



Feng Shui vs Western Practicalities



mystical nonsense, or something worth consideration?

I don't want you to get the wrong idea: A Season of Happiness hasn't gone mystical or new-age. We've always tried to look at life in practical terms based on our own personal experiences which are influenced by a Western-style culture. Neither is the intention to discredit an ancient philosophy by unfairly comparing it to the way we've always been used to doing things. What I would like to show is how East and West are pretty similar in the search for a better, happier lifestyle - each is simply utilising a different compass to find the best direction. The one thing we all have in common is the natural instinct to know when we are striking the right balance, the feeling of comfort and satisfaction when we realise that whatever we have been trying to achieve is actually working.

Years ago my wife gave me a book on Feng Shui because, I suspect, she believed it would help me find a solution to some problems that had been dogging me for a while. At the time I was working at home, skipping between writing, housework and gardening. My initial reaction to the gift was uncharitable to say the least. Sporting a sarcastic sneer, I recall flicking through the pages and thinking: *what a load of rubbish!* - this before even reading a word. When I eventually did some days later, I was still harbouring my earlier resentment and focussed only on those passages which seemed to fire my animosity towards principles that I considered both alien and utterly useless to me. Over ten years on, I have just read it again, in a different place under vastly different circumstances, and I now realise how pig-headed I was back then. No wonder my wife bought me the book - she probably hoped it would improve my temperament and negative outlook.

Having taken the time to try and understand it, I gather Feng Shui is a guide for people to acquire what they need to be happy and successful by following a set of rules relating to where they live and work; in effect, the building and the rooms within it where they perform their desired tasks and activities, twenty-four hours of every day. If you are thinking like I was ten years ago, you'll be tempted to ditch this article right now; but stick with me a while longer, I beg you: I promise I am coming to the practical bit. Looking back, that was the way I always tackled my problems because it was what I knew best. When I compare my solutions with Feng Shui, however, although the reasons for changes made might have been different, the results were remarkably similar. As a simple example, by a process of elimination I discovered I could write best sitting on the bed leaning back against the head-board - I don't know why: it just worked, that's all; applying the principles of Feng Shui, it seems the position of the bed and the way it was facing was the ideal direction within a room in the "right" part of the house exactly where I was likely to be most creative and productive - a peculiar coincidence, or something much more?

The aspect of this philosophy that I have found hard to get my head around is that of global references. Feng Shui, I am led to believe, is based on direction defined by the magnetic

compass. Whereas I am "down-under" in Australia, the author of the book I read lived in the UK. From either country, magnetic North will always be the same, but many of the reasons for a particular part of a building being more suitable for a certain activity than another are said to be influenced by climatic changes. In the Northern hemisphere, especially in the author's homeland, the north face of a building would receive the coolest temperatures and a softer light, these said to be associated with "sex, spirituality and isolation". A room in this location, the book claimed, would be ideal for an artist's studio. I had mine in the south, exactly the opposite, because that was the best, most consistent natural light and the room didn't become like an oven when the temperature outside was 35°C or more, as it is here for a good part of the summer. So, I thought, if I am going to do the principles of Feng Shui justice, I have to reverse all references to the compass points. Wrong! Irrespective of the Sun's relative position to a building in the middle of the day when it is at its brightest and hottest, wherever one is in the world it always rises in the east and sets in the west. Accepting this, I've had to adopt a kind-of top-to-bottom transposition as if standing on my head, leaving east and west unchanged.

What, you are probably wondering, does any of this have to do with you? Surprisingly, this Chinese philosophy which you may know absolutely nothing about does feature in your everyday life; that is to say you utilise some of its principles whether you realise it or not. When you move into a new residence, one of the first jobs is to set up the furniture. If the property is rental or pre-owned, those who lived there before you would have allocated certain areas for specific usage suitable to their own tastes. Bedrooms might have fitted or walk-in robes, the lounge room could have a fixed heater or fireplace on one wall, with sockets for the TV and Hi-fi set into another. For the sake of convenience, you may initially go with your predecessor's choices, putting beds in the obvious bedrooms, couch and chairs in the lounge, and your dining setting in what was most likely a dining area; but once you have begun to settle in, you could discover that someone else's preferences either don't fit your lifestyle, or simply just don't feel right. If you are anything like us, you won't be able to put up with the discomfort for long and will soon be in the throes of shifting furniture around, possibly in a bid to emulate the set-up of your old home which had worked well for you in the past. Unless you are extremely lucky, it won't have the desired effect and you will be moving stuff from one location to the next until you manage to blunder on an answer that is as close to satisfactory as you can make it. When you have, you'll know it instinctively, so perhaps it was worth the effort of all that trial and error. The same solution, however, perhaps even a better one, could have been arrived at minus the stress and strain by applying some of the Feng Shui principles.

