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## The Impact of *Feng Shui* on Chinese Communication

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**Abstract:** *Feng shui*, the art of space arrangement, has made a great impact on Chinese society. It reflects and shapes most of the traditional Chinese cultural values. Because *feng shui* continues to play an important role in the contemporary Chinese world, it is important for scholars in different disciplines to systematically study *feng shui* in order to better understand the Chinese way of thinking and behavior. The goal of this article is threefold: (1) to delineate the meaning of *feng shui*, (2) to examine the philosophical and cultural bases of *feng shui*, and (3) to analyze its impact on the Chinese social interaction. It is concluded that, as a collection of Chinese ancient wisdom, *feng shui* not only contains much mysterious knowledge, but also possesses many ideas that can be explained and studied by using the contemporary research methodology, including empirical and interpretive investigations. [China Media Research. 2007; 3(4): 102-109]

**Keywords:** *Feng shui*, *chi*, Chinese philosophy, Chinese culture, nonverbal communication, *yin*, *yang*, *wu xing*

As a traditional Chinese worldview, *feng shui* was said to be discovered by the legendary ancient Sage, Fu Hsi, who “looked upward and contemplated the images in the heavens,” and “looked downward and contemplated the patterns on earth” (Wilhelm, 1977, p. 328). From his systematic observation Fu Hsi gained insight into the laws of nature and the influence of cosmic forces on the environment and the myriad. He then instituted *feng shui* to sanctify the lives of his people. He attuned them to the moods and rhythms of nature, and provided them with security and a sense of continuity.

Passed down from generation to generation, the relationship between humans and their environment dictated by the concept of *feng shui* continues to dominate Chinese life in all aspects. Chinese people often trace success or failure not so much to human actions, but to the workings of mysterious earth forces (i.e., *feng shui*) that are believed to be responsible for determining health, prosperity, and good luck. *Feng shui* has influenced Chinese culture at a very deep and profound level. It is so engrafted upon Chinese social life that it has become firmly intertwined with every possible event of domestic life such as birth, marriage, housing, and funeral.

Although many people argue that *feng shui* is a superstitious practice because it is outdated and lacks scientific explanation or evidence, the assumptions of *feng shui* on natural causes and effects, which serve as a system of how to survive and excel by being in harmony with nature, can provide us with a new perspective for facing the problem in modern society in which technology has polluted our environment, our health, and our morale. Thus, in order to demystify *feng shui* this article attempts to examine the concept from three aspects: (1) what is *feng shui*, (2) the

philosophical and cultural bases of *feng shui*, and (3) the impact of *feng shui* on Chinese social interaction.

### What Is *Feng Shui*?

*Feng shui*, or “wind water”, represents a traditional Chinese worldview regarding the relationship between human being and nature. The original name of *feng shui* in Chinese is *kan yu*. *Kan* means heaven, and *yu* means earth. Embedded in the traditional Taoist philosophy, the theory of *kan yu* dictates that any actions taken on earth will affect the heaven, and vice versa. In addition to *kan yu*, a more popular name for *feng shui* is *di li* (i.e., “land patterns” or “geography”), which stipulates *feng shui* as a systematic study of the land and its patterns, both natural and man-made. Western people tend to perceive *feng shui* as “geomancy” which, according to Skinner (1982), is a misnomer because the term more relates to an Arab form of divination, which spread north into Europe and south into Africa at the end of the first millennium. *Feng shui* encompasses more than geomancy (Rossbach, 1991).

