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Divining the path to harmony

Developed over centuries and shrouded in esoteric spirituality, feng shui is staging a resurgence in China. Crucial to its teachings is a certain kind of compass - and the finest have been made for generations by a single family

Anhui is no longer a wealthy province, but for much of China's history, the area was rich and prosperous. The entire country flourished during the Tang dynasty, but it was here in the south that not just commerce grew but also the cultural lives of the citizens. Set amid spectacular scenery, Anhui became a center for artists, intellectuals, and businesses. And it was in a town called Wan'an that a fascinating industry took root. The Wu family has created precision equipment for the practice of feng shui consultation for nearly three hundred years. Named after the founder, Lu Heng Wu, the business is still based in a house of traditional Anhui style, with wood-paneled reception areas, internal courtyards, and natural light wells. Here, the current Mr. Wu, Zhaoguang, manages a team of 20 who manufacture these instruments for use the world over.

The development of feng shui is convoluted and widely contested. It straddles philosophy, spirituality, medicine, numerology, astrophysics, and geology, so has often been derided from a scientific viewpoint, yet many architects defend its tenets. Unsurprisingly, one can find advice very similar to the practice of feng shui in the writings of Vitruvius, the Roman civil engineer on

whose work much of western architecture's traditions were built. Even without a formal understanding of the principles, it is possible to feel the sensory pleasure of harmony in a space designed with the appropriate care and precision. A perfect example is the shop itself. When we sit down to discuss Zhaoguang's work, the doors and windows are open, the air is cool and fresh, and the light is bright and clear but without glare. Bird song mixes with other pleasant background noise, and there is a sense of calm. It is right that this building in particular should pay attention to such things, but when constructed in the seventeenth century, all the houses on the street would have been laid out according to feng shui principles. The gentle equilibrium is evident in two ancient nearby villages, preserved as they were intended. Listed by UNESCO in 2000 as World Heritage Sites, their entry stops short of mentioning feng shui but praises the "rhythmic space variation... tranquil alleyways...the whole reflects the pursuit of coexistence, unity, and the harmony of man and nature."

Mr. Wu took on the responsibility of the family business following the death of his father, Shuisen, in 2014. At 33, the fashionably dressed Zhaoguang does not conform to the image of a conduit for esoteric knowledge, yet the business is clearly in his blood. Like many young Chinese born after the period of economic and cultural reform of the 1980s, he embodies both a modern outlook and a respect for the past. It's a view that characterizes many aspects of Chinese life and the world of feng shui in particular. Even getting a clear answer on his Chinese horoscope causes problems: born in the year of the Rat, Zhaoguang in fact considers himself a Pig due to a discrepancy in the lunar calendar. Details like this demonstrate the need, certainly for fortuitous feng shui, for tools and reference points.

Zhaoguang began his apprenticeship at three years old, watching his father in the factory. It was a difficult time for the business, which was slowly emerging from a painful era. During the cultural revolution, feng shui had been denounced as superstitious and bourgeois. The factory and shop were requisitioned; Zhaoguang's father sent to work in a coal mine. With the reforms of the 1980s, the family was allowed to return home and business quietly resumed. Strangely enough, while the practice of feng shui remains officially outlawed, businesses such as the Wu compass factory are now lauded because of their contribution to craft heritage.

Apart from a couple of years in the army, which he feels gave him focus to run the business, Zhaoguang's life has been intertwined with the compass factory. Still, he rejects the image of the feng shui master or sage,

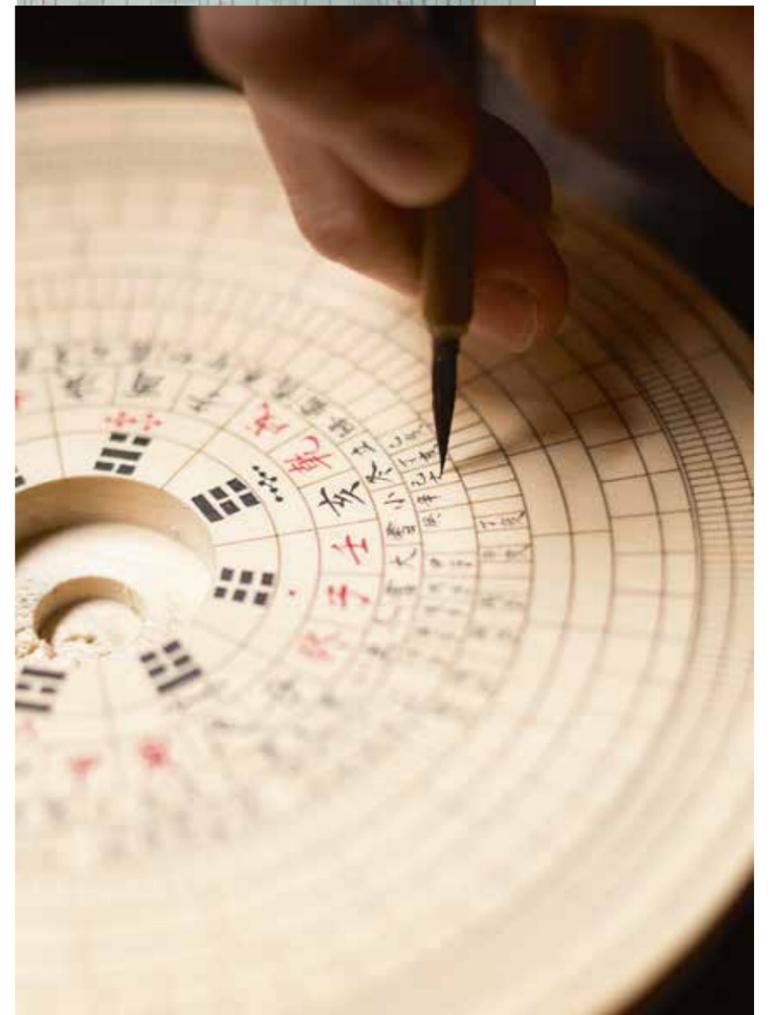
saying the discipline is so complex, a real master would know his learning is never complete. That's also true of making compasses. Despite their apparent simplicity, countless improvements have been introduced over the years; far from their being a purely historical artefact, compass technology and use continue to evolve.

