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FENG SHUI: NEW DIMENSIONS IN DESIGN

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SYNOPSIS

Is the increasingly popular decorating philosophy called *feng shui* just another way to bring beauty to your home or office? Behind the seemingly harmless facade of intricate and detailed decorating advice is a spiritual belief system based on the concepts of a universal force called *chi*, the opposing but complementary yin and yang, and the interaction of the five elements — earth, water, fire, metal, and wood. Feng shui is a system in which one uses tools of divination and complex formulas and calculations to determine how to control the flow of chi outside or inside a home or office. Harmony, balance, and peace are achieved mainly through the proper placement of objects in one's physical environment. Feng shui uses occult practices to identify lucky and unlucky areas of a home and to determine how to keep bad chi at bay while attracting good chi. Adherents of feng shui believe invisible, magical forces are tamed through occult forms of divination. Its worldview is antithetical to the biblical worldview of a supernatural, sovereign, personal God.

IS FENG SHUI JUST A NEW WAY TO DECORATE?

Feng shui (pronounced "fung shway") has come to the United States and other Western countries riding on the wave of interest, since the 1960s, in all things Eastern. Donald Trump uses feng shui, as does Merrill Lynch.¹ At the Whitney Museum of American Art's biennial exhibit, an artist selling two stone lions chose the buyer based on applications that explained potential buyers' feng shui problems.²

Feng shui is used on a regular basis in China, Tibet, Korea, Japan, Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam, Malaysia, and the Philippines,³ and increasingly by those from Asian cultures living in the West. In early 2001, Hong Kong billionaire businessman Eric Hotung decided to sell the house he had bought for \$6 million from Senator Ted Kennedy in 1997 because he thought that the house "suffer[ed] from bad feng shui."⁴

Feng shui, however, is not just for the rich and famous. Business people, merchants, home builders, real estate brokers, interior designers, corporate managers, regular home buyers, and others are paying high fees for feng shui consultants.⁵ In addition to an increasing number of books that reveal its popularity, an Internet search discloses the existence of the International Feng Shui Guild, the Feng Shui Society, The American Feng Shui Institute, the Feng Shui Network, and various courses on feng shui offered through Web sites and universities.

What is feng shui? Many believe it to be just another decorating concept. One Web site promoting feng shui says it is "about balance, comfort and harmony. Feng shui is not a religion or a mystical belief. Rather, it is a science that offers the ability to create a balance in your dwelling or place of work."⁶ One

“how to” book says, “This Chinese art of harmonious placement is largely common sense and good design.”⁷ Beneath the veneer of this ancient art, however, are concepts that go far beyond common sense decorating advice.

Feng (“wind”) shui (“water”) originated within the context of Chinese Taoism. It is an intricate system designed to harness the flow of an invisible universal force called *chi* (pronounced “chee,” also spelled *qi*, *ki*, or *ch’i*) in order to maximize its benefits. The chi in one’s physical surroundings, in concert with yin and yang energies and the five elements (earth, water, fire, metal, and wood), is thought to be affected by the characteristics and placement of physical objects: “The skill of a Feng Shui consultant lies in recognising where chi is flowing freely, where it is trapped and stagnant, or where it may be excessive. The work of an occupier is to create space for chi to flow and activate the opportunities that may be frustrated by obstacles.”⁸

Another definition calls feng shui an “ancient and complex Chinese art that combines mysticism, science, and superstition to determine health, luck, and prosperity according to natural landscapes and the placement of dwellings, buildings, and graves....Its fundamental concept is that in order to be healthy and prosper, one must be in harmony with the earth and receive the benefit of ch’i, the universal life principle, which exists in all things and flows through the earth and nature.”⁹

Other definitions also indicate its basis in Taoist philosophy: “Feng Shui is the science of divining Yin and Yang in one’s immediate environment.”¹⁰ Feng shui is “terrestrial divination,” used to “discover how energy flows in the land and to live in harmony with it”; it is the oldest form of Taoist divination.¹¹

THE KEY IS CHI

Central to feng shui is the concept of chi, which is believed to be the force that permeates every aspect of the universe. Chinese philosophers Lao Tzu, Confucius, Mencius, and others developed this concept between the sixth and fourth centuries B.C., which they considered to be “the source of vitality, harmony, creativity, and moral courage.”¹² Also known as the dragon’s breath, chi is called the “life and breath of the universe.”¹³ Chi is similar to *prana* (the divine breath in Hindu philosophy) in India, an energy “upon which all things depend for health and life.”¹⁴