Wang (1991) indicated that *feng shui* is “an inherited cultural phenomenon, a method of pursuing good fortune and shunning the course of calamity, a common and popular folk custom, a study of the relationship between environment and humans” (p. 5). It concerns the harmonious positioning of dwellings for the living and tombs for the dead, with special regard for the proposed site’s manifestation of *chi* or the life’s “breath.” In other words, *feng shui* is “the art of living in harmony with the land, and deriving the greatest benefit, peace and prosperity from being in the right place at the right time” (Skinner, 1982, p. 4). Thus, the goal of *feng shui* is to be in harmony with the environment in order to maximize fortune, success, and happiness. In the words of Rossbach (1984):

It is an eco-art dealing with conservation, ecology, orientation, spatial arrangement—basically how and where man should place himself or build his shelter in this vast world. It is a means to define one's position in the spherical universe, and then improve on it. And I discovered that it helps the promise of everything anyone could possibly want: happy family, good marriage, healthy and long life, successful career, wealth, good luck. . . In its full scope, *feng-shui* tells us how to locate ourselves in the universe in a better way. (p. x)

Rossbach's definition unfolds four characteristics of *feng shui*: pervasive, mysterious, utilitarian, and harmonious. First, *feng shui* is pervasive. The practice of *feng shui* in China has been extended over 2,000 years from early the Chin dynasty to the contemporary age. The practice of *feng shui* spreads over China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong, and penetrates into all aspects of Chinese life (Wang, 1991). Thus, it is an indispensable part of Chinese cultural heritage.

Second, *feng shui* is mysterious. *Feng shui* is a discipline that aims to manipulate the invisible and subtle energies of the cosmos, or *chi*, to create harmony between human and environment. It tries to synchronize our external environment in order to equip us with positive energy which helps us foster our fullest potential. In addition, the mysterious feature of *feng shui* is based on its metaphysical cosmology. It not only absorbs knowledge from different disciplines, including philosophy, psychology, ethics, aesthetics, and astrology, but also from the ancient Chinese religious beliefs such as *yin* and *yang*, *wu xing* (the Five Elements), *ba kua* (the eight trigrams), and other spiritual phenomena (Yang & Chang, 1995). These mixed elements make *feng shui* a complicated and mysterious area of practice and study.

Third, *feng shui* is utilitarian. *Feng shui* inherits the traditional Chinese belief that the ideal life of human beings is to attain peace, benefit, prosperity, health, wealth, happiness, and longevity (Yu, 1992). Because Chinese people believe that the power of nature can influence people's physical and mental state, their future, and their fortune, the ideal goal of *feng shui* practice is then to select a right place for people to live or bury the dead family members. This implies that all levels of *chi* are harmonized with the law of nature, which, in turn, brings well-being to people. The utilitarian function dictates the reason why *feng shui* is so popular in Chinese society.

Finally, *feng shui* emphasizes harmony. *Feng shui* emphasizes the harmonious relationship between human beings and the natural environment, and the achievement of this harmony is through a searching process, rather than through creation. Therefore, people

should employ the knowledge and skills of *feng shui* to explore and examine the place where they intend to build a house, a grave, a farm, or to hold a ceremony. It requires people to adapt to, to find ways to match with, but not to change or struggle with, the natural environment (Kau, 1992).

In short, *feng shui* specifies the relationship between people and their environment. Based on the law of nature, *feng shui* provides us a way of understanding how to find and develop a comfortable environment in which we can live and work efficiently and productively. It teaches us how to create a harmonious and balanced condition around us. With its various skills and profound theory, *feng shui* has become an integral part of Chinese tradition that mirrors Chinese cultural wisdom, which commands that if we pay attention to our environment, we will find new ways to weave a thick web of meaning and create different realities in our life space.

### **The Philosophical and Cultural Basis of Feng Shui**

*Feng shui* is a long and well-established practice in Chinese society that is interconnected with the Chinese culture. Its theory is deeply grounded in Chinese philosophical thinking, and its contents not only reflect but also reinforce Chinese cultural values.

#### **The Philosophical Basis of Feng Shui**

The history of *feng shui* can be considered to be the history of Chinese philosophy. Chinese philosophy serves as a foundation for *feng shui* to develop and flourish. Four aspects of Chinese philosophy especially contribute to the development of *feng shui*: mutual responding between heaven and human, *yin* and *yang*, *wu xing*, and *chi*.

