

# Feng shui, fact, and fiction: An exploratory study

Jill Poulston and Rene Bennett  
Auckland University of Technology, Auckland, New Zealand

This will be published as:

Poulston, J., & Jenkins, A. (2013). The persistent paradigm: Older worker stereotypes in the New Zealand hotel industry. *Journal of Human Resources in Hospitality & Tourism*, 12(1), 1-25. doi:10.1080/15332845.2013.723252

Please consult the final published version if citing. Text may differ slightly.

## Abstract

**Purpose** – This exploratory study aims to determine whether a relationship is likely to exist between good feng shui and success.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The feng shui of eight hotel foyers and entrances were evaluated against 20 criteria, and managers asked to comment on the success of their hotels. Results were examined for possible relationships between feng shui and their descriptions of success.

**Findings** – Similarities between the reported success of hotel and feng shui evaluations were found in six out of the eight hotels in the study.

**Research limitations/implications** – Responses on success were subjective and based on five criteria, which were insufficient to determine the existence of a firm relationship between actual success and feng shui. However, this was an exploratory study, and the relationships were sufficiently strong to warrant further research.

**Practical implications** – Findings suggest that feng shui offers useful design principles, and hotels with good feng shui are described as being more successful than those with poor feng shui. Good feng shui appears to have a positive effect on feelings of success.

**Originality/value** - This is the first study that attempts to test the relationship between good feng shui and success.

**Keywords:** Design, Hotels, Success, Feng shui, Luck

## 1 Introduction

Feng shui is a form of geomancy (landscape-based divination) initially used to select burial sites in China to protect the dead from evil spirits (Bruun, 1996, Lai, 1974, March, 1968). According to Eastern traditions, landscape feng shui principles can be applied to many aspects of life, such as the placement of buildings and the design of interior spaces to bring success to their inhabitants. Feng shui crosses cultural beliefs, psychology, philosophy and architecture, so is difficult to investigate scientifically. However, some hotel operators appear to follow feng shui practices to improve profitability, although there is no academic evidence of this, and none to suggest that it works. This exploratory study therefore reviews academic and other interest in feng shui and the use of feng shui in commercial accommodation, to determine whether or not the topic warrants further investigation. Interviews with managers of hotels and backpacker lodges and evaluations of their properties' entrances and foyers were undertaken to determine whether a relationship existed between good feng shui and feelings of success. In six out of the eight properties studied, a close relationship was found, and the two properties with the poorest feng shui ratings also had the weakest success ratings.

## **1.1 Background**

Some tourism and hospitality businesses are either superstitious, or prepared to cater for superstitious guests. Many hotels omit the 13th floor (Jahoda, 1969), and many airlines (e.g. Continental, KLM, and Air France) omit the 13th row (Grossman, 2005). Furthermore, an internet search for 'lucky hotel' produces several pages of websites, whereas a search for 'lucky bank' produces nothing of note.

Feng shui might be considered a superstitious and unscientific way of trying to determine or influence one's future prospects, but perhaps that is because (as with astrology) charlatans are common and often entertaining. However, while some hospitality businesses reputedly follow feng shui principles, it is not known if this is to improve ambience, profit, luck, or to attract Asian customers.

It is not uncommon for seemingly improbable ideas to be treated as spurious, especially if it is difficult to see how they work, and scientists in the past have been marginalised by their peers and the wider community for speaking out on matters that to them seemed truthful, but to others, were speculative or ridiculous. Galileo (for example) was imprisoned for providing proof that the universe was not centred on the earth, which was in conflict with the Catholic Church's belief, along with the later and perhaps equally dubious proposal that people evolved from apes. However, unlike the theory of evolution, Western acceptance of feng shui is not reliant on new discoveries, but the willingness of the academic community to verify its validity. If feng shui works, businesses could follow the principles for good effect, but if it is a superstition, they should not expect any returns except perhaps the allegiance of some Asian customers.

## **1.2 How does feng shui work?**

Feng shui considers the earth as a living organism (symbolised as a dragon), and chi, its breath. Modern feng shui uses compass directions and landscape features (amongst other things) to provide guidelines for the placement of buildings and furniture, to ensure success for their users. The placement of objects such as furniture influences and is influenced by chi, loosely translated as 'life energy', which should be balanced in terms of its yin and yang, or feminine and masculine energy. Because chi moves around a building, feng shui masters position furniture to deflect strong flows of chi, such as occur along a corridor and through an entrance, and to encourage the development of positive chi by creating channels for it to move gently through.

Feng shui principles therefore take account of chi and its movement. For example, it is bad feng shui to build on the corner of a Y or T intersection, as the negative chi moving along the street will invade the house, bringing bad luck to its inhabitants (Too, 1999b) (bad luck in this sense is best thought of as economic stress, poor health, and domestic unrest, rather than an unfortunate incident).

Similarly, an office at the end of a busy corridor it is considered bad feng shui, especially if the inhabitant's back is visible from the door, as the chi flowing down the corridor will run into the worker's back, affecting concentration, health, and career prospects (Too, 1999b). Feng shui also provides guidelines for the placement of items within a building, such as a money tree (jade plant) near the cash register, or in the south-east corner to symbolise and encourage wealth, or a picture of sailing ships on a living room wall, to symbolise forward movement, and encourage success (Too, 1999b).

