FENG SHUI AND ITS PLACE IN AMERICAN INTERIOR DESIGN EDUCATION: VIEWS FROM STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT
The purpose of this study was to explore perceptions of interior design students in the United States about Feng Shui and its place in the practice and pedagogy of interior design. Additionally, the study analysed their understanding of the fundamentals of Feng Shui. Thirty-eight students from three classes in the interior design programme at one university completed a survey. Several misconceptions about Feng Shui were uncovered and results indicated that students are misinformed about its basic fundamentals. However, participants agreed that Feng Shui has a place in American interior design and should be included in the interior design curriculum although as an elective course.

KEY WORDS
feng shui, interior design, design education.

INTRODUCTION
After several years of designing homes for families with varied needs, our office was asked to design a home based on the principles of Japanese sacred geometry. No one in the office felt sufficiently informed on the topic to design the home. The couple commissioning the home brought their advisor on the topic to give a presentation for the design staff. Everyone sat glued to their seats, amazed at the rigidity of the principles put forth and awed by the demonstrations about the effects of sacred symbols on one’s energy fields. As an interior design educator, the incident in the office led me to contemplate how (mis-)informed our students may be regarding the principles presented by various traditional sciences of architecture like, Feng Shui, Japanese sacred geometry, and the Indian science of Vastu-shastra.

In that context, this study was aimed at identifying interior design students’ awareness about Feng Shui, their perceptions of the science, and their beliefs regarding their future clients’ outlook towards Feng Shui in their projects. Interior design students at one university in the United States completed a survey asking them about their understanding of and opinion about Feng Shui especially with reference to its validity in interior design in American society. The intention was to identify whether students are prepared to face the request that came to my office, and also their opinion about introducing studies of traditional sciences of architecture in interior design curricula in the United States.

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BACKGROUND LITERATURE

A review of all Feng Shui principles associated with interior design is neither the intent nor permissible within the scope of this paper. This section discusses literature that explored the prevalence of Feng Shui in Western society, and opinions from scholars about its application in a variety of fields in the United States.

FENG SHUI IN WESTERN SOCIETY

Mak and So (2007) traced the introduction of Feng Shui in Western society and outlined the changing impressions of Feng Shui from its understanding as a superstition to its scientific applications. Having traveled the skeptic route through centuries, Feng Shui is rapidly carving a niche for itself in the Western world in fields including, but not limited to, architecture, interior design, urban planning, landscape architecture, applied geography (Nemeth, 2008), automobile design (Amato, 2006), and even literature (Plotnik, 2001). Within architecture and interior design the application of Feng Shui was explored in a variety of functions in the Western world like banks (Song, 2001), healthcare (Blum, 2004; Boykin & Raines, 2006; La Torre, 2006), and offices (Lagatree, 1997). In the United States a legislative proposal was presented in the state of California to adopt building codes and standards based on Feng Shui to augment the positive energy in the state (Gaeddert, 2004).

Hwangbo (2002) mentioned that the widespread interest in traditional cultures including Feng Shui is part of the search for alternative theories which will serve toward the betterment of the built environment. However, Hwangbo argued, there are several misconceptions that have arisen as a result of “the Western perspective” and long standing debates of the matter being “discursive, ill-informed, and seriously unbalanced” (p. 111). Obringer (2005) discussed the inclusion of Feng Shui in the Western world and stated that “at dinner parties you can hear anecdotes in which people’s distress or success are discussed with reference to yin and yang” (p. 55). Obringer further mentioned that the advent of Feng Shui in the West may reflect an attempt to “humanize architecture and landscape” (p. 62). As Feng Shui gets rooted into Western society, debates include support and skepticism about its practices, scientific justification, and validity in Western society. Blum (2004) wrote about Feng Shui as “a current fad in the West” (p. 5). The validity of Feng Shui may be under debate but its widespread application is a fair validation of its acceptance in American society.

