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# By the numbers

## Philosophy behind lucky numbers runs deep in Chinese culture

BY EVE EDMONDS  
Special to the News

**S**peed skaters will be tearing around the track and positive energy will be flowing through the air if Richmond resident Sherman Tai picked his numbers right.

Tai is the Feng Shui master for one of the five proposed bids for the Olympic oval design contract competition submitted to City Hall Friday.

The five firms will present their proposals to a city panel later this month and Richmond council will review the bids in November.

Tai is also the Feng Shui master for the River Rock Casino, Richmond City Hall and all North American HSBC buildings.

Although Tai won't divulge exactly which oval bid he is working on or what suggestions he made, the Chinese numerologist did say race times, at some level, will be affected by the numbers he has selected in the building's design.

It's no coincidence, for example, that the address of the River Rock Casino is 8811 – eight is associated with prosperity.

Richmond realtors, who deal with a large Asian population, know that numbers can significantly increase or decrease the salability of a house – two, three, six and eight are viewed favourably, but four is bad news as it means death.

Developers in Richmond have been known to apply to the city for specific numbers in their development area.

Generally, the meaning of certain numbers in Chinese numerology is related to their sounds.

For example, the Cantonese pronunciation of the number eight is similar to the pronunciation of the word prosperity; two sounds like easy; three is similar to life; nine sounds like longevity.

Combinations of numbers are also prized for their punning references to good luck and prosperity. Two-eight, for example, means easy prosperity – just

what you're looking for at a casino.

The fact Cantonese and Mandarin are tonal languages helps foster this kind of word play.

However, a belief in luck and good fortune runs deeper than that, says Walter Soo, the VP for gaming development at the River Rock Casino.

He learned pretty quickly that colour also has significance.

"A green hat is associated with a dunce cap," Soo says. "One time we handed out green baseball caps and people were very insulted."

But for the most part, Soo says it would be wrong to assume all Chinese actually believe in the power of numbers.

"This is a very ancient culture. A lot of these customs come down through the years. Some take it very seriously, but I think a lot of people just do it in response to a kind of cultural peer pressure – to know better than to have an address with a lot of fours in it, for example."

While many might not thoroughly understand the significance of Chinese numerology, Tai certainly does and he gets frustrated when it's misrepresented as a form of superstition.

Numerology, he explains, is just one component of a larger philosophy based on the I Ching (pronounced E Ching), he explains.

"When we're talking about numbers, it's much more complicated. You can't simply have 888 on your licence plate and think you'll be a billionaire."

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**Feng Shui**  
master and fortune teller Sherman Tai with coins and turtle shell.

JULIE IVERSON/RICHMOND NEWS

## ***Numbers: include elements***

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Different numbers have different meanings for different people, he adds. To understand what numbers have significance for you depends on a detailed equation involving your birth date and time, where you live and other factors.

These numbers, in turn, are connected to the five elements: earth, wood, fire, water and metal. Each year relates to one of the five elements.

The Year of the Rabbit is wood, for example, and wood is compatible with water (the Year of the Pig) but not metal (the Year of the Monkey or Rooster) – and even this is a drastic over-simplification.

Robert Chen, a professor of Asian studies at UBC, says that numbers have significance in all cultures. Seven is important in Christian theology while 13 is viewed as unlucky. However, he adds, numbers do have greater significance in Eastern thought partly due to their connection with the five elements and the cycle of life.

“The Western, Judeo-Christian ontology has a much more linear view of history. It is one in which there is a beginning and we work towards an end. The course of history is an expression of God’s will, which is enacted by man.”

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*“The Western, Judeo-Christian ontology has a much more linear view of history.*

**– Chen**

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In the West, there is also a stronger belief in individualism – the notion that the individual is master of his or her own destiny. One’s success or failure is not determined by luck but by the individual’s will or inner strength.

In Eastern thought, humanity is part of a delicate balance. Individuals cannot railroad their destiny. There are laws of nature and tradition to consider. The goal is to find harmony.

Tai, who works with individuals and organizations, says that much of his work is about creating environments within buildings and within people’s private lives which foster harmony and peace of mind.

“When you have that, you have better health, which can give you more energy, which can lead to prosperity. So you see, it’s about more than lucky numbers.”