

IDEAS

## How to Keep the Dragons Happy

*The Chinese art of feng shui can ensure a prosperous building*

Once erected, the Bank of China's new tower in Hong Kong will twist 70 stories upward like a megalomaniac Rubik's Cube. Its four triangular shafts will anchor their glassy rhomboids to a square base graced with traditional Chinese motifs. Designed for Peking's state bank by famed U.S. Architect I.M. Pei, the \$128 million building is a Communist bow to Hong Kong's modern, money-chasing spirit. But the Communist bankers made one major blunder: they forgot to consult the masters of *feng shui* (pronounced fung shway). As a result, a hex could fall on the tower's capitalist neighbors.

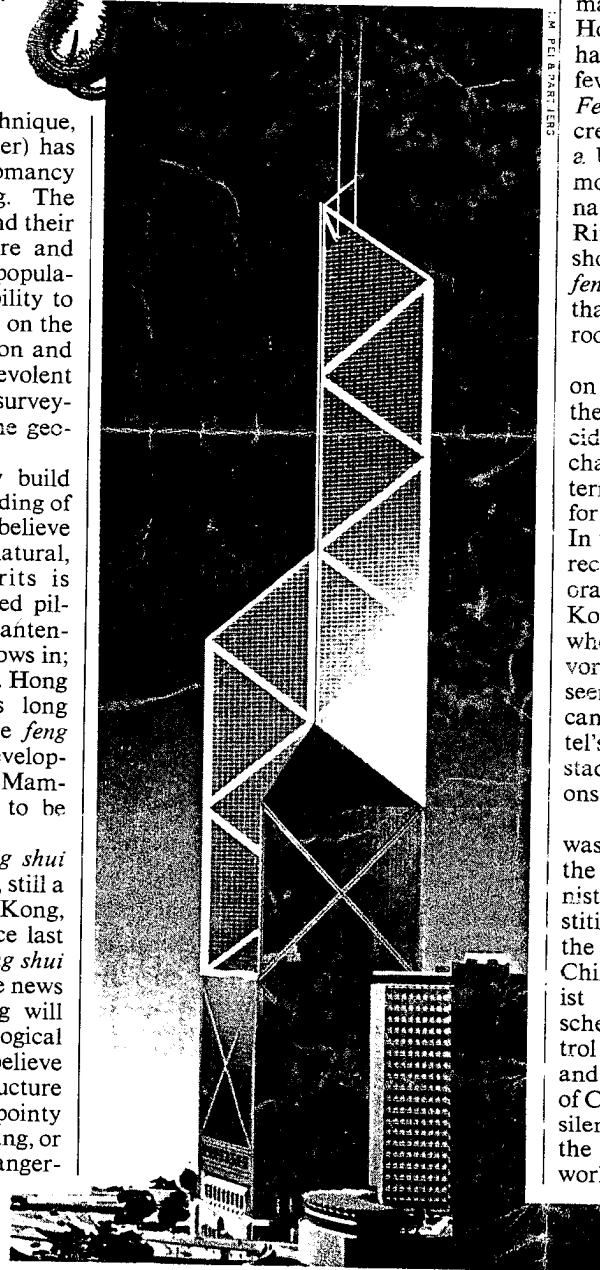
Invented more than 2,000 years ago in China as a quasiscientific land-surveying technique, *feng shui* (literally, wind and water) has evolved into an esoteric mix of geomancy and architectural fortune-telling. The *feng shui* masters in Hong Kong and their counterparts in Taiwan, Singapore and other places with large Chinese populations can measure a building's ability to attract riches and prosperity based on the structure's shape, direction, location and the presence or absence of benevolent dragons in the area. Even with a surveying charge of \$12.50 per sq. ft., the geomancers are in great demand.

People in Hong Kong rarely build without first getting a *feng shui* reading of architectural plans. Merchants believe business failures occur when the natural, harmonious movement of spirits is thrown into confusion by misplaced pillars, tables, windows or television antennas. With good *feng shui*, money flows in; with bad *feng shui* money flows out. Hong Kong's colonial government has long compensated rural villagers whose *feng shui* has been disrupted by land development. Together with the worship of Mamon, belief in *feng shui* appears to be Hong Kong's dominant religion.

Without the approval of a *feng shui* master, the Bank of China building, still a hole in the ground in central Hong Kong, is off to an inauspicious start. Since last month a number of preliminary *feng shui* studies have begun, and much of the news was not good. While the building will stand on the most propitious geological line in the colony, some masters believe the triangular elements of the structure spell bad luck. Reason: the acute, pointy edges would slice through the yin-yang, or cosmic balance, thus pricking and angering unwary spirits, who would then direct their anger at buildings toward which the triangles pointed. Though the unauthorized *feng shui* readings seem to indicate that the Bank of China would gain at the

expense of others, the psychic note of aggression was far from the comradeship Peking hoped to project. The building, in short, would anger not only the spirits but the neighbors.

Most Hong Kong enterprises avoid such bad vibrations by contracting with a *feng shui* master while their buildings are still in the planning stage. The ultramodern \$650 million Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank building, which the Bank of China tower would rival for dominance of the city's skyline, prudently had its blueprints vetted by *feng shui* experts. For a



Enter the geomancers: I.M. Pei's design for the Bank of China

*A Communist bow to capitalism or a hex on the neighbors?*

fee of several thousand dollars, a *feng shui* master advised moving a bank officer's door away from a nearby escalator to preserve the delicate yin-yang. Management, mindful of the *feng shui* faith of the Hong Kong Chinese, the bank's main customers, complied. In Singapore, which is 76% Chinese, the newly completed Hyatt Regency was suffering from a lack of business in 1971 when a *feng shui* master advised that the hotel's fountain and façade be remodeled to rid the hotel of unhappy spirits and lure back Chinese guests discouraged by stories of its bad *feng shui*. The occupancy rate is now said to be gratifyingly higher.

Alluding to the sometimes bizarre recommendations of *feng shui* masters, an ancient Chinese proverb states, "If you invite a geomancer into your house, you may as well start packing to move now." Hong Kong's Exchange Square building has managed to remain on its site—with a few strategic revisions. During his survey, *Feng Shui* Master Chung Ying-Mei decreed that the structure's base must form a U shape, which he claimed was much more receptive to the good fortune emanating from the bay. Architect Remo Riva complied. Says Riva: "He said we should also put up an antenna to channel *feng shui* waves into the building. Barring that, he suggested we put a hole in the roof." The building now has a skylight.

Labor relations are heavily dependent on *feng shui*. "If we didn't go along with the local staff's beliefs, they might just decide to stay at home one day," says Michael Mathews, vice president of the international sales and marketing division for Hong Kong's glittering Regent Hotel. In the Regent's case, the *feng shui* master recommended that the hotel set up a panoramic picture window facing Hong Kong Harbor to allow the nine dragons who live nearby to have access to their favorite bathing spot on the bay. Dragons, it seems, do not know how to use doors but can easily pass through glass. Says the hotel's public relations chief, Lynn Grebstadt: "No one wants nine irritated dragons stranded in the lobby."

Though the location of Peking itself was fixed by classic *feng shui* masters of the 13th century, the Chinese Communists have condemned the art as "superstition," severely limiting its practice on the mainland. That may yet undermine China's attempt to assimilate the capitalist spirits of Hong Kong, which is scheduled to come under Peking's control in 1997. Thus local businessmen and ordinary citizens regard the Bank of China's *feng shui* dilemma with a polite silence, avoiding any embarrassment to the People's Republic. Meanwhile, as work proceeds on the unlucky building, the Communists have refrained from commenting on its future. The dragons are not talking either.

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