CONCEPTS AND (MIS-)CONCEPTIONS ABOUT FENG SHUI

Gaeddert (2004) stated that Feng Shui “rife with archaic superstition” has been adopted in a simplified version as a “worldwide fad” (p. 9). Choy (2007) argued that veering away from a true understanding of Feng Shui’s core principles may be the central cause for the “increasing corruption” of Feng Shui in modern times. Although there is a lot of skepticism about Feng Shui critics wrote about the misinformation proliferated through the media or the oversimplification of an inherently complex ideology developed and refined over thousands of years. Hilts (2004) mentioned that articles, television shows and books that offer fast and simple Feng Shui suggestions for interiors promising better health and wealth, have led to incorrect choices being made based on incomplete information. This idea may be translated into the role that television plays in students’ ideas about Feng Shui in design.
CATEGORISING FENG SHUI

A question that has long consumed the Western world is whether Feng Shui may be categorised as a science, art, superstition or religion. Yoon (2007) defined it as a “highly systemised ancient Chinese system” of site selection. Nemeth (2008) opined that Feng Shui is a “systematic, interpretive art” but not an explanatory science (p. 29). Hwangbo (2002) summarised this debate stating that Feng Shui is “neither an art nor a science from the Western epistemological viewpoint”. He opined that it is “rather, an unnameable discipline, a mélange of arts and sciences which governs design issues of architecture and planning, embracing a wide range of human interests” (p. 111). Choy (2007) argued that establishing guidelines for Feng Shui practice through an understanding of its core principles will arrest the corruption of Feng Shui and its interpretation as a superstition. The debate continues and a clear, universally acceptable answer eludes a majority of the Western world. The debate about categorising Feng Shui was also formulated in a question on the survey instrument for this study.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

A study of literature on the introduction and induction of Feng Shui in Western society established the widespread incorporation of these principles in various aspects of architecture, interior design and other fields. The question raised through these studies is whether Feng Shui has become so rooted in the design profession in the United States that there is a need to incorporate studies of traditional sciences in the design curricula. The need to answer this question is further emphasised by the universal acceptance of the idea that there are prevalent misinterpretations of Feng Shui largely due to incorrect information and an oversimplification of the ideology. In that context, the guiding question for this study is: What are the opinions of interior design students in the United States about the inclusion of Feng Shui in interior design curricula?

METHODOLOGY

A survey instrument developed by the researcher was used to collect data for this study. The first part of the survey asked about demographic information. The second part of the survey included questions focused on gaining insights into participants’ opinions of and knowledge about Feng Shui. All questions were multiple-choice with a space for alternate answers and comments as necessary.

The survey was administered in August and September 2008 in three classes in the interior design programme, one graduate class, the senior design studio and the freshman design studio. Twenty students in the senior design studio were asked to participate and 16 students returned the survey. All 15 students in the freshman studio and seven out of ten students in the graduate class returned the survey. The total number of surveys returned from all participants was 38.

The data collected from the surveys was entered in a spreadsheet and analysed using percentages and frequency to identify student opinions about various aspects of Feng Shui and its incorporation in interior design practice and pedagogy in the United States.

FINDINGS

Data analysis of the surveys provided interesting insights into the opinions of interior design students as well as an understanding of their knowledge about Feng Shui. The
findings may be divided into: demographics of the participants, knowledge about Feng Shui, and opinions about Feng Shui in interior design in the United States.

**DEMOGRAPHICS OF PARTICIPANTS**

Participants in this study comprised interior design students from one programme in the Pacific Western United States. In keeping with the demographic of the department, there was only one male among the 38 participants who completed the surveys. The participants were largely between 20-30 years of age with three participants between 30-40 years old and eight participants under 20 years old. Almost 40% of the participants were Caucasian, 29% were Hispanic, 21% Asian, and others from Middle Eastern cultures.

