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A Place for Everything and Everything in Its Place: The Application of Feng Shui to Hotels

By Ingrid Lin

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“You wouldn’t build anything in most parts of Asia without having feng shui consultants come in and help you.” – Neil Jacobs, the president of global hotel operations for Starwood Capital.

Feng Shui: real, phony, or magic?

The western world might consider feng shui to be a mystical and mysterious art, or perhaps even a sham, but an exploration of its origins reveal that it is neither of these—feng shui is both more nuanced and more relevant than most expect. Feng shui is an authentic, 3,000-year-old Chinese system of art and science practices that consists of a set of beliefs and rules regarding the inter-dependence and inter-influence of the person-environment fit. It can be viewed from many different perspectives, ranging from philosophical and psychological to spiritual to practical. The direct Chinese-English translation of “feng” means wind, and “shui” refers to water. Thus, the combined construct explains the interactive energy of wind and water, or “chi,” that flows through nature and the universe. Chi should not be impeded but balanced so that any negative forms (“sha chi” or poisoned arrows) may be offset with positive adjustments (Schaefer, n.d.).

Feng shui is used to identify features in individuals’ surroundings that make them feel relaxed and calm or, conversely, uneasy and irritable; basically, the practice suggests that individuals’ relationships with their surroundings is fundamental to their health and well-being. Feng shui is

not a religion, nor is it a magic. It is simply a set of principles that helps individuals to create a harmonious environment with optimal comfort and aesthetic satisfaction, thus leading to improved health and well-being. It also guides the placement of objects based on the flow of chi and on patterns of yin and yang. All phenomena in the universe are the result of endless interactions between the two opposing natures of yin and yang (Mak & So, 2010).

The Elements and Tools of Feng Shui

There are many schools of feng shui. The core concept of Feng Shui entails the five elements: metal, wood, water, fire, and earth. Each element is associated with specific color and direction (See Figure 1), which serve as a guide to enhance the flow of the energy and improve the balance of the five elements in the surrounding environment. The relationships among the five elements can enhance or disrupt good feng shui. Please see Table 1 for the specific applications of the five elements in hotel servicescape design.

Table 1. Application of the five elements of Feng Shui to promote positive hotel servicescape design and décor (Locke, n.d.; Tchi, 2017)

Element	Meaning	Direction	Colors	Shape	Season	Design & Décor	Objects convey positive chi	DON'Ts
1. Earth	Trust, reliability, grounded, centered, balanced, sturdy, good at handling money.	Center	Light yellow, beige, peach, light brown	Square	Indian Summer	Accessories & Artwork that features or depicts landscapes, earth; featuring touches of yellow, beige, or brown tone colors. As for selecting furniture, (e.g., select tables & seating that are square-shaped). Fabrics/texture: Plaid patterns	Objects that are made out of crystals, ceramic, clay, brick, rock, sand	Earth elements should not be incorporated in conference rooms if want to evoke challenging or controversial conversation.
2. Wood	Growth, creativity, change, adventure, healing, new beginnings	East	Green, brown	Rectangle	Spring	Accessories & Artwork that depicts plants, trees, flowers; featuring green color and rectangle-shaped tables. Fabrics/texture: Flowers, vegetation, vertical	Plants, flowers, trees, paper, any wooden or green items.	Wood elements should not be incorporated too much if want to encourage conservative thinking and avoid risky endeavors.

						stripes/cotton, linen, silk.		
3. Fire	Inspiration, understanding, passion, motivation, positive action	South	Red, strong yellow, orange, magenta, reddish purple, pink	Triangle	Summer	Accessories & Artwork that features or depicts animals ; decorating touches of red. Fabrics/texture: Leather, real or faux fur, suede, wool, down-fill.	Lamps, candles, sunlight, steeples, spires, or items that generate heat.	Limit the use of fire elements if want to encourage rest (e.g., spa, guest room)
4. Water	Introspection, wisdom, deep thought.	North	Black, blue	Undulating	winter	Accessories that feature glass or water (e.g., waterwall). Artwork that depicts water scenes ; decorating touches of black or dark blue. Fabrics/texture: swirls or wavy patterns.	Things that made of glass; water fountains, or fountains, bird baths), curvy & winding paths.	Water elements should be incorporated accordingly to the purpose of the space. For example, avoid too much of the water elements in active public areas, as they tend to restrain lively, loud, and action-oriented behaviors.
5. Metal	Precision, ethics, focus, control, concentration, appreciation of beauty & form, mortality	West	White, ivory, gray, silver, any metallic shade	Circular or round	Autumn	Accessories & Artwork that feature metal or depict architectural elements (domes & arches). Fabrics /texture: circles or metallic sheen. Furniture: select circular-shaped tables.	Architectural elements, any item made of metal, any round item, electrical item, concrete gold, silver, metal based coins, knives, pots, pans, metal trays, utensils.	Metal elements should not be used if want to promote creative thinking or a relaxing environment.