#### **Mutual responding between heaven and human.**

The mutual responding between heaven and human is one of the key concepts of Chinese philosophy. According to Fun (1995) and Liu (1995), through interaction, heaven and human are interdependent and mutually influence each other. On the one hand, the will of heaven determines the destiny of human, including social and political stability, personal fortune, farm production, and life and death. Conversely, human actions and social conditions affect the movement of heaven. For example, Chinese people think that the way of governing a state affects the patterns of weather; that personal virtuous behaviors might change the revelation of celestial phenomena; and that social instability could lead to natural calamity.

Based on the thinking of mutual responding between heaven and human, the early practitioners of *feng shui* extended the idea to explicate the relationship between earth and human. In other words, *feng shui* indicates that earth and human are also mutually

affecting each other. As previously mentioned, the whole theory of *feng shui* is built on the idea that the environment where a person chooses to dwell or to bury a deceased family member will directly affect the fortune of the person and family. By the same token, a person's conduct also affects the spirit of the environment. As Liu (1995) pointed out, people with different virtues will produce different outcomes by dwelling or burying in the same place.

**Yin and yang.** The dialectic interaction between *yin* and *yang* emphasized in Chinese philosophy is another main idea absorbed by *feng shui*. *Yin* and *yang* are the two opposite but complementary forces that form the universe. Etymologically, *yin* implies the shady north side of a hill or a mountain, while *yang* is the sunny south side of a river or a mountain. *Yin* was further extended to represent amiable, yielding, receptive, and submissive attributes, and *yang* represents active, unyielding, and dominant attributes. Although each force is a self-changing system, it is the interaction of *yin* and *yang* that forms a complete and holistic system of the universe (Chen, 1993; Lao, 1991). As indicated in the *Book of Changes*: "the successive movement of *yin* and *yang* constitutes what is called Tao" (Chu, 1974, p. 95). According to Lao Tze's *Tao De Ching*, Tao produces the myriad, and the myriad "carry the *yin* and embrace the *yang*, and through the blending of the material force they achieve harmony" (Chan, 1963, p. 176). The theory of *feng shui* is greatly influenced by the geographical or placement direction represented by *yin* and *yang* and the idea of harmony embedded in the dialectic interaction between the two forces.

**Wu xing.** The adoption of *yin* and *yang* as an application of placement direction and harmony from Chinese philosophical thinking also introduces an interrelated concept, *wu xing* (the Five Elements), to *feng shui*. *Wu xing* represents the five basic elements of the universe: water, fire, wood, metal, and earth. Chinese philosophers used *wu xing* as the five symbols to classify attributes of the universe. The Five Elements form a holistic network of a dialectically interactional relationship. On the one hand, the five elements of *wu xing* are complementary towards and mutually productive of one another. That is, water produces wood; wood produces fire; fire produces earth; earth produces metal; and metal produces water. The complementary relationship among the five elements leads to positive outcomes of interaction. Then again, the five elements of *wu xing* also contrast, or overcome one another. That is, water overcomes fire; fire overcomes metal; metal overcomes wood; wood overcomes earth; and earth overcomes water. The contrasting relationship leads to negative outcomes of interaction (Rossbach, 1987).

*Feng shui* argued that before we were born we existed as part of *wu xing* in nature. In other words, we

are a product of a specific environment through the culmination of energy (*chi*) created by the dialectic interaction of *wu xing*, which in many ways determines the path of our life. However, the major application of *wu xing* to *feng shui* is to match the five elements to the four directions of the universe. Taking the northern hemisphere as an example, the sun rises in the east where energy is abundant, thus, the east matches the wood of the Five Elements. The sun sets in the west where the light is dim, thus, the west matches the attribute of metal. By the same token, the south is warm matching fire; the north is cold matching water; and the center is the spot of earth (Rossbach, 1987). Based on the dialectic interaction of the Five Elements, a complete system of judging whether a place is appropriate for building a house or a grave is then developed in *feng shui*.