The first compasses used in China are thought to have been natural lodestones, carved into spoon shapes that could balance and pivot on a single point, allowing them to rotate on a smooth surface to indicate direction. Dating from around 200 B.C., the compass was at first used principally for spiritual and ritual purposes. It was not until the Song dynasty over a thousand years later that it was first used for navigation. While the familiar convention of a compass is to show magnetic north, these compasses pointed south, as reflected in the name, "zhi nan zhen" (south-pointing needle).

The south-pointing feng shui compass is actually known by another name, "luo pan," interpreted as a tool for sifting or gathering. This idea comes from the network of interconnected components that make up our universe and the way a practitioner aims to determine the perfect alignment of time, location, and natural elements for an individual's requirements. Rather than the navigational compass that indicates just one piece of information, the luo pan can be used to make sense of myriad factors. Zhaoguang likens it to a dictionary. Simply looking something up is likely to yield multiple answers; you need a depth of contextual knowledge to decipher what it is telling you.

The luo pan made by the Wu family is a disk of wood, from five to 15 inches across, with a series of concentric circles leading to a small central bowl. This "pool of the heavens," with its reflective surface and delicately balanced needle, is the nucleus. It is this that reveals the surrounding information – and it is what separates a Wu compass from the competition. While Anhui gift shops do a brisk trade in items that seem similar, the Wu compass is unique in design and construction. It takes about three months to transform the raw material into a finished product. The first stage is selection of the wood, either ginkgo or tiger wood (a local boxwood). Blond in color, these are shaped and smoothed to create a flat, high-contrast surface that will take the carved lines and painted characters without spreading the ink, a process involving more than 20 cycles of drying, oiling, and rubbing with a special abrasive dried grass.

Each generation of the Wu family has contributed improvements, and Zhaoguang is no exception. The latest development is linked to the crucial final stage, setting the needle, performed by the head of the Wu



Previous pages: the marvel of the compass. The information is here, if you know how to look. Moving out from the central pool of the heavens, rings and figures indicate the eight symbols of the I Ching and the denominations of the heavens, the earth, and the individual, among many other considerations (left); the young director Zhaoguang Wu (right). Opposite: a kitten on the steps of the Wu family home, built around 400 years ago. This hefty doorway recently had to be moved when nearby construction work affected the building's feng shui. This page, from top: only the initial outline can be seen during the early stages of production; smoothing the surface of the luo pan with special abrasive dried grass; hand painting the characters





This page, from top: a temple-like door of the Wu house; cutting the base for the magnetic needle; and preparing the base to receive it. Opposite: the specialist implements of the feng shui practitioner – compass, sundial, and ruler. Based on what the compass reveals, feng shui can show how to achieve a sense of balance between a building, the people using it, and the outside world



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family behind closed doors. Zhaoguang has refined the needle's suspension, making it more accurate while negating the need for a completely level surface. The needle itself is also the subject of a secret process: each gains its magnetic property from a stone on which it is placed for an entire month. About three by five inches, this stone, thought to be a meteorite, was obtained by the second generation Mr. Wu and is kept out of sight for fear that climatic factors will affect its properties. So valuable is it to the family that the fourth generation maker, Jiaorui Wu, laid down his life for it. In 1861, during the last stages of the Taiping Rebellion, the invading army occupied much of Anhui. Jiaorui was killed in a looting raid, suspected of hiding money. On discovering this "treasure" was nothing more than a rock, it was discarded – later to be recovered by the family.

These days, there is a tranquillity to the house and factory, and one can't help but appreciate the influence of feng shui on the building itself. Interest in the art is re-emerging, with architects increasingly incorporating it. But even when a building is completed, the elements governing its feng shui can change, necessitating "maintenance" to keep balances amiable. "We had to move our door in 2009," says Zhaoguang, "because of a bridge built in the town around that time." Sure enough, the granite doorway, which is over four hundred years old and must weigh several tons, has been rotated to leave a misalignment with the wall of about two inches, proof of how seriously the family takes this process.

Thanks to their global reputation, particularly in Hong Kong, Japan, Taiwan, and the U.S.A., there is often a long waiting list for the factory's products (which can cost more than US\$10,000). It's a prosperous, happier time. The only concern is production – as with so many of China's traditional crafts, it is hard to find apprentices willing to commit to the business long-term. But with feng shui's sturdy comeback and a recently arrived baby daughter, Zhaoguang needn't worry about demand, or the preservation of that dedicated family lineage. ♦

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萬事般依增六高 加添福祿稱心懷	貴人	貴門開者主招財 置賣金銀日日來
奸邪凶惡百般生 臨火官災不用論	天災	病門開者主生病 奴婢逃走家業敗
夫妻終須要離別 更無心事問懷懷	天禍	離門開者主分離 男子潛逃不見歸
須信科名從此來 五福咸亨皆吉利	天財	義門開者主生義 又見門庭多喜氣
廣人莫用僧道忌 犯者時時官事纏	官祿	官門開者主加官 仕宦逢之喜氣歡
定合多災禍日生 更嫌作事無成立	孤寡	劫門開者主盜劫 毆打損傷敗日業
公事重重無了期 家業三年却損壞	天敗	害門開者主災害 相爭到毆家業盡
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