They do seem to work. Placing a favourite chair in a part of the room where it is likely to attract negative energy, then facing it in a direction not conducive to relaxation tends to make the sitter uncomfortable and prone to frequent distraction. An office or computer desk set against the wrong wall might affect concentration and focus. An individual could have disturbed sleep in one bedroom, whereas their insomnia and nightmares may not be a problem if they moved to a different one. Even the position of the bed and which way it faces can be influential. Colour is another aspect of living conditions that can influence mood and comfort. The right hue of surrounding paintwork and soft furnishings can mean the difference between a room that is suggestive of the reason for being there, or at odds with it. Feng Shui is a guide to this consideration and many others. We've proved over and over again that the principles of this alternative philosophy are an amazingly accurate guide to better living, albeit in hindsight - because our choices were made without it and were based purely on past experience and practicalities. They just happened to produce very similar results which were fortunately happy ones.

Most of us have to be guided by circumstances and availability. There is no such thing as a perfect solution, and my Feng Shui author admits this, so we have to be practical about where we live and when we move to a new abode. Not everyone can afford to buy or build a home in the ideal position during an auspicious time of the year, especially not one with a layout that satisfies the most advisable principles of Feng Shui. In many cases, those who can only rent are often stuck with what they can get. Places can be adapted, though. A tenant may not be allowed to knock down walls and add extensions, but there are steps they can take which

introduce the personal touch. When you think about it, no matter what it is made of, or in what shape or form those materials are assembled, we all live in a box, usually incorporating a number of smaller boxes. The home comes not from the outside, but those intimate comforts we put in it; and there are a few additions recommended by Feng Shui that can even improve on this. Water is said to be a powerful force. A small water feature, or an aquarium set in the right place can apparently direct a beneficial flow of Chi energy through a room or building; in a practical sense, watching fish swim in a calm environment has a settling influence - that's why they can be found in some medical waiting rooms. Mind you, they are a lot of work and if you succeed in killing the fish by neglect, I don't imagine you'd feel too serene. Mirrors, apparently, can be good or bad, depending where they are mounted. They certainly reflect light and can project the illusion of space and depth; but I'm skeptical about their ability to influence the flow of an invisible energy which I find hard to admit the existence of. Clearly my Western upbringing will only let me go so far when it comes to Eastern philosophy.

As for the practical side of where and how to set up a home, we had plenty of opportunities to perfect our skills while on the road. Two years as itinerant fruit pickers necessitated moving from place to place, and as we were camping, each time we pitched the tent, decisions had to be made with respect to the best position. Where we had a choice of available sites, we picked the one which was reasonably close to facilities, but that didn't compromise our privacy and was away from areas that might be noisy at night - having to work from dawn till dusk, we needed our sleep. Trees provide shade, but they can also drop branches; dips in the ground can fill with water when it rains; and a spot near a cow paddock might be a pleasant outlook, but the smells and flies that go with it are quite the reverse. Then there was which way to face the tent, taking into consideration the season with regard to heat, prevailing winds, the possibility of storms, plus having a relaxing view to appreciate while we were winding down at the end of a hard day. Feng Shui was never applied because we didn't think about it, just going with past experiences; but on reflection, it would probably have supported most of the decisions we made.

Whatever materials it is constructed of, whether brick or timber, iron or canvas, your home is where you spend a good portion of your life, so it should be a place where you can shut the door on the stress of the world outside, somewhere you can feel safe and content. To make it that way, by all means draw on the practicalities learned over the years, or give the principles of Feng Shui a chance to help improve your lifestyle and future prospects. Whether directions on the compass or cultural philosophies, East and West remain constant. Opposites they may seem, and both are guides to different ways of life; but whichever you choose to follow, at some stage you will meet up with the other; and if you stay on the same course for long enough, you will eventually arrive back where you started. So, be that in some country on the map, or simply a state of mind, use any means to make your life the best it can be.

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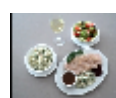
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