Ancient Chinese masters rely on two useful tools, ba-gua and lo-pan, to practice feng shui. The direct translation of ba-gua from Chinese to English refers to eight divinatory trigrams or areas (See Figure 1). The eight areas include the following: (1) health and family (east); wealth and abundance (southeast); (3) fame and reputation (south); (4) love and marriage (southwest); (5) creativity and children (west); (6) helpful or supportive people and blessings (northwest); (7) career & path in life (north); and (8) spiritual growth and cultivation (northeast). These areas correspond to the most important parts of an individual’s life and the areas that matter the most for health, happiness, and well-being. Ba-gua presents the energy framework of the relationship between one’s space regarding specific areas of his or her life.

Another important tool that all feng shui masters use is lo-pan, which translates to “everything in a plate or a bowl.” Like a compass, lo-pan is used to define the eight areas of ba-gua and determine favorable or unfavorable areas, directions, and colors used between feng shui areas of a site in connection to specific areas of people’s lives. It decides what adjustments need to be made to create a good balance or enhance specific areas of the divinatory trigrams.

Different people have different sensitivities towards the influence of Feng Shui. Some people strongly believe in feng shui, practice the principles of it, and rely on it as a guide to maximize their luck and prosperity. Some treat feng-shui as part of their deep-rooted cultural identification and include its principles as part of their lifestyle and spiritual life. And there are still others who view feng shui as superstitious, unreal, or bizarre, so they choose to ignore completely, believe lightly, or treat it as a necessary evil. While it was once regarded as an obscure philosophy by westerners, feng shui is now a tool of the trade for real estate brokers and a marketing hook for hotel owners, investors, and operators to gain a competitive advantage while attracting Asian consumers.

What can feng shui do for hotel businesses?

Today, more and more businesses are turning to feng shui because it helps to build a foundation for stability, effectiveness, and prosperity in business. Besides hotels, companies such as Coca Cola, Orange, HSBC, and British Airways have all adopted feng shui in the past (Feng Shui London, n.d.). A list of hotels that incorporate feng shui design is listed in Tables 2 & 3.

Table 2. Hotels advertised as feng shui hotels

1. Viana Hotel and Spa, Westbury, New York, USA
2. Metropolitan Hotel, Vancouver Waterfront, Canada
3. Melarose Feng Shui Hotel, Brandenburg Gate, Berlin
4. De La Mer Feng Shui Hotel, Tel Aviv, Israel
5. 414 Hotel, New York, New York, USA
6. The Lucky Dragon Hotel and casino, Las Vegas, Nevada, USA

Table 3. Hotels that incorporate feng shui design

1. The Peninsula Hotel, Hong Kong, China
2. Hong Kong Shangri-La Hotel, Hong Kong, China
3. Sheraton Hotel, Tianjin, China
4. Gold Coast Hotel, Hainan, China
5. Wangfu Hotel, Beijing, China
6. Genting Hotel, Malaysia,
7. Trump International Hotel, New York, New York, USA
8. Baccarat Hotel & Residences, New York, New York, USA

Good feng shui is believed to help improve a company's prosperity and success. Conversely, bad feng shui is believed to disrupt and detriment a business enterprise. A hotel's business success depends highly on not only its management and operations, but also on the hotel's feng shui and whether the hotel incorporated feng shui design appropriately.

There is very limited information relating to hotel feng shui design, with the exception of feng shui master Liu's (2012) recommended strategies in Chinese. Based on Liu's (2012) suggestions, the following includes a few practical applications and fundamental advice for hotel owners and operators to ensure the stability, effectiveness, and prosperity of their hotel operations

1. The location or construction site of the hotel

The feng shui design of the hotel site is closely related to its construction site and basic structure. The basic structure and the hotel's surrounding environment in an urban location depends on the requirements and constraints of the overall urban design of the city, the history and culture of the surrounding buildings, the terrain and topography of the base, the main landscape, the roads, the water flow, and the layout of the hotel (Liu, 2012).

