

# TRANSLATION

Proceedings of the  
**Society of Architectural Historians,  
Australia and New Zealand**  
Vol. 31

edited by Christoph Schnoor  
(Auckland, New Zealand SAHANZ and Unitec ePress;  
and Gold Coast, Queensland: SAHANZ, 2014).

The bibliographic citation for this paper is:

**Mengbi Li, "The "Translation" of Zhaobi in China across Time and Space," in  
*Proceedings of the Society of Architectural Historians, Australia and New Zealand:  
31, Translation*, edited by Christoph Schnoor (Auckland, New Zealand: SAHANZ  
and Unitec ePress; and Gold Coast, Queensland: SAHANZ, 2014), 145-154.**

*Published in*

*Auckland, New Zealand: SAHANZ and Unitec ePress [ISBN - 978-1-927214-12-1];  
and Gold Coast, Australia: SAHANZ [ISBN - 978-0-9876055-1-1]*

*All efforts have been undertaken to ensure that authors have secured appropriate  
permissions to reproduce the images illustrating individual contributions.  
Interested parties may contact the editor.*

*This work is licensed under a  
Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License.*



Mengbi Li, *University of New South Wales*

## The “Translation” of Zhaobi in China across Time and Space

Zhaobi is a piece of highly decorated wall which usually stands at the entrance to traditional Chinese architecture. Zhaobi has a long history and is still in use today. However, a comprehensive analysis of the use of zhaobi in different periods as well as its conscious and unconscious symbolic transmission between social classes and ethnic groups is absent. Despite the physical form of the zhaobi and its seeming stability, this paper suggests there are nuances of change and variability embedded in the history of zhaobi as a result of political influence, intellectual criticism and ethnic minorities' desires to record their identities. Moreover, the transmission of zhaobi through time provides clues illustrating the pursuits and desires of people from different social and cultural backgrounds. This research suggests that the manifestations of zhaobi witnessed three stages: initially, zhaobi was endowed with authoritative power since it was only permitted in the Imperial Palaces; in the second phase, a democratization process resulted in zhaobi's diminished authoritative power while, ironically, contributing rich meanings through exquisite craftsmanship. In the last phase, the research maintains that zhaobi regained much of its original purpose which was to symbolize family identity and suggest the behaviour needed at the entry to the Imperial Palace. The problem of 'translation' of meaning in architecture therefore can be elucidated through a case study of the adaption of zhaobi by the Bai minority group into their houses. This paper also highlights two of the non-material agents of architectural transformation - politics and family identity - which play an important role in enriching zhaobi's connotations compared with its purely physical translation.

## Introduction

As a roofed and decorated wall, usually positioned at the entrance to the traditional Chinese house (fig. 1), *zhaobi*(照壁) has existed for 3,000 years in China. Despite dynasties changing, *zhaobi* has successfully kept its original appearance. Even the oldest *zhaobi* (fig. 2) does not present an unfamiliar form; it is located at a gateway and 4 metres in front of the main entrance of a courtyard house.<sup>1</sup>



Fig. 1. *zhaobi* of the Baba Temple built in 1684 (image by author)

Not only transmitted through history, *zhaobi* also spread geographically and reached as far as the South-western borderland of China. At face value, *zhaobi* is a purely architectural feature of physical interest. There are, however, many subtleties lying beyond its physical form and to search for their nuances, broadening the disciplinary lens is necessary.

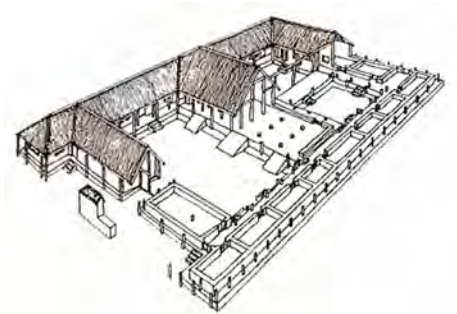


Fig. 2. Restored picture of Fengchu architectural relics of the Western Zhou Dynasty 1046-771 BC (Fu, Xinian, "An Initial Study on the Western Zhou Dynasty Architectural Relics in Fengchu, Shanxi," in Fu Xinian Jian zhushi Lunwenji 傅喜年建筑史论文集 [Collected papers of Fu Xinian on Architecture History]; Wenwu Chubanshe, 1998), 33-45.