**Chi.** *Chi* is the vital energy that forms the essence of all materials (Chang, Lu, Mun, & Chen, 1984). It is the fundamental element that produces the dynamic interaction between *yin* and *yang* and among the Five Elements. Chinese philosophy stipulates three features of *chi* (Lee, 1980; Liu, 1995): (1) *Chi* gives birth to heaven and earth, (2) *Chi* is the ultimate source of life, and (3) *Chi* dwelled in human body and in heaven and earth is mutually penetrating. These features of *chi* show a great impact on *feng shui*. According to Liu (1995), the theory of *chi* influences *feng shui* on three aspects: (1) *Chi* becomes the ontological foundation of *feng shui*, (2) It leads to the development of "living *chi*" theory in *feng shui*, and (3) It becomes the overall criterion of making a judgment in the practice of *feng shui*.

First, *feng shui* employs the concept of *chi* to explain the creation of the universe. The universe, including mountains and rivers, is formed by the dynamic interaction of *chi* replenished in heaven and earth. *Chi* is regarded as the universal principle underlying all things, the universal law governing all things, and the reason behind all things. It is the cause, the form, the essence, the sufficient reason for being, and the highest standard of all things, i.e., it is manifested everywhere (Lee, 1987). The adoption of the concept of *chi* transforms *feng shui* from a technique or skill-oriented practice, to a field with a complete ontological theory.

Second, based on the principle of mutual penetration between *chi* in human body and in heaven and earth, *feng shui* develops the theory of "living *chi*" to explain the interrelationship between human beings and earth. It argues that when a person dies, the "living *chi*" will be separated from his/her physical body. Consequently, an important goal of *feng shui* is to find a place filled with active "living *chi*" which can match the living *chi* of those alive or dead. By doing this, the living or deceased persons can absorb and gather the

“living *chi*” of the earth. This, in turn, will make the family prosperous and bring benefits to other people (Liu, 1995).

Finally, the concept of “living *chi*” becomes the overall criterion *feng shui* uses to measure or judge whether the environment is appropriate for dwelling or burying. According to Yang and Chang (1995), a mountain or place containing living or auspicious *chi*, in contrast to evil *chi*, is covered with green trees, clear and clean rivers, and purple-color atmosphere. Moreover, “living *chi*” requires that the place one selects must be able to “store the wind and gather the *chi*.” The wind is the movement of *chi*, and the water is the solidification of *chi*. A place with water (i.e., in *feng shui*’s terminology, “to get the water—*de shui*”) is where the wind or *chi* is gathered. In addition, the direction based on the positive interaction among the Five Elements (i.e., they are producing each other) also provides a place where the wind or *chi* is gathered. This is why *feng* (wind) *shui* (water) received its name.

### **The Cultural Basis of Feng Shui**

With a profound cultural basis *feng shui* is broadly associated with different aspects of Chinese culture. It not only enriches but also reinforces Chinese cultural values. Four Chinese cultural values are especially emphasized and reflected in the practice of *feng shui*: prosperity/status/longevity, harmony, moral concern, and aesthetic views.

**Prosperity/status/longevity.** Because the goal of *feng shui* is to select a place with living *chi* for dwelling or burying in order to benefit the family and others, the pursuit of prosperity, status, and longevity, as Chinese cultural values, has long been integrated into *feng shui*. Prosperity refers to the possession of a sound family and a healthy body; status refers to high social class and fine clothing; and longevity refers to a long and happy life. *Feng shui* teaches people how to attain this goal and the emphasis makes *feng shui* one of the most attractive parts of Chinese culture because it can well fulfill the psychological needs of Chinese people.

**Harmony.** *Feng shui* is also consistent with one of the cardinal Chinese cultural values that stresses harmony and prevention of conflicts. Based on the ancient view that treats the universe as an organic whole in which heaven, earth, and human are interdependent and united, Chinese people consider harmony as the end rather than a means of human interaction. Conflicts are then harmful to the development of a harmonious relationship which is a continuous and dynamic process for people to adapt and relocate themselves towards interdependence and cooperation (Chen, 2001; Chen & Chung, 1994). *Feng shui* teaches people exactly how to develop harmony and prevent conflicts with nature by adapting to the natural environment.

