

Taking feng shui seriously

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Abstract

Feng shui is a form a geomancy (divination) based on the landscape, and was initially used to select burial sites in China to ensure the spirits of the dead were protected from evil spirits. According to Eastern traditions, landscape feng shui principles can be applied to many aspects of life, such as the placement of buildings and the design of interior spaces to bring success to their inhabitants. Feng shui crosses cultural beliefs, psychology, and architecture, so is difficult to investigate scientifically. However, many hotel operators appear to follow feng shui practices to improve profitability, although there is little scholarly evidence of this, and none to suggest that it works. This paper therefore explores scholarly interest in feng shui and the use of feng shui in hotels, to determine whether or not the topic warrants serious research. A pilot study is outlined to determine whether a relationship exists between hotels with good feng shui and the number of times these hotels have changed their name, being an arbitrary indicator of the hotels' economic stability. If the pilot study suggests a relationship, further study will be undertaken on a larger scale, using profit and loss statements where available, to more accurately determine the relationship between the use of feng shui principles in hospitality, and success.

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1 Introduction

1.1 Background

The tourism and hospitality businesses are superstitious, or at least cater for superstitious guests. Many hotels skip the 13th floor (Jahoda, 1969), and airlines skip the 13th row (e.g. Continental, KLM, and Air France)(Grossman, 2005). Furthermore, an internet search for ‘lucky hotel’ produces several pages of websites, whereas a search for ‘lucky bank’ produces nothing of note.

The eastern tradition of feng shui might be considered superstitious and an unscientific way of trying to determine or influence one’s future prospects, but perhaps that is because, (like astrology), charlatans are common and entertaining. However, feng shui is apparently used by numerous hotels to improve their ambience, profit, and luck.

It is not uncommon for seemingly improbable ideas to be treated as spurious, especially if it is difficult to see how they work, and many scientists have been marginalised by their peers and the wider community for speaking out on matters which seemed truthful to them, but were heresy or fiction, to others. Indeed, Galileo was imprisoned for suggesting that the universe was not centred on the earth, which was in conflict with the Catholic Church’s belief, along with the later and dubious prospect that people evolved from apes. However, unlike the theory of evolution, western acceptance of feng shui is not reliant on new discoveries, but more on the willingness of the academic community to verify its validity. If feng shui has a logical basis, then hotels could follow its principles for good effect, but if it is a superstition, they should not expect any returns for their effort except perhaps the allegiance of Asian guests.

1.2 What is feng shui?

Feng shui is a form a geomancy (divination) based on the landscape, and was initially used to select burial sites in China to ensure the spirits of the dead were protected from evil spirits (March, 1968). Feng shui considers the earth as a living organism (symbolised as a dragon), and chi, its breath. Modern feng shui uses compass directions and landscape features (amongst other things) to provide guidelines to the placement of buildings and furniture within the buildings to ensure success for the inhabitants. The placement of buildings and furniture influences and is influenced by chi, loosely translated as ‘life energy’, which should be balanced in terms of its yin and yang, or male and female energy.

1.3 Practical feng shui

Feng shui principles can be applied to determine the placement of a house, a room within a house, or piece of furniture. For example, it is bad feng shui to build at the end of a T intersection, as the chi coming along the street will invade the house, bringing bad luck to the inhabitants. Bad luck in this sense is best thought of as (for example) economic stress, poor health, and domestic unrest, rather than an unfortunate incident.

Similarly, it is bad feng shui to work in an office at the end of a busy corridor, especially if the worker's back is visible from the door, as the chi flowing down the corridor will run straight into the back of the worker, affecting concentration, health and career prospects. Feng shui also provides guidelines for the placement of certain items within a building, such as a money tree near the cash register, or in the south-east corner of a home to symbolise and encourage wealth, or a picture of sailing ships on a living room wall, to symbolise forward movement, and encourage success.

2 Literature review

2.1 The science of feng shui

Academic papers on feng shui are difficult to source in the west, primarily because most are in Asian languages (e.g. Hwang, 2001), and therefore unavailable to most western academics (e.g. Paton, 2007). However, feng shui is commonly taught in schools of architecture (e.g. University of Auckland), and feng shui principles are clearly evident in the design of many western buildings, such as Frank Lloyd Wright's Falling Waters in Pennsylvania, and Richard Meier's Getty Center in Los Angeles. There are academic conferences on feng shui such as the international congress on scientific feng shui held in Italy, and the feng shui convention in Singapore in 2007. Doctoral theses have been written on feng shui topics (e.g. Eriksson, 2008; Lee, 1986; Mak, 2004), and various scholarly papers written, although these are primarily on architecture and landscape design.