---

1 See Shanxi Zhouyuan Kaogudui 陕西周原考古队 [Zhouyuan Archaeological Team of Shanxi Province], "Shanxi Qishan Fengchucun Xizhou Jianzhu Jizhi Fajue Jianbao 陕西岐山凤雏村西周建筑基址发掘简报 [Brief Report on the Excavation of Western Zhou Dynasty Architectural Relics, Fengchu Village, Qi Mountain, Shanxi Province]," *Wenwu* 文物 [Cultural Relics], no. 10 (1979).

This research discovers that the history of *zhaobi* can be separated into three main phases, identifiable by their differences which are chiefly reflected in both the *zeitgeist* (spirit of the time) and the needs of different social groups.

## First phase: ancient *zhaobi* and authoritative power

Treated as a symbol of political power, *zhaobi* marked the prominence of the ruling classes and indicated the emotions as well as the behaviour that visitors were expected to display. The oldest *zhaobi* found today was built in the Western Zhou Dynasty between 1046-771 BCE. At that time, *zhaobi* was rare in China. *zhaobi* were detected in archaeological remains in Fengchu. When these remains were first found at Qi Mountain in Shanxi province, archaeologists deduced that Fengchu might be an imperial city. They had discovered *zhaobi*, city moats and a former national archives administration, where writings about national politics, economics and military affairs were documented on turtle shells. All these findings confirmed the archaeologists' deduction.

Reflected through literature records, the use of *zhaobi* was limited by social conventions and laws. In the rigidly hierarchical Western Zhou Dynasty, political rank was represented in architectural form. For example, it was ruled that emperors' pillars could be coloured red, while local feudal princes had to use black and chancellors' colours were cyan and white.<sup>2</sup> Construction techniques were also distinguished; timbers prepared for an emperor had to be cut, polished and burnished. For local feudal princes, timbers should be cut and polished and for chancellors, they would simply be cut.<sup>3</sup> Rules for using and constructing *zhaobi* were recorded in *Xunzi* so that only an emperor could build a *zhaobi* outside his gate. Local feudal princes were obliged to locate it inside and chancellors were only allowed to use curtains.<sup>4</sup> The special status of *zhaobi* was not only realised by limits on its use, but also emphasised by its symbolic function for creating a formal atmosphere.

*zhaobi*'s early designation emphasized its role as an exclusive privilege of the ruling classes. *zhaobi* was called *xiaoqiang* (萧墙).<sup>5</sup> This term is a combination of two Chinese characters: *xiao* (萧) and *qiang* (墙). The meaning of the latter character, *qiang* (墙), is wall.<sup>6</sup> *Xiao* (萧) was equivalent to another character, *su* (肃) which means serious, solemn, respectful, and keeping silent.<sup>7</sup> In practice, the literal meaning of *su* (肃) mirrors *xiaoqiang*'s role as a wall for solemnity and respect accorded to the ruling classes.

2 “樞，天子丹，诸侯黝，大夫苍。” in Yang Shixun 杨士勋, and Fan Ning 范宁, *Chun Qiu Gu Liang Zhuan* 春秋·谷梁传 [a commentary on the *chunqion* annals] (Shandong Huabao Chubanshe, 2004), 100.

3 “礼，天子之櫺，斫之砮之，加密石焉...诸侯之櫺，斫之砮之。大夫诸侯之櫺，斫之，士斫本。” in Yang and Fan, *Gu Liang Zhuan*, 101.