**Moral concern.** Moral concern is another core value of Chinese culture, and family is considered the prototype of all social organizations and the locus of all moral concerns. Chinese people also strongly believe that establishing a close and harmonious family relationship is the ultimate mean to uphold the moral concern. According to Yu (1992), the moral concern based on the Chinese family system is mainly reflected on the lineal structure of family relationships. The lineal orientation of family relationships is characterized by a highly developed historical consciousness, in which Chinese people take it for granted that they should take care of their parents, elder persons, their ancestors’ grave, and obey wishes of deceased parents (Chen, 1988). The lineal orientation also demands a tight association with extended families. In other words, the family system is the basis of Chinese moral concern and filial piety is the thread closely and harmoniously connecting members of the extended family together.

The practice of *feng shui* strongly reflects the moral concern of Chinese family system. *Feng shui* dictates that the pursuit of a harmonious relationship between people and natural environment mirrors the filial piety towards parents and ancestors. Thus, to find a right place where we can support and respect our parents and to bury them after they die becomes one of the most basic tenets of *feng shui*.

**Aesthetic views.** The Chinese aesthetic views are based on the thinking specified in *I Ching* or the *Book of Changes*. Four tenets of *I Ching* form the foundation of Chinese aesthetic views: (1) the union of heaven, nature, and man, (2) harmony, (3) the dialectic interaction of *yin* and *yang*, and (4) the moral and artistic emphasis (Lee, 1992; Lee & Liu, 1987; Wang, 1991). *Feng shui* absorbed these ideas and develops its own complete aesthetic system. Lee (1989) and Kau (1992) pointed out four principles of aesthetics in *feng shui*. First, the mountain side and the river shape should be lively crooked and winding. This is where the living *chi* clusters. Second, the architecture should be symmetric and properly fit with nature. For example, the shape of the hemisphere for the roof of a building or tomb is preferred. Third, the chosen area for dwelling or burying should have a clear boundary in which the environment shows a holistic balance. This requires that an appropriate area from the perspective of *feng shui* must have natural shields on its four directions within an appropriate distance. Finally, the holistic balance of the chosen area is grounded in the concept of humanistic harmony. In other words, *feng shui* emphasizes the importance of integrating people with the environment by harmoniously resolving the dialectic contrast between *yin* and *yang*, strength and weakness, activeness and tranquility, fullness and emptiness, and swiftness and slowness, in order to create a humanistic atmosphere.

### **The Impact of *Feng Shui* on Chinese Social Interaction**

It is obvious that *feng shui* penetrates into every aspect of Chinese society, including architect, aesthetics, social, political, and personal life. The following section focuses on the discussion of two areas that are related to daily life: interpersonal interaction and business life.

#### ***Interpersonal Interaction***

The principle of *feng shui* directly influences Chinese interpersonal communication by developing two interactional patterns that are distinct from other cultures: harmonious relationship and selective communication.

***Harmonious relationship.*** The harmonious relationship between nature and people dictated by *feng shui* was extended to regulate human interaction. It demands that people should work harmoniously with those around themselves to promote well-being. As a result, social harmony becomes a common goal for people to achieve, and through which people can work together to create a favorable environment. In order to reach the state of social harmony, *feng shui* indicates that it is important for people to perform good conduct which is embedded in the concepts of *jen* (humanism), *yi* (righteousness), and *cheng* (sincerity). This practice leads to the development of a hierarchical relationship pattern in Chinese society. For example, Confucius proposed *wu lun* (Five Code of Ethics) to stipulate the hierarchical relationship in which “the superior must show justice, and the subordinate shows loyalty; father shows love, and son shows filial piety; husband shows initiation, and wife shows obedience; the older brother shows brotherly love, and younger brother shows reverence in return; and friends show mutual faith to each other” (Chen & Chung, 1994, p. 95). This particular relationship functions to maximize differences in age, sex, role, or status, and to encourage the mutual and interdependent relationship (Condon, 1977).

