

**DEVELOPING A FENGSHUI-BASED  
STRATEGIC DECISION-MAKING MODEL  
FOR  
MALAYSIA'S PROPERTY INDUSTRY**



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**DECLARATION**

This work has not previously been accepted in substance for any degree and is not being concurrently submitted in candidature for any degree.

Signed Chua Caik Leng (candidate)

Date: 30 December 2021

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## ABSTRACT

In the property industry, stakes are high. The perfect condition of a reasonable time and information for stakeholders to get a sense of confidence to make well-guided decisions is unheard-of. To compound the problem, conscious and subconscious belief-based factors like Fengshui is pervasive in Malaysia's property industry. Although this phenomenon significantly impacts strategic decision (SD) making in the property industry, few mainstream academics would like to indulge too much in an esoteric subject like Fengshui. Whether we choose to ignore this phenomenon or not, Fengshui continues to impact local players and any global players operating or wishing to invest in Malaysia. This study aims to develop a model to address Fengshui-based SD making for Malaysia's property industry. Transcendental phenomenology was adopted to examine the Fengshui-based SD makers' experience without losing its lived, first-person character. Fourteen participants of Malaysia's captains of the property industry formed the purposive sample. The researcher has prior familiarity and prolonged engagement with the subject matter. Therefore, the Modified Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method was employed, including pre-reflective descriptions from the participants and revelations from the researcher. Criteria of this method also require that the researcher's profile fits the purposive sample, and the research question under investigation is also his passion. Data were simultaneously collected via in-depth interviews, analysed and organised into themes until saturation. The final model informs the business leader if the business opponent he interacts with is an *Aliiever* SD maker, *Acquiescer* SD maker, or a *Believer* SD maker. Understanding this enables business leaders to adapt to their environment and act according to the way (*Wuwei* in Daoist philosophy) the situation naturally encourages. Findings in this study reveal theoretical gaps to explore in pursuing Fengshui-related cognitive biases such as confirmation bias and authority bias. The proposed model will benefit multinational corporations by assisting them in better preparing for foreign assignments on this abstract yet impactful area of study in Malaysia's property industry.



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Fengshui, a subject that I had given up more than once the temptation of relating it eloquently to a UK DBA project, underscores the uncertainty and difficulties inherent in writing such a thesis in non-Chinese language. But I am fortunate that friendly mentors, long-time Fengshui peers and scholars have supported me. Without them, this project wouldn't be possible.

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meet with them to hear their brilliant thoughts. Some became my critical friends during the DBA journey and helped me grow as a phenomenological researcher.

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## DEDICATION

Losing my beloved mother to the unforgiving COVID-19 pandemic in July 2021 took its toll on my *Qi* and truly tested my pain endurance level to the limit.

This study is dedicated to the memory of you, Madam Lee Kia, who always believed in my ability to overcome setbacks. Ma, you're no longer here, yet your faith in me has enabled me to make this journey.

My heroine, unsung.



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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Believer	Type 1 Fengshui subscriber - Fengshui believer who is oblivious of rationality
Aliever	Type 2 Fengshui subscriber - Fengshui subscriber who is unable to be rational
Acqueiscer	Type 3 Fengshui subscriber - Fengshui subscriber who is unwilling to be rational
e.g. R11/ <b>D3/DM</b>	Means respondent or participant No. 11, the third <b>developer</b> in the sample and a <b>decision maker</b>
e.g. R1/ <b>P2/DI</b>	Means respondent or participant No. 1, the second <b>property purchaser</b> in the sample and a <b>decision influencer</b>
e.g. R14/ <b>A2/DM</b>	Means respondent or participant No. 14, the second consultant <b>architect</b> in the sample and a <b>decision maker</b>
e.g. R12/ <b>C2/DM</b>	Means respondent or participant No. 12, the second <b>contractor</b> in the sample and a <b>decision maker</b>
NAPIC	National Property Information Centre
REDHA	Real Estate and Housing Developers' Association
SD	Strategic decision
TMT	Top management team

## TRANSCRIPT CONVENTIONS

...	Significant pause
I've had ENOUGH	Capitals indicate raised voice relative to normal
' '	Emphasis by kinesics without raising voice
[ ]	Researcher's descriptions rather than transcriptions

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## GLOSSARY OF TERMS USED

Alief	A habitual belief-like attitude, especially one that strains the person's explicit beliefs. E.g., a person who refuses to eat a pudding he made shaped and coloured like faeces. He may believe that it is safe to eat the pudding but automatically alarms that he is in danger.
Bazi	Directly translated as "8-character". A Chinese astrological concept is known as the Four Pillars of Destiny. Bazi states that a person's destiny or fate can be divided by the two sexagenary cycle characters assigned to the person's birth year, month, day, and hour. Each of which has a Heavenly Stem (S) and Earthly Root (R), hence $4 \text{ (year, month, day, time)} \times 2 \text{ (S, R)} = 8 \text{ (characters)}$ .
Boolean operator	Boolean operators, in search engines, are used to connect and define the relationships between search terms, e.g., AND, OR and NOT. The objective is to save time and prevent futile effort by removing hits that must otherwise be scanned before discarding.
Cognitive resource	Cognitive resources refer to a person's cognitive capacity that can be used for numerous tasks. Easy (or well-practised) tasks take less cognitive resources. Because high-load tasks consume more cognitive resources, people cannot multitask as high-load tasks require a lot of mental energy.
Decision-making	The phrase will be hyphenated, i.e. 'decision-making' when it is used as an adjectival meaning, e.g. "We need a decision-making model".

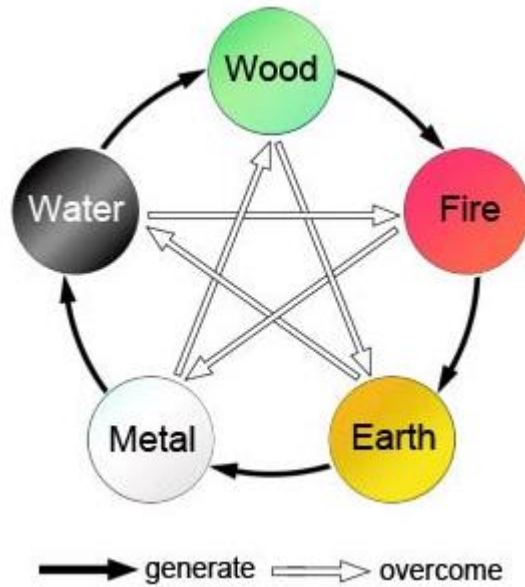
Decision making	The phrase will not be hyphenated when ‘decision making’ is used in a noun form, i.e. a noun plus gerund, e.g. "This calls for a serious decision making’.
Default option	The option automatically gets chosen for strategic making if no active reaction or decision is taken.
Fengshui subscriber	The phrase ‘Fengshui subscriber’ has been adopted in this study as a person who has encountered using Fengshui, willingly or not, directly or indirectly, in making a critical decision.
Lived experience	The first-hand account, interpretation, and impression of an individual. In German, lived experience is <i>de Erlebnis</i> or existentially important experience. In this study, lived experience will be defined as the Fengshui subscriber’s subjective knowledge of their strategic decision-making moment in Malaysia’s property industry.
Intellectual humility	Intellectual humility is portrayed as an intellectual virtue, alongside qualities such as open-mindedness, intellectual gumption and integrity, as opposed to intellectual vices like pride and ego.
Phenomenology	The study of conscious experience, as experienced from the first-person point of view.
Rational person	A completely objective person who analyse all available data to weigh the pros and cons before making a decision with self-interest only.

Researcher	It means Chua Caik Leng, the author of this doctoral thesis. The use of first-person 'I' is common in a phenomenological research report for readers to appreciate the active voice and who is taking action in the reflexive account. However, the use of the first person 'I' may still confuse the sensibilities to some. Lest some may regard using first-person writing as a violation of the quest for objectivity, the ' <i>researcher</i> ' has substituted ' <i>I</i> ' in the main text. In this study, the 'researcher', 'author', 'principal researcher' and 'researcher-as-instrument' are the same person.
Qi	The central ontological element of Fengshui. In the practice of Fengshui, <i>qi</i> is the 'invisible forces' that bind the universe, earth, and humanity together.
SD stakeholder	A strategic decision stakeholder is responsible for key agreements or final decisions, in a position to implement the SD, has expertise or information crucial to realising the desired outcome, likely to be affected by the decision outcome, will need to be informed of the SD outcomes and can block SD. (Note: A <i>business opponent</i> is the SD stakeholder of the opposite side).
Truncation	Use of symbol asterisk to characterise the rest of the term. Internal truncation serves to represent one or more characters within one word.
Wildcard	In searching electronic databases, a wildcard symbol (*, ? and/or *) is used to substitute or represent one or more characters, which can be characterised as number of literal characters or an empty string. E.g. col*r can mean

color or colour.. wom?n will include both singular and plural.

### Wuxing

Also known as the Five Elements, comprises *jin* (Metal), *mu* (Wood), *shui* (Water), *huo* (Fire) and *tu* (Earth).



Wuxing is the foundation of everything in the universe and natural phenomena. The Chinese correlative thinkers see all phenomena as having their respective characters, generating or destroying one other.



## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### 1.1 Background of the study

The official dictionary definition of ‘Feng Shui’ typically explains it as comprising two Chinese characters, i.e., *Feng* 风, which means “wind”, and *Shui* 水, “water”. Also referred to as Chinese geomancy, Fengshui is, at its ontological core, about utilising energy forces (called *Qi*) to harmonise the human inhabitants with the surrounding environment. *Qi*, strictly translated as air or ‘cosmic breath’, represents the universe's life energy in Chinese metaphysics (Needham, 1962; Teh *et al.*, 2018; Paton, 2021).

To date, science can neither dismiss nor warrant *Qi*'s existence definitively (Matthews, 2019). Despite lacking scientific proof<sup>2</sup>, the belief of these all-encompassing energy forces has been, without question, ingrained in the Chinese culture for at least three thousand years (Brown 2005; Florenthal *et al.*, 2013). Yap (2021b) claims that authentic Chinese metaphysics and

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<sup>1</sup> Instead of the Wade-Giles method of writing Chinese, this thesis uses the Hanyu Pinyin system, which was adopted by the International Organization for Standard (ISO) in 1982, and was followed by the United Nations in 1986. The **Hanyu Pinyin** system is seen today in the spelling of such names *Qi* (instead of **Chi**), *Yijing* (instead of **I-Ching**), *Dao* (instead of **Tao**), *Fēngshuǐ* (instead of **Feng Shui**), *Mao Zedong* (Mao Tse-tung), *Qigong* (instead of **Ch'i Kung**), *Guangdong* (instead of **Canton**), *Sichuan* (instead of **Szechuan**) and *Beijing* (instead of **Peking**).

<sup>2</sup> Rational empiricists present scientific explanation as a deductive structure (Woodward, 2019).

classical Fengshui have been sustained over the millennia because they function on the same rules and premises and subscribers observe that the effects work. Mak (2017) states that while Fengshui, generally, is viewed as superstition, its principles are constructed mainly on empirical, science-based research. Tam *et al.* (1999) find that the property industry seems to prefer the use of Fengshui because, once demystified, its concepts appear sensible within the built environment.

Westerners are generally viewed as less susceptible to such superstition due to their distance from traditional Chinese society. However, this does not mean that they do not subscribe to superstitions. During the 2003 National Science Week, Prof Richard Wiseman of the University of Hertfordshire conducted a UK Superstition Survey with over 2000 participants. The survey revealed 77 per cent of participants admitted to being at least a little superstitious and/or having engaged in superstitious behaviour; in comparison, 42 per cent said they were very/somewhat superstitious (Wiseman and Watt, 2014). In contrast with another Western context, the 1996 GALLUP poll reported that 53 per cent of Americans were at least a little superstitious, and only 25 per cent were very/somewhat superstitious.

As a predominantly Asian belief, Fengshui does not openly translate into any intelligible agenda for modern business action. Yet, its ascendancy in the evaluation process for decision making usually goes unchallenged (Florenthal

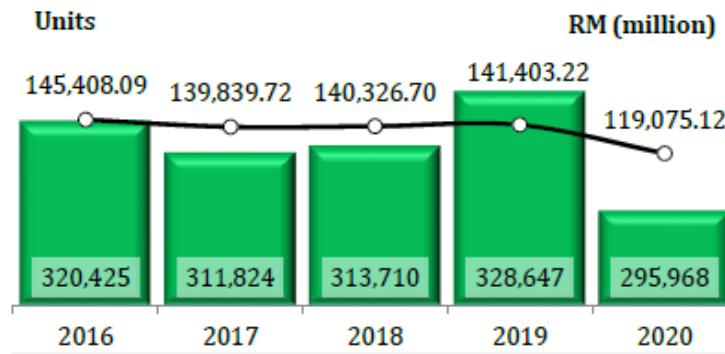
*et al.*, 2013; Bruun, 2011). Business stakeholders, unable or unwilling to offer compelling reasons, still give unwarranted respect and normative weights in such an unspoken requirement of Fengshui. Such is the phenomenon pervasive in the local property industry, which everyone knows but none critically questions.

## **1.2 Property industry in Malaysia**

Malaysia's property industry is capital intensive; not surprisingly, it is fragmented and dominated by big players. With a population of 32.7 million and a GDP per capita of about RM50,000, Malaysia has a resilient property industry (Mohd Uzir, 2021; REDHA, 2021). The country's Central Region is the property hub, which recorded the highest population of 8.40 million (NAPIC, 2019<sup>3</sup>). Population distribution in 2019, according to states, indicated that Selangor was the most populous state (6.52 million), followed by Kuala Lumpur (1.78 million) and Putrajaya (0.10 million). Although the Central Region comprises only 25.8% of Malaysia's total population, it accounted for a significant 75.6% of its property market share (*ibid.*).

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<sup>3</sup> That is, the latest published data available.



**Figure 1-1 Malaysia’s overall property market performance**  
(Source: REDHA, 2021, p. 1)

Malaysia’s property sector performance registered a slight improvement in 2019 compared to 2018, with 160,172 transactions worth RM68.3 billion recorded in the first quarter of 2019 alone (*ibid.*). As of the third quarter of 2019, due to the prolonged property downturn, there was a property overhang of 50,000 residential units worth RM34 billion. In 2020, the property sector as a whole registered 295,968 transactions totalling RM119,075.12 million, a fall of 9.9% in volume and 15.8% in value (2019: 328,647 units, RM 141,403.22 million). With a market share of 64.7 per cent, the residential sector continued to drive overall property market transactions, followed by agriculture and commercial at 20.7 per cent and 6.8 per cent, respectively (NAPIC, 2020).

According to the Real Estate and Housing Developers’ Association Malaysia (REDHA), toward the end of 2019 and before the COVID-19 global outbreak, 27,000 residential units were sold with a total sales value of RM21 billion. A vast majority of the sales came from urban developments within the Central Region, where Selangor and Kuala Lumpur recorded the first and second

highest in sales, respectively (*ibid.*), hence this study's attention on Malaysia's Central Region.

Natural growth, rural-urban migration, rural reclassification, and urban agglomeration of built-up regions are factors contributing to Malaysia's urban development (Zhang, 2011). The cause of rural-urban migration contributes most to urban development, especially in Selangor and Kuala Lumpur. Selangor has the largest number of households, with 1.6 million units: 535,400 are Petaling Jaya households, while 461,600 are households with Kuala Lumpur (Khazanah Research Institute, 2019). Growing urbanisation in major cities has drawn young people to look for more employment and opportunities to promote economic development in the region (Lim, 2017).

Closely connected with Malaysia's property industry is the construction industry, which alone contributed a total value of RM146.6 billion in 2019. It grew by 0.6 per cent compared to RM145.5 billion in the previous year (Mohd Uzir, 2020). Among other states, Selangor has the highest value of construction work done at 24.5%, followed by Johor at 16.5%, Kuala Lumpur at 15.8%, Sarawak at 8.6% and Penang 6.4%. This study will focus on the Federal Territory of Kuala Lumpur, Selangor and Johor's states for property market activity concentration and practical reasons.

In Malaysia, all industries rely on construction to some extent as part of their business investment. Driven by the resumption of activities across all

subsectors post-COVID, growth in the construction sector is expected to rebound from -19.4% last year to +4.0% in 2021<sup>4</sup>. The property sector is a vastly intricate industry because of the diverse output range, from infrastructure construction to public and private housing and the countless parties with a vested interest in its complex supply chain. Natural and human-induced threats are also crucial to the property industry (Kreimer *et al.*, 2003). The Malaysian government has always been cognisant of the knock-on effects of the property sector on the economy. The property industry's attention as an economically and fundamentally important sector is due to its appealing multiplier effects on more than 140 industries (Liew, 2019).

According to Mohd Uzir Mahidin, the chief statistician of Malaysia, these three states' contributions accounted for 56.8% of the total value of construction work in Malaysia, i.e. almost 60% of the property industry activities in the country. Because the gains from construction activities flow through Malaysia's economy, the construction industry significantly affects national economic growth (Chia *et al.*, 2014). Due to the economic power of the property industry, the phenomenon of Fengshui subscription is of considerable importance. Unbeknownst to most key players, Fengshui

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<sup>4</sup> Source: Department of Statistics, Malaysia and Bank Negara Malaysia

subscription has unwittingly been accepted in the industry (Tsang, 2004a; 2004b).

### **1.3 Problem statement**

Compared to just thirty years ago when the researcher started his professional architectural practice in Malaysia, the influence of Fengshui in property industry decision making has gained tremendous currency. The local property industry has its undercurrent of superstitions, and the most pronounced is Fengshui subscription (Hassan *et al.*, 2021; Kamarazaly *et al.*, 2021; Liu and Liu, 2020; Yap and Lum, 2020; Shafii *et al.*, 2020; Keong *et al.*, 2019; Sia *et al.*, 2018). According to Torres *et al.* (2021), despite modernisation, superstitious beliefs in society would be valued and constantly enlivened because people are afraid of facing misfortunes or abominations if they do not subscribe to the superstitions stated in their culture.

However, the purpose of this study is not to ascertain why or to answer if Malaysians are becoming more superstitious. As Fengshui implicitly continues to play an impactful role within the property industry, there is a pressing need for a systematic inquiry into how the phenomenon has manifestly played a part in strategic decision (SD) making.

Fengshui allusively influences almost every SD in Malaysia's property industry, whether selecting and purchasing a development site, choosing auspicious times to commence building construction, opening a commercial centre, or even launching a development project. There is no actual objective rationality in the Malaysian property business, especially within organisations that appear outwardly hostile to subjectivity inwardly harbour it. Subjectivity is a critical perspective in SD makers within the time-pressured, ill-structured and non-routine nature of SD making. Despite an increasing corpus of conceptual literature emphasising the relevance of this area, there has been very little development of theory describing the contextual conditions that have Fengshui factored in SD making. This research empirically focuses on how key stakeholders think and react to this phenomenon during critical decision making, especially when making or breaking a deal.

According to urban studies scholar Yeoh (2005), while Southeast Asia dominates the post-colonial enterprise of fostering national identity and national pride, Fengshui is still very much embedded in subtle ways as the shared ideals of values. The mentally recognised value becomes imperative to their perceived good fortunes, which explains why criteria like 'lucky floors', specific front door orientation, the avoidance of T-junctions, and exposed internal beams fervently matter and have persisted (Sia *et al.*, 2018; Yau, 2015). He *et al.* (2020) and Lin *et al.* (2012), and recently Wang and Hartzell



(2021) demonstrate via quantitative approaches that local characteristics, such as Fengshui, dramatically influence housing prices in Asia.

A Fengshui-based decision occurs when a decision-making factor could be outweighed or influenced by Fengshui. There is new evidence that Fengshui is still a vital decision-making component in property purchases, according to research by Heriyati *et al.* (2021) with the tech-savvy millennials during the COVID-19 pandemic. This finding provides insight that even the open, creative and informative community hold on to traditional values, pointedly Fengshui, to make major decisions. When end-users of the property industry value what they understand as good Fengshui, the developers and architects will continue to provide them with the new properties.

This phenomenon has also manifested in stakeholders' needs and value judgments (Risen 2016; Tsang, 2004a; Tsang 2004b). At times, its role has noticeably reoriented the entire perception of value and ultimately influenced strategic moves in an unexpected and unorthodox way. While cultural beliefs are practised openly with social acceptance and receive much attention from mainstream academics in Malaysia (Sumaco *et al.*, 2014; The Hofstede Centre, n.d.), it is baffling that the influence of Fengshui in property business remains reticent and unexplored.

According to Tam *et al.* (1999), amongst the variables of property purchase (i.e., Fengshui, accessibility and building age) that affect housing prices in

Hongkong, Fengshui yields the highest regression coefficient of 0.95. House buyers are also willing to fork out almost 10% more for lucky apartments in Singapore (He, *et al.*, 2020). A recent quantitative study that applied both QLS models and spatial econometric models on 63,306 private secondary residential transactions confirms that in China, developers are willing to give a discount of up to 12.6% for a dwelling with less desirable Fengshui orientations (*ibid.*).

Another new study by Liu *et al.* (2021) adds to the growing body of evidence suggesting heads of rural households would self-insure against "bad luck" in their zodiac year<sup>5</sup> as much as 18.5% increase in life insurance expenditure compared to the head's non-zodiac years. Overall, Wang *et al.* (2020) have most recently documented empirically the paradox that luck can be quantified and has a price tag according to the consumer preferences for lucky products.

Fengshui drives numerical preference in peculiar ways. Ke *et al.* (2017) provide evidence in the Taiwan security market where investors tend to have an irrational preference for lucky listing codes when selecting stocks. Lucky numbered shares are traded at a premium compared to those with regular or

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<sup>5</sup> The year of the person's Chinese horoscope birth sign is thought to be one of the unluckiest years of his life. According to Chinese astrology, individuals born in their zodiac year are said to upset *Tai Sui*, the God of Age, and thus incur his curse.

‘inauspicious’ numbers (Meng *et al.*, 2021). This idea also manifests in Chinese A-share (held mainly by Chinese) that stock prices are more than twice as apt to end in ‘8’ than ‘4’, where ‘8’ sounds like "rich" and the word "4" is a homonym for the noun "death" in Chinese. Empirical findings also show that the CSI 300 futures index demonstrates a pattern of price clustering, with the quotation often avoiding ending in “4” (Liu and Liu, 2020). Remarkably, the preference for ‘8’ in B-share (mainly held by foreigners) is not evident (Brown and Mitchell, 2008).

In the study on Malaysian developers’ optics of the importance of Fengshui in purchasers, Shafii *et al.* (2020) accomplish that Malaysian Chinese are generally superstitious. According to Hassan *et al.* (2021), not only are purchasers in Malaysia's property industry superstitious, but so are developers. Interestingly, to the developers in Malaysia, “only rich and famous people are concerned about the Fengshui element in selecting a residential property” (*ibid.*, p. 23), as far as Generation Y is concerned.

In Malaysia, the lucky number ‘8’ comes with a premium (Keong *et al.*, 2019). However, it is thought-provoking to see the popularity of ‘8’ among the *Chinese* does not significantly translate into higher bidding prices for ‘auspicious’ car plate numbers when Lim *et al.* (2017) illustrate the race components of bidding prices: Malays RM16,878.67; Chinese RM16,646.14; Indian RM22,750.50. Although that statement is contentious, at least it is the

perception of the developers in Malaysia. A more recent study by Kamarazaly *et al.* (2021) reveals that 39% of Malays factored in Fengshui to choose a house, which is consistent with the findings of a previous study conducted by Amar *et al.* (2012), who found that Muslims today are more acquainted with the concept of Fengshui. However, they do not necessarily subscribe to it or overtly admit they do.

Koh (2019) also observes that although the engagement with Fengshui is predominantly Chinese, uniquely in Malaysia, the practice is intriguingly colour-blind. Using the Spearman's rank correlation tests to study the influence of Fengshui in Malaysia's property pricing and selection, Yap and Lum (2020) confirm Koh's (2019) observation on the colour-blindness in Fengshui. On top of that, Yap and Lum (2020) also find no specific prioritisation of Fengshui elements among the three major ethnic groups in Malaysia in their subscription to Fengshui, whether it was the main door or orientation of the property, house number or street location.

Academically, there is no empirical study on how Fengshui has influenced SD making in the local property industry. Yet, regularly come upon is a far-reaching but nondescript influence of Fengshui in decision making at various stages of the project, from feasibility study stage to the occupation of the premises (Mak, 2017; Rahardjo, 2017; Bazley *et al.*, 2016; Chang and Lin, 2014; Li, 2014; Wu *et al.*, 2012). There is a gaping hole in our current knowledge as

Fengshui continues to play a poignant role in Malaysia's property industry unofficially.

Drawing from his three decades of active professional practice in Malaysia, the researcher agrees that the impact of Fengshui is widely felt not just amongst the Malaysian Chinese in the property industry but also stakeholders of other races. It may strain credulity, but Fengshui carries significant cultural weight in decision making equal with, if not more impactful than, the tangible factors. The phenomenon within the property industry can no longer be left unexamined and under-theorised. Nevertheless, any attempt to thoroughly understand or solve the problem will lead to further confusion and misery without analysing primary qualitative data on a granular level. In this *noisy*<sup>6</sup> context and subject, correlation does not necessarily mean a causal relationship (Kahneman *et al.*, 2021).

Not knowing that Malaysia's property industry stakeholders could view decision-making factors subjectively, the Western businessmen may feel puzzled why negotiations might be lengthier, and decisions might be unscientific with their Malaysian counterparts. Many factors, subliminally or with full knowledge, can influence a decision, and non-conscious influences

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<sup>6</sup> 'Noise' to Kahneman *et al.* (2021), is the unwanted variability in professional judgments, e.g. in the judicial system, judges give different sentences in identical cases due to 'noises' within the individual. It can also happen when people observe the same problem under different conditions—conditions that shouldn't matter, yet they do.

and belief systems can sometimes affect SD making without the stakeholders being aware of them. In other words, decision making is a high causal density phenomenon (Hamilton, 2016); therefore, understanding the lived experiences of SD makers who let Fengshui factored into their crucial decision making is foremost necessary and vital.

Like in the recent global pandemic, market disruptions can also display the logical interpretation of the decision-making process (Hargitay and Yu, 1993; Hoesli and MacGregor, 2014). SD making in Malaysia's property in disruptive environments continues to cause risk development across the country. Consequently, disturbances present an increasing systemic challenge to optimal property investment decision-making (Desai and Sarmiento, 2015). Regardless, other crucial decisions in Malaysia's property industry still must be made amid market disturbances. Keinan (2002) has already shown that high stress can reduce people's control, causing people to subscribe to superstitious thoughts like Fengshui.

Whether as a practice or a mere belief, Fengshui has an impactful international presence. Whether business leaders ignore this phenomenon or not, Fengshui is still a serious concern to the local players and any global players who operate or wish to invest in Malaysia. When faced with significant decisions, these players would spare no effort to consult "experts" in this branch of metaphysics, be it launching a new project, selecting a new site,

commencing new construction, signing a new contract, or even recruiting key personnel. In the Fengshui parlance, the subscriber constructs what he has “accepted as actuality” (Husserl, 1982, p. 32), and a concoction of these subjectivities eventually influences decision making and drive action (Kahneman, 2011).

Positivist tenets dismiss the subjective belief as a non-existent, false or mere illusion for the simple reason that such subjectivity could not be observed or studied through scientific methods (Burrell and Morgan, 2005). The only methodology that the scientific positivists claim as valid is the one that can analyse measurable data. Therein lies the heart of the dispute. The scientifically-minded deny a non-observable world of belief systems “exist” as an actuality, albeit real and actionable enough for others who subscribe to the subjective belief. Subject matters such as belief system, faith, superstition, ideals like freedom and free will are personal or nebulous and are outside the purview of mainstream science.

Scientific knowledge is regarded as objective, hence the reasons behind the positivist claim of validity or truth. This DBA thesis does not set to dispute that. However, from prolonged observation, the researcher argues that Malaysian property industry key players are not entirely functioning under objective reality. Feelings attached to a phenomenon that can neither be easily measured nor practically surveyed will lead to a specific (re)action that

can impact SD making. Many regard reality as what they think and genuinely feel as tangible from their life experiences. Their subjective truth or belief is the fact that will also affect the behaviour of their decision making. The evidence of how a swaying belief system acts on the decision-making process and decision quality must be gathered, illuminated and systematically broken down for examination.

Be that as it may, decision makers who subscribe to Fengshui make their claims through means and methods of non-physical reality, a domain outside the realm of the positivist paradigm. As the researcher engaged actively in the property industry for the past three decades and took cognisance of how the industry players subscribed to Fengshui in Malaysia, rationality has never been critical or even necessary. Fengshui, at best, is a rhetorical option, used to explain the unexplained decision loosely and only if required.

Although the property industry players acknowledge the practice of Fengshui in Malaysia and recognise that a significant number of stakeholders subscribe to it, most subscribers appear to be indifferent about dealing with Fengshui in strategic management and business decision making. Just like a norm, cultural practice or traditional practice, it warrants no question. It signals Fengshui subscription as both taken-for-granted, immuned to queries, and perhaps even unquestionable, similar to how conventional knowledge is still readily employed by some in crucial decision making.



However, others feel ambivalent with factoring in Fengshui in business decision making, as the risk appetite for ‘mysticism’ or fuzzy factors is never keen. Yet, when faced with a Fengshui-related SD, people still look for a quick fix due to the cognitive dissonance<sup>7</sup> created by uncertainties. Cognitive dissonance can be troublesome if SD makers start justifying destructive behaviours or start stressing themselves by rationalising dissonance. Not only does it cause anxiety when cognitive dissonance goes unaddressed, but it can lead to impaired decision making. On the flip side, cognitive dissonance can improve the decision-making process and decision outcome if appropriately addressed.

While 2020 had challenged Malaysia’s property industry in ways the industry players never expected, it has also proven an unstoppable force for good. Malaysia’s ordinarily superstitious property industry has become more discerning of Fengshui. Their becoming more critical of Fengshui does not mean that they have emerged as less superstitious. On the contrary, in an uncertain environment, the attractive characteristic of magical thinking like Fengshui adds to a kind of confirmation bias for its ability to describe all phenomena (Risen, 2016; Agassi and Jarvie, 1973). Risen (2016) contends that people naturally tend to assume causal relationships. Research also indicates that it is elementary for people to want a sense of control and generate

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<sup>7</sup> Cognitive dissonance is the state of mind which simultaneously holds opposing, and even irreconcilable ideas.

coherent theories that connect almost any attribute to nearly any outcome (Kahneman, 2011; Kunda, 1987).

It becomes evident now that the problem is multifaceted. It does not help when present-day Fengshui subscribers also face a dearth of authoritative Fengshui material translated into a more available language, such as English (Matthews 2019; Paton, 2007). Fengshui subscribers have become obliged to rely on tertiary sources of information from populist writers. Instead of paying attention to the original ideas of Fengshui, many of them are living by a loose system of Fengshui principles.

On the one hand, pluralistic ignorance<sup>8</sup> may also be the reason why people accommodate the influence of Fengshui in Malaysia's property industry. On the other hand, Fengshui may be an intimate knowledge that the local SD makers feel rightful to embrace, albeit covertly. After all, such wisdom gained from the in-depth human insights has been passed down through millennia to successive generations by their forefathers.

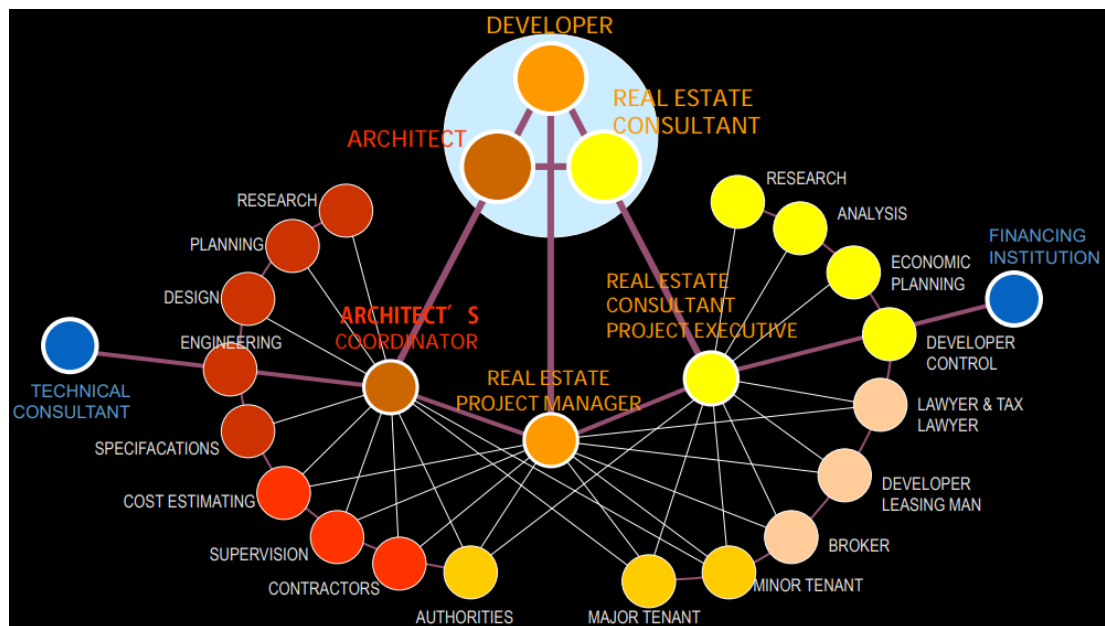
#### **1.4 Research Objectives**

According to REDHA, the property industry means the planning, design and construction, the sales and purchase, and the development and management

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<sup>8</sup> Pluralistic ignorance is a condition in which most community members secretly oppose a norm, but go along with it anyway because they mistakenly believe that most others accept it.

of real estate, which comprises the property, land, building, air rights above the piece of land and the subterranean rights below it. Real estate<sup>9</sup> is an approach to developing the built environment planned comprehensively by considering the product, the market, legal and financial aspects.



**Figure 1-2** Malaysia's key components of property industry providers  
(Source: The author)

The property industry in Malaysia is a sector where finance and project teams meet (Figure 1-2). Intriguing enough, this is also where the rational industry players have an epistemological collision with Fengshui subscribers, which creates an erratic behaviour seen but seldom understood<sup>10</sup>. Fengshui subscription is a social phenomenon prevalent in Malaysia. Despite the widespread application of Fengshui, the property business in Malaysia has

<sup>9</sup> Development of a real estate can be residential, commercial and industrial.

<sup>10</sup> Understandably so, since there is only one way to be rational, there are many ways to be irrational.

never officially acknowledged this phenomenon. It is patently ludicrous to dismiss Fengshui as a hocus pocus without first understanding how this covert and mystical phenomenon has influenced and continues to influence the property industry's SD-making process (Kryžanowski, 2021). The researcher recognises this as an issue for property industry key players; hence research objective is to explore this phenomenon to deal with its effects in SD making.

Every part of SD making within Malaysia's property industry requires human participation (Figure 1-2), and the successes or failures result from the type of decisions humans make. Business decisions are often not consistent. They are also intransitive<sup>11</sup>. People have to think about the kind of inputs that would provide what they consider the best results. Whichever strategic tools may be available for use, human decisions vary from good to bad, depending on the decisional outcomes they achieve. Failure, to them, mostly comes from suboptimal decisions resulting from poor discretion, while success may arise from having used a suitable decision-making process, luck or perceived luck. Recent research shows that a good decision outcome may not necessarily construe a fair decision-making process due to outcome bias (Duke, 2020).

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<sup>11</sup> Meaning, if choice A is preferred over B, and B is preferred over C, yet A is not necessarily be preferred over C.

SD making is a conscientious act of intention and thoughts, whether inspired by Fengshui or not. Although disbelievers think that gravity in Fengshui-based SD making is misguided, the same can be said to the disbelievers by those who engage in Fengshui. It is beyond the scope of this study to argue the rights and wrongs of Fengshui-based SD making. Instead, this research premises that Fengshui-based SD, tacitly accepted by SD makers and stakeholders, is prevalent and significantly affects Malaysia's property industry.

The local property industry recognises how impactful superstitious beliefs are, but it does not understand why. Or how and what best to do about it. Exploring the nexus between the subscribers' worldview, intentionality, and how they make a weighty decision at the material time with the need to heed what the Fengshui consultant says will answer why and how subscribers let Fengshui influence high-level decision making. Although the phenomenon is only tangible for the subscribers who believe, Tsang (2004b) has already proven that once the superstition is known, even half-believers would experience cognitive dissonance unless they base their decisions on that superstition.

Having worked intensively with countless developers in Malaysia over the past three decades, the researcher has encountered that the property industry key players are by no means rational, or at least, not constantly so. Instead,

the unproven advice of Fengshui has often impinged upon decision making in business dealings within the property industry without an empirical framework to understand the phenomenon, let alone addressing the problem. According to Hamilton (2016), non-conscious influences are the 'ghosts' in decision making; in Malaysia's property industry, it is highly doubtful that subscribers are verily conscious of their weight Fengshui in their decision making.

This study has an overarching aim to develop a Fengshui-based SD-making model to improve the decision-making process and decision outcome by optimising the cognitive dissonance<sup>12</sup> and resistance due to the impact and influence of Fengshui in decision making. Understanding this phenomenon necessitates going far beyond published materials. Naturally, to explore the basis of behavioural theories for decision making in the property industry, a holistic understanding of the SD makers' lived experiences is required, especially when they let Fengshui be part of their judgment.

Univariate and multivariate studies indicate enormous cognition biases in property investment decisions, differing vastly between SD makers (Lausberg and Piepk, 2015; Meyer and Pfnür, 2015). The degree to which SD makers in property development decisions are biased depends on their objective and

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<sup>12</sup> *Cognitive dissonance*, coined by Leon Festinger in the 1950s, describes people's discomfort when two cognitions or cognition and a behaviour contradict each other.

subjective experiences and motivations. As evidenced in Meyer and Pfnür (2015), the degree of bias in SD circumstances, which leads to decision inefficiency and unnecessary cognitive dissonance, is not fixed but can be managed.

This study does not aim to question the validity of Fengshui nor judge the SD maker who subscribe, had subscribed or will subscribe to Fengshui in the property industry. Not labelling people but acknowledging that a square peg in a round hole never worked for business decision making, this study seeks to understand with a morally neutral description of the type of subscriber before building a Fengshui-based SD model for the industry. Although the quagmire of the business leaders' beliefs not aligning with rational SD making is impactful, there is currently no decision-making framework in Malaysia as far as Fengshui subscription is concerned. A compelling investigation of the nuances of the participants' experience in their Fengshui-infused decision making would be impossible using a quantitative study (Creswell and Poth, 2018).

In this study, SD makers are primarily the top management team (henceforth, TMT) in Malaysia's property industry. Their letting Fengshui factored in their SD making would inevitably create tension and cognitive dissonance in business. In practice, although the subscription of Fengshui is supraliminal to the subscribers, the influence of Fengshui in their decision making can be

subliminal. Primary data from these insights and lived experiences are paramount to fill the knowledge gap required to fulfil the study objectives. Particularly noteworthy is that the local industry is dominated by a few developers currently concentrating on improving quality and leveraging economies of scale. Out of more than 1,000 property developers in Malaysia, the top seven developers control more than 70% of the local market share (PublicInvest Research, 2021).

Even the most perplexing issues have solutions. For better outcomes than have been achieved thus far, this research must examine what is occurring in Malaysia's property industry rather than what conventional business theories offer. The objective is to gain a granular understanding of the participants' lived experiences relevant to the research questions and goals and, from there, to establish an informed, contextually nuanced interpretation across the participants. By drawing out "thick meaning" from the participants, the hope is to provide the industry with consequential and actionable outcomes in the decision-making model. The strategy is Fengshui-based because it addresses the cognitive and emotive biases that have erratically influenced SD outcomes. The model can then facilitate a strategic realignment method to improve decision quality.

A Fengshui-based SD-making model does not define what or how exactly property industry players should decide. Although not a silver bullet, it



compels business leaders to view their options desirably. It saves them from the drudgery of making sense of the perplexing subject of Fengshui by putting in place a decision matrix with the most pertinent information and presenting it in a condensed and easy-to-digest format. In sum, the broad objective is to make the erratic influences of Fengshui in decision-making intelligible and systematic so that a business leader who uses the model may confront Fengshui-based SD making more mindfully in similar contexts.

This study will, foremost, gather the first-hand account of Fengshui subscribers experienced in the local property industry through a transcendental phenomenological research approach, primarily how the phenomenon affects stakeholders' decision making. Primary data are crucial for developing a model relevant to the unique research context at hand. The utility of transcendental phenomenological research may not be evident at first. The problem requires looking at a Fengshui-infused decision-making process through a fresh lens. First, the primary data must be analysed and understood. Without this, formulating a model to address the phenomena is unrealistic.

This research ultimately aims to develop, primarily, a descriptive model (see Section 2.4) and not make normative statements about Fengshui-based SD making. Because there is *no value judgment* in this study whether subscribing to Fengshui in SD making is right or wrong, the most achievable is a

descriptive model that gives pointers on how to react to which Fengshui subscriber type in a beneficial way (later, explained as *Wuwei*) (Turban *et al.*, 2010).

Furthermore, the chosen research design of a phenomenological approach with fourteen participants does not lend itself well to the development of normative models. In other words, once the optimal research design for creating an empirical model was determined, extending the research to generate a normative model became virtually impossible. But a descriptive model has its value as a basis for future normative models, for example, the possibility of reimagining a debiasing mechanism in Fengshui-based SD making.

The researcher has referred to secondary data from literature reviews and notes from his prolonged professional immersion in the subject to assemble the theoretical background and conceptual framework. As research “purpose is the controlling force in research” (Patton, 2015, p. 248), this study has a cardinal purpose of developing a model to address Fengshui-based SD-making categorically for Malaysia’s property industry. To achieve that will require answers to the following research objectives:

1. To examine the cognisance and lived experiences (*de Erlebnies*<sup>13</sup>) of the SD makers in Malaysia's property industry when they let Fengshui be part of the factors in making a significant decision.
2. To understand using a phenomenological approach what drives and ultimately shapes SD making for these subscribers<sup>14</sup>, with the view to developing a Fengshui-based SD-making model for Malaysia's property industry.

Both the scholarly community and industry will lose out if they neglect the empirical understanding of Fengshui in Malaysia's property industry. The industry does not wait for academia to catch up in the real world. The researcher requires a unique platform to explore the complex problem and a Fengshui-based decision model, which he believes can be accomplished in a rigorous, ethical, collaborative and enduring way via a professional DBA programme. Peer review regulates subjectivity and prejudices when his works are presented at international conferences and published.

Business leaders and academic scholars are fighting for the same ideal – advancement in knowledge. How they seek to achieve value and development is another matter. Since the significant impact of Fengshui is clear and not

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<sup>13</sup> First-hand account, interpretation, and impression of an individual. In this study, it would be the lived experiences of the Fengshui subscriber. A lived experience is a representation and understanding of human experiences, options, and decisions and how those factors influence one's perception of knowledge.

<sup>14</sup> A person who has encountered using Fengshui, willingly or not, directly or indirectly in making a critical decision.

imagined, there is a need for rigorous empirical evaluation on decision-making stakeholders to provide direct evidence on the effects of Fengshui in SD making. Businesses are integral to knowledge development and will go ahead with or without their activities or phenomena being studied, analysed and theorised.

## **1.5 Research Questions**

Phenomenological questions, both the research and interview questions, are limited to experiences (Peoples, 2021). Within a conscious experience, a research participant makes meaning of it, has perceptions about that experience, and interprets it. But, still and all, the experience is neither meaning, perception, nor interpretation (*ibid.*). An example of a perception statement is, “I suppose my client thinks that I am superstitious”.

Whilst the participant is experiencing a thought or feeling, the experience with his client is not present. Therefore, this statement would be about perception rather than an experiential account. The researcher should first note that this statement is significant and relevant to the participant. But, an appropriate phenomenological question to ensue is to ask the participant to explain within an experience lived, e.g. “Can you give me an example of when you thought your client considered you superstitious and what happened at that moment when you felt that way?”

The philosophical assumptions of this study steer how research questions are formulated (Tuffour, 2017). Therefore, to discuss the nuanced but critical theoretical distinction between the descriptive and interpretive phenomenology approaches is needed. The lack of such clarification will create difficulty in evaluating how this study produces knowledge, let alone using it (e.g. Charlick *et al.*, 2016; Lopez and Willis, 2004; Wojnar and Swanson, 2007).

When people let Fengshui be a significant business decision factor, the decision-making moment occurs within their “life-world” (Husserl, 1936/1970). By no means does this lend itself to checkboxes or Likert scale survey instruments. When subscribing to Fengshui in crucial decision making, people have different perspectives and see decisional strategies and outcomes differently. Research data can be obscure, and participants who are themselves SD makers can unwittingly distort their information to appear sensible and rational.

The two dominant schools of thought in phenomenology are the transcendental phenomenology by Czech-born German philosopher Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), and Martin Heidegger (1889-1976)'s interpretive phenomenology (Reiners, 2012). The transcendental phenomenological

approach<sup>15</sup> that the researcher adopted in this study dictates using *epoché* or bracketing<sup>16</sup> to suspend his prior knowledge of the subject temporarily. To set aside the preconceived account from his prolonged engagement in the issue entails a detailed description of the lived experience without ascribing *a priori* meaning (Balaban, 2002). More importantly, the experience described should rigorously be anchored upon research data and not his theory (Charlick *et al.*, 2016).

While the bracketing approach of descriptive phenomenology has received some criticism (Spiegelberg, 1974; Loidolt, 2018; Zahavi, 2019), the actual application is much more sophisticated than just attempting to shun the researcher's prior experience. Instead, the aim is to ensure that the participants' experiences, and not the researcher's interpretations, are used to identify the phenomenon's structure (Zahavi, 2019).

Heidegger maintained that in interpretive phenomenology (also known as hermeneutic phenomenology), bracketing does not occur because personal knowledge is part of a phenomenological investigation (Wojnar and Swanson, 2007). Since the concept of bracketing is deemed neither achievable nor required, this approach does not respond to the researcher's concern to

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<sup>15</sup> Also known as *descriptive phenomenology*.

<sup>16</sup> Bracketing can be thought of as the researcher's endeavour to suspend his preconceptions and beliefs in order to gain experiences before making meaning of them.

address his personal biases (Smith *et al.*, 2009). After all, language consistency is incredibly unstable in an abstract subject like Fengshui subscription; the researcher's three decades of active engagement with the research question would be overwhelming and problematic if there were no mechanism to suspend his judgments.

Therefore, the more systematic transcendental phenomenological inquiry in a descriptive approach is the best option. The overarching research question that gave focus to this phenomenological inquiry was formulated in such a way to yield a thick description of the lived experience in participants' Fengshui-infused SD making:

1. What is the lived experience (*de Erlebnies*) of the SD makers in Malaysia's property industry when they let Fengshui be part of the factors in making a strategic decision?

The form of the supplementary questions was recursive, which led to the expansion and clarification of the participants' experiences, intending to elicit as rich a description of the phenomena as possible:

- 1 (a) How do participants, as members of the top management team, make sense of their Fengshui subscription experiences in SD making?
- 1 (b) Can participants describe the experience when they thought they had made an optimal (or suboptimal) SD with Fengshui factored in?

Phenomenological insights that responded to the research questions will lead to:

- Findings that will broaden the current scope of understanding of the phenomenon; and
- Developing a model capable of addressing a Fengshui-based SD categorically for Malaysia's property industry players.

## **1.6 Research Context**

Although relatively lengthier, this Section is necessary for readers to comprehend the study context completely. The researcher's attempt to "stay true" to the text and data for visible trustworthiness will tumble if the context and circumstances surrounding a phenomenological investigation of this genre are not thoroughly addressed (Bengtsson, 2016, p. 8).

From as simple as uttering a prayer before boarding a plane to avoiding choosing Friday the 13<sup>th</sup> to make a weighty decision are scientifically irrational or unnecessary (Park, 2008). Still, people who behave and act in such a manner are likely to maintain deep affectivity on what drives that action. Can the belief or subscription of Fengshui be categorised as superstitious pervasive in contemporary culture since Fengshui cannot be explained objectively by science?



Like any forecasters, Fengshui subscribers may appropriate and redefine the prevailing discourse of knowledge legitimacy based on their epistemological perspectives (Matthew, 2019). Therefore, as far as Fengshui subscribers are concerned, it is not surprising that they may positively reframe their beliefs as acceptable and rational if not even ‘scientific’ or ‘compatible with science’ against other sources of knowledge. Their cognitive ability to process data to make a decision, often a strategic one, is influenced in many ways by their Fengshui subscription or belief as if it is an image in which they make sense of the world.

As content without context is meaningless, Kuhn (1962/2012) has cautioned that researchers must work from within their respective paradigm or a known context. Given (1) the imperfect nature of understanding the world, (2) the ontological subjectivity of Fengshui and (3) the qualitative bearing of this research, this section will illustrate the array of boundaries to understand and appreciate the contexts in which this study took place. Scientific research requires philosophical frameworks to conduct evidentiary exploration, not just data to support the hypothesis. If there is any dependency on one another, science cannot exist without a philosophical framework (*ibid.*).

### **1.6.1 Textbook ontological and epistemological context of Fengshui**

Textbook knowledge examines how something works or has traditionally worked in a controlled environment or studied in a large, average community

(De Castell, 1990). Here, the term ‘textbook’ reminds readers that, while discussion in this section is helpful, Fengshui subscribers may not perceive the phenomena under investigation as intuitive in their daily decision making.

As far as Malaysia’s property industry is concerned, textbook knowledge of this abstract subject is under increasing strain when Fengshui subscribers may not practise or even understand what has been written by Fengshui academics or related business scholars. Therefore, it is crucial to differentiate upfront between the theory and the practice of Fengshui within the local populace.

What the classical Chinese text presents (as reality and the nature of knowledge) is not necessarily what contemporary Asians understand, want to understand or practise in the real, or business, world. Unlike in the UK, with its *Feng Shui Society*<sup>17</sup> as a regulatory body administering professional registration for accredited Fengshui consultants and teachers throughout the

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<sup>17</sup> The Feng Shui Society <https://www.fengshuisociety.org.uk/> is a non-profit organisation founded in London in 1993 to oversee, protect and promote the highest standards of Fengshui practice. Besides having established practice standards and codes of conduct expected of professionals, the society offers professional Fengshui practitioners training course fully accredited for setting-up practice and admission as members. The objective is to give and maintain public confidence in the integrity of Fengshui standards of practice and safeguards the reputation of professional consultants.

UK and Europe, Fengshui in Malaysia is largely an unchecked body of knowledge.

The textbook versions of Fengshui bear little intellectual authority in Malaysia, and people have no qualms disregarding them. Moreover, the property industry neither uses nor shares academic publications because the consumers are flummoxed or unable to understand the complicated application.

The fact that the classical Chinese and modern Fengshui subscribers are fundamentally correlative thinkers is something both have in common (Huang, 2019; Ames, 2014). Fengshui uses correlative thinking language to express nexuses between humans and the cosmos, microcosms, and macrocosms (Henderson, 2011).

Correlative thinking is an approach that focuses on correlations<sup>18</sup>; such in Wuxing<sup>19</sup>, green is a manifestation of the Wood element, and red, the Fire

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<sup>18</sup> An example as pointed out by Sinologist Marcel Granet (1884-1940)(Huang, 2013) is the two underlying ‘guiding principles’ (principes directeurs) of the binary Yin and Yang and how the Chinese effortlessly grasp what they are rudimentarily. A correlative thinker born in the dragon's year does not see himself literally as a dragon but regards it as a metaphor for recognising his future character and behaviours (Choy, 2017). Fung (2010) finds no common perspective among Sinologist scholars on ‘correlative thinking’ to explain the Chinese mode of thinking. But all of them recognise that at root level correlative thinking is more intuitive at the root level and appears to be multivariant in the sense that it depends more on inspiration than on facts (*ibid.*; Hall and Ames; 1998; Needham, 1962).

<sup>19</sup> Also known as the Five Elements, comprises *jin* (Metal), *mu* (Wood), *shui* (Water), *huo* (Fire) and *tu* (Earth).

element (Chua, 1985). It draws a correspondence between the different life orders or the universe's domains, such as the human body, the political body, and the celestial bodies.

Fengshui concepts deal with high-level principles in ancient texts, such as natural law and the form-*Qi* relationship (Guo Pu, 276-324 AD; Erdogan and Erdogan, 2014). The earliest textual reference to site selection activity appears in many related passages on oracle bones dating back to the mid-Shang dynasty 1766-1046 BC (Guo Pu, 276-324 AD/2004). Much later in the Pre-Qin period before 230 BC, pursuing '*Dao*' (translated as the 'way') was the main task in most ancient Chinese philosophers' scholarship<sup>20</sup>. In contrast, the Ancient Greek philosophers considered pursuing 'Truth' as their ultimate goal. Daoism has often been mistaken as a religion (Gregory, 2018). This misunderstanding about Daoism keeps many researchers from approaching it because of its association with religious dogma.

In *Yijing*<sup>21</sup>, the Book of Changes, man's true nature belongs to *Dao*, which comprises the root of all things. To grasp the ontology of Chinese Fengshui, however, one must appreciate the Chinese metaphysical trinity of Heaven (Tian), Earth (Di), and human beings (Ren), also known as San Cai (三才).

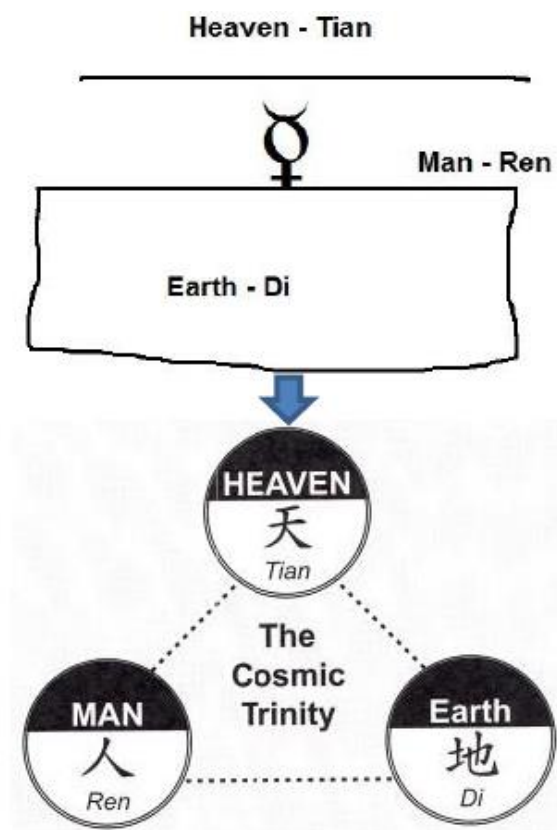
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<sup>20</sup> Daodejing was and never is not a statement of religion or dogma. It is a merely universal *Way* to align an individual's inner world with the essence and evolution of the universe.

<sup>21</sup> *Yijing* is the foundation upon which Fengshui underpins, *vide* *Yijing* or Book of Changes, A Translation by Richard Wilhelm (1873-1930), rendered into English by Cary G. Baynes (1950).

Dao is at the heart of the Chinese worldview. Daoism is about Man's position in the larger environment beyond society. San Cai, first mentioned in Chapter 10 of the Yijing, is "The Way of Heaven, the Way of Man and the Way of the Earth are in it, and then the San Cai is taken and doubled".

*"Therefore Dao is great, Heaven is great, Earth is great, And man is also great. Existence contains these four greats. Thus Man is one of the great universal manifestations. Man takes his law from the Earth; the Earth takes its law from Heaven; Heaven takes its law from the Dao. The law of the Dao is its [ideal mode of effortless action] Ziran 自然<sup>22</sup>" (Daodejing, Chapter 25)*



**Figure 1-3 Tripartite unity of the Cosmic Trinity of Chinese metaphysics (Redrawn by the author from various sources)**

<sup>22</sup> 故道大，天大，地大，人亦大。域中有四大，而人居其一焉。人法地，地法天，天法道，道法自然。 *Daodejing, Chapter 25*

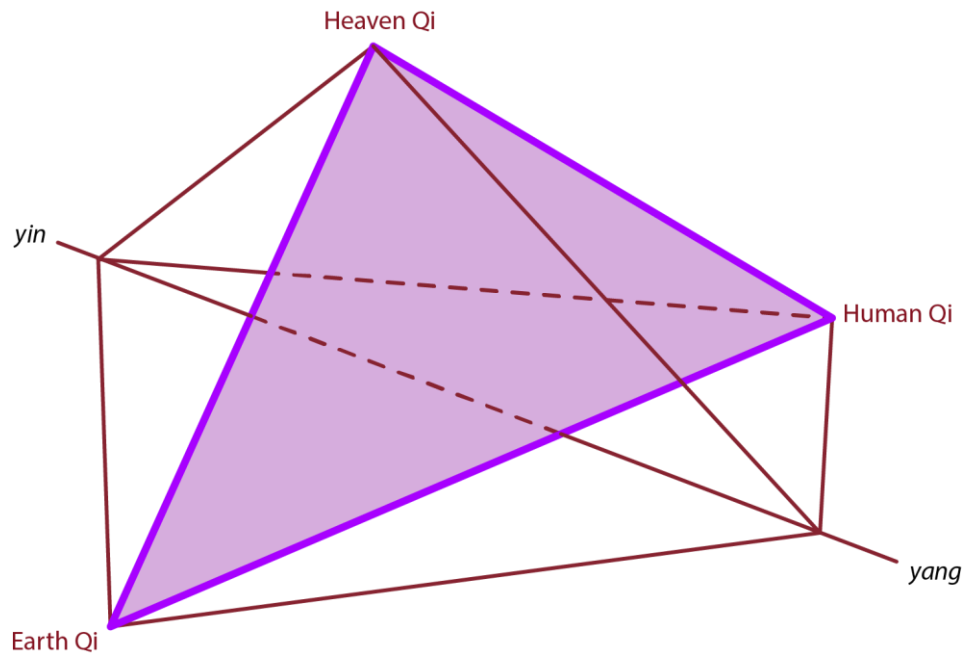
‘San Cai’ literally translates to “three abilities” (Choy, 2009, p. 2). Early translators used the phrase ‘San Cai’ to describe the concept of Tian, Di, and Ren, which has led to some people mistaking the three realms as in a static state when the Chinese view of the world is always situational and never fixed. On the contrary, the world is continuously changing, so nothing exists truly and permanently. Heaven, or *Tian*, was correlatively conceived as an anthropomorphic in the early Zhou Dynasty (1064–256 BC)<sup>23</sup> (De Groot, 1962). The earliest literature of China says that Heaven’s awareness of earthly things comes primarily through ordinary people’s experiences (Eitel, 1988). It is the oldest worldview that became a vital cultural element of Chinese life for which there are existing written documents (Feuchtwang, 1974).

Whatever is observable in Heaven will have a physical manifestation on earth. Thus, human life will parallel nature’s laws. Although Tian has lost its personification in later references and can be compared to destiny or fate (Stefon, 2009), in ‘textbook’ ontology, Fengshui is still mainly about experiencing, understanding and explaining these influences (Bonaiuto, 2010; Chen, 2007). Since it comes from a completely different worldview, some aspects may seem quite peculiar to present-day business leaders. But it

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<sup>23</sup> A personified, all-powerful ‘deity’.

can be explored and understood with the classical concept of Fengshui (Figure 1-4).



**Figure 1-4** A model of San Cai Qi in balance with Yin-Yang quality  
(Redrawn by the author based on Choy, 2009, p. 5 )

In Chinese metaphysics, where Fengshui resides, the reality is that three critical energies from Tian-Di-Ren hold power to influence a person's life. In other words, the shaded plane in Figure 1-4 is not static as the ontological concept of San Cai (三才) but is perpetually shifting back and forth in the continuum of Yin and Yang. The shaded triangular form is also constantly changing as it embodies the Tian, Di and Ren dimensions in varying magnitudes over time.

Whilst superstitious beliefs are those beliefs that run counter to accepted rational thought or are inconsistent with laws of nature, Fengshui to the

believers *are* the law of nature. "Heaven [Tian] and earth [Di] are full of ... people [Ren] ... born in earth, return to earth, divine residence and burial, ancestral earth only" (cited in Xu and Wang, 2022, p. 31). So underlines the ancient concept of Fengshui, which demonstrates the hallowed importance of the land in people's hearts. Because of the early Chinese people's inability to manipulate the landform, "following nature" was understood; hence, the land carries this original spontaneous ecological concept.

According to the traditional Daoist philosophy<sup>24</sup>, what we humans carry out on earth will cosmically affect Heaven and vice versa. No matter who we are, these three factors, Tian-Di-Ren, always govern the decisions one made or is about to make. So, by forecasting and managing the inputs, human decision makers can navigate the outcome. There is no mindless prediction in Fengshui, but most contemporary Fengshui-related literature ostensibly uses the words predict and forecast interchangeably (Ariely, 2010; Ofori *et al.*, 2017).

Daodejing<sup>25</sup> suggests contextual dyadic thinking as a foundation to classical Chinese ontology, as a path different from dualistic thinking in modern Western philosophy. Unfortunately, because Chinese philosophy texts lack

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<sup>24</sup> *Daodejing* by Lǎozǐ; Fengshui in Chinese is kan yu (堪輿): Kan refers to Heaven, and Yu, Earth. Therefore, the researcher has always thought of the tripartite unity of Cosmic Trinity (San Cai) as derived from the Daodejing, but the Cosmic Trinity of Tian-Di-Ren seems to be pervasive already in the earliest ever classic *Yijing*, so that is probably not strictly correct.

<sup>25</sup> Ditto.



prose while being so to the point, they are tricky to comprehend without a massive Chinese literature background (Faure and Fang, 2008). Western-educated readers who rely on the translated version of philosophical texts may be further confused instead of understanding them. Even modern Chinese thinkers like Hu Shih (1891-1962) regard Daoist philosophy as hostile to the existing norms and practices, labelling Laozi, the founder of Daoism, as a rebel (Lai, 2015).

Still, the Chinese universally accept the duality of Yin and Ying. Yin-Yang or ‘act’-‘don’t act’ by individuals or organisations relates to system changes via willful action or nonintrusive action, as in *Wúwéi*<sup>26</sup> (無為, in Chinese, literally means *not doing* or *non-action*). This statement epitomises the Chinese values of ‘going with the flow’, or ‘cooperation’. Wuwei, being the operative word in the Chinese description of nonintrusive progress, can only be carried out by "an ideal leader or decision maker"<sup>27</sup> (Moon, 2015, p. 457). With the ontological grounding of their belief discussed, it is not surprising to see why the Chinese view reality as adaptable according to socially constructed models.

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<sup>26</sup> *Wúwéi* does not mean not acting, it means ‘effortless action’ or ‘actionless action’. According to the central text of *Daodejing*: ‘The Way never acts yet nothing is left undone’. This is the paradox of *Wúwéi*.

<sup>27</sup> This key point will be revisited and examined in greater detail in the subsequent chapters.

## 1.6.2 The Fengshui milieu in Malaysia

The preceding section has discussed the structure of the worldview and the posture of Fengshui in Chinese philosophy, such as the philosophical trilogy of Tian-Di-Ren and man having to relate to the Heaven characterised as a higher order of fate or destiny<sup>28</sup>. If such Fengshui textbook epistemology is to be stood by, one must approach this study from that ontological lens. The truth is, however, not the case. Understanding Chinese ontology helps insofar as to appreciate the difference between the Western values and Chinese *Tian-Di-Ren*. But, lack of documentary evidence, it is uncertain how much contemporary Chinese Malaysians truly accept Chinese ideology and practice its values. Because destiny and luck are uncontrollable, the widely-held axiom in the Malaysian Chinese diaspora of '1st-destiny, 2nd-luck, 3rd-Fengshui'<sup>29</sup> leads to the epistemic belief that they can do the next best thing, i.e., to improve their destiny is to *subscribe to Fengshui*.

Every culture has its implicit common knowledge of what is real. It is relatively frequent in Malaysia's property industry to come across Fengshui subscribers making a significant decision without relying on empirical

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<sup>28</sup> Fengshui ought not to be taken literally and read as if the syllabus is cast in stone. Using the most common Fengshui idiom that is globally embraced by all Fengshui masters (一-命, 二-运, 三-风水, literally means 1st-Destiny, 2nd-Luck, 3rd-Fengshui) - it only means, to be successful in life, one's *destiny* is the first criterion, to be followed by *luck*, and thirdly *Fengshui*.

<sup>29</sup> 一-命, 二-运, 三-风水

evidence, never mind the philosophical underpinnings. For most of the Western culture, the Fengshui principles of San Cai of having a Heavenly Father (*Tian*) nourishing Earth (*Di*) with the nexus of *Qi* to affect Man (*Ren*) are bizarre. Most Malaysians are pretty familiar with the Fengshui concepts, but even they are not inherently well versed with the basic principles of Fengshui. Even among Chinese subscribers, Fengshui theories are based on mystical principles and not founded on hard scientific facts. Therefore, Fengshui is open to different interpretations. While some subscribers may think Fengshui is beneficial or necessary<sup>30</sup>, others consider it merely an occult art.

In contrast to the classical Fengshui taught in closed-door classes in China, the Black Sect Fengshui teachings<sup>31</sup> in the United States are trendy and approachable. As it is more straightforward than the classical Fengshui taught in Asia, Black Sect is much easier to practice and has become very popular. Therefore, Black Sect is a Western faction of relatively recent tradition that is more New Age than the traditional schools. Ironically, Black Sect does not

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<sup>30</sup> A *sine qua non* of any hopeful outlook for the success of their significant project or investment.

<sup>31</sup> In the late 1970s, Harrison G. Kyng formed the Shen Dao Fengshui in the United Kingdom, a new form of Fengshui school premised on the shoulders of the two established giants, the Form School and Compass School. Kyng uses the Wuxing modality to evaluate his client's health and the harmony of the client's building (Skinner, 1982; 2012). The next decade in the United States of America, Thomas Lin Yun Rinpoche set up Black Sect Fengshui, based on "transcendental" methods of Tantric Buddhism. Black Sect Fengshui even has its *luópǎn* uniquely created with the eight compass segment directions to depict a specific area of human life.

exist in Asia. So, there are only two different approaches to practise Fengshui, i.e. the Form School and the Compass School (Bourassa and Peng, 1999; Mak and Ng, 2006). While the Form School relies on the study of landform and its visible surroundings, the Compass School employs detailed analysis of cosmology and calibrations of a subject site using tools, the pivotal instrument *luópǎn*<sup>32</sup>.

Traditionally, however, Fengshui schools<sup>33</sup> comprise the Form School and the Qi School (Yap, 2008). As far as the academic tradition is concerned, Prof Master David Koh<sup>34</sup> situates Fengshui as a system of environmentalist thinking and geography. His viewing the Earth as the conduit of forces has attracted the property industry's appeal to the Form School, particularly in the last two decades (Koh, 2019). Today in Malaysia, Fengshui (also known as

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<sup>32</sup> A traditional compass usually made of wood. The many-ringed compass body displays an elaborated details of cosmological directions and metaphysical data. Also known as a geomantic compass, a Chinese magnetic compass, and a Fengshui compass.

<sup>33</sup> Note however that it is incorrect and highly misleading interpretation to say that there are, traditionally, two schools of Fengshui, i.e. 'Compass School' and the 'Forms School'. In fact, all methods and techniques of Fengshui use Forms and a Compass (or Luo Pan). A more appropriate and correct division of the two schools of thought in Fengshui is that Fengshui methods and techniques fall into either a Forms School (Xing Shi Pai) or a Qi School (Li Qi Pai). There are two famous 'schools' that advocate Xing Shi and Li Qi, and they are the San He (Three Combinations) and San Yuan (Three Cycles). Most major Fengshui systems, methods and techniques will fall under either one of these schools. But since the context of this study is Malaysia, which is generally acknowledging only Form School and Compass School, the analysis will reflect this fact.

<sup>34</sup> A Malaysian, with professorship by Jiaotong University and Tongji University in China, coined the word 'Environology' to replace 'Fengshui' for political-correctness. He claims that 'Fengshui' in modern societies connotes religious, cultural or superstitious beliefs, which link to the idea of making divinations, and to some religions (e.g. the Muslims in Malaysia), considered a taboo.

Environology) is a university-recognised subject. Locally, a group of architects under Pertubuhan Akitek Malaysia (Board of Architects Malaysia) have completed courses on Environology to apply sound concepts in their design and give their clients added support value.

In reality, however, 'Fengshui' today is a catchall term with nuanced interpretations for different subscribers with dissimilar 'belief maps', which is where the problem arises. The actual vignette of Fengshui subscription, more so in Malaysia, is far from the epistemic or scholastic ideal discussed. Some Fengshui scholars regard the relatively new schools of thought with commercial motive as eroding the reputation of the traditional Fengshui schools and Chinese metaphysics as a whole (Huang, 1999; Chen and Nakama, 2004).