## **1.3 Separating superstition from logic**

Setting aside difficulties relating to scientific proof, some feng shui rules make good sense,

which perhaps explains their growing popularity in the West. Feng shui principles codified into building practices in China are similar to those used in the West (e.g. having two doors between the kitchen and toilet) and are common sense. In general, feng shui offers guidelines to providing comfortable, attractive, clutter-free and safe buildings, and is recognised as a source of good design principles (Han and Sinha, 1996, Mak and Ng, 2008, Mak and Ng, 2005, Wah, 1998) for both practical and aesthetic reasons.

Although not all feng shui necessarily makes immediate sense, it could be argued that the placement of specific items in a house or office creates psychological effects on an inhabitant's subconscious mind. For example, a picture of three people in a couple's bedroom is bad feng shui, as this might bring another (unwanted) person into the relationship. One could speculate that the picture of three reaches into the subconscious minds of the inhabitants, suggesting that someone is missing from the relationship. Although such speculation extends beyond the scope of this paper, research in this area could be productive.

Difficulty arises however, when feng shui and common sense part ways, such as in the use of mathematical shapes to attract or repel spirits, or avoiding the negative effect of the corner of a building pointing to another building, channelling too much chi and bringing bad luck to those in the other building. While these ideas might make sense to some people, they will be considered superstitions by others, and therefore in the same domain as lighting a candle to protect a loved one, or worshipping a deity to improve one's life or after-life. However, as three quarters of Americans consult horoscopes regularly (Gallup and Newport, 1991) and 65% have a religious belief (Newport, 2009), it seems that scientific proof is not a prerequisite for a common belief, superstition and religion being common. Superstitions are wide spread in Britain (Jarvis, 1980), and belief in the paranormal is increasing (Newport and Strausberg, 2001). Superstition is an 'important part of Chinese life' (Tsang, 2004, p. 924) and many other cultures besides. Belief in feng shui is also increasing (Hwangbo, 1999), but it is difficult to determine if this part of a trend to become more open-minded about seemingly unscientific phenomena, or because so much of feng shui makes sense.

## **2 Literature review**

### **2.1 The use of feng shui in hospitality**

Although anecdotal evidence suggests feng shui is widely used in hospitality, the only academic paper found was Hobson's (1994) discussion about feng shui in Asian hospitality. Internet information is available about hotels using feng shui principles to enhance their wealth, although it is likely that some do this more to please their Asian guests. For example, in Vancouver (Canada), the Metropolitan Hotel's owner, Henry Wu, follows feng shui principles. Black stone lions guard the entrance against evil spirits and bring good luck, and Wu openly supports feng shui practices in the hotel's mission statement: 'build a feng shui refuge and they will come' (Gayot, 2008). Hyatt Regency Hong Kong has apparently incorporated feng shui principles in its design, with hotel doors and furniture carefully positioned to encourage good luck, and Grand Hyatt Singapore's foyer was reputedly designed by a feng shui specialist to bring good luck to staff, guests, and the hotel's owners. Several hotels in Auckland have stone lions at their entrances, and although it is not known if these are for feng shui reasons, this seems the most plausible explanation. Restaurants also follow feng shui practices with apparent success, such as the Ocean Seafood Restaurant in Los Angeles, which attributes its wealth to a consultation with a feng shui master (Arsone, 1991).

Feng shui is a cultural belief, and difficult to investigate scientifically. However, it is evident that some hospitality operators respect its traditions and employ feng shui practices not just to

please their guests, but also, to improve profitability.

## **2.2 Interest in feng shui**

Academic papers on feng shui are difficult to source in the West because most are in Asian languages (Hwang, 2001), and therefore inaccessible to the majority of Western academics (Paton, 2007). However, feng shui is taught in schools of architecture (e.g. Oregon State University, USA, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, and Ealing, Hammersmith and West London College) and its principles are evident in the design of some Western buildings, such as Frank Lloyd Wright's Falling Waters in Pennsylvania, and Richard Meier's Getty Center in Los Angeles. Feng shui is the sole topic of conferences such as the Feng Shui Convention in Singapore (2010) and the Feng Shui Society Conference held in London (2010), and doctoral theses have been written on feng shui topics (e.g. Eriksson, 2008, Lee, 1986, Mak, 2004), along with various academic papers, primarily on architecture and landscape design (e.g. Hwangbo, 2002, Hwangbo, 1999, Wah, 1998, Xu, 1998).

Empirical studies generally agree that good feng shui is preferred in landscape features (e.g. Han and Sinha, 1996) and building design. For example, in a study of the relationship between good design and feng shui principles, Mak and Ng (Mak and Ng, 2005, p. 427) found that 'the selection of surrounding environment for a building and interior layout as proposed by the architects generally concurs with the ideal feng shui model established more than two thousand years ago'.

The strongest followers of feng shui live in Singapore and Hong Kong, where Chinese have been able to follow their traditions, unimpeded by the regulations against superstitious practices imposed during the Chinese Cultural Revolution. Over a third of Hong Kongers believe in feng shui practices, with the better educated also being the most dedicated (Emmons, 1992). Their allegiance to feng shui is demonstrated in the well-known feng shui war between the British and Chinese in the late 1980s. The intention was to rid the island of the British, who had no understanding of feng shui principles and occasionally destroyed important feng shui features (Emmons, 1992). The Bank of China was apparently positioned to direct negative chi to the British Governor's house and the American Consulate, which in turn radiated negative chi to Hong Kong's legal department. Apparently feng shui remedies such as mirrors were used by staff in both buildings to deflect the negative energy from their workplaces, with the ultimate result (as claimed by feng shui proponents) that the British returned Hong Kong to Chinese rule (King, 2010, Martin, 2010, Tsang, 2004). Ignorance of feng shui is still not tolerated in Hong Kong, where carelessness by government officials controlling public works can result in claims against the government for disruption to the feng shui of the environment (Martin, 2010).

