



Original research article

## Using traditional rituals in hospitality to gain value: A study on the impact of Feng Shui



Madeleine Ogilvie<sup>a,\*</sup>, Danny Ng<sup>b</sup>, Erwei Xiang<sup>b</sup>, Maria M. Ryan<sup>b</sup>, Jaime Yong<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> School of Business and Law, Edith Cowan University, 270 Joondalup Drive, Joondalup WA 6027, Australia

<sup>b</sup> School of Business and Law, Edith Cowan University, Australia

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### ABSTRACT

Superstition and the rituals used to support such beliefs remain an important part of Chinese business society. With the advance of globalisation and the normalisation of many business practices this study explores the importance these rituals continue to play in the contemporary hospitality setting. The paper examines the prominence of Feng Shui in business today in a qualitative study using Chinese restaurants to explore associated business behaviours and perceived value of use. Findings from 20 phenomenological interviews from across four different Asian communities are discussed highlighting the core elements of this ritualistic practice. Results indicate that these practices continue to be used widely, have significant impact in managing the servicescape, and, influence the decisions and behaviours of proprietors. Feng Shui ritual plays an important role in the creation of value for business proprietors who practice it and a conceptual framework on how these rituals provide value is proposed.

### 1. Introduction

Traditional beliefs and superstitions are an important element in defining the cultural identity of a country or group of people. They have been used for centuries by anthropologist to gain understanding of cultural difference, as well as, to provide insights into the unique behaviours and values of many communities around the world. Superstition remains a crucial part of Chinese business society and with new economic reforms in China today there is a resurgence in the use of these beliefs as restrictions on the population become more relaxed (Tsang, 2004).

Feng Shui, or “wind water”, is a traditional Chinese worldview regarding the art of spatial alignment and orientation, and the relationship between humans and their environment. As defined by Skinner (1982 p.4), 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”. Reflecting Daoist cosmology, it is believed that Feng Shui is responsible for health, good luck and prosperity and is deeply entrenched in Chinese social life, having influence on a person from birth, through marriage till death.

The principles of Feng Shui are deeply ingrained in the psyche and culture of many Chinese (Hobson, 1994). Chinese people will often relate success or failure to the dynamics of earth forces (e.g. Feng Shui), as opposed to the cause of human influence (Chen 2007). To produce

vibrant Qi (cosmic health), Feng Shui principles assert that sites be favourably oriented and protected from evil influences (sha) by buildings, walls or natural landforms (Guo 2006). As such, Feng Shui connects beliefs of planning, interior design, psychology and common sense (Tsang, 2004). As highlighted by Ho and Chuang (2012), Feng Shui is the practice of designing space to create balance and harmony, drawing on the movement and quality of energy, or *qi*, through the environment. Feng Shui can thus be seen as the relationship between people and their surroundings.

While Feng Shui is integral to Chinese culture and society (Wan et al., 2012), scientific inquiry into views of Feng Shui are in their infancy and given the importance of Feng Shui in shaping the contemporary Chinese world, it is pertinent that research across different disciplines investigates how Feng Shui influences Chinese behaviour and thought (Chen, 2007). China’s rapid globalisation and increasing dominance in world trade also highlights the importance of considering these traditions as they diffuse into the global market place. Business literature to date has focussed on Feng Shui and issues such as its influence on interior design and customers (Ahmadnia et al., 2017; Ho and Chuang, 2012); real estate (Wu et al., 2012; Choy et al., 2007; Peng et al., 2012); corporate reputation and image (Chang 2009, Chang and Lii, 2010); branding and supernatural beliefs (Chang and Lii, 2008; Schmitt and Pan, 1994); family business functions (Wall et al., 2009) and consumer purchase intent (Luk et al., 2012). Poulston and Bennett

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: [m.ogilvie@ecu.edu.au](mailto:m.ogilvie@ecu.edu.au) (M. Ogilvie), [d.ng@ecu.edu.au](mailto:d.ng@ecu.edu.au) (D. Ng), [d.xiang@ecu.edu.au](mailto:d.xiang@ecu.edu.au) (E. Xiang), [m.ryan@ecu.edu.au](mailto:m.ryan@ecu.edu.au) (M.M. Ryan), [j.yong@ecu.edu.au](mailto:j.yong@ecu.edu.au) (J. Yong).

(2012) explored the relationship between Feng Shui and hotel foyers and other researchers the pertinence of Feng Shui in Asian culture (Hobson, 1994, Chen, 2007; Tan, 2012; Wang et al., 2013a,b; Wu, 2008). However no studies have deconstructed the Feng Shui ritual and explored the perceived value this ritual provides its users.

Consequently this paper presents findings from a study that deconstructs the Feng Shui ritual, and explores these ritual practices in Chinese restaurants from across four Asian countries. It provides context to restaurant proprietors' behaviours and examines how these traditional practices still influence business decisions and assist in creating value for those who practice them.

Given the limited research into Feng Shui practices in business today, the aim of this study is to gain a greater understanding of how this traditional belief impacts contemporary retail practices. It is proposed that the practice of Feng Shui has permeated global markets and continues to have significant influence in business practices in Asia; and, that these lingering traditions are important in understanding everyday commercial behaviour not only in Asia but in the greater global context.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Ritual

As China emerges as a major economic powerhouse of the future, its traditions and ancient beliefs remain evident and continue to impact on a plethora of business dealings. Superstitions provide many business men and women with a sense of security in their decision making (Tsang, 2004) and the behaviours they adopt in following these superstitions are often ritualistic in nature and follow a set script, with a ritualistic performance (Rook, 1985).

