geomantic interpretations are also found at a provincial level. In T'aengniji each province is introduced as being connected to high mountain ranges, often from the north. For example, Hamgyŏng and Hwanghae provinces are introduced by mentioning how branches from Mt Paektu stretched to form mountain ranges and other prominent landforms in the provinces. The following is the introductory passage of Kyŏngsang province.

Kyŏngsang is the best province in terms of its geomancy. It lies to the south of Kang'wŏn Province and it adjoins Ch'ungch'ŏng and Chŏlla provinces to the west. To the north there is Mt T'aebaek which is projected high in the sky and geomancers classify it as a water-type star mountain.20

One cannot but take the first statement made in introducing Kyŏngsang province as a serious expression of the importance of geomancy. It does not leave any room to think otherwise.

Geomantic interpretations are found at a capital and city level, too.

[Kyŏngju] is called "Tonggyŏng" (Eastern Capital) nowadays and is governed by a mayor. The main administrative centre lies in the middle of the left branch of Mt T'aebaek and geomancers name it hoeryonggojo (The Landform of a Dragon Looking Back on his Ancestor).21

Geomantic interpretations are found at a settlement and a village levels.

In general, the fortunes of the inhabitants on riversides fluctuate because of the geomantic shortcomings of the sites. Only settlements along streams can enjoy the tranquillity, scenery and the advantage of irrigation.22

In Kyŏngsang Province, Kŭmho Village in Taegu, Kach'ŏn Village in Sŏngju and Ponggye Village in Kŭmsan have wide fields and fertile rice paddies. Their population has not decreased since the Silla dynasty. They have good geomantic and economic conditions for people to live there for many generations.23

Geomantic interpretations are also found at an individual mountain level.

[ Mt Wŏlch'ul] has such fine and beautiful features that it is categorised in geomantic landscapes as "the fire mountain in the morning sky."24

The quotations above reveal that serious and decisive geomantic descriptions are made in "Discourse on Eight Provinces " as well as "Discourse on the Selection of Livable Places" at all levels. There is no doubt that geomancy receives the highest priority, has a wide coverage and a heavy weighting in T'aengniji.

20 Yi Chunghwhan, (1912), op. cit., p. 15.
21 A geomantic term which describes a landform where the main mountain range encircles the area in a semicircle so that the end of the mountain range faces the main mountain range which it originated from.
22 Ibid., p. 73.
23 Ibid., p. 77.
24 Ibid., p. 22.
**GEOMANTIC TERMS USED FOR SCIENTIFIC QUALITY?**

While pointing out the inclusion of geomancy as one of the weaknesses of *T'aengniji*, Yoon Hong-key defended it by saying that the geomantic condition included in *T'aengniji* seems to have some scientific basis. He argued that Yi Chung-hwan's recommendation of open plains [as an ideal geomantic condition] "is explained by the fact that open areas provide vast cultivable land," and Yi Chung-hwan's comment on the colour, compactness and texture of soil can be regarded as indications of soil fertility. His view is later shared by some scholars. The passage explaining geomantic conditions that Yi Chung-hwan proposed is as follows.

> How should geomantic conditions be approached? First of all the outlet of water course is to be examined, then the terrain, and the shape of mountains. Then one needs to look at the colour of the soil, the water courses, the court mountain and the court water flow.

I do not think Yi’s explanation of the six conditions has a scientific base. Some of them are barely scientific. The following is the explanation of the court mountain and the court water flow, the mountain and water in front of an auspicious site which look as if they are bowing toward the site.

> Generally, whether a site is for a house or a grave, if a big river flows towards it, the site may enjoy initial prosperity but later be doomed to lose fortune. One must watch incoming water courses. The incoming water must be in accordance with the direction of an incoming mountain and flow slowly and meander in order to mix their *yin-yang* energy.

The necessity of mixing *yin-yang* energy is a key element in ancient Chinese cosmology. Resorting to it, however, does not warrant scientific explanation.

**QUOTATIONS OF GEOMANCER’S REMARKS**

Kim Chŏngshim stated that whenever Yi Chung-hwan expresses his opinion on geomancy he quotes geomancers’ remarks. Unlike her claim, however, not all the statements regarding geomantic qualities of places include quotations of geomancers. These are shown in the quotations made in previous pages of this article. The following are more examples of landscape analysis without quotations of geomancers.

Together with Mt Tobong, Mt Samgak forms a beautiful landscape. The rocky summit is shaped like numerous flames rising in the sky. It has a special aura which is difficult to describe. This mountain, however, has no supporting mountains, nor many valleys. In the olden days there used to be the Chunghangsa Valley but it was flattened when Pukhansansŏng Fortress was built. Since Mt Paegak and Mt Inwang on the inside of the fortress look rather ominous, they are no match for Mt Song'ak which is free of any malicious spirit. The only good point about them is that a branch of theirs called Mt Namsan stretches up the Han River to form a geomantically favourable area.

Mt Kuwŏl also has the shape of an oncoming mountain turning around to look at the original mountain range.

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25 Ibid.
26 Yoon Hong-key, (1971), *op. cit.*, pp. 22-23.
28 Ibid., p. 65.
29 Ibid.
These quotations reveal the author’s own classification of landscapes into certain types according to geomantic principles. This clearly demonstrates that the author did not always depend on quotations from geomancers.