4 Dongfang, Shu 东方朔, and Yang, Liang 杨倬, *Xunzi* 荀子 (Shanghai: Shanghai Shiji Chuban Jituan, 2010), 126.

5 *Xiandai Hanyu Cidian* 现代汉语词典 [the Contemporary Chinese Dictionary], 4th ed., s.v. “萧墙”, 1494; Zhang, Nan 张楠 “The Evolution of Screens” (master's thesis, Shanxi University, 2009).

6 *The Contemporary Chinese Dictionary*, 4th ed., s.v. “墙”, 1096.

7 Wang, Junrong 王君荣, Xu, Yiping 许颐平, and Chen, Zhe 程子和, *Tujie Yangzhai Shishu* 图解阳宅十书 [fengshui for built environment] (Huanying Chubanshe, 2010), 277. Also see Hanfeizi, and Dexunmiaobei, and ganshi.

Ancient scholars such as He Yan and Liu Xi depicted *zhaobi*'s original role in their writings. He Yan 何晏 (195-249 AD) was a respected scholar and a politician. Even as a child, He Yan showed a talent for understanding etiquette and literature. Impressed by little He Yan, the local prince of the Wei vassal state brought He Yan up as his son. As a result, He Yan knew the living circumstances of the ruling class well. His knowledgeable background also contributed to a comprehensive understanding of *zhaobi*, both in its linguistic meaning and its political power. He Yan wrote in *LunyuJieji*: "*xiaoqiang* is regarded as a screen. *xiao* (萧) is *su* (肃). To respect etiquette between the monarch and his subjects during a meeting, *zhaobi* is located to stimulate an atmosphere of seriousness and formality, so it is called *xiaoqiang* (萧墙)."<sup>8</sup> Another scholar, Liu Xi 刘熙 (died 160 AD) was a glossary expert of the Han Dynasty (206 BC-220 AD). In *Shiming*, a classical work aiming to explain the origin of glossaries, he also interpreted *xiao* (萧) as *su* (肃) and mentioned its deliberate function of holding visitors in awe not just of the physical structure but the symbolic power of *zhaobi* as well.

The ancient *Zhaobi* also influenced responding behaviour. According to ancient etiquette, a visitor should prepare themselves reverentially once they saw a *zhaobi* at the gate. Consequently, another term referring to *zhaobi* was mentioned frequently during the Han Dynasty (206 BC-220 AD). The term was "*fusi*" (罍罍), which portrayed the symbolic function of *zhaobi*. *Fu* (罍) means repeat again or once more, and *Si* (罍) means think or conceive.<sup>9</sup> To quote from *Gu Jin Zhu* (first published in the Jin Dynasty 265-420 AD): "If a minister comes and wishes to talk to the monarch ... after the minister steps into the gate but behind a *zhaobi*, he needs to think carefully about how he will report. *Fusi* (罍罍) means stop and think again so you are able to prepare yourself with due seriousness."<sup>10</sup> Following the rules for meeting the emperor, even local feudal princes had to kowtow behind the *zhaobi*. According to *Jingli*, a book about meeting etiquette applied in the Zhou Dynasty,<sup>11</sup> this would apply on more solemn occasions, for example during rituals conducted in autumn when feudal princes came to visit the emperor.

However, the rules of *zhaobi* became looser in later dynasties. In the turbulent Chunqiu Period (approximately 771-476 BC), China was balkanized into vassal states and war-shattered. At that time, even though *zhaobi* was still a sensitive symbol of power and identity, rules were challenged occasionally, as recorded in *Analects*. Referring to the qualities of *Li*<sup>12</sup>, Confucius criticized a non-imperial dignitary's misuse of *zhaobi*. As a senior chancellor of Qi vassal state, Guan Zhong was not supposed to build a *zhaobi* but did so. Confucius expressed his views of Guan's behaviour

8 “萧墙，谓屏也。萧之言肃也，君臣相见之礼，至屏而加肃静焉，是以谓之萧墙。” in He, Yan 何晏, *Kongxue Sanzhong Lunyu Jieji Yi Shu* 孔学三种论语解集义疏远 (Zhong Hua Shu Ju, 1935). Translated by the author.