Popular Fengshui (Figure 1-5), or sometimes stated in the colloquial term of New Age Fengshui, has a heterodox practice that many old schools are too conservative to try. Their parsimony is understandable considering the copious quasi-spiritual laws on the placement of objects, practised in the same sphere as fortune-telling, primarily driven by the consumer culture, such as selling crystals, talismans, and the arm-waving lucky cat Maneki Neko. These lucky charms are not part of Classical Fengshui but are more about pop psychology, superstition, and folk tales. Nevertheless, it is still gaining compelling popularity because it exudes an easily understood quick-

fix aura by charismatic service providers in a showbiz style of selling Fengshui consultancy services.

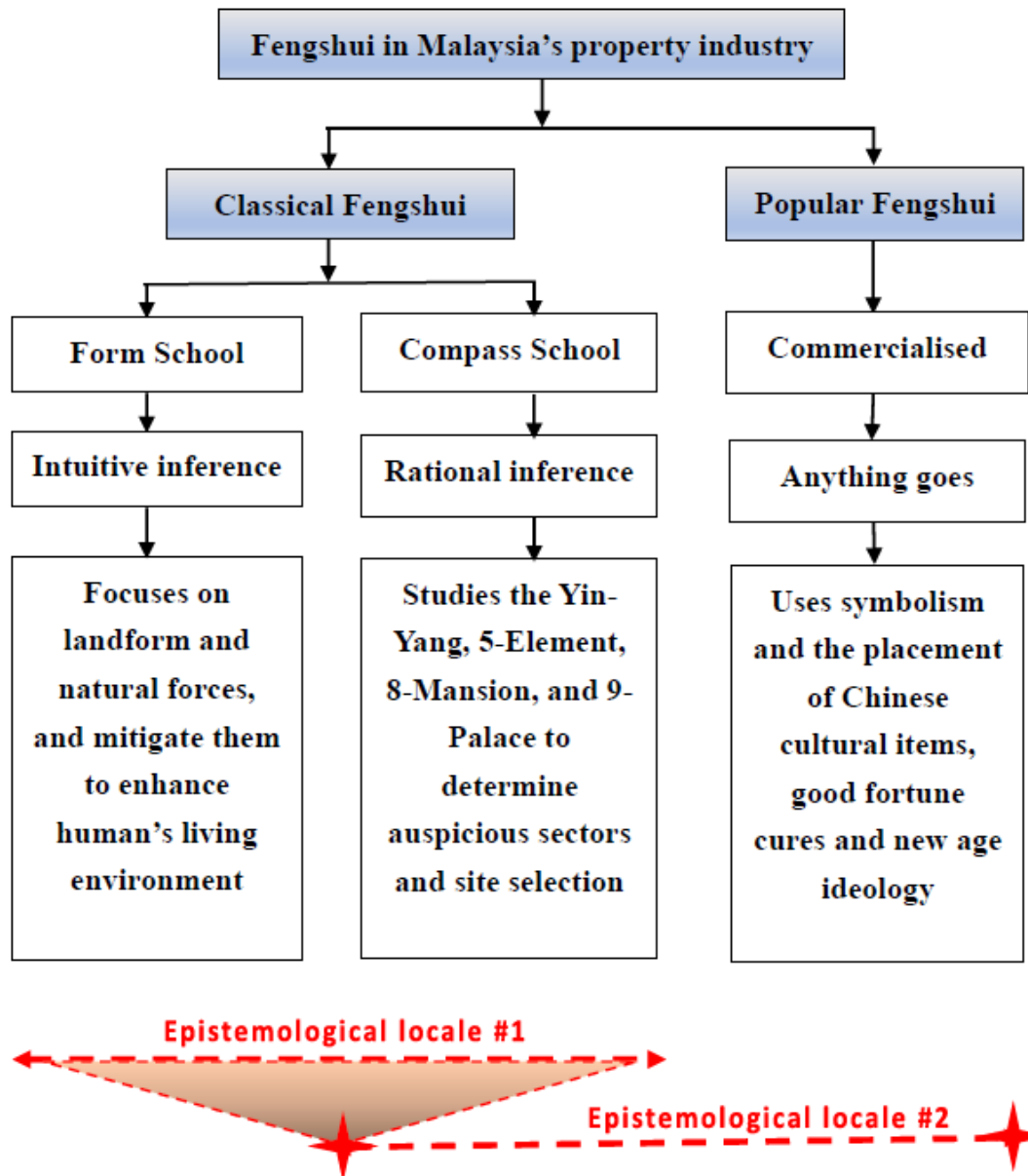


Figure 1-5 Fengshui in Malaysia's property industry

Source: The author, in collaboration with Koh (*per. comm*, 2017, 8 June)

Popular or New Age Fengshui makes the discipline more adaptable and appealing to the westernised Malaysian people, encouraging Fengshui tolerance and adoption into daily life. However, Popular Fengshui departs from the fundamental wisdom of classical Fengshui by attempting to simplify

its concepts. Due to the increasing popularity of Fengshui and the increasing number of business leaders wanting to apply the discipline to their industries, it is critical to grasp what traditional Fengshui principles and fundamental concepts represent and how to combine them.

Since there is no governing or endorsed body in Malaysia, the pillars of knowledge in Fengshui are in disarray if they exist at all. Within the local property industry, any Fengshui master can claim his expertise or any scholar, his authority. Against the current Fengshui landscape in Malaysia, Fengshui subscribers squarely fall within the New Age Fengshui under the Popular Fengshui School (Koh, 2019). Many self-proclaimed 'Masters' give cheap consultancy to more disillusioned Fengshui subscribers. The latter feel that purchasing and placing some placebo New Age Fengshui items in their homes will turn fortunes around.

Due to the Fengshui subscription ecosystem in Malaysia, which allows for the interpretation of Fengshui principles without reference to any organised body of knowledge, the most well-received Fengshui will become the Popular Fengshui practised. Epistemology is, thus, relevant to the research questions since it helps gauge what is justified true belief to Fengshui subscribers and even questions how subscribers came to acquire the Fengshui information they know and what boundaries the knowledge has. In other words, readers

should appreciate the subscribers' epistemological locale<sup>35</sup> or how they reconcile what is true with what is false?

To face commercial reality, the New Age Fengshui practitioners (see Figure 1-5) practically require a one-size-fits-all Fengshui remedy rather than relying on the traditional esoteric diagnostic. Despite their equivocal rejection of all things commercial, proponents of New Age Fengshui maintain a deep commitment to commerce. As a result, they capitalise on a sizable market for books and personal services involving inchoate woo, particularly among the troubled and comfortable masses. As witnessed by the researcher, Fengshui seminars of gargantuan size are profit-making machines (see, for example, Appendix C).

Fengshui consultancy has a disconcerting conflict to reconcile between focussing on the mass market or serving a privileged clientele as it has traditionally practised (Koh, 2019). From the researcher's vantage point after his prolonged engagement in the industry, Fengshui subscribers are somewhere in the middle of these extremes (Refer to Epistemological locale #2 Figure 1-5). They look at Fengshui loosely in a simplistic way and subscribe

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<sup>35</sup> Locale, according to Agnew (1987, p. 7), is the material environment for social activities, in which the subjective and emotional relationship people have in the setting.



to benefit themselves and their businesses, which underlines the problem with Fengshui-infused decision making today.

There is a substantial lack of comprehension of what Classical Fengshui is all about and what the practice entails. As Yap (2008) admits, while taking the idea of Fengshui to the 21<sup>st</sup> century and the masses, commercialisation has also conveniently left out a lot of the genuine information derived from theories of the classical texts and literature on Fengshui. Appendix C shows the star attraction some Fengshui masters enjoy within the *pop culture*-like Fengshui milieu in Malaysia today, with a groundswell of legitimate interest and (uninformed) supporters listening to hyperbolic advice and annual predictions. Hamilton (2016) reckons social proof is why cultural phenomena behave like this: popularity begets popularity.

Without specific ordinances regulating the practice of Fengshui in Malaysia, this belief system is but a tacit understanding, an informally agreed-upon rule for domestic consumption (Zhao, 2021). From a practical standpoint, however, Fengshui practitioners have themselves implicitly accepted and attuned to the inexorable success in the commercialisation of Fengshui and condoned the tongue-in-cheek “anything goes” consumer mindset toward the knowledge of Fengshui. Sadly, this foreshadows an absence of universal form and decree in the practice of Fengshui in Malaysia, much less any common structured knowledge or endorsed epistemology. So long as the Fengshui

masters are convincing enough, lay practitioners and the subscribers will accept the advice as “justified true belief”. Fengshui as a lay practice evolved to become highly accommodating.

But be that as it may, arguably, there is nothing fallacious in treating their respective constructs as their reality as it is created from *their* referencing a world ‘out there’ (McNamee, 2017). The current Fengshui milieu is a typical example of how a set of ancient knowledge transformed into a commercial-based belief. Whilst the textbook explores the epistemology of how people justify knowing Fengshui, it does not represent the real world. Yet, this is the backdrop fundamental to face to situate this study accurately.

### **1.6.3 Socio-cultural context of the study**

Every culture has its pseudoscientific practice, some with solid philosophical bedrock. For example, western cultures had, or perhaps still have, druidic practices and geomancy. The Middle Eastern cultures have Ilm Al-raml or ‘science of the sands’, and in Kazakhstan, there is Kumalak. In Malaysia, the Malay has Tajul Muluk or Malay geomancy, India has Vāstu śāstra or Indian geomancy, and the Chinese, Fengshui (Koh, 2019; Lah *et al.*, 2014). But is Fengshui real just because there is an ontological and epistemological foundation behind it? Or it is only real because Fengshui subscribers say it is real? If yes, Fengshui only exists because they created it; the subscribers give Fengshui validity to prevail.

Is the belief in Fengshui rational? Due to the lack of evidence, naïve realists<sup>36</sup> would say “No” and even equate Fengshui as a scam to torture people of sound mind. Relativists<sup>37</sup> who say “Yes” may be characterised by those who claim their evidence is aplenty or those who reckon that proof is unnecessary. In examining the Fengshui subscription, the foremost task is to go into the *socio-cultural context of this study*. After all, Fengshui subscription seems to be rooted in a specific community with a distinctive cultural perspective. The context is not for scholars to like or dislike but to learn from it, acknowledge, and apply the research statement.

Koh (2019) maintains that Fengshui is generally misconstrued as some mystical practice or pseudoscience by Western scholars from other fields without any in-depth discourse about the methodology and core theoretical propositions in modern scientific theory. In truth, Western scholars are still debating about the legitimacy of Fengshui within the mantle of knowledge (Matthews, 2019). On the one hand, such incertitude is understandable. Since the subscription to Fengshui indubitably exudes a sense of absurdity as if the notion of free will is no longer valid in the business sector (Tsang, 2004a; Tsang 2004b). On the other hand, the West should perhaps take a much more nuanced view of the importance of Fengshui in dealing with Asian

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<sup>36</sup> Naïve realism is the belief of seeing the world around us objectively, with a view that people who do not share an objective worldview are presumed naïve.

<sup>37</sup> The relativist thinkers believe there is no absolute truth except the truths that he or she or his/her particular culture happens to believe.

businesses. Narrowly asserting Fengshui as mere magical thinking will not help understand the socio-cultural context of this research.

*“Is [Feng Shui] a science? Is it a superstition? Merciful Buddha! Why bother passing judgment on it? Feng Shui is a cultural phenomenon; its true meaning lies in what it reflects in its ideal landscape – a kind of blueprint for a cultural and living model for us.” (Choy<sup>38</sup>, n.d.)*

This study is situated explicitly within a backdrop of the socio-cultural contextual reality of Malaysia’s property industry. As per any qualitative endeavour, this study that seeks to provide an in-depth understanding of real-world issues will conscientiously consider the natural socio-cultural context in which the research participants function. According to most qualitative researchers, the 'reality' that we experience is constructed by our social, cultural, individual and historical contexts (Polit and Beck, 2017). Therefore, the investigation is for diversity in participants to identify, examine or illustrate phenomena in a real-world setting.

Like any Asian society, Malaysia's cultural issue is omnipresent and is arguably the most potent subconsciously dictating force that influences the mind. In the local business world, the cultural factor is dominant and embedded in almost every perspective, within which industry stakeholders

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<sup>38</sup> Harvard Prof. Yu Kong-Jian 俞孔坚’s comment in the conclusion his book, ‘In Search of an Origin for the Ideal Landscape: The Cultural Significance of Feng Shui’, as translated in English using Microsoft Pinyin IME 3.0 program by Choy (n.d.)

make a significant deal (Shavitt and Cho, 2016). With culture comes values, and these values have a psychological impact and social value orientation on the decision-making process and inevitably affect, if not govern, the participant's decision. Sometimes, the correct intentions can lead to an incorrect outcome, as good intentions produce bad results.

Investors from one culture are often perplexed by the decisions made by business stakeholders from other cultures. Malaysians are typically mindful of, if not practising, politeness norms. Malaysians are generally indirect because they prefer to avoid confrontations (David and Kuang, 2005). Their indirectness offers a cushion that can save all sides 'face' or 'dignity' should there be a rejection on an offer or contract (*ibid.*). Albeit hollow, the Chinese prize 'face' as a source of pride; it is imperceptible, but it exists because it is visible to the public (Goldstein, 2017).

Understanding culture is doubtlessly a significant facet of the decision-making process, more so in a global environment. An effective SD maker must be informed about the traditions, values, and beliefs prevalent in society and understand others' frames of mind before deciding. The unnecessary bafflements occur when people are unaware of the factors that people in another culture consider when assessing an action's worthiness (Nobel *et al.*, 2001). Lack of cultural understanding can impair a multi-cultural coalition's decision-making process and cohesion.

Although Fengshui is an ‘acceptable cultural practice’ to the layman in Malaysian society, is Fengshui indeed a culture? Culture has a consistent encyclopaedic definition, that is:

*“the manifestation ... in regard to the traditional and customary practices of a particular ethnic or other cultural groups. In the broadest sense, this term can apply to any person manifesting any aspect of any culture at any time. However, in practical usage, it often refers to the traditional practices developed within specific ethnic cultures, especially those aspects of culture that have been practised since ancient times”.*

Culture is understood as human activity in its most diverse manifestations, including all forms and methods of human self-expression and self-knowledge, the accumulation of skills and abilities by man and society as a whole. Culture also manifests human subjectivity and objectivity (character, competencies, skills, and knowledge). Culture is a reality created by a person in his relationship to nature, himself, other human beings socially, and his belief system.

In their evidence-based research work, Nobel *et al.* (2001) reveal that people developed ‘belief maps’ to organise their criteria into a set of ‘appeals’<sup>39</sup>. The problem with the property industry in Malaysia, as discussed, is there is no

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<sup>39</sup> viz. tradition (e.g. UK military’s “punch above its weight” exudes the wish to uphold their past international prestige), authority (e.g. Movie stars’ endorsements of a presidential candidate are an appeal to authority), feasibility (e.g. Trump’s statement that “China is a communist country and cannot understand democracy” is a negative appeal to feasibility), and so forth.

concordance between textbook knowledge and the real-world Fengshui subscription. Because people choose to do what they perceive as most desirable, their belief maps show those beliefs relevant to a target audience's evaluation of that action's desirability.

The cultural diversity landscape in Malaysia means the open-loop system does not run decision making. The socio-cultural context of the issue is not their primary concern. Instead, decision makers commonly use the heuristic approach to make inferences (Gigerenzer and Brighton, 2009). Traditional culture is like a thick filter in front of the property industry players' eyes, allowing them to see just what they are used to in their region of the world.

Whether in its broad terms or a practical sense, subscribing to Fengshui can fit into a cultural practice (The Hofstede Centre, n.d.; Chen *et al.*, 2015). Like the investigation on *pantang*<sup>40</sup>, an inquiry on cultural practice, including the practice of Fengshui, should not attempt to judge or correct it. Nor is it within the researcher's scheme to get hung up by these arguments. As property buyers for a place to stay, they want all the luck they can get. Developers will do all possible to avoid the awkward predicament of lousy sales owing to bad Fengshui. The beliefs that the industry players uphold (or discard) are still

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<sup>40</sup> Malay taboo, i.e. the customary prohibition of something due to a traditional belief system, e.g. campers or hikers to mountains in Malaysia must "ask permission" before urinating in the jungle lest offending supernatural beings.

indicative and represent their values. If, in their perception, it works, so be it. This study does not try to educate the Fengshui subscribers on any moral stand of the practice, nor does it have the capacity to do so. This study recognises that Malaysia's property industry operates within the said socio-cultural environment and evaluates how such a phenomenon affects SD-making.

### **1.7 Significance of the Study**

*“Strategy and decision making cannot be disconnected. Decisions are the currency of business that creates change, makes things happened and propels a company forward” (Lewko, 2017, p. 21)*

A study is significant if it can practically be used (Roller and Lavrakas, 2015). This study provides an opportunity to make the findings valuable, promoting awareness through new ideas, actionable next steps, and applicability to contexts similar to Malaysia's property industry. The empirical evidence gained from this systematic investigation in Malaysia's property industry may open up a new horizon for examining how best to operate in a context with Fengshui ingrained in business decision making.

However, except for a few property developers exploiting Fengshui in launching new developments over the past ten years for marketing purposes, Fengshui subscription in the property industry is reticent. The clandestine manner in engaging Fengshui by stakeholders indicates the business



community is still seeing Fengshui as *epistemic* self-doubt (Coady, 2012). Despite its impact on critical decisions, Fengshui has always been a socially and corporately silent practice in Malaysia's property industry; hence, the industry needs a model that understands this phenomenon and addresses SD making with Fengshui factored in. This study can significantly contribute to knowledge on this aspect in the theoretical and practical domains.

### **1.7.1 Theoretical contribution**

Locale #2 in Figure 1-5 alludes to an epistemological stance where the property industry is now fashionably employing a commercialised branch of the Fengshui approach. This realm is an unbalanced mix of stakeholders who acquiesce with but do not necessarily believe in Fengshui subscription and those who indeed believe. Husserl's transcendental phenomenology is the theoretical framework that holds this research as the guiding light. Husserlian phenomenology posits that reality is internal to the knower, i.e. what appears in the person's consciousness (Neubauer *et al.*, 2019). When Fengshui subscribers are blissfully ignorant of Fengshui, it raises issues with their philosophical wisdom in Fengshui. Fengshui subscribers today are either unable to know or unwilling to figure out the ontological foundation of Fengshui. Perhaps, they do not need to learn beyond their constructs or rationale of why they subscribe to Fengshui.

The findings of this study are relevant to at least two distinct bodies of research in terms of their theoretical contribution. The first theoretical significance is to broaden the current heuristics and cognitive bias field. Second, this research contributes to the literature on Fengshui in Malaysia in general and its influence on SD decision making in particular, where property industry players construct views of favoured and unfavourable outcomes in Fengshui-based decision making.

While past research has either been sporadic or insufficient and even veiled with commercial motives, this study begins with acknowledging that Fengshui can be a powerful, subconsciously dictating force that influences the decision-making process in Malaysia's property. It consolidates current knowledge and pushes the boundary to develop a model that may impact a business environment where Fengshui is an entrenched part of the mainstream business culture, an area under-researched in Malaysia.

The Fengshui that property industry stakeholders subscribe to in Malaysia reflects popular culture because Fengshui can provide a false sense of control (Vyse, 2013; Thompson, 1981). Worse yet, the everyday conception of reality is different from one SD maker to another within the industry. With the paucity of time and better information, it is unsurprising that the stakeholders tend to make decisions using mental shortcuts (Kahneman, 2011; Hamilton, 2016). Misalignment in ontological narratives on SD making is an

exciting area not adequately investigated but attempted, as evidenced by this study in Malaysia's property industry.

Through a systematic and rigorous investigation of Fengshui and its impact on Malaysia's property industry, this study is the first to probe into industry players' insights to confirm whether Fengshui plays an influential role in any SD making. This provides new ideas that will inform further research in the SD-making model *vis-à-vis* the individual's belief map. The model will facilitate and guide decision making under the environment of Fengshui subscription in Malaysia's property industry, with the least decisional conflicts.

Concurrently, this research will contribute to the current body of knowledge by offering a fresh perspective of addressing Fengshui from the subscribers' perspective. Albeit confined within a non-interventionist frame, this will be the first work of its kind in Malaysia backed up by the empirical study and heedful of epistemology. The researcher has encountered and gathered decades of anecdotal evidence concerning how the local property industry players exhibited specific heuristics and biases influenced by Fengshui in their judgment and SD making. This study will provide the required academic evidence to consolidate and formalise the researcher's industry knowledge base currently grounded thickly upon anecdotal evidence.

### **1.7.2 Practical contribution**

According to Bornman (2013), the practical contribution of a study resides in its ability to enhance the efficacy of currently used techniques. Here, the significant contribution is an original and structured knowledge framework of Fengshui subscription, which has led to developing a novel model to address Fengshui-based SD making in Malaysia's property industry. Users of the model must understand the cognitive biases inherent in Fengshui subscription in Malaysia. To help business leaders in the property industry, this model guides by embracing and reconciling the role of cognitive biases, which other models tend to ignore or amplify. Although the model's context is within the local property industry's applicability, this study has the potential to serve as a new and only springboard to further research SD-making vis-à-vis Fengshui in Malaysia.

Whether they want to identify it as a superstitious belief or not, Malaysia's property market players need a new benchmark to cope with Fengshui. In the absence of any empirical study, the present placebo effects of Fengshui subscription are getting more pronounced and cannot be dealt with rationally in the business world. Stakeholders who subscribe to Fengshui during critical decision making appear erratic and are without apparent motivation to gain financially, save the fear of making the 'wrong' decision. More likely, they are dealing with decisional conflicts, resistance to uncertainty, and pressure from other industry players.

Malaysia's property industry operates in an unstable and increasingly volatile business environment, which adds to the complexity of SD making. How do stakeholders prepare to deal with an industry where Fengshui has such radical uncertainties and unprecedented popularity gap at the same time? The answer lies in how Malaysia's Fengshui subscribers are operating in the property industry's socio-cultural context. Past research has widely overlooked the socio-cultural context when exploring Fengshui subscription. Notably, therefore, the property industry SD stakeholders are subscribers within the Fengshui milieu's socio-cultural setting that this study is targeting. They contribute not only to the shaping of the socio-cultural milieu but are also constituted by it.

The analysis of business opponents remains rudimentary as, before this, there has been no emergent strategy to SD decision making linked with recognition of Fengshui's influence. Only by truly understanding how the decision environment, Fengshui and cognitive cues work can a model be developed to guide the stakeholder's decision-making machinery. Otherwise, no stakeholder can fathom how other Fengshui subscribers decide. Without the need to question the legitimacy of Fengshui nor judge the people who subscribe to it in the property industry, this study offers the local property industry a model that addresses crucial decision making with Fengshui factored in. Nonetheless, it does not claim that the local property industry

stakeholders can use the model to understand other subliminal forces that can subtly influence decision making.

Stakeholders' acquiescence or willingness to subscribe to Fengshui puzzles the property industry, and an outrageous decision-making approach can bring about cognitive dissonance (McLeod, 2018). Cognitive dissonance involves contradictory behaviours, beliefs or behaviour, which creates a sense of mental distress leading to a shift in attitudes, values, or habits to minimise discomfort and regain equilibrium. Besides post-decision dissonance and internal conflicts, an untenable decision-making factor will not answer any audit by independent external reviewers when the decision has adverse consequences like revenue loss, productivity, opportunity, or respect. In this study, cognitive dissonance may also include debonding the social capital established within the property industry community.

Fengshui should not remain in an unfashionable business research field because it is challenging to study empirically from a realist lens. Instead of greenlighting Fengshui to invoke an unmanageable heuristic approach to business judgment, the phenomenon has been explored and guided by a specific model that can accommodate the influence of Fengshui. The model is practically a tool to mitigate decision makers' cognitive biases and dissonance to improve decision quality.

Another practical contribution is a well-established cognitive dissonance paradigm has manifested in this research to explain the study phenomenon, which opens an entirely new platform in researching Fengshui. This study can provide practitioners with understanding and a unique catalyst to develop a novel theory for decision effectiveness under unorthodox belief. In general, this study will provide insights to inform further research in SD making vis-à-vis other socio-cultural belief systems; and in particular, Fengshui. A Fengshui-based SD-making model ultimately gives stakeholders a sense of control over Malaysia's property industry's current predicament, where belief-based factors like Fēngshuǐ are pervasive, maddeningly unclear how to handle the decision-making process.

## **1.8 Organisation of the Thesis**

This thesis consists of five chapters. What ensues this introductory Chapter 1 will be Chapter 2 Literature Review, followed by Chapter 3 Methodology, Chapter 4 Findings, and finally, Chapter 5 Conclusion.

Chapter 1 introduces the trajectories and the rudimentary details of why must this study be carried out. Real issues encountered and authoritative literature drove the research problem statement outlined in this chapter, clearly distinguishing between research objectives and research questions. Since Fengshui is not a common area of management research, contextual information Section 1.6 must be provided for readers to make sense of the

study. Besides clarifying the researcher's research posture for greater transparency and trustworthiness, this section sets the socio-cultural parameter this study situates. It is crucial to explain what a Fengshui subscriber is as far as this research is concerned and where the researcher's voice derived. The significance of this study is integral to the discussion in this Chapter.

Chapter 2 highlights the account that explains the challenges in the literature review of this research topic, predominantly motivated by the need for rigour. Additionally, acknowledging the 'popular' Fengshui practitioners, Chapter 2 discusses their impact on Malaysian stakeholders at large, where nuances are clarified to manage the plethora of relevant literature. It shows a two-fold way to categorising the literature. The first identifies distinct contextual factors that act as enablers in different emphasis on the literature's critical review. The second objective is to identify specific contexts associated with Fengshui influence in business decision for model formulation later.

Chapter 3 describes the method used for this study and the rationale for choosing a qualitative research design. The epistemology of Fengshui in textbooks is markedly different from those in the real world. So, the researcher must discuss the epistemological and philosophical tenets of the methodology here. Next, he addresses the research methodology, highlighting participants, their protection, and the selection criteria. A full



description of the data gathering process, including review and general protocols, is presented, which shows how the Moustakas' (1994) method assesses data (Colaizzi, 1973, 1978; Keen, 1975; Stevick, 1971). Finally, the researcher summarises his procedures in safeguarding trustworthiness and defining trustworthiness, dependability and confirmability. Chapter 3 is relatively long since, in a phenomenological investigation, the philosophical premise principally drives this study's methodology.

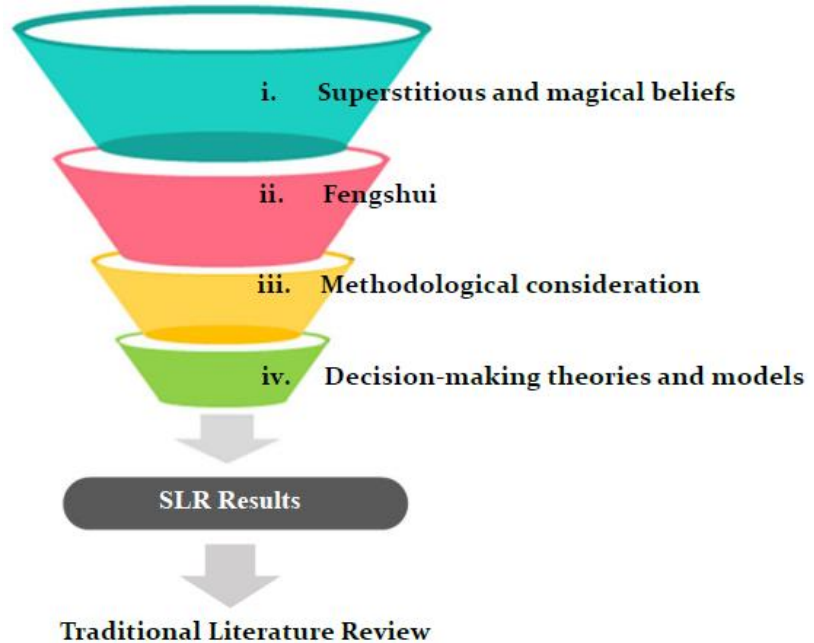
Chapter 4 *Findings* consists of the final results of the research, analysis of them and sub-conclusion. The massive volume of qualitative data collected is ordered, arranged into tables and figures coded in specific themes. Sub-conclusions and findings are clearly illustrated and should state the facts and/or scholarly literature on which they are based. In readiness to develop a Fengshui-based SD-making model, the researcher deliberates the findings vis-à-vis Chapter 1 to see how the research results have addressed the problem statement.

Chapter 5 *Conclusion* overviews the findings, reflection on research questions and methods. The final chapter delves into each milestone of the research process, from tying the findings back to the data examined to providing granularity on how the Fengshui-based SD-making framework can be the foundation for establishing a novel Wuwei strategy to answer the research question. After tying up loose ends for cohesion, the Wuwei Model is

proposed based on the study's overview, placing analysed findings and conclusions to offer a solution. Ultimately discussed is an account of the research limitations and recommendations for future research.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW



**Figure 2-1 Funnel Structure Concept of Literature Review**

**(Source: The author)**

This research topic uniquely encapsulates three distinct and discriminable subject areas. *Fengshui*, *phenomenology*, and *SD making* can individually form standalone literature reviews. When combined, or congruously focusing on the materials of people factoring in Fengshui as part of their SD making, a literature search has yielded no specific studies comprising the three subject areas, which, after all, are arbitrarily related. To compound the difficulty, Fengshui can also be viewed as part of superstitious and magical practices as far as scholarly literature is concerned. To overcome, the researcher must contextualise and situate his study on the broader literature, which begins

relatively wide and zero in on the particular niche of his topic of interest, like the funnel in Figure 2-1.

Owing to the research topic's multifaceted nature, assessing it from the funnel structure downward should expound the necessary domains to inform and form the overall trajectory of approaching the SD maker's subscription of Fengshui. In the end, a literature review is never about reporting facts per se but interpreting the relevant facts to add value and nexus to the topic (Xiao and Watson, 2019).

Adding value is extra challenging when the topic of interest is new or has little pedigree in academic literature. Heavy reliance on disconnected information from secondary sources in an arcane subject like Fengshui within a business discipline is problematic without a systematic approach. Lest over-claiming the term 'rigorous' in dealing with esoteric knowledge like Fengshui, the researcher must question how rigorous is 'rigorous enough' in a doctoral study topic of multifaceted nature?

## **2.1 Justification for beginning with Systematic Review**

Fengshui literature is unfortunately *noisy* and *biased*, i.e., borrowing Kahneman's terminology in Kahneman *et al.* (2021). Some Fengshui literature randomly misses the mark due to 'noises.' When people are biased, they may miss the mark consistently instead of reflecting how Fengshui operates in the local property industry. In the same way, judges in austerity should deliver

equal sentences in comparable cases; they do not do so owing to 'noises' within the individual (*ibid.*). To a certain extent, the researcher's decades of active professional practice in the local property industry may corroborate this subject's knowledge gap in a practical sense. However, for academic rigour, the vacuum must be verified albeit arduous, considering *Fengshui* is, sadly, masked under other terms and discourses that are not readily visible for direct application to research without interpretations.

Discussing and examining belief systems has always been a well-known challenge (Hill *et al.*, 2000). The anomalies may be attributed to different conceptualisations of abstract concepts "related to cognitive phenomena," such as faiths and belief systems, and disparities in valuing them (*ibid.*, p. 54). Given the obscurity, whether the desired research findings existed or were readily identifiable was unknown (Jacob, 2011; Muller-Bloch and Kranz, 2014). The available literature does not provide any compelling answer to fill the gap, thus begs for the need to comprehensively identify and synthesise all the relevant literature using structured, transparent and replicable procedures at each stage of the evidence search process (Mohamed Shaffril *et al.*, 2021). If a literature review is not thorough, relevant papers can be overlooked or revealed as a knowledge void, despite having filled.

Directly embarking on a conventional literature review seems untenable for an amorphous study topic. Although a scoping review may seem like a reasonable option, it would also painfully capture unrelated articles,

controversial literature, proceedings, and books (Noble and Smith, 2018). In this case, the quantity would be unmanageable. While widely subscribed in Malaysia's property industry, Fengshui as a practice is often ignored as an exclusive Chinese metaphysics arena or relegated to a superstitious 'magical' rite. But this is hardly explicit in the current literature. Such ambiguities underestimate the importance of embodied human thoughts inside and beyond their philosophical and lived experience, subsequently influencing decision making. Because it is a daunting task, such attention is noticeably missing in the existing literature.

Moreover, not all data in a multifaceted research topic is considered equally valuable; there are hierarchies of evidence-review with different strengths or value levels in the decision-making process. This is partly due to the innumerable material with either a hidden agenda of self-promotion or a piecemeal, unorganised basis without a systematic scholarly structure. Fengshui has both cultural and superstitious angles to complicate the literature search. Pairing up the 'rational' components like SD making and property business with seemingly 'irrational' elements like Fengshui and magical beliefs on the outset sounds like a forced marriage, making a rigorous review seem like an impossible task.

On this account, while the research question appears to have been correctly defined and developed, the operative keywords can be hazy due to conflicting worldviews. Furthermore, these keywords are concise when standalone, but

contexts and meanings may be vicissitudes when combined. For example, keywords like 'Feng Shui', 'Fengshui', 'superstition', 'superstitious', 'decision', 'decision-making', 'decision making', 'phenomenology' and 'phenomenological' can frustrate literature search. The information overload weakens the robustness of literature yield results and confuses evidence saturation with crucial omissions (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). To address the lacuna and have the core study areas unambiguously established, the researcher decided to use a *systematic literature review* (hereafter, SLR) as per Cochrane's methods with proven rigour and allowance for the gap identification (Higgins *et al.*, 2019).

In this instance, a qualitative SLR allows the researcher to engage more objectively with the research topic and prioritise empirical evidence over his preconceived knowledge (Mallet *et al.*, 2012). The SLR conducted first would synthesise all relevant literature and incorporate all available information in the respective field of study to address the problem statement (Müller-Bloch and Kranz, 2015). SLR helps to investigate outside their disciplines by incorporating systematic search techniques, predefined search strings, and standard inclusion and exclusion (Robinson and Lowe, 2015).

Literature reviews are typically not exhaustive, so not all relevant literature may be included (Cooper, 1988). In this regard, SLR underscores openness to define and justify all terms in inclusion criteria beforehand. Likewise, the articles to be excluded must be reasoned (Greyson *et al.*, 2019). Adopting such

analysis protocol, publishing standard, or guidance helped ensure that the researcher is 'on track' and enhances the methodological transparency of literature review (Haddaway *et al.*, 2018). In this vein, each stage of synthesis must be stated transparently, with the researcher's stance visible (Seers, 2015). Synthesis of the entire applicable secondary sources would reveal and confirm knowledge gaps.

Focused on nexus, effects, validity and causality, SLR has encouraged the researcher to analyse research design, analytical methods and causal chains to ensure robust evidence (Mohamed Shaffril *et al.*, 2021; Lockwood *et al.*, 2015). Upon conducting SLR to examine the research question systematically and explicitly identify knowledge gaps, informed directions were subsequently tabulated for subsequent review conventionally without qualms. Details are as shown in Appendix A.

The SLR of over 119 academic publications highlighted three important features why people voluntarily or acquiesce in subscribing to Fengshui, including (1) superstitious either naturally or through conditioning, (2) cognitive psychology accounts, and (3) an evolutionary biology explanation. The study has made three critical observations about existing research based on this SLR: (1) inconsistency in the conceptualisation of decisional uncertainty, (2) a lack of diversity in the dimensions of uncertainty included in Fengshui subscription, and (3) an underestimation of the idiosyncracies of



individual SD makers. A research agenda is offered, along with recommendations for future studies to overcome these shortcomings.

## 2.2 Fengshui

The SLR has confirmed the problematic gap to connect Fengshui subscription to present-day business and management studies. To better appreciate this subject's background, it is worth examining the historical antecedents of the definitions vis-à-vis the progression of perceptions in Fengshui, which requires diving deeper into history with different lenses and exploring beyond the early Christian missionary motivation. With such a chronological vignette, the aim is to demystify and discuss this obscure yet significant Fengshui subscription in more edifying optics.

As recorded in the epochal *Historical Annals of Sima Qian*, the actual practice of Fengshui<sup>41</sup> was recorded only about 4,000 years ago, almost in tandem with the origin of Chinese civilisation (Lin, 2000, see also Anon., 2020). According to Chinese metaphysics historian Stephen Skinner<sup>42</sup>, Fengshui may be dated

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<sup>41</sup> Fengshui is one of those Chinese words that are considered untranslatable from Chinese to English, although translation attempts had been made, viz. into “Chinese Geomancy” (Feuchtwang, 1974) and more recently, “Environology” by the researcher’s teacher Prof. Master David Koh (Nor Aniswati *et al.*, 2015, p.275). Since ontological concepts like Qi and Dao do not exist in Western meaning, there are risks in obscuring the essence of Fengshui if translated. English thus absorbed “Fengshui” as loanword with zero substitution in the late 1700s.

<sup>42</sup> Skinner has been credited for “bringing Fengshui to the West”.

back to 2,852 BC, when Fu Xi<sup>43</sup> was claimed to have articulated the Eight Trigrams of Yijing based on Fengshui belief (Skinner, 2019).

Although the Chinese have employed Fengshui as a belief system for three thousand years (Ros and Paracola, 2020), the *history* of Fengshui was not formally recorded until about two thousand years ago (Sang and Luk, 2004), as confirmed by manuals found during the Eastern Zhou dynasty<sup>44</sup>. The term ‘Feng Shui’ was first coined by Guo Pu<sup>45</sup> (276 - 234 CE), known as the father of Fengshui in China, in his book *Zàngshū* (葬书), or the Book of Burial. Before that, Fengshui was a subject matter of “di li” (literally translated is ‘geography’) (Skinner, 1982, p.xi) or “kan yu” geomancy theory (Mair, 2000, p. 77).

### **2.2.1 A chronological literature review of Fengshui**

With the entrance of Western Christian missionaries in the late-16<sup>th</sup> century, China began to maintain consistent communication with Europe, and many Chinese intellectuals began to assume that the West had surpassed China in several scientific and technological domains. China, with its rich intellectual heritage and many approaches to scientific learning, and the West immediately established a channel of communication between them. Both

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<sup>43</sup> Fu Xi, a legend in the Chinese culture, who created the Kanji system of Chinese character writing around 2000 BC, records in the textualised version of oral tradition only.

<sup>44</sup> *Circa*. 771 BC – 476 BC

<sup>45</sup> Guo P (276-324), *Book of Burial*, A Translation of the Ancient Chinese The Book of Burial (*Zàngshū*) by Zhang, J (2004), Lewiston, New York, The Edwin Mellen Press

sides were excited by the opportunities for discussion; but, the Chinese thinkers began to appropriate the Western ideas with zeal, sometimes to the point of forsaking their millenniums-old Chinese philosophical systems and centuries-old explanatory frameworks (Chen, 2007). Thus began a sense of Western superiority complex.

A late-16<sup>th</sup> century Jesuit missionary to China called Matteo Ricci was the first who openly criticised Fengshui as a pseudoscience. An ideological clash between East and West is vivid in narratives found in his journal records (Ricci, 1615/1953):

*“In choosing a place to erect a public edifice or a private house, or in selecting a plot of ground in which to bury the dead, [the Chinese] study the location with reference to the head and tail and the feet of the particular dragons [chi lines] which are supposed to dwell beneath that spot. Upon these local dragons, they believe that the good and bad fortune, not only of the family but also of the town and province and the entire kingdom, is wholly dependent. Many of their most distinguished men are interested in this recondite science and, when necessary, they are called in for consultation, even from a great distance. ... Just as their astrologers read the stars, so their geologists [diviners] reckon the fate, or the fortune of a place, from the relative position of mountains or rivers or fields, and their reckoning is just as deceitful as the reading of the stargazers” (Ricci 1615/1953, p. 84).*

Two hundred and fifty years later, Rev. Dr Eitel, who published the first Western account of Fengshui in 1873, gives Fengshui an esoteric definition, i.e.

*“wind and water, because it’s a thing like wind, which you cannot comprehend, and like the water, which you cannot grasp” (Eitel, 1873/1987, p. 3).*

Oddly enough, despite recognising Fengshui as a Chinese natural science system, Eitel disparages various Fengshui elements that he could not explain as superstitious (*ibid.*, p. 1, p.78, p. 83 and *passim*). Even contemporary dictionaries also characterise superstition as a belief or practice that arises from ignorance, fear of the unknown, faith in magic or chance.

Outraged by the impediment caused by Fengshui in missionary works, another missionary scholar, Rev. Edkins (1823-1905), advocates for further investigation of Fengshui lest the phenomenon might remain a massive obstacle to the progress of civilisation (Bruun, 2011). Fengshui bore the tag of occultism and the arcane.

Adding to the snub, 18<sup>th</sup>-century Sinologist de Groot (1962/1892) equates Fengshui as:

*“.. a ridiculous caricature of science... a farrago of absurdities... a quasi-scientific system” (de Groot, 1962/1892, p. 934).*

Further hostility of the period toward Fengshui came from Joseph Needham. The West perceived Needham as one of the most respected and influential 20<sup>th</sup>-century scholars with the depth and strength of science in China. Needham has also been criticised for promoting Western science as the sole universal science, inferring that geomancy and other traditional branches of

knowledge valued by many thoughtful Chinese are merely pseudosciences (Matthews, 2019). However, he, who described Fengshui as a ‘grossly superstitious system’ later admitted that Fengshui as:

*“.. embodied a markedly aesthetic component, which accounts for the great beauty of the dwelling sites of so many of the forms, houses and villages throughout China” (Needham, 1962, p. 239).*

Max Weber, one of the most foundational theorists on the development of modern Western society, sees Fengshui as Chinese magic that hinders capitalism from evolving since the idea of Fengshui clashes with the new factory and railway construction required for a rational economy of the time (Weber, 1927/2003).

Feuchtwang (1974), an emeritus professor of anthropology at the London School of Economics who meticulously translated original Fengshui texts and studied Chinese geomantic symbolism, offers an integrated interpretation of Fengshui. In a more equanimous tone, he elaborates:

*“.. first, a structuralist interpretation of its natural classifications as parallels to social classification; second, a psychological interpretation of its projections of the imagination, including symbols; third, an analysis of the possible functions of Fengshui as divinations; and fourth; an interpretation of the perception of reality contained in the system” (cited in Bruun, 2011, p. 16).*

Feuchtwang’s classical interpretations, especially his last element, support the notion that to the users (or, in the case of this study, the subscribers), Fengshui is a vehicle to express self-identification within their worldview.

Feuchtwang perceives Fengshui as a way a subscriber conceives and deals with reality. In other words, Fengshui is like a cosmological realm where the subscriber operates to serve the specific interest<sup>46</sup>.

Skinner<sup>47</sup> (1982), who supports Fengshui as the art and science of changing the Qi quality and its flow in a building for the well-being of people living or working there, does not consider Fengshui superstitious.

*“Although Fengshui is the most often and most colloquial Chinese name for the theory and practice of sitting attuned to the elements, the name which is most consistently used in classical Chinese sources is ‘ti li’ (地理) (‘land pattern’ or in modern times, ‘geography’). This emphasises the fact that the Chinese saw Fengshui not so much as a superstitious branch by itself of rural practices but an integral part of the study of the land itself and the patterns on it both natural and manmade” (Skinner, 1982, p. xi).*

Skinner’s *“The living earth manual of Fengshui: Chinese geomancy”* (*ibid.*) has formed the bridge between the ‘popular’ Fengshui at that time and the academic Fengshui literature that favoured explainable knowledge.

Rosbach (1984) has a romantic view of Fengshui as she describes it as:

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<sup>46</sup> What was true of Fengshui subscribers in the 18<sup>th</sup> century China is apparently true, *mutatis mutandis*, of Malaysia’s property industry, as can be seen later in Chapter 4.

<sup>47</sup> Twenty years after his magnum opus book, Stephen Skinner migrated from Australia to England and back to Malaysia as part of his Fengshui research requirements. He partook in the formation of the International Fengshui Association in Singapore. Skinner is arguably the modern-day Eitel, sans academic prejudice from his academic background in Fengshui and close association with the region. The researcher had recently interacted with him as a fellow alumni at The World Feng Shui Summit 2020 held virtually in London.

*“the forces [that] are believed to be responsible for determining health, prosperity, and good luck” (Rossbach, 1984, p. 1).*

When asked, “What is Fengshui?” Walters (1988) states paradoxically that:

*“if the answer is scientifically reasonable, then Fengshui loses its innate mystique; whereas if the answers lack analytical logic, then Fengshui is dismissed as a pseudo-science” (Walters, 1988, cited in Mak<sup>48</sup> and So, 2015, p. xi).*

Closer to the Malaysian context, the emergent of the term ‘environology’ used to denote the practice of the arts and science of Fengshui has gained popularity, especially from the metaphysics scholars and non-for-profit Fengshui associations, such as Environology Malaysia (Koh, 2019; Nor Aniswati *et al.*, 2015). Unsurprisingly, Bell *et al.* (2005) illustrate a remarkable similarity between Fengshui and Western environmental psychology, despite their theoretical and methodological divergences. Bell *et al.* (2005) describe environmental psychology as:

*“the study of the molar relationships between behaviour and experience and the built and natural environments” (Bell et al., 2005, p. 6).*

Comparatively, the Malaysian Institute of Geomancy Sciences (2014) defined environology as:

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<sup>48</sup> On 2 September 2019, as scheduled, the researcher held a physical meeting with Dr Michael Mak at the University of Newcastle, Australia, to discuss the present-day subscribers’ perception of Fengshui vis-à-vis his enhanced new edition book ‘*Scientific Feng Shui for the Built Environment*’.

*“the study that focusses on creating a balanced and harmonious relationship between man and environment. It is the art and science of learning to understand nature, mimic nature and live with nature harmoniously” (Environology Malaysia, 2020, p. 7).*

Ironically, the Westerners were the first to research Fengshui, an Eastern subject. By and large, a steady increase in tolerance of Fengshui is discernible over time. It was relatively easy to find disparaging definitions of Fengshui in the early Western academic literature. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, studies done by the Contemporary Missionaries presented Fengshui for the insidious purpose of rejecting it. Today, scholarly appreciation of Fengshui is more visible, as can be observed in the attempt to find a more culturally neutral terminology of Fengshui. In stark contrast to contemporary Fengshui texts, particularly those associated with New Age Fengshui, the 19<sup>th</sup> century's mistrust and denigration of Fengshui are nearly complete opposites.

Except for Ricci's (1615/1953) indirect comment on Fengshui, the Western scholarly literature on Fengshui did not appear until the Westerners came to China in the 1800s with their economic and religious motives (Chen and Nakama, 2004). In many ways, the earlier prevalence of Fengshui irked the Westerners. Fengshui was a barrier to the Westerners' effort to dismantle the obstructing ideologies that prevent church and infrastructure developments. It was natural for the 'culprit' to be reprimanded and labelled as 'superstition' by subscribing to a traditional belief system. Except for Ricci (1615/1953, p.



298), the lack of historical background in current literature may also unjustly support the animus upon Fengshui<sup>49</sup>.

Chronologically, the approval pendulum has swung back again from disfavour to the favour of Fengshui and back. Most of the recent scientifically-inclined scholarly journals connote superstitious belief negatively, i.e. a misplaced cause versus effect (Forster and Kokko, 2009), a positive association with the idea in luck (Chen and Young, 2018), or a method to confront bad luck and uncertainty (Vyse, 2013; Ang *et al.*, 2014; Zhang *et al.*, 2014). Since any metaphysics that is still classified as pseudoscience is beheld as a form of superstition by definition, Fengshui has the same pejorative connotation in the current context.

Anyone from the professional and business sectors or who has a respectable position in society would likely and understandably rather disassociate with Fengshui, i.e., avoid being in an irrational, superstitious, or unscientific context. Dismayed with cultural bias and the oversimplified bifurcation of East and West, Paton (2007) has this to state on the academic resistance to accepting Fengshui as a science:

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<sup>49</sup> Some Westerners were (and still are) naïve to believe that they could brainwash society of another country and impose their level of moral self-righteousness and paternalism on the Chinese to “save” these people from the superstitious and unchristian belief. Without understanding the ontological root of Fengshui, the Westerners lacked an appreciation for the nuances and complexities of other cultures and the Chinese people. Without trying to know the subscribers' socio-cultural genesis, the Westerners quickly declared Fengshui as unscientific and irrational belief.

*“.. I argue that humanity survives using observation-based knowledge systems (i.e., science), no matter what the culture is. As a species, we do not run fast enough, our claws are not strong enough and we do not reproduce quickly enough to survive against other species unless we use such observation-based knowledge systems. Moreover, it is important within this striving for the survival of our species that we see the cultural and geographic biases of these knowledge systems. With an understanding of such biases and their relationship to war and the logic of short-term advantage, we may more readily see the value of traditional knowledge. We may also see more clearly the value of struggling with, rather than against, our own and other species for mutual survival. Thus, to enable the garnering of such knowledge, science rather than scientism should hold sway” Paton (2007, p. 442).*

When the Jesuit missionary arrived in China in the late-16<sup>th</sup> century, Fengshui was already misunderstood, let alone accepted. Anything not understood or legitimised by them would either become peripheral, ‘non-existent’, or branded as superstitious and backward (Eitel, 1873/1987). Because Fengshui is not congruent with Western science, ethnocentric researchers who lack an oriental worldview to comprehend Fengshui tend to vilify the practice (de Sousa Santos, 2006). From a cultural relativist lens, every culture has distinct but equally valid modes of perception, belief, and choice. So, Fengshui subscription cannot be judged by the Western cultural standard, as though the latter must be correct and objectively superior.

### **2.2.2 The three views of Fengshui today**

Baron (2015) and recently, Naguit and Yutuc (2020) have reaffirmed that even the younger generations of Chinese business people in this region are

now subscribing to Fengshui at a moderate to a high level. In terms of psychological influence, Jin and Juan (2021) have recently demonstrated using a combination of Fuzzy Delphi and Virtual Reality methods that subscribers who stayed in the environment with Fengshui consideration showed a more positive psychological reaction than those not. Notwithstanding the advances made by business academics and knowledge of cognitive biases, lacking a thorough understanding of the Fengshui factor in decision making, Malaysia's property industry subscribers seem to be facing the same Fengshui-based cognitive biases centuries ago. What are cognitive biases at play today that could still affect SD making? First, we need to identify how the Fengshui subscribers contend with the influence of Fengshui in SD making in the property industry.

Stokols (1990) analysed environmental psychology literature and proposed three environmental influences: *instrumental*, *spiritual*, and *minimalist*. Luk *et al.* (2012) have incidentally advocated identifying Fengshui with three similar views. Essentially, Luk *et al.* (2012) expounded the theory follows the correlations that subscribers commonly use Fengshui as either *an instrument*, *metaphysics* or through a so-called '*minimalist*' lens. Naguit and Yutuc (2020) have posited viewing the contemporary Fengshui practices from the *instrumental*, *metaphysical* and *minimalist* lens.

Tam *et al.* (1999) and Ho and Chuang (2012) suggest the use of Fengshui as an 'instrument' for improving people's lives and dealing with unpredictable

and challenging times. People holding the *instrumental* view are more likely to make causal attributions to external factors (Luk *et al.*, 2012), reflecting a perceived lack of personal influence over events. This view has a strong positive impact on the decision to subscribe to Fengshui to improve luck, health, wealth and interpersonal relationships (*ibid.*). The instrumental view underlines subscribers, who are essentially believers, the need for control over their world (Naguit and Yutuc, 2020). Fear of non-compliance with Fengshui adds to the psychological discomfort and may harm the subscriber's health and productivity (Tsang, 2004a).

The *metaphysical* view of Fengshui lends itself as an art form to live in harmony with the world. Here, a harmonious environment is not a means but an end in itself. Subscribers of this view focus on how Fengshui arrangements inspire spiritual life and enhance cultural identity; hence they may develop a sense of unity with the world, derive spiritual satisfaction, and sincerely appreciate Chinese culture. The metaphysical view, positively associated with Bell *et al.*'s (2001) and Dutcher *et al.*'s (2007), is about connectivity with nature. For people who take this perspective, Fengshui is used not for material gain or luck but to express their spirituality and cultural identity (Luk *et al.*, 2012). Subscribers of the metaphysical view have a lesser cognitive impact than their instrumental counterparts.

Finally, Fengshui is viewed as pointless and ignored in the *minimalist* view (Naguit and Yutuc, 2020). It is not uncommon in Malaysia's property industry

that people sometimes *have to* subscribe to Fengshui but do not necessarily adulate it because they do not see any credibility in the belief (*ibid.*). The Jesuit missionary to China, as discussed, supported this view (e.g., Ricci, 1615/1953; Eitel, 1873/1987; de Groot, 1892/1962). Wan *et al.* (2010) find that Chinese people's acceptance of this view is positively associated with the adoption of a Western religion (e.g. Christian faiths, including Catholicism) and negatively correlated with the adoption of an Oriental religion (e.g., Daoism or Buddhism). People who have obtained a Western education that emphasises rational and scientific thinking are more likely to be familiar with the minimalist viewpoint (*ibid.*).

Since Malaysians who acquire a Western education or understand Chinese culture will be familiar with all three views, this study would explore a similar concept of categorisation in data collection. The idea suggests that 'instrumental' subscribers espouse Fengshui subscription, the 'metaphysical' subscribers accept Fengshui subscription and the 'minimalist' subscribers, at best, acquiesce to Fengshui subscription. Bourdieu (1967) defines habitus as a collection of fundamental, deeply internal master patterns that incorporate cognitive schemes that guide behaviour in terms of ideas about the nature of social reality. Habitus is neither fixed nor permanent but is subject to morph into a new structure in response to unanticipated circumstances or over time (Navarro, 2006). The three views of Fengshui, viz. instrumental, metaphysical and minimalist, fit Bourdieu's theoretical framework of habitus, socially manifested without free will. Created and reproduced unconsciously, a

habitus like Fengshui subscribers in Malaysia's property industry is "without any deliberate pursuit of coherence... without any conscious concentration" (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 170).

### **2.3 Heuristics and cognitive biases in Fengshui-based SD making**

Behavioural economist Herbert Simon stated that people rely on heuristics when confronted with difficult decisions. Heuristics are decision-making aids that facilitate the process of arriving at a plausible conclusion when the 'ideal' judgment is unattainable or unknown (Simon, 1955). Worse, Chang *et al.* (2015) assert that when business leaders make SD based on their belief systems, they tend to be unsystematic and prioritise short-term gratification. Naguit and Yutuc (2018) agree that acquiring and processing information in belief system-based decision making is generally disorganised and opportunistic. It is inevitable because to make SD based on a belief system is complex; thus, heuristics, or mental shortcuts, are automatically activated to simplify complicated judgments (Hamilton, 2016).

Accordingly, heuristics are inherently a form of cognitive bias that can yield flawed conclusions. Besides heuristics, behavioural scientists found some 188 processes and shortcuts known as cognitive biases in the past fifty years<sup>50</sup>. Cognitive biases are a significant tenet of human decision making (Barnes Jr.,

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<sup>50</sup> This discovery is ongoing. It should be noted that at the 2020 Wikimedia Commons website, Cognitive Bias Codex is still being counted and progressively updated [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Cognitive\\_Bias\\_Codex\\_-\\_180%2B\\_biases,\\_designed\\_by\\_John\\_Manoogian\\_III\\_\(jm3\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Cognitive_Bias_Codex_-_180%2B_biases,_designed_by_John_Manoogian_III_(jm3).jpg)

1984; Das and Teng, 1999; Ehrlinger *et al.*, 2016), and decades of research on cognitive biases (Tversky and Kahneman, 1974) exist: such as confirmation bias (Nickerson, 1998; Klayman, 1995; Oswald and Grosjean, 2004), anchoring bias (Furnham and Boo, 2011; Epley and Gilovich, 2006, 2001), and availability bias (Tversky and Kahneman, 1973). Stanovich and West (2008), who originally coined the labels System 1 and System 2<sup>51</sup>, argue that high intelligence does render people immune to heuristics and cognitive biases.

Recognising this phenomenon from a fresh lens, Lin *et al.* (2021) called it ‘underthinking’, which occurs when a lack of deliberation promotes believability in subjective claims like Fengshui. But time and information are usually too scarce in many SD making environments to facilitate scrutiny. These heuristics and cognitive biases are obstacles to understanding people's reality and significantly impact how SD makers relate to others.

Evident from the SLR, it is expedient to examine Fengshui-infused SD making from the lens of heuristics and cognitive biases<sup>52</sup>. The study of cognitive biases and cognitive dissonance is one of the most commonly studied social psychology fields. Psychologist Leon Festinger used the word ‘cognitive dissonance’ to explain the individual’s state of mind when his action is not

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<sup>51</sup> They now choose to call them *Type 1* and *Type 2* thinking.

<sup>52</sup> E.g., subscribing to Fengshui can be the Apohenia tendency to see meaningful connections between unrelated things (Risen, 2016). Fengshui subscribers find it hard to admit that factoring Fengshui in their significant decision making is precarious, or if their self-justification performance is to reduce cognitive dissonance.

compatible with his values (Krogerus and Tschappeler, 2017), i.e. the negative feeling that comes from believing in two conflicting values simultaneously. Cognitive bias is pivotal in this study because it often leads decision makers to fall short of what the modern business world deems as the best option from a logical perspective. The first step is to admit that the mind *decides biasedly*. A second step is to understand *how*.

### **2.3.1 Evolutionary roots of believing**

The SLR has revealed the nexus of evolutionary biology theory and superstitious behaviour in decision making. The evolutionary perspective suggests that superstitious tendency is simply one way the brain keeps us safe (check, for instance, de Petrillo and Rosati, 2021; Mandal, 2018; Craciun, 2014; McKay and Dennett, 2009; Foster and Kokko, 2009). In 1948, B. F. Skinner published his seminal work to prove that even pigeons believe their thoughts or rituals could influence remote outcomes (Skinner, 1948). Despite criticisms from Vyse (2013) and Chance (2007) that allege Skinner's study as temporal contiguity<sup>53</sup> without causation, Skinner's work remains the canon for researchers in the field of superstition (Wagner and Morris, 1987; Freud, 2012).

Several psychological research results have shown that human moral values do not represent human behaviour (Gigerenzer and Todd, 1999; Samuels and

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<sup>53</sup> Temporal contiguity occurs when two stimuli are encountered close together over time and, as a result, an association may be formed.

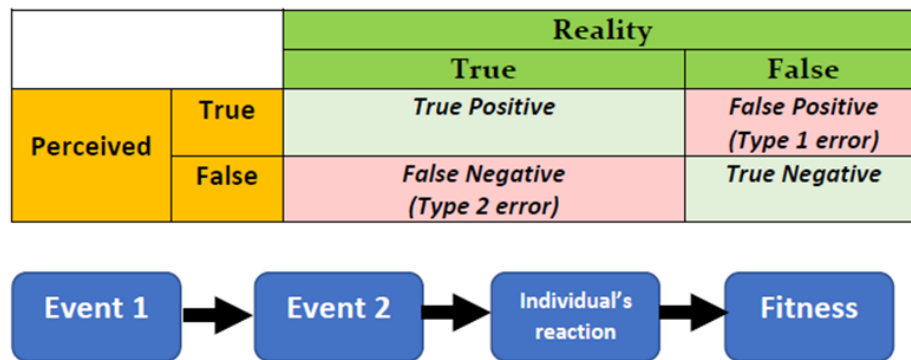


Stich, 2015). From this viewpoint, an inferential approach is ecologically rational if it is correct and successful to the types of tasks that have been essential in the world in which we have evolved (Gigerenzer and Todd, 1999). Fast and frugal decision making refers to applying ecologically rational heuristics, such as the recognition heuristic<sup>54</sup>, rooted in the psychological capacities that human has evolved. They are ‘fast and frugal’ because they are adequate under conditions of bounded rationality—when knowledge, time, and computational power are limited (Goldstein and Gigerenzer, 2002).

But there are other possible evolutionary roots of human decision making. Beck and Forstmeier (2007) posit that cultural inheritance can shape superstitious behaviours. An adaptive learning strategy may also manifest superstitious behaviour, in which natural selection favours strategies that frequent Type I error (delusion) (Foster and Kokko, 2009). Numerous scholars support that true belief is adaptive, and superstition is maladaptive (Bullinaria 2004; Beck and Forstmeier 2007; McKay and Dennett 2009). Thus, the Panglossian assumption is that natural selection evolution should ‘weed out’ maladaptive behaviour (Abbott and Sherratt, 2011).

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<sup>54</sup> That is, the dictum of “Go with what you know”.



**Figure 2-2 Evolutionary reason for superstitious behaviour  
(Adapted from Foster and Kokko's (2009) extended model)**

The conceptualisation in Figure 2-2 assumes that Event 2 precedes Event 1, where the former directly affects the individual's fitness. Foster and Kokko (2009) suggest that the individual's reaction to Event 1, even when Event 2 does not occur, is a 'false positive' hence a superstition. Foster and Kokko (2009) compare superstition to a good wager. Most Chinese people prefer '8', which symbolises wealth. Hearing Plot 8 for sale paid at a premium price for his office tower development, a CEO SD maker is not daft but more likely reflects on a 'prior beliefs' or lack of data that can influence his decision.

Foster and Kokko's model presumes that superstitious behaviours are maladaptive behaviour and true beliefs are adaptive; a presumption often used to argue for the manifestation of the superstitious phenomena (viz. Bullinaria 2004; Beck and Forstmeier 2007; and McKay and Dennett 2009). Taking evasive or precautionary action even when it is false can be naturally selected under certain circumstances in Foster and Kokko's extended model. Therefore, like Fengshui-based SD making, perceived maladaptive behaviour

can arguably be adaptive if the perceived overall benefit is greater than the cost.

### 2.3.2 Pascal's wager

The 17<sup>th</sup>-century French philosopher, theologian, mathematician and physicist Blaise Pascal (1623–1662) has intriguingly argued that a rational person should live as if there was a God and continue to believe in God (Connor, 2006). Pascal's claim is worth examining to see how people wager with their lives that either the supernatural exists or does not exist (see Figure 2-3). This idea is later known as Pascal's Wager.

It seems unfair to say that people can bet on some form of motivation beyond worldly. But the theologian's claim deserves attention because the thought experiment has managed to pinpoint just the kind of consideration that may substantially impact the ordinary decision-making mind. Like with Fengshui subscription, this kind of cognitive dissonance concern makes the SD maker's decision unnecessarily hanging.

	God exists	God don't exist
You believe in God	<i>Infinite reward</i>	<i>No loss</i>
You disbelieve in God	<i>Infinite loss</i>	<i>No reward</i>

**Figure 2-3** The 4-Block World in Pascal's Wager  
(Adapted from Oppy, 1991, p. 160)

Though Hacking (1975, cited in Hájek, 2018, p. 2) recounts the Wager as “the first well-understood contribution to decision theory”, some recent religious-philosophical studies deem Pascal's Wager a careless argument that has committed a few fallacies (Duff, 1986; Hájek, 2003; Rota, 2016). Pascal's Wager notably treats logic as black-or-white, whereas there may well be more than two options in life, religious or secular. Pascal ignores that most theistic religions are not merely a matter of ‘to believe’ or ‘disbelieve’ but demand a great deal from believers such as frequent praying and faith. It also assumes that the ‘God’ Pascal refers to can be deceived by a dishonest human (Oppy, 1991).

Nevertheless, scholars may probably have too hastily concluded that Pascal's Wager is undeserved academic respect. Essentially, Pascal's Wager presents a tang of logical, moral and psychological elegance. The researcher argues that Pascal's argument is efficient in the imperfect business world of decision making ingrained with Fengshui-based mental shortcuts, especially when decision makers are utility maximisers. In the property industry where New Age Fengshui subscribers have nothing to lose and everything to gain, the following version of Pascal's Wager may reapply in the context of this study, especially for Fengshui subscribers who are unable to be rational and those who are unwilling to be rational (Alievers and Acqueiscers):

1. Either Fengshui exists, or it does not.
2. Human reason cannot tell us whether Fengshui exists or not.

3. If Fengshui exists, those who subscribe to it will be rewarded with enormous luck and harmony.
4. If Fengshui does not exist, no one's luck will be affected by it.
5. On the strength of the preceding premises, the prudent SD maker will choose to subscribe to Fengshui.

The above is the minimal line of thoughts of Pascal's Wager. The researcher adds the following considerations:

6. SD makers must wager either one option or another since refusal to wager is effectively a wager against their sense of self-importance at the citadel of TMT.
7. The chances of winning or losing are fifty-fifty whichever way they wager, and therefore the prudent SD maker will wager on the option which offers the higher utility.
8. Because the stake is finite, and the potential reward is infinite, the only possibility to avoid losing the stake is to *subscribe to Fengshui*.

### **2.3.3 Belief bias**

Belief bias (sometimes referred to as the Semmelweis reflex) is the tendency to appraise the strength of arguments based on the believability of their conclusion rather than how firmly they support that conclusion (Leighton and Sternberg, 2004). This cognitive bias makes SD makers adhere to their

pre-existing beliefs and reject new information that contradicts them, regardless of adequate evidence.

Gupta *et al.* (2020) hold that the underlying source of this dismissal is an innate prejudice towards uncertainty, which may be at the basis of people's fear for new ideas. As such, SD makers are more inclined to accept an argument that supports an inference that aligns with their values, beliefs, and past knowledge while rejecting counter-arguments to the conclusion (Evans *et al.*, 1993). According to Čavoјová (2015), belief bias is still an incredibly prevalent and significant form of cognitive impairment that causes people to easily be blinded by their beliefs and reach an erroneous conclusion. Belief bias has influenced various reasoning tasks, including conditional reasoning, relation reasoning, and transitive reasoning (Andrews, 2010).

It is well established that misinformation presented initially as accurate but later proven incorrect and retracted has a persistent influence effect on inferential reasoning, known as the continued influence effect (Wilkes and Leatherbarrow, 1988; Chan *et al.*, 2017; Walter and Tukachinsky, 2020). To believe misinformation after a retraction seems unreasonable and a bias, according to critics like Lewandowsky *et al.* (2012). Nonetheless, people with belief bias may demonstrate continued influence if source reliability to retract the initial misinformation is arguable.

### 2.3.4 Kiasuism

*“Superstition is foolish, childish, primitive and irrational, but how much does it cost you to knock on wood?” (Viorst, 1984)*

The term ‘Kiasu’ in the Oxford English Dictionary<sup>55</sup> refers to a person "governed by self-interest, typically manifesting as a selfish, grasping attitude arising from a fear of missing out on something." ‘Kiasu’, in the Chinese Hokkien dialect, means ‘afraid to lose’. While the term is generally stereotypical in Singapore, several studies have shown that Kiasuism is very much present in Malaysia, and to a lesser degree, in Australia, Hong Kong, and the United States of America (Cheng and Hong, 2017; Ayyavoo and Tennakoon, 2015; Ho *et al.*, 1998).

In the Malaysian business context, Kiasuism construes an irrational “fear of losing out” (Nga, 2020, p. 174). In Malaysia’s (New Age) Fengshui parlance, its equivalence is FOMO, viz. “fear of missing out” (Yap, 2021a; Akbari *et al.*, 2021). This value-laden attitudinal function is a mechanism to make the utmost of the others, in that it has been considered an obsession at times (Cheng and Hong, 2017). Objectively viewed, the term ‘Kiasu’ seems derogatory and underrated only because it is over-berated. Kiasuism, sometimes seen as a motivation to improve continually, is part of the common human traits in TMT (Bedford and Chua, 2018).

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<sup>55</sup> <https://www.asiaone.com/singapore/oxford-english-dictionary-features-kiasu-word-day>

Kiasuism and FOMO are subliminal and widespread phenomena in Malaysia that could impact SD making but, like Fengshui, are rarely addressed in mainstream Western literature or discussed. Nga (2020) evinces that Kiasuism, allied with the Asian cultural value of pride in achievement, has significantly embedded in critical decision making in Malaysia, not just in the Malaysian Chinese community but also in the non-Chinese Malaysian business. Tacitly rooted in this characteristic is the need for self-preservation and extreme caution (just in case) if things go wrong (Metz, 2019). The decisions made tend to be risk-averse when decision makers are kiasu. While they seem natural and healthy, these risk-averse decisions may not be best in the organisation's long-term interest (Ivancevich *et al.*, 2011).

The only similar characteristic of the Kiasu culture found in Western-based research is consumer behaviour in the form of a compulsive desire to 'keep up with the Joneses' (or other brands), which causes social media fatigue (Bright and Logan, 2018). Kiasuism can also be related to the philosophy of self-efficacy. The theory of self-efficacy of Bandura (1994) implies that one's confidence in their ability to accomplish a goal depends on mastery, motivation, and emotional wellbeing. In line with this, Kahneman and Tversky's (1979) Prospect Theory also delineates that loss aversion is more than double the pleasure of gain (*ibid.*).