## **2.3 Feng shui and success**

Evidence of chi and the relationship between auspicious symbols and success are elusive, and although it seems that a relationship might exist between expectations of and actual success, no academic literature was found to support this. The only relevant research in this area was on optimism, which Brummett *et al.* (2006) found to be associated with longevity. 'The Secret' (Byrne, 2006), a popular book about the law of attraction, promotes the power of positive thinking and positive visualisation for the fulfilment of one's desires. Assuming that this works, it is possible that feng shui operates according to principles of optimism and positive visualisation, but without scientific proof of the power of positive thinking, other perspectives such as logic or belief in occult ways must be applied. The placebo effect (also known as auto-suggestion) provides another plausible explanation for the use of feng shui 'remedies' such as money-trees or bowls of coins to increase wealth.

As the West becomes more familiar with Eastern ideas, so does feng shui become an increasingly acceptable system of spatial planning (Hwangbo, 2002, Xu, 1998). Familiarity and acceptance is also assisted by feng shui experts such as Lillian Too (1999a) who explain the concepts of chi, yin and yang in simple terms, without venturing too much into the deeper cosmological aspects of this ancient philosophy and tradition.

## **2.4 Summary**

Stories of feng shui's success in Hong Kong, and internet reports of international hotel companies employing feng shui consultants, provide evidence of a system of design features and object placements that feng shui masters advise will bring success, but without any proof that they will actually do this. As Western literature does not address the potential relationship between good feng shui and success, it was decided to assess the feng shui of a selection of hotels and interview their managers to see if there was an association between feng shui and their descriptions of success.

## **3 Research design**

As this was an exploratory study, a small-scale approach was selected, using both quantitative and qualitative data collected from hotels and hotel managers. Western books have a consistent theme of good feng shui associated with abundance and success (e.g. Too, 1999a, b), so it was decided to explore this by looking for relationships between feng shui and success in a small sample of commercial lodging operations.

### **3.1 Data collection**

Using a convenience sample, twenty managers of Auckland hotels and backpacker lodges were approached, and of these, eight agreed to be interviewed. Auckland has a strong Chinese community, with 13.8% Chinese responding to the 2001 census (Statistics New Zealand, 2001), rising to 17.1% in the 2006 census (Locals Councils, 2010). Although only one of the participants was Chinese, it was expected that feng shui would have a high level of acceptance locally, because of the Chinese hotel workers and visitors.

Participants were advised that the study was about hotel design, but included questions on feng shui, which appeared to deter some prospective participants. Interviews were conducted on site, and digitally recorded. After the interviews, the feng shui of the foyer and entrance areas was evaluated, and photographs taken to assist with further off-site analysis.

### **3.2 Good feng shui**

Evaluation criteria were drawn from a variety of books (Hale and Evans, 2008, O'Brien, 2002, Too, 1999a, b) and websites (The Feng Shui Institute of New Zealand, 2010, The Feng Shui Store, 2010). While it may seem unscientific to draw material from non-academic sources, as the purpose of the study was to test claims made by feng shui writers that good feng shui brings success, this was entirely appropriate. Although Chang *et al.* (2009) demonstrated the use of a weighted average to assess feng shui in office layouts, using the criteria of dragon, cave, water, sand and direction as a basis for evaluation, they also noted that there was no feng shui theory for evaluating layout (as the authors are Taiwanese academics, and presumably Mandarin speakers, this suggests that not just Western academics lack scientific studies of the topic).

Feng shui texts offer a range of possible criteria, such as the balance between yin and yang (e.g. weak and strong, light and dark, quiet and busy), or the use of the five elements of wood, fire, earth, air, and water. However, these attributes underpin other more visual aspects of feng shui, which are popularised in a way that amateurs can quickly grasp the concepts without having a deep understanding of the underlying principles. The popular rules of feng

shui were therefore considered an appropriate basis for evaluation criteria. After consulting several texts and websites, a list of good and bad feng shui features was developed, including the criterion that the hotel foyer 'felt' successful. Admittedly this was a particularly subjective criterion, but it allowed for a point for ambience, grandeur, and visual pleasure generally.

The hotels' entrances and foyers were selected for evaluation, as these are the most public and accessible areas of a hotel, and therefore affect all visitors.

### **3.3 Interest in feng shui**

Participants' interest in and knowledge of feng shui was tested, to assess the likelihood of their employing feng shui principles. Questions were:

1. What do you understand about feng shui and what value do you think it may have?
2. How interested are you in improving the feng shui of this hotel?
3. Does your employer, as far as you know, follow feng shui practices? If so, please tell me about this, giving examples.

### **3.4 Feng shui and success**

A variety of hotel performance measures are available (e.g. Min *et al.*, 2009, Reynolds, 2004, Sharma and Sneed, 2008), but for this study, a general view of success was more relevant than bottom line profit, as feng shui is purported to bring success generally rather than financial success in particular. Performance indicators favoured by industry, such as staff turnover, occupancy and profit, were therefore used subjectively; that is, participants were asked about their operation's performance in these areas. While labour costs, food and beverage cost, average room rate, food and beverage revenue and guest feedback are also important measures, it seemed unlikely that managers would share these in an exploratory study as willingly as comments about occupancy and staff turnover. As management turnover can indicate problems with organisational culture (Stalcup and Pearson, 2001), participants were also probed about ownership and management changes. Questions on ownership were based on the logic that stable ownership can indicate success, because financial failure often results in a sale. Managers were also asked how they viewed their property's success, their current challenges, and what they excelled at, although their answers did not contribute to the success scores. Some questions were included to assist with the development of a survey for future study.