This energy is also known as bioenergy, vital energy, vital force, universal life force, the creative force, and the life force. “Just as acupuncture, chakra balancing or shiatsu massage can adjust the flow of energy in the body, so can feng shui adjust the flow of energy around us.”¹⁵ The chi must flow “not too quickly and not too slowly” and will stagnate or become destructive if it is blocked.¹⁶ The Taoist belief teaches that good health results from the harmonious flow of chi in one’s body; likewise, feng shui seeks to get the chi flowing around and throughout buildings and gardens so that harmony, power, romance, and/or success will result.¹⁷ The yin and yang components of chi “must be in balance” as well.¹⁸ The literal translation of yin and yang is “shade” and “light,”¹⁹ but it can also refer to other opposing but complimentary pairs such as female and male or sour and sweet.

In Chinese cosmology, the relationship between heaven, earth, and humanity is paramount. This is reflected in the various categories of chi: heaven chi, earth chi, and human chi, which are each subdivided. Human chi, for example, includes social chi and personal chi, which are each further subdivided.²⁰

Another belief about chi is that certain things can attract positive energy, *sheng chi*, which moves along curved lines, or negative energy, *sha chi*, which “strikes quickly in straight lines.”²¹ Straight pathways and other designs that form a straight line are therefore to be avoided.

Universal life energy is also linked in many cultures to supernormal powers and sorcery. Tantric yoga, for example, cultivates the flow of prana in order to raise psychic powers, prana being the source of Hindu magic.²² In alchemy, this universal force is called *spiritus*; the occult kabbalah terms it *astral light*; and hypnotist Franz Mesmer called it *magnetic fluid*.²³ The chi is also claimed as the source of power for levitation and other occult feats.²⁴

BACKGROUND AND HISTORY

It is believed feng shui probably emerged in the second century B.C.²⁵ Originally used as a method of “divining” where to dig graves, feng shui developed into a way to discover where to build homes and cities.²⁶ Buddhism absorbed feng shui soon after it migrated into China in about the first century A.D. and built its temples according to feng shui principles.²⁷ Rosemary Guiley, a writer on the occult and the paranormal, gives three roots of feng shui: the religion of Taoism; divination practices “based on patterns in nature”; and astrology, numerology, and other methods used to determine the placement of things, a crucial aspect of Chinese beliefs.²⁸ Early feng shui masters were priests and holy men who passed on its principles orally.²⁹

The Tao, the Trigrams, and Reading Patterns

Feng shui was seen as a study of “the way of heaven and earth in relation to humans” so that one can choose a life and place to live that harmonizes with our *ren tao*, which is “the way of being human.”³⁰ The Taoist relationship between heaven, earth, and man is referred to as “the three gifts,” which is represented graphically by eight different combinations of three parallel unbroken and broken lines called trigrams. These trigrams, which are often carved on coins, are the basis of the complex I Ching, an ancient book containing 64 hexagrams used as a tool of divination. The I Ching is based on the Taoist method of reading patterns of change in the universe.³¹ One article says, “The root of all ancient Chinese science, symbolically and energetically, balances Man, in perfect harmony between Heaven and Earth, as defined by the workings of nature and graphically represented by the trigrams.”³²

The trigrams are also related to the yin and yang energies, which must be balanced in feng shui. The Tao is the state of stillness from which all things originate; from that comes the constant change (called *t'ai-chi*) and interchange between the yin and yang energies, from creation to dissolution.³³ Yin and yang, in a complex pattern, generate the trigrams or *pakua*, which are illustrations of the moving yin and yang energies.³⁴ Feng shui seems to have arisen out of a desire for harmony between the elements, nature, and man in order to prevent disaster and keep evil at bay in a world full of the unexpected.