### 2.3.5 Confirmation bias

Although psychological literature has long demonstrated evidence of confirmation bias, the term ‘confirmation bias’ was first used in a 1977 paper describing an experimental study on the subject (Mynatt *et al.*, 1977). Confirmation bias is one of the most common biases that can severely undermine decision making due to the tendency to seek and favour evidence supporting current beliefs and ignore or reject evidence that does not fit existing beliefs (Risen, 2016; Klayman, 1995). It is the primary cognitive bias relevant to the subscription of unorthodox beliefs because subscribers tend to seek information to confirm and not negate their hypotheses as they think instinctively and emotionally<sup>56</sup> (Risen, 2016).

When people subscribe to a belief system, intuitively, they will retrieve examples from memory that support their action (van Prooijen *et al.*, 2018). Once a preexisting belief is put forward or a superstitious hypothesis created, the subscribers will repeat the behaviour instead of trying new conduct that could debunk their belief system. They tend to interpret ambiguity as confirmatory and see even the suboptimal proof as concrete supporting evidence (Risen, 2016.). Therefore, confirmation bias helps understand why superstitious intuitions like Fengshui are still intact today despite lacking scientific validity (*ibid*).

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<sup>56</sup> Appears to be associated with System 1 thinking, which will be discussed in the next section.

Wherefore, subscribers who accept Fengshui as a significant factor in their SD making will have experienced the perceived efficacy of Fengshui. This phenomenon is confirmation bias seeking to validate the information to confirm one's preexisting beliefs or hypotheses (Nickerson, 1998). Other pertinent cognitive biases of such psychophysical kind<sup>57</sup> (Arkes, 1991) are Shafir *et al.*'s (1993) Reason-based Choice, Kahneman and Tversky's (1979) Prospect Theory, Kahneman's (2011) Two Systems of Thinking, and Vyse's (2013) work on superstition and critical thinking.

### **2.3.6 Self-serving bias**

A self-serving bias is the typical human behaviour for taking credit for positive outcomes but blaming external factors for adverse consequences (Miller and Ross, 1975). An architect securing a significant project attributes his win to internal factors like his hard work and creativity but would blame a loss on external factors like an unfair selection board or rivalry sabotage. Existing research recognises that power increases the self-serving bias (Lammers and Burgmer, 2018); thus, self-serving bias operates more commonly in the TMT.

Because "people have a need to view themselves positively" (Heine *et al.*, 1999, p. 766), self-serving bias manifests as a robust phenomenon not limited to specific groups, although recent evidence from a meta-analysis carried by

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<sup>57</sup> Non-linear reactions to various gains and losses contribute to psychophysical based errors, .e.g., if a client has already invested RM1 million in renovating his factory, another RM300,000 new furniture seems less taxing than if he had not already spent the RM1 million.

Allen *et al.* (2019) purports to self-serving bias as more prevalent among males than females and at lower performance levels. Maintaining a sense of self-worth is important, but departures from the "preferred" level of self-serving bias may lead to adverse outcomes. Coalson (2014) opines that *overconfidence* is the standard medium for self-serving bias to occur and operate.

Self-serving bias is characterised by a 'knew it all along' overconfidence in one's capacity to foresee future occurrences, which Roese and Vohs (2012) believe will stymie decision makers' ability to learn from experiences. Fengshui subscribers who think myopically will not conduct a thorough search for explanations and will typically seize the first causal candidate available (Shah and Oppenheimer, 2009).

### **2.3.7 Authority bias and the HiPPO effect**

Because humans prefer to assign accuracy to someone in power, they are more likely to be more influenced by that opinion of the authority figure. Milgram's (1963) groundbreaking experiment using electric shock demonstrated that two-thirds of his participants willingly obeyed an authority figure who commanded them to act contrary to their conscience. Natural selection does not favour characteristics that do not help in survival. Evolution has led to a deep reverence for the more powerful (*ibid.*).

Drawing from the SLR in Appendix A, *ad verecundiam* or the logical fallacy of appeal to authority for survival. Since authority figures have a superior

distribution of resources and other means of survival, obeying them is an evolutionary advantage (Oswald and Hart, 2013). Exacerbated by the Asian society, which embraces ‘respecting the elder’ culture, the superiority hierarchy has been ingrained in the mindset from a young age (Hinnosaar and Hinnosaar, 2012). However, respect for authority may also be a cognitive bias, mainly when the authority figures are instinctively considered trustworthy experts for lack of contradictory evidence.

The SD makers in this study all have organisational power and will bring their ‘givens’ in a Fengshui-based SD making process. Because SD, to a large extent, has been found to comprise behavioural components, viewing the phenomenon under the lens of authority bias is useful. From a contemporary business perspective, closely linked with authority bias is Avinash Kaushik’s HiPPO effect or the ‘highest-paid person’s opinion’ (Appelgren and Nygren, 2019) and upper echelon theory in Section 2.6.3.



**Figure 2-4** HiPPO effect or the ‘highest-paid person’s opinion’  
(Source: Tom Fishburne @ <https://marketoonist.com/about>)

The TMT SD maker, usually the executive Founder or CEO, is subject to authority bias in a HiPPO effect. His decisions based on hunches often win over his subordinates' better ideas or data-driven decisions. When data is scarce, the HiPPO perspective, or relying on intuition, arguably makes sense (*ibid.*); however, coupled with the upper echelon effect, heuristics and biases of a Fengshui-based SD can be concerning. The phenomenon of authority bias is reportedly rare in Western Europe but is large in Eastern Europe and Asia (Hinnosaar and Hinnosaar, 2012). Not questioning authority can lead to acquiescence in SD making. A compliance mindset in Fengshui-based SD making is feared to have existed for a long time in the fabric of society within Malaysia's property industry. In addition to the TMT, the 'authority' in this context includes the Fengshui master, a figure seen as knowledgeable and in possession of crucial forecasts important for business leaders to know.

In Fengshui-based decision making, the SD maker tends to value 'decision quality', i.e. the quality of a decision at the point the decision is made. With authority bias, its outcome is even secondary. Termed simply as 'decision quality' by Howard (1988), this principle facilitates things to move in decision problem analysis and allows for the assurance of productivity (Neal and Spetzler, 2015). In this context, decision quality is an extension of decision analysis and, when properly applied, allows capturing maximum value in uncertain and complex scenarios (*ibid.*).

Time wasted unnecessarily by being indecisive happens in low- and high-impact decisions. Business leaders should recognise that the extra time pursuing an ideal decision is not worth it (Duke, 2020). The illusory ideal to achieve a decision with perfect certainty is *maximising* (Simon, 1955). On the other hand, *satisficing*, i.e. a portmanteau of ‘satisfy’ plus ‘suffice’, is decision making motivated by the first satisfactory option available (*ibid.*).

A satisficer with a compliance attitude encounters less cognitive dissonance than a utility maximiser (Heshmat, 2015). Though not necessarily superior outcomes, satisficing tends to lead to a greater degree of happiness in post-decision evaluation. When a maximiser with understandably limited cognitive resources<sup>58</sup> faces enormous choices, he must make an optimal choice (O'Muircheartaigh *et al.*, 2000; Schwartz *et al.*, 2002). Because decision making based on maximisation is impractical and typically unlikely in the natural business environment, authority bias prevails.

## **2.4 Decision-making theories**

Decision making is the act of choosing between two or more options. In the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, the word "decision making" was introduced from the lexicon of public administration into the business world and started replacing narrower descriptors like ‘resource allotment’ and ‘policymaking’ (Gabor,

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<sup>58</sup> Cognitive resources refers to “the idea that a person has a certain cognitive capacity, which can be used for carrying out various tasks” (Goldstein, 2011, p. 87). In other words, high-load tasks require a lot of mental energy.

2000). Despite a substantial body of literature, SD-making knowledge is still widely deemed limited and based on untested assumptions (e.g. *ibid.*; Langley, 1990; Pettigrew, 1990; Rajagopalan *et al.*, 1993; 1997; Schneider and DeMeyer, 1991). Eisenhardt and Zbaracki (1992, p. 17) remark that the crucial role of SD-making research has not moved significantly from being “mature paradigms and incomplete assumptions.”

Since ‘decision’ implies the end of deliberation and the beginning of ‘action’, a decision is deemed the most fundamental building block in business strategy. However, unlike the investment sector, property industry decision making is different: many parties collaborate on a single reasonably long-term project, and property industry players literally can see the project and its progress evolve (Meyer and Pfnür, 2015).

During the historical progress in business and management study, numerous decision-making theories formulated have far-reaching differences in their basic approaches to rationality, available information and options (Jankelová and Puhovichová, 2020). These theories appear in everyday life, underscoring logic or intuition and the rationality or irrationality of decision making based on the decision maker’s beliefs and knowledge (*ibid.*). This Section discusses selected theories pertinent to this study and their manifest (ir)rationality relevant to SD making.

### 2.4.1 Descriptive theories

Descriptive theories attempt to explain how real-life decisions, in practice, are made. As this includes models of naturalistic decision making, psychology inevitably enters into economic thought (Tversky and Kahneman, 1974), and decision making, in turn, employs knowledge of behavioural economics (Teitelbaum and Zeiler, 2018). As a state of brain functioning, emotions can affect deviations in rationality. In addition to psychology, de Martino *et al.* (2016) emphasise the role of emotional processes in decision-making models, adducing that emotions and their effects are part of the field in decision-making science.

Because descriptive model describes things as they are; using data aggregation and data mining to provide insight into the phenomenon to answer: “What’s happening?”, descriptive theories have since piqued the interest of many scholars for they reflect the real world, and hence are more bent toward adopting real-world intuitive decision making (Schwarz *et al.*, 2002; Ariely, 2010; Beach and Mitchell, 2014; Okoli *et al.*, 2016). Fengshui invokes an emotional response, occurs in the natural world and is beyond the field of normative decision-making science (Charles *et al.*, 2017). Not surprisingly, both Hassan *et al.* (2021) and Keong *et al.* (2019) agree that the property industry, among others, must grasp market perceptions of Fengshui to succeed.



### **2.4.2 Normative theories**

Normative theories seek to establish how people should decide in an ideal or optimal environment, where decisions are made based on logical and well-established conclusions supported by clear or likely evidence (Pruitt *et al.*, 1997; Slovic *et al.*, 1977). Normative theory-driven decision-making models, which include the classical models of decision making, have long become a metric or a criterion to which the degree of '*rationality*' has been embedded in the process (Simon, 1995; Barros, 2010). However, many contend that relying on complete and known risk quantification in normative theories is untenable (Chapman and Sonnenberg, 2003; Thompson and Dowding, 2001).

The drawback of rationality-based normative theories is that they consider the issue static. In reality, the goals are incoherent, the decision makers are unaware of the variations, and their priorities are far from steady (Robbins and Coulter, 2017). In the rapidly changing nature of industries like the property industry, the issue cannot be exact, static, or definable in any accuracy (Gallimore and Gray, 2002; Nsibande and Boshoff, 2017). In the context of Malaysia's property business, it is impossible to identify and assign relative probability weight to all risk components while accounting for all aspects of risk.

### **2.4.3 Integrative theories**

To go even further, Cioffi (2021) challenges conventional thinking and knowledge in decision making by proposing a holistic framework, including sensemaking and iterative processing. By definition, descriptive models are used to describe decisions and are not prescriptive; they can be incorporated into process models but retain their descriptive nature. However, integrating them into a process model by Cioffi (2021) may help comprehend rather than prescribe solutions.

Therefore, in dual processing theory and the cognitive continuum, descriptive and normative perspectives on decision making have been integrated. The Dual Processing Theory proposes two systems, System 1, an intuitive process that allows for rapid decision making, and System 2, an analytical approach that allows for slower and more disciplined decision making (Croskerry, 2009). This theory aims to describe how humans make decisions in the real world.

When cue acquisition and cue interpretation fit 'stored' patterns of knowledge, SD makers use System 1 (intuition) (Bowen, 2006). Suppose cue acquisition and interpretation do not match currently stored information. In that case, the SD maker will employ System 2, which may involve adopting various reasoning processes, such as hypothetico-deductive reasoning (Ohlsson, 2012). The cognitive continuum focuses on the link between task concepts and mental modes. A more structured task evokes a more analytical

decision-making process and an ill-structured work suggesting an intuitive process (Cader *et al.*, 2005). The continuum counters the allegation that analytical thinking is a unitary generic process that is indifferent to the quirks of the choice task environment.

In contrast, intuition is nearly entirely related to context-specific factors unique to each decision (Muntean, 2015). The dual processing and cognitive continuum methods work toward a more holistic understanding of decision making, wrestling with analytical and intuitive decision making. The idea is that a holistic decision-making theory must take the decision-making processes of all existing theories into account.

#### **2.4.3.1 Two Systems of Thinking**

‘Thinking, Fast and Slow’ is Daniel Kahneman’s<sup>59</sup> magnum opus on cognitive bias and decision theory, which focuses on three areas of his research (Kahneman, 2011). The first is the idea of two different ways the brain thinks, which he calls System 1 and System 2. System 1 is fast, subconscious, and pattern-driven, while System 2 is slow, calculating, and thoughtful. The second is the concept of remembering and experiencing self, which explains why we spend more time capturing memories than enjoying the view. The last concept is the distinction between economists (he calls ‘econs’) and

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<sup>59</sup> Israeli economist and psychologist Daniel Kahneman was awarded the 2002 Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Science because of his empirical results which challenge the assumption of human rationality in modern economic theory.

humans. Econs are logical and market-based, whilst humans, irrational and emotion-based (*ibid.*). The intuitive System 1 and analytical System 2 are the two cognitive functions inextricably linked to decision making (*ibid.*; Epstein, 1994). System 1 produces the quick, associative, effortless, and hard to monitor and modify; System 2 requires effort, is meticulous, deliberate, more serial, controlled, and comparatively versatile (*ibid.*; Epstein, 1994; Kannengiesser and Gero, 2019).

This study finds it useful to hinge primarily on the Two Systems of Thinking in decision-making theory. Firstly, this is due to the unavoidability to review Fengshui-influenced decision-making against heuristics and cognitive biases. The apparent incompatibility between Fengshui as subjective data and decision making as an objective process inevitably creates cognitive dissonance among stakeholders who believe in rational business decision making. Since no study can explore new frontiers on flimsy ground, this research examines Fengshui-influenced SD borrowing the authority of Kahneman's shoulder. Subscribing to superstition can be traced back to the idea of the human mind over-simplification of Systems 1 and 2 thinking defined by Kahneman (2011). Likewise, people in the property industry subscribe to Fengshui for subjective intent, the fear for adversity in investment or the hope to reap good fortunes.

Furthermore, unlike other decision-making theories, Kahneman's polarisation of the two thinking modes stands out in the current body of

decision-making knowledge and how different other models have adopted it. Most decision-making theories cannot forsake the Two Systems of Thinking, as human decision makers are either System 1 or System 2 thinkers. Germinated from this theory are the more dual-system views, such as the dual-process of social cognition (Smith and Collins, 2009; Smith and DeCoster, 2000) and, more recently, Evans' (2020) dual-process of reasoning. All premised on System 1 as the quick, high-capacity, independent of working memory and cognitive ability; and System 2 as the slow, ponderous, heavily dependent upon working memory and linked to individual cognitive skill differences. System 1 is the earlier of the two cognitive systems from an evolutionary standpoint. Not only does System 2 struggle to multitask, but it also requires the SD maker to invest mental energy to function correctly (Hamilton, 2016).

Though the Two Systems of Thinking was a well-argued seminal work by Kahneman, Schimmack (2020) recently demonstrates a general lack of replication in the empirical studies cited in Kahneman (2011), in particular, Chapter 4 (The Associative Machine) on implicit priming results. The replication doubt notwithstanding, Two Systems of Thinking essentially provides a foundation for why humans think they are rational but sometimes act irrationally, befitting for examining Fengshui-based SD making.

### 2.4.3.2 Hot and cold cognitions

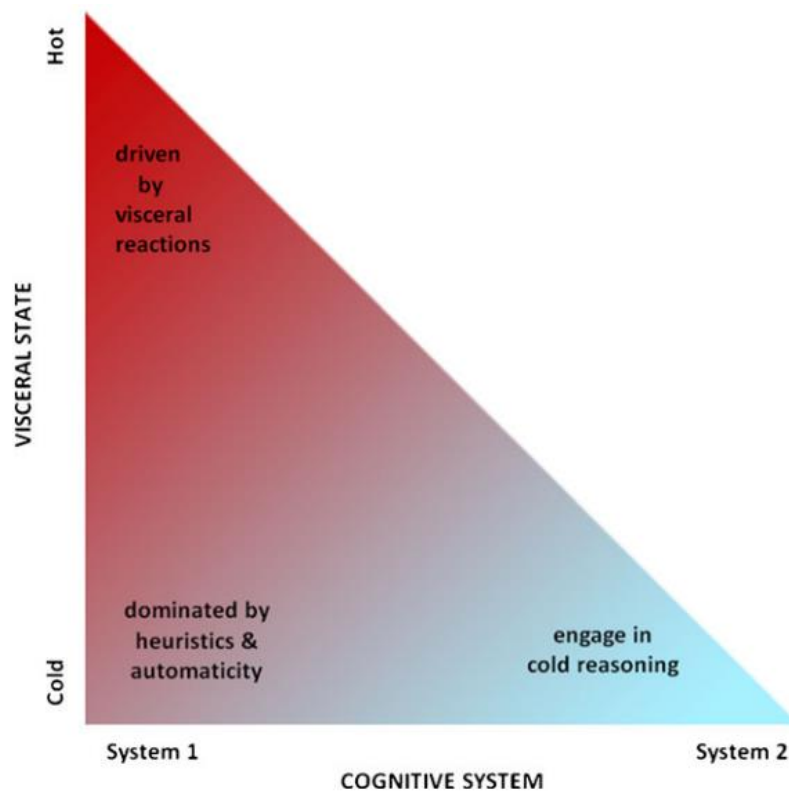
Hot cognition was postulated by Robert P. Abelson back in 1963, but the concept did not gain traction until the 1960s and 1970s (van den Bos, 2007). According to the hot cognition hypothesis, an emotional condition can influence a person's thinking, which is cognition coloured by emotion (Roiser and Sahakian, 2013). Cognitive and physiological arousal is associated with hot cognition, making a person more open to external cues (Niznikiewicz, 2013). Hot cognition might emerge in various ways, including through belief systems, psychology, and other social settings, especially when esoteric and cryptic subjects are tied intrinsically to emotional states (Roiser and Sahakian, 2013). Fast, automatic, emotion-driven cognition can lead to biased decisions.

<b>Hot System</b>	<b>Cool System</b>
<b>Emotional</b>	<b>Cognitive</b>
<b>“Go”</b>	<b>“Know”</b>
<b>Simple</b>	<b>Complex</b>
<b>Reflexive</b>	<b>Reflective</b>
<b>Fast</b>	<b>Slow</b>
<b>Develops Early</b>	<b>Develops Late</b>
<b>Accentuated by Stress</b>	<b>Attenuated by Stress</b>
<b>Stimulus Control</b>	<b>Self-Control</b>

**Figure 2-5** Characteristics of the Hot-Cold framework  
(Source: Metcalfe and Mischel, 1999, p. 4)

In contrast to hot cognition, cold cognition means cognitive processing of information that is unaffected by emotional engagement (Niznikiewicz, 2013). Decision making in cold cognition is more likely to employ logic and

critical examination on objective data. As a result, engaging in a task while using cold cognition is expected to be emotionally neutral. Hot-Cold cognition and the Two Systems of Thinking are highly correlated but not identical (Metcalf and Mischel, 1999). Kahneman (2011) pointed out that the granular but distinct difference is between System 1 and Abelson’s hot cognition. He opines that System 1 comprises all the “hotness” of the hot cognition plus the automatic function of memory, which Yang *et al.* (2012) lately frame as the Hot-Cold decision triangle in Figure 2-6.



**Figure 2-6 The Hot-Cold decision triangle**  
(Source: Yang *et al.*, 2012, p. 459)

Roiser and Sahakian (2013) study that people can make decisions in either a cold or a hot mode in light of this idea (Loewenstein 1996; Shiv and Fedorikhin, 1999). In hot cognition mode, they take the data regardless of their genuine preferences. All choices and repercussions are considered in

cold cognition mode, including the possibility of entering hot mode. The Hot-Cold decision framework is based on cognitive systems and visceral influences. All else being equal, the likelihood of selecting healthier options is determined by the degree to which the person is viscerally hot and the extent to which System 1 vs System 2 are engaged in the decision-making process (Yang *et al.*, 2012).

Both the hot and cold cognitions offer benefits and drawbacks contingent upon the circumstances surrounding the decision. Metcalfe and Mischel (1999) use the framework to describe willpower dynamics. The impact of rational thinking and visceral urges can be visualised as follows: in a hot state (red, upper-left area of the Triangle), people's decisions primarily reflect visceral reactions (e.g., deciding whether to subscribe to a superstition that has no proof); irrational options satisfying visceral urges are preferred over logical options congruent with long-term goals (*ibid.*).

The twilight zone (bottom-left corner of the Triangle) is characterised by choice contexts in which visceral influence is limited, and decisions are made using System 1 processing (e.g., continuing to subscribe to Fengshui even when heuristic is satiated) (*ibid.*). While decisions made in this area of the Triangle are not always bad, unhealthy options are frequently not carefully scrutinised, and heuristics and automaticity that are harmful to the decision can go unchecked (*ibid.*). Finally, in the blue area (bottom-right corner of the Triangle), where System 2 processes guide decisions (e.g., verifying that the



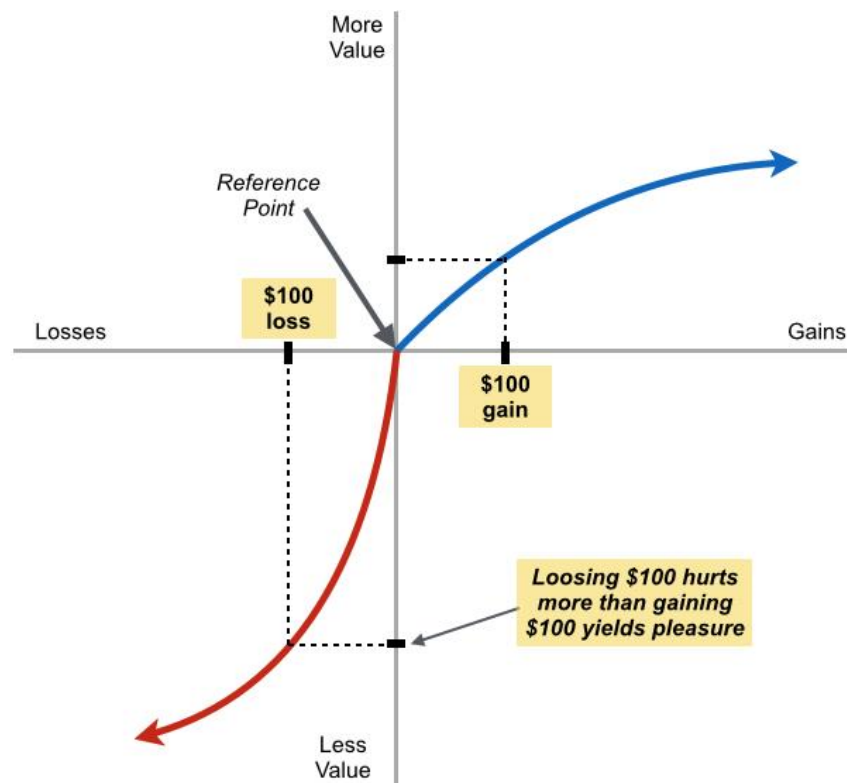
possible Fengshui outcome has no scientific grounds before deciding), healthier options are more likely to be chosen due to cold reasoning and deliberation.

### **2.4.3.3 Prospect theory**

The Prospect theory, developed by Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky in 1979, has stood the test of time (Kahneman, 2011). Several scholars have extensively studied the theory and found it still valid in describing behaviour and predicting it (Fulfer and Maille, 2018; Inesi, 2010). It is an empirically supported behavioural economic theory that describes the behavioural biases that underpin most decision making. The theory postulates that people decide from a reference point based on the importance of gains and losses (Kahneman and Tversky, 1979). Essentially, their aversion to failure is more than double the enjoyment of their success (*ibid.*).

Figure 2-7 illustrates that people losing a specific sum will experience a significantly more utility loss than their utility gained from attaining the same amount of money. SD makers understand the outcomes in terms of risk but can't predict them with certainty. Prospect theory claims that people will look at changes in their utility rather than the final result and perceive loss twice as acutely than gains. Loss aversion affects decision making daily, and Tsang (2004b) finds that Chinese subscribers greatly value risk or loss aversion in a Fengshui-based decision. In Western superstition, Chinchanchokchai *et al.* (2017) indicate that Americans become substantially more risk-averse in their

choices after thinking about Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>, compared to a day not associated with bad luck.



**Figure 2-7** Loss aversion graph  
(Source: Rothschild, 2015, unpaginated)

Such a mindset can lead others to exploit or nudge the decision makers' behaviour by carefully framing choices, such as in Fengshui, avoiding bad luck rather than seeking good fortune. It is helpful to understand that something extremely favourable will have less of an impact on your opponent's psychological state than his contemplation of a result of an equivalently unfavourable consequence (Wu, 2013). In other words, a more negative nature has a greater significant impact on a person's psychological state and decision processes than possible neutral or positive outcomes (Rozin and Royzman, 2001). This bias toward the averse leads SD makers to pay much more attention to avoid a potentially undesirable occurrence, resulting in

both the real and perceived unfavourable consequences to be unjustly important (*ibid.*).

## **2.5 Decision-making models**

Based on Newell and Simon's (1972) pioneering information processing paradigm, behavioural models have emerged to recognise the role of heuristics and bias in decision making (Sah and Loewenstein, 2011; Gallimore *et al.*, 2000). In many cases, these models provide the property industry with a false impression that decision making is a sequential process (Parker, 2014), which opens the way for subjective judgments and sentimental influence (Roberts and Henneberry, 2007; Chukwudumogu *et al.*, 2018). Still, they have their fair share of criticisms for not adequately reflecting the real-world issues in a complex decision-making environment (Gallimore *et al.*, 2000; Adair *et al.*, 2001). In the real business world, especially in Malaysia's property industry, problems can be nonroutine without a straightforward solution.

When decision making also involves a specific belief system, the information becomes hazy even if available timely and adequately. Ambiguities and information deficiencies in the property industry are two of the most typical irregular constraints. Mostly, they are unanticipated and often dealt with *reactively*<sup>60</sup>. Decision making under conditions of uncertainty is like being a

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<sup>60</sup> For example, during a highrise construction, costly change orders had to be issued when the developer engaged a Fengshui master. Many (still) regard that the Fengshui master's advice is a brilliant applied theory to make 'correct' business predictions. The researcher attributes this

pioneer entering the unexplored territory, inevitably dependent on intuition, educated guesses, and hunches. It requires a model as a navigation map to conceptualise and make sense of the phenomenon's complexity by highlighting the most relevant parts for use by the business leaders (Massa *et al.*, 2017).

### **2.5.1 Rational decision-making model**

Long before Tversky and Kahneman's work, 18<sup>th</sup>- and 19<sup>th</sup>-century thinkers were already interested in the decisional psychology underpinning economic life. During the neoclassical revolution, at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, scholars increasingly tried to emulate the natural sciences and differentiate themselves from the then 'unscientific' field of psychology (Camerer *et al.*, 2011). Scott and Bruce (1995) portray the rational model as a comprehensive analysis and logical assessment of alternatives, among other decision-making styles.

The rational decision-making model, grounded on facts and analysis, outlines steps that people should systematically take in choosing a particular course of action (Uzonwanne, 2016). The model premises that all (re)actions are inherently 'rational' in character. The model assumes that SD makers are not only cognitively capable of identifying and collecting usable information that supports their final decision; they also measure the potential costs and

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kind of fallacy to the people's mental models' operation, an area with numerous citable research done.

benefits of any action before determining what to do (Scott, 2000). Despite the time and effort involved, comparisons indicate that rational decision making provides more powerful and practical solutions than decision making based on intuition or gut feelings (Uzonwanne, 2016.).

Realistically, however, decision makers can't access all the information available and be cognitively competent, especially in the local unsettling property industry. Aside from the folly of attempting to impose rationalist behaviour on others, it is also debatable whether people are able and willing to make an optimal choice by weighing every alternative without the duress of any externalities (Olivier, 2007). Kahneman (2011, p. 269) asserts that “people are neither fully rational nor completely selfish, and that their tastes are anything but stable”. Apparent in Nouriel Roubini's<sup>61</sup> prediction of America's housing market crash in 2006, the rational man theory of economics rarely works (Ignatius, 2009).

### **2.5.2 Bounded rationality decision-making model**

The principles propounded by the bounded rationality model challenge the notion that people can make decisions rationally as if humans are like robots (Kahneman, 2002). Bounded rationality, a concept proposed by Herbert Simon, gave a new breath to rational decision making by embracing the view that decision makers are, after all, *homo economicus*. Rationality is but

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<sup>61</sup> Nouriel Roubini, the famous economist known as Dr. Doom.

bounded because people, in real-life situations, have limited perceiving power, available data, and time to think (Simon, 1982).

Bounded rationality is coined by Herbert Simon, questioning the notion of a conception of human rationality rooted in mathematics (the machine metaphor of data processing). Rationality is bounded by limitations on our thinking power, available knowledge, and time (Simon, 1982). Bounded rationality parallels the social science principle that defines people as 'cognitive misers' (Fiske and Goodwin, 1994) and reflects a fundamental theory in human psychology that underlies behavioural economics.

According to Simon's work of the 1950s, human minds must be understood relative to the environment in which they evolved. Decisions are not always optimal. There are restrictions on human information processing due to limited knowledge (or information) and computational capacities (Simon, 1982; Kahneman, 2003). As an alternative basis for decision making, Simon (1982) has proposed bounded rationality as it complements rationality as optimisation, which sees decision making as an entirely rational method of seeking an optimal option, given the information available (Gigerenzer and Selten, 2002). Bounded rationality is one of the psychological pillars of behavioural economics and is a central premise of the 'natural assessments' interpretation of heuristics and dual-system models of reasoning (Gilovich *et al.*, 2002).

Empirical evidence has explicitly supported what Janis (1989) has pointed out that executives are likely to use any available shortcuts to circumvent cognitive restrictions. The prominent part of the bounded rationality model still inclines to *satisfice*, which refers to accepting the first option that fulfils the minimum criteria (Sent, 2017). People are ‘ecologically rational’ by implementing simple and intelligent algorithms that can lead to near-optimal inferences while making the best possible use of limited information-processing resources (Gigerenzer and Todd, 1999). However, Eisenhardt and Zbaracki (1992) argue that there is no longer much ambiguity over the debate on whether SD makers are rational or boundedly rational. Built on the ideas of Simon, Gerd Gigerenzer's work on ‘quick and frugal’ heuristics later suggest that the rationality of a decision depends on the constructs identified in the environment (Albar and Jetter, 2013).

The concept of human limitations to rationality was not entirely new in economics. The research programme 'heuristics and prejudices' of Tversky and Kahneman made significant methodological contributions. They proposed a systematic experimental approach to understanding economic decisions based on evaluating real choices under different conditions. Their theory entered the mainstream three decades later, resulting in rising academic, public, and commercial acceptance.

Bounded rationality's principle of limited knowledge or information is one of the topics discussed in the 2008 book *Nudge* (Thaler and Sunstein, 2009).

Thaler and Sunstein define a nudge as “.. any aspect of the choice architecture that alters people’s behaviour in a predictable way without... significantly changing their economic incentives” (*ibid.*, p. 6). Therefore, under bounded rationality, this study takes cognisance of a nudge in the form of choice architecture that may substantially alter the SD maker’s choice.

### **2.5.3 Intuitive decision-making model**

Human beings are rational because they are capable of acting rationally. However, that does not mean that they always do so. What might seem sensible in the short term (e.g., profit-maximising or awarding a tender to the lowest bid) is not necessarily rational long-term (e.g., environmental destruction or unemployment). Also, values are subjective, and so are definitions of rationality. Different individuals disagree about what is rational, e.g., a libertarian might argue that acting in his own best interest is rational. In contrast, a progressive might say that looking out for everyone’s collective interest is more logical. Max Weber and Jürgen Habermas described that instrumental rationality is the backbone of contemporary society, although operating in a 'rational' manner is not necessarily sensible (Duvenage, 2010).

Research also shows that emotions, such as desire, sympathy, fear, and anxiety, are not the enemy of measured, logical decision making (Burke and Miller, 1999). Many other sizes and dimensions of emotional attributes can lead to different cognitive (mis)perceptions and mental gears that eventually tilt human behaviours to bias toward specific decision outcomes (Chmielecki,



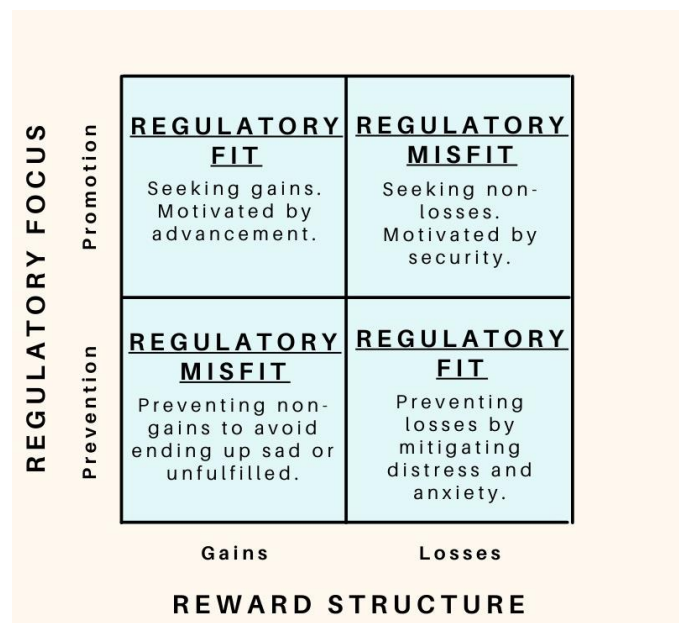
2020). Klein (2004) claims that 90 per cent of important decisions are somewhat emotional and intuition-based. Intuitions, in reality, are an essential part of cognitive machinery for decision making.

Experts scan the environment for identifiable decision-making patterns using the intuitive decision-making model (Klein, 2004; Miller, 2003). When a pattern is recognised, they will play a possible course of action through to its outcome based on their previous experience. Due to their background, training, and knowledge, these decision makers know how well a given solution may work. In this way, novices cannot make appropriate decisions because they have no previous knowledge base.

As discussed, SD making in the property industry does not operate in a vacuum but is highly impinged upon by the TMT and environmental attributes (see also, recently, Fisher *et al.*, 2020). The TMT usually comprises vastly experienced, if not also professionally-trained, players. Thus, they will use intuition as a cognitive inference based on their prior experiences and emotional inputs (Burke and Miller, 1999). Although most consider intuition-based decision making to be positive, some research has questioned the confidence in their intuitions (*ibid.*). If that is true, intuitive decision makers will welcome nudges.

## 2.5.4 Regulatory fit model

E. Tory Higgins established the regulatory fit model based on the regulatory focus theory as a psychology concept that proposes two primary motivational foci: prevention and promotion (Higgins, 1997). Since its publication more than twenty years ago, this idea has spawned a significant amount of research and applied to various business disciplines, including decision making (Higgins and Pinelli, 2020).



**Figure 2-8** Overview of Higgins' regulatory focus model  
(Source: Adapted from Otto *et al.*, 2010, p. 798)

Focus on *prevention* is motivated by the need to avoid loss, emphasising obligations and responsibilities and a preference for vigilante/avoidant measures. On the other hand, *promotion* focuses on the motivation to obtain gains, emphasising ambitions and ideals, preferring the eager/approach strategies. Promotion objectives increase the sensitivity of positive results,

while prevention objectives increase the sensitivity of negative consequences (Higgins and Pinelli, 2020).

The key discoveries behind regulatory mode theory can be stated in terms of four possible motivations for people, as shown in Figure 2-8, distinguishing between two distinct value concerns: advancement and growth issues and safety and security concerns. According to the standard hedonic principle, people are motivated to maximise pleasure and reduce pain, but the Regulatory Focus Theory disagrees. Higgins (1997) posits that people seek pleasure and avoid suffering differently. The prospect of financial gain drives some people. They labour diligently to earn promotions and raises. Others struggle hard to avoid being dismissed. They seek to avoid losing what they have got. Both wanting promotion and job security are motivated states, but one group approaches gain, while the other approaches a non-loss (Higgins *et al.*, 2001). These subtle distinctions matter because they can steer people's cognitive decision-making machinery and influence their decisions.

An eager strategy that focuses on seeking gains and avoiding non-losses, for example, would be a regulatory fit for those with a promotion focus but a regulatory misfit for those with a prevention focus. On the other hand, a cautious strategy that focuses on being careful (to avoid losses and maintain non-gains) would be a regulatory match for those with a preventive focus but a misfit for those with a promotion focus. Regulatory fit occurs when an individual's goal pursuit approaches match their regulatory emphasis (*ibid.*).

### 2.5.5 Choice architecture

*“If we had to make all decisions that are relevant to us, without the assistance of helpful choice architecture, we would be far less free. In a literal sense, choice architecture enables us to be free” (Sunstein, 2014, p. 130).*

Contrary to the classical economic models, customer utility does not necessarily increase or remain unchanged by offering more choices (Benjamin *et al.*, 2010). Each additional option takes additional time and consideration to decide, increases decision fatigue and potentially outweighs the advantages of having more choices (*ibid.*). Research has shown that consumers broadly display fast, visceral reactions and strongly prefer simplicity willingness to pay a premium to minimise the amount of irrelevant and inaccessible information (Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, 2020). Because these are classic ingredients for cognitive biases, choice architecture takes biases as a given. Business people should work with biased individuals and move them to the preferred decision despite the cognitive deficit (Thaler and Sunstein, 2009).

Thaler and Sunstein (2009) initially coined ‘choice architecture’ to enhance customer decision making by minimising biases and errors resulting from bounded rationality. Along with choice simplicity, the idea is to ‘nudge’ decision makers toward personally and socially desirable behaviours like exercising more, avoiding unhealthy diets, or registering to vote. A nudge is “the choice architecture that alters people's behaviour in a predictable way without forbidding any options or significantly changing their economic incentives” (*ibid.*, p. 6). To Chadd *et al.* (2020), this is an essential insight for

policymaking, which this study would include while developing a Fengshui-based SD model. Some influences may be justifiable if they can nudge the opponent to make decisions in their own best interests without limiting alternative options (Thaler *et al.*, 2013).

Choice architecture is ubiquitous and unavoidable. Even a modest government will influence people's decisions, considering the consequences of default rules as prevalent in property law, contract law and tort (Sunstein, 2005). Critics of libertarian paternalism opine that although manipulations of choice architecture may resolve irrational decisions, they can also impose rationality agents' costs. For instance, curtailing choice (Johnson *et al.*, 2012) would undermine the value for human agency and moral autonomy (Goodwin, 2016).

However, if the argument is valid, architects like the researcher would have been guilty of manipulating the built environment over the millennia since they are, in essence, also choice architects<sup>62</sup>. Much nudging by architects in green buildings minimises harmful effects on human health and addresses environmental sustainability. Many nudges are not only allowable on ethical grounds but are necessary. Like any tool, it is only unethical when people

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<sup>62</sup> Pun is coincident.

abuse it. This study pivots on understanding how people make choices to help guide better decisions (Sunstein, 2015a).

## **2.6 Business decision making**

Conventional wisdom holds that business decisions should be logical, data-driven and straightforward choices based upon facts. In the real business world, SD makers operate in an environment that neither is free from external influences nor provide ideal resources, adequate data and ample time. They struggle to navigate the 'heart and head' dichotomy, continuously coping with facts and assumptions.

Business decision making is also evolving. Just as Malaysia's goods and services have changed within the property market, the ways decision makers develop, market, foresee obstacles and strategically decide have also changed (Chew, 2021). The global COVID-19 pandemic reveals the SD maker's vulnerability, showing that even the best-laid plans can quickly unravel. While businesses employ analysts to evaluate big mounds of data to seem rational in their approaches, one's perception may change over time, if not different from others. Unorthodox factors sometimes drive the cognitive process for SD making, and market disruptions only make it worse.

Whether a sound business decision means having the desired outcome or getting there, *decision effectiveness* is paramount. Keller and Staelin (1987) define decision effectiveness as the decision maker's accurate assessment of

the decision made and how well it has resolved the problem. Duke (2020) reminds scholars to refocus on the decision process and not the outcome. She cautions that outcome bias (she called 'resulting') can result in "the [decision outcome] tail wagging the dog", which is a mental shortcut of a random outcome defining the quality of a decision (*ibid.* p. 2).

### **2.6.1 Defining strategic decision**

SD making is "a non-routine decision process that has long term consequences" (Hedelin and Allwood, 2002, p. 125), often used within the context of strategic planning in management science, with roots in Chandler's (1962) *Strategy and Structure*, and Ansoff's (1965) *Organizational Strategy* (Hoskisson *et al.*, 1999). Later, Mintzberg *et al.* (1976) popularised SD amounting to crucial executive deal-making (or -breaking) decision, usually impactful and precedent-setting. Since a "strategic decision is considered the choice of the company's overall strategic orientation" (Jankelová, 2017, p. 89), to undo is tricky after human and financial resources have been put to the cause. After all, SDs are executive decisions a company makes according to its belief systems (Hambrick and Mason, 1984).

Unlike day-to-day tactical decisions, SDs affect key factors determining a company's strategy's success or failure. Typical SD includes "Should we launch our flagship project this year?" or "Must we downsize our R&D Department?". Therefore, SDs are decisions that influence the company in years, decades, or beyond the project's lifetime. Simply put, they are usually

significant and long-term. Acknowledging that SDs have competing interests, Nutt and Wilson (2010, p. 4) summarise SDs as having nine characteristics:

1. They are problems that are difficult to define precisely.
2. Key players use politics to align them with their preferences.
3. It requires a deep understanding of the issue for a viable solution.
4. There is no one best solution but many possible solutions.
5. Questions about trade-offs and priorities are in the solutions.
6. The effectiveness of the solution benefits is hard to evaluate.
7. Usually, the solutions are linked to organisational issues.
8. High levels of ambiguity are associated with solutions.
9. Realising hoped-for benefits has considerable risk.

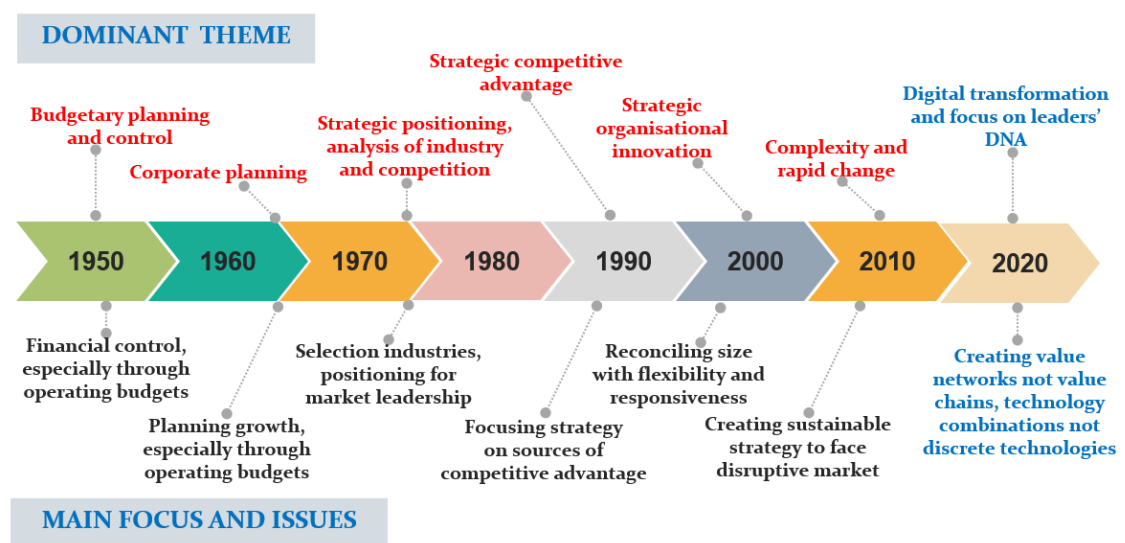
Traditional strategic planning generally maps a path from A to B, with B primarily reflecting a more lucrative version of A. That usually requires understanding the past and the current external environment in the market or corporate space and using that knowledge to forecast the future, thereby enabling executives to generate preferred results reliably (Bina, 2013). The fatal flaw of that idea of a strategy is that as the external environment changes often make forecasts unreliable, the strategic plan becomes obsolete<sup>63</sup>.

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<sup>63</sup> Malaysia felt this acutely as the COVID-19 pandemic took place, which nobody could have expected the health and economic crises' depth and duration. All except critical and essential services were halted by the MCO (movement control order), which led to a 30% loss of manpower and their income and a 42% drop in the consumption of construction materials



Given how strategic planning has evolved since the 1950s (Figure 2-9), it is unrealistic to believe that the decision-making process determining strategy planning can remain consistent today. Despite Mintzberg (1994) declaring the fall of strategic planning a quarter of a century ago, it is very much alive in 21<sup>st</sup>-century organisations. More so in developing economies that purportedly supports the need for anything strategically and adequately planned, citing sound corporate governance principles. Malaysia's property industry is one of them. Yet, it covertly embraces the nonlogical mechanisms in SD making when belief systems like Fengshui find their way to be part of the criteria (Baron, 2015).



**Figure 2-9 Chronology of development in strategic planning**  
(Adapted and modified from Bina, 2013, p. 3)

Hamel and Prahalad (1989) propose that organisations have ‘strategic intent’ - a determined, competitive goal that provides vision and directs the firm's

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(equivalent to RM4.6 billion) (Ayob, 2021). Businesses could no longer hold on, and they had to bear the blow without a strategy to bounce.

SD making throughout time. When viewed from an organisational level, it does not appear to be compatible with Fengshui-based SD making, but from a TMT perspective, it is. Eisenhardt (2003), in a similar vein to Fengshui romanticism, asserts that 'improvisation', as used in jazz or theatre, is an effective metaphor for portraying the tension between short- and long-term decisions. In jazz improvisation, performers work in fluidity within the constraints of a few simple rules. On the one side, the product is novel and unknown, but it is incredibly melodic on the other. If the goal is to boost corporate performance, first is to better clarify theory by undertaking a more consistent examination of the inputs, impulses, and essential processes involved in SD decision making.

### **2.6.2 Strategic decision maker**

The study of humans making strategic choices is a complex undertaking (Herweg and Müller, 2021; Starmer, 2000), and executives make decisions in the course of their day-to-day duties. Major property industry players in Malaysia work in a highly dynamic and demanding market that continually oscillates between profit maximisation and good governance and the constant need to make critical decisions within an imperfect condition or rationality to base decisions on facts (Elbanna, 2006).

In Malaysia's property market, which is dynamic and full of uncertainties, SDs are typically made by the TMT regardless of publicly listed entities or private businesses. Cormier *et al.* (2016) concur with Hambrick and Mason (1984) in

claiming that the starting point for any SD making is the TMT, which usually comprises the founders, CEOs, Executive Directors, COOs or key executives within an organisation who have with authority to influence SD making<sup>64</sup>. Samimi *et al.* (2020, p. 3) describe the leadership direction that makes SD “individuals at the top management levels of the organisation, which have strategic implications for the company”.

While the TMT operates as the nerve centre for SD decision-making, the ultimate decision button is guarded by one or two key SD makers, generally the founder and a dominant CEO. Cognitive scientists have shown that people make critical decisions in ways that do not comply with economic rationality standards (Elbanna, 2006). Therefore, albeit not thoroughly examined, these key players' mental model is crucial in SD making.

The less examined intuitive cognition, such as the upper echelon's background characteristics, plays an integral part for the TMT in SD making. It is particularly challenging when the TMT must decide under time constraints, some pressure, or during which information is insufficient or unclear (Treffers *et al.*, 2019). Olson *et al.* (2007) indicate that collectivism and uncertainty avoidance in the Chinese TMT heterogeneity undermines decision-making performance. Nevertheless, this observation is uncommon in Malaysia's property industry. More common seems to be Rong's (2020)

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<sup>64</sup> The same is applicable for the purposive sample used in this study.

recent findings, highlighting that as far as non-standard beliefs (including superstition and associated cognitive biases) are concerned, the TMT's role is vested with particularly influential decision-making capacity at both the individual and organisational levels.

### **2.6.3 Upper echelon theory**

Although the Upper Echelon Theory (UET) is not a decision theory *per se*, it offers robust empirical data on companies' SDs relevant to this research topic. It describes how a firm's success is heavily affected by the TMT's decisions and how the values and belief systems of the TMT become a representation of the firm (Hambrick and Mason, 1984; Pfeffer and Davis-Blake, 1986; Bower and Gilbert, 2007). Hambrick and Mason (1984) advance two interconnected trajectories: (1) Top managers make decisions according to their interpretation of reality, and (2) This interpretation of reality stems from their cognitive processes, values, personality attributes and ethical standards of behaviour.

In the context of SD making, the SD makers in this study are individuals of the TMT; therefore, UET can legitimately be a central issue. Several studies have claimed that the TMT, which comprises the 'top echelons' with strategic leadership, is significant enough to evaluate choices of substance and strategy methods (Hambrick and Mason, 1984; Miller and Toulouse, 1986). Research has centred primarily on the impact of TMT on corporate strategies (Miller and Toulouse, 1986; Finkelstein and Hambrick, 1990), performance

(Haleblian and Finkelstein, 1993; Smith *et al.*, 1994) and strategic planning (Bantel, 1993). However, there was relatively little empirical work on the relation between TMT and the SD-making process (Lewin *et al.*, 1999; Simons *et al.*, 1999; Bantel, 1993).

Among the TMT characteristics are their need for achievement and risk-taking attitude (Papadakis *et al.*, 1998). Malaysian Chinese TMT with culture-laden beliefs who still practise paternalistic leadership commonly can lead to irrational decision making. Nonetheless, despite having a healthy dose of ego essential to maintain self-respect, TMT members are indubitably the starting point for crucial decision making (Cormier *et al.*, 2016). In this sense, the TMT's SDs will typically be dynamic, marked by their bounded rationality, multiple (but not uncommonly conflicting) goals, and various alternatives (Hambrick and Mason, 1984). The theory implies that the more complicated is the decision, such as decisions of strategic nature, the more critical are the personal characteristics of SD makers in the TMT, such as age, belief systems and specialisation, etc. (Barker and Mueller, 2002; Colbert *et al.*, 2014)

The key leaders in the TMT are vested with extreme decision-making power in listed Chinese companies. Other studies, especially Schoar and Bertrand (2003), suggest that the preferences and beliefs include superstitions like Fengshui and cognitive biases. However, TMT leaders would usually stand on what they believe and impose it on others by being persistent to prove themselves right, regardless of the quality of their belief or argument (*ibid.*).

Rather than suppressing their belief system, they at the upper echelon would try justifying it. The findings in Chapter 4 support the literature review that these individuals may not need complete information or the right kind of data or even the ability to synthesise and make sense of the material required to make critical decisions.

#### **2.6.4 Decision making in the property industry**

Traditionally, the property industry has always regarded SD making as a rational and logical endeavour (Hargitay and Yu, 1993; Gigerenzer and Selten, 2001). In this respect, decision makers in this industry work procedurally in a business setting to make optimal decisions (Roberts and Henneberry, 2007). Recent studies, however, have argued that property investment knowledge is anything but static (Gallimore and Gray, 2002; Nsibande and Boshoff, 2017); thus, assuming an ideal market condition is unthinkable.

In Malaysia's property industry's high power distance culture, 'ordinary' people expectedly have limited say in major decision making. For the most part, people in a culture where power distance is significant expect to be told what to do and view this as normal (Hofstede, 2001). Many individuals expect more involvement, influence, consultation, and even agreement when decisions that impact them are made in a low-power-distance society. Decision making is no longer a matter of binary choice. Some research, including recently Kamarazaly *et al.* (2021), Keong *et al.* (2019) and Desai and Sarmiento (2015), have tried to understand without coming to fruition the

decision-making dynamic of property industry players amid market irrationalities and disturbances based on their reaction to the current structured rules that exist in different locations.

For instance, a decision in the local property industry to postpone the launch of a flagship housing scheme until after the *Hungry Ghost Festival*<sup>65</sup> month is based on a set of evaluations, i.e. the risk of suboptimal sales if the taboo is impactful against other damages associated with delay. Albeit judgment-driven, the relationships between judgment and decision are far from simple (Fluke *et al.*, 2020). There is no commonly acknowledged model for SD making in the devil-may-care property industry, despite an abundance of literature including diverse theories and principles aimed at simplifying the decision-making process to optimise investment results.

In the ideal world, the *homo economicus* would be omniscient and clear-headed. But in reality, within Malaysia's property industry, business leaders make decisions under imperfect conditions that necessarily prevent them from thinking things through. Researchers have suggested various theories, such as rational choice theory, portfolio theory, expected utility theory, prospect theory and game theory, to enhance decision making in the property sector (Buisson, 2016; Samsura *et al.*, 2009; Smith and Clark, 1982).

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<sup>65</sup> The seventh lunar month of the Chinese calendar, known as the 'hungry ghost month', is when the 'gates of hell' are believed to open, and ghosts roam the human world in quest of nourishment.

Unfortunately, these ideas do not show the effect of inter-organisation, culture and investment in the assessment of SD making in the middle of disturbances

Not all the property industry players who subscribed to Fengshui are believers. Developers sometimes merely respond to a commercial reality that good Fengshui sells, with neither any depth nor insight on the phenomenon, much less managing it with proper SD-making strategy or strategic understanding of Fengshui. Currently, there is no cognitive cohesion even between subscribers, let alone the non-subscribers, in the local property industry ecosystem, on how Fengshui comes into the equation of their SD-making.

In Malaysia's property industry, stakeholders do not necessarily make SD grounded on facts; as Kahneman (2011) established, they often base SD on heuristics and subjective truth. Accepting that something is 'subjectively true' means that it is valid for the stakeholder, real enough for him to believe and rely upon making his judgment (Searle, 2012). For others, the same information may not be false at the same level of truth. Although humans making decisions by nature are not consistently rational, workwise, the TMT nonetheless expects some rationality in strategy for execution as a matter of prudence. Yet, the property industry oddly accepts that people who believe in Fengshui are not silly or irrational and that Fengshui subscription is just an intrinsic business decision element (Kamarazaly *et al.*, 2021, Yap *et al.*, 2020).



## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

#### **3.1 Research philosophy and paradigmatic consideration**

A decision-making process complicated by the need to be either mindful of or influenced by Fengshui is problematic from the start. It is daunting due to the multiple objectives and risks arising from uncertainties and assumptions, thus leaving SD makers unsure how best to optimise their values, perceived or otherwise. What steered the study's philosophical approach was the desire to understand the meaning of the experience as it is lived by the captains of Malaysia's property industry when they make SD with Fengshui factored in.

SD making is, rightly, a sobering endeavour typically carried out with due diligence. As such, the TMT participants may have reservations about disclosing their inner experience of letting something abstract influence their important decision making. To avoid the risk of appearing unintelligent, participants may narrate their Fengshui subscription through a false facade. The obstacles in genuinely sharing the experience of a Fengshui-based SD making may be associated with embarrassment, guilt, vulnerability, and unease. It should, consequently, not come as a surprise that participants develop doubt and display avoidance during the in-depth interviews.

In this context, verbal content without essence is inadequate; the inquiry must include their lived experiences with Fengshui as part of their SD-making process.

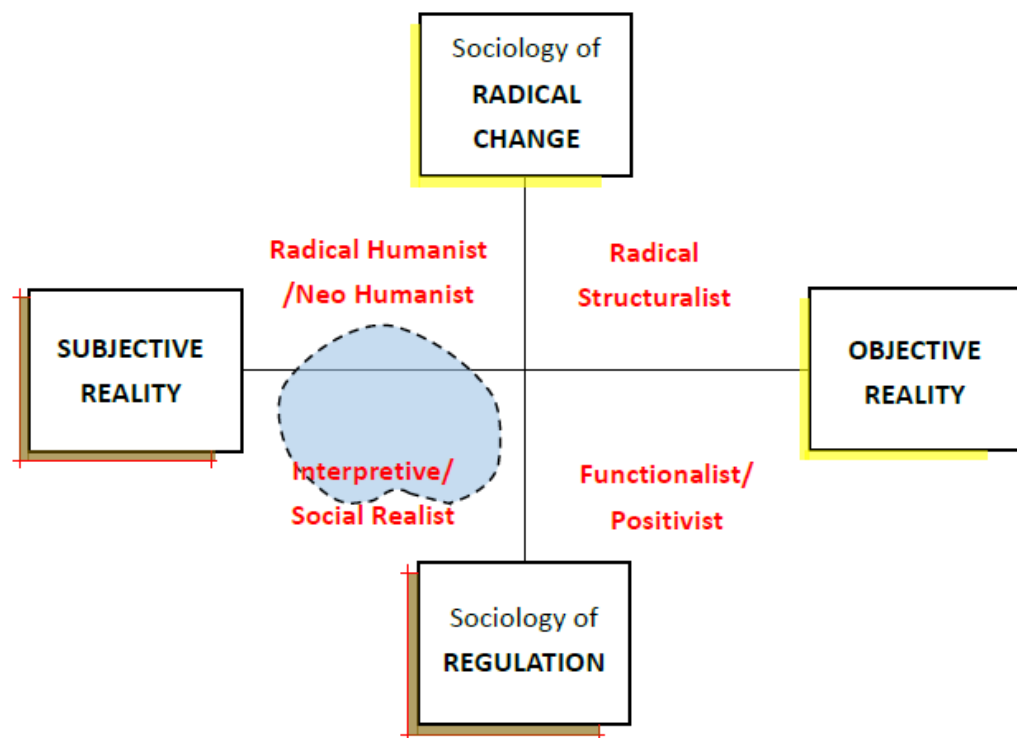
To ensure the usefulness of the research findings, the researcher felt compelled to pause and evaluate data collection factors such as sampling, mode, interviewer bias, and the integrity of the theme-constructing process during analysis and the ultimate interpretations (Roller and Lavrakas, 2015, pp. 342-343, *passim*).

The researcher employed a qualitative phenomenological approach, which was considered the most appropriate given the scarcity of genuinely helpful material on the subject and the capacity to examine the research question from the participant's perspective (Percy *et al.*, 2015). Besides, it is practicable to conduct qualitative research when the researcher's expectations for the findings are vague, and the objective of the inquiry is to elicit views and lived experiences (Giorgi, 2009; Moustakas, 1994). Husserl, in his groundbreaking work *Logical Investigations*, reminds:

*"We can absolutely not rest content with 'mere words' i.e. with a merely symbolic understanding of words" need for a descriptive phenomenology and for a careful study of inner experience[...]. Meanings inspired only by remote, confused, inauthentic intuitions—if by any intuitions at all—are not enough: we must go back to the 'things themselves'" (Husserl 2001, p. 168).*

This study goes '*back to the things themselves*' by exploring and making sense of the significance of Fengshui-infused decision making, drawing upon two primary theoretical frameworks: Husserlian transcendental phenomenology and Kahneman's *Two Systems of Thinking*. According to Husserl (1929/1982, p. 35), the phenomenological approach requires disinterestedly examining "to see and to describe adequately what they see, purely as seen".

Given the multivocal nature of this study, ‘softer’ data are favoured. The key is to gain insight into the essence or structure of the lived experience of the participants (Rose *et al.*, 1995) and to arrive at a description of the nature of the particular phenomenon (Creswell and Creswell, 2018), which requires the researcher’s access to the participants’ world and their experiences as lived. The philosophy and paradigm analysis must provide a methodological way of gaining insights into the underlying influences and bring unexamined experiences to light, which the participants would otherwise not be readily able or willing to disclose.



**Figure 3-1: Four paradigms for the analysis of social theory**  
 (Source: Burrell and Morgan, 1979, p. 23)

Burrell and Morgan (1979) presented two axes to describe sociological theories. The vertical axis emphasises order and stability (*regulation*) versus radical change in society's essence. In social science, the axes reflect whether researchers take their work as an objective approach to an objective reality (following natural

science genres) or, perhaps, as inherently charged with subjectivity (*ibid.*). The resulting orthogonal axes divide four quadrants, which Burrell and Morgan (1979) posit as the four incompatible paradigms, each based on specific meta-theoretical assumptions typically taken for granted.

Figure 3-1 depicts how the research paradigm of this study establishes its posture. This study, positioned chiefly at the interpretive/social realist quadrant, features compatibilities with phenomenology as a research paradigm - which, incidentally, no scholarly study of this discipline has so far investigated empirically. Because of the nature of the research question that is subjective and regulative in guiding assumptions, an interpretive stance best fits the bill. To make sense of the phenomenon, an investigation in the light of everyday context was necessary with the participants.

The interpretive approach still sees the world as relatively regulated and stable, but it has a subjective view of that social reality. Here, the social relative is studied as a *status quo* as if it is cohesive and orderly. The researcher, therefore, needs to understand human activities and view them at a level of each person's subjective experience rather than the overall objective reality. Put differently, the reality is not out there waiting to be discovered. Mensch (2021) goes so far as to argue that Husserl's final, albeit incomplete, insight into the nature of selfhood must be understood as a process. Selfhood, or individuality, is constantly being coated with subjectivity.

That said, a series of major crises recently shook the global economic environment<sup>66</sup>, and the new world order is imminent. Although this study's framework has landed comfortably on an interpretive domain, it creeps over to the radical humanism boundary (Guba, 1990), as mapped out on Burrell and Morgan's framework. This study's posture may move slightly up into the Radical Humanist quadrant with the ongoing global transformations, especially commercially.

The inquiry of Fengshui-based SD-making ultimately drives the recognition of the role of cognitive bias and how to address it. That is to say that this study helps SD makers reshape how they think about the current Fengshui milieu in Malaysia, even to the point of (progressively) renegotiating the social reality within the local property industry (*ibid.*). The research strategy has the actual potential capability to make property industry and organisation leaders rethink the underlying assumptions and fundamental beliefs, which are essential to reveal the very different ways that reality manifests.

### **3.2 Who is this 'researcher-as-instrument'?**

Thirty-five years ago, when the researcher was an industrious architecture student at the University of Newcastle in Australia<sup>67</sup>, he wrote a research paper on *Chinese geomancy and its influence on Chinese urbanism* (Chua, 1985). The

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<sup>66</sup> The UK's Brexit Referendum, the COVID-19 pandemic, USA's shift to protectionism, Trump's rise and fall, China-USA new cold war, to name a few.

<sup>67</sup> The same alma mater of Fengshui scholars Skinner (1982, 2012, 2017) and Mak (2006, 2010, 2017a, 2017b).

work had set the philosophical foundation underlying the subject, recast his worldview, and developed a personal interest in knowing more about Fengshui incessantly. Writing an academic paper on such a topic in the 1980s was rare and intrepid, but it was the dawn of a lifelong passion for the researcher.

Returning to Malaysia, the researcher co-founded the Malaysian Institute of Geomancy Sciences (MINGs, now, Environology Malaysia) in 1998 and formally studied Fengshui and Bazi at MINGs in 2004. Drawing upon his active professional practice in Malaysia as an architect since 1990, he experienced first-hand accounts of how the phenomenon of Fengshui has influenced numerous pivotal decisions in the property industry. Up to now, what irks the researcher is seeing the mainstream academics regard Fengshui as an outmoded field of study.

The researcher started practising architecture in Malaysia in 1991 before he co-founded Environmental Design Practice Sdn Bhd<sup>68</sup> in 1995 with a long-time close family friend. As a principal architect, he has continued to witness and partake at high-level meetings, living the experience of stakeholders making significant decisions in the cognition that Fengshui is, in their reality, necessarily akin to a substantive and noteworthy factor. But architects are still human and have their values. Similar bracketing or keeping in abeyance value judgment was not easy but developed out of professional practice necessity. The researcher has completed more than twenty hospitals in the region. Revisiting some of his completed hospitals and engaging with the end-users who were now,

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<sup>68</sup> More details can be obtained on the following company website: <https://edparchitects.com.my/>

perfunctorily and emotionally experiencing his design, he realised how unique and value-laden lived experience is. A researcher cannot plan or plant lived experiences on others.

As an established practitioner in the same property industry, the currently prevailing “*anything goes*” Fengshui milieu in Malaysia has filled him with disquiet because bowing to commercial reality, the state of Fengshui as a respectable Chinese metaphysics is spiralling out of control. In the research context (*vide* Section 1.6), the notion of setting the research posture in place is even more critical since the researcher is the primary instrument of inquiry (Mehra, 2002; Fusch and Ness, 2015). The researcher’s experiences and values can colour his perception of their world, which could be inherently biased. According to Morrow *et al.* (2001) and Moustakas (1994), to mitigate biases, the researcher must make his values, experiences, potential biases, and assumptions known and become part of the research report here at the very beginning.

Scientific research is a human activity interwoven socially, culturally, economically, and politically; cognitive values are inseparable (Gonzales, 2013). Researchers’ worldviews and knowledge production depend chiefly on their backgrounds, beliefs and values (Sułkowski, 2009; 2012). The term ‘researcher-as-instrument’ refers to the researcher as an active participant in the study process (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995), as he

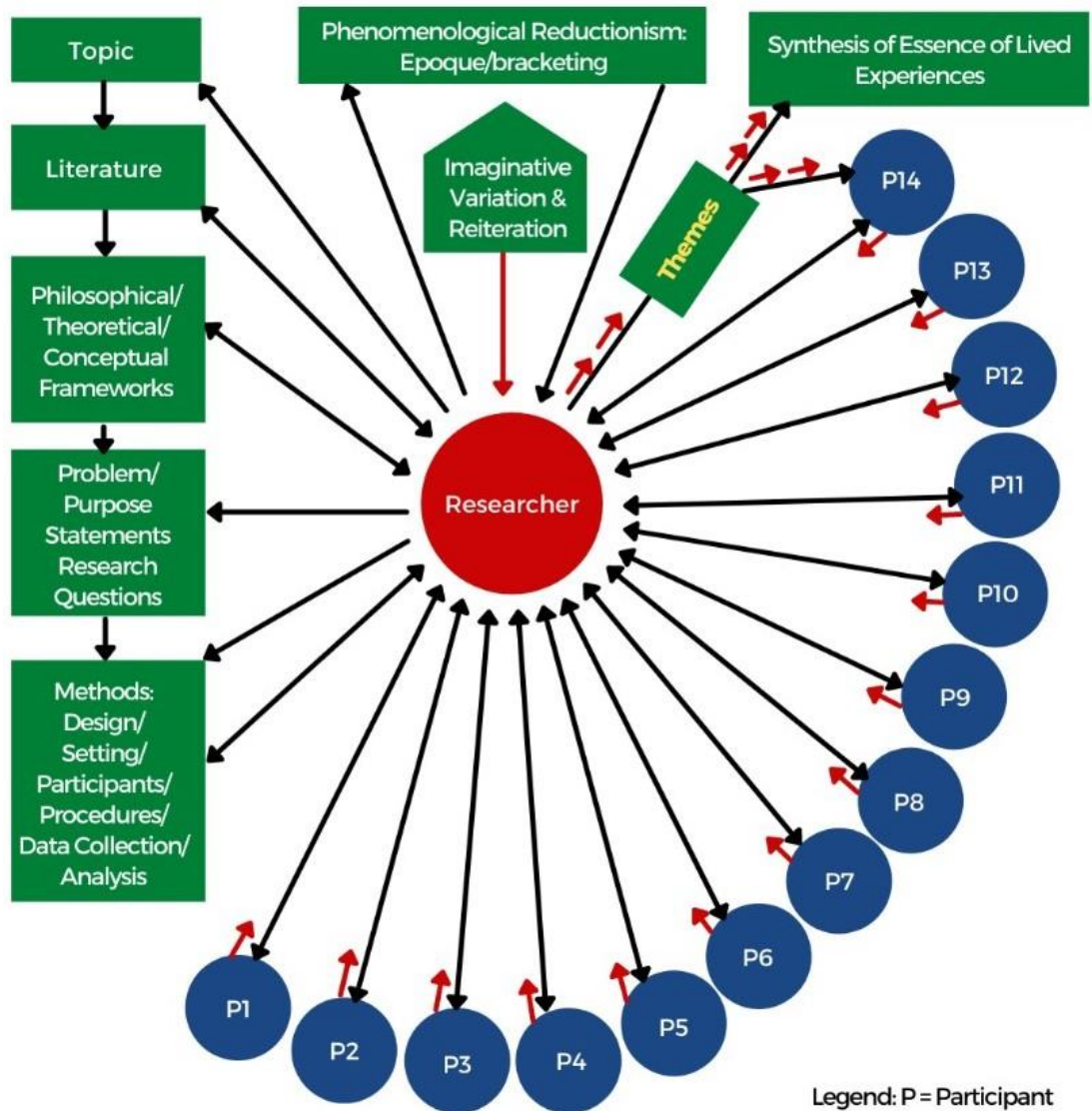
*“use[s] organs to grasp the objects of the study, to mirror them in their consciousness, to be transformed into [a] phenomenological representation” (Turato, 2005, p. 510).*

Through the researcher's facilitative engagement, discussions developed in which the participants feel safe sharing their lived experiences (Owens, 2006). In value-laden scientific research of this nature, the researcher must describe his own experiences from the outset (Gonzales, 2013). It is a technique to increase the alertness of the researcher's underlying feelings about the research topic; the researcher should relinquish biases and look at the subject with a fresh eye (Creswell and Creswell, 2018; Merriam, 1998; Moustakas, 1994).

