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City & Country: Grandmaster of feng shui

In the world of feng shui, Yap Cheng Hai is a name that requires little introduction.

Grandmaster Yap, as he is known in feng shui circles locally and abroad, has been a practitioner, consultant and teacher of geomancy decades before it became better known to the wider world.

For more than half a century, he has been offering feng shui solutions and executing them for an illustrious clientele comprising the who's who in town - from top politicians and business tycoons to celebrities - as well as to those of more modest circumstances.

In the man himself, one can glimpse the intrigue of this ancient Chinese science. The intensity of his stare can be unnerving when he so chooses and he exhibits a dry sense of humour, cracking jokes at every opportunity. But beyond this is an unmistakable sense of inner strength and determination.

There is a certain aura about Yap that is impossible to ignore, something which tells you that there's more to him than meets the eye.

The 76-year-old is fit as a fiddle, with healthy flushed cheeks and a physique honed by regular kung fu practice.

He says he knows 12 types of kung fu and nods gently but affirmatively when asked whether he practises often. Where?

"Everywhere and anywhere. Even now," he declares as he points to his abdomen. Hmm... Do I see slight movements?

The grandmaster is prepared to listen to your questions, but be prepared to receive questions in reply. His answers are often followed by a "do you get it?"

"I enjoy life," he declares to City & Country. And it shows in his passion - and there are many.

"I love music. All brands. Which singer do I like? It does not matter. From classical to pop. Who cares who's the singer or group? As long as it's good music..."

He's crazy about paintings as well. "I collect originals, Van Gogh, I never fail to visit the Louvre whenever I am in Paris. I have just come back from a visit there."

And there's more. "I love photography, I have a collection of cameras [20 video cameras and cameras to be exact]. Eight of the cameras are Leicas. I am a Gemini - I like anything, I enjoy life," he repeats.

"I am not the richest man on earth. But how can I help people to be happy and enjoy life if I don't enjoy life myself?" he chuckles. He is an entertainer when he so chooses and in his face, some see a resemblance to the Laughing Buddha, Matrieya. I spot a huge blue sapphire ring encased in sparkling diamonds on his finger. Is that a gift from one of his clients?

"Bulls**t," he almost roars. "I bought that. I have 45 rings!"

Welcome to the world of Yap Cheng Hai. A landscape that spans beyond mountains, rivers, qi, poison arrows and pakua. And experiences and encounters that'll send chills down your spine - like something out of Ripley's Believe It or Not. Take the following episode, in Yap's own words.

Yap's mummy friend in London

The year: 1975. Place: British Museum. Time: almost 5pm.

"I was in London to enroll my son into college. That day, my friend Chin [who holds a doctorate] and I popped over to the museum. Before I entered the mummy display room, I sent out a telepathic message - please communicate with me, whoever, whatever"

"Somehow, I was drawn to an exhibit at the other end of the huge hall. Without the benefit of its inscription, I could, to the amazement of Chin, rattle off details of the mummy - he was about 3,000 years old, a temple caretaker who died when he was just 19 or 20 years old.

"By then, it was closing time, Chin and I walked towards the exit and both of us felt a strange gush of cold air behind us - my newfound friend was ushering us out! My friend - Chin, that is - shuddered.

"The following year, I went back to the museum, this time alone. I looked up my 'friend' and we 'chatted'. I asked him about his looks and before I knew it, I started walking away from him, took two turns to the left and then bingo, in front of me was an upright coffin cover with the carved image of his face! He was quite handsome, actually.

"I have since gone back several times - each time I'm in London. On my last trip, my 'friend' was no longer there! I 'asked' him where he was and he responded - from the cellar. The museum authorities obviously rotate its exhibits."

How it all started

With the benefit of hindsight, it is clear that Yap, from a tender age, has been destined to walk the path of feng shui. An avid fan of palmistry, Chinese culture and the mystic, he used to come out top in history, geography and mathematics - the so-called ingredients behind the science of feng shui. History and geography deal with culture and topography while mathematical skill equals an analytical ability. Was it any wonder then that Yap was attracted to feng shui?

Still, his affinity with geomancy did not surface till years later. Upon graduation from the Singapore High School in 1949, he was intent on pursuing a career in electrical engineering - all because there were only two electrical engineers in Singapore then and the prospects the profession offered were tremendous! As fate had it, Yap's businessman uncle managed to persuade the young man to work for him instead.

Three years into the job at building materials company Chin Ho & Co in Kuala Lumpur, Yap was promoted to manager, along with a pay jump from the initial RM400 to RM700. Life carried on, with little surprises, until feng shui came into play.

'Wind and water'

Feng shui literally means "wind and water" in Chinese. As advocates believe, there are auspicious and inauspicious land sites, just as there are good and not-so-desirable positioning of homes and workplaces (even down to the measurement of the desk and its height).

In the house, good feng shui positioning is said to create and promote, among other positives, harmonious relationships, good health, abundance and prosperity. Yap, who was staying in Petaling Jaya as a young man, was familiar with all these, yetâ€¦ "My two very young sons then [Yap has three sons and a daughter] were always ill and could only feed on a special and very expensive formula milk. Life was trying, you may say. One day, it suddenly dawned on me that something was amiss with the feng shui of the house. I did some calculations and moved the boys' room accordingly. Believe it or not, very quickly after that, they could go off the special formula."

From then, there was no turning back for Yap and his conviction about feng shui and its power.

Guaranteed to work?

Does feng shui work 100 per cent of the time? Are results guaranteed? I pop the question only to be asked: "Does a doctor guarantee a patient his wellness? Do you ever ask a doctor to guarantee that he makes you feel well?"

Pausing briefly, Yap continues, this time in a more gentle tone: "Feng shui is not foolproof. A doctor may examine a patient and then prescribe a treatment. What if the prescribed medication is not taken accordingly?"

Moreover, Yap is quick to add, the best feng shui formula can only be harnessed "if the heart is good". What exactly does he mean? "Well, God helps those who help themselvesâ€¦" he replies.

As for his track record, he estimates to have carried out more than 10,000 feng shui consultations in the last 50 years. The figure works out to an average of 200 a year or one every other day.

And how much does each consultation cost his clients? Yap would only offer candidly: "It depends. A shop will differ from an office building. Even link houses will vary - if they [residents/owners] can afford to stay in a bigger house, they can afford to pay more." Much also will depend on what Yap calls "affinity between him and the prospective clients".

Besides consultations and the building material business, these days sees Yap travelling abroad extensively, his "little black book" filled to the margins.

It is during these trips overseas that Yap lifts the curtain on his world of feng shui, conducting seminars the frequency of which is growing rapidly due to expanding interest in the Yap Cheng Hai Feng Shui Centre of Excellence. The centre conducts feng shui courses and trains exponents around the world and at last count, it boasts 2,500 students from 35 countries. The centre was founded by Yap and his protégé Joey Yap eight years ago.

So, when Yap is not busy detailing the fundamentals of feng shui to clients in a bid to convert dire "no-cure" situations into productive and harmonious abodes, he is imparting his know-how on what it takes in order to do just that.

By the way, five in Yap's family have followed in his footsteps - two of his three sons, their wives and his daughter are his students.

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