Questions were:

1. Is your business successful? If so why?
2. Do you find it easy to find and keep good staff?
3. Is your occupancy good, fair, or poor, compared to that of your competitors?
4. How many owners has this property had in the last 20 years?
5. What is this hotel good at?
6. What are your biggest headaches?

Descriptions of success for each property were graded out of 10 and converted to grades out of 4 for comparisons with the feng shui evaluations. Grades were calculated using a positive and negative scoring basis; that is, points were deducted from a starting position of 10 for negative items, and added on for positive items. Grades were independently scored by each

author then adjusted after discussing any areas of difference. Several questions were asked about luck, and a score out of 10 allocated on the same basis as the scores for success.

Questions were:

1. Have there been any unlucky (i.e. random) events in the hotel recently, such as a death or accident?
2. Have there been any lucky events in the hotel recently, such as staff winning lotto, or unexpectedly securing a large business account?
3. Overall, how do you rate your hotel in terms of good or bad things happening to it?
4. Ethical approval was granted by the university's ethics committee, and in accordance with this, participants were warned they would be asked about deaths and accidents. Although three participants gave permission for their hotel names to be used, these were kept confidential to enable more rigorous discussion.

### **3.5 Analysis**

Interview notes were transferred to a spreadsheet, to enable easy identification of themes. Evaluations were scored out of 20, with higher numbers indicating better feng shui. While it may appear simplistic to grade the feng shui of a property on the basis of features, this is similar to the approach used by organisations such as the AA (Automobile Association) and Qualmark to allocate stars or diamonds as indicators of luxury standards.

After each property's feng shui had been evaluated, the grade was reviewed to ensure it was an accurate reflection of property's feng shui generally. This was considered an important step, as a hotel that did not feel 'good' needed that reflected in the overall score. It was this part of the analysis that resulted in the addition of the criterion 'does the foyer feel successful?'

## **4 Results**

### **4.1 Overview**

Although the properties ranged from a large internationally branded five star hotel to two locally branded backpackers' lodges, for convenience they are all referred to as 'hotels'. Interviewees were all males except one, and each was the property's overall manager. As the General Manager for Hotel E was not initially available, the interview commenced with the Assistant Manager, with the General Manager joining in part way through. Properties are named in order of quality rating, with the highest quality being Hotel A.

### **4.1 Interest in feng shui**

Participants were surprisingly knowledgeable about feng shui. Hotel A's manager described feng shui as:

*The alignment or construction of a building or furniture that is meant to be in harmony with life and energy forces – conceptual forces - sleeping dragon - Eastern oriental forces.*

It was interesting to find such a good understanding in a manager responsible for a hotel whose foyer had excellent feng shui. However, he said he was not an expert on feng shui, which he mostly viewed as 'good design principles' but was interested in improving the hotel's feng shui. He thought feng shui had 'probably been taken into account' in the initial building design, but could not verify this.

Hotel B's manager knew nothing of feng shui, which he viewed as 'a matter of good design'. Hotel C's manager thought it was a superstition, somewhat akin to the idea of avoiding black

cats, and related to the avoidance of bad luck. He was not interested in improving the hotel's feng shui, even though his Asian staff were quite vocal about how this might be achieved. He felt that feng shui was similar to Asian cuisine in that its main advantage was to attract Asian customers.

Hotel D's Assistant Manager thought feng shui was 'common sense in design'. The manager (an Asian), said he knew very little of feng shui but was interested in it, which was his reason for participating in the study. He commented:

*If I was doing business in Asia I would focus on it more, but being an Asian in a Western country, it has more to do with common sense.*

However, he saw merit in feng shui, and hoped to use it to solve some problems:

*We could add more positive features with regards to feng shui by creating a better first impression on arrival, right from the front door up to the lobby. The southern winds blow rubbish and such towards the entrance, and there could be a way to implement feng shui to reduce the impact of this.*

He also commented on the successful use of feng shui elsewhere:

*Hyatt Singapore was not successful before, but after the renovation it became an icon and very successful due to the positive feelings brought about by the design.*

Hotel E's manager did not know much about feng shui and was unsure how it would work in a hotel, but thought it was related to functionality and keeping things simple and uncluttered.

Hotel F's manager claimed to have a limited understanding, but then described feng shui as 'environment and atmosphere', explaining that 'layout is an element of good luck and good fortune' that 'can add value and has a place in hotels'. The manager of Hotel G understood feng shui as 'the way the furniture layout can bring good to people', but did not think it had any value in a hotel. Finally, the manager of Hotel H, which was designed according to feng shui principles by a Chinese family, 'thought it had benefit, and does something with the good energy'.

#### **4.2 Perceived benefit of feng shui**

Participants revealed a range of attitudes and understandings about feng shui, which five viewed as good design principles. None had implemented feng shui remedies (such as lions at the entrance) to attract good luck (although there are several hotels with lions at their entrance in Auckland, their managers did not participate in the study). Although they had not used feng shui in their hotels, participants discussed various benefits they associated with feng shui.

Some reflected a vague sense of positive values: 'it can bring good to people', 'puts you in touch with positive feelings', and 'creates a positive atmosphere'. Some were related to design: 'common sense in design', 'design elements to do with safety', and 'good design principles'. Others were just vaguely positive: 'creates a better first impression', 'creates a welcome', and 'it can add value'.