Understanding the researcher's prior familiarity with the subject and values helps consider what could have shaped or may influence this study's problem statement. The researcher axiologically framing the research questions and generating evidence to answer them must be evident. Nevertheless, Husserl described but did not demonstrate how to use bracketing (Overgaard, 2015); it is nearly impossible to suspend the researcher's ideas, prejudices, and prior knowledge (what Husserl referred to as "transcendence") in the absence of some validated instrument incorporated into the research design.

Phenomenological research can explore the experiences that the participants had with a particular phenomenon (van Manen, 1997). This approach puts the researcher as the primary research instrument to explain the participants' interpretations of their lived experiences with a phenomenon, as depicted in Figure 3-2 (*ibid.*; Creswell and Creswell, 2018). Readers must gain access to and comprehend the essence of the participants' individual and collective lived experiences.





**Figure 3-2** Researcher-as-instrument to conduct phenomenological research [Adapted from Creswell and Poth (2018), in conjunction with Moustakas (1994) and Husserl (1936/1970)]

To date, there is still no empirical study on how Fengshui has swayed SD making in the local property industry. Despite the researcher’s prolonged engagement with Fengshui and Malaysia’s property industry, the idea is still to approach this study with a neutral attitude. For the past three decades, his active and assiduous professional practice in Malaysia’s property industry has required him to bracket his judgment as second nature of professional habit, just like dealing with his

meticulous hospital clients<sup>69</sup>. We can't feel how a palliative patient feels unless we are one. Thirty years is not a short period; this has neatly qualified him as an experienced professional and shaped him to be reflexive, but this does not obliterate the need to do an extensive literature review to confirm the present-day Fengshui role in Malaysia.

### **3.3 Phenomenology**

Chapter 1 has introduced the methodology underpinnings of this research, which linchpin is, of course, a phenomenological approach. Phenomenology took its root from the Ancient Greek period of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle when philosophers started to uncover what phenomena mean. The etymology of 'phenomenology'<sup>70</sup> comes from 'phenomenon' + 'logy'. Insofar as the term phenomenon means anything that exists of which the mind is conscious, it follows that phenomenology is the study of what shows itself to consciousness, or "what is it like to experience a certain phenomenon" (Peoples, 2021, p. 3). Phenomenology has been defined in a variety of ways over time. But it is mainly accepted as "the study of structures of consciousness as experienced from the *first-person point of view*" (Smith, 2018, p. 1, emphasis is researcher's).

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<sup>69</sup> Had the researcher not been reflexive, instead of hearing perspective of his clients to carry out his design, he would find all design data were in fact his own perspectives heralded back to him. To be reflexive is to understand researcher bias, through the researcher actively engages in critical self-reflection about his or her potential biases and predispositions.

<sup>70</sup> 'Phenomenon' is derived from the Ancient Greek word *phainómenon*, which denotes 'thing appearing to light' or 'thing brought to the surface (to view)'; and the suffix *logy* or in Greek *logos* indicates study, treaty or science (Merriam-Webster.com. 2011). Hence, etymologically speaking, phenomenology means 'study of the phenomenon'.

### 3.3.1 Phenomenology as a philosophy

Originated in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, phenomenology was a philosophical movement. It examined phenomena as experienced without the encumbrance of theories or their causal explanation and as unaffected as possible by preconceptions (Neubauer *et al.*, 2019). Phenomenology was initially a form of critique on the Cartesian Methodic Doubt<sup>71</sup> (Broughton, 2002). Cartesian doubt is a systematic process of doubting the validity of one's convictions, which has become a characteristic method of philosophy. Rene Descartes, the lauded forefather of Modern Philosophy, initiated the philosophical revolution in modernity by offering a methodology of philosophising that seeks to ground knowledge on the most universal and self-evident truth:

*“..that I exist and that the ‘I’ that exists is essentially the cogito (a **thinking** I)<sup>72</sup>” (Stone, 1990, p. 462)*

Descartes systematically doubted the world's certainty outside of the self (ego) as his starting point to have absolute certainty about his existence. Unlike Descartes, Husserl affirmed a world outside of the self (Pietersma, 1986). If there is a world outside of the self, the person's mental states exhibit intentionality (*ibid.*). In other words, the thinking 'I' is always conscious of this world. For this reason,

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<sup>71</sup> Descartes' method has been seen by many as the origin of the modern scientific method.

<sup>72</sup> This is a variation of the famous Cartesian dictum: *Cogito Ergo Sum* (I think; therefore, I am). The idea here is that Descartes employed the Methodic Doubt in his search for certainty by systematically doubting everything at first. But in the process of questioning everything, there is one thing that Descartes cannot doubt that he is doubting. Now, if he is doubting, then he must be thinking. Therefore, if he is thinking, then he must be existing because the act of thinking presupposes the existence of the one that thinks. Thus, with the discovery of the self, of the I that *thinks*, Descartes concluded that certainty could be attained.

Husserl criticised Descartes for failing to properly understand the nature of 'consciousness', which continually is a consciousness of something other than itself (*ibid.*). As a mathematician, Husserl wanted to add rigour to the study of consciousness that was previously lacking. As a revolutionary thinker, he wanted to see the study of consciousness as the foundation of all scientific inquiry (Adams, 2001).

Influenced by Franz Brentano (1838 - 1917), in the early 1900s, Husserl conducted scientific exploration of the first-person experience in the lifeworld to rigorously and unbiasedly arrive at an essential understanding of human consciousness (Shosha, 2012). In the modern philosophical context, phenomenology is still about providing an account of how things appear to our awareness. Husserl based his work on Brentano's understanding of intentionality, an exercise the mind uses to interpret reality from a fresh perspective. Emphasising the value of intentionality, Husserl reminds:

*“The reason why phenomenologists are interested in analysing the structure of conscious intentionality is because they want to clarify the relation between mind and world” (quoted in Zahavi, 2019, p. 23).*

Broadly, there are two basic variants in phenomenology, i.e. pure phenomenology and existential phenomenology. Husserl, the fountainhead of modern phenomenology<sup>73</sup>, advocated the tradition of pure phenomenology, often also

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<sup>73</sup> The recent rise of 'Husserl Studies' to the Q1 tier of the SCImago journal ranking may construe as the Husserlian phenomenology genre returning to prominence . It does mean that Husserl Studies has moved from the top 50% of journals to the top 25%, that is, to the best quartile rank.

known as transcendental phenomenology (Husserl 1936/1970). On the other hand, existential phenomenology is more associated with the later thinkers, such as Husserl's student Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Jean-Paul Sartre. Husserl conceived phenomenology as a descriptive instrument to focus on the 'pure' description of an individual experience (Husserl, 1969; Matua and Van Der Wal, 2015). Phenomenology, as a philosophy, proceeds based on Husserl's and the later thinkers' theoretical and methodological foundation.

Compared to his teacher Husserl, Heidegger's interpretive school of phenomenology excluded "understanding how we know as humans, but accepted knowing as what it means to be [human]" (Reiners, 2012, p. 2). Ma (2009) and many Heidegger scholars see a link between Daoist's *Man* in *Dao* (appearance in logos) and Heidegger's *Being* (*Sein*). Depraz *et al.* (2003) have shown that phenomenological engagement has similarities and affinities with East Asian philosophies.

From theory to process, using phenomenology of 'seeing things as they are', 'seeing' reality and 'to the things themselves' (Searle, 2015; Merleau-Ponty, 1973; Husserl 1936/1970) resonates with the Daoist experiences of seeing the suchness of things and becoming highly conscious.

*"Phenomenology is anti-metaphysical insofar as it rejects every metaphysics concerned with the construction of purely formal hypotheses. But like all genuine philosophical problems, all metaphysical problems return to a phenomenological base, where they find their genuine transcendental form and method, fashioned from intuition" (Husserl, 1997, p. 101).*

The methodological epoché (bracketing) in transcendental phenomenology gradually dissects the sensitive and abstract realms, removing all attributes and forms until only the ultimate nature remains (essence) (Dörfler and Stierand, 2020). Thus, Woo (1984) regards Laozi and Husserl as adopting a similar approach to analysing epistemological assumptions, attempting to establish ontology in the 'Wesensschau' (imaginative variation or ideation).

### **3.3.2 Phenomenology as a research methodology**

As a research methodology, the phenomenological inquiry construes “an attempt to deal with inner experiences unprobed in everyday life” (Merriam, 2002, p. 7). Although phenomenology has a philosophical beginning (Groenewald, 2004), it has the methodological means to “step back and explore the nature and basis of knowledge” (Zahavi, 2019, p. 1). For over a century, phenomenology has provided critical guidance to many social science and humanities disciplines, including psychology, sociology, anthropology and architecture. Phenomenology has also provided a dynamic source of inspiration in recent decades, not just for theoretical debates in qualitative research but also for ongoing cognitive science research (*ibid.*; Sutton and Bicknell, 2020; Christensen, 2017).

Phenomenology holds a prime position today, far from an outdated and irrelevant methodology. Beyond just being a predominantly methodology used in nursing research, scholars and researchers use phenomenology as a legitimate mode of inquiry lately in, among other disciplines, Malaysian finance (Adnan *et al.*, 2021), public policy and administration (Mukhamediyeva, 2020), journalism (Bengtsson

and Johansson, 2020), political and social ideals (Chong, 2020), education (Stolz, 2020), healthcare services (Engward and Goldspink, 2020), religions (Brencio, 2020), literature (Weiss *et al.*, 2020), economics (Mlinar and Crespo, 2020) and marketing research (Martirano, 2016). The methodology principally involves phenomena that are not easily pinned down or immediately apparent to the researchers or the participants.

### **3.3.3 The rationale for employing a phenomenological research strategy**

A large part of the current Fengshui literature comprises both positive and negative superstition dimensions. Findings indicate that superstitious practices are cognitions too complicated to assess because people feel shame and chagrin for having such behaviours (Vyse, 2013; van Raalte *et al.*, 1991). Concerned about negative social perceptions, people usually do not admit believing in superstitious practices like Fengshui but subscribe to it privately (Vyse, 2013). In this case, a phenomenological study helps raise an understanding between states of individual consciousness and doubt, which may masquerade as a confident business decision.

Although qualitative research allows researchers to gain insight into participants' thoughts and feelings, previous studies have yet to consider SD made in a Fengshui-charged context. Within the phenomenological study, the lived experience elucidates the experiences and decisions a person makes and how this influences their worldview (Creswell and Poth, 2018). Developing a Fengshui-

based SD model without first investigating their lived experiences appears to be a handicap.

*“Human beings, who are almost unique in having the ability to learn from the experience of others, are also remarkable for their apparent disinclination to do so” (Douglas Noel Adams, 1952-2001, English author and environmentalist).*

A plethora of research has shown that conditions of stress, confusion, and loss of control compel people to participate in superstition (Vyse, 2013; Rudski and Edwards, 2007; Case *et al.*, 2004; Keinan, 2002). People are aware that superstitious thinking lacks logic (Risen and Gilovich, 2008; Pronin *et al.*, 2006), but they tend to subscribe to such practices, just in case they work (Jahoda, 2007; Killeen, 1978). Albeit not categorically referring to Fengshui subscription, James and Wells' (2002) study concludes that superstitious practices could adversely affect the subscribers' well-being.

Foreseeably in this study, sometimes the decision makers treat their Fengshui subscription as a cloak-and-dagger practice, akin to having a sense of guilt and indignity. To some, Fengshui appears to be antagonistic both in rationality and science. But sometimes, it can be the opposite. However, in the business context, it is unlikely that researchers can penetrate the inner thoughts and convictions of Fengshui subscribers. Either the latter do not wish to reveal their lived experiences or do not know how to. They may not even connect or be mindful of their lived experience.



People may have different perspectives and see decision strategies differently when subscribing to Fengshui. Even more challenging is the myriad contexts in which subscribers factor Fengshui into their SD making. It is erroneous to dismiss the subjective perceptions of decision-making subscribers as not beneficial or to regard these insights as less accurate than the empirical evidence obtained from external reality if obtainable at all in this case.

As a research methodology, phenomenology can explore and understand people's everyday lived experiences (Husserl, 1936/1970) and is therefore commonly used to elucidate “knowledge as it appears to consciousness” and “what one perceives, senses, and knows in one’s immediate awareness and experience” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 26). Creswell (2018, p. 285) explains a phenomenological research approach as “.. the concept experienced by participants ... Such as grief, anger, or love”. Ergo, an appropriate phenomenological inquiry is how one lives the experience of factoring Fengshui into a significant business decision.

Husserl’s phenomenology as an inquiry methodology stemmed from the belief that experimental scientific research was inadequate to study the fabric of the human experience (Mapp, 2013). Therefore, phenomenology seeks to gain observations from those involved in their lives, detailing their lived experience of a specific time (Clark, 2000). It is a matter of finding the significance and essence of experience. In informal in-depth interviews, it offers explanations of interactions in the first person. These are then transcribed and analysed for

themes and interpretations (Moustakas, 1994), thereby facilitating the understanding of the experience.

Creswell (2018, p. 58) describes the purpose of phenomenology as to “reduce individual experiences with a phenomenon to a description of the universal essence”. Moustakas (1994), in his authoritative book, the *Phenomenological Research Methods*<sup>74</sup>, stipulates that the description must include “what” they experienced and “how” they experienced it. He differentiates phenomenological research design from other qualitative methods as follows:

*“Phenomenology is the first method of knowledge because it begins with “things themselves”; it is also the final court of appeal. Phenomenology, step by step, attempts to eliminate everything that represents a prejudice, setting aside presuppositions, and reaching a transcendental state of freshness and openness, a readiness to see in an unfettered way, not threatened by customs, beliefs, and prejudices of normal science, by the habits of the natural world or by knowledge based on unreflected everyday experience” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 41).*

The objective of phenomenological research is to construct meanings from the lived experiences of those involved in the phenomenon (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016; Creswell, 2018; Lodico *et al.*, 2010; Moustakas, 1994). Phenomenology is a reflective study of how things appear to our conscious awareness and, ultimately, how the world seems to us in terms of our understanding and subjective experience (Husserl 1936/1970). In-depth interviews were conducted with selected TMT from Malaysia's property business, including industry heavyweights

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<sup>74</sup> Which is one of the primary references of this study.

such as founders of listed companies, to study SD making with Fengshui factored in. Active professionals and heads of professional bodies were included as participants to add depth and accuracy to the phenomenon examined.

The Fengshui subscriber's truth is by no means the reality perceived by others, although it is a justified true belief to this subscriber. Searle (2012) names this representation theory of perception. The relationship between personal impression and objective reality is perceptual intentionality (*ibid.*). The subscription to Fengshui must be studied as the whole experience in its natural context and as the subscriber lived it. In other words, the phenomenological research methodology examines the meaning of the experience, i.e., what and how it was experienced (Moustakas, 1994). The phenomena of interest under investigation are the *unit of analysis* in phenomenological research (Roller and Lavrakas, 2015).

In the transcendental phenomenological methodology that this study adopts, bracketing the inquirer's assumptions is crucial; otherwise, describing the essence of a phenomenon as accurately as possible from the account of those who have experienced it will be impossible (Gearing, 2004). The researcher must adopt a phenomenological attitude wherein he suspends or brackets his belief in the natural by recognising that it is just that – a kind of belief. This bracketing act, known as the 'epoché', is a Greek word used by Husserl. Epoché, the hallmark of the transcendental phenomenological worldview, means avoiding assumptions or

judgments about the phenomena under investigation (Langdridge, 2007; Moustakas, 1994).

*“The phenomenological Epoché does not eliminate everything, does not deny the reality of everything, does not doubt everything- only the natural attitude, the biases of everyday knowledge, as a basis for truth and reality. What is doubted are the scientific ‘facts’, the knowing of things in advance, from an external base rather than internal reflection and meaning” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 85).*

Epoché allows the researcher to turn his attention to the ongoing activity of consciousness through which his experience of reality is ultimately constituted (Moustakas, 1994). Husserl (1936/1970) calls the overall act of using the epoché to reveal the experiential terrain the phenomenological reduction, i.e. to examine things as they appear (phenomena), not what the researcher preconceives them to appear.

Through phenomenological reduction, the researcher can appreciate the essence or meaning of things as they arise. By reflecting upon their everyday experience, the researcher will gain insights and a sense of its underlying order structure and coherence. In essence, these are the covert data that otherwise would never surface because the participants have no propensity to tell, but every reason not to.

Moustakas (1994) characterises all participants as 'co-researchers' because the phenomenon derives from the participants' beliefs and experiences, and the unit of study is the phenomena. All phenomena originate from the participants'

experiences in narratives. The researcher's responsibility is to generate textural, structural, and textural-structural accounts that do not include his own subjectivity (*ibid.*). His task is to study how his participants experience subjective or first-person accounts together with the 'intentionality' in their Fengshui subscription.

The transcendental interpretation does not require the researcher to interpret the narrated experiences *per se*. Participants as co-researchers are not involved in the analysis performed by the researcher. However, the researcher must inform the participants of their roles and how their experiences and narratives can be instrumental in answering the research question.

The compelling aspect of phenomenology is the experiences that are continually changing and unfolding in unpredictable ways (Neubauer *et al.*, 2019). Since people may have a change in viewpoint, according to Moustakas (1994), the fundamental shift of perspectives arising from phenomenological reduction helps the researcher assume a *natural attitude* towards the phenomenon of experience.

Conducting a phenomenological study is the way to tie those experiences down permanently. To scholars, this can produce some surprising insights into things' fundamental nature (Caelli, 2000; Lopez and Willis, 2004). In sum, as a research methodology, transcendental phenomenology offers the logical, systematic, and coherent design mechanisms to adequately describe the Fengshui subscriber participants' essence of lived experience (Moerer-Urdahl and Creswell, 2004).

### 3.4 Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework of a phenomenological study automatically draws on phenomenology<sup>75</sup> as a philosophy (Larsen and Adu, 2022; Peoples, 2021). Maxwell (2013, p. 39) stipulates that “the actual ideas and beliefs that you hold about the phenomena studied, whether these are written down or not; this may also be called the ‘theoretical framework’ or ‘idea context’ for the study”. Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology is the underlying theory of this study. The research, therefore, conforms to the guidelines of a traditional phenomenology approach within the Husserlian tradition described in Moustakas (1994).

Factoring Fengshui in crucial decision making involves multiple participants who have witnessed the phenomena in the lived experiences’ essence. Phenomenology, as a theoretical framework or “blueprint or guide for [this] research” (Adom *et al.*, 2018, p. 438), can be viewed as how people perceive and interpret their social world or a phenomenon through their lenses and how these perceptions can, in turn, influence their lived experiences (Berggren, 2014).

Humans only have an idea of what reality is. All they can know is what their senses, instruments, and theories tell them. None of these is infallible. It is beyond human understanding to experience what reality is in real life<sup>76</sup>. For Merriam (1998, p. 4), from a position that there are multiple realities, and these realities

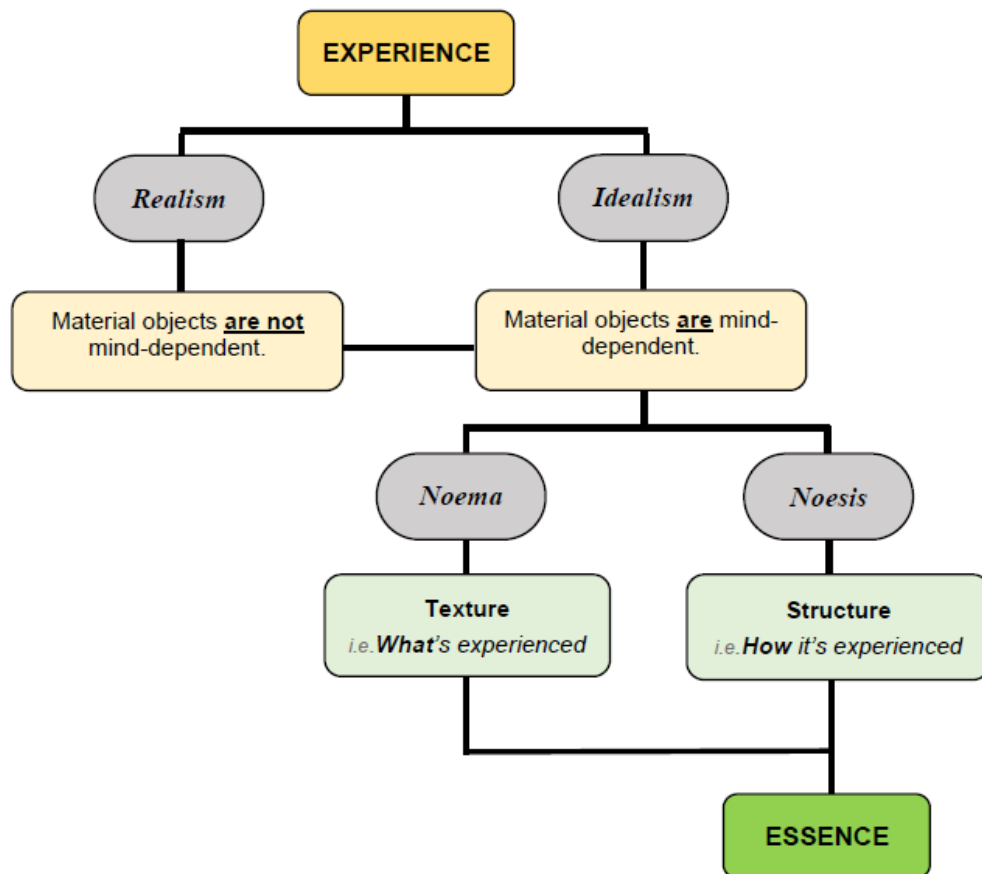
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<sup>75</sup> Thus, a better heading here might be ‘Philosophical framework’ or ‘Grounding philosophy’.

<sup>76</sup> For example, migratory birds are attracted to their destiny because they can see wavelengths, and that is how they know where to go (Wiltschko *et al.*, 2010). If birds can see and sense wavelengths, consider the limitation of what the human mind can perceive that forms experience.

are “constructed socially by individuals”, interpretive research is appropriate to explore experiences, and this involves “inductive, hypothesis- or theory-generating (rather than a deductive or testing) mode of inquiry”.

As esoteric as Fengshui is, a subscriber subscribing to it in a crucial SD moment is admittedly not a direct experience as if it clarifies the external and physical reality. This study dwells on the “subjectivity and discovery of the essences of experiences and provides a systematic and disciplined methodology for the derivation of knowledge” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 45).



**Figure 3-3** Theoretical concept of a phenomenological experience  
(Source: Adapted and condensed from Cilesiz, 2011, p. 497)

Figure 3-3 is a diagram the researcher adapted and simplified from Cilesiz (2011) to understand what experiences mean phenomenologically. In which, she (*ibid.*,

p. 497) explains that “[the] concept of reality in phenomenology is based on the ideal-material duality; every experience has a material and ideal component”.

Rectangles in the figure represent the elements, while ovals denote the concepts. Under the idealist worldview of phenomenology, each experience has two interrelated dimensions: *noema* and *noesis* (Husserl, 1969; Moustakas, 1994). Noema refers to the object of action as the perceived, the thought, the remembered, the judged. Noesis refers to the act of experience, such as feeling, thinking, recollecting, or believing. Like ‘doxa vs epistêmê’ (popular opinion vs intellectually-certain knowledge) in Plato's allegory, our senses can trick us into truth. In other words, the ‘reality’ is only achievable in the ideal world, where the essence of things are, and the sensible world is just a copy of the real, idealistic world (Szaif, 2007).

### **3.4.1 Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology**

Transcendental phenomenology postulates that reality is intrinsic to the knower (Neubauer *et al.*, 2019). Whether the business leaders are blissfully unaware of their Fengshui-based SD making or not, it is possible to examine their perspectives. For four reasons, a theoretical framework of Husserlian transcendental phenomenology aligns with the objectives of this study:

- (1) In this study context, Fengshui subscribers are either unwilling or unable to comprehend its ontological foundation<sup>77</sup>.

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<sup>77</sup> They do not see the necessity to learn beyond this framework or why they follow Fengshui.



- (2) A phenomenological framework is the best fit<sup>78</sup> to capture the "value of a term or phenomenon for many individuals of their experiences" (Creswell, 2018, p. 56; Merriam and Tisdell, 2016; Moustakas, 1994).
- (3) This theoretical framework allows the researcher to temporarily suspend his judgments about the phenomena under investigation<sup>79</sup> (Langdrige, 2007; Moustakas, 1994; Merriam and Tisdell, 2016).
- (4) Finally, adopting a phenomenological theoretical framework is the most effective way to address the lack of research of this type in academic journals<sup>80</sup> (Creswell and Poth, 2018).

### 3.4.2 Daodejing's Wuwei principles

The core premise on which the model takes reference is Wuwei (无为), a central concept in Daoist philosophy, which implies behaviour that does not go against the natural order of Heaven and Earth, the Dao. It is central to the Chinese philosophy of achieving the most significant effects through wise strategic passivity. Wuwei is an attitude of genuine non-action that presupposes natural action or action that does not involve struggle or undue effort (Lai, 2015; Benetatou, 2013). Because Wuwei directly translates to "non-doing" or "doing

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<sup>78</sup> The ultimate goal is to step beyond describing a shared experience to what it means reflectively for the participants to have "a description of the universal essence" (*ibid.*, p. 57; Moustakas, 1994).

<sup>79</sup> The Husserlian transcendental phenomenology is both beneficial and necessary, given this researcher's past knowledge and values in the property industry (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016). The judgment suspension process of epoché available in this theoretical framework lets the researcher bracket his values, communicate his own experience, and make known potential biases before examining the respondents' lived experience (Husserl 1936/1970; van Manen, 2015; Giorgi, 2009).

<sup>80</sup> To the best of the researcher's knowledge, there is no empirical work on Fengshui or decision making using a phenomenological research approach.

nothing" in Chinese, such paradox appears to be an invitation to relax or, even worse, to surrender to sloth or indifference. In practical terms, Wuwei is a “non-coercive” or “non-interfering” action.

Several related philosophical concepts from the literature reviewed are similar to Wuwei of Daoism. Unfortunately, there is no precise translation for Wuwei in English. British philosopher Alan Watts (1915-1973) preferred the term “the spirit of not forcing” (Watts, 2000, p. 30). Rather than implying inaction, Wuwei entails being at ease when performing the most demanding tasks to perform them with practical wisdom, optimum competence, and performance (Slingerland, 2007). Understanding the concept of Wuwei requires a remarkably open mind and being receptive to a few possibilities that seem pretty alien to modern business study. Whilst these ideas may appear obscure and esoteric, they are based on universal understanding.

According to Daodejing<sup>81</sup>, the idea is at the heart of what it means to follow Dao or the Way (Minford, 2018). The paradox of Wuwei is challenging to grasp when Daodejing states that, for example, the Way never acts, but nothing is left undone. In truth, Wuwei is the cultivation of a cognitive stage in which the actors are in sync with the flow of a life problem or issue instead of battling it unhelpfully. Practitioners of Wuwei are non-judgmental and tend to ‘go with the flow’ rather than having any active resistance to the natural forces of life problems (*ibid.*). As per sinologist Jean François Billeter, this is a "state of perfect understanding of the

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<sup>81</sup> i.e., Daodejing is Daoism's central text, as discussed in Section 1.6.1.

reality of the situation, perfect efficacy, and the realisation of a perfect economy of energy" (quoted in *ibid.*, p. 7), which allows the practitioner to exert more influence and control over human concerns.

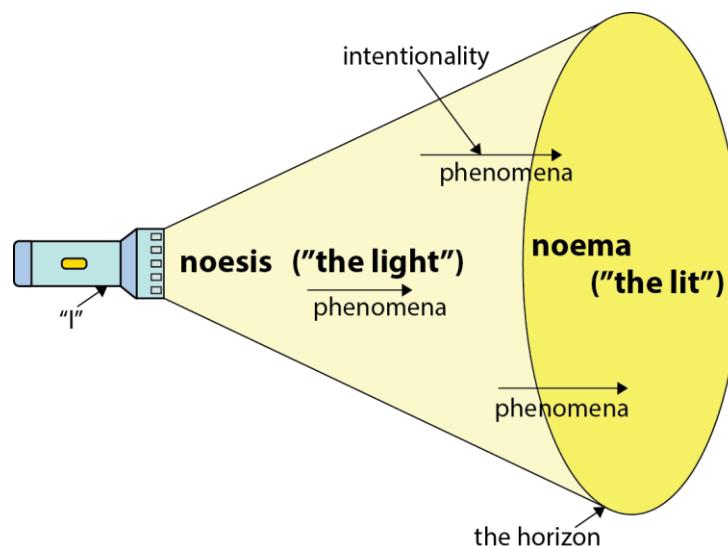
Csikszentmihalyi's Flow Theory is a Western psychological paradigm similar to Wuwei (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). On the other hand, Flow Theory sees humans as basically bouncing between the two extremes of indifference: monotony when things are too easy or meaningless and anxiety when things are too complex, unclear or causing cognitive dissonance. Flow, to Csikszentmihalyi, is an optimal stage of experience that can be engineered, characterised by the consciousness of complete absorption and excitement in the present moment (*ibid.*). Using Csikszentmihalyi's as a reference point, Barrett (2011) attempts to provide a more straightforward interpretation of Wuwei's transcendence about daily occurrences of skilled spontaneity. Flow Theory may not explain Wuwei's essence, but it can help us think more thoroughly about the transcendence that Wuwei may entail in general (*ibid.*).

In practice, Edward Slingerland, another sinologist, qualifies Wuwei as a "set of ['transformed'] dispositions [including physical bearing]... conforming with the normative order" (*ibid.*). Gregory (2018, p. 24) calls this "being in the zone". The Daoist leadership is about being accommodating (Xing and Sims, 2012); the concept of Wuwei in a Fengshui-infused SD making will therefore engage with the intricate circumstances of Fengshui influence in an intelligently passive and

noninvasive manner. Accommodation is a strategic panacea characterised as low on assertiveness but high on cooperation.

A business leader who relies on accommodation is willing to forgo part of his wants to meet the needs of business opponents. When the 7-Criteria Checklist is satisfied (see Figure 5-9), accommodating is appropriate but destructive when misused. However, the indulgent business leader may risk despising his opponent if he remains unnecessarily placatory while the antagonist's demands and concerns are satisfied.

### 3.4.3 Guiding concepts in transcendental phenomenology



**Figure 3-4 Torch of the basic phenomenological concept**  
(Source: Adapted from Boeree, 1998, unpaginated)

Apart from epoché (bracketing), which serves as the central principle in transcendental phenomenology, it is necessary to discuss the other primary concepts and technical terms of noema-noesis, intentionality, horizons, phenomenological reduction, and imaginative variation in order to fully

appreciate the theoretical and conceptual frameworks of this study (with the help of Figure 3-4).

### **3.4.3.1 Noema and noesis**

The noema reflects the research participant's objective experience, and the noesis represents his subjective experience (Moustakas, 1994). To Moustakas, noesis is "the ultimate self-evidence" (*ibid.*, p. 30), "the process of perceiving, experiencing, thinking, remembering, or judging..." (*ibid.*, pp. 69–70, which matters in Fengshui-infused decision making). Noema is "not the real object but the phenomenon, not the tree but the appearance of the tree" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 29). Simultaneously, the noesis would refer to 'how' the various participants interpreted and experienced the event. Albeit separated, the ideas and the materials are interrelated. It is their interrelation that gives meaning (Sheehan, 2014).

For example, as the deep conversations with participants proceeded, the noema would constitute the 'what' in the sharing. Noema accounts for "what is thought" (Moran and Cohen, 2012, p. 284). The new meanings (noesis) for the phenomenon (noema) would emerge and unravel their structures (Moustakas, 1994). Any noema (what experienced) corresponds to a noesis (how experienced) will form the primary relationship between conscious subjects and their objects (*ibid.*). When combined and coacted with noesis, the noema will determine an experience's consciousness (perception, feeling, thinking, recollection, judgment).

### 3.4.3.2 Intentionality

According to Aristotelian philosophy, the term *intention* refers to the direction of the mind towards a specific object, which denotes that this object is consciously present in consciousness (Kolkelmans, 1994). In transcendental phenomenology, *intentionality* has two dimensions, viz. the noema and noesis (Moustakas, 1994). Husserl borrowed the concept of intentionality from his German philosopher teacher and psychologist Franz Brentano, who saw the difference between mental and physical phenomena (Creely *et al.*, 2020). Brentano (2006) refers to mental phenomena as the intangible representations of objects in the physical world filled with a meaning brought to them by the subject.

Therefore, all experience has intentionality; consciousness is always consciousness of something (Gubrium and Holstein, 2000). Intending actions can involve perception, such as seeing, hearing, fearing, thinking, and judging. Intended objects such as sights seen, the words understood, emotions felt, thoughts pondered, and the ideas considered are not just the conventional objects but also visceral objects like emotions, thoughts and ideas (Boeree, 1998).

A Fengshui subscriber cannot be conscious without being aware of subscribing to anything, and the consciousness of an object requires a subject. While intentionality refers to doing something with intention, like going for a lecture, it does not mean doing it without thought (Kockelmans 1994). If he obliviously reads billboards en route to that lecture, there is no intentionality in the subject. Intentionality refers to an interpretation of truth that is understood when the

object and subject work together (Caelli, 2000). In other words, intentionality represents the orientation and directedness between the noesis and the noema.

### **3.4.3.3 Phenomenological reduction**

*Reduction* essentially denotes “leading back” or a “return” (Moran and Cohen, 2012, p. 352). Husserl employs the technical term ‘reduction’ to describe the procedure of revealing the essence of lived experiences after the natural attitude has been suspended throughout the compartmentalising any assumptions, beliefs, and biases to examine a phenomenon under study (Abalos *et al.*, 2016). The term phenomenological reduction is apt because facts are ‘reduced’ to the way they stand out to the researcher as presences. To Moustakas (1994), researchers should recognise their perception-related external objects when describing what they see. Simultaneously, they should consider the inner act of consciousness, referring to the rhythm and relation between the phenomenon and the self (*ibid.*).

The researcher takes no stance about the ultimate (existential) truth of what he sees using phenomenological reduction. Instead, he simply witnesses it just as it presents itself to him and identifies it as such. Here, the participants' experiences in the textual language will be deconstructed and explained using phenomenological reduction to set aside previously taken existential problems. Not only will overlapping, repeating, and ambiguous phrases be removed during phenomenological reduction, but so will aspects unrelated to the phenomenon

under investigation and those not explicitly inside the context of conscious awareness<sup>82</sup> (Adams, 2001; Moustakas, 1994).

#### **3.4.3.4 Horizon**

Unlike the natural sciences, human sciences are based on real human experiences within a lifeworld (Husserl 1936/1970). A lifeworld is the total assemblage of the world as, say, a Fengshui-based SD maker knows it, including intersubjective beliefs and social tensions (*ibid.*). From this standpoint, the decision maker's horizon becomes intersubjective and personal (Haj-Boulouri and Flensburg, 2017). Since the participants often know no more than they are sharing in narrating an abstract subject like Fengshui subscription, the researcher would not fully grasp the essence.

Horizontalisation, or the fusion of horizons, is necessary to illuminate statements or quotes essential to decoding how participants experienced the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). To be prudent, in horizontalisation, the researcher accords the same value on various parts of the participants' narratives (Adams, 2001). The fusion of horizons is an elimination process in phenomenological reduction to

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<sup>82</sup> Consider that when an architect sees a building in front of him, he implicitly assumes that it is possible to go inside, admire its interior, or dwell in it. If he were to approach it and see another side, a hollowed-out façade, the horizon that maps out a set of expectations will discontinue. The non-real character will alter the set of potential interactions that he might have with the entity. This collection of possible experiences is implicit in every conscious perception of an object.



clean up the raw data for clarity and demands data from interactions 'be reduced' to invariant constituents, often called the units or horizons of meaning.

Figure 3-4 shows how through the 'lit' (noema), the light (noesis) creates the horizon with the intentionality of shining a light towards an object of something or someone. To Husserl (1913/2014), the 'horizon' in the diagram *represents* the context of all perception at that particular experience lived. Or, in phenomenological research terms, the lifeworld in which each of the research participants lives.

#### **3.4.3.5 Imaginative variation**

Husserl (1936/1970) identified imaginative variation as a method to reveal the essence of an intentional object through imagination that adds and takes from the object to determine what would be needed for it to remain the same still. Similarly, what could be taken away without losing its character as *that object*. Therefore, the imaginative variation is based solely on the imagination of researchers rather than on empirical evidence (*ibid.*).

The imaginative variation (of the subscribers) is the third step in phenomenological reduction. Moustakas describes the mechanism of imagination variation as:

*"... to arrive at structural descriptions of an experience, the underlying and precipitating factors that account for what is being experienced; in other words, the 'how' that speaks to conditions that illuminate the 'what' of experience" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 85).*

The textual and structural descriptions of participants are interrelated. Neither can one exist nor be investigatable without the other, but if examined together, the invariant structure or essence of the experience will emerge (Moustakas 1994; Cilesiz, 2011; Eddles-Hirsch, 2015). Having re-read the transcript many times, identified the natural meaning units and the key themes, the researcher, in this case, should inquire, "What is the meaning of SD making with Fengshui factored in?" It became clear that participants' recollections of their experiences form distinct and substantive representations of their daily language (Giorgi, 2009).

As the researcher, the primary task is to translate these into a phenomenon-specific language. This transformation process aims to make explicit language within the natural meaning units more implicit in the lived experience context. The process continues until the shared meaning of the phenomenon of interest is revealed (Priest, 2003). The invariant structure is the essence of the underlying insight of an experience that cannot be further broken down (Creswell, 2013).

The step eliminates redundant elements by defining a potential interpretation of the phenomenon and raising questions about it (Beech, 1999). Simply put, it is what makes something, at its core, something. Removing the researcher's noetic framework, his ready blueprint of reality, and his intentionality for negotiating and navigating the Fengshui subscription world become possible through imagined variation.

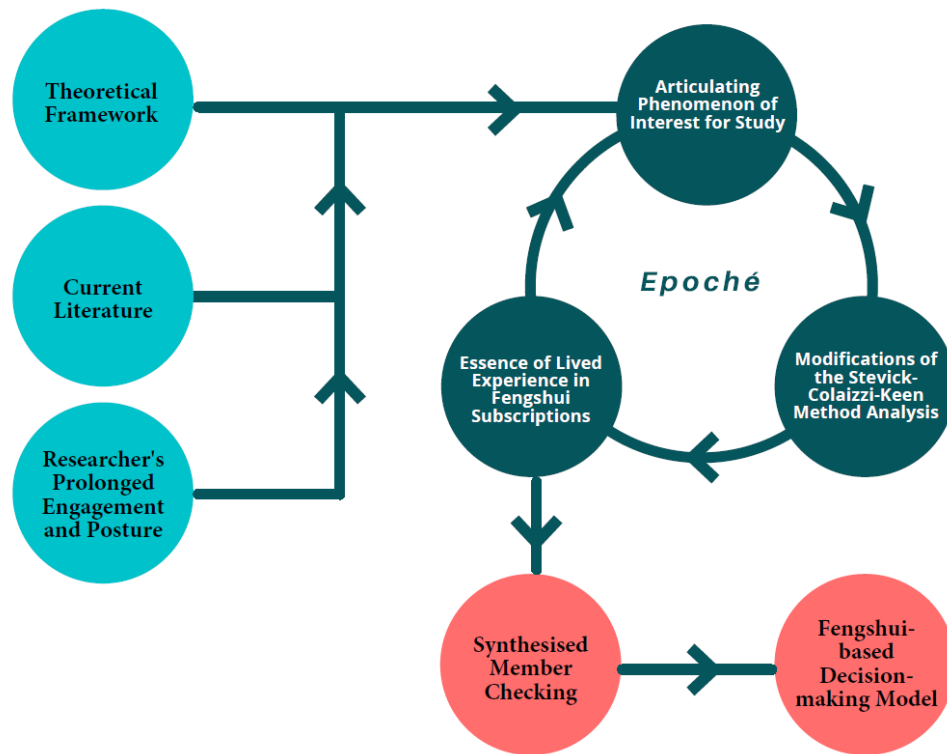
### **3.5 Conceptual framework**

The idea behind phenomenological qualitative research is to study the components of either a new field or a field in which core components have not been well-described. As the unknown is the point of inquiry, it may justify the researcher's hesitance to use a conceptual framework as if a concept is known. Using a conceptual framework in the classical sense (e.g., Dobson, 2002; Jabareen, 2009; Maxwell, 2013) would confine the replies to what was already known, skewing a qualitative study by asking questions that fit a theory.

This study thereupon finds it more appropriate to heed Conroy's (2003) notion of a phenomenological research conceptual framework, which is only to help illustrate research design, and adopt Miles *et al.*'s (2014, p. 20) definition of a conceptual framework, which is a visual or written product that:

*“..explains, either graphically or in narrative form, the main things to be studied—the key factors, concepts, or variables—and the presumed relationships among them.”*

This study uses sources as recommended by Crawford (2020, p. 44) to establish a conceptual framework: (i) the life experience and epistemological posture of the researcher, (ii) the professional literature, or what is already known about a complex phenomenon, and (iii) theoretical framework. The three key sources drive the framework, as depicted in Figure 3-5.



**Figure 3-5 Conceptual framework**  
(Source: The author)

The researcher has an enduring passion and a prolonged engagement<sup>83</sup> in the research subject. Even so, he felt like he did not add something new to the research area. On this account, he labouriously teased out the relevant literature via systematic review before embarking on formal evidence review. A phenomenology approach was eventually deemed the best fit to shed some fresh insights in this context because it derives experiential and context-defined perspectives. Phenomenology circumvents abstract concepts to demonstrate insights rather than dictate them, resulting in a more in-depth and broader knowledge of study participants' points of view (Ravitch and Riggan, 2017). Although a phenomenological study does not establish theory *per se* (van Manen,

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<sup>83</sup> It started since he wrote his first academic paper on Fengshui in 1985 at the University of Newcastle, in Australia. *Prolonged engagement* here refers to spending a lengthy period of time with the same stakeholders in their home culture and everyday life, which provided him with an incomparable grasp of behaviour, values, and social interactions in the same study context.

1997), it delves into an accurate understanding of the meaning of Fengshui subscriber's everyday experiences (*ibid.*; Polit and Beck, 2017), which enables model formation by the researcher closer to addressing the real-world problem.

Husserl sought to see intentionality in its purest form because he believed that this was the function of consciousness that provided meaning (Larsen and Adu, 2022). Suppose thoughts are Fengshui, and thinking is loss aversion. Husserl would find a way to go “back to the things themselves” (Husserl, 2001, p. 168) and compartmentalise the Fengshui part from loss aversion to explore Fengshui subscription without obscuring his examination on SD making. Before engaging in *epoché*, the conceptual framework was driven by the very tenet of this Husserlian philosophical assumption, as represented by the third circle in Figure 3-5.

The *epoché* technique in transcendental phenomenology means this study did not automatically accept existing knowledge and theories at face value. Instead, it took cognisance of notions from these theories to help make sense of the findings later (Husserl, 2017; Larsen and Adu, 2022). As a result, the heuristics, cognitive biases, decision-making theories, and models discussed in Chapter 2 were neither sacrosanct nor necessarily dictating the study's direction. Plainly expressed, the researcher viewed them as, for instance, ‘extremely likely’ (confirmation bias), likely (loss aversion), neutral (Hippo effect), and maybe (regulatory fit model), unless and until the data confirmed so.

### **3.6 Research approach and trustworthiness**

This section describes the strategies employed to enhance trustworthiness in the research. Generally, the trustworthiness standards set by Lincoln and Guba (1985) are applicable to determine whether a qualitative research study is 'rigorous' (Amankwaa, 2016). In essence, trustworthiness boils down to addressing the issue of "How can I [a phenomenological researcher] persuade my audience that the research findings of my inquiry are worth paying attention to, and worth taking account of?" (Lincoln and Guba, 1985, p. 290, the inset is the researcher's).

The hallmarks of scientific rigour in qualitative research have been well documented (Creswell and Poth, 2018; Merriam and Tisdell, 2016; Rolfe, 2006; Adams, 2001). In qualitative terms, rigour is a method of establishing trust or confidence in the outcomes of a research project. It enables the researcher to maintain consistency in the methodology over time (Creswell and Poth, 2018) and aptly describes the population under study (Thomas and Magilvy, 2011). An architect would want to build his practice on the best evidence he can, and to do so, he needs to have confidence in those research findings in design knowledge, building sciences and understand how the structures work.

This phenomenological investigation views trustworthiness as a critical component of high-quality qualitative research. Therefore, the study has included Lincoln and Guba's (1985) trustworthiness criteria of *credibility*, *dependability*, and *confirmability*. For good measure, 'soundness in theme analysis' recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006) has been adopted as the fourth criterion.

### 3.6.1 Criterion of credibility

*“How can one establish confidence in the ‘truth’ of the [participants] with which and the context in which the inquiry was carried out? (Guba, 1981, p. 79).*

Analogous to internal validity in quantitative research, the most critical criterion in qualitative research is the report's credibility (Polit and Beck, 2017). The researcher took due diligence to establish that data analysis has been exhaustive and coherently conducted. Recording, systematising and reporting analysis methods must be sufficiently detailed to allow the reader to decide whether the process is credible (Nowell *et al.*, 2017). The reader should be able to follow the progress of events and methodological decisions of this thesis and discern their rationale when the procedures are sufficiently defined, clarified and justified (Hammarberg *et al.*, 2015).

The Husserlian phenomenology requires the researcher to announce personal prejudices, assumptions, and assumptions and set them aside (Gearing, 2004). If the researcher is unaware of his preconceptions and beliefs, he cannot put these issues aside. Therefore, for credibility, the researcher's ability to be aware of his values, interests, perceptions and thoughts becomes a prerequisite before setting aside the things that influence the research process (Chan *et al.*, 2013). Crotty (1998) also argues that qualitative researchers are *ipso facto* humanly impossible to be entirely objective. Thus, this bracketing process is necessary to preserve what is already understood about the phenomenon while keeping the participants' accounts separate. Bracketing enhances data collection and analysis credibility, and it maintains the phenomenon's objectivity (Ahern, 1999; Speziale

and Carpenter, 2007). It must be apparent that the researcher avoids enforcing his assumptions on the data collection process or the data structuring (Ahern, 1999; Gearing, 2004; Speziale and Carpenter, 2007).

The researcher in this study has been active in the same industry for thirty years; he is familiar with similar data, misinformation, and TMT idiosyncracies to know what data authenticity and saturation entail. According to Zakerihamidi *et al.* (2015, p. 43), the researcher who has “long-term involvement with the participants during data collection” thoroughly understands the culture, language, or opinions of the individuals or group under study. Prolonged engagement is also critical for developing trust with participants, which increases the likelihood of obtaining relevant and rich information (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

Phenomenological qualitative research is credible when its results, presented with adequate context descriptions, are recognisable and can relate to people who share the experience (Hammarberg *et al.*, 2016). That is why the researcher has depended on a clear description of the research context, selection and characteristics, data collection, and the data analysis process to allow research transferability and ensure rigour and trustworthiness of the findings (Polit and Beck, 2017; Elo and Kyngas, 2007).

### **3.6.2 Criterion of dependability**

*“How can one determine whether the findings of an inquiry would be consistently repeated if the inquiry*



*were replicated with the same (or similar) [participants] in the same (or similar) context?” (Guba, 1981, p. 80).*

According to Yin (2003), the phenomenon under inquiry may have broader applicability than the particular case under study. It resembles experiments in the physical sciences, which “make no claim to statistical representativeness, but instead assumes that their *results contribute to a general theory of the phenomenon*” (*ibid.*, p. 32, the emphasis is the researcher’s). Dependability comes with a research process that is logical, traceable, and reported clearly (Tobin and Begley, 2004).

Readers should be better able to evaluate the research context and thus trustworthiness if they can analyse the study methodology (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). This study has demonstrated how literature has been systematically reviewed and presented and how the research process has been meticulously documented (Koch, 1994).

The methodological framework Moustakas (1994) proposed based on the modified Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen Research method (Creswell, 2018) was used to conduct thematic phenomenological analysis. Besides being proven stable throughout the research, the study’s dependability appeared strengthened by presenting statements concerning the researcher’s posture, biases, values, the synthesis, essence and evaluation of his participants.

### **3.6.3 Criterion of confirmability**

*“How can one establish the degree to which the findings of an inquiry are a function solely of the [participants] and conditions of the inquiry and not of the biases, motivations, interests, perspectives and so on of the inquirer?” (Guba, 1981, p. 80).*

Confirmability does not only mean the results are unbiased but also and consistent and replicable given the same context. This quality is comparable to quantitative analysis objectivity (Polit and Beck, 2017). Methods to ensure confirmability include maintaining an audit trail of analysis and providing a log (*ibid.*). For that, the researcher keeps comprehensive notes of all his comments and decisions. Findings were subjected to peer-review sessions with respected qualitative researchers, locally and abroad, which helped avoid prejudices from a single person's viewpoint. The findings were confirmed via synthesised member checking by returning and sharing the textural-structural synthesised themes with participants. The researcher also implemented a similar validation check with similar individuals in his professional practice and committee members in Environology Malaysia, a Fengshui association in Malaysia. Feedback received suggests that the issues presented were fungible in Malaysia's property industry amongst other SD makers under a similar context.

### **3.6.4 Soundness in thematic explication**

The emphasis on research trustworthiness is central in the phenomenological study. The researcher bracketed himself purposefully to grasp the phenomenon under investigation from the perspectives of the participants interviewed, that is, “the focus [was] on an insider perspective” (Groenewald, 2004, p. 11). Through

repeated references to his primary data of written and audio recordings of the participants, the researcher examined the data holistically<sup>84</sup> to identify and cluster units of meaning to reach synthesised themes.

The researcher's prolonged engagement in the research topic field was a two-edged sword. On the one hand, he has always considered it second (professional) nature to comprehend the perspectives of his business opponents and clients, to seek the middle ground whenever possible. "To sell what Tan Sri buys, you must see the world through Tan Sri's eyes," for example, is a locally-practised maxim in Malaysia's property industry<sup>85</sup>.

On the other hand, the researcher's own heuristics and biases that could affect his judgment must be addressed more effortfully by epoché<sup>86</sup> or the process of bracketing as provided in the Husserlian phenomenological research methodology (Dörfler and Stierand, 2021). Qualitative evidence about the efficacy of using the epoché technique is kept in the reflexive journal records (examples

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<sup>84</sup> Phenomenologists like Groenwald (2004) sometimes referred to as 'Gestalt', which means the whole greater than the sum.

<sup>85</sup> Comparable to a British knighthood or the French Grand Officer of la Legion d'Honneur, the title "Tan Sri" is bestowed by the King of Malaysia on the federal government's recommendation. Because the title is limited and does not exceed a certain number at any given moment, it is regarded as a high civilian honour. Unofficially, in Malaysia the TMT individual having a Tan Sri title is typically seen as awe-inspiring by his business opponents.

<sup>86</sup> As commonly cited from *The Republic* by Plato, "Opinion is really the lowest form of human knowledge. It requires no accountability, no understanding. The highest form of knowledge is empathy, for it requires us to suspend our egos and live in another's world. It requires profound purpose larger than the self kind of understanding".

of entry at various stages of the fourteen in-depth interviews are as shown in Appendix G).

If readers of this study are unclear about how the researcher interpreted his data or what assumptions guided his analysis, the research trustworthiness will be nonassessable (Nowell *et al.*, 2017). Consistent with the rigour development effort, a phenomenology researcher must also perform the transcendental-phenomenological reduction under the selected methodological framework.

As the researcher's understanding of the studied phenomenon evolved, the generation of themes continued to develop in response to the analysis's insights. In this analysis, large quantities of data were broken down into clustered themes for deciphering, making the understanding process explicit and allowing derivative text production for further research. Therefore, a theme is *not* a summary of points but a headline that tells a story.

In a phenomenological investigation, thematic analysis (or explication<sup>87</sup>) is an instrument to define, analyse, coordinate, explain, and report topics in a data collection (Braun and Clarke, 2006). It is a qualitative study method commonly used in various research and epistemologies (Nowell *et al.*, 2017). Although there is no solid consensus on rigorous thematic analysis, a sound thematic analysis can enhance the confidence in attaining informative and trustworthy results (*ibid.*).

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<sup>87</sup> Refer Section 4.4 on why the use of 'explication' over 'analysis'.

In other words, a comprehensive and rigorous thematic analysis will improve the research trustworthiness in interpreting and representing textual data. Conversely, since thematic explication is the translator of the qualitative analysis languages that allow researchers to communicate with others using various research methods (Roller and Lavrakas 2015), trustworthiness will be compromised should the thematic analysis be executed in unclear terms

### **3.7 Methodological framework**

The methodological foundation of this study is built primarily on Husserlian phenomenology to gain insight into the research participants' lived experiences (Rose *et al.*, 1995). The framework entails gathering qualitative data that involves the researcher's entrance to his participants' world and access to their experiences as lived. By no means can such primary data be available elsewhere<sup>88</sup>. Yet, it is vital to remember that they are not necessarily creatures of logic. Qualitative researchers deal with emotional beings, people rife with prejudice driven by their mindset and vanity.

Evidence from the literature indicates that studies that adopt the descriptive phenomenological approach mainly illuminate aspects of poorly understood experiences (Matua and van der Wal, 2015; van Manen, 2011). What appears to the Fengshui subscribers' consciousness is more significant than what an outside

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<sup>88</sup> The person who experiences speed on a roller coaster cannot explain it as the way speed rate is worked out in Physics within the realm of a positivist world view. He has to describe the meaning of his experience from the subjective (or first-person) point of view. Therefore, the description within the natural setting is contextually relevant.

observer perceives as reality. The essence of the lived experience in the former influences SD making, not what the latter defined as facts. A phenomenological methodological framework has enabled the researcher to understand participants' intentionality and meanings. It helps adjust issues and ideas as they emerge, ultimately developing a novel model.

The local TMT frequently make SD decisions based on personal observation, reflection, and judgement. Congruent with what Gliner and Morgan (2000) and Stark (2013) espouse, the researcher equally believes that understanding the SD makers' personal lived experiences is the key<sup>89</sup> to a more practical approach than scientific data in improving the decision-making process. While a substantial portion of this study seems to incline toward basic research, research findings meaningful and applicable in Malaysia's property industry meet the criteria for applied research. Advocates of applied research will concur that, like doing business in Malaysia's property industry, a qualitative study on Fengshui-infused SD making is more than applying formal logic and empirical laws.

Local practitioners and proponents of applied research would readily assert that despite often being characterised as anecdotal, weak in generalisability and unsettled as a foundation for the scientific decision-making model, personal lived

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<sup>89</sup> Common maxim in use is 知彼知己，百戰百勝, i.e. *“If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles. If you know yourself but not the enemy, for every victory gained you will also suffer a defeat.”* –Sun Tzu, *The Art of War* (in Chapter III, Strategic Attack).

experience understood is always more practical than generalised scientific data in improving the decision-making process within specific groups.

A quantitative approach is suitable for examining, for example, the superstitious level experienced by Fengshui subscribers or its frequency. However, because the phenomenon is still hazy in this context, such a method may undervalue a participants' account or experience incorporating Fengshui into SD making. Therefore, in this study that engages with subjectivity, knowledge is constructed by systematically collecting and analysing the participants' experiences, making meanings through discourse (Husserl 1936/1970). Awareness is the first step to addressing the problem. Being veracious is not necessarily the key to developing a Fengshui-based SD-making model; the key is understanding the SD-making experience as lived.

Given the posture, prolonged engagement of the researcher, context and objective of the research, an inductive approach in qualitative inquiry is the most compatible and relevant to the problem statement (Neubauer *et al.*, 2019; Groenewald, 2004). Only qualitative research “stud[ies] things in their natural settings, attempting *to make sense of or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them.*” (Denzin and Lincoln, 2017, p. 3, emphasis is researcher's).

### 3.7.1 Purposive sampling

Patton (2015) opines that purposive sampling is most appropriate for phenomenological studies. Creswell and Poth (2018) recommend five to twenty-five participants for phenomenological research. Notwithstanding, like any other qualitative studies that collect and analyse data simultaneously, this research considers data saturation the 'Gold Standard' for establishing a purposive sample size (*ibid.*, Braun and Clarke, 2019). Data processing interlaced with the interview process introduced new points and aided in detecting data saturation.

*"The principal investigator reviewed the audiotaped and transcribed notes throughout the study to monitor saturation, ending data collection when saturation was reached in both subsamples." (Underhill et al., 2015, p. 670).*

This research began with twelve participants based on suitable candidate availability and a manageable sample size for phenomenology data saturation. The participants must fulfil the following basis of selection criteria (Hays and Singh, 2012):

1. Have at least twelve years of upper management level of working experience in the local property industry;
2. Willing to share their experience in this abstract subject voluntarily without constraint;
3. Being a leading industry player who has or is involved in SD making; and
4. Have the experience, either willingly or compelled, in the making a critical decision in the local property industry with Fengshui factored in.



Data saturation was detected by the narratives becoming repetitive, and no new experience is revealed (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016), generally between one to two hours in the interview process. Guest *et al.* (2006, p. 59) characterise data saturation as “the point in data collection and analysis when new information produces little or no change to the codebook”. However, Denzin (2006) claims no one approach or theory has effectively captured relevant or important data saturation. He argues that data triangulation has a direct link with data saturation, in which the researcher “must learn to employ multiple external methods in the analysis of the same empirical events” (*ibid.*, p. 13). After the twelfth in-depth interview, there seemed to be no new themes arising from the study. For good measure, the researcher added two more participants to justify data saturation (Braun and Clarke, 2019).

To build a model that addresses a phenomenon and the intricacies of the Fengshui-based SD-making, the data in use must come from the participants who make the SD. Participants here are from the *movers and shakers* list of the local property industry. Database of the movers and shakers of the property industry in 2020 obtained from Real Estate and Housing Developers' Association Malaysia (REDHA) is, unsurprisingly, showing those who actively remain positive in the eyes of property stakeholders befitting the sample. Bogner *et al.* (2018) believe that this sample category has practical insider knowledge and operates as proxies for a larger community circle.

Nevertheless, for heterogeneity and data triangulation (Denzin, 2012), the sample will comprise four groups of Malaysia's property industry TMT to make up the different key industry decision makers (Table 4-1). Aside from the obvious explanation that only the TMT can provide data of SD making, the researcher was aware of social desirability bias when dealing with sensitive qualitative in-depth interviews (Tourangeau and Yan, 2007). By social norms, participants tend to answer questions in a way that others would find favourable. However, these captains of the industry are not too concerned with the societal norms that characterise acceptable attitudes and behaviours (Nancarrow and Brace, 2000). They are typically powerful enough to disregard these rules or actively distort their responses to avoid portraying themselves in an unfavourable light.

From the inception of this course in August 2017, the researcher had begun searching for individuals who fit the abovesaid selection criteria within his professional practice in the local property industry. Out of numerous qualified, twelve responded positively to partake in this DBA study. Following that, the researcher conducted a preliminary informal meeting with each participant to explain the study's background adequately, the nature of the investigation and finally confirm their participation.

### **3.7.2 Research instrument**

An instrument is “a set of procedures and techniques for gathering and analysing data” (Strauss and Corbin, 1998, p. 3). Therefore, the primary tool in this study is the semi-structured in-depth interviews. To fully understand Fengshui

subscribers' lived experiences and how their values can contribute to developing a Fengshui-based decision-making model, a modified Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen Research method must further underpin the Husserlian phenomenological tradition (MSCK) (Giorgi and Giorgi, 2008; Sanders, 2003). The mechanism must be adaptive to contextual factors while still being adaptable enough to investigate symbolic aspects and social significance to establish empirically supported new ideas and theories.

The philosophical underpinning awareness in an empirical phenomenological study approach is indispensable because it guides the data collection procedure to be consistent and coherent<sup>90</sup> (Dowling and Cooney, 2012; Holloway and Todres, 2003). Henceforth, a descriptive phenomenological study of this nature should use MSCK as a logical and transparent apparatus to investigate the basic structure of experience. It enabled the researcher to put aside his perceptions of a phenomenon and give meaning to participants' experiences. Colaizzi's (1978) data analysis approach is systematic and robust; it is a qualitative tool that warrants its quality and reliability. It helps researchers to discover new trends and their interwoven relationships. In this respect, the researcher is also a primary instrument of data gathering and making sense of the phenomenon under investigation (Pezalla *et al.*, 2012; Ortlipp, 2008).

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<sup>90</sup> This has thoroughly been discussed in the Section 3.2.

The SAGE Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods defines lived experience as:

*“A representation and understanding of human experiences, decisions, and options and how these factors influence one’s perception of knowledge. Lived experience is also about how subjective factors of human identity shape the experiences”.*

Considering the research question, the researcher’s background and the unique access to this group of participants, investigating lived experiences is an approach within the Goldilocks range. In the context of this study, lived experience refers to the *first-hand account, interpretation, and impression of the individual participants letting Fengshui as a factor in their SD making.*

It is important to note that the semi-structured questionnaire in Appendix D was prepared merely as a conversation guide or ‘Interview Prompt’. Unlike the research questions, participants did have access to the conversation guide beforehand. Its purpose is to direct the flow of the open-ended nature of the inquiry, with shared expectation, towards the ultimate goal of providing rich data on the research questions without taking the interview off-tangent unrestrainedly.

With that, the researcher still used the most effective form of phenomenological data collecting approach, namely, a non-rigid one-to-one in-depth interview with the classic key question of initiation. Typically, it comprised "Tell me about your experience when you ..." (Mapp, 2013; van Teijling and Ireland, 2003) whenever

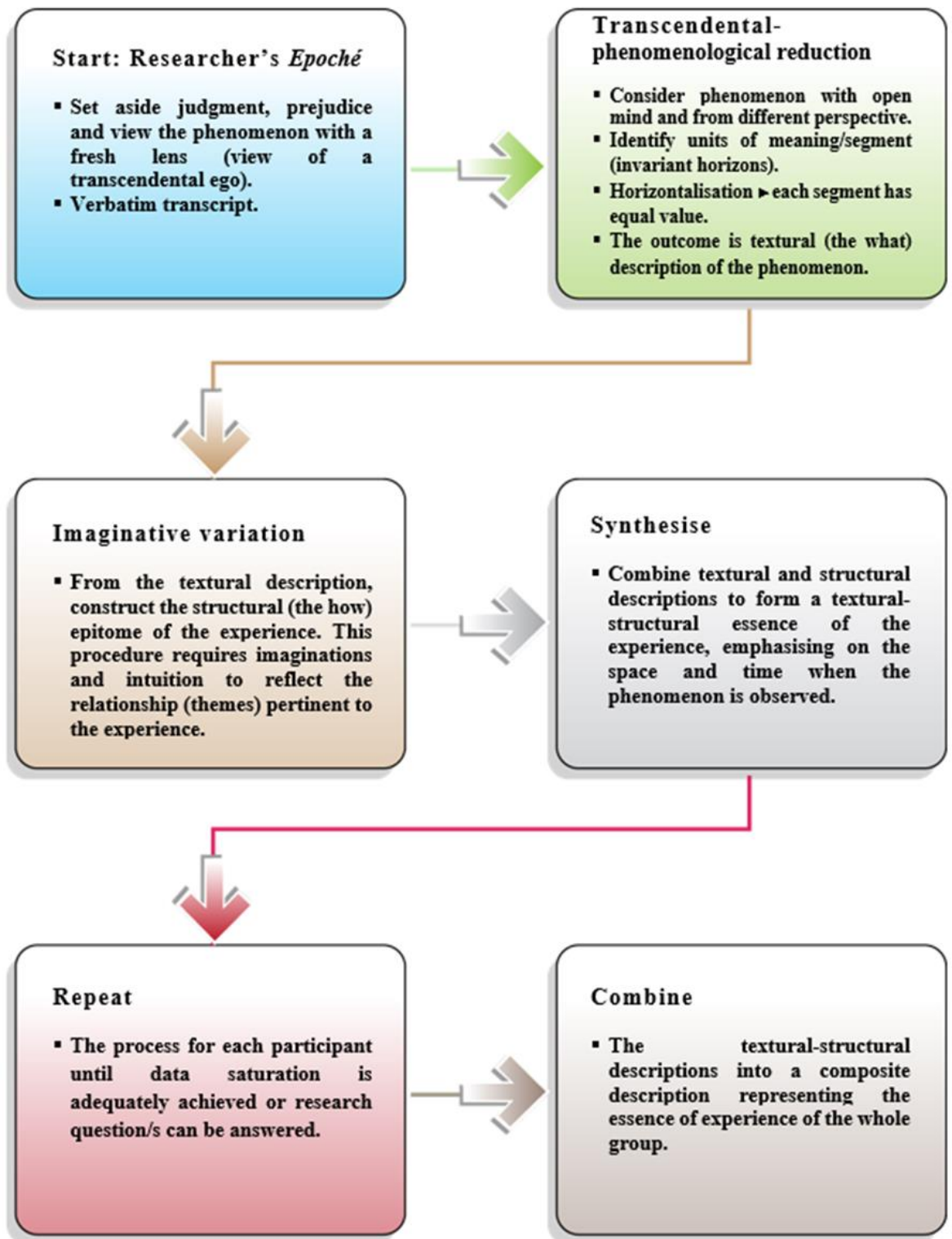
possible, as lived experience can only be communicated to the outside world by those who have experienced the phenomena (Mapp, 2013).

The reason for adopting a semi-structured interview protocol was to allow the researcher to control the interview questions' trajectory to answer the research questions in due course. The semi-structured questionnaire fostered a data gathering process within a “natural attitude, which is the attitude of daily life and common sense” (Giorgi *et al.*, 2017, p. 178) without having the researcher lose focus on the research objectives. While participants also addressed other topics that they thought were important to the interview, they did provide essential informational input on the research questions.

Before conducting interviews, the researcher engaged in self-reflection and epoché to be objective and set aside preconceptions (Giorgi, 2009; Moustakas, 1994). The researcher's past experiences were as much as possible bracketed to minimise prejudices, preventing influences in the study or perception of the phenomenon (Nelson and Cutucache, 2017; Chan *et al.*, 2013)<sup>91</sup>. These biases were written and discussed before the researchers accepted that "an inner sense of closure" was reached (Moustakas, 1994, p. 89; also, refer Colaizzi, 1978).

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<sup>91</sup> As Moustakas and others prescribed, this was carried out by repeated rounds of reflection on any preconceptions or biases the researchers might have had.



**Figure 3-6 Modified Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method**

Adapted from Moustakas (1994, pp. 121), made graphical by Chun (2017, p. 57)

The textual-structural description (generated for each participant by repeating the above steps as per the flowchart in Figure 3-6) represents the meaning and essence of the experience, which emerged by repeating the above steps (Creswell

and Poth, 2017; Moustakas, 1994). Next, these descriptions were integrated into a clustered group experience theme that could not be further reduced (Moustakas, 1994). The essence of experience became the building block for the researcher's decision-making model.

### **3.7.3 Synthesised member checking (SMC)**

Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest using member checking to improve rigour in qualitative analysis, advocating that credibility is innate in the accurate description or interpretation of a phenomenon. Yet, Webb (2003) and Webb and Kevern (2001) opine that member checks in phenomenological research are redundant; because once a description is judged plausible by the researcher who wrote it, it is deemed 'valid'. Most other studies (Milne and McWilliam, 1996; Corben, 1999; Prowse and Lyne, 2000; Côté-Arsenault and Morrison-Beedy, 2001; Lillibridge *et al.*, 2002; Arpanantikul 2004; Carr 2004; Dunne *et al.*, 2005; Birt *et al.*, 2016) generally agree that member checks can enhance rigour in phenomenological studies if the ownership of the data remains with the researcher.

Understanding the Fengshui subscribers' lived experiences is the first step for the business leader to align his strategy. The data of conscious experience as lived through in the first-person perspective must be consistent. If indeed possible, the participants should be allowed to revisit their transcribed data to "ensure that the participants' own meanings and perspectives are represented and not curtailed by the researchers' own agenda and knowledge" (Tong *et al.*, 2007, p. 356). Without

this degree of confirmability, it would be unclear if the results upon which the model hinged can be transferable to the local property industry. Nor the findings can be confidently viewed as evidence to address the Fengshui-based decision-making problem.

