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3 Things Matter: Location, Location and Feng Shui

By EDWARD A. GARGAN

The bristle-haired shipping tycoon chosen by Beijing to run Hong Kong when 150 years of British colonial rule fade away at the end of June was searching for a place to organize his new government. Size, location and view all mattered, of course. But more important, indeed most important, was the imprimatur of a feng shui master.

Seemingly eager to please, the colonial Government, which has been openly hostile to many of China's plans for Hong Kong, offered up a suite of offices atop one of the glitziest malls in the central business district. The leader-to-be, Tung Chee-hwa, turned them down flat.

So, Mr. Tung hustled about town, very secretly, before settling on two floors in what is called the Asia Pacific Finance Center, a mirrored semi-cylinder joined at the hip to the Citicorp tower within slingshot distance of the jaggedly angular Bank of China headquarters.

Despite the expansive views, the private elevator and the central location, Mr. Tung turned first to a master of feng shui (pronounced fung shway), the Chinese art of harmonizing people and their environment, to analyze the balance of light and dark in the offices, the orientation of windows and doors, the angle of his desk.

"Feng shui is something you cannot refuse to believe in," Mr. Tung declared after receiving the master's approval. "Only after the feng shui expert nods his head to a place do I feel comfortable."

Indeed, Mr. Tung had made it clear even before he was selected in December to be Hong Kong's first Chief Executive under Chinese rule that he would not move into Government House, the cavernous 19th-century edifice, somewhat resembling a provincial railroad station, where Gov. Chris Patten lives and works.

"I've heard that Government House is crowded and the feng shui is not good," Mr. Tung informed the gaggle of local journalists who trail him relentlessly.

Feng shui, literally "wind and water," is as central to Hong Kong's ethos as making money, eating and shopping.

Houses are built only after consultations with geomancers to insure propitious orientation with the landscape. Funerals are often scheduled, deals struck and investments made only after the seal of approval from a feng shui practitioner.

When Wellen Sham, a leading businessman, tours Hong Kong looking for sites for his new supermarkets, feng shui is at the top of the list of his concerns.

"I have a feng shui master who accompanies me when I inspect sites," Mr. Sham told The South China Morning Post. "There's always the question of feng shui."

The advice and benediction of feng shui masters are sought widely, and in virtually any situation.

One of Hong Kong's leading tycoons, Li Ka-shing, rescheduled his mother's funeral when a feng shui expert suggested a more appropriate time. And when a number of riders at Hong Kong's newly renovated Happy Valley race track tumbled from their steeds, a welter of jockeys and trainers demanded that feng shui experts be summoned to assess the track's harmony problems.

To be sure, not everyone here regards feng shui with such solemnity. For the last five years, Credit Lyonnais Securities Asia has published what it calls its Feng Shui Index, a wry and irreverent assessment of Hong Kong's prospects and opportunities for investors.

With last year's index predicting a fire at Governor Patten's home (there wasn't one), a fatal hurricane (it was among the calmest years in memory), an airplane disaster (none at all) and a dismal year on the stock market (new highs have been the rule), the index, gleaned from the wisdom of various feng shui experts, has been struggling to find its feet.

And even the best feng shui does not insure unclouded horizons. The sculptured twin glass towers owned by the Lippo Group, the Indonesian conglomerate, are deemed among the most favorably oriented in the central business district. Still, such ideal harmonies have done little to prevent a Lippo director, James Riady, from being caught in a spreading web of allegations over improper campaign contributions to the Democratic Party in the United States.

For his part, though, Mr. Tung has cast his lot with the feng shui master Choy Pak-lai. Mr. Choy, who was hired specifically by the Government to vet the offices chosen by Mr. Tung, said he was reassured by the layout of the Asia-Pacific site.

At the same time, he was troubled by the British Governor's offices, offices he urged Mr. Tung not to take over.

"Government House," said Mr. Choy, referring to Governor Patten's home and office, "was surrounded by tall buildings, which blocked its spirit."

Other feng shui experts were less sanguine about Mr. Tung's choice. Lee Chik-san, another local geomancer, was unsettled by the view of construction sites -- buildings with inauspiciously sharp triangular and rectangular shapes -- from the future Chief Executive's office.

"If the dragon cannot see his office, then he will be in trouble," cautioned Mr. Lee. In the cosmology of feng shui, it is thought that a mythical dragon reigns at the heart of Hong Kong, exerting influence over all that happens.

Mr. Patten's spokesman, Kerry McGlynn, was unruffled by suggestions that spiritual and natural forces were in disharmony at Government House.

"The feng shui can't be all that bad," Mr. McGlynn said. "When the Governor moved in, the Hang Seng stock exchange index was a bit over 6,000 points. It's now a bit over 13,000."

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