



Don't pass on false beliefs such as feng shui to our children – teach them science instead

Three seemingly unrelated, recent news stories drew my attention and started me thinking about our education system. One story was about the predictions made for the performance of the Hang Seng Index in the Year of the Rooster. Apparently, this year will be auspicious but bumpy, because the rooster's elements are gold and fire. Another story was about the seizure in Bangkok of nearly three tonnes of pangolin scales, which some believe can cure cancer and enhance sexual performance. The third story was about a local man who was acquitted of procuring unlawful sex acts by false pretence after a woman accused him of deceiving her into having sex with him. It seems the man, who claimed to have feng shui knowledge, said he could help her salvage her estranged relationship with her boyfriend by having sex with her.

Of course, the theme running through these stories concerns false beliefs about the world. And although the first story about the stock market may add a bit of levity to the seasonal atmosphere, the other two stories had severe consequences. Unfortunately, these types of stories appear all too often.



Hong Kong-based brokerage firm CLSA shares its market tips for the Year of the Rooster. It's the company's 23rd Feng Shui Index, a tongue-in-cheek play on the influences of the Chinese zodiac on Hong Kong stocks. Photo: David Wong

Year of the Rooster promises financial gain, but beware of market volatility

To some extent, the attraction we feel towards mysterious forces is natural. Throughout our evolution, before the advent of science, realities about nature were unknown to us. Some of our ancestors believed that thunder was a signal of unhappy gods. Likewise, disease was seen as punishment for wrongdoing. Our ancestors taught their children about imaginary causes, and because no better explanation was available, the beliefs became entrenched. Sadly, many of these beliefs remain with us today.

We owe it to the next generation to do everything we can to ensure we hear fewer stories about hapless victims of mumbo jumbo, or the slaughter of endangered species

How is it that blatantly false beliefs continue to dupe so many people? One reason may be that humans have strong propensities towards belief in the paranormal. Our brains are programmed to seek causes from effects. Providing simple answers to complex phenomena, using “evidence” such as the flow of energy (feng shui), is attractive in the hands of masters.

Linking causes to effects was an effective way to predict future events and thus enhanced our survival. Over the eons, just as it made good sense to our ancient ancestors to run when they heard the roar of a lion (a cause) to avoid being eaten (an effect), there was also no harm in praying to the gods to stop the thunder, which worked most of the time. Our ancestors who successfully connected causes with effects survived and passed their genes down to us.

So while we are predisposed to certain cognitive biases that operate automatically, there is another element that we have much more control over: the way we educate our children. Presently, our science curriculum does a good job of highlighting the importance of developing a curiosity in science and solving problems. One wonders, however, whether the principles of science learned in experiments in school labs are too distant from the everyday world experienced by our youth. Students become knowledgeable about how chemicals react, and the like. But, somehow, many do not end up applying even the most basic level of critical thinking in their everyday lives.

Hong Kong students' lack of interest in maths and science should worry us

Thus, there appears to be a need for a more purposeful highlighting of the scientific method, which underscores the importance of following a trail of evidence while retaining a healthy dose of scepticism. This could

help our children overcome their inborn attraction to pseudoscience and lead to better decision-making in their daily lives. However, presently, almost half of our senior secondary students are not taking even one science subject. We can only hope the new subsidy to promote the teaching of science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM) in secondary schools can go some distance towards addressing this shortcoming.

Science matters, and our children are falling behind



A customs officer holds up pangolin scales during a news conference this month at the customs department in Bangkok, where nearly three tonnes of smuggled pangolin scales were seized. Tweaking the curriculum comes too late for followers of feng shui masters, or those who consume pangolin soup. Photo: Reuters

Tweaking the curriculum comes too late for followers of feng shui masters, or those who consume pangolin soup, but we owe it to the next generation to do everything we can in our schools to ensure we hear fewer stories about hapless victims of mumbo jumbo, or the unnecessary slaughter of endangered species. Now, more than ever, in a post-truth world of fake news and alternative facts, our education system needs to move with the times to equip our youth with the tools to cope with social realities.

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Conversations



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