

# The Fengshui Compass as an Eco-Aesthetic Medium: Construction of a Theoretical Model

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**Abstract:** This paper takes the Chinese Fengshui compass as the research object. It aims to go beyond the traditional understanding of the compass as a tool for orientation determination and divination, and instead, from the theoretical perspectives of 造物 aesthetics (the aesthetics of making/craftsmanship) and ecological culture, systematically interpret the ecological wisdom and spatial planning concepts inherent in it. For the first time, this paper constructs a theoretical model of the Fengshui compass as an "eco-aesthetic medium". Based on three fundamental dimensions—material carrier, symbolic system, and practical behavior—the paper conducts an in-depth analysis of the theoretical connotation, cultural functions, and operational mechanism of this medium, adopting an interdisciplinary perspective that integrates media studies, environmental aesthetics, and traditional Chinese ecological thought.

**Keywords:** Eco-aesthetics; Medium; Fengshui compass; Theoretical model

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## 1. Chapter 1: Innovations

The core innovation of this paper lies in the construction of a theoretical paradigm. This shift is based on a profound understanding of the compass's historical evolution and philosophical foundations. From the natural orientation function of the Sinan (the ancient Chinese lodestone compass), to the technical standardization of the magnetic compass, and further to the finalization of the *Luojing* (the Fengshui compass) that integrates a cosmic symbolic system, the Fengshui compass has gradually evolved from a practical instrument into a cultural carrier that embodies the classical Chinese ecological wisdom.

## 2. Chapter 2: Theoretical Foundation: The Conceptual Framework of the Eco-Aesthetic Medium

### (1) Theoretical origins of eco-aesthetics: eastern ecological wisdom

In the East, particularly within traditional Chinese culture, there has long been a profound reservoir of eco-aesthetic wisdom. The cosmic view of "the unity of heaven, earth, and humanity" regards nature and humans as a vibrant, interconnected whole, rather than opposing subjects and objects. Concepts such as "the beauty of perpetual generation" and "vital energy in motion" reflect an aesthetic focus on the fluidity of life and the interconnectedness of all things. Zeng Fanren's "eco-ontological aesthetic perspective" and Cheng Xiangzhan's emphasis on "eco-aesthetic education" are both attempts to revitalize and reconstruct traditional Chinese ecological wisdom in a modern context, striving to build an aesthetic model that transcends anthropocentrism and emphasizes the unity of all beings.

### (2) Philosophical implications of the medium: as environment, mediator, and constructor

As a specific material medium, the Fengshui compass first serves as an "intermediary". It establishes

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embodied, symbolic, and emotional connections between humans and the world, mediating the way they interact. Furthermore, the compass and the entire system of symbols and practices it carries possess a powerful capacity for environmental construction—through its material properties, symbolic rules, and usage rituals, it participates in "constructing" the ecological and cultural reality that we perceive and experience. Just as the compass does not merely indicate direction, it also constructs a cosmological framework for understanding space. Therefore, the medium is far more than a passive channel; it is an active shaper of reality.

The connotation of the eco-aesthetic medium encompasses three dimensions:

### **(3) Definition of core concepts: the connotation and functions of the eco-aesthetic medium**

1) Perceptual Inspiration: It awakens the subject's sensitivity to subtle changes in the environment and cultivates a profound, mutually permeating aesthetic perceptual ability ("resonance" or "gan tong").

2) Relationship Harmonization: Through its symbolic system and operational rituals, it mediates the dynamic relationships between humans, the environment, and cultural meanings, aiming to eliminate conflict and create harmony ("harmonization" or "tiao he").

3) World Construction: It actively participates in the symbolization and meaningful interpretation of ecological reality, guiding the subject toward an aesthetic and ethical way of living, and ultimately achieving "poetic dwelling".