THE TOOLS OF FENG SHUI

A feng shui consultant must take many things into account: how the chi is flowing in a house, the shape of the land and house, the directions the rooms face, the location of the rooms, the decor of the home, and the landscaping of the yard/garden.³⁵ They are also factored in with yin and yang, along with the five elements of water, earth, fire, metal, and wood.³⁶ Feng shui practice can include traditional feng shui, modern interpretations of feng shui, geomancy, dowsing, space clearing, and astrology.³⁷

Form and Compass Schools

Around the fourth century A.D., feng shui split into two schools, one based on landscape contours and the other based on the use of a “cosmic compass to chart astrological factors, *I Ching* hexagrams, the Five Phases, and other elements,” with further “metaphysical” elements added around the eleventh century.³⁸ The former school became known as the Form School and the latter became the Compass School.

The Form School depends on intuitive insight and emphasizes the shape and contours of the area.³⁹ The Form School might advocate that a small river should be in front of the house, that there should be an open view of the sky, and that the most used door of the dwelling should have “auspicious decors,” which are Chinese characters containing “auspicious meanings.”⁴⁰ The four mythical animals — the red bird, the black tortoise, the blue dragon, and the white tiger — are to be placed symbolically in the front and the back and to the left and the right of the desired location. This can be done with landscape shapes, colors, and/or statues. The black tortoise, for example, is ideally a hill at the back of the building.⁴¹

The intricate approach of the Compass School, based on a view of the flow of chi as well as the earth's magnetic effects and fields, uses the trigrams of the I Ching, which are subdivided into 64 hexagrams.⁴²

The elements of the compass method are based on Chinese numerology “that identifies lucky and unlucky corners of a building according to specific numerical calculations.”⁴³ Particular colors are also associated with the compass points.⁴⁴

Lucky Corners and Magic Squares

Within the Compass School, the most popular tool is an octagonal grid called a *bagua*, which shows the eight basic directions of the compass. These directions are known as *guas* (categorized according to birth time), which can also be called the Nine Palaces (eight directions plus the center).⁴⁵ This process detects the lucky and unlucky areas of the house.⁴⁶ The eight directions include four that are positive (stimulation, success, content, calm) and four that are negative (depression, loneliness, weakness, destructiveness).⁴⁷ The eight directions also correspond to the eight trigrams. Using your birth date and time, you can generate a chart of your eight *guas* to reveal in which of the eight directions each of the positive and negative forces abide.⁴⁸

The eight directions can also be depicted in a square shape called the *Luo-shu* (or *Lo Shu*) or magic square.⁴⁹ According to legend, the magic square appeared on the back of a turtle 4,000 years ago.⁵⁰ The square, which is comprised of numbers that add up to 15 in any direction, became part of Taoist magical practice.⁵¹

The compass method, for example, may result in the north being “calm,” the southeast “destructive,” the south “weak,” and the west “content.”⁵² Contemporary feng shui uses names for these directions that are more palatable to the modern consumer, such as prosperity, fame, relationships, creative energy, travel and helpful people, career, knowledge, and family and health.⁵³

One feng shui book gives a formula for calculating one’s *mingua* (destiny number). It determines which direction and which of the five elements are luckiest — information that can be applied in the eight directional formula.⁵⁴ What if more than one person lives in the house? Traditionally, the number of the “breadwinner” is used, although each person or breadwinner can use different areas of the house.⁵⁵ Conflicts can be modified with the use of colors and objects related to each person’s element, whether it be wood, fire, earth, metal, and water.⁵⁶ Another source, however, suggests that mathematical calculations based on birth times are in order for more than one person in a residence, stating that a total of 64 combinations applies to just two people!⁵⁷

A COMPLEX TASK

Some of the advice seems to be mere common sense, such as ensuring that dining chairs are comfortable, having a warm fire in a cold room, and balancing the shapes and sizes of plants.⁵⁸ It can be difficult, however, to find much that is based only on aesthetic principles; virtually all of the advice is based on the flow of chi, or the balance of yin and yang, or the directions and elements. Here are some examples:

- The stove should be positioned toward the east and southeast of the kitchen because that is the direction for the wood element.
- Flushing the toilet with the lid open increases the chances that “your money will go, too.”
- Cover your computer screen at night if it is in a bedroom so it won’t “act as a mirror and disturb your spirit” in sleep.
- Hang curtains at the bottom of stairs or put a mirror on the landing to draw chi up so that chi does not flow down and out the door.
- To help chi rise up the stairs, put plants under the stairs or hang art that is “light and bright.”
- Because the kitchen is the money room, cooking on all burners with a variety of food will help bring in money.
- Use crystals to draw in chi.