The front of the hotel should entail a widespread and spacious lobby that embraces the road "chi" or energy. In order to select a prime location that will represent good fortune and a thriving residence, the hotel's exterior appearance or outlook must have a clear cut and square shape design; this implies that guests coming into the open square space will fill the room and wealth will surge.



Lobby and Reception area in the 5-star Oberoi Mumbai Hotel at Nariman Point, Mumbai, formerly Bombay, Maharashtra, India (Photo by Tim Graham/Getty Images)

It is against the feng shui norm for a hotel front entrance to face ominous things. The hotel also should not face a narrow gap between two buildings, light pillars, traffic signs, trees, other buildings or objects that contain sharp corners or angles (known as the “sharp shot evil”), chimneys, toilets, etc. If a hotel commits to any one form of evil, conflicts between hotel executives may arise more frequently than expected, strange occurrences will disrupt the smoothness of the operation again and again, and eventually, the business will fail.

The hotel also should not be located too closely to churches or temples because money and good luck will be difficult to gather. Because churches and temples are spiritual places of worship, the nearby “chi” will be disturbed and affect the ecology. Similarly, hotels also should not be built close to cemeteries or funeral homes, which are filled with negative yin “chi” and hence will inevitably cause adverse effects.

2. The position of the hotel front door or main entrance.

From the exterior design perspective, a hotel’s main entrance is of vital importance to determining the good fortune of the hotel, as it represents a channel between customers and the business. This accounts for thirty to fifty percent of the feng shui role. The door position also determines the popularity of the hotel. The best main entrance position will coordinate with the water direction to enhance the flow of chi; this promotes the wealth and popularity of the hotel.

The position of the front door should not fall between two words that appears on lo-pan because it represents falling and death. Further, it implies that the elements within the divinatory trigrams or “gua” will be chaotic; hence, it will cause trouble for the hotel. The front entrance door also should not touch the stairs or elevators, nor should the door be located directly below the toilet or stove. These easily lead to a higher risk of illness and injury in employees and financial failure.

The design of the door should also be in line with the local climate conditions, people’s habits, religious beliefs, magnetic orientation, and hotel’s positioning requirements. For example, the Hong Kong Kowloon Peninsula Hotel door decoration is very modern in style. The design of the door consists of a tall Chinese folk door god, it seems uncoordinated, but this door god has historical meanings. The original Peninsula Hotel was located in front of the old railway station site; the railway station got removed after the completion of the Hong Kong Cultural Center and Space Museum. The space museum is an egg-shaped building, it is facing the Peninsula Hotel, the hotel guests mentioned they often see ghosts appear above the egg-shaped building in the middle of the night; they described the scene as like a big graveyard. This haunted mystery scared many visitors who would not dare to stay. Management attempted to reverse the downturn, but after several unsuccessful efforts, the management turned to feng shui masters. The management was told that they had to follow the feng shui home of the will, and please the door god to exorcism. Sure enough, after following the feng shui tips to please the door god, the hotel business had since thrived and successful.



Photographer: Justin Chin/Bloomberg

The lobby should be bright in style and decoration, as well as reflecting the local culture. If the front door leads directly to the front desk, it should add stone lions in the lobby to avoid evil happenings. Displays that depict unicorns, turtles, elephants, or Buddha figurines demonstrate bravery as well.

3. Guest room feng shui design

The feng shui of a hotel guest room can directly affect hotel operations. Service to guests is the core mission of the hotel; it is also the main source of hotel revenue. Thus, guest room feng shui design represents one of the most important aspects of the hotel design process throughout the entire project.

It is best to consider designing the guest rooms in the higher or upper part of the main building. Dining, entertainment, leisure and other functional areas that tend to bring huge source of noise vibration such as a nightclub or a sports bar, must be strictly separated from the room area. The height of the room is generally 2.8 meters: any taller and it will give the impression of emptiness, while too much lower may promote a sense of depression. The room decoration in general is recommended to utilize light-colored elements, since these promote wealth and create a calm and tranquil environment in which the guests can relax. Guest room design should also take advantage of all windows, natural light, and the landscape, so that guests feel comfortable and at ease (e.g., The Beijing Capital Hotel, Shanghai New Jinjiang Hotel, Shenzhen Bay Hotel, Hong Kong Mandarin Hotel).