## **3. Chapter 3: The Triple Structure of the Compass as an Eco-Aesthetic Medium**

### **(1) Material layer: the ecological aesthetic value of materials and craftsmanship**

Examining the compass from a material perspective reveals that it profoundly embodies the eco-aesthetic wisdom in traditional Chinese craftsmanship, which emphasizes "superior materials and exquisite craftsmanship" and "the unity of the Dao (the way) and implements". From the selection of specific tree species, to the natural air-drying process that conforms to the material's inherent properties, and even the symbolic meanings and ethical attitudes infused into it, all indicate that the making of the compass is a profound collaboration between humans and nature. It directly reflects human respect for and dialogue with the order of nature.

#### **1) The practical and rational basis for wood selection**

As a precision instrument, the material selection for the compass adheres to strict criteria that integrate practical rationality with eco-aesthetic values. The primary criterion is material stability: the wood must have a dense structure and mild properties, resistant to deformation or cracking due to changes in humidity or the passage of time. Even the slightest deformation would cause inaccuracies in the scale on the compass face, rendering the entire instrument non-functional. Secondly, emphasis is placed on craftsmanship compatibility: the material must have moderate hardness and fine fibers, making it easy for craftsmen to perform delicate engraving—essential for presenting clear strokes of complex symbols such as the Twenty-Four Mountains and *Fenjin* (a Fengshui measurement unit)—while preventing cracking or burring during the carving process.

#### **2) Typical woods used and their cultural-ecological symbolic systems**

Through long-term practice, specific tree species have been regarded as premium materials for compass making due to their excellent properties and profound cultural connotations.

**Ginkgo Wood:** Revered as the "top-quality material for compasses", ginkgo wood has a uniform grain and is highly resistant to warping and cracking, making it ideal for fine engraving. From an ecological symbolic

perspective, the ginkgo tree is a living fossil plant; it grows slowly, has an extremely long lifespan, and is regarded as a spiritual medium capable of connecting the energies of heaven and earth. This aligns perfectly with the compass's function of facilitating communication between heaven and earth. Also known as the "grandfather-grandson tree", it carries the auspicious meaning that "a grandfather plants the tree, and his grandson enjoys its fruits". Its traditional symbolism of warding off evil also enhances the sacredness of the compass as a ritual implement.

**Tiger Bone Wood (also known as White Soapwood):** With its fine and tough texture, it is the core material passed down through generations in the production of Wanan Compasses (a renowned style of Fengshui compass from Huizhou).

**Precious Hardwoods:** Rare hardwoods such as teak and rosewood are also occasionally used. Their stable texture and high value enhance the solemnity of the compass as a heritage item passed down through generations.

### **3) Ecological ethics and temporality in material processing**

The processing of wood is not merely a technical process, but also a stage of dialogue with nature and an embodiment of ecological ethics. Compass making requires a significant investment of time: after cutting, the wood must undergo natural air-drying for at least three years. This allows the wood to gradually stabilize its properties in circulating air and rebalance its energy with the surrounding environment. Subsequently, craftsmen devote even more patience to manual sanding, carving, and inscribing. The manually sanded compass face is as smooth as jade, with exquisitely carved scales. This production process itself is a pursuit of harmony between "human craftsmanship" and "heavenly craftsmanship".

### **(2) Symbolic layer: the symbolic system of the cosmic model**

The symbolic layer of the Fengshui compass is the core interpretive interface of its role as an eco-aesthetic medium. Far more than a simple orientation marker, it is a highly systematic and codified symbolic system—essentially a product of distilling and condensing the grand cosmic model into symbols.

#### **1) The generation and distillation of symbols: from astronomical observation to philosophical abstraction**

The construction of the compass's symbolic system stems from ancient Chinese observations of the nature of time and space, and philosophical abstractions derived therefrom. It is a process of refining natural phenomena into cultural symbols. Its basic frameworks, such as the *Hetu* (River Map) and *Luoshu* (Luo Chart), the Earlier and Later Heaven *Bagua* (Eight Trigrams), the Heavenly Stems and Earthly Branches, the Twenty-Four Mountains, and the Twenty-Four Solar Terms, are not arbitrarily arranged. Instead, they are highly generalized and symbolically represented reflections of the laws governing astronomical movements and geographical orientations. The compass's symbolic system is essentially a constructed natural philosophy and a spatio-temporal coordinate system, serving as the fundamental paradigm through which its users understand the world.