9 Liu, Xi 刘熙, *Shiming* 释名 [Explanations of terminologies] (Zhong Hua Shu Ju, 1939); Li, Fang 李昉, *Tai Ping Yu Lan* 太平御览 [a series of books edited in Taiping period and read by Taizong Empor of the Song Dynasty] (Zhong Hua Shu Ju, 2011).

10 “臣来朝君[...]行至门内屏外，复应思惟，罍罍言复思也” in Bao Cui 崔豹, *Gu Jin Zhu* 古今注 [An interpretation of classics] (Liaoning Jiaoyu, 1998). Translated by the author.

11 Wei Dai, *Guo Xue Yuan Dian Dao Du: Jing Li* 国学原典导读- 谨礼 [Sinology Classics Review-Etiquette] (Ba Shu Shushe, 2003), 122.

12 *Li* is not a definitive object but important in China. It can understood as etiquette, proper behaviour or ritual propriety.

sarcastically, saying: “The princes of states have *saimen*<sup>13</sup> intercepting the view at their gates; the Guans had likewise a *saimen* ... If Guan followed *Li*, would it not mean that all people followed *Li* well?”<sup>14</sup>

## Second Phase: Democratization - Weakened Authoritative Power but Enriched Artistic Value

400 years later, approximately from the Tang dynasty (618-907 AD) when the governors were comparatively more open-minded, *zhaobi* was no longer a privilege of the imperial family. More people began to build *zhaobi* and its symbolic meaning as well as function changed gradually and because of the varied lives of its new users, *zhaobi*'s former authoritative power of marking the imperial class's identity was weakened. During the following dynasties, the rules of *Li* (ritual) were still kept, but 'misuse' of *zhaobi* was not unusual in civil life. Applied more widely, *zhaobi* became increasingly reflective of people's lives with increasingly rich meanings such as symbolic representations of prosperity and long life as well as being constructed for aesthetic purposes and to preserve good fortune for the house.

When the literati began to use *zhaobi*, it became a tool for aesthetic and artistic practice and in the Tang Dynasty (618-907 CAD) another naming of *zhaobi* appeared. It is known as *yingbi* (影壁). *Ying* (影) means shadow or image and *bi* (壁) means wall. Deng Chun, a scholar of the Southern Song Dynasty (1127-1279CE), suggested a possible origin of this term in his *Huaji*, a history of Chinese painters. Apparently, when Guo Xi (a painter of the Northern Song Dynasty) was savouring a wall painted with landscape drawings by Huizhi (Yang Huizhi, an artist of the Tang Dynasty), Guo Xi suddenly had an inspiration.<sup>15</sup> He began to paste mud onto the wall by hand, giving the wall an undulating effect full of sags and crests. When the mud dried and turned hard, he painted the wall guided by the shape of the dried mud and a magical effect emerged of mountains and forests. He continued to draw figures and pavilions on the landscape. The rugged surface projected shadows and gave the picture a three dimensional appearance. Subsequently, painters coined a new name for *zhaobi* that is *Yingbi* (literally, a wall of shadows).

Apart from drawing, ancient Chinese literati also wrote poems on *zhaobi*. Generally drawing and writing were the favourite pastimes of ancient Chinese literati. In *Quan Song Ci*, GuoYingxiang, an intellectual in the Song Dynasty (960-1279 AD), described a birthday party at which there was a lively atmosphere and there happened to be a *zhaobi* present. Guo decided to compose a poem, and named it *Xi Jiang Yue*. To celebrate this memorable occasion, he wrote the poem (as well as the

13 *Saimen* means *zhaobi*.

14 “曰：‘邦君树塞门，管氏亦树塞门；(…)管氏而知礼，孰不知礼？’” in Mao, Zishui 毛子水, Luyu Jinzhujinyi 论语今注解义 [Analects and Translation] (Chongqing Press, 2009), 45.