The bathroom is also an important part of feng shui because it can directly affect the health of the guests. Good feng shui suggests that the bathroom door should not face the bed, nor should the upper floor of the bathroom pressure travel toward the headrest of the bed, or downstairs in the direction of the front desk, the administrative offices, the hotel restaurant, or the kitchen, because it will produce adverse consequences. Finally, small green flowers in the bathroom can improve the feng shui effect of the whole room

4. Front desk and cashier

Hotel operators should pay great attention to the position of the hotel front desk or cash register. In addition, per feng shui principles, the back of the cash register must be a solid wall or cabinet, meaning the hotel can easily gain expert support and customer patronage to produce a booming business. The cashier should be placed on the mountain plate shown on the lo-pan compass and on the hotel's left side, the position of finance and wealth. Feng shui pays attention to the fact that "money should not be revealed explicitly," so the money should be kept mysterious. If the cashier area lacks lighting and is located in a dark corner, its operating efficiency is expected to be poor, whereas lighting implies vibrancy and big profits.

5. Kitchen

Kitchen feng shui is also considered the core of the hotel and merits the recruitment and selection of skilled chefs, high-quality food, and work efficiency. The essence of the kitchen is fire, so the kitchen must avoid gold, which melts easily. The stove needs to be placed in an unlucky position to suppress the fierce god; at the same time, the oven door must face toward the auspicious position to collect and accommodate positive chi.

6. Executive and administrative offices

Hotel executive and administrative offices are more auspicious if they are either square-shaped or rectangular-shaped, which imply cooperative employees, smooth hotel operations, a bright future, and prosperity for the hotel. The main door of the office should not face any stairs directly. This is called “door chongsha” and is considered the biggest feng shui taboo, as all the good energy will flow right through the door. It is also against good feng shui to have the front office door directly facing the back office door.

The office should provide bright and pleasant lighting to foster positive yang energy, energetic employees, and thriving performance. On the contrary, if the office lacks lighting, it can produce obstacles, low employee morale, disturbance to the business, and ultimately unfavorable business development and performance.

7. Hotel name, color, and style

The style, color tone, and name of the hotel are all considered part of the feng shui design elements. They are also part of the hotel’s cultural connotation, business ideas, and feng shui pattern summary and expression. The style and name of the hotel guide to the consumer culture, while the color tone can illustrate the interactive relationships among the five elements of feng shui. Of course, these and many other elements show the convergence of the five elements of feng shui. Basically, in a way, all design elements incorporated into the hotel have some relationship with feng shui.



The Lucky Dragon Hotel & Casino in Las Vegas, Nevada includes a nine-story hotel with 203 rooms, 27,500 square feet of casino space and five Asian-inspired restaurants. The fire element is heavily represented through its bright red, yellow, and orange design elements.

Feng shui case studies: haunted hotels, symbols of success, and benefits of feng shui

The Grand Hyatt Hotel in Taipei, Taiwan, has been listed as one of the top ten haunted hotels in Taiwan: said to be built on a World War II military warehouse or execution ground, there are purportedly lingering restless spirits. Many guests claimed that they saw a ghost on the top floor and refused to ever stay there again. When this story went viral worldwide, the first thing that the hotel management did was to consult a reputable feng shui master and ask him to conduct a site evaluation and recommend possible solutions. The feng shui master recommended hanging two Chinese calligraphy scrolls next to the elevator in the lobby and other specific areas of the hotel (e.g., some guest rooms) to avert those restless spirits. The Grand Hyatt Hotel has since undergone a complete revitalization and renovation of the entire hotel by incorporating feng shui.

Another example relates to a casino hotel in Las Vegas, where Chinese visitors refused to enter the casino via its front entrance (Frazier, 2012). According to one of the fundamental feng shui principles for any businesses, the position of the front door entrance accounts for a big portion of the success or failure of the hotel; and in the case of the MGM Grand Hotel in Las Vegas, the front entrance, which featured a huge lion's mouth, nearly led it to failure. When the hotel first opened in 1993, many wealthy Chinese guests considered the entryway's decoration to be bad luck and would enter the casino through the side entrance or avoid the MGM Grand completely (Young, 2013). Chinese visitors thought that the lion would eat them and/or their profits and believed that gambling in the MGM Grand guaranteed a definite loss. In 1998, the MGM Grand responded to the perception of bad feng shui and replaced its main entrance. A large bronze statue was added above the entrance to keep with the MGM lion theme, while not scaring away guests.