Kim Chŏngshim also interpreted Yi Chunghwan’s quotations of geomancers’ remarks as an attempt to overcome geomancy. I consider that the reason why other geomancers statements were quoted in T’aengniji was to back up the author’s arguments by referring to authoritative figures or books on geomancy.

The content itself proves it, which is shown in the following.

Generally the best mountains are shaped like high towers and pavilions, as explained by geomancers....

However the incoming and outgoing directions of flow have to accord with [geomantic] principles; only then can the place be auspicious so that its owner will produce many descendants. Those geomantic principles are not discussed here in detail because there are books on the subject written by geomancers.

This quotation starts with the descriptions of what geomancers regard to be the best mountain and ends by suggesting to resort to the books written by geomancers. That is, both geomancers and their writings are considered to be worth consulting.

The above examinations contradict what Kim Chŏngshim contested. Although Yi Chunghwan quoted geomancers’ comments instead of making direct statements in some cases, he also expressed freely his own view on geomancy.

QUOTATIONS OF OTHER SOURCES

Examining how other quotations are made will shed light on whether quotations are made to distance the author from geomancy. Among the Korean reference books quoted in T’aengniji, Shipsŏnggi (Record of Ten Excellent Places), Tongp’yŏn (General Writings), yugi (remaining records) and a work referred to as chŏgi (written record) are works of geomancy or geomantic prophecy.

In T’aengniji, the use of quotations is not confined to the explanations of geomancy. “Chiji (Regional Gazetteer) is quoted to describe Mt Chiri as the abode of a Taoist god and a gathering place for supernatural beings” while Koryŏsa (The History of the Koryŏ dynasty) is mentioned in referring to a place.

Shanhaijing (The Classic of Mountains and Seas), Tangshi (The Annals of the Tang Dynasty), Hanshu (The History of the Han Dynasty) and Songshi (The History of the Song Dynasty) are also quoted for their reference to places or for anecdotal purposes.

Shanhaijing, the first book cited in T’aengniji, is quoted in explaining Mt Paektu as follows.

Over at the other end of the plain, the mountain range rose again to form Mt Paektu which is called Mt Buxian in Shanhaijing.

30 Ibid., p. 43.
Kim Chŏngshim p.58.
31 Ibid., p. 43.
Kim Chŏngshim p.58.
32 Yi Chung-hwan, (1912), op. cit., p. 64.
33 Ibid., p.2.
Tangshi (The Annals of the Tang Dynasty) was quoted to explain the place which was the ancient territory of Koguryŏ.\(^{34}\)

The old boundary extended beyond the Amnok River and reached the Chingshi Mountain Pass [in Manchuria]. The so-called Anshi and Baiyan fortresses mentioned in the Tangshi are located in this area.

Songshi (The History of the Song Dynasty) was initially quoted to identify a place with one mentioned in history.\(^{35}\)

This is the very place which was recorded in Songshi as a place where a palace was built against a big mountain.

Quotations are made not only on places but also on incidents or judgements. Songshi was quoted a second time in explaining the unusual practices of the royal family of the Koguryŏ dynasty.\(^{36}\)

In Songshi, the fact that in the mid-Koguryŏ dynasty, some kings took their younger sisters [who were related to the legendary dragon lady] as their wives is criticised because [the author of the book] was not aware that this was practised only in the royal family, and not amongst commoners.

While Hanshu was mentioned to describe Puffers, which an historic person ate,\(^{37}\) Mingshi was quoted when evaluating Ming generals' contribution in resisting the Hideyoshi invasion. It was argued that it was not fair that Chen Lin (Chin Lin) was honoured, due to Yi Sunshin's efforts while Yang Gao (Yang Ho), who also contributed to the fighting, was imprisoned.\(^{38}\)

Thanks to Yi Sun-shin, upon returning home in the year of musul [1598], Chen Lin reported more decapitations than any other Ming general and was awarded land. In Mingshi there is a commentary on the Ming general's contribution to the Eastern expedition. How could the [people of] China know of the achievement of Yi Sunshin? While Yang Gao was imprisoned regardless of his contribution, Chen Lin, thanks to Yi Sunshin, acquired fame and received a generous reward. Such was the reward and punishment meted out by the Ming Emperors.

It is clear that Mingshi was quoted as integral evidence of the unfairness in history. The above quotations clearly indicate that reference materials in Taengnij are included to give weighting to statements.

**Conclusion**

The examinations made so far point out that geomancy was introduced in Taengnij geomancy with highest priority, was covered widely and was treated in a serious and yet balanced manner. Some scholars argue that Yi Chunghwan quoted professional geomancers’ remarks in order to distance himself from geomancy. After thorough examinations of the text, I conclude that the quotations are made to reinforce the author’s view. This is in line with other bibliographical sources such as Koryŏsa, Tangshi, Hanshu and Songshi. When Yi Chunghwan explained his view he often sought support from credible sources.

\(^{34}\) Ibid., p. 3.  
\(^{35}\) Ibid., p. 39.  
\(^{36}\) Ibid., p. 40.  
\(^{37}\) Ibid., p. 10.  
\(^{38}\) Ibid., p. 23.
Unlike some previous scholars, I believe that geomantic viewpoint and geomantic evaluation of places by Yi Chungwan is an essential part of *Taengniji*. Failing to appreciate the importance of geomancy in the book would lead to an improper evaluation of the Korean classic.