15 “故中原多惠之塑山水壁。郭熙见之，又出新意。遂令巧者不用泥掌，止以手枪泥于壁，或凹或凸，俱所不问。干则以墨随其形迹，晕成峰峦林壑，加之楼阁、人物之属，宛然天成，谓之‘影壁’。” in Deng, Chun 邓椿, Hua Ji 画继 (Renmin Meishu Chubanshe, 1964), 119.

reason for composing the poem) on the *zhaobi*.<sup>16</sup> This custom has been carried on in some parts of China until today, so one can frequently see paintings and poems on *zhaobi*. They had always been an instrument for artistic expression since the second phase in the history of *zhaobi*.

To discuss the relationship of traditional Chinese architecture and good fortune, *Fengshui* - a Chinese geomantic omen - must be examined. In *Zangshu*, Guo Pu 郭璞 (276-324 AD) wrote:

"*Qi*<sup>17</sup> rides the wind and scatters, but is retained when encountering water. The ancients collected it to prevent its dissipation, and guided it to assure its retention. Thus it was called *fengshui*."<sup>18</sup>

So gathering *qi* and protecting it was regarded as an auspicious way of acting. *Qi* is the *sine qua non* for the Chinese. It is believed that material, human and myriad objects are formed from *qi* and vice versa. In Chinese philosophy, *qi* forms the weather (wind, rain and cloud).<sup>19</sup> Not only the human body but also its consciousness and spirits are maintained by *qi*.<sup>20</sup> Such an invisible element could, however, be protected by walls offering an auspicious future. So *zhaobi* was also translated figuratively as "protective screen" or "spirit wall" in English.<sup>21</sup> In *Yang Zhai Shi Shu* (first published in the Ming Dynasty 1368-1644 AD), the protective function of *zhaobi* walls was explained as being able to separate space even though spaces were not completely enclosed. The result was that auspiciousness and ominousness would be kept within each space without inter-disturbance.<sup>22</sup> In recent dynasties, mainstream thought associates *zhaobi* with good fortune and uses it as a tool for *fengshui*. As Knapp documented, in some places (such as Shanxi province) people call *zhaobi* "*fengshui* walls".<sup>23</sup>

The myths of *zhaobi* also reveal an auspicious nature. There is a prevailing myth about *zhaobi* raised in many documents such as *The Insider's Guide to Beijing* and *The Means of Screen Wall in Folk House*.<sup>24</sup> It is said that wandering ghosts or evil spirits may enter houses through its entrance so the gate is vulnerable. However, *zhaobi* can act as a mirror to deflect such dangerous influences. When the ghosts or spirits see their own image on the *zhaobi*, they will be terrified and retreat back. In this way the house is protected. Though reliable historical records are lacking to verify the existence of this belief, when the author discussed *zhaobi* myths with the villagers in Yunnan

16 Tang, Guizhang 唐圭璋, *Quan Song Ci* 全宋词 [The annotated corpus of the Song Dynasty] (Zhong Hua Shu Ju, 1965).

17 *Qi* is similar to the Greek *pneuma*. *Qi* has many broad meanings in Chinese culture.

18 "气乘风则散,界水则止,古人聚之使不散,行之使有止,故谓之风水。" in Guo, Pu 郭璞, *Zangshu* 葬书 [Book of Burial] (Hua Ning Chu Ban She, 2010), 358-59. Translated by Stephen L. Field.

19 Guo, Book of Burial, 588-92, 596-98; John S Major, *Heaven and Earth in Early Han Thought: Chapters Three, Four and Five of the Huainanzi* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 28-31.

20 Tai Ping Jing 太平经 [Daoist classic], (Zhong Hua Shu Ju, 2013; first published in the Han Dynasty 220 BC-220 AD).

21 Ronald G Knapp, *China's Living Houses: Folk, Beliefs, Symbols, and Household Ornamentation* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1999), 68.

