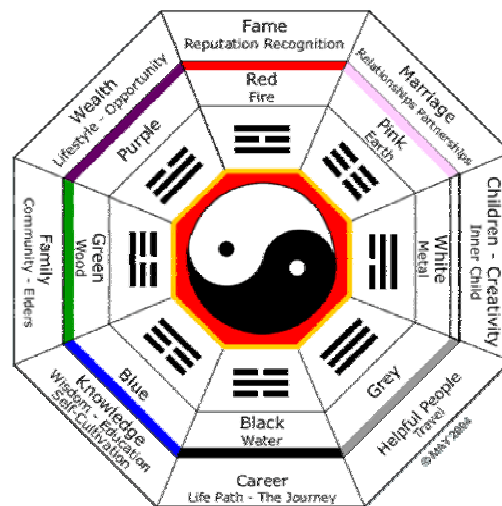


Feng Shui



Whether you're looking for balance and harmony in your home, office or diet, feng shui is the latest (by Western standards, anyway) miracle cure for all that ails you. But, in fact, the concept of "chi," the energy that feng shui strives to balance, can be traced to Taoism, a Chinese philosophy that dates back to the sixth century B.C. The Taoist belief asserts that human language is incapable of explaining our existence in the world. Chi is a power beyond the physical world.



Some dismiss feng shui as an old Chinese myth or a fad for kooky new agers, but feng shui advocates say that it can improve everything from harmony in the home to wealth and well-being.

But what exactly is feng shui? Is it science or superstition? Where did it come from? And how do you use it? In this article, we'll address all of your questions about the art of feng shui.

Feng shui literally translates from Chinese as "wind" (feng) and water ("shui"). It's the art of arranging buildings, objects, space and life to achieve harmony and balance. Feng shui works on the assumption that the world is driven by unseen forces. The idea behind it is to "unblock" the way, so the forces may flow freely and create balance in a space (or life).

The main difference between the practices of feng shui (or "vastu" in the Hindu culture) and Western traditions is a belief that we as humans are connected to the spaces we inhabit. Believers in feng shui see sacred purposes and mystical meanings behind design -- not just artistically appealing buildings or superficially pretty surroundings. They view the world in terms of cosmic energy.

Feng Shui Symbols

The five elements

These are the phases through which chi moves.

1. **Earth** (rocks, ceramics)
2. **Fire** (candles, fireplaces)
3. **Metal** (electronics, silver picture frames)
4. **Water** (fountains, aquariums)
5. **Wood** (living plant or tree -- dead wood, like furniture, doesn't count)

You can think of the elements acting on each other as an advanced game of "Rock, Paper, Scissors" -- there are two cycles, productive and destructive.



The yin-yang

This symbol is one of the most readily recognizable of Chinese culture. The black and white swooshes are connected, with a dot of the opposite color in each. The concept behind the yin and yang are that they are opposite states of chi (energy). One cannot exist without the other. Yin (black) is associated with femininity, matter, nighttime, coldness, passivity and softness, and yang (white) is about masculinity, spirit, daytime, warmth, activity and hardness. If you didn't have night, you couldn't understand what day is, so neither can exist on its own. In the world of feng shui, the yin and yang must be balanced.

While chi, and thus yin and yang, are constantly in motion, the symbol is traditionally displayed with the yang on top, under the assumption that heat rises.

Feng Shui History

India and China both lay claim to feng shui ancestry. Archeologists have discovered evidence that about 5,500 years ago, Indian mystics practiced the principles of "**vastu shastra**," literally translated as "building science." It's a system that explains how to design and construct buildings, houses and cities. Followers of vastu believe that every building is a living organism with its own energy, and they study the effects of the five elements -- earth, water, fire, air and space -- on the world around them.

According to some historians, about 3,000 years ago, Indian vastu practitioners (typically monks) crossed through Tibet and into China. The Chinese adopted and adapted Vastu principles, which evolved into the various schools of feng shui.

Those in the feng shui camp trace the philosophy's origins to village gravesites that date as far back as 6000 B.C. Most scholars agree that feng shui originated as a method of burial that evolved over time. There is even some evidence of feng shui principles in prehistoric Europe -- Stonehenge, for example.

The Chinese, like the Indians, used the philosophy's design principles to lay out their cities. The Book of Ritual from the Chou dynasty (1030-722 B.C.) describes the plans for a capital city, dictating the use of squares and placement of gates at the four compass points. It is considered the basis for all Chinese city designs, most notably Beijing.

Feng shui made its earliest tangible leap to the United States in the 1980s and has been growing steadily ever since. In recent years, interest in feng shui's architectural and design elements has greatly expanded in North America, Europe and Australia.

Feng Shui Uses

Once again, depending on whom you ask, feng shui can be applied strictly to architecture and design -- or it can pertain to anything from choosing your house site to increasing your wealth or choosing the name of your business.

Architecture and city planning

Architecture and city planning were clearly a part of the origins of the Chinese tradition. The basic premise is that our homes and offices should be built with nature rather than against it.

In city planning, grids with courtyards at the center of town allow the chi to move without "rushing" it.

In architecture, a horseshoe-shaped structure, with the entrance facing a courtyard, allows chi to flow in. According to the Form School, a house should be built on slightly elevated ground with its back protected from the wind by trees, another building or earth (like a hill). Building on a dead-end street or an irregular piece of land is not desirable because it stops the energy from flowing. A rectangular plot of land is ideal.

Offices

The earliest adopters of feng shui in the West were hospitals, and businesses have been quick to follow. Hospitals were among the first to recognize the benefit of applying feng shui to hallways. In the past, hospital corridors were long, narrow and straight. Feng shui experts say this makes energy accelerate unnaturally, which causes stress. Now many hospitals -- and offices -- break up the straight lines by widening hallways and placing plants and paintings to create a more soothing energy.

Chinese artwork isn't considered particularly helpful to an office's chi -- despite what some art dealers might say -- but artwork in general can affect the atmosphere. A painting of a sinking ship, for example, wouldn't bode well for a business trying to stay afloat. Many who criticize Black Hat feng shui point out that people are paying handsomely for often common-sense advice, such as keeping the environment clutter-free and using incandescent lighting instead of harsh fluorescent bulbs.

However, many businesspeople, including Donald Trump, Virgin Atlantic Airways founder Sir Richard Branson and New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg, say they use feng shui in some form or another. In the past, they have used consultants for advice on everything from door placement to the use of aquariums (which bring water energy to the office environment).