***Selective communication.*** The practice of *feng shui* also fosters the practice of selective communication in Chinese social life. *Feng shui* suggests that in order to increase one’s fortune one has to be affiliated with those who have similar personality types and compatible birthdays (*shen chen ba tze*). In the contemporary Chinese world the idea of “*shen chen ba tze*” continues to play an important role in the relationship development between males and females. The incompatible “*shen chen ba tze*” often prevents the couple from marrying each other.

#### ***Business life***

Not only can *feng shui* increase our fortune in the daily life, but it can also be applied to ensure business

profits and create a favorable business environment. It is very common for the Chinese to consult *feng shui* experts before they develop a new business. In business *feng shui* is used to detect, avoid, and correct situations containing “*sha chi*” (killing or ominous *chi*). According to *feng shui*, office space should be arranged or decorated in a way to be conducive to the accumulation and flow of “good *chi*.” People work in such an environment will feel more energetic, creative, and balanced. This, in turn, will increase the potential for social and financial success and personal harmony. *Feng shui* believes that the *chi* of a space or place can always be transformed to meet the needs of the occupants. However, a place with harmonious *chi* must be constantly stimulated and stored in order to make it more valuable. In addition to this influence, *feng shui* also impacts four aspects of business life: name of the company, location of the company, interior design and setting, and organizational behaviors.

***Name of the company.*** Because the company’s name represents its image to the public, *feng shui* dictates that it is very important to choose an appropriate and correct name for a company. If the name spells luck and confidence, it will give a spiritual aspiration to the management. If it spells ill omen, it will exert a psychological anxiety or burden. To benefit the business it is therefore necessary to select an auspicious and meaningful name that can balance the movement of *yin* and *yang*, and the Five Elements. Usually, a good name denotes or connotes the meaning of wealth, luck, and fortune.

Similar to the name selection, the design of a company’s logo also needs to take *feng shui* into consideration. For example, a logo of a commercial building should carry a denotative indication and give a message regarding its trade and products. In other words, a company’s logo should be attractive, identifiable, and appropriate.

***Location of the company.*** According to *feng shui*, commercial buildings should be located and built to harmonize surrounding buildings and fit into the surrounding environment and natural elements. The ideal way of selecting the site of a building is to look for the spot of “dragon vein” which means, for example, a main road in a city. *Feng shui* provides six common elements for choosing an appropriate location for a company (Lin, 1990; Rossbach, 1987; Walters, 1988): (1) position—a Chinese compass is used to find the best and most appropriate position for the company; (2) a hill at the back of the building—the hill provides support for the company whether in good or bad times; (3) near water—water represents the vein of a dragon that can gather living *chi*, and represents money, profit, and wealth. To have water (e.g., river, swimming pool, or anything that symbolizes as water) indicates that the

company will be prosperous in the future; (4) away from fly-overs—a fly-over is something like the shape of a knife which will reduce the *chi* of the company and bring about bad influence; (5) away from hospitals, temples, or grave sites—they tend to produce unlucky, miserable, and unstable *chi* to the company; and (6) avoid being surrounded by high buildings—because the *chi* of the company will be suppressed by the high buildings.

**Interior design and setting.** The objectives of a workplace are to produce goods and provide service for profits. The interior design and setting often affect ambiance of the office. It is then important to create a comfortable working condition in which employees are able to carry-out their tasks. For example, the arrangement of furniture in the workplace, especially in the manager's room, will show a great impact on business interaction. It is suggested that the desk of the manager should always be in a quiet place away from public eyes that can offer support and protection. The manager's back should never face windows or doors where the *chi* is too strong and lacks support, concentration, and power. The height of the desk in the manager's room should also correspond to the wealth and prosperity specified in *feng shui*.