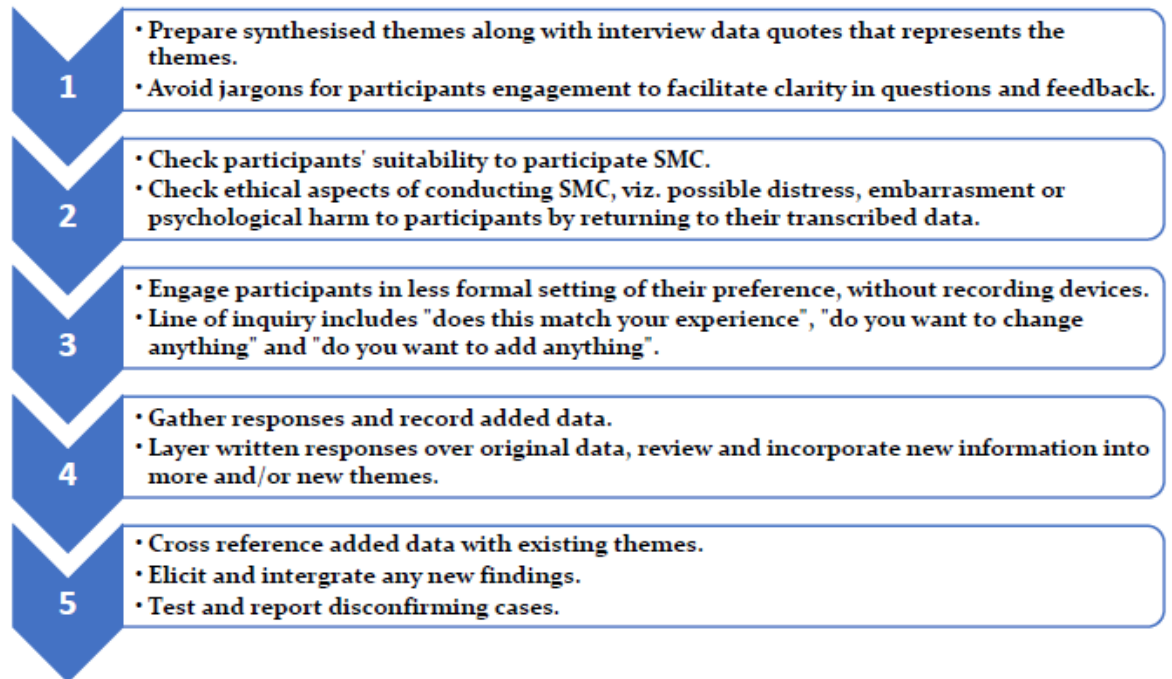
SMC was advanced to understand how best to evaluate and assist newly diagnosed patients with melanoma<sup>92</sup> (Birt *et al.*, 2016). As Birt *et al.* (*ibid.*, p. 1809) rightly advise, although SMC was “developed to meet the specific needs of a health research study, the method is transferable to other research fields”. While SMC facilitates confirmation of existing data, the researcher analyses the individual participant's synthesised themes, new rich data may emerge during the member check dialogue. Layers of significant descriptions, when appropriate, are then added to enrich the data.

As Colaizzi (1978) advises, the researcher has welcomed these new data and integrated them into the final product, a process that other researchers have achieved (Corben, 1999, Côté-Arsenault and Morrison-Beedy, 2001). Therefore, member checking in this study is not simply a technical step but an analytical process that poses unique epistemological, ethical, and resource challenges (Harvey, 2015).

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<sup>92</sup> The epistemological stance is that there is an external reality and that this reality is known only through these cancer sufferers' understanding and meanings





**Figure 3-7 Synthesised Member Checking (SMC)**  
 (Adapted from Birt *et al.*, 2016, p. 1806)

According to Colaizzi (1978), the use of SMC in this study helped increase the accuracy and trustworthiness of the research by clarifying responses in the first interview and gathering additional data pertinent to the investigation. As mentioned in Section 3.4.3.4, such fusion of horizons involves highlighting remarks or verifying phrases critical to decoding how participants experienced the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994).

Revisiting the same phenomenological data with the same people at different periods in time (e.g., at other times of the year) has been characterised as a form of *time triangulation*, as Denzin (1989) proposes. In this case, the revisits were carried out with the themes synthesised. Although not mentioned by Denzin, the researcher has found the SMC also provided an opportunity for catharsis. Catharsis is the process of genuinely reliving memories, such as deep sentiments,

and communicating them in a safe environment eventually leads to more significant insights.

#### **3.7.4 Analysis framework**

As the primary instrument of data collection and understanding the phenomenon under investigation (Pezalla *et al.*, 2012), the researcher in this study of a transcendental phenomenology tradition views phenomena with a fresh eye and open mind, resulting in acquiring new knowledge derived from the essence of experiences (Moustakas, 1994). In a qualitative investigation of this nature, tact and administrative ethics must be integral in the research design, from the research methodology's choice to data management (Christians, 2000; Fine *et al.*, 2000; Denzin and Lincoln, 2017).

Because Fengshui subscription often carries a magical or superstitious undertone, it is critical to look after the participant's intrapersonal sensitivity. All the TMT participants are experienced, seasoned, educated and well-intentioned captains of the industry. Not many of them would want to be perceived by others, including the researcher, as superstitious, unscientific or irrational in their decision making. If poorly executed, some participants may be put in an awkward position of either involuntarily being seen as superstitious or speaking falsehood. Either outcome will be a bane to the research.

No matter what, to adequately address the primary phenomenological research questions, the researcher must get the participants to:

1. Describe their experience/s when they let Fengshui be part of the factors in making a strategic decision (SD).
  - 1(a) Provide example/s of when they thought they had made an optimal (or suboptimal) SD with Fengshui factored in?
  - 1(b) Describe how they, as TMT, make sense of their experiences in making a crucial business decision with Fengshui factored in?

MSCK<sup>93</sup> adopted here is in line with the Husserlian descriptive phenomenology (Creswell, 2018). Therefore, it facilitates phenomenological reduction, including bracketing, horizontalisation, theme organisation, and textural-structural descriptions (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016; Moustakas, 1994). In addition, MSCK accommodates self-reflection on the researcher's personal bias (Creswell, 2018). This study fulfilled two principles of using MSCK in data analysis (*ibid.*). Firstly, the researcher's profile must fit the purposive sample criteria<sup>94</sup>. Secondly, the research question under investigation is the researcher's passion (in this case, his enduring passion, professionally and beyond).

Colaizzi's seven-step descriptive phenomenological method, adapted initially by Moustakas (1994, pp. 121-122), was simplified by Creswell (2018) as MSCK, including member checking. For a graphical representation of the MSCK flowchart, refer to Figure 3-6. Essentially, the steps are as follows:

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<sup>93</sup> That is, the modification of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen research method by Moustakas (1994).

<sup>94</sup> As the primary research apparatus, bringing his experience into the study was emotionally significant for the researcher. Besides putting emotions into perspective, epoché reinforced project ownership.

1. Researcher's epoché: Provide a comprehensive description of your experiences with the phenomenon;
2. Transcendental phenomenological reduction: Generate a textural description or a description of 'what' the participant experienced;
3. Imaginative variation: Generate a structural description or a description of 'how' the experience happened;
4. Synthesis: Generate a composite description of the phenomenon integrating textural and structural descriptions;
5. Repeat (1) to (4) for each of the fourteen participants until saturation;
6. Combined textural-structural descriptions to represent the universal essence of the purposive sample; and
7. Conduct member review and description examination by the participants to accurately represent experiences.

The details of each of these steps, as well as the effects, were recorded as follows:

#### Step 1: Researcher's epoché

According to Moustakas (1994), Step 1 addresses two questions: (1) How does the researcher's personal experience with the phenomenon under study *not* influence data collection and analysis?, and (2) What new concepts and understandings about the phenomenon under review do the researcher gain? The researcher bracketed his biases, preconceived ideas, and assumptions about the experience and not let them affect how he viewed the data. To attain that<sup>95</sup>, he: (a) refrained from including supporting answers or view expressions, (b) did not restrict to asking only specific questions,

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<sup>95</sup> Although sounding arduous, this is almost second nature to the researcher who has been practising as an architect for thirty years. Professional architects would naturally apply epoché and refrain from asserting their personal preferences, belief systems or worldviews upon the client during design briefing unless the client's requirement contravenes building regulations.

and (c) reported the responses as given. As each interview progressed, he transcribed it verbatim.

#### Step 2: Transcendental phenomenological reduction

Step 2 is to generate a textural description or a description of ‘what’ the participant experienced. To ensure transcribed data consistency, the researcher listened to the recorded interviews many times to understand the participant’s perspectives, with epoché still in place. In the process of horizontalisation, the participant’s units of meaning<sup>96</sup> describing the phenomenon were identified and assigned with equal value (Merriam, 2002; Moustakas, 1994). As stated in Section 3.4.3.3, repeated, overlapped, or ambiguous claims were omitted. He grouped the units of meaning and clustered them into textural descriptions (the what) (Moustakas, 1994).

#### Step 3: Imaginative variation

Step 3 is to generate a structural description or a description of ‘how’ the experience happened. The researcher constructed the structural (the how) epitome of the Fengshui subscription experience from the textural description. This step calls for imaginations and intuitions to reflect the relationship of the themes pertinent to the experience (Moustakas, 1994). The researcher viewed the phenomenon under investigation from varying perspectives to explicate the structures of experience more distinctively. This comprised imaginatively altering the features of experience.

#### Step 4: Synthesis

In Step 4, the researcher combined the textural and structural descriptions to form a textural-structural essence of the experience. The textural-structural accounts revealed the essence of the

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<sup>96</sup> The descriptions are examined according to the procedures provided by MSCK in Moustakas (1994), viz. (a) Is the statement necessary to understand the phenomenon? and (b) Can it be abstracted and labelled?

experience, emphasising the space and time when the phenomenon was observed (Creswell, 2018; Moustakas, 1994).

#### Step 5: Repeat

Step 5 involves repeating the process of (1) to (4) for each of the fourteen participants until data saturation.

#### Step 6: Combine

In Step 6, inductive reasoning and analysis combined the individual textural-structural descriptions of all the participants to portray all the participants' essence of experience as a group. The objective was to achieve the textural-structural descriptions to represent the universal essence of the purposive sample.

#### Step 7: Member checking

Finally, the member checking process empowered the participants the chance to delete or supplement data in another mood or environment (Birt *et al.*, 2016). Returning to face sensitive data can be distressing if not appropriately handled; therefore, this was conducted with tact. Only with consent could the synthesised member checking (SMC) process (see Figure 3-7) be implemented to enable participants to manage subjective perception and re-connect with their lived experience for data dependability without the research losing ethical anchor and researcher losing control of data.

### **3.8 Ethical considerations**

SD making is, by implication, a serious business-like endeavour that business leaders approach with due diligence. As such, the TMT participants may have reservations about disclosing their inner experience of letting something abstract influence their SD making. To avoid the risk of appearing unintelligent or backward, participants may narrate their Fengshui subscription through a false

facade. The obstacles in genuinely sharing the experience of a Fengshui-based SD making may be associated with embarrassment, guilt, vulnerability, and unease. It should, consequently, not come as a surprise that participants develop doubt and display avoidance in expressing their experiences.

In this context, verbal material is inadequate if the core message remains shrouded; the inquiry must penetrate participants' authentic lived experiences. However, the subscription to Fengshui is an obscure subject, and possibly private too, to most participants. In answering the research questions, participants substantially revealed personal and potentially sensitive details about their superstitions, including socially undesirable traditions, awkward irrational behaviours, and fragility. An in-depth interview data collection in this phenomenological study will allow participants to reflect and describe their experiences and emotions for methodic examination.

To be prudent, the researcher met informally at least once with each participant who provided consent. The preliminary discussions aided in understanding what to expect during the formal in-depth interviews and improved the semi-structured questionnaire that was eventually used (Appendix D). These informal meetings were also seen as a process by which the researcher could become more human to the participant, presenting the chance for strengthening rapport and lessening the hierarchical character of the study engagement (Sword, 1999).

Yet, only upon Ethical Approval could the in-depth interviews be formally conducted. Recorded interviews were transcribed only by the researcher for

enhanced confidentiality reasons and for the researcher to appreciate and immerse in the dense qualitative data, as recommended by Saldaña (2013).

The researcher carried out the data collection alone and ensured that he obtained Ethical Approval (PG2/EI Form) from the University before commencing any research activity. A phenomenological interview is an existential approach between two individuals so that, from the viewpoint of whoever lives it and gives it meaning, the researcher can appreciate a phenomenon (Guerrero-Castañeda *et al.*, 2017). The atmosphere must be correct to accomplish this. By and large, the participants were heads of their respective organisations. During the preliminary informal meetings, it became clear that they would feel more at ease being interviewed in their office or residence privacy since the audio recording was also in use. As a result, all post-PG2/EI interviews were conducted either in the researcher's private office or the participants'. Each interview lasted about an hour to an hour and a half, began with some time devoted to rekindling trust and rapport, which was essential to set the interview conditions<sup>97</sup>.

Confidentiality and anonymity are paramount in studying a specified industry within a relatively small fraternity. The regular care in pseudonymisation may not be sufficient to prevent the participants from being identified. For instance, in the case of a participant holding a particular position X in Malaysia's "oldest and

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<sup>97</sup> At the outset, the researcher approached each participant as follows: "I am interested in the personal story of people who have experienced significant decision making in which Fengshui has, in their opinion, factored in. I would like to hear *your story* and would appreciate any assistance from you to enable me to understand the experience as fully as possible."



leading real estate agency" - if X is known, or the description of this company is detailed enough, the very reason to use anonymity here is gone. Therefore, the *incognito* coding has been strictly used in place of a description as far as anonymity is concerned, e.g. "R1/D2/DM" would mean Respondent No. 1, the second developer in the sample and a decision maker. No personal data will, therefore, be required.

Before the interview commenced, informed consent (as per Appendix E), duly signed, was obtained. Each participant was also briefed on the study, assurances of confidentiality and privacy, risk level, and options for withdrawing from the study without prejudice. The interview process did not follow a specific sequence of questions (save the set of conversation guides) but respected the participants' sequencing of their sharing of lived experiences (Fontana and Frey, 1994). In either case, the participants answered all of the research questions.

Unlike other qualitative inquiries, phenomenological research focuses on the lived experiences, and participants would tend to share opinions instead of experiences if they are unclear. To avoid that, before the interview, the researcher ensured participants had correctly understood what (phenomenological) data are and how are they gathered. As expressly stated in written consent, the interviews were audio-recorded and verbatim transcribed solely by the researcher for him to immerse in the rich qualitative data (Saldaña, 2013), besides confidentiality.

When working with people who can access sensitive material, it is imperative to respect their circumstances and the constraints placed on the research process.

Brzuzy *et al.* (1997, p. 79) have identified this quandary as an “ethical tension” between the need to get in-depth information and the possibility of participants re-living their distress. Even though participants gave their informed consent in the study, the ethical decision was to prioritise participants' comfort and readiness over the ‘thickness of data’. The researcher had no reservations about taking this stance, nor did he intend to jeopardise the invaluable *Guangxi* forged with these participants.

Finally, the eventual model, which may include components of behavioural insights, must essentially consider ethics. Ethical aspects are well-covered within the emerging field of choice architecture (Schmidt and Engelen, 2020; Sunstein, 2015b), which partly evaluates the mindsets of the counterparts in decision making. This study called for the same level of concern in developing ethical principles. Several issues had been considered, including:

1. How to prevent unintended negative (side) effects, if any, in using the model?
2. How to ensure that the intended consequences are morally sound across the board, rather than only reflecting the researcher's ideals and ethics?
3. How can data be securely stored while minimising potential effects for users, such as retaliation from an opponent or other decision stakeholders?

### **3.9 Methodological limitations**

Since the set-up of a qualitative study is subjective and occurs in natural settings, no two studies will yield the same results; hence “it is extremely difficult to

replicate studies” (Wiersma, 2000, p. 211). For research transferability and to help ensure that the results are robust and confident, it is crucial to explain the context, the selection and characteristics of the participants, the data collection process, and the data analysis process (Elo and Kyngas, 2007).

The limitation of a qualitative study of this nature is that the findings cannot, ineluctably, be generalised. All qualitative research, especially phenomenological study, cannot exist in a vacuum, unconnected to everything that has come before and will arise after it. The study used an empirical phenomenological research approach and purposive sampling. Hence, it was constrained to analyse phenomena using only data from the fourteen participants' actual personal experiences. Although a qualitative study is never about generalisation or reproducibility in the quantitative sense, key industry players may lack the requisite knowledge in a qualitative investigation to determine whether or not the research parameters apply to similar contexts and populations for the study to be helpful.

From the discussion thus far, the research approach seems appropriate. Nonetheless, some within mainstream scientific positivism will remain sceptical of a phenomenologically oriented research technique (Armstrong, 2014). Also, phenomenological studies are time-consuming and costly. The leverage of this research type may not be evident at first. Stakeholders tend to hasten to conclude the research project with a frustrating feeling of “now what?”, which can be a valid downside of phenomenological research.

Chong (2020) has also alluded to the notion that solipsism<sup>98</sup> can occur in the philosophical transcendental phenomenology paradigm. Without academic rigour, this thesis runs the risk of being dismissed as the researcher's solipsism. While most experts agree that trustworthiness is essential, literature has arguments about what trustworthiness constitutes (Leung, 2015; Villata *et al.*, 2011; Collier-Reed *et al.*, 2009). Transcendental phenomenological research is not about overcoming paradoxes of thought or reality but a method of insight discovery that seeks to perceive a phenomenon from all angles and in its state of becoming.

Husserlian phenomenologists would not have sought to solve the problem of solipsism. Notwithstanding the complexity and challenges of solipsism, the transcendental phenomenological approach can make decision makers and property industry key players rethink basic assumptions and fundamental beliefs in factoring Fengshui into their decision making. It can reveal how reality manifests in very different ways. But all the benefits are not evident at the outset, and the immediate apparent limitations can be demotivating.

In the research instrument employed, McLeod (2011) disagrees with Colaizzi's step-by-step approach in investigating a phenomenon, arguing that it is not a linear process of understanding the phenomenon under study. To McLeod, applying Husserlian phenomenology's core concepts stepwise is impractical, as posited by Colaizzi. Although the steps were *displayed* in sequential order, the

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<sup>98</sup> The thinking that “I am the only mind which exists”.

researcher could not help using the flow in ways he saw fit. Thus, in this study, the textural-structural description generated with each respondent was repeated not fully per the flowchart in Figure 3-6. Once iterated and incorporated into a universal account of group experience, these descriptions served as the groundwork for the researcher's decision-making model (Moustakas, 1994).

This study has focussed on TMT purposefully with the view that if a crucial decision were to be made, it would primarily be the TMT's prerogative. However, the original concept of TMT was cognitive orientation, and the previous research centred more on the demographic features and heterogeneity of individual team members, not the social characteristics of the TMT as a collective body (Liu, 2017). Whether the study results could indubitably reflect TMT as a collective entity is uncertain.

Phenomenology intrudes on people's private lives, and trust can be a stumbling block, particularly when participants are sharing sensitive material. For a few participants, it was their first time discussing deep-seated personal issues with the researcher, even though all have known the researcher for years, if not decades, in the context of work. Also, due to Malaysia's interstate movement control during the pandemic, four interviews had to be conducted virtually via Zoom. One of the constraints was that individuals might be hesitant to provide sensitive information electronically, limiting the amount of probing available. Despite having consented to participate in the study, some individuals did not always feel comfortable having a detailed sharing or were hesitant to share unless face-to-

face. After all, they were dealing with superstitious issues that could lead to unease and distress. The researcher sometimes considered it inappropriate to probe further or shift focus to explore other aspects of their experiences.

Finally, another methodological limitation not foreseeable beforehand was an apparent ego dampening in some TMT members due to the recent COVID-19 pandemic, with their realisation that even solid corporations could still be vulnerable. The researcher intended to interview several participants he knew to be charismatic and self-assured, which is an element of interest. Being confident and self-possessed is an asset, but it can also be an explorable liability. Seemingly, the present pandemic, which brought to light human frailty, had partially subdued the leadership ego in a couple of the participants that the researcher desired to examine vis-a-vis the researcher questions. They appeared anything but their regular quirky personalities as if going through a Darwinian adaptation process. In sharing their factoring Fengshui in SD making experiences, it would have been more axiomatic to see more Type I Believers be their usual extraverted selves.

## CHAPTER 4

### FINDINGS

#### 4.1 Introduction

The '*Findings*' chapter in a phenomenological dissertation must, necessarily, be firmly rooted in phenomenological philosophy (People, 2021). This chapter, therefore, is set within the frame of the Husserlian transcendental phenomenology adopted. This research has a primary goal to architect a Fengshui-based SD-making model for the business leaders in Malaysia's property industry to alleviate the cognitive dissonance and resistance caused by a mismatch between the Fengshui subscriber type and the SD-making context. Secondary sources alone are inadequate to accomplish that.

By leveraging the researcher as the primary instrument for data collection and analysis, raw data of the phenomenon under inquiry were mediated through him as a human agent to make sense of participants' lived experiences and their structures of the world. The MSCK adopted, based on the transcendental phenomenology tradition, made him the first informant to contribute to the analysis (Moustakas, 1994). Epoché allowed the researcher to disclose his feelings and prolonged engagement in this subject and temporarily suspend his biases. The bracketing mechanism has provided room for self-examining his own experiences, which is a hugely important reconciliation step for avoiding judgment and prejudices in working over the findings.

Emphasising openness, questioning pre-understanding, and adopting a reflective mindset were cardinal methodological principles for the researcher during the study to help preserve trustworthiness. Transcendental phenomenology had provided a valuable thematic analysis framework to examine the participants' perspectives reliably and consistently to answer the research problem toward developing a novel SD-making model with the cognition of Fengshui factored in.

## **4.2 Summary of participants**

The fourteen participants<sup>99</sup>, comprising proprietors, TMT members and founders of companies listed on the main board of Bursa Malaysia, were SD makers in Malaysia's property industry. An in-depth interview with these industry titans would be impossible if not for the researcher's active professional practice in the same industry that has developed *guanxi*<sup>100</sup> with them over three decades. Silverman (2014, p. 166) characterises that as having a "rapport with interviewee [who generally] ... understands the aims of the project". The unique privilege of the researcher to access TMT members and to have them share their intimate experiences regarding Fengshui subscriptions is also the strength of this inquiry (Prior, 2018).

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<sup>99</sup> To be safe, following the twelfth in-depth interview, the researcher followed the suggestion of Braun and Clarke (2019) and included two additional participants since they became available just to satisfy the desire for certainty in data saturation. Eventually, a total of fourteen participants took part in the study.

<sup>100</sup> 关系 or 'personal relationships'



The purposive sampling strategy was based chiefly on the premise that to construct a model to explain a situation or phenomenon and better understand the SD regimen, the data in use must come from the participants who make the SD. In this case, naturally, study participants were drawn from the *movers and shakers* list of the local property industry who make SD but usually would not so freely discuss their lived experience in this topic.

The key was to understand human consciousness in-depth and establish meaningful interactions for the property industry stakeholders. What people tell how they feel is not necessarily what they truly felt. Some did not accurately reflect their understanding of the facts, making the whole process complex but intriguing. As Johnston (2009) advises, the researcher had to step back at some point, ditch the technical architecture and property talk, and concentrate on the human being in front of him. Bringing together various perspectives and experiences on sensitive and humanistic research was never easy, but the outcomes had been worth the effort. Here, the researcher looked at the inner landscape of the subscribers' consciousness for richness in data. Along with the tested phenomenological approach, emphatic listening had proven indispensable<sup>101</sup>.

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<sup>101</sup> The beauty and efficacy of phenomenological qualitative data gathering were not apparent to the researcher until participant response, such as this example, arrived near the end of his in-depth interview: "I'm glad you gave me an opportunity to share this because, yeah, it's not like every day I can articulate, reflect on my experience although, yes, I lived it, right?" (Participant No. R1/P2/DI, per. comm, 24 July 2020, vide Appendix G)

In order to protect the participants' confidentiality and anonymity, their demographic information has been substituted with a mere column of profiles with general backgrounds (shown in Table 4-1). If revealed more than that, participant demographics are feared to carry information that may risk giving away their identity, especially in this niche group of key property industry players.

<b>PARTICIPANT</b>	<b>BACKGROUND</b>	<b>POSITION</b>	<b>CODE NAME</b>	<b>INTERVIEWED ON</b>
<i>Developers</i>				
1	Developer	Decision-influencer COO	R2/D1/DI	27 July 20
2	Developer	Decision-influencer Senior GM	R4/D2/DI	2 August 20
3	Developer	Decision-maker Founder	R11/D3/DM	28 October 20
<i>Purchasers</i>				
4	Purchaser	Decision-maker Owner	R13/P1/DM	25 February 21
5	Purchaser	Decision-influencer Co- Owner	R1/P2/DI	24 July 20
6	Purchaser	Decision-maker Owner	R7/P3/DM	20 August 20
<i>Consultants</i>				
7	Fengshui Master	Decision-maker Founding President	R3/FM1/DM	31 July 20
8	Fengshui Master	Decision-maker Co- Founder	R5/FM2/DM	5 August 20 (via Zoom)
9	Fengshui Master	Decision-maker Founder	R8/FM3/DM	31 August 20
10	Architect	Decision-maker Founder	R6/A1/DM	14 August 20 (via Zoom)
11	Architect	Decision-maker Director	R14/A2/DM	3 March 21
12	Real Estate Agent	Decision-maker Principal	R9/RE1/DM	22 September 20 (via Zoom)
<i>Main Contractors</i>				
13	Contractor	Decision-maker Co- Founder	R10/C1/DM	24 September 20
14	Contractor	Decision-maker Founder	R12/C2/DM	5 December 20 (via Zoom)

Table 4-1 Participants of the purposive sample

### 4.3 Data collection

All the interviews took place physically at participants' respective bases, viz. the Federal Territory of Kuala Lumpur, Selangor and Johor, save four interviews had to be conducted virtually due to pandemic lockdown. Nevertheless, at least one casual physical meeting with each participant had already taken place before 18 March 2020, the day the Malaysian government implemented the first phase of the Movement Control Order to contain the COVID-19 pandemic. These preliminary meetings provided the researcher with an insight into what to expect during the formal in-depth interviews, familiarisation with the interview protocol and each participant's sensitivity level. With this knowledge, the researcher also managed to finetune the questions without losing the inquiry essence. The semi-structured questionnaire<sup>102</sup> was provided to the participant a week before the interview (refer to Appendix D).

A phenomenological study refrains from asking the participants, squarely, for their opinions, to defend their behaviour or ask 'why'<sup>103</sup> (Groenewald, 2004). Instead, it examines the participants' words described organically, recognising that people do not share the same interpretation of terms or labels. The researcher generated participants' narratives in research by asking questions such as "Can you describe with an example of when you...?" or "What was it like when...?". This way, the researcher fundamentally strived to challenge and contextualise such

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<sup>102</sup> Which the researcher more appropriately called, a 'conversation guide' emphasises that the questionnaire serves no more than a loose guide.

<sup>103</sup> The questions 'why' may make participants react in ways they believe the researcher wants to hear, which may not be in their minds or hearts.

accounts and engage in a sustained, structured approach to natural actions (Kensit, 2000).

As stated in the University's PGI Form, the researcher initially expected twelve participants. After the twelfth interview, he eventually included two more participants for good measure because data saturation, although perceived, but without certainty. During these interviews, all participants appeared natural, candid and sincere. Participants gave their accounts of SD-making experiences made with Fengshui factored in. They subscribed willingly to Fengshui but, at times, were compelled. In some instances, participants displayed mixed feelings while describing very personal Fengshui practices they had experienced. After all, SD making is not something to be taken lightly. Unsolicited, in their sharing, they also showed instances of cognitive dissonance in their stories about experiences with their decision stakeholders. The goal of the inquiry was to gather their lived experiences of all such events as textural data.

Besides data conformability, member checking was carried out after data transcription as a verification by the respective participant, as stated in the University's PG2/ EI Form (Refer Synthesised Member Checking in Figure 3-7). To warrant interpretive 'validity' (Sandelowski, 1998) and "themes validity"<sup>104</sup> (Bradbury-Jones *et al.*, 2010, p. 28), the researcher conducted member checking over six months after the interviews with the participants whenever practicable

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<sup>104</sup> With due respect to the authors, the researcher as a purist qualitative person would have preferred these phrases to be 'interpretive *credibility*' and 'themes *transferability*' as 'validity' does inaccurately connote a deductive approach with numerical.

in more casual settings after work-related meetings or over dinner<sup>105</sup> using SMC. All seven participants who participated in the member checking did not modify the synthesised themes. Instead, all data had been verified, with some significant additions that complement a richer data set. Textural data are as tabulated in Appendix F.

The researcher also self-examined his preconceived ideas throughout the data collection process to preserve objectivity and prevent biases. The researcher temporarily set aside his preconceptions to consciously disallow his experiences to influence the study or affect the phenomenon's interpretation (Chan *et al.*, 2013). As Moustakas (1994) describes, the researcher reiteratively reflected upon any preconceptions or prejudgments that he might have had. These prejudgments were written out and reviewed until the researchers felt “an internal sense of closure” was achieved (*ibid.*, p. 89; see also Colaizzi, 1978).

#### **4.4 Explicating data and generating themes**

Following data collection, the conventional next step would be data analysis. But in this case, the researcher has concurred with Hycner (1999) and Groenewald (2004) in preferring the term 'explication' over 'analysis' to avoid the connotation of a *dissection of a phenomenon* (Cagarman *et al.*, 2020). In contrast, data explication points to examining its constituents while maintaining the context

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<sup>105</sup> Note that majority of the participants are the researcher's existing clients, and/or friends that occasionally get together. For clients, SMC were typically carried out during the usual after-meeting lounging with a steaming cup of coffee, safe and relaxed atmosphere.

holistically. Given that phenomenology deals with the essence of a lived experience from the participant's perspective, keeping the entire intact should be the locus not overlooked.

#### **4.4.1 Reflexive practice**

Recognising how each researcher has a specific background, values, and professional identity that might affect the research process is an element of reflexivity. Reflexivity requires paying constant attention to the researcher's influence on data collection, processing, and interpretation. As an architect, 'reflective practice' or 'reflection' is ingrained in his professional routine. Building professionals frequently engage in reflexive practice in the procurement of their work. To be *reflexive* is a self-learning capacity that, when practised, enables an individual to reflect on what they have learnt and can detachedly evaluate the impact of those learnings on the larger context in which they work (Schön, 1987; 1983).

While architects are inextricably attached to their projects, which have life cycles ranging from several years to a decade or more, their creations are ultimately owned by the clients and used by the end-users. Partialities and prejudices will impede professional delivery if architects do not reflect on their work. It is, therefore, inconceivable to run an architectural practice without engaging in some form of reflexive practice. That said, how many professionals, who claim to reflect, do so close to the criticality of Schön's (1983) reflective process? To Schön,

a reflective practitioner would iteratively revisit his experiences by reflecting on the situations from many viewpoints even after they have occurred.

The capacity to set aside personal experiences and preconceived frames of reference is more a function of one's reflexivity than objectivity since the researcher cannot set aside something they are unaware of (Colaizzi, 1978). For Myerhoff and Ruby (1992, p. 307), a reflexive practice is “the capacity of any system of signification to turn back upon itself, to make itself its own object by referring to itself”. This awareness results from an honest appraisal of the values and interests that may otherwise interfere with the researcher’s activity. Being forced to pause, ponder, and analyse one's sentiments and prejudices in this manner minimises self biases, a core component of the Husserlian approach (Ahern, 1999). To bracket, one must be reflexive, and both actions necessitate time, ability and proper setting to reflect (Paterson and Groening, 1996), all furnished accordingly in this study.

This study utilised journaling to discern the researcher's personal experiences more adeptly and investigate his prejudices through reflective practice and critical thinking processes. The bracketing evident in the reflective journal entries demonstrates the credibility of the data collecting and analytic functions. (Porter, 1993). The researcher managed to get insights into his own biases through reflexive journaling, which helped him reconsider his assumptions in light of new information (Peoples, 2021). Appendix G comprises sample recordings from the researcher's reflective journal, which readers can use to assess the trustworthiness

of the study that claims to have dispensed with, to a large extent, the researcher's influence. A verbatim example to illustrate this point is:

*“I couldn't help but also detected a lack of neutrality with R7/PI/DM in our earlier informal discussions and this in-depth interview. I had a strong impression that she avoided situations where she would experience unpleasant sensations and sought out accounts where she could share happy feelings of being a lady COO who was always steady and correct. I recognise my annoyance as deriving from my expectation of a ‘correct way of responding’ by my participants. That was indeed a preconceived idea of mine. Upon giving it some thoughts, it also dawned on me that epoché doesn't mean I don't have preconceptions; it just means I don't let those thoughts control my assessment” (The author, Reflexive Journal, 28 August 2020).*

As a result, every modification of preconceptions through reflexive practice resulted in fresh and revised perceptions that were not just revelatory but also overwhelming.

#### **4.4.2 Textural descriptions of the experience**

A reminder by Patton (2014, p. 104) for “doing phenomenological research” is to adequately identify: “What is the meaning, structure, and essence of the lived experience of this phenomenon for this person or group of people”. In transcendental phenomenology, themes encompass textural and structural descriptions of the experience, and, ultimately, the combined textural-structural synthesis institutes the essence of the lived experience (Moustakas, 1994).

Themes are prevailing significant statements or phrases used to elucidate data within a phenomenological study (van Manen, 1997). According to Creswell



(2018) and Moustakas (1994), themes are identified and derived from the participants' significant statements. Related conceptions, also known as cross-coding, can help to clarify a phenomenon fully (Saldaña, 2013). However, the rich descriptive study of the phenomenon was based solely on common themes identified from the numerous participants, not the literature nor the researcher's knowledge from his prolonged subject engagement. Upon going through the process until saturation, these themes later set the dynamics to frame a decision-making model.

The *textural* descriptions of the data vividly describe the participant's experience of factoring Fengshui in SD making. As displayed in Appendix F, textural descriptions are rich data of the phenomenon written from the verbatim transcripts that, although often laconic, encapsulated the participant's frame of mind and experience in decision making. The textural descriptions used the participant's own words for better precision in describing the '*what*' (of the phenomenon) to enable readers to first appreciate the overall sense of the experience lived (Moustakas, 1994).

This first dataset served as the groundwork for subsequent analysis. It provided pertinent information and illustration, but not (yet) the essence of the participant's lived experience (Patton, 2014). Upon completing this stage, the researcher reviewed the research questions "with a fresh eye and open mind" (Chun, 2017, p. 52). Although participants experienced the same phenomena,

they shared their experiences in a different context<sup>106</sup>. In the MCSK method employed, the researcher has had experienced the same phenomenon. It was easy for the participants to resonate with the researcher and establish a rapport, as they shared the same vocabulary: the interactions were natural and had been non-stressful. When the researcher came across a contrary point of view, he would reconsider if his preconceptions were a bias or a genuine difference of judgment.

#### **4.4.3 Structural descriptions of the experience**

According to Moustakas (1994), the textural descriptions were evaluated from different angles to arrive at a structure description (the 'how') using imaginative variation (vide Section 3.4.3.5). Appendix F shows the analysis of the textural descriptions by grouping meaning units and themes that are constant over time. Structural meanings emerged after aggregating and elucidating textural data into invariant meaning units and themes (3<sup>rd</sup> column in Appendix F). Structural descriptions emphasise the participants' underlying complexities; in this case, the factoring of Fengshui into their SD-making. The ensuing textural-structural descriptions, which captured the meaning and essence of the experiences, are discussed in the following section (Creswell, 2018; Moustakas, 1994).

Each participant's textural-structural descriptions were created by repeating preceding processes. The researcher then collated all entries to form a

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<sup>106</sup> In the same way that two rollercoaster riders on the same ride could have and relate a vastly different experience when interviewed. Simply put, the two using their respective lived experience will project a different intentionality in deciding their next ride.

comprehensive summary of group experience (Moustakas, 1994). The emphasis was on the background of the SD experience, including information regarding past decision-making experiences of the participants and how Fengshui played an influential part (*ibid.*). The structural synthesis compelled the researcher to go deeper than the experience's intrinsic effect and into the 'deeper meaning' of the experience's fundamental effect as expressed in the quotes and verbatim passages in the textural descriptions (Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2014).

The researcher studied the structural descriptions again with a 'fresh eye and an open mind'. Therefore, epoché was by no means a one-time process. Instead, the researcher regularly returned to his epoché (or first analysis) during the investigation. Because transcendental phenomenological research is a spiral process, the researcher moved back and forth periodically to reflect. All of the reflections were incorporated into the final product and used to improve the content.

#### **4.4.4 Textural-structural synthesis**

The meaning and essence of the experience that emerged were subsequently captured texturally and structurally in the descriptions participants offered (Creswell, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). In phenomenological research, a textural-structural account integrates both *what* (texture) and *how* (structure) participants experienced the phenomena, in this case, the lived experience of factoring Fengshui into SD making.

The textural and structural descriptions work in tandem to provide a more comprehensive explanation and understanding of the TMT factoring in Fengshui in their SD making. Textural-structural synthesis enables the readers to appreciate holistically what and how was it experienced. The synthesis revealed the essence of the human experience, reflecting the lived experience shared by the participants (Moerer-Urdahl and Creswell, 2004).

At this stage, to enhance data credibility, the researcher carried out a 'validity check' by going back to the participants to see whether the essence of the interview was appropriately captured (Hycner, 1999, p. 154). Modifications, if any, would be made in this synthesised member checking (refer to Figure 3-7). The researcher assembled textural-structural descriptions for each participant, as Moustakas (1994) requires in the MSCK method. To synthesise these data into a complete picture of the group's lived experience, the researcher repeated the preceding approaches for each member (see Table 4-2).

Textural description clusters	Structural descriptions	Combined textural-structural descriptions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Our [Fengshui] master predicted the pandemic correctly, did he not?</li> <li>• I am the 'feeling part' to balance the decision-making body of objective data.</li> <li>• I don't make decisions solely based on rationality.</li> <li>• I trust my gut feelings and that extra intangible element to be doing the right thing.</li> <li>• My experiences of previous success empowered my Fengshui subscription.</li> <li>• At first, I subscribed to Fengshui for loss-aversion; now, I do so to seek gain.</li>   <li>• I don't think it's a religious sin to subscribe to Fengshui.</li> <li>• I fear facts that I can't grasp, so I'd rather err on the safe side.</li> <li>• I know it's irrational, but I rather not tempt fate.</li> <li>• What is there to lose to subscribe to Fengshui?</li> <li>• There might be physical costs if I complied but emotional costs if I don't.</li>   <li>• It's alright; we all have the unthinking cultural baggage that influences us.</li> <li>• I experienced a sense of peace and confidence when I let Fengshui be part of my critical decision making.</li> <li>• Fengshui subscription is very hard to shake; if you can't beat them, join them.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Possess confirmation bias.</li> <li>• Entail illusory control.</li> <li>• Possess authority bias.</li> <li>• Motivated by personal construct about cause and effect.</li>   <li>• Show guilt in factoring belief system in SD making.</li> <li>• <i>Kiasu</i>; and fear of missing out.</li> <li>• Unable to overcome reliance on Fengshui in SD making.</li>   <li>• Succumb to hot cognition thinking despite recognising irrationality.</li> <li>• Unwilling to overcome reliance on Fengshui in SD making.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Belief bias</li>   <li>• Just-in-case syndrome</li>   <li>• Compliance mindset</li> </ul>

Table 4-2 Essence of experiences explicated from data

## 4.5 Synthesised themes

To recap, textural descriptions (the what) were analysed from several angles, through imaginative variation, to arrive at a structural description (the how). Via textural-structural description, the meaning and essence of the experiences were captured and documented (Creswell, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). Repetition of the processes above resulted in a textural-structural description for each participant. The textural-structural descriptions produced were then combined and synthesised into single universal themes of group experience (Chun, 2017). Table 4-3 shows the synthesised themes, tabulated for easy reference.

Synthesised theme	Summarised description of theme	Participant's lived experience counts														Total
		P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8	P9	P10	P11	P12	P13	P14	
<b>1. Belief bias</b>	<b>Processing only data consistent with own Fengshui belief</b>	7		6		6		4	6		7	1	2	2	1	<b>42</b>
<b>2. Just-in-case syndrome</b>	<b>Feeling the need to justify Fengshui subscription</b>		5		7		4	2		4		5	4	2	3	<b>36</b>
<b>3. Compliance mindset</b>	<b>Unable to avert factoring Fengshui in SD making</b>		3		2		2			4		3	2	1	3	<b>20</b>

**Table 4-3 Table of synthesised themes**

After processing the data through the MSCK's method, three overarching themes became apparent: *Belief bias*, *Just-in-case syndrome* and *Compliance mindset*. As shown in Table 4-3, *Belief bias* is about participants processing data consistent only with their Fengshui belief. *Just-in-case syndrome* is the deep-seated conviction to justify why they subscribed to Fengshui, that is, to avoid a sense of infinite loss if Fengshui turns out to be valid (vide Pascal's wager in Section 2.3.2) despite being sceptical or otherwise apathetic in Fengshui. The *Compliance*

*mindset* is the participants' inability to avert Fengshui in SD making despite their knowledge that the practice is irrational and unscientific.

These themes, when synthesised, subsume associated essences like confirmation bias, loss aversion and authority bias earlier found in the researcher's pre-bracketing stage (Journal entry, 25 February 2021, Appendix G). The three synthesised themes, which materialised through the data, relate to how the SD makers in Malaysia's property industry experienced factoring Fengshui into their SD-making processes. Their summarised descriptions represent the participants' lived experiences with empathy displayed when making Fengshui-infused critical decisions. These emerging Fengshui-based decision-making heuristics do not seem to accord with any rational decision-making theories, thus should be classified and proffered as cognitive biases.

#### **4.5.1 Theme One: Belief bias**

In comparison, Theme No. 1 was the most frequently occurred theme in the interviews (Table 4-3). Belief bias is closely related to confirmation bias explored in Section 2.3.5. Because it signifies the tendency to process only information that is compatible with what the participants knew and what they impartially believed in, belief bias is disguised commonly in (the last sentence of) accounts like this:

*“Fengshui is not anything we have studied in business schools. We picked up this knowledge accidentally in the industry without seeking it particularly. Fengshui subscription is very hard to shake, as it confirms what we truly believe. Until the cost of believing in Fengshui becomes unbearable, I will not let go of it. Then again,*

*‘high’ is a relative term ... [self-satisfied smirk]”  
(R5/FM2/DM per comm, 5 August 2020).*

Fengshui was a popular but unofficial topic among the participants, and a majority of them were mentally looking for material that confirmed their pre-existing opinions and ideas about it. This phenomenon was most visible when the participants had a well-rooted, ideological, or emotionally driven Fengshui belief within a high stake decision. There was an unhealthy appetite to be correct, which appeared to be fostered by the perceived need for a TMT to exercise impeccable judgment, such as:

*“I felt so confident with every positive experience. My client told me that he hardly could export a container in a month for the past three years, but after following my Fengshui advice, he exported 12 containers every day, and the order piled up to the following year! Can coincidence be so fast, frequent and effective?”  
(R8/FM3/DM, per comm, 31 August 2020).*

Also displayed was the desire to show that they had been correct for the umpteenth time in Fengshui-based SD making. Seemingly, it had obstructed their recognition of noises and impeded a clear view of their decision factors. The evidence offered by System 1 proved to be more robust than their logical System 2 thinking. However, in many cases where Fengshui subscription was too complex for the cognitive apparatus of System 2, participants appeared to let System 1 take over the System 2 response gladly. As a result, a strong belief bias suggests that System 1 can become fixated on a salient idea that Fengshui indeed works, despite the lack of evidence:

*“I can’t lie - in my project, I am sorry to say that a Fengshui master to advise on the most auspicious*



*layout and design must come before the architect. I am willing to pay considerably more to ensure optimal luck and hitting 100% take-up rate, which I believe building professionals by no means can provide” (R7/P3/DM, per comm, 20 August 2020).*

Participants who placed a high value on their Fengshui beliefs but lacked complete information were more vulnerable to the effects of broken assumptions. Their cognitive dissonances were visible during the interviews, perhaps owing to the intimate relationship between their belief systems and their involvement in the local property industry. Fengshui subscribers did not let new evidence undermine or derail what seemed to them a sound belief system. Even after their theory was challenged or the invalidation indicated, they failed to make necessary adjustments to their views. They lacked the knowledge or a flexible belief system capable of making sense of contradictory events. In this vein, many rhetorics like this surfaced:

*“I have seen Fengshui work for others and experienced success applying it for myself in my company and home. I have no reason to disbelieve since there could not be so many coincidences of positive results. Why let a mere fact spoil a good theory?” (R10/C1/DM, per comm, 24 September 2020).*

To put belief bias into context, some participants divulged their willingness to postpone significant milestones during the Hungry Ghost month, such as contract signing and handing-over of completed construction work, even if it meant paying a fortune in damages. Advice from Fengshui masters proved to be unduly more authoritative than any licensed professionals. As if generating a sense of control for closure of the issue, Fengshui subscription manifestly alleviated the anxiety associated with complex decision making, which is why the

phenomenon is ubiquitous in conditions of self-doubt, uncertainty, fear, and threat. It did not matter if the closure of the issue based upon Fengshui was rational. What revealed in the following narration by a hospital developer participant vividly illustrates this point:

*“I felt a sense of serenity knowing Fengshui was factored in a decision. Not that I worship the Fengshui elements placed in the hospital, but having understood what the Fengshui master was trying to do with specific Fengshui remedies, I saw no harm. It gave the doctors a psychological sense of confidence too. At least, we could move on” (R2/D1/DI, per comm, 27 July 2020).*

Nevertheless, their so-called ‘sense of control’ might also be extrinsically generated by the Fengshui master. Thus, the quality of Fengshui masters and the integrity of the industry's Fengshui practice are impactful. Unfortunately, Fengshui practitioners in Malaysia, like most parts of the world, have yet been governed by any professional body.

*“So, I think the quality of a Fengshui master is paramount. I hope there are not many fake ones out there. Key people are listening to them. When my high-profile client confided, ‘My Fengshui master advises against closing that deal, period’, to me, there goes any scientific management theory in the real world. Sometimes, I felt like wasting time doing my MBA!” (R9/RE1/DM, per comm, 22 September 2021).*

Lest Malaysia’s property industry Fengshui subscribers understand it well but not well enough to apply correctly; some Fengshui masters might obfuscate their expertise by deliberately making it seem too complex to understand:

*“Fengshui masters, they’re always ... when they speak ... it’s always indirect manner, preventing me from comprehending fully. So it’s kind of like a philosophical*

*way to communicate. I think even if the advice was logical, it might sound irrational. It's also typically in Chinese poetic terms that I do not understand" (R14/A2/DM, per comm, 3 March 2021).*

But R3/FM1/DM, a Fengshui master, felt otherwise, albeit there contains some veracity in her jocular narrative:

*"To avoid my clients understanding some but not enough to apply Fengshui without proper consultancy ... which is dangerous [in mumbled Cantonese]... I sometimes deliberately make it like more difficult to grasp; also .., [Laughther], if they know well enough, they'd no longer need me [her Fengshui consultancy]" (R3/FM1/DM, per comm, 3 July 2020).*

Still, despite the nebulous context of Fengshui-infused decision making in the property industry, it is fascinating to see that, in many cases, the 'corrective' System 2 in SD makers could not override System 1's heuristics for engaging Fengshui wholehearted in SD making. It ostensibly gave business leaders the needed illusion of control. As narrated by a property industry TMT member, when the belief bias arose, it is not easy to overpower:

*"Without ado, [at my advice] he moved to another unit facing south and spent additional time and cost to remedy the Fengshui issue. Sales magically escalated after that!" (R5/FM2/DM, per. comm, 5 August 2020).*

Subscribing to Fengshui seems to have noticeably lent SD makers to experience a sense of control inexplicably. Belied bias made them feel less apprehensive or anxious, be it illusory or not. Religion, science, and belief systems appeared to be the aspects that enable business leaders to have a sense of control and ease. Because Malaysia's property industry is neither a religiously regulated community

nor a pious locale, SD makers rely on science or pseudoscience to make them feel better. In a fast-paced business environment of imperfect knowledge, science or scientific management principles are not easily reachable or understood for application purposes. Thus it may explain the prevalence of dependence on socio-cultural belief systems within the local SD-making ecosystem.

#### **4.5.2 Theme Two: Just-in-case syndrome**

Participants succumbing to the 'Just-in-case' syndrome had a tough time reconciling their private subjective persona as a Fengshui believer with their public persona as the TMT. They felt the necessity to justify their Fengshui subscription. Reflecting on emotionally charged accounts during in-depth interviews revealed that participants felt uncomfortable being regarded as superstitious and holding a prominent position. There was also substantial evidence of religious guilt discovered with their Fengshui subscription. A case in point is R11/D3/DM in his unveiling:

*"I couldn't have been more overjoyed and relieved when my pastor gave his okay for me to activate the lion sculptures' eyes at the opening ceremony recommended by the Fengshui master" (R11/D3/DM, per. comm, 28 October 2020).*

As a decision-maker executive Founder of the organisation, R11/D3/DM did not require external permission. Still, his transcendental need for his pastor's approval only confirms his religious guilt in Fengshui-based SD making. This information first demonstrates his allowing heuristics to operate by substituting an easy decision for the difficult-to-decide Fengshui issue he earnestly needed an

answer. Second, it calls into question the assumption that a Founder (of a blue-chip firm) is immune to the Hippo effect when Fengshui is concerned.

Oddly still, most participants readily accepted non-objective information used in SD making, never mind if the stakes were high. In fact, the higher the stakes, the more they were seen to tempt fate.

*“Because Fengshui has saved my career and my marriage, it has become my guiding belief now whenever a significant decision has to be made. How can it not be? You would, too, if you were me. I no longer could take the risk of disregarding Fengshui in my decision making, just in case the earlier positive results were not coincidental” (R7/P3/DM, per. comm, 28 August 2020).*

Though it may strain credulity, the phrase ‘just-in-case’ has seemingly supplanted any logical explanation for many in the local property industry. When it comes to Fengshui subscriptions, it may just be either too complex or vague to find compelling justifications for why one should or should not tempt fate.

Characteristically, the subscriber’s mindset was:

*“If you believe in Fengshui, you have a lot to gain; you don't lose much if it doesn't work” (R10/CI/DM per. comm, 24 September 2020).*

The decision had been impactfully skewed, if not virtually made, with Fengshui as a primary consideration by the SD maker. To err on the safe side regardless of the reasonableness of the deciding factor appears manifest as a disposition, dubbed the ‘just-in-case’ syndrome in this study. Their System 2 knew that the System 1 belief and biases were driving the decision but couldn’t prevent it from

doing its work. Thus, Fengshui-based decisions had made the objective part of commercial decision making more complicated.

Many participants showed intrinsic motivation factoring Fengshui in SD making, viz., fearing missing out (FOMO). Participant R4/D2/DI (per comm, 2 August 2020) and R7/P2/DI (per comm, 28 August 2020) at first wanted to avoid getting unfortunate outcomes, losing what they have, or getting stuck in their current 'non gain'. However, they were motivated by the potential for gain in subscribing to Fengshui, e.g. "At first, I subscribed to Fengshui for loss-aversion; now, I do so to seek gain" (R7/P2/DI, per comm, 28 August 2020).

Notwithstanding, the peril of basing a decision on Fengshui is self-evident. Even if the practice was metaphysically sound, gaining access to this store of knowledge seemed arduous and ambivalent. Whether or not the forecast given by the Fengshui master was accurate, it appeared to have diverted the SD makers from their normal decision-making process:

*"There would be physical costs if I complied and emotional cost if I don't" (R2/D1/DI, per comm, 27 July 2020)*

The apparent inconsistency between Fengshui subscription and decision making caused cognitive dissonance among the decision stakeholders who believe in rational decision making. To eject effortlessly from that discomfort zone, participants instinctively seemed to have adopted a safety net strategy, planning for the possibility that the Fengshui prognosis might come true. They would be blameless in either outcome:

*“Of course, I felt somewhat guilty when my Fengshui-based decision didn’t turn out correct. However, if I have tried my best to decide based on what I reckoned as the best Fengshui, my job is done. No one can blame you for having tried and failed, but everyone, including myself, would blame me for not trying what the [Fengshui] master advised” (R1/P2/DI, per comm, 24 July 2020).*

Participants who revealed a ‘just-in-case’ tendency in their traits had essentially recognised that Fengshui-based SD making could not be avoided but could be accommodated to be unworried and agreeably operating in the property industry.

*“The more I understand the logic of how it works and witnessed it work, the more that I cannot take the risk of disregarding Fengshui, you know, just in case there is harm for not subscribing to it” (R14/A2/DM, per comm, 3 March 2021).*

When narrated on letting Fengshui be part of their crucial decision making, participants outlined a general conception, under which it was likely to be presented to the mind as a personal justification (which this study shall call a ‘schema’). Those who established favourable schemas due to their early contacts with Fengshui had continued to inherit their earlier solid beliefs in Fengshui in a now high-stakes SD making.

In comparison, those who established dysfunctional schemas resulting from unfavourable decision outcomes surprisingly still developed a significant affinity for Fengshui. The data indicate that this is most likely due to the participants’ quest to avoid having ‘shattered assumptions’, a face-saving disposition perceived to offset unfavourable schemas acquired in their early encounters with Fengshui subscription. Even if forecasts were perceptibly not as accurate as before,

participants kept subscribing to Fengshui in their decision making, demonstrating another potency of the 'just-in-case' syndrome:

*“In our major office renovation and expansion a few years back, my decision based on Fengshui had not been as enriching as before. But I still found myself avoid tempting faith; I simply had to subscribe to Fengshui ‘just in case’ it worked” (R14/A2/DM, per comm, 3 March 2021).*

### **4.5.3 Theme Three: Compliance mindset**

The fact that theme No. 3 accounts for barely 20 per cent of the themes discussed throughout the interviews does not imply that this phenomenon was unpopular. Given that most participants were founders and CEOs, it is understandable that they rarely had to comply with anyone. It was true that as they searched further into their recollections, they realised they did not need to be attached to Fengshui:

*“Looking back at the emotive account of my experience, I supposed I was treating my project as if it was owned and used by me- that was a mistake. Well, I am not him [my client], not the end-user, so why was I so attached? By allowing them to believe whatever they have believed shouldn't be that hard” (R12/C2/DM, per comm., 5 December 2020).*

On the one hand, some participants showed equanimity in Fengshui-based decision making. Curiously, despite the apparent discomfort with Fengshui-based SD making, R8/FM3/DM was unable to abstain from complying. There were signs of the Hippo effect as in:



*“The client stepped in to instruct the entire project team to comply with my Fengshui requirements at all cost” (R8/FM3/DM per. comm, 31 August 2020).*

On the other hand, having extrinsic motivation factoring Fengshui in SD making appeared ubiquitous. Some participants responded to Fengshui-based SD making in consistent ways with Malaysia's property industry players' cultural norms vis-à-vis automatic compliance with authority figures. As discussed in Section 2.3.7, authority bias occurs when one trusts too readily in a person of authority. In the case of R2/D1/DI, the person perceived as authoritative was the Fengshui master:

*“When the [Fengshui Master’s] advice didn’t jive [with mine], I acquiesced without question. You know, there’s no time to check this kind of data or argue during construction” (R2/D1/DI, per. comm, 27 July 2020)*

Being mentally beaten down into a state of compliance does not constitute a belief in or consent with the Fengshui subscription. In short, it is surrender under the situation where subscribers comply because they fear the consequences of refusing. Yet, upon acquiescence, participants stayed on their agreed trajectory. The epitome of such experience is as follows:

*“As a matter of fact, after crossing the point of no return, I’d rather lose the deal than lose face. Money can be earned back, but respect will be hard to regain... (pause)... it may be quite a farce if people realise Fengshui was the primary deciding factor here” (R14/A2/DM, per comm, 3 March 2021).*

In comparison to other species, humans have a unique ability to adapt. Extraordinarily, collaboration in the manner of ‘going along with’ appeared to be the best course of action for some participants. As the data demonstrate, the

decision-making factor did not emerge to aid in addressing logical problems or even drawing inferences from fresh evidence. Instead, participants appeared to devise decision factors to assist them in resolving the challenges inherent in irrational and shadowy issues. Acquiescence was the most straightforward way out, as can be seen in:

*“Although one can view Fengshui as a superstition, as a professional, I don’t feel it’s wrong to allow and work with my clients factoring Fengshui in decision making. Like their religion, who am I to say I need proof? I’ve encountered many who actually used Fengshui as their primary guide in major property selection. If subscribing to Fengshui is that crucial to them, so be it” (R9/RE1/DM, per comm, 22 September 2021).*

Once committed to Fengshui-based SD making, Acquiescers could switch from a deliberative to an implemental mindset, where they tended to go to great lengths to defend the SD they had already made. Intriguingly, these are the subscribers who initially had reservations about Fengshui but could not prevent it from playing a significant role in their decision-making process in the end.

*“Do you recall I once asked you [the researcher, who was his architect] to appeal to the City Hall for allocating our project units address numbering with ‘4’? I felt ludicrous, yet obligatory, with that instruction” (R11/D3/DM, per. comm, 28 October 2020).*

TMT SD makers who factor Fengshui in their SD making risk putting others under undue pressure. Even if business leaders are willing to engage, they will be unable to do so if they are unaware of the Fengshui subscriber type of their business opponent or SD stakeholder. Participants who fought experienced loss, as shared:

*“I began to accept that the people's belief systems in our property market are too complicated to shake. Some may not believe in Fengshui, but they would indeed acquiesce once the Fengshui master has revealed some information” (R9/REI/DM, per comm, 22 September 2021).*

In the past, accounts have taken people's assertions regarding their beliefs at face value. Meaning to say: if a person asserts that she does not possess a superstitious belief, it is presumed that she does not. But the data here show that these accounts are unsound. Instead, this study will argue that participants who acted superstitiously did, at least to an extent, have the superstitious belief, despite openly dismissing it, and vice versa. The following paradox is self-explanatory:

*“Funnily though, when the client showed indifference to what I saw as worrisome Fengshui issue, I found myself behaving calmly, too. If he didn't care, why should I? But with such dissonance, I could still compose myself and move on. I guess I am not superstitious” (R13/PI/DM, per comm, 25 February 2021).*

Participants' position as TMT of public listed firms is just “too much of a headache not to be clandestine about it” (R4/D2/DI, per comm, 2 August 2020; R11/D3/DM, per. comm). Although they required no approval for their belief system, if possible, they would want to avoid the embarrassment of being characterised as superstitious, which explains their noticeable tendency to (still) want to appear rational:

*“Our business decision making is objective, but it is prone to human subjectivity like we all in the property industry are. Our business is not to teach or judge who is objective and who is not. So long as it is not illegal, we can respect any belief systems” (R9/REI/DM, per comm, 22 September 2020).*

But, compliance can also be a risk-averse mindset or a ‘tick all the boxes’ strategy. From the findings, in most cases, the outcome of this approach is that the SD achieved concurrence promptly. Still, as internal and external factors change around the participants, stakeholders may become non-compliant the next day or a week later. Ironically, this approach restricts business SD making and does not support value creation, innovation, or active risk management, all of which are key business drivers. Compliance mindset may feel good, but it also gives a false sense of security, as evident in R3/FM1/DM when she confessed:

*“At pandemic times, we wear face masks. Other times, we wear ‘imaginary masks’ to hide our feelings from other people. In high-level meetings, I say we care about Fengshui when I don’t. With the project team, I’d pretend to be okay with Fengshui factored into our decision making when I know some of us are unsettled inside” (R3/FM1/DM, per. comm, 28 October 2020).*

Finally, there were signs of a growing ambivalence around Fengshui subscription in SD making, which is supposed to be a due diligence procedure through the lens of a natural attitude (Husserl, 2001). Even if some of it turns out to be questionable or illusionary, the natural attitude in participants accepted it as it is. However, assuming the perspective from a phenomenological attitude, the nature of the said Fengshui subscription should depend on how they experienced letting Fengshui play a part in it.

*“In the hospital project that I did with you (the researcher), I would regard myself as a man of science, not a Fengshui believer. But I understood Fengshui bring good luck whether I believe in it or not, so I subscribed to it in my decision making anyway. Anyway, we practise in an industry ... a world of both nature and*

*culture, don't we? Since when do we need to split hair?"*  
(R2/D1/DI per. comm, 27 July 2020).

Employing a phenomenological reduction (*vide* Section 3.4.3.3) in examining R2/D1/DI would have yielded a vastly different result. 'Reduction,' as used by Husserl, refers to the process of disclosing the essence of lived experiences after the natural attitude has been suspended during the compartmentalisation of any assumptions, beliefs, and prejudices to analyse a phenomenon under investigation (Abalos *et al.*, 2016). R2/D1/DI openly incorporated Fengshui into his SD-making in this instance, without overtly attributing his Fengshui-infused judgment to mindless compliance.

#### **4.6 Discussion and summary of findings**

Humans are hard-wired to avoid navigating with ambiguous, noisy, and conflicting information in making a crucial decision. A fundamental characteristic of resilience and growth has been the ability of business leaders to anticipate change and quickly adjust. In SD making, business leaders who consider themselves *avant-garde* must learn to continue to circumnavigate ambiguity and, upon understanding the opponent's Fengshui subscriber type, swiftly unlock new negotiation streams and flow with them for decision closure opportunities. Yet, when it came to incorporating Fengshui into SD-making, data indicating significant decisional dissonance seem evident and unavoidable.

#### 4.6.1 Data vis-à-vis literature reviewed

The classical postulate of Fengshui subscription is that people who study and practices it never think it is superstition. Instead, it is founded on the ontology of Yijing, stipulating Tian-Di-Ren, and generates everything through cyclical motion and perpetual change of the Yin and Yang nature<sup>107</sup>. What immediately evidenced is that findings in this study corroborate the notion that contemporary subscribers lack cultural and philosophical knowledge of Fengshui, which led participants to take Fengshui at face value versus those in classical tradition who seemingly use it with the appropriate amounts of respect and discretion.

Business leaders are frequently called upon to work against their impulses within today's complex climate in Malaysia's property industry. They will need to know when to make SD unaided, following their instincts or relying on group wisdom. In a period of increased uncertainty, progressive business leaders who want to make things happen will need to have a relatively profound awareness of the context, the ability to accept complexity and cultural paradox, and the willingness to adapt their SD-making style flexibly. Nonetheless, data in this study bear all the earmarks of an antithesis that SD making is logical and scientific; at least, this is the insight drawn into Malaysia's property industry.

Given the conventional view of SD making as a prudent undertaking, it was astonishing to find irregular, eccentric and even fallacious SD data in Chapter 4.

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<sup>107</sup> *vide* Figure 1-3 (Tripartite unity of the Cosmic Trinity of Chinese metaphysics) and Figure 5-7 (Concept to address the Hot-Cold cognitive continuum)

Going by the findings, SD-making in Malaysia's property industry will continue to ignore the constraints associated with prioritising facts and a formal analysis process over subjectivity and intuition in the real world. Based on a rudimentary misunderstanding of the Chinese intellectual tradition (covered in Chapter 2), the widespread perceptions of Fengshui held by those educated in Western institutions were wrong in the past and continue to be incorrect today.

The current educational system is generally objectivist and positivist. Hence, the unpopularity of a belief-based SD making in research. Flaws in rational SD making, such as the assumptions of having complete and perfect information to decide, measurability of criteria exist for which data can be objectively collected and analysed were still detected. Therefore, rational SD makers, who favour objective data over subjectivity and intuition, may still level the same old platitude at their opponents, viz. Fengshui subscription is a fallacy and can be overlooked (as though all the heuristics and cognitive biases in the SD making by the TMT are mere imagination or trivial).

The subscription of Fengshui in decision making being random, unsettling, and 'nonlogical'<sup>108</sup> fits the 'noise' in Kahneman *et al.*'s (2016) definition. Chester Irving Barnard (Barnard, 1936, cited in Simon, 1987, p. 302) describes nonlogical decision making behavioural factors as those "not capable of being expressed in

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<sup>108</sup> The effect of individual unscientific belief system on high-level decision making falls into a category some scholars would call 'nonlogical' (Phipps and Shelton, 2020).

words or as reasoning, which is only made known by a judgment, decision or action".

Still, this does not imply a realistic possibility for edifying Fengshui to the masses in the business community. Even if that were possible, as discussed in Chapter 1, Fengshui in Malaysia is far too unstructured for the neophytes to stomach. It does mean that a good practical start is to put in place a reliable model that provides unerring steps to identify with whom the business leader is dealing.

The SLR in Chapter 2 informs that superstition, which includes Fengshui by definition, has its long history in human evolution co-occurring with other cognitive developments such as logic. The participants having control over SD should be impartial and in the organisation's interest. However, they are also human beings and therefore have personal beliefs, attributes, and preferences. There are psychological and, as substantiated, biological reasons too that research so far have not explored enough.

The participants made decisions that appeared to be more favourable to their emotional and psychological needs than the organisation. It seems improbable that, having learned about the Fengshui influences, they would be able or willing to put the Fengshui element at bay while making SD decisions. In making critical decisions, the lived experience continually emerged centred on seeing what they want to see, particularly those congruent with their beliefs. Since their established belief system was merely seeking validation, they appeared to ignore anything



that contradicted their perspective. In short, they were but looking for reasons that strengthen their stance in making the Fengshui-based SD.

Disappointedly, there is no indication of a link between the three most anticipated three views of Fengshui ideology in Section 2.2.2 and Malaysia's property industry SD-making ecology. Building on the work of Stokols (1990) and Luk *et al.* (2012), the views of contemporary Fengshui practices via the instrumental, metaphysical and minimalist lens espoused by Naguit and Yutuc (2020) have no bearing on the outcomes of this study. Although the three Fengshui subscribers found in this study, namely Believers, Alievers, and Acqueiscers, are comparable to instrumental, metaphysical, and minimalist people, the association is not entirely fitting.

People who take the perspective of instrumental and metaphysical are more likely to exhibit a desire for power control over their environment and a sense of connection with the natural world, respectively. Believers and Alievers, on the other hand, have blind faith and refuse to question it because of material gain or an aversion of ill luck. Given that Fengshui is considered meaningless and neglected by the minimalists, there is some parallel with the study's Acqueiscers, who recognise that Fengshui is also meaningless albeit cannot be ignored.

Stalwart Believer participants retrieved examples from memory that support their Fengshui subscription automatically. Confirmation bias creates a feedback loop that reinforces the belief, viz.

*"Prelaunch take-up was 90%, and three days after debut, sales reached 100%. It was a glorious experience... Fengshui works again!" (R8/FM3/DM, per. comm, 31 August 2020).*

Risen (2016) is unwavering in her assertion that System 2 thinking is often and intentionally ignored. Despite recognising Fengshui as irrationality generated by autosuggestion, they succumbed to it in SD making. Consistent with Risen's (2016) claim, there were also participants who 'acquiesced' or caved into their System 1 thinking, even when they were aware it was unreasonable. The reason was that the costs of subscribing to Fengshui were frequently low. Meanwhile, the perceived penalty of not subscribing was perturbing, for example:

*"So, if the conditions weren't too painful to fulfil, I would comply just in case what the master suggested was true" (R2/D1/DI per. comm, 27 July 2020).*

Evident during the deep conversations with the TMT participants, their ability to anticipate change and react quickly as business leaders have been critical in their resilience and capacity to overcome gridlock. They shared experience navigating through ambiguity and, once they understood their opponent's Fengshui subscription, rapidly unlocking fresh negotiating streams and flowing with them for decision closure opportunities. To them, Fengshui in Malaysia's property industry appeared to be an infallible instrument worth considering.

