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Start with welfare for better service

Letter from MATTHEW CHUA

I REFER to the report "Singapore's service slip-up" (Nov 9). It is of no surprise that our service ranking has dropped to 26th place in terms of customer service in the Global Competitiveness Report.

Just take a look at the retail staff at our IT Malls Funan and Sim Lim Square. They are underpaid and overworked. The manpower law states that each employee earning less than \$1,600 per month (excludes overtime, bonus, allowances and so on) should work no longer than 44 hours per week.

But, from what I understand, these employees are working at least 60 hours per week, even though long hours would reduce productivity and level of service.

Many of them also work on a commission basis and hence are inclined to only close the sale and ignore the other aspects of customer service – for example, after-sales service.

I once asked a shop in Sim Lim about the working hours of their staff. Their answer was simple: "Not happy, work somewhere else".

I believe one of the ways to increase our level of service is to have the Ministry of Manpower enforce the Employment act strictly making sure that these retail staff are not taken advantaged of.

By looking after the welfare of staff in terms of working hours and pay, morale will increase and also raise the service standards in Singapore.

Voices

The gongfu scientist

She says there is no inconsistency between *fengshui* and western science



WHAT – or rather, who – do a biomedical research scientist, a gongfu instructor and a fengshui master have in common?

In the case of Ms Yap Hwee Boon, they are three persons in one. Malaysian-born Boon Yap (as she is affectionately known) may run her own biomedical consultancy and hold two Masters degrees, but as the daughter of fengshui and martial arts grand master Yap Cheng Hai, she hasn't left family tradition behind.

She shares her dad's vision of making classical fengshui easily accessible to the Western world. In Singapore for the 3rd International Feng Shui Convention, she tells MICHAEL WEE about how Eastern and Western science can come together in harmony.

How has your father influenced you?

I grew up in a male-dominated environment, living with my father and my three brothers, so that made me very much a tomboy – perhaps this is why I picked *wushu* instead of ballet!

My father was fun but strict. He made us learn *wushu* from a young age also because of health reasons, as my two older brothers had asthma. *Fengshui* was part of our life: Father was always working on the house, changing something here and there, and moving our beds around. It's a way of life that's stuck with me since childhood.

When did you decide, like your dad, to go professional with *fengshui*?

When I had more free time after my studies, I decided to pursue fengshui more deeply and naturally, friends started asking me to assess their houses' *fengshui* and things like that. It was the same way my father started out. But he also taught me that there needed to be an



POSITIVE ENERGY: Ms Yap Hwee Boon was in town for the Third International Feng Shui Convention earlier this week.

exchange of energies. You see, with *fengshui*, you're influencing people's luck and you need something in return or you'll lose out ...

In today's society, money of course is a strong currency of energy.

You started training in Shaolin gongfu at age four. Was it tough?

(Laughs) It was only tough under my father, not with other instructors. He would say, "The way you hold your staff, people know you can't fight" – and you knew you were finished. But it gives you discipline, which is useful in other aspects of life.

You're also an accomplished artist and pianist, and you enjoy travelling and scuba-diving. Why such diverse interests?

My father made me go for all sorts of lessons. Many of the teachers were my father's *wushu* friends or masters. My father gave me more opportunities than I could ask for, ours being a lower-middle-income family. He wanted us to enjoy the opportunities he never had, and I didn't want to waste it.

Also, growing up with my brothers, we went swimming in tin mines, cycling and other

outdoor activities, so it gave me a taste for adventure of that sort.

Your father must have jumped at your decision to study science.

I actually wanted to be a naturalist – a David Attenborough, a Jane Goodall! But I guess my father's main concern was for me to get a job. I knew I had to be practical because in Malaysia, you couldn't get a job as a zoologist or a naturalist, observing monkeys everyday.

Biomedical science was a practical compromise. I did have some fights with my dad. When I was going to Australia for my graduate studies, he didn't let me apply for biological science, but applied science, which was more career-oriented. When I got to Australia, I move to biological science. I'm glad my father accepted my decision when I phoned him and told him that was what I really wanted to study.

Are Western science and *fengshui* truly incompatible?

I don't think there's any inconsistency between science and *fengshui* at all. It's just that *fengshui* acts on intangible energy and science can't explain or measure *qi*. It's wrong to say

fengshui is unscientific as, to me, science is about formulated, systematic knowledge attained via empirical means – that is, experimentation, observations, so on. *Fengshui* knowledge has been attained through 5,000 years of observation and recording – 5,000 years of empirical evidence!

The problem is that unlike the experiments we carry out in labs, in *fengshui* there are too many unknown and uncontrollable variables as *fengshui* deals with nature.

Has your knowledge of science helped you connect to your Western audiences on *fengshui*?

Yes, I think I'm able to bridge East and West because I've lived in both worlds. My science training has taught me to be logical and analytical and, in another way, it has given me credibility in the West. For people who think *fengshui* is a sort of superstition, they start getting curious as to why a practising scientist is talking about *fengshui*, and it makes them think twice about any preconceptions they have.

How is *fengshui* picking up in the West?

It's becoming more popular. There has always been a fascination with the East, but people are also often dissatisfied with that the West has to offer, so they're looking to the East for something beneficial to their lives.

What motivates your work in biomedical science and *fengshui*?

I feel a sense of satisfaction when I'm able to help people with my knowledge of both biomedical science and *fengshui*.

For example, if friends have problems, most of us would only be able to empathise. But I'm able to see if their problems are perhaps related to *fengshui* – and then I can do something.

Same goes for biomedical science. I'm involved in developing incredible life-saving devices. One was a stem-cell machine that gives children who otherwise would have died young a chance to live longer.

Both these fields are life-giving and fulfilling.