#### **2) The reference and network of symbols: from single meanings to a complex system**

Each individual compass symbol has a clear referent and cultural meaning. More importantly, however, these symbols form a dynamic, interconnected network of meanings through complex combinations. This transforms direction—once a cold geometric angle—into a cultural semantic concept infused with ecological qualities such as vitality, rest, good fortune, and misfortune. In doing so, it achieves a semiotic conversion from physical space to living space.

### **3) The function of the symbolic system: mediating the conversion from cosmic view to practical language**

The ultimate function of the compass's symbolic layer is to serve as a "semantic mediator" connecting abstract cosmic views to specific environmental practices. Firstly, it visualizes and operationalizes invisible energies. It transforms intangible cosmic laws (such as the circulation and accumulation of "qi" or vital energy) and invisible forces in the environment (such as geomagnetism and seasonal changes) into clear, measurable, and calculable visual symbols and scale instructions on the compass face. Secondly, it provides a symbolic language for ecological assessment. By interpreting the symbols corresponding to specific directions and their mutual generating or restraining relationships (e.g., a direction associated with "fire" requiring "water" to achieve balance), Fengshui practitioners engage in in-depth dialogue with the natural environment and assess its ecological pattern using this symbolic system. Finally, this symbolic system guides ecological practices: it transforms the abstract concept of "the unity of heaven, earth, and humanity" into specific, actionable spatial layout instructions (such as site selection, orientation determination, and avoiding inauspicious influences), thereby completing the creative conversion from philosophical concepts to aesthetic practices.

#### **(3) Behavioral layer: embodied practice in rituals**

The use of the Fengshui compass is far more than a mere technical act; it is a highly ritualized form of embodied practice. Its core lies in achieving a profound spiritual interaction and integration between humans, tools, and the environment through ritualized embodied performance. This elevates the understanding of natural order from utilitarian measurement to an ecological practice rich in ethical significance and aesthetic value.

#### **1) Ritual preparation and framework: constructing a sacred sphere and psychological transformation**

Compass practice begins with a series of rigorous ritual preparations. These actions collectively form a "threshold" that transitions the user from an ordinary state into an aesthetic context of focus, reverence, and openness to the environment. Rituals performed before use—such as hand-washing, incense-burning, mental concentration, and even silent recitation of mantras—are not superstitious acts. Their inheritance carries profound ethical and cognitive functions. Through stylized actions of physical purification and mental calming, a sacred sphere of practice is demarcated both physically and psychologically. When holding the compass, practitioners are required to hold it at chest level, maintain a steady posture, and look directly at it—ensuring the compass is level and the mind is upright and balanced. This bodily posture itself is an imitation of and tribute to the order of heaven and earth.

#### **2) Bodily performance and perception: embodied techniques with multi-sensory engagement**

In the specific operation of the compass, the user achieves in-depth dialogue with the environment through a high degree of integration between bodily senses and technical skills. This process relies on a set of skilled "embodied techniques": the sense of sight shifts back and forth between the scales on the compass face and the landscapes in the distance, capturing the correspondence between symbols and terrain; the sense of touch perceives the subtle adjustments of the compass body and the stability of the magnetic needle through the fingertips; and the sense of kinesthesia is manifested in the rotation of the entire body to calibrate the direction, achieving precise alignment with the Tianxin Shidao (the central line of the compass, representing the axis of heaven and earth).

#### **3) The achievement and significance of practice: the realization of eco-aesthetics and the orientation toward dwelling**

The ultimate significance of the embodied practice with the compass lies in achieving organic integration among the body, the medium, and the environment, and ultimately orienting toward aesthetic dwelling.

When the three disks of heaven, earth, and humanity (on the compass) align during operation, and when direction, symbols, and terrain correspond perfectly, the user gains not only technical success but also a sense of ethical and aesthetic fulfillment.