The evidence from this study supports the idea that cognitive dissonance has led most participants to make unreasonable SD as they try to reconcile contradictory beliefs. Typically, participants experiencing cognitive dissonance-related

experiences would try to resolve conflicting views so that their thoughts become linear and rational again, classically represented by narrative such as:

*“Some of the Fengshui remedies took considerable effort to carry out. It was challenging for me, as a Muslim and a man of science, to reconcile. Ultimately, I think the intention is important. For me, Fengshui subscription is not to create wealth but to have a feeling of calmness for the facilities we develop” (R4/D2/DI, per comm, 27 July 2020).*

Cognitive style is related to perceptions of the work environment, and people will seek fit between their style and workplace decision-making requirements (D'Amato and Zijlstra 2008; Wooten *et al.* 1994). As a result of self-selection, individuals within specific communities and working groups are likely to have similar cognitive styles related to their professional role's information processing requirements (Hayes and Allinson, 1998). Sometimes, this is called 'cognitive climate,' i.e., the majority group's collective preferred style clustered around their mode or mean (Kirton and McCarthy, 1988). R4/D4/DI was quick in diving into the cognitive climate that was beneficial:

*“To ordinary businessmen, this kind of Fengshui-based decision would be crazy and unheard of. To our top management, RM2MILLION LAD [liquidated ascertained damages] was worth it. My heart agreed, but my mind objected. But my style is never the rebellious kind; I can adapt quickly and gladly” (R4/D2/DI, per comm, 27 July 2020).*

Dysfunctional proportions of cognitive styles may contribute to the appearance of cognitive 'microclimates' inside the industry's SD ecosystem (Stum, 2009). When there are disconnects between the SD maker's mindset and the cognitive climate of the workplace, conflict and dissonance are all factors that influence the

decision quality, according to research by Kirton and McCarthy (1985), Kettelhut and Schkade (1991), and Brigham *et al.* (2007). If there is a great deal of uncertainty, even a seemingly correct decision can have adverse outcomes (Spetzler *et al.*, 2017; Keren and de Bruine, 2003). Because SD-making results usually emerge over time, satisfaction in deciding has little effect on the SD maker's dissonance (Mellers, 2000; Heitmann *et al.*, 2007). Data also shows that it was the SD-making impulse that matters, e.g.:

*“I fear facts that I can't grasp, so I'd rather err on the safe side” (R6/A1/DM, per. comm., 14 August 2020)*

Furthermore, in participatory services, consumer involvement in the value-creation process does have a significant impact on decision-making outcomes (Dong *et al.*, 2018). It demonstrates how the conventional property industry players' decision-making processes take into account both their rational and cognitive attributes operating within the settings that achieved what perceived as quality decision (Bolomope *et al.*, 2020), as reflected in:

*“I recall an impasse in one RM55 million project with ROI, funds, etc., worked out in order. But the Fengshui of the site was, to my company, unfavourable. Although the rational parts of our strategic decision making ultimately prevailed, we spent significantly on having a second Fengshui opinion, revising the architectural design to mitigate adverse Fengshui and time cost. Instead of feeling guilty, I felt a sense of achievement getting around the impasse. More importantly, it gave me peace of mind” (R10/C1/DM, per. comm., 24 September 2020)*

Spetzler *et al.* (2017) define a 'quality decision' as knowing (1) the decision frame or the purpose of the decision, (2) the available alternatives, (3) probable

outcomes, (4) expected value creation, (5) sound reasoning carried out, and (6) the clarity of intent to act. Every decision, of course, has ramifications or outcomes. TMT participants could not entirely control the results of their decisions in an uncertain setting, especially when an abstract factor, such as Fengshui, was incorporated. In other words, what seems like a good decision may have a positive or negative outcome. Interestingly, most participants still believed they had produced a high-quality decision, despite not fulfilling all of Spetzler *et al.*'s (2017) criteria of meeting the benchmark for decision quality (at the time of the decision). The essence is that participants just wanted to have a chance to factor in Fengshui in SD making if the circumstances were decidedly dire:

*“Last year, I underwent coronary bypass surgery. As you know, to get the best cardiovascular surgeon, you don’t choose the surgery date; it is allocated to you. Mine was on 14 August 2020. OH MY GOD, ‘14’ means SURE TO DIE. But of course, to skip that date means delaying the procedure, and my doctor had forewarned that would be even more dangerous for me. I went through it, thank God, uneventfully- I think being an Earth Ox operated, by chance, on that Ji Chou (Earth Ox) day acted very favourably for me. But, you can never imagine what kind of mental stress and anxiety that I had gone through. The trauma of realising I was not in control of my Fengshui subscription in a crucial life obstacle like that was dreadfully unbearable!” (R11/D3/DM, per. comm., 28 October 2020).*

The tendency for participants to welcome information that confirmed their ideas while rejecting information that contradicts them was glaring. Confirmation bias is one of the most well-documented types of faulty thinking. Half of the participants justified and believed that Fengshui had a positive effect on the success of their past decisions. They were always adept at spotting only their

when presented with other possible attributes. According to Mercier and Sperber (2011), this lopsidedness reflects the need of preventing them from getting ridiculed by others, for instance, the other Board members, for being irrational and superstitious.

There is also glaring nexus in the findings with the loss aversion tendency discussed in the Prospect theory in Chapter 2. The significant interactions in the data underline the importance of expanding this theoretical understanding to consider both positive and negative Fengshui subscriptions. The phenomenon can be modelled, connecting Fengshui belief with psychological maladjustment, demonstrating that the endowment effect mechanisms in Fengshui-based decision making operate according to the loss aversion principle.

Distinctively, it is clear that Fengshui subscribers place a higher value on a good fortune they already *possess* than on a similar good end they aspire to *acquire* subscribing to Fengshui. So, believing in negative Fengshui (losing their current good luck) may have its origins in the tendency to be loss-averse. This crucial understanding subsequently helps shape the theoretical groundwork of the proposed model.

Heuristic judgments were seemingly triggered when the TMT's prior associations with Fengshui caused an effect on current decisions. In a situation of no concrete validity in the Fengshui subscription, evaluation connected with Kiasuism and the 'just-in-case' syndrome continued to be a decisive factor for the participants. Bias appeared to go hand in hand with seeking immediate gratification from

doing what was possible, including subscribing to Fengshui regardless of logic for the desire to avoid losing what was already possessed.

Confirmation bias is the human propensity to find and interpret evidence that supports an established belief, thereby influencing the logical System 1 thinking and decision making. This effect can be impactful, even harmful, as Nickerson (1988) reasons as one of the most challenging aspects of human cognition. Confirmation bias has been apparent in numerous criminal investigation fields, including interviews and forensic investigation (e.g., Ask and Granhag, 2005; Dror *et al.*, 2006; Kassin *et al.*, 2003). Dror (2020) implies that bias has a worrying and extensive influence, including collecting and analysing data and applying analyses.

According to the Prospect Theory discussed in Chapter 2 (Section 2.4.3.3), loss aversion elicit stronger reactions, and sure enough, participants are more sensitive to possible losses than potential gains. However, the research findings show that the Prospect Theory holds not only for tangible benefits and losses but what the participants framed their Fengshui subscription in their mindset also matters. This study raises intriguing theoretical questions that may have ramifications for our current understanding of Prospect Theory. There was little benefit in arguing in Fengshui-based SD making, whereas there was much to be gained from being right:

*“If you believe in Fengshui, you have a lot to gain; you don't lose much if it doesn't work” (RIO/CI/DM, per. comm., 24 September 2020)*

Economic models suggest that people make decisions by comparing an option to its opportunity costs<sup>109</sup>. People choose the considered option if it is superior to the foregone alternatives. Interestingly, this study shows that not all SD makers would objectively consider what opportunity cost is. It contradicts what some decision researchers hypothesised as the operative opportunity costs when R4/D2/DI framed without reservation his opportunity cost. Peace of mind is a shadowy concept that is far from simple to quantify as an opportunity cost.

*"Not subscribing to Fengshui today would mean that I sacrifice my peace of mind tomorrow" (R4/D2/DI, per comm., 2 August 2020, emphasis is the researcher's)*

#### **4.6.2 The research questions revisited**

If Fengshui is iffy and a decision-making model should be definite, this research topic may risk appearing oxymoronic. This study will be irrelevant if mental shortcuts or cognitive biases do not influence people, and the subject will also be paradoxical. But the literature systematically reviewed by the researcher, together with his decades of persistent vigilance for this phenomenon in Malaysia's property business, revealed the contrarian. In truth, the aberrant aspect of Fengshui subscription remains problematic. Every day in the property industry, SD makers are inundated with options, with or without adequate time, data, the opportunity to be clearheaded and other influences in the decision making.

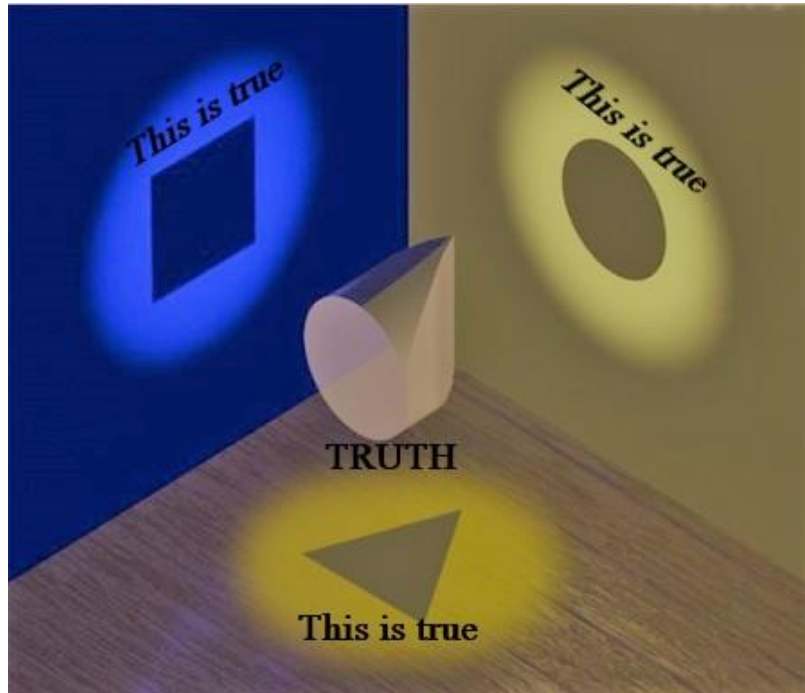
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<sup>109</sup> Opportunity cost is an economic term for whatever you didn't get by choosing whatever you chose.



*“What is the lived experience (de Erlibnes) of the SD makers in Malaysia’s property industry when they let Fengshui be part of the factors in making a SD?”* is the principal research question. Understanding how these SD makers arrive at their choices is the overarching step a solution should focus on first. To address the ambiguity of Fengshui in SD making, the researcher had foremost engaged in the heuristics operating in Malaysia’s property industry during the decision-making process. Without this, to study the phenomenon for model development purposes is foolhardy, if it is even practical at all an approach. The researcher did not take for granted that something experienced (or lived) by him in the property industry would be the same as what Fengshui subscribers in the same context perceive. The researcher could not infer that he knew how Malaysia’s SD makers subscribe to Fengshui with intentionality in the property industry.

Fengshui is arguably the most misunderstood yet commonly embraced perception and practice in Malaysia’s property industry. The lived experience of a Fengshui subscriber is observer-dependent. Suppose one projects an object as per in Figure 4-1. It will show a square and a circle on the walls and a triangle on the ground. To merge the three reduced-dimension figures, one must attempt to square the circle, circle the triangle, and so forth; manifestly unattainable because the three figures contradict one other.



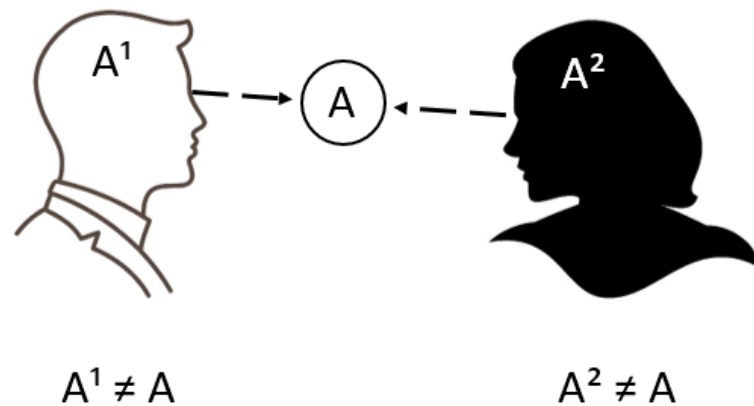
**Figure 4-1** Three different perceptions of ‘truth’ at a different angle of the viewer

(Source: Unknown)

As evidenced, certain parts of Fengshui subscription were always be missed by reductionism. Even though theoretically possible, the object's completeness and the third dimension could not be abstracted, isolated or taken from the other three angles of view. One can only add, or subtract, substrate dimensions arbitrarily in mathematics, but not in reality.

Conforming to Keating *et al.* (2020) and Checkland and Poulter (2020), the truncated cylindrical object in Figure 4-1 can be the reality depicted as ‘A’ in Figure 4-2. The square image is what Searle (1980; 1984) termed the sense datum (denoted as ‘A1’), which appears in the mind of the Mr Subscriber (Tuomela, 2010). From his background capacity and intentionality, ‘A1’ is what he perceives, therefore, believes as the reality. Unfortunately, ‘A1’ is not the phenomenon ‘A’. Likewise, the sense datum ‘A2’ in Mrs Subscriber’s mind is also not ‘A’, nor is ‘A2’

equalled to 'A1'. Her perception of 'A' is also affected by her background capacity and intentionality (resulting in it) becoming 'A2'.



**Figure 4-2 Noetic perspective versus noema**  
(Source: The Author)

A = The noema or phenomenon at a material time or the objective datum.

A<sub>1</sub> = The man's noetic perspective, his subjective truth, or his sense datum.

A<sub>2</sub> = The lady's noetic perspective, her subjective truth, or her sense datum.

As discussed in Section 3.4.3.1, the noema here may be the social interaction in Malaysia's property industry. Going by Moutakas' (1994) account, the noema that Mr Subscriber perceives is his noetic perspective on A. This study is interested to find out not just A but A<sub>1</sub> if one is to deal with SD decision making with Mr Subscriber. Likewise, it is critical to comprehend A and A<sub>2</sub> when dealing with Mrs Subscriber.

The so-called *reality* is but objects or events (phenomena) as Fengshui subscribers experience in their consciousness. Fengshui subscriber A's truth is his noetic perspective and not the truth perceived by others. However, it is still *justified true belief* to A. Searle (*op cit.*) names this representation theory of perception. For

instance, 13 May 2022 being a *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>* is an objective truth, which may be ‘A’. Being an unlucky day or triggering the cognisance of the *May 13 incident*<sup>110</sup> is a subjective perception of Mr Subscriber's noetic perspective; hence, forming A1 in inference with his sense datum in mind<sup>111</sup>.

Mrs Subscriber subscribes to Fengshui dissonantly, knowing that the behaviour is unscientific in her professional practice. To reduce that dissonance, she must either stop subscribing to Fengshui—or justify her subscribing to it. A case in point for this phenomenon was:

*“It is not a superstition as many business people believe it works, and being Chinese, it is acceptable to believe in the ancient Chinese system, you know” (R1/P2/DI, per comm., 24 July 2020).*

As to the first supplementary research question of “***How do participants, as members of the top management team, make sense of their Fengshui subscription experiences in SD making?***”; the data offer unexpected findings. Generally, TMT decision makers in Malaysia's property business are still bound to operate in the best interests of their organisations. That said, it is fascinating how they can engage fruitfully against business opponents who have fixated worldviews or lack objectivity in SD making. Mindful that the social harmony in relationships is a central Confucian concept (Sheer and Chen, 2003), Chinese

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<sup>110</sup> The Chinese-Malay racial violence that took place in Kuala Lumpur on 13 May 1969, killing almost 200. A dark episode of history in Malaysia.

<sup>111</sup> This phenomenon became visible in the interviews on 27 July and 31 August 2020, respectively, with R2/D1/DI and R8/FM3/DM. With the intentionality toward launching significant property sales on this day, the participants, represented by A1, favoured a postponement no matter how others saw A.

business leaders would likely avoid making any bellicose or direct challenges to other's worldviews. To them, passing judgment on beliefs will threaten the harmony of the interpersonal relationship (Fang, 2005; Costin, 2005). Significantly, the worth in *value creation* may skew towards the intangible and disregard the measure of 'sound reasoning'.

Nevertheless, the research findings unveiled the absence of a conventional form of best practice problem-solving in the Fengshui-based SD-making pulse. Although a business decision that leads to meeting its objective with minimum or no dissonances to any stakeholders is crucial, the hallmark of a good SD is, interestingly, one that also allows *sustainability* in steadfast business relations. Indeed, the SD maker's task is to problem-solve toward attaining the best possible business solution, but not police, judge, or correct the stakeholders when an abstract factor is in operation.

Working with the Chinese and understanding their culture is not as straightforward as one might think. Like building a house, make sure the foundation is solid before venturing into something more complicated. In Malaysia's property industry, culture may trump strategy like that is no big deal. In other words, even the best strategy plan can derail if SD stakeholders do not share the relevant business ethos. When it comes down to Fengshui-based SD making, the decision-making TMT members and their mindset during the SD-making impulse are what matter, albeit occasionally misinterpreted. Business leaders must accept that SD making marinated in Fengshui elements is neither a

businesslike nor logical phenomenon. To deal with the paradox of Fengshui requires pushing beyond logic to provide business sustainability. Otherwise, the business leader may prevail this time around, but his clients would not likely return.

Daodejing, which first articulated the idea of Wuwei, states, “Do that which consists in taking no action and order will prevail” (Minford, 2018, Chapter 3, *passim*). The idea is that we should get an advantage for ‘doing less’ or stop trying to induce action artificially. Then, when we decide to move, our efforts will be natural and use the most optimal cognitive resources to accomplish the desired results. Humans have a significant advantage over other species in that they can cooperate when there is a chance of benefiting themselves. In the intangible issue, cooperation is difficult to develop and even more challenging to maintain. Neither can logical reasoning enable business leaders to solve abstract problems like Fengshui subscription or even help draw inferences from the novel and unfamiliar data. Instead, the mindset has to be adjusted to accommodate:

*“I didn’t feel bad for declining to help a client 100%. He was a VIP, and he insisted that I, as his Fengshui consultant, mention something positive for him to use in sales marketing during the launch. Sure, my intervention could have lessened the severity of his Fengshui problem, but it couldn’t have solved it. But I don’t have to be that direct when I communicate, do I?”  
(R8/FM3/DM, per comm., 31 August 2020).*

This research uses a phenomenological approach to make sense of the Fengshui-based cognitive biases and heuristics. Incontrovertibly, while the SD makers are engaged in a dance between System 1 and System 2 thinking, Fengshui exudes

real, symbolic, and commercial forces in Malaysia's property industry. A model to reconcile Fengshui-based decision impulses is more about identifying the pulse of decision making but mitigating it to overcome indecision or reduce cognitive dissonance.

Accordingly, a model that addresses the problem statement should let business leaders understand and make sense of Fengshui influence more effectively for timely closure of the problem with the least stress and cognitive dissonance. Because business people have heuristics and biases stemming from Fengshui subscription, the model should assist in making SD emerges as more synchrony with their belief system and perceived value.

“Can participants describe the experience when they thought they had made an optimal (or suboptimal) SD with Fengshui factored in?” is the final supplemental research question, which generated subjective responses, more to justify their use of Fengshui as a decision-making factor. Whether it was about eliminating cognitive dissonance or raising their actual and perceived value, because of the sensitivity of high-level SD making, their approach had been described as the non-confrontational, indubitably a way that maintained internal harmony while achieving their goal. The following narrative extracted is from a professionally-trained real estate TMT member, while embodies the mindset discussed, warns that:

*“I began to accept that the people's belief systems in our property market are too complicated to shake. Some may not believe in Fengshui, but they would indeed acquiesce once the Fengshui master has revealed some*

*information” (R9/REI/DM, per. comm, 22 September 2020).*

This study neither intends nor has it the means to change the opposing SD makers' belief systems, behaviours, and attitudes. In this study, the SD makers are captains of the industry, and all champions have the same sense of self-importance that drives their success, optimism and confidence. Faced with fear and uncertainty, they opt not to speak their minds lest they are judged or looked up as weak. Their ego brushes any self-doubt out of their path to make the SD.

Often, business leaders can't make an optimum SD that benefits them because they are unable to recognise and comprehend their opponent's cognitive bias and, as a result, are unable to address or help lessen the influence the predisposition has on such a person (Chmielecki, 2013; 2020). Otherwise, they would have made the appropriate adjustments, resulting in a more satisfactory decision outcome.

When factors in the decision setting affect people's choices, small changes in those factors, in the form of mindset adjustments and nudges, can be strategically used to influence people's choices without limiting their ability to communicate their preferences (Thaler and Sunstein, 2009). If used positively, these approach readjustments or a flux mindset can be a more efficient alternative to the heavy-handed approaches in increasing common values and enhancing mutual benefits.

There is nothing unacceptable with differing beliefs or opinions in SD making, even though people think they are entitled to theirs and critical to others. Business leaders do not win a deal by bluntly labelling others as superstitious on



a squishy factor such as Fengshui, substituting some tangible criteria. Both can win without attempting to change the other uninvitedly. Derived from the data of this investigation, the decision-making framework to address Fengshui-infused decision-making without getting on the opponent's nerve boils is necessarily a *passive* model.

There have been no fully adequate theories for analysing Fengshui-based SD making until this attempt. This study opened new ground with a phenomenological lens to investigate heuristics and cognitive biases. From the findings, participants who understandably could not proceduralise Fengshui-based SD making addressed the problem with practical wisdom (Phronesis).

Phronesis is an ancient Greek term for wisdom or intellect applicable to practical action, which involves good judgment and excellent character and habits (Griffin, 2020). Pellegrino (2002, p. 382) defines phronesis as “the capacity for deliberation, judgment and discernment in difficult moral situations” when applied to decision making. Although only extensively cited in medical practices (Malik *et al.*, 2020; Kotsee *et al.*, 2016; Dowie, 2022), this study proposes that business leaders also exercise phronesis to make wise yet practical decisions<sup>112</sup>.

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<sup>112</sup> Due to its pragmatic nature, phronesis is frequently translated as 'prudence', from Latin prudential, when not simply solved by words denoting knowledge or intelligence. Phronesis entails the capacity to recognise and deliberate on worthwhile ends and goals and the appropriate means most likely to achieve those ends and goals (Kaldjian, 2014). Utilising the opponent's momentum against him is significantly less exhausting and substantially more likely to succeed. The only energy used is observing, planning, flowing along, and biding one's time until a suitable move becomes opportune. As suggested by American art critic Thomas McEvelley, mindfulness, in this case, would be the closest translation to Wuwei (McEvelley, 2002).

Aristotle called it the practical wisdom that leads us to the positive end of human flourishing using the *right* means (*ibid.*).

Findings from this study helped to support the development of a conceptual model and led to empirical investigation. Be it Wuwei, phronesis, practical wisdom, or a water-like passive approach as the fundamental principle, establishing which Fengshui subscriber type is the business opponent is vital. Then only can the most critical issue and the path of least resistance for dealing with a Fengshui-based SD be taken into account. Therefore, the Wuwei approach does not merely address Fengshui-based SD making but does so in a way that engages the cognition of the business opponent as the key SD stakeholder.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSION

#### 5.1 Introduction

Fengshui cannot be proven scientifically. Neither can any dominant cultural or religious practices. An architect would not overreact, nor would he take umbrage at his client's request for (say) the kitchen be designed as though the client were piloting the starship Enterprise as she cooks. Unless the requirement is unequivocally unethical or violates any building codes, it is not the professional's place to judge but work on the design to meet the specifications. Similarly, emerging business leaders shan't be emotionally affected by Fengshui subscription in SD making, which is prevalent in Malaysia's property industry.

Coming back to the actual case when a key opponent SD maker asserts, "You can't launch that project during the Hungry Ghost Month!"; must business leaders demonstrate that the opponent is erroneous or provide 'proof' that they are correct? Other platforms exist for judging whether a subjective construct is correct or incorrect. In SD making or dealing with the SD stakeholders, the business leader could continue his business strategy or revise it in light of the fresh crucial understanding that the project's work programme may need revision vis-à-vis his stakeholder's values. To prevent intangible but significant external values from disrupting business objectives, the model to address Fenghui-based SD making should anchor on a passive framework that is agile and adaptable to the situation as soon as known.

Fengshui subscription comes from belief systems. Belief systems are necessary for human consciousness to discern their respective truth. There are many belief systems in the business world, more so in Malaysia's property industry. Respecting your SD stakeholder's belief system entails having no propensity to contradict or contend with their values. Not only is disputing the veracity of Fengshui with SD-making stakeholders futile, but it also brings no advantage to the deal nor value to the business.

Data in this study support the anecdotal observations in the local industry so far. In general, there are three options for dealing with a Fengshui-based SD circumstance in Malaysia's property industry: change it, leave it, or accept it. Business leaders should only fix something if they can. Albeit sounding terse, business leaders should come to terms with the predicament to deal with it as long as they cannot escape it. Acceptance does not necessarily mean that one party loses and the other party wins, but it could mean both parties gain.

Superstitious beliefs run counter to accepted rational thought or are inconsistent with laws of nature. Yet, the findings of this research validate that Fengshui is the law of nature to the believers. In Malaysia, the problem does not lie with any social-cultural homage and belief structure now ingrained in the property industry. Most of them have doubts and recognise that these beliefs are irrational but continue to hold them. It accounts for how the key players handle the phenomenon in their decision making that shapes their approach, as epitomised by participant R4/D2/DI:

*“I felt compelled to believe. But I stepped back, bringing that impulse into focus. At a safe distance, I was free of the impulse. But, I had a problem. Why, without the impulse dominating me, I still doubt: Should I believe?” (R4/D2/DI, per. comm, 2 August 2020).*

While the industry has its objective legal boundary set, business SD makers have subjective worldviews upon their conceptual and business parameters. On the one hand, TMT SD makers sometimes fear others perceiving them as illogical and superstitious in supposedly sober-minded and serious business decision making. On the other hand, they have an inherent need to engage in and subscribe to Fengshui in the local property business at specific decision-making stages.

Dondi *et al.* (2021) has cited recent McKinsey Global Institute research that cognitive skills such as coping with uncertainty, adaptability, adopting a different perspective, translating knowledge into different contexts and mental flexibility are among the distinct talents necessary for future business leaders. Adaptability is the ability to be flexible and efficient in using that information in various decision-making contexts. Business leaders should regulate uncertainty like Fengshui-based SD making before external pressures make course correction much more difficult, if not impossible. It is more of a meta-skill to learn how to unlearn and relearn, which fosters an awareness of mindset adjustments in decision making.

Findings in Chapter 4 back the argument that the SD stakeholder’s dogma or believability of Fengshui should not be a concern for business leaders. Rather than objectifying Fengshui subscription in business as mere superstition and

doing so to their disadvantage, contemporary Western scholars should not vacate the space to understand the phenomenon. Instead, the insights provided in this study reinforce that business leaders of tomorrow should adapt in the most efficient manner possible to fulfil their business objectives in hand. Adaptability is a critical success factor that enables business leaders to be expedient, learn faster, and orient toward opportunities ahead, not just the challenges.

## 5.2 Fengshui-based strategic decision-making model

Too many objective options confuse SD making. Worse, unrestricted subjectivity creates decision paralysis instead of liberation (Piasecki and Hanna, 2011). To deal with Fengshui-based SD making is to reflect on the implicit mindset of the target population and the underlying perspective of the problem before applying any of the existing toolkit solutions (Furnham and Boo, 2011). We must first comprehend what is occurring in Fengshui-based SD making before deciding how to address it.



Figure 5-1 Malaysia's property industry SD-making cognitive flow  
(Source: The author)

Within the busy SD ecosystem of Malaysia's property industry, heuristics and cognitive shortcomings detected will undergo a battle of various time lengths

between System 1 and System 2 thinking. A Fengshui-based decision occurs when a decision-making factor could outweigh the other influenced by or based upon Fengshui. Say, the general notion of “If you believe in Fengshui, you have a lot to gain; you don't lose much if it doesn't work” (R10/C1/DM per. comm, 24) causes a decision maker to subscribe to Fengshui just in case it works. This has complicated the objective aspect of business decision making, hence a Fengshui-based decision. Not to be overlooked, as illustrated in the following narrative, there are equally lots of Acquiescers too:

*“I have found it most convenient and safest in a happy working relationship to simply admit that agreeing with my CEO’s construal is easier and, more often than not, a productive interpretation of Fengshui requirements regardless of my ‘absolutely correct set of beliefs’” (R2/D1/DI, per comm., 27 July 2020).*

### **5.2.1 Malaysia’s property industry decision-making ecosystem**

Yet, in the case of Malaysia’s property industry, it does not fully explain why participants, mindful that Fengshui may be irrational, subscribed to it anyway. Before excogitating a model for the property industry, the preeminent in this study is to comprehend the first-hand experiences and insights of the SD makers in the same fraternity who can engage in Fengshui that they know is subjective.

Evidence from the research findings suggests Fengshui-based SD making covering all three of Kahneman's (2011, pp. 8, 41) described emotions: uncertainty, fear, and ego. Consequently, it is suitable that the Two Systems of Thinking framework serves as the foundation for the model.

Although the data reinforce using the Two Systems of Thinking approach to decode how Fengshui-based SD operates amidst biases and mental shortcuts toward identifying these subscribers, it does not imply that System 2 would closely check and approve the subjective System 1 thinking. 'Approval' only means that System 2 has the opportunity and the ability to acknowledge the System 1 response yet allow it to proceed. So, in a decisional acceptance scenario, the individual ends up doing what System 1 might have proposed, in this case, factoring Fengshui in SD making.

In contrast to approval, System 2 may override System 1 thinking. 'Override' occurs when System 2 prohibits the SD maker from acting on the System 1 response and instead replaces it with something it believes is more rational or acceptable. So, if we are on that SD-making path infused with Fengshui belief, System 1 will remain consistent, that is *to subscribe*, vide the earlier notion "If you believe in Fengshui, you have a lot to gain; if it doesn't work, you don't lose much".

There is an apparent propensity to subscribe to Fengshui, but instead of succumbing to the temptation of System 1, System 2 will intervene and restrain it. System 2 understands that heuristics and biases are inappropriate in a businesslike, prudent decision-making state. Knowing the action is unequivocally irrational, they still make crucial decisions utilising either approval (finally selecting what System 1 has proposed) or rejection (needing System 2 to block System 1 response). Surprisingly, these SD makers tend to differ in their



predisposition to override their System 1 thinking. To be specific, participants appeared to differ in their inclination for System 2 engagement, e.g.:

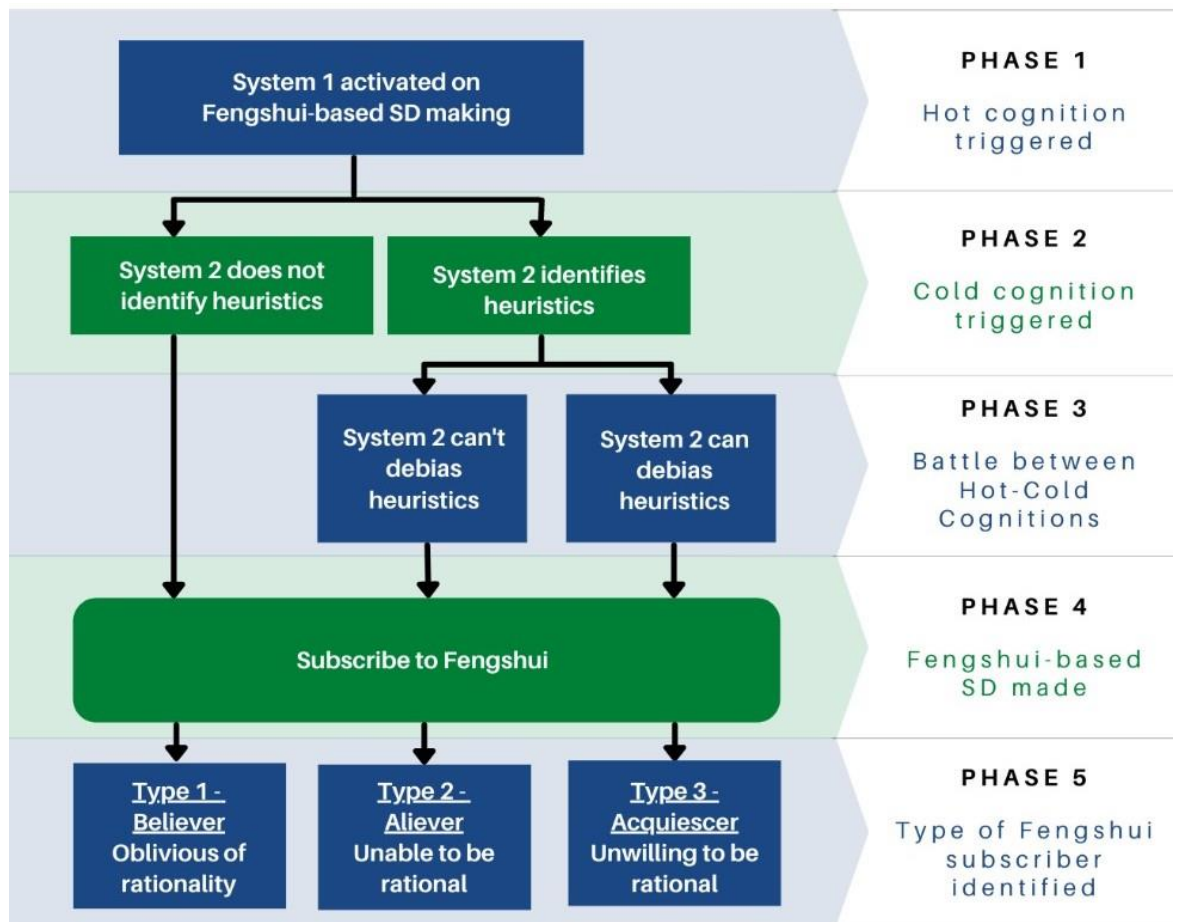
*“In the hospital project that I did with you, I would regard myself as a man of science, not a Fengshui believer. But I understood Fengshui bring good luck whether I believe in it or not, so I subscribed to it in my decision making anyway” (R2/D1/DI, per comm, 27 July 2020).*

Ergo, from the evidence review and supported by the findings in Chapter 4, the researcher introduces the Fengshui-based strategic decision-making model, categorically for the SD-making ecosystem in Malaysia’s property industry. The model, depicted in Figure 5-4, is adapted from the Dual systems of cognitive thought developed by Chicago Booth’s Jane Risen<sup>113</sup> (Risen, 2016, p. 184).

Braced by the findings in Chapter 4, the model explains why participants subscribed to Fengshui in SD making and organise them into distinct Fengshui subscriber types for easy future reference. This study combined Risen’s ideas into the dual systems account of Fengshui subscription to fit Malaysia's property industry use (Figure 5-2).

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<sup>113</sup> Unlike other models, Risen’s model distinguishes between detecting a fallacy and correcting it. Furthermore, she suggests that people can also maintain superstitious beliefs that they explicitly recognise are illogical (*ibid.*). To understand the battle between System 1 and System 2 thinking here (Figure 5-4), Hamilton (2016) reminds us that the System 1 thinking does not have to be appropriate, wise, or even factually correct to be validated by System 2 mind.



**Figure 5-2 Fengshui-based strategic decision-making model**  
 (Source: The Author)

As a result, a Fengshui-based SD framework categorically operates in Malaysia’s property industry SD-making ecosystem can be understood with the following main features:

1. System 1 processing is quick, autonomous, and Fengshui-based SD making resides. However, although it usually is effective, it occurs mainly subconsciously and relies heavily on heuristics, resulting in unchecked decision making prone to prejudice in the intuitive mode.
2. System 2 processing is intentional, relatively slower, rule-based, and under conscious control. Therefore, it can detect heuristics to minimise errors due to cognitive biases.

3. In the face of an ambiguous Fengshui-based SD making, stakeholders seem hardwired to use System 1 processing whenever possible.
4. In the form of decision biases or judgment biases, cognitive biases eventually lead to more common errors in System 1 thinking.
5. Excessive reliance on System 1 processes can overwhelm System 2, inhibiting reflection and counterproductive for anyone who wants to reduce or remove *biases*<sup>114</sup> from their cognitive strategy.
6. Upon employing System 2 thinking, detecting heuristics may still facilitate System 1 processing. A conscious attempt at debiasing can overcome biases that negatively affect decision making.

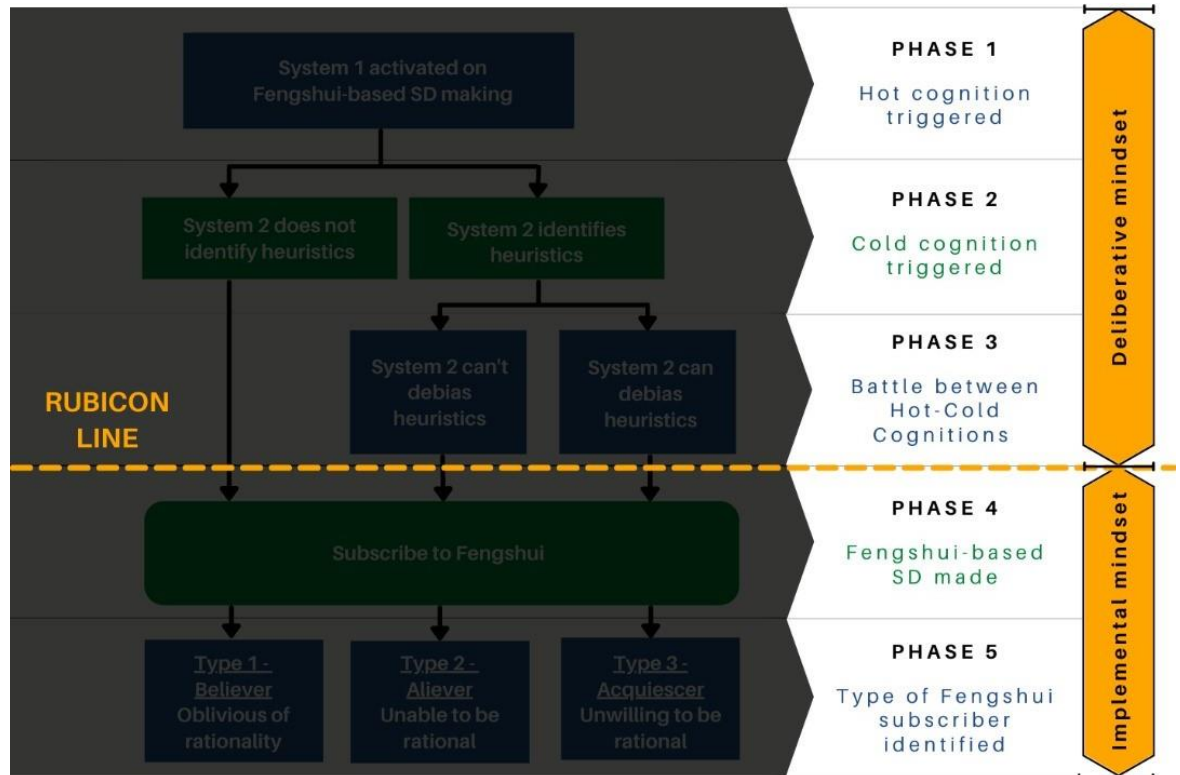
But,

7. **The findings in this study show that heuristics detected may or may not succeed in undertaking executive override, which is critical for debiasing.**
8. **Identifying the three possible types of Fengshui subscribers and their characteristics becomes critical to forming the framework in developing a Fengshui-based SD decision-making model.**

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<sup>114</sup> Keren (1990, p. 523) calls this act of removing bias as “debiasing”: A term that is still being used.

## 5.2.2 Expanding on the notion of two mindsets



**Figure 5-3 The Rubicon line in Fengshui-based SD-making model**  
(Source: The Author)

The threshold of mental modes (now referred to as the *Rubicon line*) has offered a persuasive illustration in understanding the participants' Fengshui-based decision making (Figure 5-3). This imaginary threshold separates the 'deliberative mindset' (Phases 1 to 3) and the 'implemental mindset' (Phases 4 and 5). Participants' Fengshui subscription intentionality differs between the deliberative and implemental mindset stages.

Following the discussion on the data in Section 4.5, the Rubicon line should be between Phase 3, during which the battle between hot and cold cognition occurs, and Phase 4, where the Fengshui-based SD occurs. It may not be a linear barrier but a liminal space where SD makers can remain deliberative or implement the choice.

*“Having dealt with so many buyers, I now realise that Fengshui subscribers are either behaving like believers or non-believers; there are no fence-sitters” (R9/RE1/DM, per comm, 22 September 2020).*

Before making a Fengshui-based decision, SD makers are in deliberation mode. The deliberative mindset is preoccupied with deciding what to believe. Phases 1 to 3 (Figure 5-3) are where the exploratory mind seeks out information and considers the pros and cons. Open-mindedness is frequently associated with a deliberative mindset.

Once a decision has been committed, the implemental perspective takes over to focus on delivering goals. The implemental mindset is presented in Figures 5-2 and 5-3 as Phases 4 and 5). Implemental mindsets do not squander cognitive resources in debating what to believe and what not to believe. Instead, it concentrates on execution. In this sense, the implemental mindset is a closed-minded mindset partial to evidence that backs up the course of action to fulfil the Fengshui-based decision.

Intrinsically, the Rubicon line is where the SD maker irreversibly commits cognitive resources. SD based on Fengshui is not a future cost that one can reverse without considerable mental energy and resources. The Rubicon idea appears to impact Fengshui-based SD making similar to the sunk cost fallacy in the research data. After investing time and emotional energy during the deliberative mindset stage, participants tend to continue pursuing their endeavour in the implemental mindset stage. More potent than the monetary

value, in this case, may well be a 'face-saving' factor in the authority figures that they can't be wrong.

Because each of the two mindset stages corresponds to a unique set of cognitive processes, the notion of the two mindsets is critical when creating a Fengshui-based SD-making model. Identifying the Fengshui subscriber type of the business opponent is incomplete without understanding at which stage and how their mindset operates. In the deliberative mindset mode, opponent SD makers deliberate before committing to a crucial decision. A deliberative mindset orients toward weighing the desirability and possibility of alternatives. A deliberative mindset is often broad-minded at the outset of a decision-making process because the SD maker may not know which attributes would be critical in determining the SD. Knowing that the opponent SD maker is in a deliberative mindset stage is valuable knowledge in Fengshui-based SD making. It means the opponent is still on the quest for decision-making materials and is susceptible to persuasion.

After having made a decision, SD makers are in implementation mode. SD makers in the 'implemental mindset' stage are significantly more focused. They have narrowed it down to one course of action as if knowing everything there is to know and care less about obtaining information about all the options. Zeroed in on one course of action, the implemental mindset is, in a sense, a close-minded mindset. As evidenced by data in Chapter 4, they become systematically predisposed towards their decision committed during the deliberative stage because they like to be victors and feel confident in their SD made. TMT, to save

face, tend to disregard evidence that contradicts their decision and seek out information that supports it.

*“I may not be what you called a staunch believer of Fengshui, but when the [Fengshui] master had explained why I must change the colour of my company logo and accepted it, I did not look back for any reconsideration. Implementation was the easy part; explaining to others why was tricky” (R10/C1/DM, per comm., 24 September 2020).*

Consistent with Hamilton (2016), when participants faced SD choosing goals versus implementing them, two stages of separate cognitive operations appeared activated. Task needs determine the characteristics that distinguish the deliberative versus implemental mindsets. It is essential to note from the data that the deliberative mindset appeared more risk-averse than the implemental mindset, e.g.:

*“It’s not easy for me to make a call knowingly premised on Fengshui ... ‘mindful that not every decision stakeholder would concur’. I’d usually tread with care and sensitivity. However, I’m not really sure why ... [once I have] decided, then I felt relieved. For better or worse, I can act rather than procrastinate. As you know, in construction, LAD [liquidated ascertained damages] is on day count” (R14/A2/DM, per comm, 25 February 2021).*

Recognising the two mindsets and determining where lies the Rubicon line will significantly aid in the design of the overall SD model's flow. Finding a means to match Fengshui subscriber type with SD-making mode now becomes more viable.

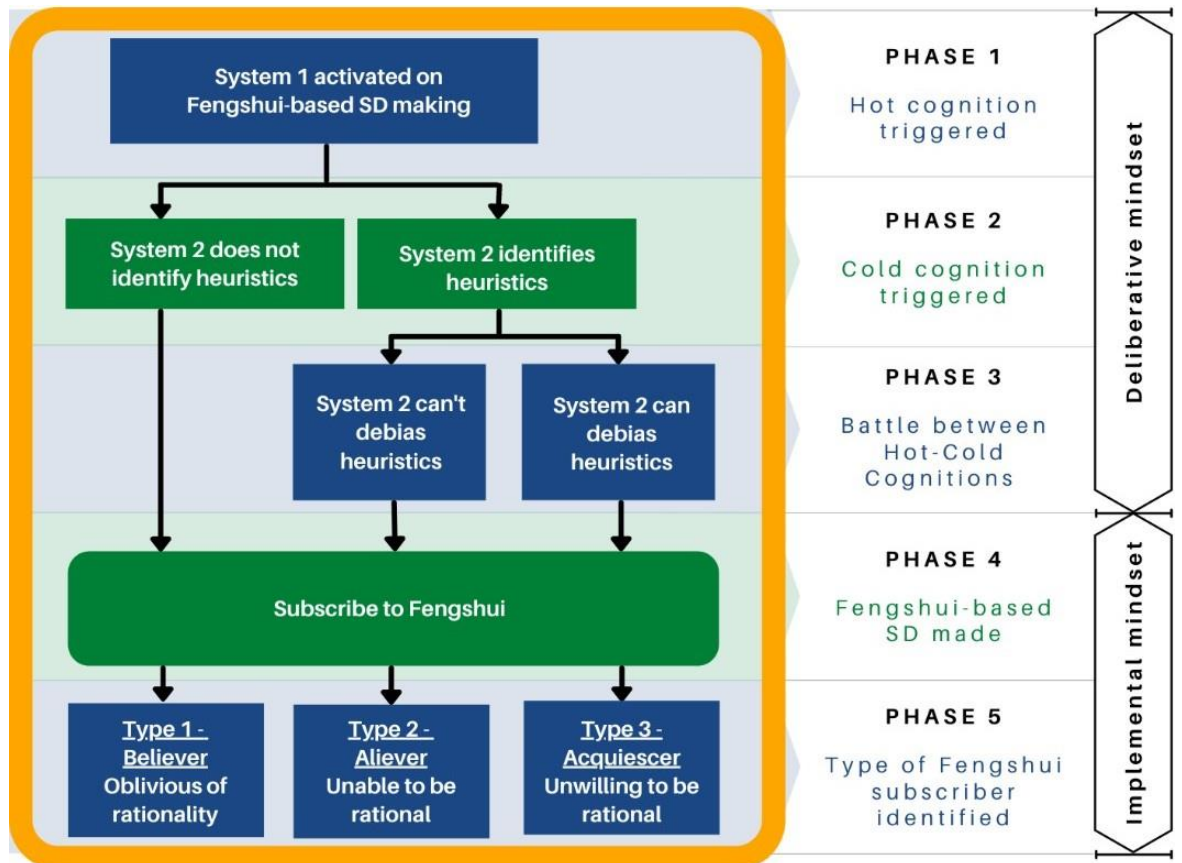
### **5.2.3 Framing a Fengshui-based strategic decision-making model**

The maxim of “all models are wrong, but some are useful” cited in Box and Draper (1987, p. 424) reminds us that every model is a simplification of reality. On the other hand, models do not have to be exact representations of reality to serve a purpose. Although these models are still imperfect, some of these flaws can be known and managed as model-based decision making. Because uncertainty and randomness are present in most real-world data, obtaining a perfect model can be unavailing. Instead, it is more valuable to develop a model that sufficiently represents a specific industry, has easy accessibility of data and the conditions necessary for its use.

A Fengshui-based SD-making model is an apparatus to recognise the gap of cognitive resistance and flow with the circumstances between the stakeholders due to the impact and influence of Fengshui in decision making. To Steiner (2012), a descriptive model suits various purposes, including behavioural, structural, and other definitions that create a conceptual relationship with the structure, such as its whole-part relationship, the interconnection of its parts, and the allocation of its behavioural elements to structural elements.

A descriptive model hence describes a system or other structure and its microenvironment relationship, which is necessary to specify and understand the phenomenon, what it does, and how it does it. Decision strategies are required to address still the grey area introduced by the descriptive model (Sheik, 2013).





**Figure 5-4 Dual systems account in Fengshui-based SD-making model**  
(Source: The Author)

Figure 5-4, which was developed by integrating the findings of this study with earlier work, shows System 1 thinking characteristics manifest in Phase 1. Here, the SD maker is confronting all sorts of cognitive biases and mental shortcuts in the form of heuristics. Phase 2 is where the SD maker tries to activate factors that influence System 2 engagement, including creating opportunities for reflection, recollecting contextual cues like accountability or the Board members' concurrence. Fengshui, after all, is unofficial knowledge that generally runs counter to business logic. Since it is distressing, the brain does not enjoy working so hard for so long. Because the endeavour is mentally effortful, it requires more cognitive resources (Jabr, 2012).

Phase 3 is where the battle begins between the SD maker's System 1 and System 2 thinking. The heuristics identified here can or will be corrected, at least to some extent. However, if the SD maker detects no heuristics in Phase 2, the Fengshui-based SD will be endorsed (as observed in the data analysis). This type of Believer SD maker is called a Type 1 subscriber or the oblivious of rationality. Although some success has been documented in debiasing biased clinical decision making (Croskerry *et al.*, 2013; Croskerry, 2009), there is no evidence, nor is it realistic to assume that debiasing can practically apply in the heterogeneous property industry setting of Malaysia. As such, the flows in the model are not bidirectional; for example, one does not detect heuristics and have them undetected next.

Phase 4 is the country's property industry ecosystem. The degree to which the SD maker want to deal with uncertainty during the decision-making pulse determines whether or not the intuitive System 2 is triggered. Supposing all SD makers nonetheless factor Fengshui in their SD making, then the process of identifying what kind of Fengshui subscribers can take place.

In Phase 5, with the Type 1 Believers identified earlier, other SD makers either believe or acquiesce to subscribing to Fengshui. An Aliever SD maker (a Type 2 subscriber) can detect heuristics but not correct them. In other words, a Type 2 subscriber is *unable* to be rational. An engineer who dares not stand on a glass bridge despite having designed and supervised its construction and witnessed many successfully used the bridge is characterised by Tamar Gendler (Gendler 2010; 2013) as having the engineer's belief of the bridge's integrity different from

his *alief* about it. In his rationalistic view, the engineer believes that the bridge is safe, but his groundless alief still prevents him from using it. As if the bridge can be sound and unsound in the mindset simultaneously, Fengshui can be authentic and phoney as a decision-making factor to the subscriber.

The participants, as Fengshui subscribers, are neither ignorant nor uninterested in examining why they make unscientific decisions. Research in superstition and magical thinking shows that sometimes these people believe things they know they should not (in particular, Risen, 2016). One of the critical elements of superstition is luck as a genuine factor in life: luck can be forecast, influenced or controlled by specific decisions to react to the knowledge (*ibid.*). In other words, subscribers realise that their intuition does not make rational sense but continue to pursue it. They detect a bias but ‘to err on the safe side’, prefer *not* to rectify; a phenomenon referred to in this study as the ‘Just-in-case’ syndrome (Section 4.5.2).

Finally, the SD maker detects the heuristic yet overridden by his Fengshui subscription. In this case, the SD maker recognises the irrationality of letting Fengshui factored in SD making but still acquiesces or assents to subscribing to Fengshui. Ergo, Type 3 Acquiescers can identify the heuristics but are *unwilling* to act rationally, although that may be their true nature. The impulse to conform to Fengshui subscription outweighs their desire to oppose it. Because they must ‘go along with’ the Fengshui subscription, setting an acquiescence or compliance mindset will be less self-contradictory.

Therefore, the proposed Fengshui subscriber taxonomy in Figure 5-4 comprises three types of subscribers. Type 1: the Believer who is oblivious of rationality; Type 2: the Aliever who knows it is irrational yet unable to overcome such cognitive stage; and Type 3: the Acqueiscer who knows it is irrational but is unwilling to be rational.

The Type 1 Fengshui subscribers are primarily System 1 thinkers oblivious of heuristics in place. Believers do not regard or appreciate others according to their worth, nor are they conscious of others' feelings. Instead of the intricacies and minute details, Believers want to know how to acquire what they desire, usually gains and fortunate, with Fengshui playing an important role. Because Believers are in touch with their own emotions, they want others to meet their values, listen to them attentively. Since Believers need to feel in charge, business leaders should connect perceptively with them if the strategy is to build rapport. While Type 2 Alievers seek security and avoid regrets, the Type 3 Fengshui subscribers mitigate anxiety by offering acquiescence or compliance.

The most vivid example is when the researcher used his neutral, bracketed self to interact with R2/D1/DI. The Aliever participant was already in the implemental mindset stage and merely cherrypicked data and assigned it a higher value to reinforce his mental conclusion rather than entertaining additional information:

*“Don’t you see, Chua? It confirms what I already knew. Data don’t lie. How else can you explain why 80 percent of the world’s buildings miss the 13<sup>th</sup> floor, airports lack the 13th gate, and airlines don’t have a 13th aisle? That’s why the maximum height of clinical floors allowed by*

CKAPS<sup>115</sup> is only 12!" (R2/DI/DI, per comm., 27 July 2020).

Attribute during SD making	Oblivious of rationality	Unable to be rational	Unwilling to be rational
Fengshui subscriber	Type 1	Type 2	Type 3
Name coined by researcher	Believer SD maker	Aliever SD maker	Acquiescer SD maker
<b>An explanatory anecdotal excerpt from the research data</b>	A well-known local property developer called for an urgent meeting to resolve a problem. The City Hall had allocated the address lot numbers in his prime housing development in the conventional manner, i.e. "1, 2, 3, 4...". " <b>Guys, by hook or crook, we must think of a way to appeal</b> " he raged, " <b>no way can we allow '4' in our scheme!</b> " (Note: The number '4' is homophonous to the word 'death').	An architect, who had practised in the local property industry for three decades, told me: " <i>I don't have any scientific evidence that Fengshui works</i> ". "So?", I probed. " <i>You know my practice was in the gutter in the 90s</i> ", he replied, " <i>but after we had a Fengshui master advised on how to renovate our office and conduct based on Bazi, things suddenly improved. I can't take the risk, just in case that wasn't a coincidence.</i> "	I paid a casual visit to the clinic of a friend, a prominent Malaysian gastroenterologist. The three-legged toad figure on his desk facing the main door caught my eyes. Knowing him well enough, I jocularly questioned, " <i>Why a man of science believes in a simple Fengshui object?</i> ". " <i>Of course, I don't believe in it,</i> " he responded, " <i>but the GM wants to bring the hospital luck whether doctors believe in it or not.</i> "

**Table 5-1 The characterisation of Fengshui subscribers in Malaysia**

With this knowledge and an awareness of the two mindset modes that operate during the deliberative and implemental stages, it is up to the business leader to

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<sup>115</sup> CKAPS stands for 'Cawangan Kawalan Amalan Perubatan Swasta' in Malay language, or the Private Medical Practice Control Branch of the Ministry of Health Malaysia.

alter his strategic posture and flow in accordance with the stakeholder buy-in requirements.

### **5.3 Espousing the Wuwei approach**

*Human beings, who are almost unique in having the ability to learn from the experience of others, are also remarkable for their apparent disinclination to do so. (Douglas Noel Adam, cited in Neubauer et al., 2019, p. 1)*

Because Fengshui-related issues are generally cryptic, the problem is usually the mental misalignment between the business leader and his opponent SD stakeholder. To resolve this requires first understanding the SD stakeholder's cognitive stages during the Fengshui-based decision making and determining what type of Fengshui subscriber the opponent is.

The Wuwei approach offers a framework for the business leader to know if the SD stakeholder he is dealing with is a Believer SD maker, an Aliiever SD maker, or Acquiescer SD maker. Identifying the SD subscriber type is crucial because it offers valuable decision-making information to, if necessary, (re)orientate at changing or influencing outcomes. Business leaders can leverage this information to improve strategic advantage over their SD stakeholders.

Fengshui is a *belief* that, when practised, would bring good luck, or on the contrary, would bring bad luck. As is evident by now, in Fengshui subscription, the fear for adversity is greater than the hope for reaping good fortune. When that risk or loss aversion gets combined with anchoring, stereotypes and other

beliefs, it creates a fertile ground for esoteric interpretations and magical thinking. Magical thinking sees correlations between events independent of each other, but that happened once simultaneously or seem to have something in common. Because of an aversion to uncertainty, there is an urge to find explanations, rationalisation, and availability heuristics about events.

A Fengshui-based SD-making model must be evidence-based and not made up. Using accurate primary data as the bedrock for model development is practical. However, that still leaves room for error in a demanding environment of decision making. It is still far too easy and familiar to posit unproven theories or approaches to explain the data, identify causes, and forecast outcomes. Even if the data itself is reliable, how is it used remains a crucial consideration, and this is where the idea of ‘evidence-based’ decision making becomes central. Instead of drowning in the illusion that business leaders in Malaysia’s property industry can effectively change such a powerful belief system of Fengshui, the proposed model effectually flows with it.

### **5.3.1 Preparation for Wuwei mindset**

The researcher offers the ‘Wuwei approach’, a schema that addresses the SD making in Malaysia’s property industry with Fengshui factored in. The Wuwei approach users, who are business leaders, must *ab initio* have identified the type of Fengshui subscriber encountered in the framework provided in this study. Wuwei redirects cognitive resources on what can be achieved rather than focusing on what the business leaders cannot control (Hamilton, 2016).

Approaching in this way avoids decision-making friction, hence significantly increasing the effectiveness of decision-making processes by anticipating or ‘flowing’ with the deficiencies that SD makers may incur (Adizes, 2004; Bazerman and Moore, 2013).

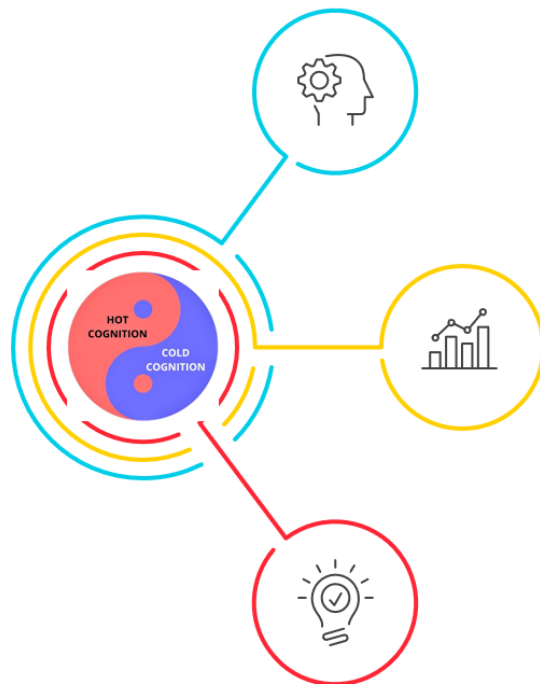
On this premise, the first step in minimising biases is to acknowledge them. Only by doing so can SD makers improve the quality of their decision making (*ibid.*). Concisely, the Wuwei approach recognises subscriber types and matches them with (re)action appropriate to achieve results with the least resistance. Without knowing what Fengshui subscriber type is the opponent, there will be no means to read between the lines to be flexible, agile and adaptable. After establishing the opponent’s Fengshui subscriber type, this study suggests using a simple CAP mnemonic to progress in a Wuwei manner.

The CAP:

- Control - When a business leader knows the opponent’s Fengshui subscriber type, he may edit out any discomfort as it emerges. Having understood his opponent’s motivation, the business leader controls what he is willing to do and why.
- Analysis - To overcome uncertainty and anxiety, analyse the confronted issues and recognise the experience and feeling. Reduce complex tasks to manageable chunks. Solutions frequently present themselves through action but avoid doing too much at once.



- Phronesis - Practise Wuwei by using practical wisdom instead of hurrying under pressure. Be precise, methodical, meticulous and treat every detail matters as interconnected. After that, flow like water effortlessly in SD making.



## CONTROL

Identify opponent's Fengshui subscriber type. Understand what you are willing to do and why. Have inner dialogue to make noises fall silent.

## ANALYSIS

Analyse with practical wisdom, calmly. It is not about ignoring problems but about seeing them in perspective so that you can act accordingly.

## PHRONESIS

Be vigilant to take advantage of the favourable circumstances that allow you to achieve your objective with the least possible effort.

**Figure 5-5 The CAP preparation for Wuwei mindset  
(Source: The Author)**

This phenomenological study is not a cookbook solution to the current challenges in a Fengshui-based SD-making property industry. Instead, it acts as an accessible pathway toward a novel attitude or mindset, a way of engaging Fengshui-based SD making that looks beyond the taken for granted. In the end, until scholars and practitioners discover a better answer, the Wuwei approach may be most appropriate in dealing with decision issues involving unjustifiable yet deeply held convictions in the local property industry.

The current pandemic forces business leaders to think deeply and broadly about responding to change and how a changing world will compel them to adapt. They have no control over the future, but they can influence how their relationship evolves from the inside out and shape strategies and SD making. Business leaders habitually resist change they cannot control—a change that surprises them, strays from their expectations, delays, or disrupts their plans. To address change, they require to build a flux mindset.

A skilled SD maker often includes a 'fluid attitude,' a value extending beyond agility and nimbleness. The capacity to hold paradox is one of the characteristics of a flux mindset. The ability to say:

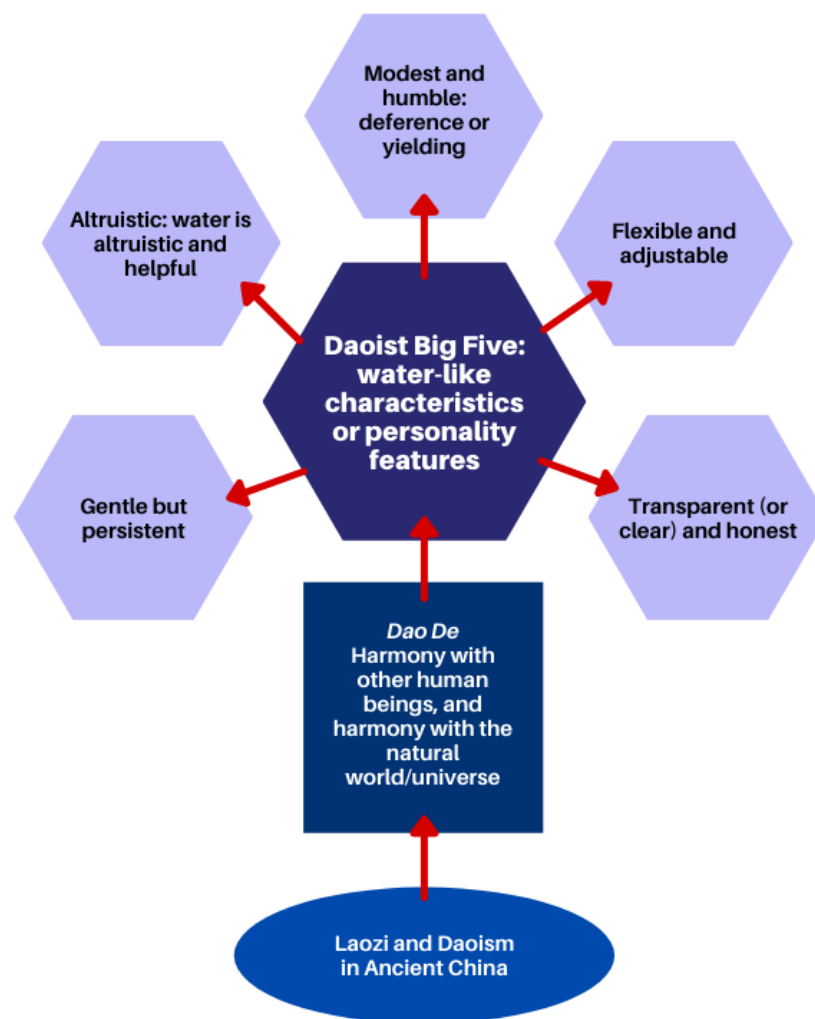
*"Yes, we perceive Fengshui pervades decision making. What am I to do? How am I to proceed? We [business leaders] aren't blind or daft. We can adapt to the most challenging issues, and we can adapt to the influence of Fengshui" (R14/A2/DM, per comm, 3 March 2021).*

Rather than allowing that anxiety to fester, the flux mindset seeks to transform it into correct action, proactivity while also taking control of the situation, as demonstrated in participant R14/A2/DM. The Wuwei approach is thus an adaptive mindset that combines behavioural insights with empirically tested results to address Fengshui-based SD making optimally.

### **5.3.2 Operationalising the Wuwei approach in Fengshui-based SD making**

Chapters 8 and 78 of the Chinese philosophical text Daodejing employ the metaphor of water as the ideal agent of transformation (Lee, 2008; Minford,

2018). Although water is soft and yielding, it will eventually erode stone. Change in this approach is intended to be passive, natural, harmonious and steady, albeit imperceptible (Minford, 2018). In other words, Daodejing suggests being like water, which is frail and submissive but unrivalled in its ability to assault the hard and heavy. The idea of achieving the most remarkable effects by a wide strategic passivity has been central to Chinese notions of politics, diplomacy in business. Rather than imposing a plan or formula on the situation, Daodejing recommends letting others act, never mind if frantically or erratically. Per contra, we adjust as we see the direction in which matters have evolved to fit our objective best.



**Figure 5-6 The Daoist model of fluidity**  
 (Source: Adapted from Lee *et al.*, 2008, p. 94)

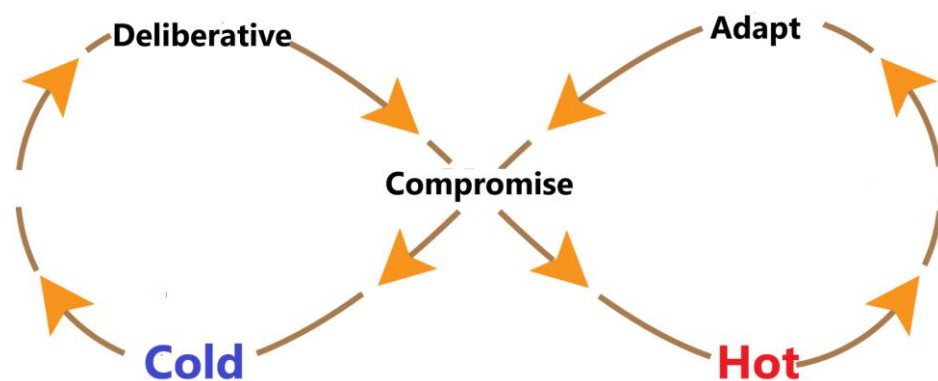
Intellectual humility encompasses an awareness of one's own biases and prejudices, over and above the limits of one's viewpoint and the amount of one's ignorance (Elder and Paul, 2012). The espoused Wuwei approach requires business leaders to possess intellectual humility, which includes recognising and embracing their intellectual limitations in pursuit of additional knowledge, truth, and understanding. Not all situations lend decision making to the Wuwei approach, but it is most certainly appropriate in a Fengshui-infused SD context.

Daodejing espouses against imposing a model on someone who does not conform to our plan (Lee *et al.*, 2008). Instead, we should let others be and equanimously adjust ourselves as we observe how things have proceeded. Thus, the Wuwei approach is not a rigid blueprint *per se* but an invitation to see the Wuwei principles under a fresh lens in business SD making. To avoid working against the natural order is the source of productivity. Water that flows from top to bottom is adaptable to changing circumstances. Rolling against the current will be difficult; flowing with it is a type of non-action to observe when next to react efficiently. As a result, SD makers read the situations and ride on the waves of the trend to get support and productivity.

If the problem is straightforward, measurable and objective, the Wuwei approach is unnecessary. Similarly, the bounded rationality approach to analysing human cognitive apparatus will not work in the Wuwei conundrum. Cognitive machinery constraints and how they lead to biases in judgments need to be investigated but using logic and reasoning to analyse decision making is a cold cognition method.

Business scholars have followed the prejudice of decision scholars and philosophers dating back hundreds of years in choosing this approach (Yang *et al.*, 2012).

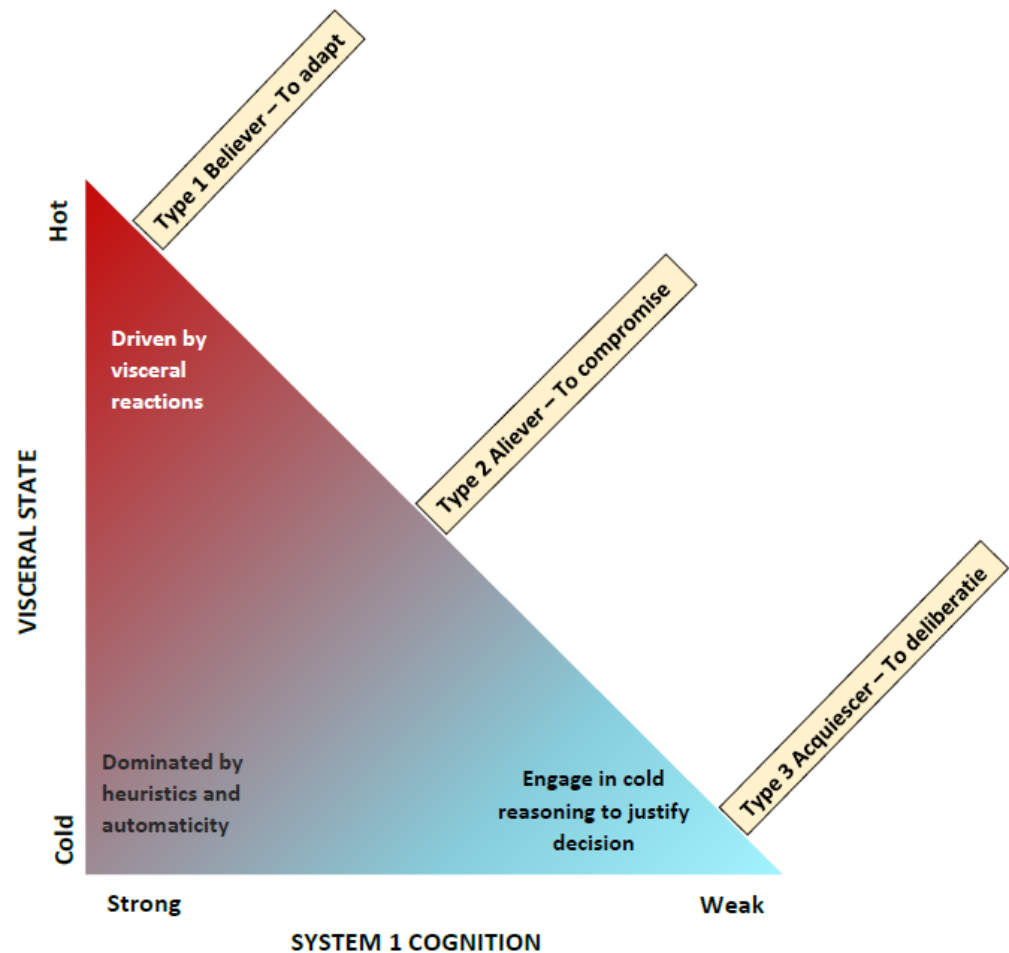
Indeed, according to Slingerland (2000; 2007), pursuing effortless and spontaneity has value. By comprehending and accepting the paradox, Wuwei makes the sentiment of cold cognitive activity as fluid as a hot cognition. It is not that early thinkers did not recognise the importance of emotion in decision making. However, because decision research primarily aimed toward improving decisions or comprehending rational choices, human sentiments and emotions were largely dismissed as a distraction (*ibid.*). In essence, hot cognition was set up to counterbalance cold cognition processes that were supposed to drive decision-making.