Decorations in the office also affect the environment of the company. For example, an aquarium containing goldfish is a good way to counter malign influences and convert the negative spirits into positive ones. Moreover, the quantity of the goldfish should be in odd number and the tank should be placed in the unlucky spot of the office. In addition to the arrangement of furniture and decorations, *feng shui* also reveals the following elements that affect the company's fortune (Kwok & O'Brien, 1991; Lee, 1989; Lin, 1990; Walters, 1988): (1) doors—should match the quantity, shape, and area to create and gather a proper *chi*; (2) windows—should match the quantity, shape, and area to create a good flow of *chi*; (3) room setting—how many rooms needed and how to set them up have rules specified by *feng shui*; (4) lighting—it is the sun of the office, thus, the office should not be too dim. An appropriate lighting can stimulate the *chi* of employees and balance *yin* and *yang*; (5) mirror—should be hung at the right place and appropriate height. Mirror can be used to absorb the living *chi* and breed fortune for the company; (6) color—*feng shui* attaches meanings to different colors used in the office. For example, red is luck, warmth, and wealth, and yellow refers to sunshine and brightness. Both are beneficial to the company; and (7) plant—plant means energy, liveliness, and growth to the company. It can be used to improve the unbalancing *chi* in the office.

**Organizational behaviors.** *Feng shui* affects the spirit and performance of employees in the company. It is argued that whomever practices *feng shui* correctly in the

office tends to be healthier mentally and physically, better able to deal with problems, more successful in life, and works well with co-workers. Overall, *feng shui* has an impact on five aspects of organizational behaviors.

First, while *feng shui* emphasizes the importance of organizational structure, it places more emphasis on human behaviors. In *feng shui*'s view, it is people who create, sustain, and terminate the organizational structure. Based on this viewpoint, management should emphasize the discovery of multiple realities of the organization, and what impact the discovery might have on the decision making process.

Second, *feng shui* views human beings as a product of external forces (i.e., environment) that condition them to respond in a predictable and determinant way. It suggests that human behaviors are guided by a systematic order. Thus, organizational behaviors can be predicted and controlled through the discovery of the external forces that guide human behaviors. The survival of an organization then depends on its ability to interpret the environment and adapt to it. *Feng shui*, in this sense, can provide a guideline for understanding the nature of and help to implement order and control in an organization.

Third, *feng shui* affects the effectiveness of business communication. As Lip (1991, 1995) indicated, a building with good *feng shui* provides an environment for successful meetings in which business collaborators can express themselves harmoniously. It is a space where the balanced *chi* and *yin* and *yang* elements can revitalize the environment and a sense of physical well-being and emotional equilibrium can be felt by interactants. This principle is often reflected in the process of business negotiation and contract signing. *Feng shui* suggests that business negotiation and contract signing should be held at the right place and at the right time. For example, in Taiwan many large business transactions are postponed during the "ghost month" (i.e., July in Chinese lunar calendar), because the month is considered a time when unappeased and hungry spirits return to mingle with the living. *Feng shui* experts often use the eight characters (*ba tze*), the Five Elements, the favorable orientation/direction (*fang wei*), and the Twelve *Sheng Xiao* (animal symbols—the Chinese Zodiac) to decide the right place and time.

Fourth, *feng shui* affects management. In order to organize and supervise staff in the company *feng shui* suggests that a manager should group employees of compatible horoscopes to work together, which is the best way to achieve cooperation among employees. The personnel list with employees' demographic information is often used to for the grouping purpose.

Finally, the belief of *feng shui* might lead to intercultural misunderstanding. For instance, Western and Chinese people have a very different perception of

nature. The former obsesses with the control nature, while the latter pursues a harmonious relationship with the nature. A Western employee may choose, for example, a room based on his/her dominance perspective that emphasizes the use of size and proximity to maximize his/her status and influence. But the Chinese employee may consider the decision irrational because the office is lacking living *chi* or harmony with the nature. If the two employees have to work together at the same room, misunderstanding or conflict will occur (Adler, 1997).

### Conclusion and Discussion

Although *feng shui* is mysterious and some people continue to consider it as a superstitious practice, it has shown a great influence on almost every aspect of Chinese life, including the way Chinese people do business, the way they communicate, and the way they perceive and practice architecture. *Feng shui* is so engrafted upon the Chinese social life that it has firmly intertwined with every possible event of domestic life. It not only reflects, but also shapes most of the traditional Chinese cultural values. More significantly, it continues to play an important role in modern Chinese societies. Thus, there is a need for scholars in different disciplines to systematically study *feng shui* in order to better understand the Chinese way of thinking and behavior.