Now, the lion statue in front of the MGM Grand Hotel sits with a closed mouth.

Believe it or not, President Donald Trump has adopted feng shui strategies. He hired a father-daughter pair of feng shui masters, Tin-Sun and Pun-Yin (von Oldershausen, 2016). When Pun-Yin first saw the Trump International Hotel and Tower, she commented that the energy was extremely bad; she insisted that Trump must follow her directions completely (von Oldershausen, 2016). Trump complied, telling the New York Times in 1994: “It is just another

element in which you can have the advantage over your competitors... Asians are becoming a big part of our market and this is something we can't ignore" (von Oldershausen, 2016, p. 2).

Feng shui strategies to fix the Trump International's bad energy included:

1. Placing a metal globe before the building to deflect the negative energy produced by the oncoming traffic in Columbus Circle. Pun-Yin said, "The instability of energy caused by traffic coming at the building—it's almost like bullets flying at you all the time. It's not stable. It's not calm" (von Oldershausen, 2016, p. 2).
2. Utilizing tea-colored glass for its exterior, which reflects the surrounding sky and would absorb the negative energy caused by the wind's sway upon the building.
3. Changing the direction of the building's entrance. Pun-Yin suggested the entrance of the building should face Central Park instead of Columbus Circle since Central Park is "the green dragon of New York City" (von Oldershausen, 2016, p. 2).



The main entrance of Trump International Hotel and Tower (right of Columbus Circle) faces Central Park rather than Columbus Circle.

Finally, the Lucky Dragon Hotel and Casino, a 203-room boutique resort off the northern end of the Las Vegas Strip, was the first Asian-themed resort in Las Vegas that heavily implemented feng shui into the overall casino design to prevent and limit any negative superstitious beliefs (Pierson, 2016). For example, "the rose-colored resort's front entrance is designed in a dragon motif. A feng shui master blessed its kitchens. The main bar is eight-sided for good fortune"

(Pierson, 2016, p. 1). Since the casino is funded heavily by the Chinese and their primary target market includes middle-class Chinese gamblers and Chinese Americans, the casino purposely avoided using the unlucky number four within the casino—guests will not find number four anywhere in the property (e.g., no fourth floor, no fours for room numbers, and no fours in the phone directory).

Conclusion

There is no scientific evidence to prove that implementing feng shui can change destiny like magic. However, businesses can simply view feng shui as a positive reinforcement of the relationship between the customer and the environment within the organization. If feng shui is applied correctly, the hotel should have a balanced and coordinated environment; it is supposed to accentuate operation efficiency, stable growth, and greater satisfaction from not only external customers, but also internal customers. Feng shui is supposed to induce an optimal, comfortable, and stress-free work environment while reducing the overall workload and employee absenteeism (Feng shui London, 2015). More importantly, feng shui should also ensure a productive environment to increase output and profits, and to sharpen managers' decision-making skills, encourage inspiration, motivation, and innovation.

All in all, the feng shui design system has been applied and emphasized more and more worldwide. Hotels do not have to follow the full complex path of feng shui principles, but can incorporate its main purpose of enhancing guests' well-being by giving them peace, balance, and appreciation within the hotel environment. Should hotels implement feng shui and use it as a marketing tool? It can't hurt; and perhaps it truly does have the potential to guide the currents of fortune for the hotels that embrace this design element.



Ingrid Y. Lin, is an Associate Professor of the School of Travel Industry Management at University of Hawai'i at Mānoa and is an alumnus of Boston University School of Hospitality. Her area of expertise includes services/hospitality marketing and consumer behavior. She teaches hospitality- and marketing-related courses at both the graduate and undergraduate level. Her research work and interests include servicescape aesthetics and design, environmental psychology, sensory marketing, luxury marketing and branding, consumer experience (emotions, perception, evaluation, and behaviors), cross-cultural studies, inter-cultural service encounter, luxury resort spa management and education, consumer/tourists' shopping behaviors, and restaurant tipping systems. Her publications can be found in several reputable business, hospitality and tourism journals.

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