Three participants thought that feng shui could 'attract the Chinese market', and one thought that although design would not affect a hotel's luck, it might work in restaurants, where there is 'an element of luck', perhaps referring to the more volatile environment of a restaurant operation. Interest in feng shui was generally associated more with design and meeting the market, than with luck.



### 4.3 Feng shui evaluations

Evaluations reflected the general sense of good or bad feng shui for each property, even though the criteria represented a small selection of those possible (See **Table 1**).

<b>Hotel feng shui (total out of 20)</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>B</b>	<b>C</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>E</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>G</b>	<b>H</b>
Higher than surrounding buildings?	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Is it higher than the street?	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0
Tree-lined drive or grand entrance?	1	1	0	1	0	0	0	0
Entrance door suited to the building size?	1	1	0	1	0	0	0	1
Are there lions or other feng shui features?	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
Planting soft and the entrance unobstructed?	0	0	1	1	1	1	0	0
Away from a T or Y or busy intersection?	1	1	0	1	1	0	1	1
Away from cemetery, derelict buildings, etc?	1	1	0	1	0	1	1	1
Work areas hidden from main entrance?	1	1	1	1	1	0	0	0
No large building pointing at it?	1	0	1	1	1	1	0	1
<b>Entrance subtotal</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>5</b>
Cashier's desk solid and strong?	1	1	1	0	1	0	1	0
Attractive and clutter-free?	1	1	1	0	0	1	1	0
Free of spikes, obstacles, strange shapes?	0	1	1	1	0	1	1	0
Colours balance yin or yang of the street?	1	1	0	1	0	1	1	0
Smells and music pleasant or neutral?	1	1	0	1	0	1	1	0
View neutral or pleasant?	1	0	1	1	0	1	0	0
Work areas hidden from view?	1	1	1	0	0	1	0	0
Pleasantly busy?	1	1	1	0	0	1	1	1
Clean and well maintained?	1	1	1	1	0	1	1	0
Does it look successful?	1	1	1	0	0	1	1	0
<b>Foyer subtotal</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>6</b>

**Table 1: Evaluation of hotel entrance and foyer feng shui**

Hotel E received a low grade because of its poorly presented foyer, which was surprising given that the manager and several staff were Asian, and therefore assumed to have some interest in feng shui. Similarly, even though Hotel H had been built according to feng shui principles, some original features were no longer used (e.g. the front door had been changed), and the entrance and foyer were poorly presented.

All foyers were decorated in warm colours except in Hotel F, which was painted pale blue. However, as pale blue is yin, this was considered an excellent balance to the yang of the busy intersection outside. Hotel C's foyer was decorated in particularly warm colours, but as it was on a busy street and intersection, this was considered bad feng shui.

### 4.4 Perceptions of success

All except Hotel A had experienced recent deaths, suicides had occurred at two properties, and the backpackers' managers reported occasional fights. The managers of the large internationally branded hotels and one of the backpackers particularly described their hotels as successful, perhaps reflecting their ability to stay positive (the study was undertaken during a particularly weak economic climate). All claimed good occupancy but described in different ways, and all except Hotels D and G admitted to staff turnover, but at different

levels. Only two hotels had experienced multiple ownership changes. Results are presented in **Table 2**.

<b>Hotel success (each out of 4)</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>B</b>	<b>C</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>E</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>G</b>	<b>H</b>
Rated as lucky (suicides, luck at events etc)	4	4	4	2	2	2	3	4
Described as successful by manager	3	3	2	2	2	3	3	2
Described as having better occupancy	3	2	3	3	2	3	3	2
Staff turnover described as below 30%	2	1	1	4	2	1	4	3
Stable ownership and management	2	2	1	3	3	2	1	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>12</b>

**Table 2: Perceptions of success scores**

#### **4.5 Interviewees' comments**

Abbreviated comments about success and performance are presented below. Parenthetical information was obtained from historical data held by the authors.

##### **Hotel A (Five star)**

No particularly lucky or unlucky events; we create our own luck. Outperform the market in volume and occupancy and have around 35% staff turnover. Measure success against competitors and last year's performance, and good at innovation. Main headaches are depressed market and soft rates. Stable ownership, but some management changes.

##### **Hotel B (Four to five star)**

No deaths or anything particularly lucky or unlucky. Occupancy 'compares competitively' in the market. Staff turnover is the 'nature of the beast' but we are better than others. Success rated as market share, and comes from relationships with guests and staff, and a responsible attitude to sustainability. Good at retaining market share and securing repeat business. Main headache is keeping competitive. Stable ownership, stable brand.

##### **Hotel C (Four star)**

Death six months ago but current good fortune phase. Ranked poorly against competitors but better rate of improvement. Turnover low during the recession but will increase pays son to help retention. Good at warm welcomes and high service standards. Main headaches are local homeless people, parking problems and local building works. Several changes of ownership (and management).

##### **Hotel D (Four star)**

Three deaths, including a suicide, but good fortune in a recent event, and lucky with staff. Successful despite losing hundreds of thousands of dollars last year, and recovering well. Staff turnover under 10%. Success more than financial - includes positive guest comments and staff. Doing better than most with well-established client base and good service culture. Main headache is increasingly demanding guests. Stable ownership and management.

##### **Hotel E (Three and a half star)**

Two deaths including a suicide, but very lucky, with above average occupancy in market segment. As the economy is affecting occupancy and rates, is hard to be competitive. Ranked seven out of ten against competitors - being in mid-range market helps stability. Staff turnover in front office and administration low, but high in housekeeping. Friendly staff and good customer service. Main headache is managing staff attitudes and getting them to follow systems. Stable ownership (and management).