If we carefully examine *feng shui* from a human communication discipline, we would find that it provides us with abundant resources that can be studied from the perspective of nonverbal communication, especially those ideas regarding space, time, direction, and color.

First, as the Chinese art of placement, *feng shui* can be treated as part of the study of proxemic communication. *Feng shui* often uses space to communicate a particular meaning. For example, it uses space to reflect the status and authority of ancestors: the older the ancestor is, the higher the tablet of the ancestor should be placed in the shrine. In other words, *feng shui* uses the height of the ancestor position to reflect the power distance in Chinese culture.

As indicated previously, *feng shui* also emphasizes the use of space in the office. It dictates that the spatial planning in the office must be efficient and conducive for work. For example, the office space should be easily and efficiently subdivided to allow for easy circulation, efficient electrical and mechanical services, flexible planning and partitioning, and easy access to fire escapes and elevator cores. In addition, *feng shui* concerns the use of space in home. The master bedroom, kitchen, and living room are the three most important sites for positive *feng shui* in the house. Using the living room as an example, according to *feng shui*, it is the area where family and family friends

gather, and it is best situated on the ground floor. Furniture in the living room should be placed at an appropriate place. The corner facing the entrance door of the living room is known as the wealth spot. Any moving object placed in that spot will seep the family fortune away. Thus, the spot is better placed with a big round leaf plant that is believed to prosper the family (Luon, 1988).

Second, *feng shui's* concern of the use of time is clearly related to temporal communication (chronemics). For example, *Tong Shu*, the Chinese Almanac, divides each day into 12 equal periods (*Tien Kan* or Twelve Branches), and each period is classified as good, fairly good or bad for conducting any event or activity. Thus, each period of a day will show what an appropriate action should be taken, such as when to move into an office, when to marry, and when to travel. This shows that *feng shui* personalizes activities based on year, date, and time of birth of the individual. Moreover, *feng shui* clearly orients to the past time by paying particular reverence to the past, reviving old times, and regarding the old methods as the best.

Third, *feng shui* uses the compass (*luopan*) to divide the direction into eight sections. Each section of the direction has a specific and different meaning (Kwok & O'Brien, 1991; Walters, 1988). Our life, including sitting, sleeping, working, and studying, is affected by facing a particular direction. According to *feng shui*, south means longevity, southwest means death, west means disaster, northwest means baleful influence, north means life, northeast means fine ghosts, east means good fortune, and southeast means vitality. To be successful, one must match the direction with one's purpose of work. For example, a businessperson wishing to gain profits should make his/her workplace and working desk face the east which is believed to bring in fortune, and a person wishes for good health should face southeast, which will bring in vitality.

Finally, *feng shui* uses color to represent different things and meanings. For example, the Five Elements are associated with five special colors. *Ching* (blue/green), representing the Wood element, refers to the blue of the sky, or the green of plants. Red is associated with the element of Fire, representing a lucky color which is dominant in the activities of New Year's Day, birthdays, and weddings. Yellow is associated with the element of Earth, which is regarded as the royal or imperial color (while used in the temples or palaces, yellow is often represented by metal decoration). White symbolizes the element of metal which is the glint of iron or silver and used to indicate purity. It is commonly applied to the funeral activities and seldom used in ornamentation. Finally, black symbolizes the element of Water. Traditionally, black was considered as a lucky color which represents



money, but its meaning has changed to associate with the macabre.

*Feng shui* suggests that the use of color can change the mood of people and the *chi* or *yin* and *yang* of a place. It is therefore important to follow the norm of using color when we communicate with people in a particular context. For example, in order to keep the balance of *chi*, we should not wear all white or all black when attending a wedding ceremony.

In sum, as a collection of Chinese ancient wisdom, *feng shui* not only contains mysterious knowledge, but also possesses many ideas that can be explained and studied by using the contemporary research methodology, both empirical and interpretative. The study of *Feng Shui* might open a door for us to better understand the Chinese.

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