

## Layout and composition of house-embracing trees in an island Feng Shui village in Okinawa, Japan

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### Abstract

A Feng Shui village landscape, which embodies the symbiosis of nature and man, might be re-evaluated as an ideal landscape model in East Asia. Ho:go is one essential word for a Feng Shui village in Ryukyu Islands. The literal meaning of Ho:go is to embrace and protect by forest planting in order to retain the living energy. Ho:go also refers to a forest belt that encircles a house, a village, several neighbouring villages, or the coastline, and is called House Ho:go (habitat-embracing forest), Village Ho:go, District Ho:go, and Coastline Ho:go, respectively. However, such Feng Shui village landscapes have disappeared rapidly since World War II because of the changing life styles. In order to preserve the traditional Feng Shui village landscape, our primary research focus concerns the actual structure, management, and regeneration of house-embracing *Garcinia subelliptica* Merr. trees. We chose to survey the two best preserved villages of Tonaki Island and Bise village in northern Okinawa Island. We reproduced the actual distribution and sizes of house-embracing *G. subelliptica* trees by HO CAD software. We found tree lines were much thicker in the borderline of the village, in particular, those either facing the coast or standing in the north. In contrast, there was usually one tree line inside the village. The surveyed *G. subelliptica* trees on Tonaki Island were much smaller than those in Bise Village. More demand of *G. subelliptica* trees for timber use in this small isolated island and better maintenance might be assumed to be the reasons for the difference in tree height between the two surveyed villages. Thus, proper maintenance in terms of cutting and cleaning are necessary to preserve house-embracing *G. subelliptica* tree lines in a traditional Feng Shui village. A traditional village landscape might also serve purposes for forest tourism and environmental education.

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### Introduction

Okinawa, the most southern prefecture in Japan, has become one of the most popular tourist destinations in East Asia with its exotic culture and rich tropical and subtropical nature. About 5,500,000 tourists visited the Okinawa Islands in 2006. A forest tourism project including house-embracing trees in a traditional village landscape is being promoted. Bise village (see [Photos 1](#)

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**Photo. 1.** An Aerial Photo of Hirae Village in the southern part of Ishigaki Island by American Army in 1945. A Forest belt of Ryukyu Pine trees (*Pinus luchuensis*) surrounded the village. The clustered village houses were embraced by Fukugi tree (*Garcinia subelliptica*) lines; scale = 1: 6000.



**Photo. 2.** Well preserved house-embracing *Garcinia subelliptica* trees in Bise Village; source: Google Earth.

and 2), which has the best preserved woods in northern Okinawa, attracts a large amount of visitors due to its easy access.

Tree planting was highlighted in the shaping of a so-called Feng Shui village landscape in Okinawa. Feng Shui is an art related to landscape management. It is based on empirical observation and deals with the flow of Qi (气) in nature. Qi, a special Chinese term, has been translated as “living energy”. An ideal Feng Shui site must accumulate living energy. Greenery is considered as one important criterion for good Feng Shui. It is

believed that a flourishing forest can keep living energy to guarantee riches and honour for the family. Feng Shui was first introduced to Okinawa in the 14th century and was later employed as a national policy of the Ryukyu Kingdom by an eminent statesman named Sai On (蔡温, C. Cai Wen, 1682–1761) around the 1730s. The Ryukyu Kingdom was an independent kingdom which ruled most of the Ryukyu Islands from the 15th century to the 19th century. The Kings of Ryukyu unified Okinawa Mainland Island and extended the kingdom to the Amami Islands in modern-day Kagoshima Prefecture, and the Yaeyama Islands near Taiwan. The Meiji Japanese government abolished the Ryukyu Kingdom, formally annexing the islands to Japan as Okinawa Prefecture in 1879. Okinawa Prefecture consists of three geographical archipelagos, the Okinawa Islands, Miyako Islands, and Yaeyama Islands. Feng Shui was applied to guide city planning and village building (Machida and Tsuzuki, 1993) and even mountain forest management (Nakama, 2002). The traditional village landscape was designed under the guidance of a Feng Shui adviser.

However, such Feng Shui village landscapes have disappeared rapidly since World War II. The forest belts which had been planted to embrace the island, several neighbouring villages, or a single hamlet were burnt during battles, or cut by means of machinery, for example for building concrete houses. Moreover, the particular Ryukyu village landscape dealt with in this paper disappeared on most islands. Since then the Okinawa prefecture has been returned to the Japanese government, and large-scale infrastructure improvement programs have been carried out to build a modern landscape.

The Rio Declaration on Environment and Development of 1992 indicated a global concern for the symbiosis of the environment and man. In this context, a Feng Shui village might be re-evaluated as an ideal landscape model for East Asia. In order to support efforts to preserve the traditional Feng Shui village landscape in Okinawa, we focus here on clarifying the existing layout and composition of house-embracing *Garcinia subelliptica* Merr. trees. For this task we chose to survey the two best preserved villages of Tonaki Island and Bise village.

## Ho:go in a Feng Shui landscape

Feng Shui was first introduced to the Ryukyu Kingdom by Chinese immigrants from Fujian in the 14th century. As mentioned, the traditional village landscape was designed under the guidance of a Feng Shui adviser. The roads in a planned Feng Shui village are laid out in a grid pattern. Houses are scattered in

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