### **Hotel F (Three and a half star)**

‘The odd death here and there’, but luck more to do with business environment than anything else. Occupancy in the top five locally but achieved through discounting. Staff turnover average but retention difficult. Successful with a good brand. Success not just financial, but staff, staff turnover, and guest feedback. Good at retaining staff and controlling costs but retention still a major headache. Stable ownership (but management changes).

### **Hotel G (One star)**

‘Average’ luck, and a few fights. Performance better than others due to good name and location. No staff turnover last year. Success rated as higher occupancy and yield than competitors and within the brand. Good at providing a range of guest services. Absenteeism and interdepartmental communication main headaches. No known ownership changes.

### **Hotel H (One star)**

A few fights, but plenty of good things happen – ‘a particular energy’. Occupancy on a par with others. Some casual staff turnover but full-time staff easy to keep. Success rated as occupancy. Good staff attitude makes guests feel comfortable and happy. Main headaches are alcohol, rosters, and outdated facilities. Four owners in 20 years.

## **4.6 Comparison of feng shui and success**

Comparisons of feng shui evaluations and success scores (**Table 3**) produced divergent results only for Hotels E and H. Results for Hotels C and F were poor, with evidence of staff turnover, poor occupancy or room rates, and changes of ownership or management. Hotel E also had poor results, but matched with poor feng shui. Hotel A had the highest feng shui evaluation and reported very good results.

<b>Feng shui evaluation and hotel success</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>B</b>	<b>C</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>E</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>G</b>	<b>H</b>
Feng shui evaluation (out of 20)	17	16	13	13	6	13	11	6
Hotel success (out of 20)	<b>14</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>Difference</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>6</b>

**Table 3: Comparison of feng shui evaluation and hotel success scores**

## **5 Discussion**

### **5.1 Overview of results**

With the exception of Hotels E and H, where poor feng shui evaluations reflected problems with their entrances, results showed strong relationships between feng shui evaluations and managers’ descriptions of success.

Hotels A and B were luxury hotels operated by experienced and confident managers. Confidential sources indicated that Hotel A had high occupancy at the time of the study, supporting the manager’s claim that it was ahead of the competition. The feng shui was good, the manager had a good understanding of feng shui (though he did not use this) and business was good. The evaluation, interview, and informal sources all suggested a possible relationship between feng shui and success.

Hotel C had experienced several ownership and management changes, and the interviewee has been manager for less than a year. He was grappling with environmental problems outside his control, and the interior of his foyer was interesting but not particularly relaxing. However, he had a positive outlook, claiming his occupancy was ‘improving at a better rate’ than competitors. The feng shui was moderately good, but several problems were noted, one of which was the location near a shelter for homeless people, and poor positioning of the

building on an intersection. The interior décor was also too dramatic (yang) for a hotel with a busy street frontage.

Success scores from Hotels B, C, D and F were moderately good and compared well with their feng shui grades. Although disparate properties, all managers were confident in their success (Hotel D had low staff turnover), though Hotel E's manager was suspected of 'talking up' his occupancy, as his responses were positive but vague.

Hotel E gained a poor feng shui grade due to maintenance and cleaning inadequacies, and the poor standard of neighbouring shops, which spoiled the hotel's entrance. The entrance to Hotel H was used as a smoking area, and the foyer was a confusion of leisure activities, cooking smells, and work areas, creating a generally poor effect. However, the poor feng shui of these properties was not matched with poor success scores, as the managers were upbeat and confident. Without exception, all participants spoke positively about their properties, perhaps reflecting a good manager's ability to stay positive even when performance is poor.

Not surprisingly, hotels with the best feng shui were visually attractive and welcoming. Hotel A was well designed, clean, and well maintained. The foyer had the air of success common to luxury hotels, evidenced by the busy bar and brasserie, staff presentation, and the quality of furnishings. The sweeping hotel entrance was impressive without being imposing, and the overall sense was one of grace and comfort.

## **5.2 Feng shui in hospitality**

No evidence was found of feng shui being used to improve profitability, and although one participant thought it could 'add value' this does not necessarily imply economic value. Interest in feng shui was associated more with design features and marketing than with luck, and although the participants had not considered using feng shui to bring success, there was evidence to suggest that good feng shui may bring feelings of success.

If nothing else comes of this study, it is sufficiently important to note this relationship, which offers designers and managers guidelines for improving the visual impact (and perhaps feelings of success) of their properties. Whether by chance or design, the hotel on the busiest intersection had a subdued interior in blues and greys. The balance of yin (weak) and yang (strong) energies worked well, and could be used to advantage by Hotel C to overcome the activity from the street.

## **5.3 Interest in feng shui**

One manager participated because of his interest in feng shui, and several had a reasonable understanding of its principles. Although none consciously used feng shui, four (at Hotels B, C, E and H) were interested in implementing feng shui design features, and of these, three thought this would provide marketing benefits. Although they were more interested in functionality than features that may or not bring good luck, none said it would not work, or that it had no basis. The conclusion therefore is that whereas some hotel managers will specifically implement feng shui, they are probably in the minority, and their reasons are just as likely to be to please Asian guests, as to bring good luck.

## **5.4 Feng shui and success**

There was clear evidence of good feng shui associated with feelings of success. While this might indicate that good feng shui promotes positive thinking, it also seems likely that pleasant surroundings may encourage a positive state of mind, resulting in a more positive reflection on progress and achievement. However, this association is beyond the scope of this particular study. Relevant to this study, is that managers whose hotels had good feng shui

particularly described their hotels as successful, and where feng shui was poor, managers were less convincing in their descriptions of success.