**KNOWLEDGE OF FENG SHUI**

The survey included questions about basic information regarding Feng Shui to test participants’ knowledge about Feng Shui basics. Figure 1 illustrates the distribution of the 31 responses about the country/culture with which participants associate Feng Shui.

![Figure 1: With which country/culture do you associate Feng Shui?](image)

Only the students who mentioned hearing about Feng Shui completed the survey and answered this question. Although most students answered correctly stating that Feng Shui is associated with China several included other Eastern countries in their answers. Four out of the seven graduate students answered this question correctly which comprised a third of all correct answers in the survey. There were no significant differences between participants from the other two classes. Under the category of *Other Answers* one student answered United States and Europe.

In keeping with the ongoing debate about categorising Feng Shui this survey asked participants whether they consider it a science, art, myth, superstition, religion, tradition or another category. Figure 2 shows the distribution of answers to this question. Participants were asked to check all categories that they found applicable.
Feng Shui as an *Art* and *Tradition* received equal number of responses from participants. It is clear that a large number of participants viewed Feng Shui as a superstition and fewer interpret it as a science. The answers categorised as *Other* were described as “culture”, “a way of life”, “energy”, “designs’, and “preference of client, practice from China”.

Figure 3 indicates the distribution of responses about the field of design with which participants associate Feng Shui. Participants were asked to select all applicable fields.

Five participants selected all fields of design provided as options in the multiple-choice question. Three participants did not answer this question. None of the participants selected the option *Other*. A majority of participants selected *Interior design* which may be attributed to the demographic of the participants comprising of all interior design students. Urban planning and building construction received the fewest responses.

Figure 4 indicates the distribution of responses about the spaces where Feng Shui may be applicable. Participants were asked to select all options they found appropriate.
Three participants did not answer this question. Almost all responses included *Residential* as a space where Feng Shui is applied. Design of museums and schools received the fewest responses.

The variety of responses on questions meant to evaluate a basic understanding of Feng Shui indicates some misunderstanding and unfounded ideas about Feng Shui. This reinforces the comments in the literature about the proliferation of misinformation about Feng Shui as it becomes more widespread in Western society without sufficient understanding of its complexity and basic ideals (Hilts, 2004; Choy, 2007).

**OPINIONS ABOUT FENG SHUI IN THE U.S.**

To identify participants’ opinions about the applicability of Feng Shui in the interior design practice and pedagogy in the United States, three questions were included in the survey. Figures 5-7 indicate the distribution of responses to these questions.

Figure 5: Does Feng Shui have a place in American society?
Clearly students participating in this survey believe that Feng Shui has carved its niche in American society and during their professional careers they may be approached by clients requesting an attention to Feng Shui ideas in their projects. Most students believed that there is a need to incorporate Feng Shui in the interior design curriculum. However, almost 50% indicated that it should be an optional class.

**DISCUSSION**

The aim of this study was to identify the opinions of interior design students in the United States about the incorporation of Feng Shui in their curriculum. Through surveys in different classes at an interior design programme important insights were gained into the perceptions of students about Feng Shui. Several misconceptions about Feng Shui were uncovered including its perception as a superstition which has been the center of long standing debates in the Western world. The survey also presented the prevalence of incorrect or insufficient knowledge about Feng Shui among interior design students in the United States.

Participants of the survey agreed, in overwhelming majority, that they may be expected to apply Feng Shui principles during their practice of interior design, and that Feng Shui has found a place in American interior design. They also agreed that it is important to consider the inclusion of Feng Shui in the interior design curriculum in the United States.
to better prepare them to cater to their clients’ requests and requirements. However, most students suggested the inclusion of Feng Shui courses as electives in the programme. Further studies are required to identify the difference between opinions from students at various stages in their programme. No significant differences were found between the groups in this study but this needs further exploration with a larger sample.

The lack of fundamental knowledge about Feng Shui but acceptance that it has a place in American interior design education emerged as the important findings from this study. This idea needs further exploration in the development of curricula to fulfill the gap that this study presented.

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REFERENCES