The original concept of fengshui was obviously an attempt to understand the 'energy' of the land in a theoretical framework based on observation and so this could be considered to be an important step in the history of geological thought. The observational basis of the early texts is emphasised by the Book of Burial:

The Classic says, “When there is excellence in powers of observation and expertise in technique, there will be a striving for perfection without defect. In adding to both the high and the low the secret lies in knowledge”. One familiarises oneself with all categories and so extends one’s knowledge of them. With a thorough knowledge of yin and yang one will have the ability to steal from the Creator.1

This idea of the necessity for careful observation of landforms is reinforced by the fact that Guo Pu himself became the most famous annotator of the Shan hai jing (Classic of Mountains and Seas), an important early geographical text, which would indicate that he had widely read such geographical/geological texts and perhaps that he himself was well travelled and had observed closely the many and varied landforms throughout China. It could be postulated that the traditional ‘lair’ configuration with mountains embracing the node at the back and to the sides on the north, east and west and with water meandering at the front to the south (in the northern hemisphere) was the theoretical outcome of such observation in that the great majority of landforms of this type would probably be covered in foliage to indicate fertility with them being sheltered from the wind to allow soil deposition and with there being sufficient sunlight and water, albeit without consideration of the effect of soil type related to the chemical geology of the area. However, the position would probably be the most fertile place in a local area of the same soil type.

The relationship between qi and fertility theorised from an observational basis can also be seen in the descriptions of unsuitable landforms in the early texts. The Book of Burial states that:

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1 JDBS, pp. 2-3.
The 5 qi² harmonise with life so a barren mountain is unsuitable for burial. Qi comes according to the land form so a broken mountain is unsuitable for burial. Qi circulates according to the earth so a rocky mountain is unsuitable for burial. Qi is held by means of configurational force so an eroded mountain is unsuitable for burial. Qi assembles by means of Dragons so a solitary mountain is unsuitable for burial.³

This relationship between observation of landform and the theoretical concept is also reflected in the later texts. In these, however, their correlational aspect hinders any possible scientific conclusion. For example, Problem 8 of the Twenty Four Difficult Problems states that:

The Yi jing says to look up to observe it in the writings of heaven and look down to observe it in the principles of the earth. Principle refers to orderly arrangement. In fact, it is the principle of literary structure⁴ and of veins and arteries. By examining how something is put in order, it is possible to know the middle and sides, the front and the back, the refined and the rough, and the large and the small in terms of building the nation and establishing the country as a safe place for the myriad people. This is the speciality of a sage king.⁵

Thus, instead of considering only the landform and the resulting fertility, the new development of the correlation with literary principle which denotes unity and coherence negates to an extent the original observational basis and an aesthetic component is introduced, taking the theory of fengshui away from geological or geographical considerations to those of aesthetics.

Nevertheless, the Twenty Four Difficult Problems does contain examples of basic geological/geographical knowledge obviously based on observation alone. Problem 2 states that:

Water must descend from a height, combine from being separated, become large from being small, and go far from being near. If one examines the flow of its tributaries and investigates where it enters and stops, it will be seen that between two mountains there must be water and between two bodies of water there must be a mountain. Without need for pondering on it, it will all become quite clear.⁶

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² This is probably the 5 types of qi associated with the Five Phases.
³ JDBS, p. 3.
⁴ Unity and coherence.
⁵ CSJX, p. 16.
⁶ Ibid., p. 4.