## 5.5 Conclusions

While the logic behind the relationship between good feng shui and feelings of success is elusive, there is sufficient connection to warrant further study. It would be interesting to learn if a property with poor feng shui could sustain low staff turnover and high occupancy, or whether this would be too difficult in a visually unattractive environment.

Several interesting findings emerged.

5. Managers who employ feng shui are in the minority, and implementing feng shui to please Asian guests is not a major consideration.
6. Hotels with the best feng shui were high quality internationally branded properties. With the exception of Hotel E, the strong relationship between feng shui and star ratings suggests that following feng shui design principles may improve hotel quality.
7. Participants tried to answer questions positively. This may be a characteristic of hoteliers or senior managers generally, who may be reluctant to admit to problems without good reason. It is also possible that their ability to remain positive may have enabled these participants to succeed in business, and become hotel managers.
8. The properties that looked the best were described as doing the best. That is, there was a strong relationship between how good the feng shui of a property was, and the way the manager described the success of that property.

On the basis of these results, a subsequent study of 20 hotels is planned using evaluations scored on a weighted three-point scale over 50 items. Actual success will be measured as staff turnover, occupancy, guest feedback, bottom-line profit and ownership stability. It seems possible that a detailed study of the relationship between feng shui and success may provide close associations between these variables. It is hoped this paper may bring some credibility and interest to feng shui, and stimulate further research, perhaps on the effects of feng shui remedies on the subconscious mind, or the design principles embedded in feng shui traditions.

## 5.6 Limitations

As presented in **Table 3**, although the success scores were interpretations of the managers' descriptions of their properties, the relationship between feng shui and success was clearly evident. However, until a larger selection of hotels is evaluated and a more refined research instrument used, it will not be possible to determine whether the correlation between the feng shui score and success of each property was a result of good analysis, the desire to see a correlation, good luck, or an actual relationship.

Hotel success was difficult to assess, and was the aspect of the study to present the most challenges in both research design and the analysis phase. Because participants had the opportunity to withhold information about negative results, success was measured as a feeling rather than as a fact, and filtered through the personalities of participants. It was assumed that some negative results were withheld, and missing data were therefore treated as indicative of poor results. However, the prospect of obtaining financial reports for an exploratory study was unlikely without first determining whether there was any point undertaking a larger study, and thereby, having some rationale for requesting hard data.

The feng shui evaluation is considered the most reliable part of the results. Although several possible feng shui criteria (e.g. water features, feng shui symbols) were ignored, grades

matched the overall impression of each property. For a more rigorous evaluation, a comprehensive schedule of criteria would need to be developed, and perhaps weighted according to each criterion's importance, to avoid skewed results caused by the absence of arbitrarily selected features. Grading each criterion out of three rather than a simple binary score would also allow for more refinement.

The major design problem however, was the reliance on four variables by which to judge the success of the hotel, and the need to grade these for comparison with the feng shui evaluations. Even if results had been based on financial data, more criteria would have been needed for a more rigorous analysis. However, as the purpose of this study was to determine whether or not a large scale study is warranted, it met expectations by providing an insight into possible relationships between feng shui and success.

Some managers did not wish to be interviewed on what they may have considered a rather spurious study of Eastern superstition, and the views of these managers might have provided a more balanced result on managers' views of feng shui. As one participant explained, 'it is doubtful feng shui can be measured in monetary terms, but if it creates change and social good, then why go against it?' Another noted 'feng shui is not scientific. Feng shui masters try to make it scientific, but it is not'. This study challenges this concept.

## 6 References

- Arsone, S. (1991), "Good Vibrations", *Restaurant Hospitality*, Vol. 75, No. 9, pp. 140-144.
- Brummett, B. H., Helms, M. J., Dahlstrom, W. G. & Siegler, I. C. (2006), "Prediction of all-cause mortality by the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory Optimism-Pessimism Scale scores: study of a college sample during a 40-year follow-up period", *Mayo Clinic Proceedings*, Vol. 81, No. 12, pp. 1541-1544.
- Bruun, O. (1996), "The feng shui resurgence in China: conflicting cosmologies between state and peasantry", *The China Journal*, Vol. 36, No. 47-65.
- Byrne, R. (2006), *The Secret*, Atria Books, New York, NY.
- Chang, P.-T., Lee, J.-H., Hung, K.-C., Tsai, J.-T. & Perng, C. (2009), "Applying fuzzy weighted average approach to evaluate office layouts with feng-shui consideration", *Mathematical and Computer Modelling*, Vol. 50, No. 9/10, pp. 1514-1537.
- Emmons, C. F. (1992), "Hong Kong's feng shui: popular magic in a modern urban setting", *Journal of Popular Culture*, Vol. 26, No. 1, pp. 39-49.
- Eriksson, I. (2008), *Feng shui in Traditional Gardens*, Doctoral thesis, Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences, Copenhagen.
- Gallup, G. & Newport, F. (1991), "Belief in paranormal phenomena among adult Americans", *The Skeptical Inquirer*, Vol. 15, No. 2, pp. 137-137.
- Gayot, (2008), A feng shui getaway in the heart of the city *The Guide to the Good Life* [Online]. Available: <http://www.gayot.com/travel/hotels/metropolitan.html> [Accessed 2 August 2010].
- Grossman, D., (2005), Check your travel superstitions, or carry them on?, *USA Today* [Online]. Available: [http://www.usatoday.com/travel/columnist/grossman/2005-10-31-grossman\\_x.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/travel/columnist/grossman/2005-10-31-grossman_x.htm) [Accessed 2 August 2010].
- Hale, G. & Evans, M. (2008), *Feng Shui: Mind and Body, Spirit and Home*, Anness Publishing, London, England.
- Han, K.-T. & Sinha, A. (1996), "An empirical study of feng-shui in landscape", *Environments*, Vol. 23, No. 3, pp. 36-42.

