

Orientation course

Does your office get that blocked energy feeling? Feng shui, the Chinese method of balancing an inharmonious environment, might unlock its potential, advises Sue Bryant

If you haven't won the National Lottery yet, check the wealth corner in your office. Perhaps there's a wilting plant there, or a bin, or a broken photocopier. Bad feng shui, in other words.

Feng shui – an ancient Chinese system of ergonomics meaning “wind and water” – is the latest life-enhancing philosophy to be embraced by businesses and individuals in the West.

Broadly speaking, feng shui assumes that the orientation and layout of your environment will affect your health, wealth and relationships. The idea of moving your desk round 90° or installing a fish tank in a corner of the office to create wealth sounds daft but essentially, feng shui works like acupuncture – when things are moved, blocked energy, or ch'i, flows freely.

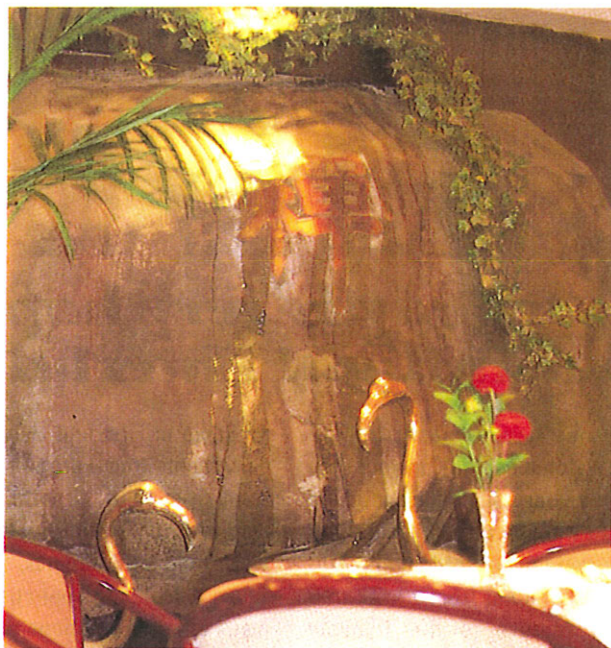
To the Chinese, feng shui is fundamental to life and has affected decision-making for 3,000 years. It incorporates divination, Buddhism, Taoism, aesthetics, the I-Ching, mythology, rural magic, symbolism ... and a fair dose of common sense.

Anyone doing business with Hong Kong, Taiwan, China or even Thailand is strongly advised not to knock it; in Hong Kong, every office building, every home and every shop has been dealt with and “blessed” by a feng shui man.

Brian Williams, general manager of the Ritz in London, spent ten years with Mandarin Oriental in Hong Kong and Macao. “You can't work in Hong Kong and not encounter feng shui,” he says. “If you open an hotel or a building, you have to go through all the right ceremonies and if an hotel is having a run of bad luck,

you have to get the feng shui man in. Anyone who's doing business with Hong Kong that involves a place where people work or live would have to take feng shui seriously.”

The feng shui man will look at everything from the position of the building at pre-building stage to the layout of individual rooms and will go as far as realigning doors, shifting cash tills and installing lucky symbols like plants, mirrors, wind chimes and tanks of goldfish. “It's very expensive – staggeringly so,” says Williams. “The guy we used to deal with was about £1,000 a session but some of them charge £6,000 or even £10,000.”



Feng shui practitioners get businesses to install wealth-enhancing features like this waterfall in London's Zen restaurant

But isn't this just nonsense? “I believed it because the staff did,” says Williams. “I didn't question it. You've got to make them feel you're taking it seriously. In our own way, we have odd practices in the West, too – Guy Fawkes night, for example.”

In Hong Kong big, blue chip companies such as Jardines, the Hongkong Bank and Bank of China will spend a fortune on feng shui. When architect Sir Norman Foster designed the distinctive Hongkong Bank building in 1986, he worked with a feng shui expert throughout. It's serious

stuff; there have been lawsuits over buildings going up and creating bad feng shui for neighbouring offices by casting shadows on them, or pointing sharp angles at them and disrupting their ch'i.

Similarly, when a new road is built in rural areas of Hong Kong, the government will often pay villagers compensation for damaging their feng shui.

It's not just buildings – feng shui influences everything from dates of important events to the choice of telephone numbers. Richard Branson consulted a feng shui man to choose an auspicious date for the launch of Virgin's Hong Kong service. The Bank of China specifically chose 282 8888 as its London number, eight being the luckiest number in Chinese.

Then there's colour and symbolism – the bowl of goldfish that you'll see in every Chinese take-away represents fire and water, which together destroy the baleful influence of wood, which saps the strength of the earth.

Feng shui now appears to have found a place in the West and is growing fast in Europe and the USA. There's a Feng Shui Association in Brighton and a new Feng Shui Society in London which will run courses for businesses and individuals throughout 1995.

Businesses are beginning to pay attention to feng shui, although many of the companies in the UK and USA employing a feng shui practitioner will already have links with Hong Kong.

Hutchison Telecom, for example, which owns the Orange mobile phone network, takes feng shui very seriously because of its parent, Hong Kong-based Hutchison Whampoa. The company's UK offices have been “done” and a Soho-based feng shui man is consulted for everything from dates of product launches to design and positioning of exhibition stands.

The London Capital Club, which also has a Hong Kong parent, was opened on September 22 last year, a “lucky” date chosen by a feng shui expert. “We spent three years looking for premises in ▷