Several empirical studies exist, and generally concur that 'good feng shui' is preferred in both landscape features (e.g. Han & Sinha, 1996) and building design. For example, a study of the relationship between good design and feng shui principles found that 'the selection of surrounding environment for a building and interior layout as proposed by the architects generally concurs with the ideal feng shui model established more than two thousand years ago' (Mak & Thomas Ng, 2005, p. 427). However, evidence of chi and the relationship between auspicious symbols and success are elusive, and although it seems likely that a relationship exists between expectations of and actual success, nothing was found to support this.

The only relevant research located was on the topic of optimism, which is known to be associated with longevity (Brummett et al., 2006). 'The Secret' (Byrne, 2006), a book about the law of attraction, also promotes the power of positive thinking and positive visualisation for the fulfilment of one's desires. It is possible therefore, that the 'superstitions' of feng shui operate according to principles of optimism and positive visualisation, but without scientific proof of the power of positive thinking, other resources such as logic or belief in occult ways must be applied. The placebo effect, also known as auto-suggestion, provides another plausible explanation for the success of feng shui principles (also known as 'remedies') such as the use of money-trees or bowls of coins to increase wealth.

2.2 Separating superstition from logic

Setting aside difficulties relating to scientific proof, there is a certain logic to feng shui, which perhaps explains its growing popularity in the west. Some of the principles that were codified into building practices in China are similar to those used in the west (e.g. having two doors between the kitchen and toilet) and make good practical sense. In general, feng shui practice appears to offer excellent guidelines to providing comfortable, attractive, clutter-free and safe buildings. Similarly, it might be argued that the placement of specific items in a house or office may have psychological effects on the inhabitants' subconscious minds. For example, it is bad feng shui to have a picture of three people in a bedroom, as this might bring another and unwanted person into the marriage. One could speculate that the picture of three may reach into the subconscious of those using the bedroom, and suggest to their subconscious minds that someone is missing from the marriage. While this logic extends beyond the scope of this paper, it would be an interesting area to research, and likely bring productive results.

Difficulty is more likely to arise when no obvious logic to a feng shui principle can be found, such as the use of mathematical shapes and symbols to attract or repel spirits, or the negative effect of the corner of a building pointing towards another building, thereby channelling too much chi, and damaging the luck of the target buildings' inhabitants.

2.3 Feng shui in Hong Kong

Hong Kong has followed feng shui principles for many years, unimpeded by the regulations against superstitious practices imposed during the Cultural Revolution. Today around 35% of Hong Kongers believe in feng shui practices, and more, for those who are well educated (Emmons, 1992). A feng shui war was waged in Hong Kong in the late 1980s to rid the island of the British, and one might postulate that it was successful, at least from the Chinese perspective. Apparently the bank of China was deliberately positioned to radiate bad feng shui at the Governor's house and the American Consulate, which in turn was radiating bad energy to the Hong Kong legal department. According to various reports, feng shui remedies such as mirrors were used by staff in both buildings to deflect the negative energy from their workplaces, with the ultimate result that the British handed over Hong Kong to China.

2.4 Feng shui in hospitality

Although anecdotal evidence suggests that feng shui is widely used in hospitality, the only scholarly paper on this topic is Hobson's (1994) paper on feng shui in Asian hospitality. Internet information is available on hotels that use feng shui principles to enhance their wealth, although it appears some just do this to please their Asian guests.

In Vancouver, the Metropolitan's owner, Henry Wu, takes feng shui seriously. There are black stone lions at the entrance (quarried in China) to guard against evil spirits and bring good luck, and the hotel's mission statement explicitly supports feng shui practices: 'build a Feng Shui refuge and they will come' (Metropolitan Hotel Vancouver, 2008). Hyatt Regency Hong Kong has apparently incorporated feng shui principles in its design, with hotel doors and furniture carefully positioned to encourage good luck, and Grand Hyatt Singapore's foyer was reputedly designed by a feng shui specialist to bring good luck to staff, guests, and the hotel's owners.

Feng shui crosses cultural beliefs, psychology, and architecture, so is difficult to investigate from a scientific perspective. However, it seems likely that many hotel operators respect the traditions of feng shui and employ feng shui practices to improve profitability.

3 Research approach

A pilot study of six Auckland and Hong Kong hotels will be conducted in May, 2009. Photographs will be taken of their entrances and foyers and notes made of any particularly auspicious feng shui features. If three or more hotels demonstrate good feng shui principles, interviews with owners and managers will be undertaken later in the year to determine whether or not feng shui experts were consulted, and to obtain performance indicators such as profit and loss analyses, to see if any correlation between good feng shui and business success can be identified. It is hoped that this may bring some credibility and interest to the concept of feng shui in hospitality, and stimulate further research, perhaps on the effects of feng shui remedies on the subconscious mind.

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