- Hobson, J. S. P. (1994), "Feng Shui: its impacts on the Asian hospitality industry", *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*, Vol. 6, No. 6, pp. 21-26.
- Hwang, B. B. (2001), "Conceptions of feng shui as represented in Western (English) documentary sources", *Journal of the Architectural Institute of Korea Planning and Design*, Vol. 17, No. 11, pp. 125-132.
- Hwangbo, A. (2002), "An alternative tradition in architecture: Conceptions in feng shui and its continuous tradition", *Journal of Architectural Planning and Research*, Vol. 19, No. 2, pp. 110-130.
- Hwangbo, A. B. (1999), "A new millennium and feng shui", *The Journal of Architecture*, Vol. 4, No. 2, pp. 191 - 198.
- International Feng Shui Association (2010), *International Feng Shui Convention*. Sentosa, Singapore.
- Jahoda, G. (1969), *The Psychology of Superstition*, Alien Lane, London, England.
- Jarvis, P. (1980), "Towards a Sociological Understanding of Superstition", *Social Compass*, Vol. 27, No. 2-3, pp. 285-295.
- King, J., (2010), *Feng Shui of Bank of China Tower, Hong Kong* [Online], White Dragon Consulting: Hong Kong, [Accessed 20 April 2011].
- Lai, C.-Y. D. (1974), "A feng shui model as a location index", *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, Vol. 64, No. 4, pp. 506-513.
- Lee, S. H. (1986), *Feng Shui: Its Context and Meaning*, Doctoral thesis, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY.
- Locals Councils (2010), Auckland Region Community Profile.
- Mak, M. (2004), *Application of Feng Shui Knowledge to Preliminary Design Evaluation using Knowledge-Based Expert Systems Approach*, Doctoral thesis, University of Newcastle, Newcastle, Australia.
- Mak, M. & Ng, S. (2008), "Feng shui: an alternative framework for complexity in design", *Architectural Engineering and Design Management*, Vol. 4, No. 1, pp. 58-72.
- Mak, M. Y. & Ng, T. S. (2005), "The art and science of feng shui - a study on architects' perception", *Building and Environment*, Vol. 40, No. 3, pp. 427-434.
- March, A. L. (1968), "An appreciation of Chinese geomancy", *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 27, No. 2, pp. 253.
- Martin, P., (2010), *Hong Kong's Feng Shui Politics* [Online]: Hong Kong, Available: <http://sinocentric.co.uk/?p=372> [Accessed 20 April 2011].
- Min, H., Joo, S. & Kim, J. (2009), "Evaluating the financial performances of Korean luxury hotels using data envelopment analysis", *The Service Industries Journal*, Vol. 29, No. 6, pp. 835.
- Newport, F., (2009), *State of the states: Importance of religion* [Online], Gallup.com, Available: <http://www.gallup.com/poll/114022/state-states-importance-religion.aspx> [Accessed 20 April 2011].
- Newport, F. & Strausberg, M., (2001), *Americans' belief in psychic and paranormal phenomena is up over last decade* [Online], Gallup.com, Available: <http://www.gallup.com/poll/4483/americans-belief-psychic-paranormal-phenomena-over-last-decade.aspx> [Accessed 21 April 2011].
- O'Brien, S. (2002), *Feng Shui in the Home: Creating Harmony*, Lansdowne, Sydney, Australia.

- Paton, M. J. (2007), "Feng shui: a continuation of 'art of swindlers'?", *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*, Vol. 34, No. 3, pp. 427-445.
- Reynolds, D. (2004), "An exploratory investigation of multiunit restaurant productivity assessment using data envelopment analysis", *Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing*, Vol. 16, No. 2/3, pp. 19-26.
- Sharma, A. & Sneed, J. (2008), "Performance analysis of small hotels in Tanzania", *Journal of Services Research*, Vol., No. 83.
- Stalcup, L. D. & Pearson, T. A. (2001), "A model of the causes of management turnover in hotels ", *Journal of Hospitality & Tourism Research* Vol. 25, No. 1, pp. 17-30.
- Statistics New Zealand (2001), Auckland Region Community Profile. Wellington, New Zealand: New Zealand Government.
- The Feng Shui Institute of New Zealand, (2010), Available: <http://www.fengshui.co.nz/> [Accessed].
- The Feng Shui Society (2010), *Feng Shui Conference IV*. London, England.
- The Feng Shui Store, (2010): Aylesbury, England, Available: <http://www.fengshuiweb.co.uk> [Accessed 21 April 2011].
- Too, L. (1999a), *Creating Abundance with Feng Shui*, Random House, London, England.
- Too, L. (1999b), *The Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Feng Shui*, Element Books, London, England.
- Tsang, E. W. K. (2004), "Toward a Scientific Inquiry into Superstitious Business Decision-Making", *Organization Studies*, Vol. 25, No. 6, pp. 923-946.
- Wah, L. (1998), "Ancient wisdom in modern design", *Management Review*, Vol. 87, No. 5, pp. 13.
- Xu, P. (1998), "Feng shui models structured traditional Beijing courtyard houses", *Journal of Architecture and Planning Research*, Vol. 15, No. 4, pp. 271-282.