**Figure 5-7** Concept to address the Hot-Cold cognitive continuum  
(Source: The Author)

Given that Fengshui-based SD making operates in a culture of fluidity rather than rigorous science, this study has addressed this shortcoming by drawing inspiration from the CAP mindset outlined in Figure 5-5. Based on this research,

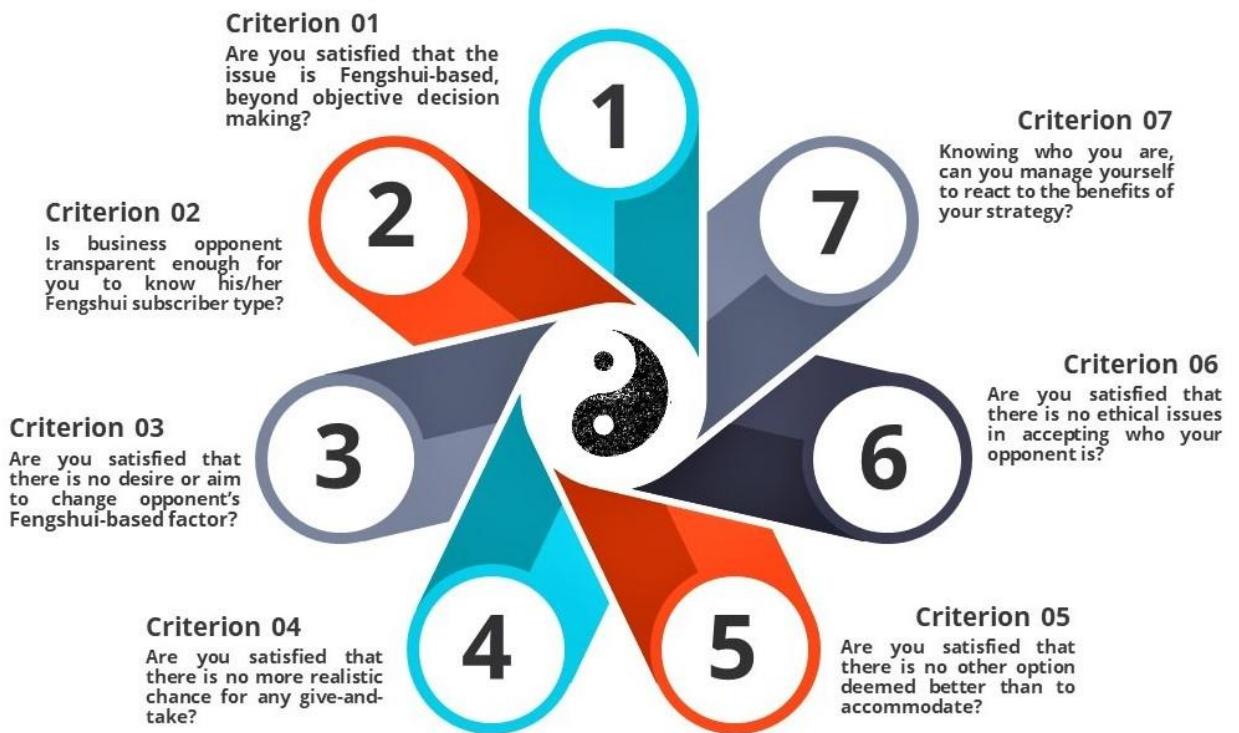
Figure 5-8 shows a diagram illustrating how the three Fengshui subscriber types are likely to fit into these emotions.



**Figure 5-8** The author's adaptation of the Hot-Cold decision triangle  
 (Source: Adapted and modified from the Hot-Cold decision triangle by Yang *et al.*, 2012, p. 497)

Despite being a passive strategy, the Wuwei approach must not deprive SD makers of the ability to exert influence to alter decision outcomes. On the contrary, it allows the practitioner to control human situations better by simply understanding the SD-making opponent. After implementing the Fengshui-based SD-making model, including identifying the opponents, viz. Type 1 (Believer), Type 2 (Aliever) or Type 3 (Acquiescer), aside from the ethical considerations outlined in Section 3.8, the researcher has proposed to go through

the following checklist of criteria (The 7-Criteria Checklist in Figure 5-9) before applying the Wuwei approach against business opponents:



**Figure 5-9 The 7-Criteria Checklist (Source: The Author)**

1. Are you satisfied that the issue is beyond objective decision making but is intimately associated with one's Fengshui beliefs, feelings, perspectives and biases?
2. Are your business opponents showing transparency enough for you to identify their Fengshui subscriber type satisfactorily?
3. Are you satisfied that there is no desire or aim to change their SD-making factor?
4. Are you satisfied that there is no more realistic chance for any give-and-take?
5. Is there any other option deemed a better alternative to accommodating?
6. Are you satisfied that there are no ethical issues in accepting who they are?





opponent, it will be wise to cater to a System 1 thinker with expected hot cognitions rather than investing unnecessarily in cognitive and tangible resources with hard cold facts and indices. Correspondingly, using hot cognition or mental shortcuts like sensing and intuition on an Acquiescer instead of System 2 reasoning would only reduce the likelihood of a Fengshui-based SD to conclude.

Bemoaning how Fengshui has impacted TMT's SD making is thought-provoking. Although business leaders can't change how their business opponents make SD decisions, they are in complete control of who they are and how they react. It is not helpful if business leaders cannot adjust their strategic posture and yet must, in the meantime, cope with it as they stand in their pursuit of some closure of dealing with the people they find on the other side of the table. "I have always been deciding this way" (R8/FM2/P, per. comm, 31 August 2020) is a statement that effectively abdicated personal guilt and stifled the need to understand any possible rationale. To deal with it or exit is decision business leaders have to make.

### **5.3.3 The Wuwei Model**

In Malaysia's property industry, it is astute and relatively painless to hold stakeholders in due regard, respect their worth, values and beliefs, and yet disagree with the particular point. As a result, it is always worthwhile to assess whether the notion of 'winning' the specific issue is more important than preserving a robust relationship with them. In the same breath of the mindset and approach of the Wuwei philosophy, allowing the opponent to sense some

victory is equally, if not more, significant than the Win-Lose strategy, which is typically short-termism.

Fengshui-based SD situations are usually fragile and unique. Wuwei requires momentarily letting go of values that business leaders would otherwise want to impose on things aggressively. Instead, it invites them to respond to the actual quintessential requirements of the situation, which tend only to be perceived when they put their ego-driven plans to one side. A loss of self-consciousness and a new harmony between the SD maker and his actual circumstances may develop.

This approach also aligns with a core part of Chinese philosophy in business to maintain positive *guanxi* (关系) with business friends and foes alike; therefore, the strategy is long term. Making things happen by deception, exercising the desire to dominate everything, and coercing strategic conditions and adversaries to our will are all short-termism, counterproductive, increase disdain and distrust, and are not sustainable in the long run.

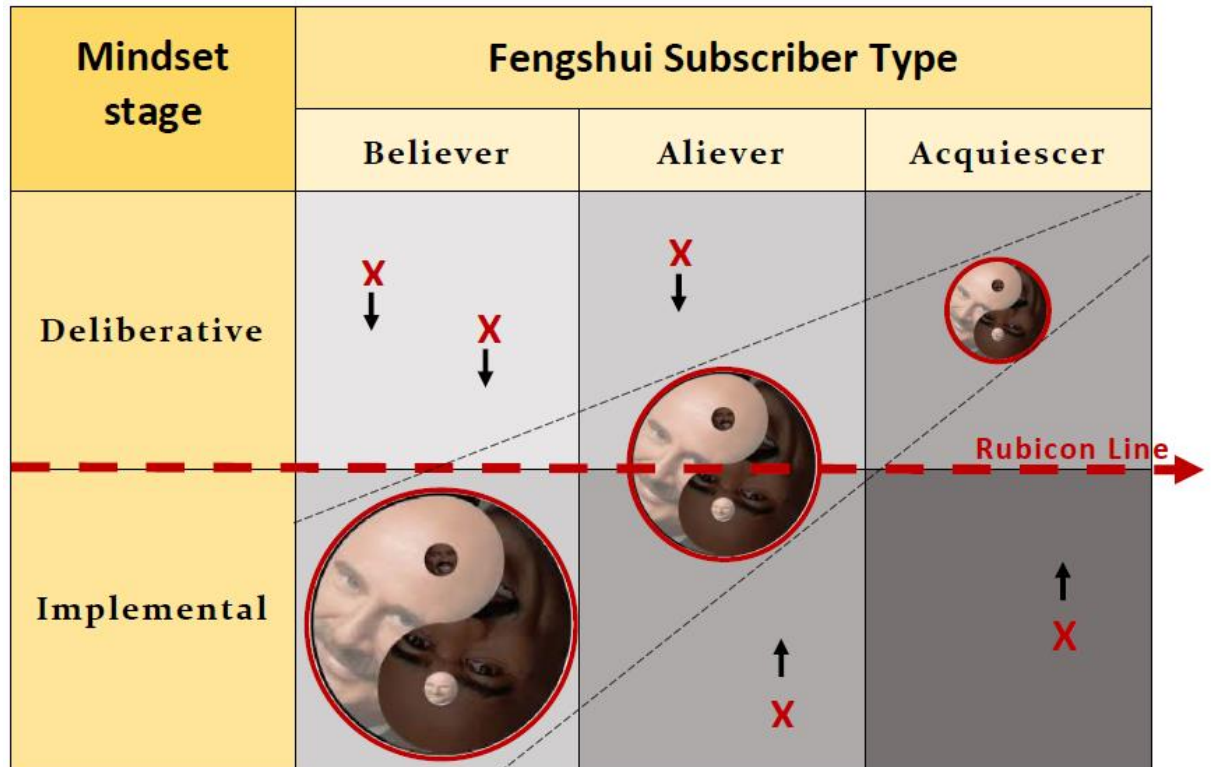
Wuwei, as an approach, is not about making SD faster, thereby risking quality, value, and business relationships. Wuwei is about removing indecision, decisional friction and cognitive dissonance, which generally results in real progress in SD making, improved SD stakeholder satisfaction, and increased decision quality (Howard, 1988; see also R7/P1/DM, per. comm, 20 August 2020). Activity is non-value-adding when it results in cognitive dissonance reconciliation, rework time and time wasted due to business indecision. People confronting non-value-adding activities should react smarter, not harder.

The essence of Wuwei manifests when one is being "in the zone" doing in a state of profound focus and flow, or, to simply put, using the minimal amount of energy to obtain the maximum results (Slingerland, 2000, *passim*). Wuwei has an inextricable connection to the Daoist concept of the natural world. When we swim with the current rather than against it, we achieve spontaneity in our actions. In other words, we should strive to make our approach authentic to align with the present issue and accept the flow and course of the nature of the decision.

In his theoretical text, Laozi's political theory on Wuwei challenges the present efficacy of strategic decision making and encourages business leaders to respect natural law. Laozi contends that the current governance system, with its aggressive, rigid, and authoritarian elements, is insufficient to achieve strategic control; hence he proposes alternative governance based on Natural Law (Ziran 自然) (Moon, 2015). Although it cannot be exact in all cases, in the absence of tangible parameters, the expedience to apply Wuwei appears sensible to deal with a soft factor such as Fengshui-infused SD making.

Data of the research context, from which the Wuwei approach underpins, also supports the development of a Wuwei Model in this study. In principle, it is to help the business leader to match or acclimate to the SD opponent's mindset. Figure 5-11 shows the domain (with yin-yang depiction) representing the SD opponent's biases that the business leader must contend with. We live in different realities, but we are unaware of how vastly dissimilar they are from one another.

Rather than wasting cognitive resources to change Fengshui-based heuristics and biases, business leaders could focus on flowing with the value that matters most during the Fengshui-based SD impulses.



**Figure 5-11 The Wuwei Model**  
 (Source: The Author)

The Wuwei Model, reflecting the mindset of Fengshui-based SD makers, can help business leaders navigate, adapt, or match the paradigm that affects one of the three Fengshui subscriber types this research has found. There is no favourable or unfavourable square in the model. Marked as “X” are instances where the business leader misaligns with the decision-making mindset of the opponent SD maker. To reduce judgment errors and cognitive dissonance, “X” should gravitate toward the respective mindset domain (the yin-yang circle) for improved decision outcomes. Otherwise, if the misalignment gap persists, there will be little chance of reconciliation or conclusion of the Fengshui-based SD.

On the one extreme, a Believer in the implemental mindset mode has little to no need of weighing the prospects for a change of heart. On the other hand, Acquiescers operating within a deliberative mindset stage are still thinking about whether the Fengshui-based decision is appropriate or manageable; as a result, they are still seeking information vital to them in making the ultimate decision. With this backdrop, business leaders can exploit the Wuwei Model to align the values that matter most during decision-making impulses.

After establishing the Rubicon line and determining which Fengshui subscriber type represents the opponent SD maker, the model offers a clear sense of where and when to generate input to influence critical decision-making. Input generation could be as simple as a timely and topical business discourse personally attended by the business leader or any intelligent transaction of appropriate communication media at the right timing. Because different Fengshui subscriber types bring different knowledge to the table, referring to the Wuwei Model should discover synergies for improved decision quality. The model's ability to access the unshared insight intrinsic in Fengshui-based SD making makes it a handy instrument.

The Wuwei approach has illustrated how a business leader can affect decision quality via effortless action or spontaneity. Viewing SD-making mindset from this lens avoids being confrontational contentious, or rash in its pursuit of decision-making closure. Instead, those employing the Wuwei approach may benefit from a contemplative practice and contextual sensitivity to achieve harmonious long-

term business relationships or *guanxi*. While the Wuwei Model guides business leaders to adopt the correct mental posture and pursue the relevant questions, it does not provide all the solutions. They will need to combine the appropriate intention with the proper knowledge, soft skill, and experience.

Not struggle too much to overcome the problem but resonate with it to overcome it seems conceptually apt in the Wuwei Model, albeit abstract. Watts (2020) believes that the Wuwei concept is critical for learning to be harmonious with the environment (in this case, the property business environment) but challenging for Westerners to recognise its value. In the Western action-oriented culture, 'inexertion' or 'effortless action' sounds illogical. But, to put it in a Western context, Wuwei is most notably reminiscent of 'going with the flow' in flux mindset (Rinne, 2021), stoicism (Benetatou, 2013) and Husserlian phenomenology's epoché concept (Woo, 1984).

The Wuwei Model leverages constant change as an opportunity, not a threat. Current decision theories are of a fixed mindset, but the Wuwei approach calls for an adaptive attitude that focuses on the reality in any given situation, rational or irrational. That is not to say that business leaders ignore irrationality or make light of superstitious practices. They are just non-judgemental in their attitude to any situations involving SD making. Although the Wuwei approach cannot be a blueprint across an organisation or industry, the archetype offers the innate ideas on which business scholarship can develop academically and professionally.

Wuwei has yet to be empirically tested or evaluated in corporate contexts. Despite that, the various discussions in this study present that Wuwei and non-striving may be relevant for Fengshui-based SD making. Furthermore, given that Wuwei and flow are closely linked (e.g. Kee *et al.*, 2021; Slingerland, 2000), SD makers in Malaysia's property industry could consider how Wuwei may facilitate their flow experience in abstract decision making beyond the existing approaches.

#### **5.3.4 The contrast of Wuwei Model to existing decision-making models**

The researcher has maintained a reflexive quest for Fengshui-based SD throughout the past three decades in the property industry. As an active practitioner with a British MBA, he realises through formal business knowledge and experience that the existing decision-making models are ineffective in the real world if the TMT in Malaysia's property industry uses any at all. However, there was no formal evidence or systematic research to support this claim. Fengshui-based SD making operates in an existential condition with no certainty nor science to answer or resolve. Business leaders who have to confront Fengshui-infused SD are always on the verge of anxiety or cognitive dissonance. As a result, this project has been a long-awaited and much-needed undertaking for the researcher and his industry.

Unlike the Wuwei Model, which adjusts to the situation, **rational decision-making models** (Section 2.5.1) appear impractical in Malaysia's property industry given the complex challenges confronting SD makers in a Fengshui-based environment entangled with cognitive biases, emotions and subjectivities.

SD making is complicated enough due to a lack of accurate information and limited time. Based upon facts and analysis, rational decision-making models unduly show how people should systematically choose a course of action (Uzonwanne, 2016), assume that they can find and collect helpful information supporting their decisions, mindful of costs and benefits (Scott, 2000). But, Fengshui-based SD decision making is the polar opposite, more mindboggling and deleterious since it is characterised by irrational decisions made without a predetermined context. The proposed Wuwei Model aptly considers the situation and which Fengshui subscriber type is the business opponent to determine which mental posture or SD-making mindset will most effectively respond to optimal decision outcome.

That said, even with adequate knowledge and time, SD makers in a Fengshui-based SD making situation cannot know the outcome of each alternative until they have chosen that alternative. As a result, even the **bounded rationality models** discussed in Section 2.5.2 that are inclined to satisfice and accept the first alternative that meets the minimum criterion (Sent, 2017) would be inferior to the Wuwei Model. Rationality in such a model is bounded by our cognitive abilities, knowledge, and time (Simon, 1982). Still, it lacks the agility of the Wuwei Model to adapt to changing circumstances for the best decision outcome. After all, Wuwei is about adapting to change and not relying on unnatural force to make business decisions.



Also, as outlined in Section 2.5.3, **intuitive decision-making models** emphasise the decision-making process as less rational, more creative, and improvisational, analogous to making do with what is available (Burke and Miller, 1999). Although closer to our proposed model, intuitive decision-making models have major downsides not present in the Wuwei Model. The current model is flawed in a group decision-making environment because individuals have different intuitive perceptions. Essentially, perspectives, views and mindsets are not static in the actual vignette of Fengshui subscription in this property industry. Wuwei Model, as elaborated, does not require a meeting of the minds. As demonstrated by the data underpinning the Wuwei Model, mindsets vary in a manner similar to possessing a threshold of mindset stages (Rubicon line).

Compared to existing intuitive decision-making models, the proposed model provided a compelling illustration for comprehending subscribers' Fengshui-infused decision-making so that business leaders can regulate themselves, (re)adjust their mental posture and react with practical wisdom (Phronesis). "Deliberative mindset" (Phases 1-3) and "implemental mindset" (Phases 4-5) are separated by this imaginary Rubicon line. Mindset and intentionality in Fengshui subscriptions, which shift between the deliberative and implemental stages, are incompatible with current decision-making theories. Hence, developing a novel decision-making paradigm is proven necessary.

#### **5.4 Significant original contribution to knowledge**

Fengshui subscribers do not tend to act rationally in their SD making. In truth, they tend to act irrationally but in conducts that can be studied. The Wuwei mindset is not about passivity or taking the easy way out regarding Fengshui-based SD making. It is about handling it in emotional and intellectual preparedness without inept effort. This research sets to demonstrate that only by integrating the contextual reality of Malaysia's property can a clear understanding of the influences of Fengshui in SD making be rooted. By advancing the theoretical insight, followed by a practical model that incorporates the Wuwei mindset and empirically-tested research propositions, this study claims to noteworthily contribute to the current body of knowledge in the field.

On the one hand, this research is empirical because it relies on empirical evidence to support its findings. On the other hand, this study also has significant philosophical ramifications for how Chinese geomancy understands the nature of reality in business and the nature of reality itself. It will serve as an overdue cue for business scholars to quit examing Fengshui-related issues from an inaccurate ontological perspective. While Westerners' worldview attempts to mitigate significant adverse decisional impacts on tangible values, the Chinese are more accommodating and can convert negative outlooks to a holistic view of reality<sup>116</sup>. It may be uncanny to the general Western worldview for the Chinese to avert

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<sup>116</sup> One of Daoism's ontological tenets, "Tian-Di-Ren", or the unity of Man and Nature, emphasises man's oneness with nature and the importance of adapting to changing circumstances. Laozi emphasises the importance of suppressing unwholesome desires and avoiding extraneous pursuits.

confrontational SD making, but going with the flow and ultimately accepting one's destiny are millennia-old virtues, the data manifest, still very much alive.

This study has overwhelming data suggesting that the SD makers process information inside their mind-dependent 'reality' in the natural business environment. A typical illustration is a report like,

*“Personally, when I factored Fengshui into my search and purchase of suitable plots, I felt ‘guided’, you know. It added reason and set parameters to my decision-making process” (R6/AI/DM, per. comm, 14 August 2020).*

There is theoretical significance to pursue deeper along these lines, at least in the Malaysian context, to locate the mainspring of Fengshui-infused SD making. It will also be both practically and academically captivating to test the extent of the applicability Wuwei approach in other industries in Malaysia under similar conditions. If the results are less generalisable to other industries, why? If this study can spawn a theoretical discourse on engaging the passivity of Wuwei in Fengshui-based SD making, that will be a bonus.

Right now, key property industry players are not necessarily making informed decisions. They are unclear about when or how they allow crucial decision making to be influenced by Fengshui. Worse, informed choices may even mean a different thing altogether with the imminent arrival of artificial intelligence (AI) and Big Data in the property industry of Malaysia. Both practitioners and scholars need to understand better and faster what drives SDs in this space and what interventions might effectively give SD makers meaningful control over their

data. As firm data collection practices and the algorithms that use this data become more sophisticated and opaque to the average consumer, what constitutes meaningful control in a Fengshui-charged SD is an interesting question in and of itself.

In the future, more significant efforts should focus on developing a theoretical account of Fengshui based on cognitive behavioural themes —this may increase our understanding of how Fengshui-based decision making can face the epoch of AI. What has started to gain traction in coming research is the area that focuses on the intersection of SD making, property industry in AI, and behavioural science.

The practical implications of this study pave the way for the various actors in other industries. Business leaders targeting robust growth should be reasonably accommodating and not needlessly aggressive. To do that, they (re)orientate to match the subscriber type to maximise value without getting on the opponent's nerve. Matching Fengshui subscriber types with decision-making styles appears to be crucial to sustaining long-term benefits and values. Decision-making styles are not necessarily static, and business leaders may adapt their approach to changed circumstances. They may even play a prominent role in the process of change.

This study also shows the importance of accounting for Fengshui in SD making; there are theoretical gaps to explore and fill in pursuing other vital biases such as confirmation bias or authority bias in other unorthodox belief systems. The

breadth of this study covering Fengshui, cognitive mechanisms, and SD making has already led to significant insights, especially concerning the conditions in which cognitive biases most commonly arise and who may be predisposed to experiencing them.

Key players in Malaysia's property industry should be aware of the different types of Fengshui subscribers and how they behave. The significance and novelty of this study stem from the proposal of a model that one can use to identify Fengshui subscriber types. It further sheds new light on the Fengshui-based SD-making phases via the deliberative and implemental mindsets of the SD makers seen between the Rubicon line. The Wuwei approach espoused by this study allows business leaders to address Fengshui-based SD making and be adaptable.

According to Ahmadi and Osman (2017), strategic flexibility in decision making offers business leaders to respond to SD-making moments with more efficiency and agility by rapidly re-posturing themselves to new approaches to respond effectively to SD makers. Likewise, the Fengshui-based SD-making model can help business leaders optimise goals in SD making with the least friction possible.

The findings in this study benefit multinational corporations by assisting expatriates in better preparing for foreign assignments on this abstract yet impactful subject within Malaysia's property industry. This study illuminates business leaders in training programmes for human resource departments by allowing for appreciation and roadmap to face Fengshui-based SD making in Malaysian business and societal viewpoints.

## 5.5 Limitations

Besides the methodological drawbacks already addressed broadly in Section 3.9, this section covers other atypical limitations worthy of revealing. Although Malaysia is a multicultural and multireligious country, Islam is the state religion; hence practising Fengshui without restraint is deemed unIslamic and unsuitable when Muslims are involved. To gain further academic legitimacy for a Fengshui-based SD-making theory will likely confront resistance in the local institutional perception of an Islamic country. For the same reason, the researcher detected uneasiness and doubts in the few Muslim participants in the interviews, which might have thwarted the study to dive into a deeper level of their lived experience sharing.

The Wuwei approach, as a Fengshui-based SD-making model, also assumes that the activation of Fengshui-based heuristics in SD is a given. The degree to which other SD stakeholders are already or readily mindful of the heuristic and how it can easily map the features of System 1 processing is unknown; this may influence whether or not the heuristic is operating in the first place. Furthermore, the dichotomous interpretation of System 2 as either engaging or not engaging is an oversimplification. System 2 may participate to a greater or lesser extent. Finally, the characteristics of System 1 that elicit numinous intuitions and the factors that affect System 2 involvement are intended to be examples rather than exhaustive lists.

The criteria for implementing the Wuwei approach (as shown in Section 5.3) assume that the business leader applying the model possesses comparable aptitude as the researcher. One may plausibly argue that the researcher's decades of experience in the field make it difficult, if not impossible, to replicate him in assessing the criteria of implementing the Wuwei approach competently within the property industry.

Wuwei is about allowing for flow and avoiding the use of undue force in business decision making. However, a TMT leading a listed property company who has started a project from a hard-nosed, objective data-driven SD making position can still later shift to radical openness, subjective and willingness to listen, as can be vivified in:

*“We humans are contradictory beings [and] what we believe can conflict with what we do ... that includes you and me too ... Sorry to say that but it is true. In some of my important meetings, I sometimes stupefied myself by beginning with an objective mindset, but ... ended up with unusual biases infused ... [voice volume reduced] ... which is fascinating but also quite terrifying” (R1/P2/DI, per comm, 24 July 2020).*

Business leaders who aspire to succeed will need the capacity to oscillate between different cognitive approaches, depending on the context. They should not try to force the other party's hand in a way that intentionally tipped the advantage your way. However, it may be difficult to tell when someone is trying *too hard*. Yet, to fund long-term sustainable success in personal life and business, the goal is to find that regulatory fit that allows everyone to win, perceived or otherwise.

Another limitation of the Wuwei approach as an archetype for matching Fengshui subscriber types to operational emotions is that the research data, upon which the model used, cast an excessively narrow theoretical net. For instance, an ethnographic or participatory action research method that one can consciously train oneself to receive new behavioural insights and possibly debiasing the decision context may yield different modelling results.

## **5.6 Recommendations for future research**

The majority of the journal articles reviewed (81) are quantitative; 20 research relied on anecdotal evidence of primary sources produced by others, while the remaining studies (18) are qualitative analyses. It strains credulity to observe that, for a pseudoscientific subject, the number of recent research papers that lean so heavily on quantitative investigations. Granted that it is neither theoretically complete nor stable enough to be examined qualitatively, but future research must not sidestep the subject just because it is cumbersome to conduct Fengshui related studies in a natural business milieu.

Using a positivist approach to explore the subjective Fengshui-based decision making is problematic and risks disconnected from the real-world application. Instead of viewing the subject from a single reality lens, this research has uncluttered the outlook for future researchers to dig deeper with the idealist approach. This study has shown that the SD makers manufacture information in the mind-dependent 'reality' in the natural business environment. Future



research should pursue further and deeper in this direction without qualms, at least in the Malaysian context, if not beyond.

Also, it is worth considering a research paradigm that is diametrical to this study for the sake of comparison and triangulation purposes. Using the radical structuralist paradigm (*vide* Burrell and Morgan's matrix in Figure 3-1) in investigating the same research objective within the same property industry will be scholarly exciting as this study has only sought to explain the participants' viewpoint in non-interventionist nature. A qualitative perspective, specifically interpretive phenomenological study where bracketing is unnecessary, can also offer alternative in-depth analysis and detailed explanations on subscribers' decision making vis-à-vis the influence of Fengshui upon them.

Findings in this study open new avenues of research. The novel approach to SD making in Malaysia's property industry has pointed to the need for future studies to investigate the impact of socio-cultural characteristics and social value orientation, which affect SD making. Though this study rests squarely within an interpretive/social realist approach (revisit Burrell and Morgan's matrix in Figure 3-1) of the research paradigm, it is worth examining whether employing a quantitative methodology will yield different findings. Such contrast can open up new fertile ground for research on this area.

It will be a noteworthy recommendation for future research to investigate in greater detail the concept of the two mindsets between the Rubicon line introduced in this study. Considering that this research was conducted in a

natural setting on fourteen participants within a specific period, future studies can be conducted longitudinally from the deliberative mindset stage of people to their implementation mindset stage. There is a lot of room for experimentation and to verify chronologically if the Rubicon line is genuinely consistent with altering decision-making modes. It will be helpful to determine whether the Rubicon line unaffectedly represents the point at which mindsets shift. Can the deliberative and implemental mindsets interchange, and, if so, what factors may drive SD makers to do so.

Another exciting prospective path is to utilise the Fengshui-based SD-making model for other debiasing strategies. Business people do not like the cognitive load of making decisions, particularly the strategic ones, under uncertain circumstances with limited time and information. It should be intriguing to study the effectiveness of the Wuwei approach beyond the benefits of individual TMT members and combine it with another strategy to improve team performance.

An unexpected outcome of this study that has future research implications is the relationship between Fengshui subscriber types and the local leadership styles. As the trajectory of this study establishes further, more research concentrating on Fengshui-influenced leadership styles is encouraged, not only on cognition studies relatively decision making but specifically on the Fengshui-influenced domestic markets. While this part of the inquiry is still embryonic, the researcher continues to follow in his profession, debates about the best strategies for the management of Fengshui in the property industry.

Finally, it will be interesting to explore with scholarly tact if the Malay Muslims (who by the very tenets of Islam should not subscribe to the Malay Fengshui Tajul Muluk) allow the belief to affect SD making subliminally. Another interesting extension of the current study is to step back and reconsider if Fengshui is a small sub-set of SD making, like determining which parcel of land to purchase? Or, is it a more comprehensive array of choices ranging from deciding what property product mix to assembling a project team<sup>117</sup>?

## **5.7 Conclusion**

Fengshui, as a practice, is defying logic. As it were, Malaysia's property industry is the same to a large extent. This study confirms that Fengshui is one of the most revered considerations for the TMT in Malaysia's property market because it spurs decision making and action. If beauty is in the beholder's eye, perhaps Fengshui rationality is in the mind's eye of the subscriber. Business leaders still have to address the problem because heuristics and cognitive biases can prevent SD makers from both sides from attaining a quality decision outcome.

### **5.7.1 Concluding remarks**

The findings of this study back up the researcher's decades of anecdotal evidence gained as a practitioner in Malaysia, demonstrating that business leaders in the property industry indeed do not always act as rational decision makers. Key

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<sup>117</sup> Our belief systems and emotions almost always infiltrate our thinking and direct our actions, as many philosophers have suspected for a long time (examples are Aristotle, 350 BCE/1991 and Hume, 1739/1978).

decision makers are largely unaware of the orthodox decision-making models, and much alone assume they use them in Fengshui-based decision making, which usually occurs under information and time duress. Therefore, the resulting heuristics and biases can lead to costly errors.

Trends hastened by the pandemic have resulted in fundamental shifts in how organisations operate in the next normal. However, these changes may not be enough to ensure success in the post-COVID-19 era. To adapt to a changing future, business leaders must delve deeper into insights and rethink SD-making strategies in the post-disruption era to remain viable.

This research also validates that, in the Fengshui-infused SD-making situation, the TMT SD makers in the property industry are not particularly ingrained in achieving objectively optimal decisions in a general sense. Like any human being, they naturally fall into satisficing and then rationalise whatever decisions they make, convincing themselves that those are quality decisions. To do that, they inadvertently adopt various known heuristics and cognitive biases (such as confirmation bias and self-serving bias) to strengthen their illusion of control. The three themes synthesised from the data are (a) Belief Bias, (b) Just-in-case Syndrome, and (c) Compliance Mindset (Table 4-3). In Chapters 4 and 5, the relevant participant verbatims help to illuminate a particular lived experience or add value to the discussion of thematic findings.

To say Fengshui-based SD making is hard to address is an understatement. Yet, the solution can be framed, excogitated and modelled, as exemplified in Chapter

5. However, most participants understood that as SD makers, they did not possess the ability, time, and cognitive resources to evaluate each alternative SD against the others. SD making to them was, admittedly, not a scientific discipline to make value judgments. Nor were they so parochial to hope for a decision-making apparatus to identify logical tradeoffs that might accompany any particular action or inaction.

Evident by now, Fengshui is also a form of cultural practice. However, the culture<sup>118</sup> here is not conventional as per the conception of Hofstede (2001) or Schein (2017). Anecdotally, Fengshui should not even exist from a contemporary management perspective, much less be factored into or subscribed in SD making. Culture break is frequently the most challenging transformation component for organisations aiming to become more adaptive and innovative.

Some argue that belief in lucky charm objects and symbols is epistemically dubious and unjustified. Even so, if buying a property of excellent Fengshui considered fortunate allows people to be more hopeful, optimistic, and persistent (and even more successful), the logic of this strategy is far from over. Many public and private properties in Malaysia follow the design principles of Fengshui as a form of magical thinking. This Chinese belief system relates a location's energy flows to the arrangement of buildings and design elements.

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<sup>118</sup> Drucker's metaphor *Culture eats strategy for breakfast* may be misleading if read with inadequate analysis. Sure, culture can derail the success of our business, but to imply that culture can consume strategy may be misconstrued as culture being fundamentally a stronger driver of our success.

Participants agreed that organising the workplace according to Fengshui principles, for instance, had helped them achieve wealth and luck. Paradoxically, encouraging epistemically questionable beliefs can, under certain circumstances, promote rationality. Business research must be more flexible and open to novel and interdisciplinary ideas, or it will continue to attract imbalanced contributions and serve only a group purpose.

Regardless, this research has addressed a very contentious and delicate topic surrounding the acceptance of Fengshui as a part of SD-making. It may appear to be a contradiction that intelligent, educated, and emotionally stable TMT believe in Fengshui principles that they recognise as not entirely rational. It is a sensitive issue that business leaders have to handle equally sensitively and professionally. While conventional belief often assumes that everyone knows what is rational and irrational about decision making, this study shows that is not the case. In any case, no one has the right to ask others to stop or change their cultural or traditional practices. Nor can one force their opinion or suggestions on others.

It is safe to claim that, to a certain extent, the proposed Wuwei approach provides a practical alternative to current mainstream decision-making models. As the latter appears inadequate in Malaysia's property industry, this new option, one may argue, is long overdue. Moreover, examining the conditions under which the identified subscriber type operates will guide business leaders espousing Wuwei to flow rather than counter with the Fengshui subscriber's cognitive state,

regardless of socioeconomic income, ethnicity, nationality (or lack thereof) and ideology.

System 1 thinking does not necessitate business leaders to defy logic in order to reap the benefits of intuition. They may, however, become slaves to their intelligence if their System 2 thinking is left unchecked. Although culture is invisible, its effects can be seen and felt. When such repercussion is blowing in your direction, you must sail through effortless in Wuwei style. Many still misconstrue Wuwei for 'non-action' instead of timely action. As in judo, you only employ muscle when your opponent is overextended and off-balance. Brutus (Shakespeare, 2001, Act-IV, Scene-III), in *Julius Caesar*, knows perfectly well when he talks to Cassius: "There is a tide in the affairs of men. Which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune". Like Wuwei, Brutus means that the key to success in life lies in understanding that a tide, or simply men's motivation, is constantly changing. It is up to one to recognise, seize and flow with the opportunity.

Fengshui subscriber type describes a person's qualities or attributes and temperaments, which result in behaviours. The Two Systems of Thinking for the Fengshui-based SD-making framework helps business leaders to get better at reading their business opponents. The Rubicon line provides insights into the distinct mindset of SD-making Fengshui subscribers in different stages of decision-making. By understanding these, especially the different Fengshui subscriber types, business leaders can regulate themselves and adjust their approaches to achieve decision quality using the Wuwei approach.

Business leaders cannot change who their opponents are, but they are in complete control of how they react to the Fengshui subscriber types of their opponents. The business opponent's SD making personality is a combination of such dispositions and behaviours. Identifying his SD making characteristics is important because it makes up his state or quality of mind that shapes beliefs, behaviours, philosophy, and therefore his imminent actions and how he may respond to you.

This study makes no claims that the Wuwei approach is a panacea for addressing all Fengshui-based SD making in Malaysia. Still, the property industry can advocate wisdom in not judging but seeking to understand to achieve the least-resistant path to flow and succeed in business dealing. Not only can Wuwei approach objectively explain accuracy in terms of the operation of symbolic and sub-symbolic mechanisms in dealing with Fengshui cognition, but it can also go 'under the hood' and look at the subscriber types to examine causal processes explicitly.

Nevertheless, any suitable tool can be used and misused. For example, a model for dealing with the Fengshui-based decision on the pricing of a property in different lucky or unlucky floors is relatively benign compared to promoting superstitious approaches resulting in severe financial or health stresses. Therefore, business leaders should use the Fengshui-based decision-making model wisely and ethically.



### **5.7.2 Final reflection**

Today, modern education appears purely intellectual. So, business research seems to overemphasise thinking intellectually and be logically correct. Even science is losing ground if researchers try to fit everything into the scientific, cold cognitive thinking. Since rationality does not encompass all facets of existence, it is naive to submit everything meaningful in the world to the test of logic. Suppose we love our culture. How would we define this cultural love affair logically? Alas, it is those innocuous acts that shape your life. We have given too much margin for our intellect and neglected to utilise other forms of intelligence within us. As a result, we have inadvertently developed a mindset that the business must manifest within an ecosystem that everything must be logically coherent or dismissed as useless. If true, our cultural love affair is pointless, and compassion is senseless; the mother's concern for the son's well-being is speculative because it all makes no logical business sense. Yet, our life and our ability to make SDs have both been affected by these experiences.

The emergent SD decision makers in Malaysia are mired mainly in a Western business education system that emerged through time to reward only those who win and lose, rather than a process that helps make better-grounded decisions that prevent costly confrontations. But they must now simultaneously develop strategy and drive SD making — and the need to do both at once has never been more urgent.

Wise, timely decision making is difficult for business leaders even under the best of conditions. Most perplexing are the unknown, high-stakes decisions. With a crisis of uncertainty on the size of the COVID-19 pandemic, organisations must face a potentially debilitating volume of these big-bet decisions. As we emerge from the COVID-19 crisis, companies in the property industry will need to drive short-term results while rethinking strategy amid seismic shifts in competitive environments and ways of working. Ergo, design and execution alone are not enough; it is the execution *with the correct balance in the right hard and soft dimensions*, akin to the Yin and Yang duality in the Daodejing. For the Fengshui-based SD-making process, the time is nigh to take a fresh look at the phenomenon and groundbreaking a novel model.

This study investigated an endemic can of worms in SD-making hiding in plain sight; it explored an underlying yet grossly underestimated peril of the TMT allowing Fengshui to be factored in their SD making, either openly or covertly. Even though this study focused exclusively on the impacts of Fengshui in Malaysia's property industry, a similar analysis can be undertaken in various other fields, including private healthcare business, law, strategic human resource management, merger and acquisition, and top personnel recruitment. Wherever high-stakes decision making occurs, it is claimed as true that Fengshui-like irrationality abounds. Nonetheless, both individual TMT and organisations are often oblivious of it. They overlook the influence of Fengshui subscription within their primary stakeholders.

The findings and evidence in this study satisfy rigorous and demanding business leaders, academics, policymakers and consultants. Business leaders may mitigate prejudice and make considerably more balanced judgments using the Wuwei model. With the power and persistence of applying behavioural insights in the Wuwei model, TMT will make more educative, humane and balanced SD decisions, save unnecessary cognitive dissonance, and prevent time, money, and resources from going to waste.

As a business leader and architect, creative solutions are tailored for 'situational' and regulatory fit in the researcher's perspective. SD makers are not predictable atoms but incredibly complex beings who can react to the same stimuli in different ways according to the circumstances. There is a need to move away from one-size-fits-all decision-making frameworks and embrace a strategic mindset approach in order to deal with the situation at hand.

Slingerland (2000) examines Wuwei as a negation of (a) conventional knowledge and values and (b) a traditional sense of action. When business decision values are reduced to cold cognitive transactions, sheer economic and utilitarian undercurrent, the significance of rejecting the conventional values embodied in these components becomes clear. A decision-making paradigm shift is required to fully embrace the Wuwei approach, emphasising spontaneity, simplicity, and meaningfulness of decision quality. Without this, forced acceptance will choke business leaders, leading them to an artificial win-win mentality.

Judgment based on a personal belief system is neither solely the result of cognitive ability nor sufficiently driven by emotional experience. The most likely route for understanding the role of Fengshui-based SD making is to access the business opponent's cognitive resources and understand their heuristic rules (or shortcuts). In his canonical book 'The Structure of Scientific Revolutions', Thomas Kuhn claim that people are unlikely to jettison an untenable paradigm until a better one becomes available, even if evidence shows that the paradigm is failing (Kuhn, 1962/2012). It is time for this study to pave the way for a novel mindset on addressing SD making in the property industry habitus, at least within the Malaysian context.

TMT control over SD making remains relevant and vital in Malaysia despite the worldwide pandemic disruption. The era of top-down edicts from TMT in the local property industry does not appear to be ending soon. As with any passive approach, there will be a strong preference for soft power, as perceived in:

*"I cultivated the self-control necessary for good judgment and business charisma. Passivity is about studying what triggers me and what it is attempting to teach me. It's about following my intuition rather than a terrifying inner voice that tells me I'm a failure if I don't." (R13/PI/DM, per. comm, 25 February August 2021 and similar in R14/C2/DM, per. comm, 3 March 2021).*

Strategic business leaders will be able to aid organisations in migrating from confrontational and aggressive to the new, gentler Wuwei, as long as the approach breaks through the tricky Fengshui-based SD making. As an inherently competitive species, business leaders are prone to viewing business as a zero-sum

game. Business does not have to be a zero-sum game, especially in the long run, because there is no limit to creating new economic value. No matter how intellectual or strong an individual may be, it is the one that can adjust to its changing context and adapt that will thrive.

In Malaysia's property industry, there are generally three ways for dealing with a Fengshui-based SD deadlock with a business opponent: change it, leave it or accept it. If you can't change it, leave it. If you can't leave it, take it. Acceptance does not necessarily mean a Lose-Lose or Lose-Win outcome but can be a Win-Win. The Wuwei approach guides business leaders from blind acceptance to accommodating the business opponent astutely. Other drawbacks may not be fully addressed yet (see Section 5.5 on Limitations). Still, the main impetus for this study is to upend the status quo in Malaysia's property industry and re-architect how business leaders deal with irrational but deeply-held convictions like Fengshui in SD making.

The proposed Wuwei approach is more pragmatic and centred on the individual SD stakeholders. It provides a persuasive alternative strategic approach that may make current decision-making practice seem unappealing and mainstream models, if any applied at all, inferior. Wuwei as a strategic approach is comparable to the idiom "If you can't beat them, join them," which suggests that if business leaders can't defeat the adversary, they might as well align with the adversary to exert some control over the situation. A broader view is adapting to your opponent's methods in a given circumstance, but not necessarily their goals.

In sum, this study confirmed the importance of Fengshui subscription in shaping the SD-making process of the local property industry key players. Additionally, the study shed light on three Fengshui subscriber types in Malaysia's property industry: Believers, Alievers, and Acquiescers, and how aligning with the respective characteristics is the best approach. Rather than combating it, business leaders can adapt the opponent's Fengshui subscriber type and mindset to their advantage. There is also a need to look at the two mindsets (deliberative and implemental) that each of the three Fengshui subscribers types operates, as explained in Section 5.3.2.

Undeniably, businesspeople who take proactive measures to maximise profits share little similarities with those from other business cultures (Rozuel, 2011). The traditional, and perhaps still, typical business practice is mainly action-oriented, materialistic and relatively short-termism, is based on growth, praises winning and competitiveness, and strives on fear (e.g. FOMO, Kiasuism). The Wuwei paradigm, on the other hand, is a metaphysical archetype based on purposive non-action and humans' cooperative and accommodating nature.

This study issues a clarion appeal to begin a theoretical dialogue on engaging Wuwei's passivity in Fengshui-based SD creation. In some cases, your business opponent may be an adversary, but they are not your enemy. An enemy is a person you wish to defeat. An adversary is someone you must circumvent if possible. Compromise is noble when dealing with adversaries: today's adversary

could be tomorrow's ally. Enemies, on the other hand, if unavoidable, compromise is accommodation.

Wuwei's 'being in the zone' accent (Gregory, 2018) will continue to be seen as contradicting the culture of commercialism and materialism. To palliate such tension, the researcher proposes transcending it via a lens beyond the binary of good and bad. Indeed, there is more ontological significance than what Western society dictates in the current paradigm of categorising things as 'good' or 'bad'. The researcher's call for a more balanced approach will spark debate and call into question the legitimacy of present decision-making models that appear to profit from hostility without comprehending the harm it does is corrosive and possibly irreparable.

In the final analysis, to a Daoist, Yin and Yang are two natural laws of the cosmos function on the same cyclical principle (Sim, 2021; *vide* Figure 1-4). It is 'bad' for a tree to die, but its demise gives nutrients for seeds to provide sustenance. While the goal is not to eradicate materialism or idealism, it is to uphold harmony by accommodating the dynamism of both values. Understanding the need to accept such duality is the cusp of the novel SD-making discovery, not *the end*.

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix A: Systematic Literature Review (SLR)

This appendix provides some background information on how the researcher began to tackle the enigmatic issue of Fengshui in the context of a management subject in strategic decision making. The background literature search must be extensive. Only then could it assist in confirming the knowledge gap, selecting a database relevant to the topic, and creating a research strategy. When considered with business administration, Fengshui necessitates a search outside the traditional academic publishing model, including "grey literature." Negative results are less likely to be published. Hence the grey literature is significant. In the end, this will impact the dependability of the findings.

Although SLR is a literature review method popularised by the healthcare research sector, it is applicable in any discipline so long as the research question has been adequately set (Higgins *et al.*, 2011). The literature on the influence of Fengshui in decision making has yielded ambivalent results across the globe. It may be called Fengshui in this part of the world, geomancy in another region or even superstition or magical beliefs in other cultures<sup>119</sup>. Ergo, this study used SLR as a baseline for empirical research to provide rigour assessment during the study's operation despite the multi-faceted issues (Xiao and Watson, 2017). The idea is to have the study's rigour commence from the literature review stage to the data elucidation and analysis (Forero *et al.*, 2018; Lincoln and Guba, 1986).

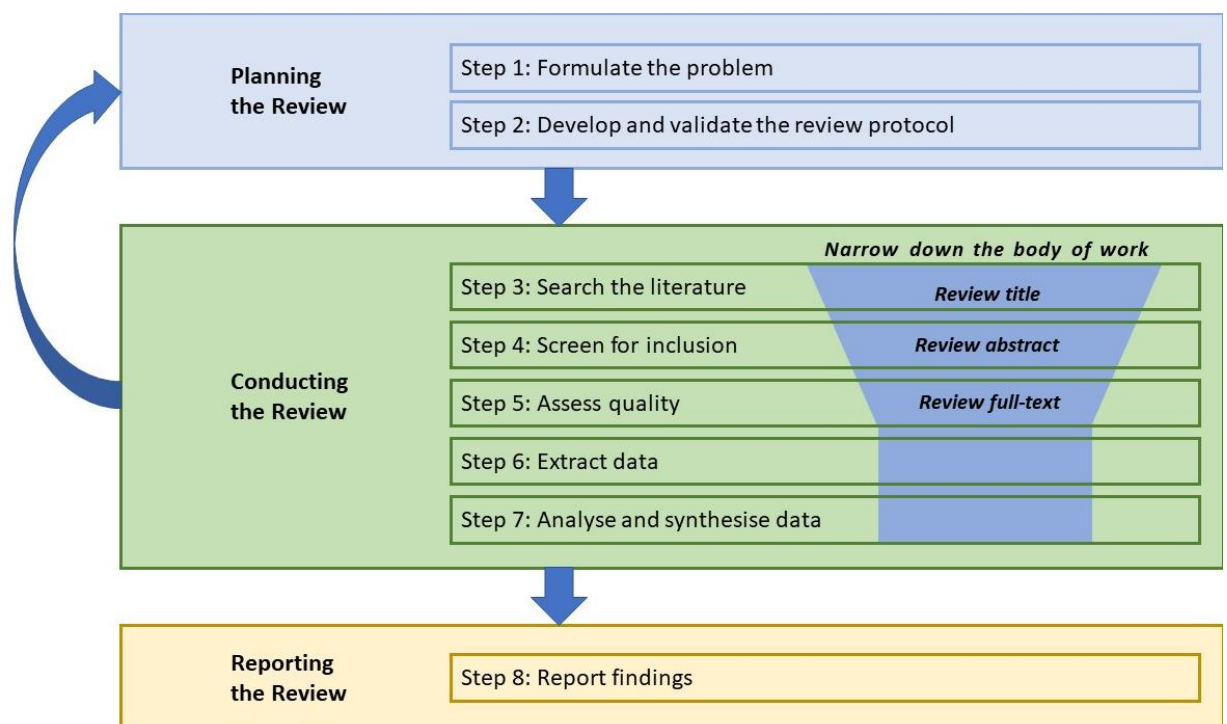
The protocol was set to include literature of superstitious and magical beliefs and systematically narrow the focus onto specific aspects of interests, like a downward funnel structure in Figure 2-1. Albeit an esoteric subject like Fengshui, the study's philosophical and methodological assumptions are bolstered by the SLR results. It

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<sup>119</sup> In an old Irish belief, the builder must plant several posts on the ground before laying the house's foundation. When he returns on the following day to see that the posts removed, it would be an indication that the spirits do not want the house erected there. Even in Malaysia, Fengshui is frequently associated with superstitious and mystical ideas, particularly in construction projects.

gave a sense of direction to determine the operative keywords before executing the traditional review with more certainty.

The SLR method adopted is guided by the PRISMA Statement (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic reviews and Meta-Analyses) plus a self-imposed protocol as added rigour. PRISMA comes with four advantages viz. (1) it sets clarity to research question that enables systematic research, (2) it allows identification of what is to be included and what is not, and (3) it examines the massive database of scientific literature in a period that the researcher defined (Delgado-Rodríguez and Sillero-Arenas, 2018). (4) More importantly, the PRISMA Statement permits a rigorous search of keywords related to this research question of a strange mix of terms (Sierra-Correa and Kintz, 2015).



**Figure 5-12**                      **Process of systematic literature review**  
 (Adapted from Xiao and Watson, 2019, p. 103)

### ***A-1 Identification phase of SLR***

This phase identifies the keywords used in the search process. Keywords were formed based on past studies' terms and the researcher's professional experience in this discipline (Table 2-1). Subsequently, search string/query string was constructed

based on a search-broadening technique of employing Phrase Searching, Wild Card, Truncation and Boolean Operator<sup>120</sup>.

Database	Search string / query string
Scopus	TITLE-ABS-KEY (superstition* OR "Superstitious belief*") AND "Decision making"
Web of Science	TS= (superstition* OR "Superstitious belief*") AND "Decision making"
Google Scholar	“Fengshui”; “Feng Shui”; “Decision making”; Decision-making”; “Phenomenology”; “Phenomenological research”

**Table 5-2 Process of systematic literature review**  
(Adapted from Xiao and Watson, 2019, p. 103)

Within PRISMA, the researcher included database resources of Scopus<sup>121</sup>, Ebsco and Google Scholar. Scopus and Ebsco were logical choices due to their reputation with Q1, Q2 indexed journals<sup>122</sup>. However, the decision to include Google Scholar<sup>123</sup> was

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<sup>120</sup> *Phrase Searching, Wild Card, Truncation and Boolean Operator* are each described in the Glossary of Key Terms on p.6. For instance, Truncation involves alphabet/s in the keywords being substituted with symbols like \*, ? or \$ in order to capture all related meaning and word usages, e.g. Adapt\* shall automatically cover in the SLR search for Adaption, adapts, adapted, adapting.

<sup>121</sup> Scopus, the main database used in this review, is the world’s largest abstracts and citation databases of peer-reviewed literature with >22,800 journals from 5000 publishers worldwide. Scopus comprises a diverse subject area, including scientific journals, books and conference proceedings covering environmental sciences, social science, and agriculture and biological sciences.

<sup>122</sup> Journal Impact Factor ranks by quartile in category (X) divided by the total number of journals (Y) in that category. Hence,  $X / Y = Z$  i.e. the percentile rank.

Q1:  $0.0 < Z \leq 0.25$

Q2:  $0.25 < Z \leq 0.5$

Q3:  $0.5 < Z \leq 0.75$

Q4:  $0.75 < Z$

<sup>123</sup> Google Scholar does not vet journals strictly enough and has been criticized for accepting predatory journals in its index (Kolata, 2017).



that Fengshui is still undoubtedly popular, accessible, and part of social epistemology, no matter how suspicious some people might look at it. With Google Scholar also included as a database, it was possible to check a broader articles scope. Some are concept papers, albeit not of journals ranking Q1 or Q2, but they helped understand the human experience (Cope, 2014). In this respect, the net cast by Google Scholar had been more extensive and provided better assurance, although it means more work in my *Eligibility* phase (Table 5-3). Based on this identification, 477 articles appeared.

## A.2 Screening phase of SLR

Criteria	Inclusion	Exclusion
Document type	Article (empirical data)	Article reviews, chapters in a book, book reviews, and blogs
Timeline	1985-2019	Before 1985, save seminal books published in English or translated in English
Language	English	Non-English, save seminal books published in English or translated in English

**Table 5-3 Identification Stage sets criteria of search**  
(Source: The Author)

Screening is the process of selecting appropriate and related papers for review. Criteria for acceptability of literature type are article journals with empirical data, excluding review articles, anecdotal accounts in the blogosphere, book reviews, and chapters. In a subject like Fengshui subscription, the researcher believes that practitioners' criteria must be considered rather than relying solely on scholars' inclusion and exclusion criteria, as recommended by Mohamed Shaffril *et al.* (2021). Ergo, knowing that a couple of major academic Fengshui conferences had taken place in Europe and Australia lately, conference proceedings were not discounted. Also, to

avoid confusion and difficulty translating, the search efforts excluded non-English publications, but major classical works like Yijing must be included, if not manually. Finally, the set timeline from where the researcher left his last full-scale search (vide Chua, 1985). Out of 477 articles found, 189 passed this screening phase.

### ***A-3 Eligibility phase of SLR***

As anticipated, the literature collected generally have no direct connection to the multidisciplinary research question. Fengshui is a comparatively more prevalent subject in popular media than scholarly literature. Lest the evidence review should lose its robustness before it has even started, the researcher refrained from hastily connecting Fengshui mechanically to SD making in the business sense like in the conventional way of a literature review. Possible biases include, but are not limited to, underrepresenting the whole spectrum of Fengshui-based decision making that actually occurred, possibly skewing toward more "media-worthy" situations due to reader interest, and may reflect the existing bias of the media outlets in question. To moderate this unique requirement in dealing with Fengshui and to address its ambiguity as a management subject, a set of rules was imposed upon the 189 articles, i.e.

Protocol (in addition to PRISMA) for my SLR:

- (1) Accept only scholarly literature and refereed sources written by recognised experts;
- (2) Discount blogosphere, articles of promotion and pamphleteering nature;
- (3) Focus on journal articles that update on the most recent research findings;
- (4) Abstain from proving or disproving superstition in business and in general;
- (5) For resource saturation purposes, accept for now that Fengshui "is" Superstition;
- (6) Abstain from adjudicating Fengshui schools and their schools of thoughts; and

- (7) If in doubt, write directly to the author/s for clarifications, Malaysia or abroad.

Searching conceptually around ‘superstitious’ and ‘magical beliefs’ here meant that Fengshui and superstition are cognate characteristics (vide Protocol rule 5). Protocol rule 5 was necessary due to the scarcity of seminal work or empirical research in Fengshui within the management discipline and the relatively new Fengshui-based decision-making concept.

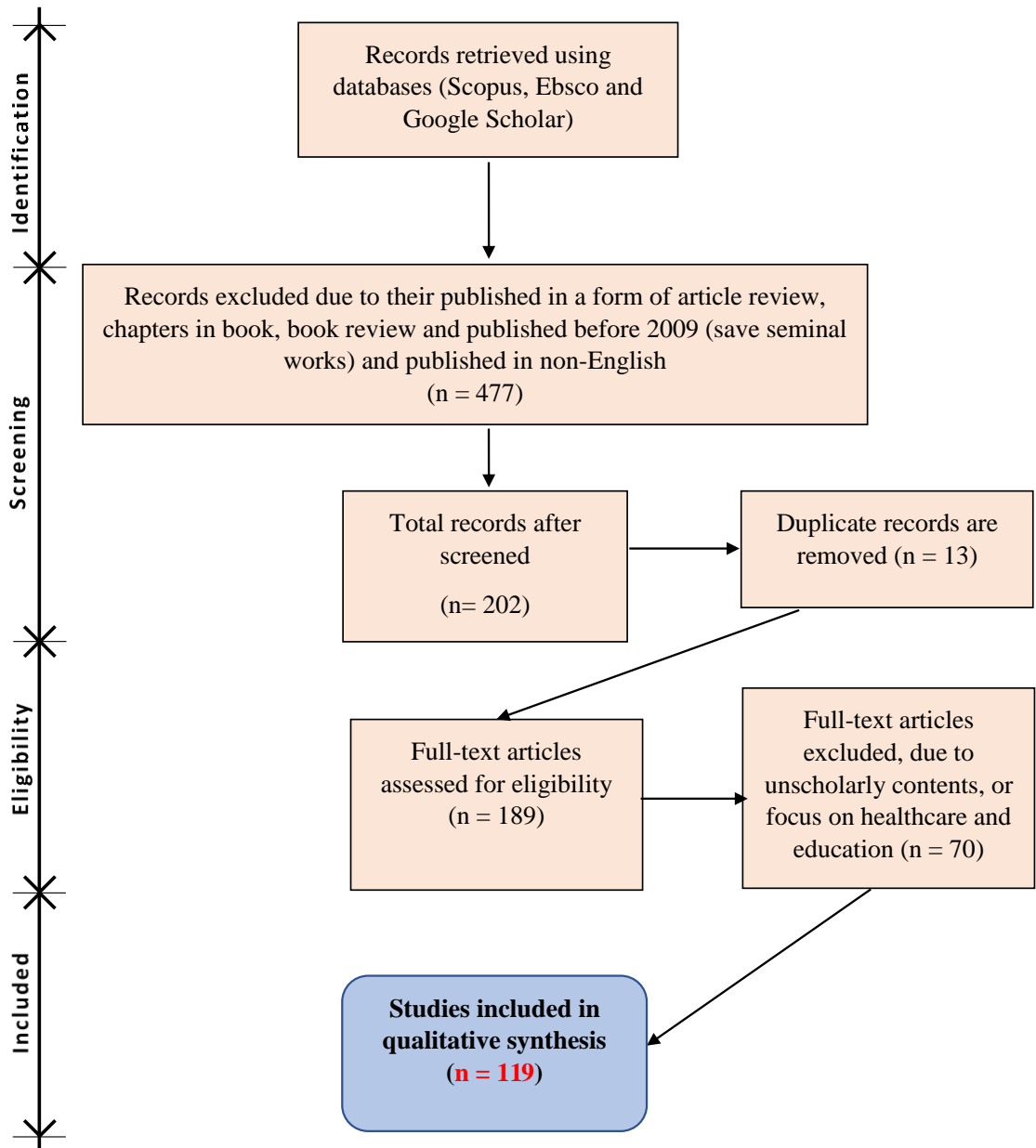


Figure 5-13 Prisma Flowchart for SLR in January 2019  
(Source: The Author)

Perhaps, Fengshui spells superstition, and instinctively ‘serious’ researchers would automatically detach their subject with anything that gives a stoic impression. Hence, many scholarly papers do not mention *Fengshui* per se but may still investigate the phenomenon. This problem has compelled the researcher to accept that Fengshui equals superstition as some scholars do (e.g. Tsang, 2004 and Risen, 2016).

Rightly or not, many journal articles use terms such as *superstition*, *superstitious belief*, *magical thinking* and even *supernatural* and *geomancy* quite interchangeably. The main objective of conducting this expert checking (Protocol rule 7) is to ensure the clarity, relevance, and appropriateness of each assumption in its particular themes; these expert reviews help establish the coding *validity* (for qualitative research, *credibility*) in Stage 2. The researcher met with four experts from Malaysia and Australia to clarify various issues between 2019 and 2020.

After the appraisal of the available evidence in the first two layers and still mindful of adhering to guidelines on the conduct of the protocol set and the thematised topic, the SLR process moved to the realm of the *Decision making and behaviour*. Seventy articles were further disqualified. The remaining 119 papers were evaluated. In particular, efforts were focused on studies that directly or indirectly answered the formulated questions. Initially, a general idea was established from reading through the abstracts alone. After differentiating the noises from the messages, the full articles were read to construct suitable themes and/or sub-themes. Qualitative analysis was performed to identify themes related to the local property industry before formulating the questionnaire guide for the phenomenological research in-depth interviews in Stage 2.

#### **A-4 Discussion and Outcomes of SLR**

The four-stage process of SLR was carried in January 2019. A rigorous review sourced from three key and purposive databases has resulted in 119 articles related to the research question. It is an art more than science in using SLR on the existing literature on the phenomenon of Fengshui. Studying how Fengshui-infused SD-making affects Malaysia’s property industry players invokes multidisciplinary. With

Google Scholar as part of the databases, of course, many anecdotal and prescriptive kinds of materials of no grounding work emerged.

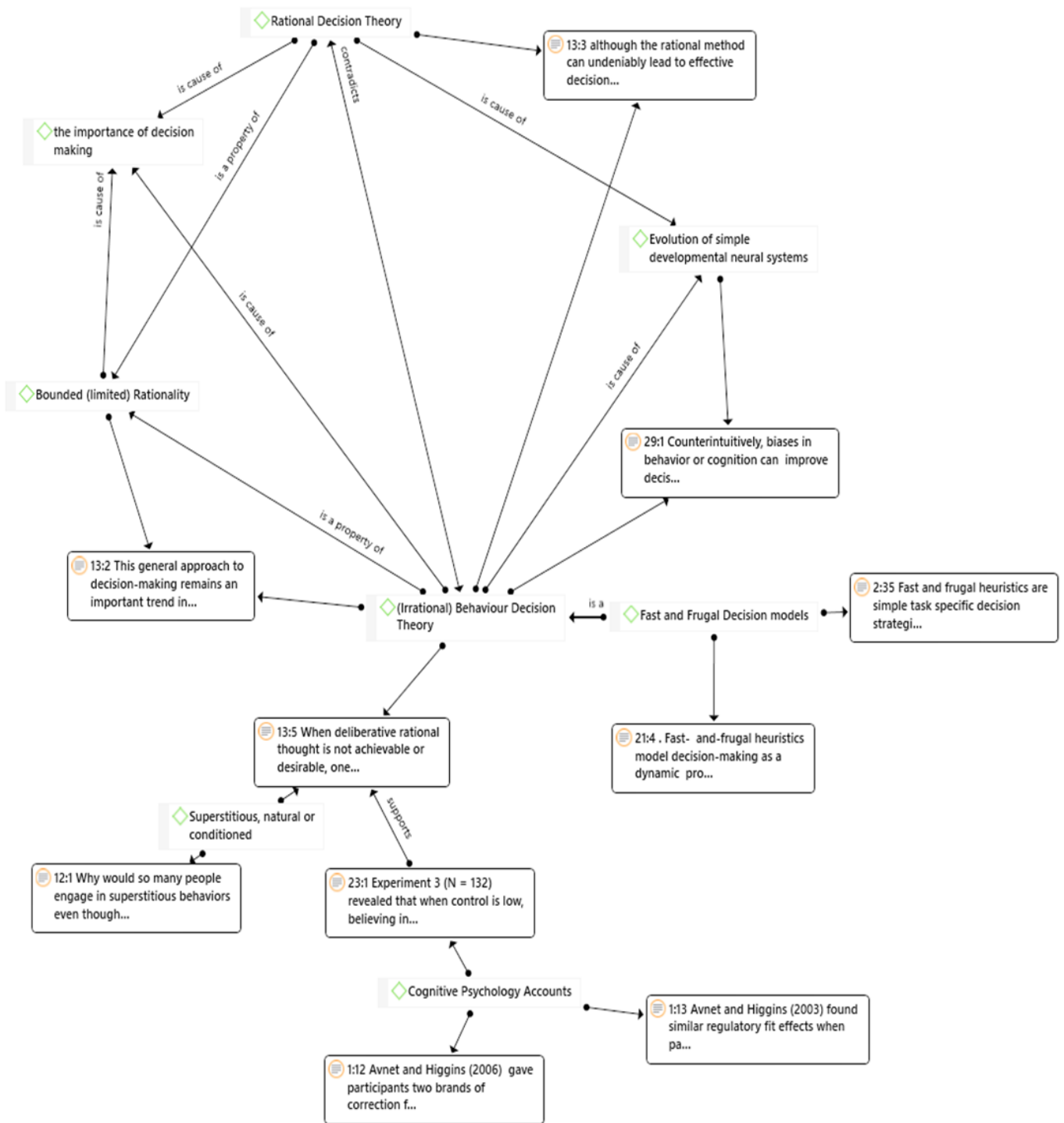


Figure 5-14 Categorisation of refereed or peer-reviewed sources<sup>124</sup>  
(Source: TheAuthor)

<sup>124</sup> Categorisation of refereed or peer-reviewed sources and influential works *vis-à-vis* the tendency to subscribe to superstitious beliefs like Fengshui [n=119]

However, the inclusion of Google Scholar in the databases displayed a clear pattern that Fengshui is gradually changing from being a strictly esoteric knowledge to an exoteric one (as hinted, e.g., in Tsang, 2004; Ho *et al.*, 2008; Rehm *et al.*, 2018). The researcher must now reconsider the esoteric knowledge that he has possessed for three decades. The advent of the internet<sup>125</sup> has pushed the understanding of Fengshui, rightly or not, more exoteric.

Academic literature inevitably draws the subject back to the discourse of magical beliefs and superstitious behaviour, conditioned or otherwise. Another bulk of the literature, almost equal to the former, underscores the pure or cognitive psychological sciences. As anticipated, the argument that we are biologically superstitious is gaining visible momentum lately (14 articles, from Barlow and Cosmides, 1992 to Mandal, 2018). Overall, Fengshui can now draw parallels to a significant host of information and insights on the development of superstitious beliefs. These sources also affirm the prevalence of Popular Fengshui, aka. The New Age Fengshui, which subscribers use to enhance their luck, avoid calamity and sustain prosperity (Risen, 2016; Ichino, 2018).

In sum, the outcome of the SLR points to three glaring reasons why people voluntarily or acquiesce in subscribing to Fengshui, viz. (1) superstitious either naturally or by conditioned, (2) cognitive psychology accounts, and (3) an evolutionary biology explanation. The findings are in tandem with Stokols' (1990) analysis of the three environmental influences: instrumental, spiritual, and minimalist, as well as proposals by Naguit and Yutuc (2020) and Luk *et al.* (2012) to posit Fengshui practices as instrumental, metaphysical and minimalist. This evidence will serve as a springboard for the *conception* of my research building blocks in Chapter 5.

That said, Malaysia's property industry is still inconsistent with Fengshui overtly as a serious decision-making factor. As seen in the current extant literature, the general

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<sup>125</sup> Social media is a double-edged sword. Whilst it accelerates the flow of information, it also hastens the spread of disinformation. Empirical facts are not important to Fengshui users at large. Instead, they are looking for the magic bullet. Hence, the plethora of literature that are neither scholarly useful nor trustworthy.

public still sees Fengshui as a popular religion, pseudoscience, a socio-cultural study and even a marketing tool (Mak, 2017; Mak and So, 2015). A practical knowledge gap arises only when the real-world behaviour deviates from the literature generally assumed by the authorities (Coker and Macaulay, 2019).