- A home's front door should be simple and practical and face the sun so that it will attract "fame, fortune, and longevity."
- Don't have the foot of your bed in line with the door; the bed's head should be on the north/south axis to be "in line with the magnetic energy of the earth."
- A pointed roof (associated with fire) against a curved roof shape (associated with metal) is destructive since fire melts metal.⁵⁹

Feng shui expert Lillian Too suggests that one should use both Form and Compass methods because no matter how good the Compass method might work out, if "harmful configurations" are in the landscape, good feng shui cannot be achieved.⁶⁰ The practice of feng shui, moreover, requires "constant adaptation" because of the continual changes of "the intangible forces," whether manmade or caused by nature.⁶¹

Dangers and Remedies

Dangers to avoid include the destructive cycle of the five elements and the imbalance of yin and yang. The five elements — earth, water, fire, metal, and wood — can be in productive or destructive relationships with each other.⁶² If you are born in an earth year, for example, it is not good to have many plants since wood (which corresponds to plants) destroys earth, but having bright or red decor (corresponding to fire) is good since fire produces earth.⁶³ If the yin and yang are not balanced, "they can become fierce and threatening," creating an "obnoxious and poisonous" chi, which will bring "misfortune and ill luck" to the residents.⁶⁴

While there are medicines for an illness, there are also specialized remedies and cures for problematic chi. Mirrors are often used to deflect negative chi, and wind chimes, plants, and hexagrams are used to attract chi through more beneficial channels.⁶⁵ Convex mirrors will diffuse negative chi, for example, while a concave mirror will attract and absorb beneficial chi.⁶⁶ An exorcism ceremony called the *Tun Fu* supposedly purges a building of spirits left from previous occupants.⁶⁷

Even if you get your house in proper feng shui shape, you must consider the feng shui of the grave sites of your parents and other ancestors as crucial since feng shui also determines the luck for descendants.⁶⁸

THE BURDEN OF FENG SHUI

Following feng shui can be a tedious process resulting in restrictions on how to landscape, build, and decorate. The rules and techniques vary from school to school and from source to source. Using feng shui can be difficult if one wishes to calculate for more than one person living in the same house. It would be tempting to pay money for an expert because of the complex and often confusing minutiae of feng shui.

There are deeper reasons to question the use of feng shui: First, feng shui is based on a worldview steeped in beliefs of luck, destiny, the chi, and in divinatory tools such as the I Ching. For some people, such a system would be rejected as superstition or nonsense; for others, it might be appealing. At the very least, however, it seems burdensome to be limited by the idea that one area of the house is one's "lucky" spot. It seems oppressive to follow a myriad of rules on where to put mirrors, how many chairs to have, what direction the bed should face, or how to fix areas where the chi is supposedly blocked or stagnant. If one were to believe a certain area was a place of smooth flowing chi, for example, would not he (or she) interpret good things in that area as a result of good chi? Does he really want to believe a tank with goldfish will bring in money?⁶⁹ What will he do if his parents' graves end up in locations with bad feng shui? The mind is very suggestible, and feng shui seems a perfect system to put one in psychological bondage to the design and décor of one's home.

Second, there is the question of the chi. What is it, exactly? Where did it come from and who is directing it? How does a straight sidewalk to one's front door attract negative chi and allow for possible disaster? One practitioner advises that since the back door represents "indirect opportunities," it would be good to have large glass doors there, which will "invite the qi to bring peace and harmony into your home — and then allow it to leave as it pleases."⁷⁰ How can a force bring peace and harmony? How can a force "leave

as it pleases"? This implies a mind with a will. Does chi think? How does a force *choose* to leave? Chi would have to have (or be) a mind if it can prefer to leave rather than stay, but then it wouldn't be merely a force. Chi is either a figment of legend and imagination, or a force with unknown attributes that can't choose anything, or a living entity with a will that can bring you luck or disaster. One should ponder whether he or she can be comfortable with any of these options becoming the center of his or her hope for life, health, and peace.

CHRISTIAN RESPONSE

The worldview behind feng shui is at odds with the belief in a sovereign God. There is no force called luck in the Christian worldview. To believe in luck is to believe one is favored or not favored by benevolent and/or malevolent forces or gods (which, biblically, do not exist), rather than trusting the sovereign God who "causes all things to work together for good...to those who are called according to His purpose" (Rom. 8:28 NASB).