Many authors have discussed myth in a consumer research context and explored its impact on consumer consumption behaviours (Belk and Costa, 1998; Levy, 1981, 1994; Wallendorf and Arnould, 1991). In these studies myth is identified as an important symbolic driver of consumer behaviour (Belk and Costa, 1998; Levy, 1981; Wallendorf and Arnould, 1991).

Frye (cited in Stern 1995) also proposes that myths have great relevance in the way we consume products and that advertising structures utilise this extensively. Consequently, myth still holds an extremely symbolic place within the fabric of most cultures. Even today, consumers are often motivated to action because of some underlying myth without giving any real thought to the rationale for that behaviour (Belk and Costa, 1998; Ogilvie et al., 2000). In any ritualistic behaviour, underlying myths play an important part in driving behaviours that are not necessarily based on logic but have their source in the myths, rituals and traditions of the culture.

Rook (1985) explores the dynamic of ritual further and believes that ritual is defined by an experience that is composed of a string of events that are conducted in the exact same sequence each time the activity is performed and the same concepts can be extended to many business practices conducted by Chinese entrepreneurs today.

Rook (1985 p253) claims that ritual is characterised by four fundamental and consistent elements. These are the use of ritual artefacts, a ritual script, ritual performances or roles, and a ritual audience. According to Rook, in following the exact same script and order of events, consumers' gain feeling and meaning each time the ritual is acted out. He believes that rituals can be differentiated from behavioural habits in that they are usually group experiences, have dramatic scripts, and/or have more meaning for the individual performing them. They also usually consist of a beginning, middle and an end (Rook 1985 p252).

Rituals are like a social language and communicate large amounts of information about the society and the current codes and practices within it (Arnould et al., 1999; Rook 1985). As Rook (1985) notes, ritual provides a structure for the correct way to do things and the feelings that are normally experienced when following the set script.

Rituals make symbolic statements about the social order by dramatising cultural myths and linking the present with the past.

Others have also analysed the elements of ritual and its impact on the individual. Jung et al. (1959) and Freud (1959) believed that rituals aided as a defence against impulsiveness by keeping the subconscious at bay. In so doing, they also helped foster the ego and develop individual identity. The seminal literature (Rook, 1985; Erikson, 1959) suggests that ritual stems from superstition and a belief in magic and may be linked to feelings of inferiority and isolation. Therefore, it is the ritual that gives meaning and structure to many of the everyday behaviours of business proprietors. Any break or change to this ritual is met with great uncertainty and discomfort, so changes in the ritual process occur slowly and are often met with great resistance (Rook, 1985). This may explain why so many Chinese business people still gain comfort from enacting Feng Shui traditions in their daily business activities, as following such ritual scripts removes the uncertainty and mitigates the risk for many who believe and follow these practices. Given the prior research into ritual and consumer behaviour, Rook's (1985) model and definition of ritual is useful in understanding these behaviours in more depth and consequently it is adopted as the framework for this study to analyse Feng Shui rituals.

### 2.2. Feng Shui in business

Considering that Feng Shui permeates all aspects of Chinese society, there has been relatively minimal scientific inquiry into Feng Shui influence in a business context. A handful of consumer-based studies have emerged in recent years, based on consumer purchase decisions with particular focus on property purchase. Wu et al., 2012 use the theory of reasoned action to explain how consumers incorporate Feng Shui principles when considering the purchase of residential property (Wu et al., 2012). Penget et al., 2012 In a similar context, studied house purchasing in Taiwan and the influence of personality traits on the importance of Feng Shui principles. It was found that superstition and self efficacy have significant impact on an individual's level of concern about Feng Shui (Peng et al., 2012).

Luk et al. (2012) examined what Feng Shui means to consumers and how these meanings affect purchase intentions. They investigated three views of Feng Shui (instrumental, spiritual, minimalist) and found that they differentially affect the intention to make Feng Shui-related purchase. Therefore, marketers need to take consumers' views of Feng Shui seriously (Luk et al., 2012).

Wang et al., 2013a,b focused on hope as the fundamental offering of Feng Shui. Their research into the use of Feng Shui in homes and offices in Hong Kong investigated the cultural resources on which consumers rely in creating and sustaining hope in their lives. They found that Feng Shui Masters serve as purveyors and co-producers of hope (Wang et al., 2013a,b).

While Feng Shui has significant impact on architecture, furniture and house layout, little attention has been given to the relationship between Feng Shui and consumers' motivation (Ho and Chuang 2012). The principles of Feng Shui not only penetrate personal life, but it is also thought that in a business sense, Feng Shui can assist profits and favourable business activities (Chen 2007). It is thought an environment exuding good qi creates energy, creativity and balance, potentially increasing financial success of the business (Poulston and Bennett 2012) and that fortune and good health follow the gathering of positive qi (Chang and Lii 2010).

It is evident that within Chinese culture, Feng Shui is an important business function, just as other organisational performance functions are. A powerful office or work environment, embodying positive qi, is considered to strengthen the performance and brand image of a firm (Chang and Lii, 2010). As such, Feng Shui has significant influence in Chinese architecture and is often employed to determine business location, office layouts and where cash registers should be located (Wall et al., 2009). As Chang and Lii (2010) discuss, this is very important in

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