#### ***A-5 Evidence and knowledge gap consideration***

The keyword 'Fengshui' and its Wade-Giles method of writing, 'Feng Shui', generated hundreds of thousands of results on the search engines from every corner of the world, ranging from scholarly journals, grey literature, to even blogs. Although there is a sizeable academic literature on the history, philosophy and practice of Feng Shui, too little study has been conducted on the critical philosophical appraisal of the theory and practice of Fengshui (Bruun, 2011; Boudry and Pigliucci, 2013).

This study examines Fengshui from the management perspective, calling a spade a spade as far as the socio-cultural and industry contexts are concerned. What synthesised from the available literature review must answer that or form the blueprint for answering that. Literature from SLR that appeared to reflect the industry's current practical knowledge, while factual, is not sufficiently authoritative to serve as a building block to practically bridge the apparent knowledge gap. Nor is SLR alone insightful enough to underpin the conceptualisation of new knowledge to fill the knowledge void in the nebulous area of a Fengshui-based decision without further review.

More severe than a practical knowledge gap, in this case, is the suspect of a knowledge void, which Coker and Macaulay (2019) find as a peculiar type of research gap occurring in most classical knowledge, viz. the enduring knowledge versus the current practice. A knowledge void often arises when research findings vary from the idea in operation now. Muller-Bloch and Kranz (2015) argue that knowledge void usually occurs when researchers attempt to apply research findings from a different research domain to a similar environment where the idea is no longer practised in the real world nor exists in scholarly literature. Alarming, this kind of conflict seems to mirror the literature review of this study in the same way.

Drawing from the researcher's background and experience, making sense of the connection between Fengshui and business decision making, in practice, does not seem too taxing. However, SLR results have proven that Fengshui and business decision-making interactions are not straightforward. With no silver bullet, a pilot study appeared judicious to ensure a comprehensive understanding in connecting the dots of Fengshui, Malaysia's property industry and business decision-making. While awaiting the University's Research Ethics Committee's approval, therefore, in mid-2020, a pilot was conducted.

Dry runs in the form of a preliminary chat with five participants of the confirmed purposive sample were held to find out why the divergence between the textbook and secondary data with his predetermined assumptions and observations of the Fengshui decision-making phenomena over the decades. The underlying objective was also to provide advance notice as to where the primary research project might have problems, where the research protocols may go off-tangent, or if the proposed interview techniques were insufficient or lacking in some way (van Teijlingen and Hundley, 2001). For added rigour in the literature review, notes of the dry runs were compared and contrasted with the literature reviewed. Ultimately, to fill the sizeable and obscure knowledge gap, if any, traditional review on Fengshui, phenomenological research methodology and decision making theories ensued.



## Appendix B: Further notes on San Cai

This Section attempts to explain the philosophy and the methodology behind the San Cai concepts and how Fengshui can be used to take advantage of what is desirable or auspicious (Ji 吉) and avoid what is undesirable or inauspicious (Xiong 凶). Because some may argue that the San Cai concept is highly ideological, the researcher has deemed it more appropriate to discuss it in the Appendix section.

San Cai or the Cosmic Trinity can be modelled in such a way to attain an equilibrium of the three Qi fields of Heaven, Earth and Man (with no primacy over one another) and between its Yin and Yang poles. A dynamic 3D model in Figure 1-3 is an example of equilibrium after balancing all three sides of the spectrum in an intricate harmony between the Yin-Yang axis<sup>126</sup>. Putting it together with Fengshui, the concept of the Cosmic Trinity of Tian-Di-Ren can be summarised as follows:

### Heaven (*Tian*天).

In Chinese textbook ontology, *Heaven* is neither an anthropomorphic concept of God nor where divinity resides. Instead, Tian represents time cycles and hence a person's fate. Heaven gives birth to an individual's destiny. When an individual is born, his destiny is generally decided and could never change<sup>127</sup>. The person's destiny code (*Bazi*) is encoded in his birth year, month, day and hour. Whilst Heaven fixes Man's destiny, Man can alter his fate on Earth.

### Earth (*Di*地)

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<sup>126</sup> The Yin-Yang is the black and white symbol that is familiar to many English speakers. This ubiquitous image represents the mingling of the cosmic forces of yin and yang. Yin is the negative, dark and feminine principle, while yang is the positive, bright and masculine principle. In Chinese metaphysics, the interaction and balance of the yin and the yang are thought to influence the destinies of all creatures and things.

<sup>127</sup> Fatalism—the belief that we are all in the grip of an inescapable destiny that we cannot change—was thought to be an idea that came from Asia, and Western people trembled in fear that it might be true.

*Earth* refers to Man's loci, i.e. the topography, composition of the land, location and sitting, external appearance, aspects and prospects, internal layout and interior design. Since Man can use Fengshui to manage *Qi* and enhance luck<sup>128</sup>, *Earth* is by no means fixed in the Cosmic Trinity. To change his fate, Man may avoid the negative *Qi* that will cause significant health, wealth or relationship problems by understanding the form of *Qi* present in the house and where it resides.

### **Man (Ren\_人)**

*Man* in Chinese metaphysics only means humanity or humankind without any reference to race or gender. It refers to the actions and decisions we make every day and the networks of people and the environment that may impact our lives and life decisions. Every single decision Man makes will ultimately (re)shape his destiny. Heaven and Earth are parents of all things, whereas *Man* alone is the marvel of all things.<sup>129</sup>

Fundamentally, the idea of Fengshui explains our position as human beings in relationship with Earth (Di地) and Heaven (Tian天). By examining the three angles of Cosmic Trinity of Tian-Di-Ren with their manifestations of Yin and Yang, one can understand *Benxing* (本性) or the natural character of the entity a person or a property site. The shaded plane in Figure 1-3 has the fluidity to take any triangular forms or angles to reach the equilibrium of a fixed *Benxing*. That is why, in dealing with anything of importance, namely life, significant decisions, the idea is to achieve a balance in Heaven (Tian), Earth (Di), and Man (Ren), or put in other words, developing a (human) strategy in time (heaven) and space (earth).

By no means can a realist ontology of single reality be applied upon a Chinese philosophy that premises reality within the human (*Ren*) mind. Since truth is relative

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<sup>128</sup> The word 'Luck' is understood very differently by the Chinese. Luck is not something random. It can be predicted and somewhat controlled. Perhaps blessing might be a better choice of word, as 'luck' could be worked upon or actively fostered, not necessarily fatalistic or surrendered to fate.

<sup>129</sup> 《尚書：秦誓上》：「惟天地萬物父母，惟人萬物之靈。」 Translated in Chen (2015).

to our *lived experience* at any given time between Heaven (*Tian*) and conditions on Earth (*Di*), a *relativist* ontology should instead underpin this study. To the Chinese, the Cosmic Trinity of Tian-Di-Ren is ostensibly a universal model. But to what extent is the philosophy impacting the property industry in Malaysia is unknown and has never been empirically investigated. It is safe to say that contemporary Malaysian business people commonly construe Fengshui as guiding beliefs for decision making, not necessarily to predict the future but more to address perceived risks and potentials.

## Appendix C: Example of Master Joey Yap's World Tour Schedule

London	: 13 October 2018
New York City	: 6 November 2018
Penang	: 14 December 2018
<b>Kuala Lumpur</b>	<b>: 5 January 2019</b>
Kuala Lumpur	: 6 January 2019
<b>Singapore</b>	<b>: 13 January 2019</b>
Ipoh	: 24 February 2019
Kota Kinabalu	: 2 March 2019
Canada	: 9 March 2019
Cambodia	: 17 March 2019
Kuantan	: 17 March 2019
Kuching	: 23 March 2019
Johor	: 23 March 2019
Manila	: To be confirmed



The researcher, who also attended this seminar, took this photo.



Eight thousand participants attended Master Joey Yap's Fengshui seminar held at Malaysia International Trade and Exhibition Centre (MITEC), Kuala Lumpur on 5 January 2019.





Photo credit: Team Joey Yap



Twelve thousand participants attended Master Joey Yap's Fengshui seminar held in January 2020 at the Malaysia International Trade and Exhibition Centre (MITEC), Kuala Lumpur



Photo credit: Business Insider

Malaysia



Five thousand participants attended Master Joey Yap's Fengshui seminar held at Resorts World Sentosa, Singapore on 13 January 2019.

**Appendix D: Interview Conversation Guide**  
**Conversation Guide for a Phenomenological Inquiry**

- 1. When was your most memorable experience having to deal with Fengshui?**

Can you tell me more about that experience? Exactly what happened?

- 2. Describe your experience when Fengshui was factored into your crucial business decision making.**

With an example, can you describe that experience in detail?

Has this lived experience impacted the way how you accept such a decision?

- 3. How does this lived experience and understanding of Fengshui inform or shape your strategic choices in the future?**

Help me understand why, and how.

- 4. Are you okay with other key decision makers letting Fengshui influence their decision that is significant to your project?**

How do you come to these views?

## Appendix E: Informed Consent Form

### Informed Consent

**Note**

A copy of the signed, dated consent form must be kept by the principal researcher (Chua Caik Leng, Malaysia IC 640315-10-7335) and a copy must be given to the participant.

**DEVELOPING A FENG SHUI BASED  
STRATEGIC DECISION-MAKING MODEL  
FOR  
MALAYSIA'S PROPERTY INDUSTRY**



**This research is undertaken under the auspices of  
London School of Commerce**

**as partial fulfilment for the award of the degree of  
Doctor of Business Administration**

**Principal Researcher  
CHUA CAIK LENG**  
BSc (Arch), BArch (Hons), MBA, APAM

**Supervisor  
Associate Professor Dr Fakhrol Anwar Zainol**

### Consent to take part in research

- 1) I, [REDACTED], have understood the purpose/nature of the study explained to me, and have had the opportunity to ask questions about this study, and voluntarily agree to participate in this research study.
- 2) I understand that even if I agree to participate now, I can withdraw at any time or refuse to answer any question without any consequences of any kind.
- 3) I understand that I can withdraw permission to use data from my interview within two weeks after the interview, in which case the material must immediately be deleted.
- 4) I understand that participation involves sharing of my experience in key decision-making in which Feng Shui has been taken into significant consideration.
- 5) I understand that only the principal researcher will transcribe, analyse, and store the information during the research activity before it is permanently deleted.
- 6) I understand that I will not benefit directly from participating in this research.
- 7) I agree with my interview being audio-recorded.
- 8) I understand that the audio-recording and signed consent form will be deleted as soon as the degree has been awarded.
- 9) I understand that all information I provide for this study will be treated confidentially, anonymised and pseudonymised.
- 10) I understand that in any report on the results of this research, my identity will remain entirely anonymous by changing personal data, if any, into codes. Any details of my interview that may have the slightest possibility to reveal my identity or the identity of people I speak about will be pseudonymised and disguised.



11) I understand that disguised extracts from my interview may be quoted in a thesis, conference presentation and published papers.

12) I understand that the signed consent and transcript of my interview will be retained for a period of time in compliance with Malaysia's Personal Data Protection Act 2010 by the principal researcher in encrypted files at dedicated cloud storage/account security, with a highly secured strong password. After which, signed consent and transcript of my interview will be permanently deleted.

13) I understand that under freedom of information legalisation, I am entitled to access the information I have provided at any time while it is in storage as specified above.

14) I understand that I am free to contact any of the people involved in the research to seek further clarification and information.

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Signature of participant

-----  
Date 5/12/20

I believe the participant is giving informed consent to participate in this study.

Signature of principal researcher

Date 5/12/20

## Appendix F: Textural data analysis

Participant code and profile	Meaning units by the participant	Horizontalised textural descriptions
<p>R<sub>1</sub>/P<sub>2</sub>/DI ----- An architect by training, R<sub>1</sub> helps her accomplished banker husband to source for, procure and decide how to convert properties into value-added developments for resale or own use. R<sub>1</sub> is an astute Chinese lady in her forties with an eye for aesthetics.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. We humans are contradictory beings [and] what we believe can conflict with what we do ... that includes you and me too. Sorry to say that but it is true. In some of my important meetings, I sometimes stupefied myself by beginning with an objective mindset, but ... ended up with unusual biases infused ... [voice volume reduced] ... which is fascinating but also quite terrifying.</li> <li>2. Fengshui was that extra element that I could neither see nor feel. It was like 'somebody' communicating with me and guiding me to make the critical decision correctly. I admit it's my blind faith in Fengshui.</li> <li>3. I didn't need to subscribe to Fengshui accurately or empirically ... to me, so long as I've understood there wasn't any negative Fengshui element, the decision would go ahead. If there were, I'd check the options to rectify the situation.</li> <li>4. I am not sure if you called that Fengshui in my strategic decision making ... it's something or somebody higher up 'above' overseeing our action. Therefore, the feel is necessary; the feeling of doing something right is important. I had rejected decisions that came with all the correct factors but minus this feeling. I trust my gut feelings and that extra intangible element to be doing the right thing.</li> </ol>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I am the 'feeling part' to balance the decision-making body of objective data.</li> <li>• I don't make decisions solely based on rationality.</li> <li>• I trust my gut feelings and that extra intangible element to be doing the right thing.</li> </ul>

Participant code and profile	Meaning units by the participant	Horizontalised textural descriptions
	<p>5. Of course, I felt somewhat guilty when my Fengshui-based decision didn't turn out correct. However, if I have tried my best to decide based on what I reckoned as the best Fengshui, my job is done. No one can blame you for having tried and failed, but everyone, including myself, would blame me for not trying what the [Fengshui] master advised.</p> <p>6. I used other rational factors to justify my Fengshui factor to convince other stakeholders that a decision is correct. I sometimes had to go to the extent of working on my words to articulate something subjective into something believable for stakeholder buy-in.</p> <p>7. I experienced a sense of balance, peace and confidence when I let Fengshui be part of my critical decision making.</p> <p>8. I did not feel guilty or wrong to change the construction of newly completed properties just because my Fengshui master said so.</p> <p>9. It is not a superstition as many business people believe it works, and being Chinese, it is acceptable to believe in the ancient Chinese system, you know.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I know it's irrational but I rather not tempt fate.</li> <li>• I experienced a sense of peace and confidence when I let Fengshui be part of my critical decision making.</li> </ul>
<p>R2/D1/DI ----- R2 is a Malay Muslim who quit his medical</p>	<p>1. I felt a sense of serenity knowing Fengshui was factored in a decision. Not that I worship the Fengshui elements placed in the hospital, but having understood</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I experienced a sense of peace and confidence when I let Fengshui be part of my critical decision making.</li> </ul>



Participant code and profile	Meaning units by the participant	Horizontalised textural descriptions
<p>practice to be part of the TMT in two different hospital development groups over the past ten years. His views and direction can influence the trajectory of how the organisation makes a strategic decision.</p>	<p>what the Fengshui master was trying to do with specific Fengshui remedies, I saw no harm. It gave the doctors a psychological sense of confidence too. At least, we could move on. If I could and knew the Board didn't feel okay to sign the contract on Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>, I won't too!</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>2. However, there were incidents that I could not relate to; I mean, how can the Fengshui master insisted that my Chairman's office be relocated to near the car park!? It's tough for me to buy-in.</li> <li>3. Some of the Fengshui remedies took considerable effort to carry out. It was challenging for me, as a Muslim and a man of science, to reconcile. Ultimately, I think the intention is important. For me, Fengshui subscription is not to create wealth but to have a feeling of calmness for the facilities we developed. Not trying to justify, but I don't think it's a religious sin to subscribe to Fengshui.</li> <li>4. I tend to follow what I understood and previously learnt as good Fengshui practice and not deviate from there once it's proven to work ... meaning it made me feel good and comfortable to comply.</li> <li>5. Subscribing to Fengshui in work is not against my religion, but just my respect for ancient Chinese philosophy, nothing wrong with that.</li> </ol>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I am the 'feeling part' to balance the decision-making body of objective data.</li> <li>• There might be physical costs if I complied but emotional cost if I don't.</li> <li>• I don't think it's a religious sin to subscribe to Fengshui.</li> </ul>

Participant code and profile	Meaning units by the participant	Horizontalised textural descriptions
	<p>6. I took the Fengshui master's advice as valid and of value when it suited my belief. When the advice didn't jive, I acquiesced without question. You know, there's no time to check this kind of data or argue during construction.</p> <p>7. Don't you see, Chua? It confirms what I already knew. Data don't lie. How else can you explain why 80 percent of the world's buildings miss the 13th floor, airports lack the 13th gate, and airlines don't have a 13th aisle? That's why the maximum height of clinical floors allowed by CKAPS is only 12!</p> <p>8. I have found it most convenient and safest in a happy working relationship to simply admit that agreeing with my CEO's construal is easier and, more often than not, a productive interpretation of Fengshui requirements regardless of my <i>'absolutely correct set of beliefs'</i>.</p> <p>9. I don't regard Fengshui as something spiritual. I had a full day session with the Fengshui master in our recent project; it dawned on me that Fengshui operates fairly logically, like not having sharp corners in my hospital, the critical workstation must have backing, etc. So, if the requirements weren't too painful to fulfil, I would comply just in case what the master advised were true.</p> <p>10. In the hospital project that I did with you, I would regard myself</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Our [Fengshui] master predicted the pandemic correctly, did he not?</li>   <li>• There might be physical costs if I complied but emotional cost if I don't.</li> </ul>



Participant code and profile	Meaning units by the participant	Horizontalised textural descriptions
	<p>as a man of science, not a Fengshui believer. But I understood Fengshui bring good luck whether I believe in it or not, so I subscribed to it in my decision making anyway. Anyway, we practise in an industry ... a world of both nature and culture, don't we? Since when do we need to split hair?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It's alright; we all have the unthinking cultural baggage that influences us.</li> </ul>
<p>R<sub>3</sub>/FM<sub>1</sub>/DM ----- Before becoming a Fengshui master more than 20 years ago, R<sub>3</sub> was an interior designer who also lectured in a local college of arts and design. As a conscientious practitioner who follows the classical Fengshui texts, she dislikes Fengshui commercialisation and is selective with her clients.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. I am pretty FED UP with clients not following my advice, especially those from the property industry. Because of that, I am now indifferent to their decision-making with my Fengshui advice factored in. I can advise what pills to take; I can't 'force my patients' to take them.</li> <li>2. According to their Bazi and circumstances, I advised based on readings computed from the Fengshui texts regardless of whether the information was good or bad. I couldn't be interested if these clients could or willing to act on my advice after that. After all, the Fengshui texts were written thousands of years ago, not that I invented them, so there's no need to challenge me.</li> <li>3. I experienced clients' resistance citing Fengshui solutions were expensive or effortful to comply. Sure, there are expensive and cheaper options to resolve a Fengshui problem. Clients shouldn't discount any option;</li> </ol>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• My experiences of previous success empowered my Fengshui subscription.</li> <li>• I trust my gut feelings and that extra intangible element to be doing the right thing.</li> </ul>

Participant code and profile	Meaning units by the participant	Horizontalised textural descriptions
	<p>it's purely cost-benefit analysis. The fact they bargained pisses me off.</p> <p>4. My clients came to me for results. But they didn't want to hear the negative information. Although they like to hear only positive readings, I don't sugarcoat ... it's frustrating.</p> <p>5. I tried an inclusive approach to keep connected with the pulse of my valued clients. I find that explaining the Fengshui readings in detail actually reduced their stress, prevented insular thinking, opened doors to ideas and collaborative relationships, and increased creativity for implementation of Fengshui remedies.</p> <p>6. When property developers consulted me for Fengshui, I felt they underestimated the element of time. They don't understand that the same issue discussed today would yield different Fengshui results if discussed or implemented next quarter. Our [Fengshui] master using the 'Tui bei tu' did forecast COVID-19 correctly, didn't he?</p> <p>7. To avoid my clients understanding some but not enough to apply Fengshui without proper consultancy ...which is dangerous [in mumbled Cantonese]... I sometimes deliberately make it like more difficult to grasp; also..., [Laughter], if they know well enough, they'd no longer need me.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I fear facts that I can't grasp so I'd rather err on the safe side.</li>   <li>• Our [Fengshui] master predicted the pandemic correctly, did he not?</li> </ul>



Participant code and profile	Meaning units by the participant	Horizontalised textural descriptions
	<p>8. At pandemic times, we wear face masks. Other times, we wear 'imaginary masks' to hide our feelings from other people. In high-level meetings, I say we care about Fengshui when I don't. With the project team, I'd pretend to be okay with Fengshui factored into our decision making when I know some of us are unsettled inside</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It's alright; we all have the unthinking cultural baggage that influences us.</li> </ul>
<p><b>R<sub>4</sub>/D<sub>2</sub>/DI</b> ----- R<sub>4</sub>, who has been with the founder through thick and thin, is a longtime member of the TMT of a public listed property development company. To the TMT, particularly the founder, R<sub>4</sub>'s opinions matter in their strategic decision making.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. In this same hotel tower [where the interview took place], before the foundation reinforced concrete slab was cast, I received the direction to plant a piece of green bamboo on each of the four corners of the site and a copy of the Chinese almanac [Tōng shū 通书] in the middle. Although somewhat puzzled by the job scope, I suddenly experienced the peace of mind that the founder had gotten that Fengshui master. He wasn't cheap, you know, his fee is in the hundreds of thousands!</li> <li>2. Fengshui subscription is not something that you can easily share with business associates and colleagues. Only family and some privileged top management members in the company can access my Fengshui audit report. Fortunately, this company is still very much a family-controlled business; otherwise, I really don't know how to explain certain Fengshui-based strategic decisions to the board.</li> <li>3. During the construction of this highrise hotel, any variations</li> </ol>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I experienced a sense of peace and confidence when I let Fengshui be part of my critical decision making.</li> <li>• There might be physical costs if I complied but emotional costs if I don't.</li> </ul>



Participant code and profile	Meaning units by the participant	Horizontalised textural descriptions
	<p>would come with significant time and cost implications. We were lucky that the changes required by the Fengshui master were not that painful to do. Rather than just instructing <i>what</i> elements had to be changed, I liked that he explained <i>why</i>. For us in the building industry, there are many ways to skin a cat. I learnt to bring in the Fengshui master early now. It's less painful to have Fengshui mistakes on the blueprints than to know them only during construction. I know it's irrational but I rather not tempt fate.</p> <p>4. But there was an issue that delayed the opening of this hotel because a propitious was unavailable. The price we paid, I recall, was about RM2 millions in terms of liquidated ascertained damages, etc. To ordinary businessmen, this kind of Fengshui-based decision would be crazy and unheard of. To our top management, RM2MILLION LAD [liquidated ascertained damages] was worth it. My heart agreed, but my mind objected. But my style is never the rebellious kind; I can adapt quickly and gladly.</p> <p>5. I subscribed to Fengshui not out of fear but because it has proven to work. Not subscribing to Fengshui today would mean that I sacrifice my peace of mind tomorrow.</p> <p>6. I associated Fengshui subscription with peace of mind</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I fear facts that I can't grasp, so I'd rather err on the safe side.</li> <li>• I know it's irrational but I rather not tempt fate.</li> <li>• There might be physical costs if I complied but emotional cost if I don't.</li> </ul>

Participant code and profile	Meaning units by the participant	Horizontalised textural descriptions
	<p>because too many projects following Fengshui advice by the master eventually turned out successful, be it our shopping centre, hotel or hospital.</p> <p>7. I feel that a building of good Fengshui is good for business. My company has a very low staff turnover, and some are with us for 30 years. They are happy because I look after them Fengshui-wise. I made sure they are seated in their best sectors according to their Bazi.</p> <p>8. I feel less uneasy in our housing developments to make Fengshui-based decisions because it makes sense to subscribe to Fengshui. Purchasers nowadays come with Fengshui masters or Fengshui knowledge. If our developments were to be planned ignorant of Fengshui guidelines, sales would be affected.</p> <p>9. I feel compelled to believe. But I stepped back, bringing that impulse into focus. At a safe distance, I was free of the impulse. But, I had a problem. Why, without the impulse dominating me, I still doubt: Should I believe?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I am the 'feeling part' to balance the decision-making body of objective data.</li> <li>• I trust my gut feelings and that extra intangible element to be doing the right thing.</li> <li>• I know it's irrational but I rather not tempt fate.</li> </ul>
<p>R<sub>5</sub>/FM<sub>2</sub>/DM ----- R<sub>5</sub> has a long and illustrious career ranging from corporate services to marketing and is now a Fengshui consultant, author,</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Property owners came to me for Fengshui advice with scepticism, ended up remain as my clients ten years later. Once they saw results, they became believers.</li> <li>2. But it saddened me to experience two types of clients ... first, those whose Bazi data were so bad that there's nothing much I could</li> </ol>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• My experiences of previous success empowered my Fengshui subscription.</li> </ul>



Participant code and profile	Meaning units by the participant	Horizontalised textural descriptions
<p>adjunct professor, speaker, and coach. Although she has researched Fengshui in the English and Australian cities, her focus remains in Malaysia for 30 years.</p>	<p>advise. Then, others stubbornly refused to take my advice or to change.</p> <p>3. I used to have the emotional baggage to seeing my clients got the necessary Fengshui remedy that I proposed. I felt it was my duty, so I shouldered the bag of responsibility. It's a metaphysical knowledge CURSE.</p> <p>4. I soon realised that I am no Superwoman. It felt better since. I moved on to better positive consultancy. This kind of experience made me a professional. I suppose a surgeon would feel sad if her patient died, but she could only try her best professionally and move on.</p> <p>5. I couldn't help respecting my clients who did the impossible to comply with my Fengshui principles. There was this Sales Director of a reputable property developer who got my advice slightly late. The show unit for a property lanch had been built and furnished for some time. But I could not lie and told him that the main door should be in the north sector, not south for sales function purposes. Without ado, he moved to another unit facing south and spent additional time and cost to remedy the Fengshui issue. Sales magically escalated after that!</p> <p>6. I find it comical that sometimes people want to listen to Fengshui advice on what they wish to hear. I don't need clients like that.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• My experiences of previous success empowered my Fengshui subscription.</li> <li>• At first, I subscribed to Fengshui for loss-aversion; now, I do so to seek gain.</li> </ul>

Participant code and profile	Meaning units by the participant	Horizontalised textural descriptions
	<p>7. Fengshui is not anything we have studied in business schools. We picked up this knowledge accidentally in the industry without seeking it particularly. Fengshui subscription is very hard to shake, as it confirms what we truly believe. Until the cost of believing in Fengshui becomes unbearable, I will not let go of it. Then again, 'high' is a relative term ... [self-satisfied smirk]"</p>	
<p>R6/A1/DM ----- R6 is a UK-trained architect, now practising in Malaysia at the architectural firm he founded. Being a Malay Muslim has not stopped him from studying the evidence-based Fengshui approach under a respectable local Fengshui master and environology professor.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. When I was in my 20s, I recall how intrigued I was to read that in Fengshui and Bazi that one's year, month, and date of birth could affect his fate and life. I did not understand it then, but I recall how important it was to acknowledge and accept that at that point in my life.</li> <li>2. Unless I was asked not to, otherwise, as an architect, Fengshui had to be considered from entrance location, approach, placement of certain rooms, and relocation of specific spaces. It's part of my professional responsibility.</li> <li>3. During the critical decision-making with my client that involved Fengshui, I felt I needed to understand the decision's basis. It's wrong not to put the decision rationale in context.</li> <li>4. I recall the positive sense of confirmation vividly seeing Fengshui prediction came true. Such experiences have contributed to my knowledge</li> </ol>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It's alright; we all have the unthinking cultural baggage that influences us.</li> <li>• I don't make decisions solely based on rationality.</li> </ul>



Participant code and profile	Meaning units by the participant	Horizontalised textural descriptions
	<p>now, and I believe it is correct to factor Fengshui into any significant decisions.</p> <p>5. Personally, when I factored Fengshui into my search and purchase of suitable plots, I felt 'guided', you know. It added reason and set parameters to my decision-making process. Perhaps, I fear facts that I can't grasp so I'd rather err on the safe side.</p> <p>6. My experience with Fengshui was that its principles can be so obviously logical yet overlooked at the same time. I'm not saying we should embrace Fengshui. I just felt like we shouldn't disregard it because often our property industry does not dwell in significant rationality anyway, and Fengshui practice is ubiquitous in Malaysia.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I experienced a sense of peace and confidence when I let Fengshui be part of my critical decision making.</li> <li>• I fear facts that I can't grasp, so I'd rather err on the safe side.</li> </ul>
<p><b>R7/P3/DM</b> ----- R7 is COO in a family-owned business valued at almost RM1 billion. With children successfully independent overseas, she now buys properties more for personal investment purposes.</p>	<p>1. I felt life wasn't fair in my early career during the late 90s. I worked extremely hard on many tenders, but our every bid always ended up No. 2. Hitting rock bottom, I felt there was nothing to lose having a Fengshui master to audit and propose renovation of our HQ. Immediately after that, business luck improved markedly. I'd subscribe to Fengshui for all significant decisions since. It even saved my marriage at one point in time.</p> <p>2. In the HQ, where major renovation took place to comply with Fengshui remedy, there were Malay staff too in the</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What is there to lose to subscribe to Fengshui?</li> </ul>

Participant code and profile	Meaning units by the participant	Horizontalised textural descriptions
	<p>company. I didn't see that as a problem. When the intention was for the company's interest, whether they believe it or not, to me, it was immaterial. But for the more senior Malay staff, I explained beforehand to get their buy-in both as a matter of respect and because the Fengshui consultancy wasn't cheap, and I had to make sure that they would not screw it up. You'll see that at first, I subscribed to Fengshui for loss-aversion; now, I do so to seek gain.</p> <p>3. Good job that the Malay staff were receptive to the idea of the Fengshui-based major company decision. And if they weren't, I honestly wouldn't care. Fengshui, to me, is a science. Both science and Fengshui demonstrate the positive effects of having a more attuned consciousness or mindfulness for our health, emotional well-being, social life, work and happiness. Like predicting weather condition work-wise, they were in no position to challenge weather forecast if the company's intention was good.</p> <p>4. I must admit that I was using Fengshui more for getting out of trouble. But now, I am subscribing to it to gain what I should have, not to overcome a problem. I think I've progressed as a Fengshui subscriber. It felt nice.</p> <p>5. I used Fengshui to help my family members. For instance, I ensured</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• At first, I subscribed to Fengshui for loss-aversion; now, I do so to seek gain.</li> <li>• I don't think it's a religious sin to subscribe to Fengshui.</li> <li>• At first, I subscribed to Fengshui for loss-aversion; now, I do so to seek gain.</li> </ul>



Participant code and profile	Meaning units by the participant	Horizontalised textural descriptions
	<p>the property that my son bought was suitable for his Bazi. I have no qualms about that, and to me, Fengshui subscription needs not be done in a hush-hush manner.</p> <p>6. Because Fengshui has saved my career and my marriage, it has become my guiding belief now whenever a significant decision has to be made. How can it not be? You would too if you were me. I no longer could take the risk of disregarding Fengshui in my decision making, just in case the earlier positive results were not coincidental.</p> <p>7. I am the 'feeling part' to balance the decision-making body of objective data.</p> <p>8. I can't lie- in my project, I am sorry to say that a Fengshui master to advise on the most auspicious layout and design must come before the architect. I am willing to pay considerably more to ensure optimal luck and hitting 100% take-up rate, which I believe building professionals by no means can provide.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I am the 'feeling part' to balance the decision-making body of objective data.</li> <li>• Our [Fengshui] master predicted the pandemic correctly, did he not?</li> </ul>
<p>R8/FM<sub>3</sub>/DM ----- R8 is Fengshui grandmaster, an adjunct professor and researcher with knowledge and experience from more than 45 years of study into this ancient Chinese science of geomancy and</p>	<p>1. I dealt with building professionals for umpteen years and saw only their prejudice in operation within the industry. Town planners and architects, trained in a specific manner, will treat any Fengshui advice not aligned with their professional training as pseudoscience and nonsensical. Although it's understandable, I think it's sad. My feeling for them is a mixture of respect and annoyance. I</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Our [Fengshui] master predicted the pandemic correctly, did he not?</li> </ul>

Participant code and profile	Meaning units by the participant	Horizontalised textural descriptions
<p>Yijing. R8 was the catalyst in having Fengshui manifest again as a legit body of knowledge in China.</p>	<p>respect their professionalism, but I don't think most of them know that they live their professional life in autopilot mode.</p> <p>2. I was engaged in this large shopping centre project in KL. When I came on board, the planner and architect had gotten the planning and building approvals. But I could not lie - the Fengshui of the proposal was terribly wrong. Because my Fengshui remedy involved significant time and cost implications, the professionals resisted vehemently. To protect my reputation, I threatened to resign. The client stepped in to instruct the entire project team to comply with my Fengshui requirements at all costs. I believe it was my saving him from bankruptcy earlier using Fengshui that encouraged this kind of strategic decision with ease in him. I felt he was repaying me with his trust rather than believing in Fengshui.</p> <p>3. I felt so confident with every positive experience. My client told me that he hardly could export a container in a month for the past three years, but after following my Fengshui advice, he exported 12 containers every day, and the order piled up to the following year! Can coincidence be so fast, frequent and effective?</p> <p>4. My experiences of previous success empowered my Fengshui subscription. I recall a key property industry player who</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Our [Fengshui] master predicted the pandemic correctly, did he not?</li>   <li>• Our [Fengshui] master predicted the pandemic correctly, did he not?</li> </ul>



Participant code and profile	Meaning units by the participant	Horizontalised textural descriptions
	<p>offered me RM200,000 as base consultancy fee, but it came with a challenge ... should AFTER my Fengshui intervention, the property take-up rate could reach 100% within the first two months, my fee would increase to RM300,000. Sure, I put in my extra effort for this; I wrote two articles about the project before giving a Fengshui talk during the property sales launch. Guess what, I didn't need two months. Prelaunch take-up was 90%, and three days after the launch, sales hit 100%. It was a triumphant experience.</p> <p>5. On the public knowledge and perception of credibility in Fengshui, it's frustrating because Fengshui is never the problem. The problem is the Fengshui practitioners. You see, if the Fengshui master is a Daoist, she'll introduce a talisman, and if he is a Buddhist, he'll infuse Buddhist chanting. It saddens me to understand that Fengshui practice is problematic in Malaysia.</p> <p>6. I didn't feel bad for declining to help a client 100%. He was a VIP, and he insisted that I, as his Fengshui consultant, mention something positive for him to use in sales marketing during the launch. Sure, my intervention could have lessened the severity of his Fengshui problem, but it couldn't have solved it. But I don't have to be that direct when I communicate, do I?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Our [Fengshui] master predicted the pandemic correctly, did he not?</li> <li>• My experiences of previous success empowered my Fengshui subscription.</li> <li>• I don't make decisions solely based on rationality.</li> <li>• Our [Fengshui] master predicted the pandemic correctly, did he not?</li> </ul>

Participant code and profile	Meaning units by the participant	Horizontalised textural descriptions
<p>R<sub>9</sub>/RE<sub>1</sub>/DM ----- R<sub>9</sub> is a real estate professional with a gold mine of knowledge about the local real estate market. With over 20 years of experience, she is well-connected to the Malaysian property industry, both in professional bodies and practice.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. In my early career life, I was very against Fengshui masters influencing property sales. I thought with anger ... 'How dare they spoil so many of my deals and diligent works with something so unexplainable?!' Now that I've understood more of Fengshui, I have more acceptance and accommodation of Fengshui in my heart. As a professional, I will not pretend that it doesn't exist or not impactful. I'll encourage young fellow professionals to be educated about this phenomenon instead of denying it.</li> <li>2. In one case, after visiting the industrial property a few times, I felt strange when this potential buyer suddenly requested, this time sheepishly, to reaccess the factory at a particular time and date. I was shocked to see the entire TMT came with the Fengshui master, fully robed and with his [<i>loupan</i>] compass. They went into details of which director must sit where and how to deal with the swimming pool, yes there was one! After all the trouble, I was indignant to hear the Fengshui master only found out that the property's main door was not suitable for the TMT's [<i>Bazi</i>]. I quickly responded, 'Hold on, there IS a side entrance'. After some deliberation and further <i>loupan</i> calibration, the deal went</li> </ol>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What is there to lose to subscribe to Fengshui?</li> <li>• Fengshui subscription is very hard to shake; if you can't beat them, join them.</li> </ul>

Participant code and profile	Meaning units by the participant	Horizontalised textural descriptions
	<p>through. Despite a multinational logistic company, this client took the trouble to renovate the side entrance and transform it into a new main entrance. Although the solution does look odd architecturally, I could not help feeling important with my creative contribution.</p> <p>3. These people I dealt with are Malaysians, employed TMT. It still amazes me why the real decision maker, a multinational logistic company owner, let his key men, who were employees nonetheless, use Fengshui to direct such a significant decision. I feel anxious when logic is out of my hand.</p> <p>4. My experience with individual property buyers and organisational property buyers had been different. Individual buyers seemed to be open about their Fengshui subscription. At the same time, corporate buyers, whether they were employer TMT or employed TMT, appeared covert of the whole thing as if it were something shameful. It's unbelievable that some were hardwired to believe only because Fengshui worked for them once or that they had heard that somebody got so rich due to applying Fengshui.</p> <p>5. I experienced a case with an Indian businessman who came with a Fengshui master. Since a famous Malaysian Fengshui master seldom does consultancy himself, I presumed my buyer</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It's alright; we all have the unthinking cultural baggage that influences us.</li>   <li>• I know it's irrational, but I rather not tempt fate.</li> </ul>



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	<p>must be an influential guy. I felt the whole deal was in the hand of the Fenghui master. Although the result was positive, I couldn't help feeling a waste of time studying real estate management overseas and getting my professional license.</p> <p>6. I began to accept that the people's belief systems in our property market are too complicated to shake. Some may not believe in Fengshui, but they would indeed acquiesce once the Fengshui master has revealed some information. It's alright; we all have the unthinking cultural baggage that influences us.</p> <p>7. So, I think the quality of a Fengshui master is paramount. I hope there are not many fake ones out there. Key people are listening to them. When my high-profile client confided, "My Fengshui master advises against closing that deal, period", to me, there goes any scientific management theory in the real world. Sometimes, I felt like WASTING MY TIME doing my MBA.</p> <p>8. Although one can view Fengshui as a superstition, as a professional, I don't feel it's wrong to allow and work with my clients factoring Fengshui in decision making. Like their religion, who am I to say I need proof? I've encountered many who actually used Fengshui as their primary guide in major</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fengshui subscription is very hard to shake; if you can't beat them, join them.</li>   <li>• It's alright; we all have the unthinking cultural baggage that influences us.</li>   <li>• It's alright; we all have the unthinking cultural baggage that influences us.</li> </ul>

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	<p>property selection. If subscribing to Fengshui is that crucial to them, so be it.</p> <p>9. Having dealt with so many buyers, I now realise that Fengshui subscribers are either behaving believers or non-believers; there are no fence-sitters. Believers to non-believers ratio is about 40% : 60%. It's strange though, when it comes to good/bad number, about 80% believe, regardlessly of races! But I don't classify numerology as Fengshui. A property with bad numbers in their addresses, lot numbers, road names or floor levels has poor resale values.</p> <p>10. Our business decision making is objective, but it is prone to human subjectivity like we all in the property industry are. Our business is not to teach or judge who is objective and who is not. So long as it is not illegal, we can respect any belief systems.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fengshui subscription is very hard to shake; if you can't beat them, join them.</li> <li>• I don't make decisions solely based on rationality.</li> </ul>
<p>R10/C1/DM ----- R9 is a Chinese Catholic who co-founded a contracting and project management company based in Kuala Lumpur, which undertakes interior fit-out and general construction</p>	<p>1. I have seen Fengshui work for others and experienced success applying it for myself in my company and home. I have no reason to disbelieve since there could not be so many coincidences of positive results.</p> <p>2. I believe Fengshui on a macro-level, not in the nuanced calibration of Bazi and Qi. I guess that makes it simple for me to subscribe to it without upsetting my church and family members too much.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• My experiences of previous success empowered my Fengshui subscription.</li> </ul>



Participant code and profile	Meaning units by the participant	Horizontalised textural descriptions
<p>works. Trained in Australia as a professional architect, he now is instrumental in making his company listed in the Bursa Malaysia.</p>	<p>3. I will not make any significant decision without checking Fengshui. To me, Fengshui is not a superstition but a science that deals with analytical knowledge about our environment. It'll be silly of me to disregard Fengshui if the decision I have to make is major.</p> <p>4. When my Fengshui master's comments conflicted with my design preference as a trained architect, I felt unsettled initially, but eventually, I would follow his advice.</p> <p>5. I recall an impasse in one RM55 million project with ROI, funds, etc., worked out in order. But the Fengshui of the site was, to my company, unfavourable. Although the rational parts of our strategic decision-making ultimately prevailed, we spent significantly on having a second Fengshui opinion, revising the architectural design to mitigate adverse Fengshui and time cost. Instead of feeling guilty, I felt a sense of achievement getting around the impasse. More importantly, it gave me peace of mind.</p> <p>6. Fengshui gives me a direct insight into my introspection, making me confident in making strategic decisions.</p> <p>7. If you believe in Fengshui, you have a lot to gain; you don't lose much if it doesn't work.</p> <p>8. I may not be what you called a staunch believer of Fengshui, but when the [Fengshui] master had</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I don't make decisions solely based on rationality.</li>   <li>• I know it's irrational, but I rather not tempt fate.</li>   <li>• I experienced a sense of peace and confidence when I let Fengshui be part of my critical decision making.</li> </ul>

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	<p>explained why I must change the colour of my company logo and accepted it, I did not look back for any reconsideration. Implementation was the easy part; explaining to others why was tricky.</p>	
<p><b>R11/D3/DM</b> ----- R11 is a VVIP in Malaysia, a third-generation Protestant, and Group MD of a company listed on the Main Board of Bursa Malaysia with almost five decades of work experience in property and construction both locally and internationally.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. This experience when I was a young contractor- my friend expressed sympathy after my brother got severe health complications for disrespecting the Nadugong shrine (Datuk Keramat in Malay) that “looked after” our construction site. From her cultural background, I must not have learned everything I could from a spiritual perspective of the local industry. I instead saw it as a kind of a blessing because, with my pastor’s help, I was allowed to care for my brother differently than ‘typical’. Both perspectives have some value and could mean the same thing. But they are both ‘superstition’ in that they are not scientific at all. I then questioned the need to be scientific. I don’t make decisions solely based on rationality.</li> <li>2. You know, every minute design element in my HQ building is Fengshui-calibrated now. Good job, my Board (of Directors) is an open-minded one. I, therefore, have no qualms applying Fengshui in all our major projects. Of course, my</li> </ol>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I don’t make decisions solely based on rationality.</li> <li>• I don’t make decisions solely based on rationality.</li> <li>• I am the ‘feeling part’ to balance the decision-making body of objective data.</li> </ul>



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	<p>(Fengshui) master's advice is important, but I also have to have this "feeling right" in my decision making. I even agreed that my master comes back every year to maintain the correct Fengshui calibration of my HQ based on my Bazi.</p> <p>3. I couldn't have been more overjoyed and relieved when my pastor gave his okay for me to activate the lion sculptures' eyes at the opening ceremony recommended by the Fengshui master. He said viewing Fengshui custom as a cultural activity is okay, but not as something to be worshipped.</p> <p>4. I recall once I accepted the bank's RM150 million loan and chipped in another RM75 million to develop a shopping centre abandoned for 18 years based on this 'feeling right' about that property. This was despite the fact that other developers didn't think that the site could work. I would be more careful in my decision making had there been an absence of that "feeling right" Fengshui in me then. I don't care what Fengshui school it is, but ultimately to me, the "feeling right" must be there.</p> <p>5. I prefer to engage Fengshui master through my architects. I feel more comfortable being seen as not directly involve in such engagement. This is also to minimise my pastor questioning why as a church leader, I subscribed to Fengshui.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I don't think it's a religious sin to subscribe to Fengshui.</li> <li>• I trust my gut feelings and that extra intangible element to be doing the right thing.</li> <li>• It's alright; we all have the unthinking cultural baggage that influences us.</li> </ul>



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	<p>Sometimes I felt my interest to explore Fengshui more was thwarted by my religion.</p> <p>6. Our projects that involved building a highway through the jungle were often opposed by fierce protests from villagers based on Fengshui grounds. When I was younger, I resisted for some time based on rationality. Immediately, my staff suffered an unexplained mental problem, including a close relative of mine who worked on the project. If you've been around long enough in this industry, as I have, you can't help but believe in Fengshui. I'm not sure if I am a natural believer or compelled to believe, but I do now accept it as true. Perhaps Fengshui conveys wisdom that I do not yet agree to attribute with certainty.</p> <p>7. Last year, I underwent coronary bypass surgery. As you know, to get the best cardiovascular surgeon, you don't choose the surgery date, it is allocated to you. Mine was on 14 August 2020. OH MY GOD, '14' means SURE TO DIE. But of course, to skip that date means delaying the procedure, and my doctor had forewarned that would be even more dangerous for me. I went through it, thank God, uneventfully- I think being an Earth Ox operated, by chance, on that Ji Chou (Earth Ox) day acted very favourably for me. But, you can never imagine what kind of mental stress and anxiety that I</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I know it's irrational, but I rather not tempt fate.</li> <li>• Our [Fengshui] master predicted the pandemic correctly, did he not?</li> <li>• I don't make decisions solely based on rationality.</li> <li>• I know it's irrational, but I rather not tempt fate.</li> </ul>

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	<p>had gone through. The trauma of realising I was not in control of my Fengshui subscription in a crucial life obstacle like that was dreadfully unbearable!</p> <p>8. Do you recall I once asked you to appeal to the City Hall for allocating our housing project units address numbering with '4'? I felt ludicrous, yet obligatory, with that instruction.</p>	
<p>R12/C2/DM ----- R12 is a notable alumnus of the University of Cambridge, a chartered member of the Chartered Institute of Building, Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors and a registered member of the UAE Society of Engineers. He is Group MD overseeing several construction-related companies that he set up.</p>	<p>1. There was this turnkey project when we had spent 6 months designing and getting approvals in readiness. Suddenly the client brought in a Fengshui master to review the project. I was dumbstruck. Fortunately, after studying the plans and site for 2 weeks, he just required one major change: the main drain flow had to be changed to avoid 'unnecessary flow of wealth'. My first thought was his Fengshui diagnosis lacking in practicality as he was in rationality. But the proposed remedy, although painful, was doable. But you know, there was no anger in me. I was enjoying the learning process in Fengshui. When I dealt directly with the Fengshui master on board, he only took care of the Fengshui of their three key personnel, i.e. the Chairman, MD and ED. After that, I find it interesting that all the 11 department's Heads (about 5-6 managers per department) quietly came to me to pursue</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It's alright; we all have the unthinking cultural baggage that influences us.</li> <li>• It's alright; we all have the unthinking cultural baggage that influences us.</li> <li>• I know it's irrational, but I rather not tempt fate.</li> </ul>



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	<p>their good Fengshui seating arrangement, etc.</p> <p>2. I believe the best approach in life is to follow the flow. It's our choice to be doing business in Malaysia. To be honest, I don't have any problem at all with the Fengshui subscription: if you can't beat them, join them with some practical wisdom.</p> <p>3. I lost the positive feeling about Fengshui when the master ordered to place a box of 3 different elements to be buried at a specific location during the construction of the foundation. Part of his Fengshui procedure was to bury a special box in the exact position where I drove in my main pile. At that point, it reminded me of the long-gone practice of the Borneo human baby head placed beneath the foundation of a bridge or building under construction to safeguard the structure. Although human sacrifices have long disappeared, I felt uneasy. The strange feeling was like eating durian for the first time!</p> <p>4. According to the Fengshui master, the purpose of that ritual was to ensure that those using the building would be safe and the business would prosper. True enough, I observed that the company was what the master Fengshui-ed it to be for the next ten years. I am not sure if it's a coincidence, but it appeared convincing.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fengshui subscription is very hard to shake; if you can't beat them, join them.</li> </ul>

Participant code and profile	Meaning units by the participant	Horizontalised textural descriptions
	<p>5. In my own family company building construction, I also engaged a Fengshui master, despite my family and me being a Christian. Yes, you see, the durian eater, although feeling weird eating that durian, return for more! I felt there's no harm in basing my design on Fengshui. Our preferred plans were conceived first; we then send them to the master to add her optics in the Fengshui aspects for our revision, if required, which usually was neither necessary nor major. I don't know how to explain it, but I have an innate sense of recognising good Fengshui.</p> <p>6. I now ask outright my clients if they have any Fengshui requirements. Instead of fearing them thinking that I am unscientific, superstitious or focusing on the subjective, I saw my clients consider my approach as value-adding. I am not a Fengshui expert, but I hold dearly that building is like a fetus in a mother's womb. I made sure there's no seed of anger planted, be it my workers or the clients quarrelling in the construction. What little I know in Fengshui I would carry out. If a Fengshui mistake occurred, I've had it rectified at my cost. Better be safe than sorry.</p> <p>7. But I didn't like to corner my client into deciding between what I believe versus what he or his Fengshui master believes.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I fear facts that I can't grasp, so I'd rather err on the safe side.</li> <li>• I experienced a sense of peace and confidence when I let Fengshui be part of my critical decision making.</li> <li>• It's alright; we all have the unthinking cultural baggage that influences us.</li> <li>• I fear facts that I can't grasp, so I'd rather err on the safe side.</li> </ul>

Participant code and profile	Meaning units by the participant	Horizontalised textural descriptions
	<p>When potentially it was going that way, I refrained from commenting.</p> <p>8. I was saddened by a client who, after building a lovely straight front façade, instructed to demolish the main entrance and rebuild at an angle against the road. All because his Fengshui master advised so. It spoiled the entire aesthetic of the architecture. I could not accept that. The problem with Malaysia is that Fengshui practice is not regulated, and anyone can claim to be a master. I could not say anything, but I couldn't help doubting the standard of Fengshui consultancy nowadays.</p> <p>9. Looking back at the emotive account of my experience, I supposed I was treating my project as if it was owned and used by me- that was a mistake. Well, I am not him [my client], not the end-user, so why was I so attached? By allowing them to believe whatever they have believed shouldn't be that hard.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It's alright; we all have the unthinking cultural baggage that influences us.</li> </ul>
<p>R13/P1/DM ----- R13 is a locally-trained architect and a Director of a well-established architecture firm in Kuala Lumpur. In the past 17 years as a professional architect, he has managed multiple</p>	<p>1. As an architect with some Fengshui knowledge, I've experienced qualms with clients who desired to have some layouts, which to me, were of terrible Fengshui. Had he been a close friend, I'd definitely have advised him against it. Although it was right not to go beyond my professional scope as an architect, I feel a bit bad not to.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It's alright; we all have the unthinking cultural baggage that influences us.</li> </ul>



Participant code and profile	Meaning units by the participant	Horizontalised textural descriptions
residential and major mixed development projects in Malaysia and China.	<p>2. I recently bought a 3-bedroom condo unit myself because the property's main entrance suits my Bazi. As you know, that's the main thing in Fengshui. But the bedrooms aren't quite suitable for my two sons. Of course, I couldn't win it all. I'm okay with that. Or rather, while awaiting the chance of moving to a better house... I am okay with that.</p> <p>3. You may say I am not a firm believer in Fengshui. But my limited knowledge in Fengshui has not affected my believability in it. I find myself subscribing to it nonetheless because I am a kiasu. Fengshui matters to me but not to the extent of moving away just because of some secondary non-compliance of Fengshui.</p> <p>4. But there was a case when the signs were clear enough to convince me that Fengshui was not just wrong but started to affect the family. There was no longer guilt nor shame in me doing all I could to resolve that. I stopped caring about being a rational professional. I just sought the best Fengshui solution and applied it, including massive renovation if I felt necessary.</p> <p>5. Funnily though, when the client showed indifference to what I saw as worrisome Fengshui issue, I found myself behaving calmly, too. If he didn't care, why should I? But with such dissonance, I could still compose myself and</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I know it's irrational, but I rather not tempt fate.</li> <li>• What is there to lose to subscribe to Fengshui?</li> <li>• I don't make decisions solely based on rationality.</li> </ul>

Participant code and profile	Meaning units by the participant	Horizontalised textural descriptions
	<p>move on. I guess I am not superstitious</p> <p>6. I cultivated the self-control necessary for good judgment and business charisma. Being passive is not a weakness but a strength. Passivity is about studying what triggers me and what it is attempting to teach me. It's about following my intuition rather than a terrifying inner voice that tells me I'm a failure if I don't.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fengshui subscription is very hard to shake; if you can't beat them, join them.</li> </ul>
<p>R14/A2/DM ----- R14 co-founded a successful architecture, medical planning and interior consultancy company in Kuala Lumpur 25 years ago. Registered as an architect and interior designer in Malaysia, he also holds a law degree from London. He has projects in Malaysia, India, Indonesia, Cambodia and Vietnam, amounting to over RM10 billion.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. My earlier experience with Fengshui masters was as a property buyer. I supposed I was lucky to have encountered Fengshui masters who explained why not just told what should be done to resolve what. The more I understand the logic of how it works and witnessed it work, the more that I cannot take the risk of disregarding Fengshui, you know, just in case there is harm for not subscribing to it.</li> <li>2. It's not easy for me to make a call knowingly premised on Fengshui ... 'mindful that not every decision stakeholder would concur'. I'd usually tread with care and sensitivity. However, I'm not really sure why ... [once I have] decided, then I felt relieved. For better or worse, I can act rather than procrastinate. As you know, in construction, LAD [liquidated ascertained damages] is on day count</li> <li>3. It's important for me to understand what I'm doing. But I find that when my Fengshui master could not convince me</li> </ol>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There might be physical costs if I complied but emotional costs if I don't.</li> <li>• I experienced a sense of peace and confidence when I let Fengshui be part of my critical decision making.</li> </ul>



Participant code and profile	Meaning units by the participant	Horizontalised textural descriptions
	<p>logically and scientifically, I still subscribed to Fengshui. In my last Fengshui consultancy with her over a significant land purchase, my rational mind only believed 50% of what she said. Yet, 50% believability did not stop me from deciding on something important unless such a Fengshui-based decision could harm others. I simply could not see myself tempting fate.</p> <p>4. Fengshui masters they're always ... when they speak ... it's always indirect manner, preventing me from comprehending fully. So it's kind of like a philosophical way to communicate. I think even if the advice was logical, it might sound irrational. It's also typically in Chinese poetic terms that I do not understand.</p> <p>5. Yes, we perceive Fengshui pervades decision making. What am I to do? How am I to proceed? We [business leaders] aren't blind or daft. We can adapt to the most challenging issues, and we can adapt to the influence of Fengshui.</p> <p>6. As a matter of fact, after crossing the line of no return, I'd rather lose the deal than lose face. Money can be earned back, but respect will be hard to regain ... .. it may be quite a farce if people realise Fengshui was the primary deciding factor here".</p> <p>7. The satisfying feeling of Fengshui subscription reduced markedly nowadays as the Fengshui master explained less to me why certain</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I know it's irrational, but I rather not tempt fate.</li> <li>• Fengshui subscription is very hard to shake; if you can't beat them, join them.</li> <li>• I trust my gut feelings and that extra intangible element to be doing the right thing.</li> </ul>



Participant code and profile	Meaning units by the participant	Horizontalised textural descriptions
	<p>things had to be done in a specific way. It's more like just following a formula. Perhaps she thought I knew everything. While results are important to me, I wanted to be part of the process. If the results came out to be what I understood, the experience would have been more enriching.</p> <p>8. I equate faith in religion the same as faith in Fengshui. Like religion, we see people go to Fengshui when there is a significant issue or problem. To me, I don't need to see proof in either, to believe or disbelieve it. But I need an explanation of the 'doctrine'. But in Fengshui, I must say that the first positive result confirmed my trajectory of subscribing to it subsequently in my key decision making. Subscribing to a religious belief is universal and does not require much reasoning to others, but subscribing to Fengshui can be deemed superstitious. Yet, they are not much different.</p> <p>9. In our major office renovation and expansion a few years back, my decision based on Fengshui had not been as enriching as before. But I still found myself avoid tempting faith; I simply had to subscribe to Fengshui 'just in case' it worked.</p> <p>10. At times, I needed to embody a self-possessed coolness when I saw the contractor's work being done not according to my</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I don't make decisions solely based on rationality.</li> <li>• It's alright; we all have the unthinking cultural baggage that influences us.</li> <li>• I know it's irrational, but I rather not tempt fate.</li> </ul>

Participant code and profile	Meaning units by the participant	Horizontalised textural descriptions
	Fengshui advice so painfully calibrated.	

## Appendix G: Examples of Researcher's Reflexive Journal

**Date:** 24 July 2020

**Participant No.** R1/P2/DI

**Interview #1 @5:40pm - 7:00pm**

My initial negative thought about this interview was toward the physical demands after a long day's work in my office. But my lethargy quickly "disappeared" as my very first participant of this study, R1/P2/DI, walked into my office. Partly because I knew how diligent this professionally-trained captain of the industry was throughout the experience I had with him in our last significant hospital development. I wanted to be fully present for this interview: I felt honoured rather than nervous over the need to prove myself. After working closely with him on our project for several years, I have nothing more to prove about who I am as a person. I feel this helped in my interview as we seemed to talk without a façade authentically without ado.

Like any other design briefing with clients and potential clients for almost three decades of practising as an architect, I find compartmentalising my *a priori* knowledge and expectation effortless and inconsequential in this interview. "Isn't that how a professional architect supposed to do?" I said to myself, reflecting that by no means would we expect our clients to regard their architectural needs and experience to be the same as ours! In other words, we temporarily bracket our philosophical and system of belief. And why not? I only want to get on with the project (if it's confirmed) or close the deal (if it's a potential client).

Albeit not apparent from the outset, I saw the beauty and efficacy of phenomenological qualitative data gathering when I reflected on the participant's response toward the end of his in-depth interview: "I'm glad you gave me an opportunity to share this because, yeah, it's not like every day I can articulate, reflect on my experience although, yes, I lived it, right?". That moment, I felt I had truly understood what Husserl asserted as a return to self and "inner evidence", which is a way to generate knowledge. R1/P2/DI had given me an account of his Fengshui subscription experience as perceived by him within the context of his world. These data were primary, pure and without the impact of externalities, including myself, who had willfully been put in a mental compartment free of preconceptions.

**Date: 27 July 2020**

**Participant No. R2/D1/DI**

**Interview #2 @9:00pm - 10:00pm**

Interviewing Fengshui subscription with a Muslim with a medical degree seemed like an antithesis of prudence. Being a Muslim and believing in Fengshui is against Islamic tenets; being a doctor and engaging in Fengshui is improper. R2/D1/DI appeared to want to help me with my investigation, but he couldn't stop justifying himself for indulging in Fengshui. He was chosen as a participant simply because he had factored Fengshui in SD making. In truth, I resented that he tried rationalising his Fengshui subscription as I know all its details - I was the architect chairing and recording these Fengshui-related meetings!

As a seasoned architect and *people person* at heart, I thought I understood creative expression and wordplay... until R2/D1/DI communicated in a complicated manner coded with guilt and insecurity. I realised I would have to push myself harder and sharpen my interview technique. Not only did I quickly learn to explore how to dig into my creative soul to unveil layered narrations, but I also began to *see* experiences in a whole new way, paying attention with my eyes, ears, heart and mind to what others have to say. I also found myself withholding my feedback until R2/D1/DI had thoroughly evaluated and settled with himself. After letting him sweat and flail around, trying to share his experience in coated meanings, I responded not too soon or too late. With newfound patience and empathy, I finally did not have to guess what he meant in his veiled verbiage. It was a nice feeling having penetrated conversation to that level.

The study's peculiarity stems from the requirement to involve TMT players to provide (at times, embarrassing) insights into a complex and challenging issue of Fengshui-based SD making. With participants like R2/D1/DI, I was worried at the outset that due to a lack of consistency among participants, it might be taxing to describe the "correct" lived experience. Worse, using my own interest and experience with the topic as the starting point of my study would be seen as inappropriate, as the whole phenomenon can mean different things to different people. It wasn't until much later that I realised that having diverse voices from the same fraternity could yield a richer set of data to help me answer my research questions.

**Date: 28 August 2020**

**Participant No. R7/PI/DM**

**Interview #7 @2:00pm - 2:40pm**

My conversation with R7/PI/DM, who described her lived experience incorporating Fengshui into critical decision making, has been challenging as I tried in vain to erase from my knowledge base that what she went through was identical with mine. I am aware that I must be conscious of my subjectivity and be professional in my intentions as I would have with my clients in architectural practice. But, I still encountered multiple subjectivities crossing my head doing that.

It seems that, in order to bracket, I must be reflexive. Both bracketing and reflexivity can't be separated. Both compelled me to have quiet time in my office after office hours (as a supportive environment) and contemplate using my reflective ability cultivated over three decades of practice as an architect. But to ensure that my prejudices did not (and could not) influence my data gathering and analysis approaches, I must also run R7/PI/DM over the synthesised member checking at a later stage.

I felt lighter after resolving this issue. I no longer felt connected to my *a priori* expertise as an architect who had experienced the same during my active practice in the same research context with the same subject matter for the past 30 years. I noticed a reduction in the dichotomy of experiencing wrong and right, which had previously prevented me from examining the phenomenon outside of that binary.

I couldn't help but also detect a lack of neutrality with R7/PI/DM in our earlier informal discussions and this in-depth interview. I had a strong impression that she avoided situations where she would experience unpleasant sensations and sought out accounts where she could share happy feelings of being a lady COO who was always steady and correct. I recognise my annoyance as deriving from my expectation of a "correct way of responding" by my participants. That was indeed a preconceived idea of mine. Upon giving it some thoughts, it also dawned on me that epoché doesn't mean I work sans preconceptions; it just means I don't let those thoughts control my assessment.

**Date: 28 October 2020**

**Participant No. R11/D3/DM**

**Interview #11 @12:00pm - 3:30pm**

At R11/D3/DM's request, this meeting was oddly held in a discussion room at a stadium. The interview then extended over lunch in a Chinese restaurant nearby. Although restaurants weren't allowed to open during this pandemic period, R11/D3/DM's influence in getting the restaurant at short notice not only to open but cook lunch just for us gave me an uncanny feeling. Sure, we had privacy. But being the only table in a sizable empty restaurant was strange. It was special because the long, earnest conversation had gone way beyond my research questionnaire guide yet managed to return to make sense of what I was inquiring. My epistemological stance changed throughout time due to my changing circumstances. Admittedly, in-depth conversations without conditions with Founders like R11/D3/DM catalysed some. I thought that the teacher I honour most was my past, but contrasting the lived experiences in R11/D3/DM and with mine has been a better guru.

R11/D3/DM helped me recognise that I had inadvertently been biased toward myself when I carefully monitored biases in others. Keeping in mind this is a "Western education DBA," I tried to always fit myself into a binary box that was either "in" or "out" of Western conceptions of Fengshui subscription. It appears that prejudice does not have to be me against others but can instead be me against myself. I was surprised he sought the advice of a Fengshui master for his house design and care to seek my opinions now. However, when R11/D3/DM was surprised that I was surprised (that there was such a necessity), I knew I had to revisit my prejudice.

It was as if he told me that Fengshui wisdom already resides within me and that I don't need Western philosophy to justify or rationalise it. Otherwise, it was self-prejudice pure and straightforward. Rather than seeing it as an anomaly or a perplexity to be kept concealed, I must revisit this "gift loaded with wisdom". I did feel like possessing a kind of affinity to Chinese metaphysics too, but I did not label the experience as something positive. Instead, there was always an inhibition element in my perspective of being seen as a superstitious Fengshui subscriber. I acknowledge the conflict of interest in serving as both a professional and one who supports Fengshui subscription. I am adapting per situation, not achieving reconciliation.

**Date: 5 December 2020**

**Participant No. R12/C2/DM**

**Interview #12 @10:00am - 12:00pm**

Like a few interviews before this, I realised that my semi-structured questionnaire approach might not be the best no matter how I declared from inception that it was merely a guide. R8/FM2/P wanted badly to convey his narrative in its entirety, as though he desired to get it out without interruption. I attempted to dismiss this concern but worried, if not guided, whether participants like R8/FM2/P accurately recounted their lived experience.

As I became aware of how debilitating the ME was for him, I resisted the need to steer him back to the subject I thought I wanted him to discuss. I simply listened intently to what he said. He eventually got around to it in his own time. Then I began to wait until he had completed his entire account before asking him to reflect on what it was actually LIKE for him connected to the dissonances he had already raised in letting Fengshui be part of their major decision making.

By this time, with my participant No. 8, the primary lesson I learned from bracketing was that it had to be a progressive skill. As revealed in my reflexive journal now, it may be unreasonable to assume complete proficiency and be comfortable with bracketing from the start. I felt uneasy and was only partially able to compartmentalise issues. I was far too aware of my own personal feelings, and this subject has never left me a single day for the past three decades. It became clear when I realised how similar R8/FM2/P's experiences were to mine, and I anticipated him describing comparable incidents.

Occasionally, I believed that all the issues had been addressed in advance, but new ones occasionally surfaced during the interview. These activities compelled me to grow beyond the Husserlian's kind of "pre-action" bracketing and into an "on-action" bracketing to facilitate a more evident emergence of the phenomenon under investigation. The later part of the interview was more casual, and bracketing became ingrained. I felt much more confident about maintaining an open mind throughout the discussion.



**Date: 25 February 2021**

**Participant No. R13/P1/DI**

**Interview #13 @10:15am – 11:10pm**

I was sure there was confirmation bias in R13/P1/DI even before beginning this DBA. I've known R13/P1/DI for five decades, which made suspending my knowledge of him extremely difficult. I know my perspectives of his experience in Fengshui subscription would likely be correct, no matter how hard it would be for me to modify perceptions of his interpretation. The fact that I knew him far too well seemed problematic – e.g. when R13/P1/DI was 'not looking', I found myself unwittingly trying to 'correct' how he experienced what he experienced. He has had a habit of self-diagnosing every problem and scenario since he was a teenager. If he believed that a particular method would work, he would relentlessly seek out objective facts, interpreting things in a way that supported his opinion and recalling only data that reinforced his belief. The issue is that he frequently overlooks critical material.

After a relatively long period of contemplation, I realised that adopting his interpretation in the way he preferred was not all that bad. In fact, I find that if I simply accept his interpretation of the experiences he sought for me, even if I do not fully believe those interpretations of the events, fascinating insights emerge for me overall. For example, he adheres to the Fengshui notion that assigning employees with specific birth dates to particular staff workstations will benefit both the organisation and the employees. Whilst I know that there is such Fengshui knowledge, but other Fengshui aspects must also be checked, e.g. the nature of the business and at what stage is the PLC of the organisation.

There's undoubtedly a crack in my *Epoché*! I should remind myself that the world flows no matter how we view what others interpret it. Little did I realise before this that R13/P1/DI's Fengshui belief might make him believe he has power over his decision outcomes. Yet, I have no right to deprive him of his ability to be in charge of situations over which he had no real influence. If that's how he relaxes his brain and improves his performance due to his perception of his desired outcome, it would be pretty unethical of me as a researcher to exert any impact on his perceived control over the decision that eventually translates into action. Thank God I figured it out before it was too late.



**Date: 3 March 2021**

**Participant No. R14/C2/DM**

**Interview #14 @4:15pm – 5:00pm**

I knew that this individual had always been economical in his words, speaks in layered meaning, and did not easily trust anyone. I could see that he often inadvertently puts on a façade in communications. He resisted opening up to me without me probing too much, and he diverted to talk about Yin-Yang. I regretfully made a quick remark about his seeing the Yin-Yang duality as a core concept in (his) Fengshui, which to me is controversial: “You already have a fixed theory of ‘good’ vs ‘bad’ before you even started the interview”. R14/C2/DM replied: “No, the Yin-Yang duality I see has a more profound significance than what the Western culture dictates in our current worldview of thinking about things as ‘good’ and ‘bad’”.

What was the additional insight here? To him, Yin and Yang are two of the universe’s natural laws, both of which operate according to the same cyclical principle. As a tree dies, it is ‘bad,’ but its demise provides nutrients for seeds to provide food. He also emphasised that he felt more open when I was indubitably honest with him and wished I had done so earlier. It caused me to reflect on my skills and wonder how things might have looked differently throughout the experience had I spoken less, connected more, or was diligent in letting the participants know who I was at the time. At times, I had not even considered that these individuals already knew me for ages as a practising architect because they had the previous project/s with me and didn’t know me as a scholar. Yin and Yang is not a zero-sum game but a duality embraceable in dynamic form.

Bracketing is by no means foolproof. But the task is not to remove my self-absorption as a confident professional but to suspend it from being the predominant force for my more profound understanding of seeing from R14/C2/DM’s perspective. I learnt to keep the peace by embracing the importance of both sides of me – the architect and the DBA researcher. Understanding the need to accept such duality is the cusp of my new reflexive journey, not the end. In my member checking process and reflection upon how I write up my account in thematic coding, I will be particularly mindful of holding my pre-understandings and assumptions beyond a practising architect doing so out of professional ethics.