Principles of the I Ching, a divinatory tool, are used in feng shui. Feng shui itself is a form of divination based on Taoist philosophy. Divination, however, is strongly forbidden in Deuteronomy 18:10-12 and other passages such as 2 Kings 17:17; 21:6; and Acts 16:16-18 (some translations may use the term "soothsaying" instead of "divination").

Feng shui operates entirely on the principles of chi and balancing yin and yang energies. To accept chi, one must ignore the personal Christian God and instead trust an impersonal force, but there is no biblical evidence for an impersonal life force permeating the universe. To seek harmony through a balance of yin and yang energies, moreover, is at odds with trusting Christ, and with the peace we have through Christ. It is entirely inconsistent with Christianity to believe that harmony and balance result from the manipulation and channeling of nonphysical forces or energies, or that such can be done by means of the proper placement of physical objects. Such techniques, in fact, belong to the world of sorcery.

Nonbiblical, New Age ideas are also found in some feng shui recommendations. One author, for example, gives instructions for meeting "the Spirit of your home," which could be a person, an animal, a voice, or a mere presence.⁷¹ One can also chant the Hindu sacred sound of "Om" and visualize its symbol in order to implant the symbol's energy into the atmosphere.⁷² Another practitioner recommends clearing the space in your home through a ritual involving physical cleaning, a purification ceremony, invoking positive energy, and preserving the clean energy through the placement of a quartz crystal.⁷³

Some feng shui advice can result in beautiful surroundings, but one can design a pleasing environment without using feng shui at all. One need only rely on common sense, personal likes and dislikes, and artistic sensibilities.

Consider what feng shui expert Lillian Too said about her visit to a Buddhist monastery in Nepal: "Below us is the sprawling valley that makes up the 'bright hall', where auspicious and favourable chi settles and accumulates before making its way up the meandering road to the monastery."⁷⁴ If this monastery is without the light of Christ, however, what good is the "favorable chi"? Christians have something much better to offer the world than a method for manipulating supposed impersonal forces to bring harmony and peace. They have a personal Savior, Jesus Christ, who gives a perfect and permanent peace totally unlike anything that can be offered or found in this world (John 14:27).

NOTES

1. Ajay Singh, "Luck Be a Stone Lion," *Time*, 3 July 2000, 53.
2. Ibid.
3. Rosemary Guiley, *Harper's Encyclopedia of Mystical and Paranormal Experience* (Edison, NJ: Castle Books, 1991), 201.
4. Gary Trudeau, Names and Faces, *Washington Post*, 13 January 2001, sec. C-3.
5. Singh; Douglas Hanks III, "Feng Shui for Builders," *Miami Herald*, 22 August 2002, <http://www.miami.com/mld/miamiherald/3911456.htm>; Andrew Yui, "Feng Shui Captivates Canadians at Home and at Work," *International Market News*, 26 September 2002, <http://www.tdctrade.com/imn/02092604/marketrends048.htm>; Lisa Heyamoto, "Feng Shui: Positive Spaces Aid Office Energy," *Seattle Times*, 12 November 2002, <http://seattletimes.nwsourc.com/>