#### **4. Chapter 4: The Operational Mechanism of the Compass as an Eco-Aesthetic Medium**

The ultimate value of the Fengshui compass as an eco-aesthetic medium lies in guiding the subject to generate a unique eco-aesthetic experience. The generation of this experience follows a mechanism that progresses from stillness to movement, from the internal to the external, and from superficial to depth. This chapter systematically explains how the compass mediates and shapes humans' aesthetic relationship with the environment through three core links—"resonance" (*gan tong*), "harmony" (*hexie*), and "dwelling" (*qiju*)—ultimately leading to the awakening of eco-aesthetic consciousness and the realization of poetic existence.

##### **(1) "Resonance" (*gan tong*): embodied energy perception and ecological interaction**

First and foremost, the Fengshui compass, as an active mediating system, reconstructs the perceptual relationship between humans and the environment. According to media ecology and embodied cognition theory, the medium is not a passive carrier of information but a technical object that actively participates in shaping the subject's perceptual framework and interaction patterns. Through its material configuration—including the cosmological symbolic structure of "the heaven is round and the earth is square", the warm tactile sensation of its natural materials, and its highly ritualized operational procedures—the compass recalibrates the way users engage with the natural environment, thereby constructing an embodied ecological cognition and aesthetic framework.

##### **(2) "Harmony" (*hexie*): symbolic order adjustment and ecological construction**

The compass's symbolic system mediates and guides the user's active pursuit of ecological "harmony". A series of its core operations—such as Xiaosha (resolving harmful mountain influences), Nashui (receiving beneficial water influences), Fenjin (precise directional measurement), and Lixiang (determining the optimal orientation)—are essentially ecological relationship adjustment practices based on symbolic calculations. Through increasingly refined symbols such as the Five Elements, the Eight Trigrams, the Twenty-Four Mountains, the Sixty Toudi, the Seventy-Two Dragons, and the One Hundred and Twenty Fenjin, the compass provides users with a semantic framework and a system of calculation rules for systematically interpreting the generating/restraining and prosperity/decline relationships within the environment.

##### **(3) "Dwelling" (*qiju*): the eco-aesthetic realization of ideal space**

As intermediate stages in the generation of eco-aesthetic experience, "resonance" and "harmony" ultimately point to the achievement of an ideal state of existence—namely, "poetic dwelling". In this process, the compass plays a crucial transformative role, bridging aesthetic consciousness and spatial practice. Its analytical results are directly materialized into specific spatial layout strategies, serving as the material foundation for the realization of eco-aesthetic ideals. This realization is manifested in practices such as building site selection, orientation determination, door placement, and water alignment. These practices aim to achieve the traditional ecological ideal of "gathering wind and accumulating qi" (creating a space that traps beneficial winds and accumulates vital energy), embodying human respect for, adaptation to, and skillful utilization of natural energies.

## 5. Chapter 5: Conclusions and Contemporary Implications

By examining the three dimensions of material, symbol, and behavior, this paper systematically demonstrates the theoretical connotation and practical mechanism of the Fengshui compass as an eco-aesthetic medium. The study shows that the compass is far more than a simple tool for orientation determination or divination; it is a comprehensive mediating system that deeply integrates traditional Chinese cosmology, ecological wisdom, and aesthetic consciousness. Through its material carrier, symbolic coding, and ritual performance, it actively participates in constructing humans' perceptual methods and interpretive meanings of the environment, ultimately guiding the subject toward the realization of poetic dwelling in harmonious coexistence with nature. The theoretical framework of the "eco-aesthetic medium" proposed in this paper not only provides a new paradigmatic shift for the study of the Fengshui compass but also opens up a persuasive aesthetic path for understanding traditional Chinese ecological culture.

Future research can further explore the differences in media characteristics and aesthetic orientations among compasses of different schools (such as the *Sanyuan* (Three Cycles) compass, the *Sanhe* (Three Harmonies) compass, and the *Zonghe* (Comprehensive) compass). It can also focus on the new forms of presentation and transformation possibilities of compass craftsmanship and its ecological concepts under the conditions of digital technology, thereby enabling this traditional wisdom to continuously radiate new vitality in the contemporary context.

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