- html/business/technology/134574297_fengshui12.html; Jeannine Athens, "Bringing Harmony into Your Home," *Gary (Indiana), Post Tribune*, 12 March 2000, accessed online at http://www.veramarie.bizland.com/news_fengshui/news%20harmony.htm.
6. "Why Feng Shui?" at http://www.168fengshui.com/Articles/Why_Feng_Shui.htm.
 7. Belinda Henwood, with consultant Howard Choy, *Feng Shui: How to Create Harmony and Balance in Your Living and Working Environment* (Pownal, VT: Storey Books, 1999), inside front cover.
 8. "The Practical Applications of Feng Shui," www.fengshuisociety.org.uk/home/index.html.
 9. Guiley, 200.
 10. Lillian Too, *The Complete Illustrated Guide to Feng Shui* (Boston: Element Books, 1996), 54.
 11. Eva Wong, *The Shambhala Guide to Taoism* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1997), 137, 141. Divination is acquiring information or determining what to do by reading meaning into ordinary patterns of nature, or by going outside the five senses via a spiritual or occult channel such as spirit contact, or by using a divinatory tool such as a pendulum. Examples of divination are astrology, palmistry, numerology, tarot cards, tea leaf reading, and the I Ching.
 12. Guiley, 627.
 13. Too, 51, 68.
 14. Guiley, 626.
 15. Henwood, 6.
 16. Ibid.
 17. Wong, 137–38.
 18. Guiley, 200, 627.
 19. Wong, 126.
 20. Henwood, 6.
 21. Ibid. See also Guiley, 201.
 22. Guiley, 627.
 23. Ibid., 626.
 24. Ibid., 327.
 25. Guiley, 201.
 26. www.fengshui.co.uk/FengShuiHistory.htm; www.grabawish.com/history.htm; <http://religiousmovements.lib.virginia.edu/nrms/fengshui.html>.
 27. www.fengshuihelp.com/ichingfengshui.htm.
 28. Guiley, 201.
 29. Ibid.
 30. Henwood, 8.
 31. Ibid., 8, 12; Too, 74; Wong, 126, 133. The I Ching is also referred to as *The Book of Changes*.
 32. Jami Lin, "The Human Factor in Feng Shui," http://www.fengshuiguild.com/FSQhuman_factor.htm.
 33. Wong, 124–25.
 34. Ibid., 126.
 35. Henwood, 5.
 36. Too, 50.
 37. "Feng Shui Strands," www.fengshuisociety.org.uk/home/index.htm. Geomancy is the use of the earth for divination, and dowsing is divination using a stick or rod. Space clearing is purifying the atmosphere of a building through special rituals.
 38. Guiley, 201.
 39. Henwood, 12.
 40. www.fengshuihelp.com/entrance.htm.
 41. Henwood, 15.
 42. Wong, 126.
 43. Too, 64.
 44. Henwood, 56.
 45. Too, 72; Wong, 130, 139.
 46. Henwood, 56.
 47. www.fengshuihelp.com/8direction.htm.
 48. "Finding Your Own Trigram and Directions," <http://www.168fengshui.com/Articles/birthdates.htm>.
 49. Henwood, 12–13.
 50. Too, 84.
 51. Ibid., 85; Wong, 130.
 52. www.fengshuihelp.com/8direction.htm.
 53. Henwood, 62.
 54. Ibid., 64–67.
 55. Ibid., 67.
 56. Ibid.
 57. www.fengshuihelp.com/tipofwk.htm.
 58. Henwood, 31, 42, 45.
 59. Ibid., 22, 27, 33, 35, 36, 41, 57, 72; Athens.
 60. Too, 63.
 61. Ibid., 53.

62. Ibid., 70; Wong, 131. The productive cycle is fire, earth, metal, water, and wood, while the destructive cycle is wood, earth, water, fire, and metal.
63. Ibid.
64. Ibid., 54.
65. Guiley, 201–2.
66. Henwood, 60.
67. Ibid., 202.
68. Henry B. Lin, *The Art and Science of Feng Shui* (St. Paul, MN: Llewellyn Publications, 2000), chap. 3; Too, 73; Wong, 138.
69. Henwood, 50.
70. Ibid., 40.
71. Denise Linn, *Feng Shui for the Soul* (Carlsbad, CA: Hay House, 1999), 74.
72. Ibid., 142.
73. Denise Linn, "Space Clearing," <http://www.fengshuiguild.com/dlinn.html>.
74. Chris Burgess, "In the Pure Land with Lillian Too," http://bne006i.webcentral.com.au/INETUCRID_1041629963_1878_29638/catalogue/adyar/lilliantoo.htm.

Feng shui, which originated within the context of Chinese Taoism, is an intricate process of how to manipulate and harmonize the flow of the invisible universal life force, the chi in one's physical surroundings, in concert with yin and yang. In California, New York City, Washington, DC, and other populous areas, businessmen, merchants, real estate brokers, and others are paying high fees for Feng Shui consultants. Donald Trump uses feng shui, as does Merrill Lynch (Ajay Singh, "Luck Be A Stone Lion," Time Magazine, 3 July 2000, 53). At the Whitney Museum of American Art's biennial exhibit, the artist behind two stone lions for sale chose the buyer based on applications explaining the applicants' feng shui problems (Ibid).