22 Wang, Xu, and Chen, *Fengshui for Built Environment*.

23 Knapp, *China's Living Houses*, 68-72.

24 Adam Pillsbury, *The Insider's Guide to Beijing 2005-2006* (True Run Media, 2008); Wang, Zhenhong, and Chen, Qianyu, "The Means of Screen Wall in Folk House," *Shanxi Architecture* 33, no. 11 (2007).

province, they usually related *zhaobi* to good fortune and positive influences.<sup>25</sup> In addition, existing *zhaobi* provide substantive proof of their auspicious nature by incorporating suitable symbols or images. The calligraphic character, *fu*, which means good fortune or blessing, is an effective way of encompassing various kinds of good wishes, and this is what villagers generally do in Jianchuan (fig. 3). Symbols, like the sun, the moon, dragon, turtle, peony, deer and pine tree, have particular meanings and also appear on *zhaobi*.<sup>26</sup>



Fig. 3. *Zhaobi* with “福” (image by author)

### Third Phase: *Zhaobi* Reused as a Symbol of Identity

In the majority of China, the function and meaning of *zhaobi* dominating the second phase has been inherited uninterrupted. However, a noticeable phenomenon is that its original function of marking family identity seems to have been rejuvenated by a regional ethnic group - the Bai. This group lives in South-western China in Yunnan province and is officially recognized as the Bai.

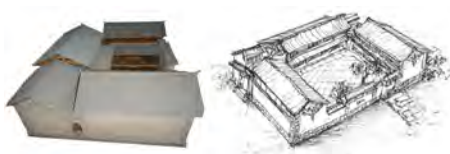


Fig. 4. Model and sketch of *Sanfang Yi Zhaobi* (image and drawing by author).

Their houses are commonly called *Sanfang Yi Zhaobi* (三坊一照壁) which means three buildings and one *zhaobi*. *Zhaobi* has been an indispensable part of the Bai for many centuries and even today, if it is affordable, the family will construct a *zhaobi* in their house. Essentially, the home of the Bai is usually a courtyard house. Around the central courtyard are three lines of buildings forming a U shape and the open side is enclosed by a *zhaobi* to form a quadrangle (fig. 4).

The Bai like to write a family story on the *zhaobi*. This phenomenon is especially prevalent around the administrative and political centre of the Bai, along the Erhailake. Stories are written to

<sup>25</sup> According to the author's survey.

<sup>26</sup> For example, the symbols of turtle and pine tree represent long life; the peony and deer represent wealth.



represent particular families in the neighbourhood and local people are able to recognize the family name of the house owner from the story on the *zhaobi*. Usually, the family story will be summarized into four characters. Among many examples, *Qinhejiasheng* (琴鹤家声), literally means a zither and a crane<sup>27</sup> and represents the family of Zhao (赵). Zhao Bian was a government official who was honest and frank, serving people with undivided attention. He was not rich but he was respected as an ancestor of the Zhao family in the Bai region because he was of good taste and he always brought his zither and crane with him. His inheritance to his descendants was simply the zither and the crane.<sup>28</sup> Consequently, the Zhao families used these two objects to identify themselves and set a model for descendants.



Fig. 5. *Zhaobi* of the Zhang family with "百忍家风" (image by author).

Other examples include the Zhangs (张) who adopted the writing on *zhaobi*, *bairnjenjafeng* (百忍家风) as the symbol of their family, literally meaning a family tradition of tolerance (fig. 5). There were nine<sup>29</sup> generations living together at Zhang Gongyi's home. In theory, many conflicts could be expected because of contrasting ages and lifestyles, but the family of Zhang lived in harmony. Zhang Gongyi's secret to managing such a big family was tolerance and magnanimity.

Apart from writing family stories on *zhaobi*, the Bai use the walls to symbolise family identity in many other ways. In the town of Xi Zhou, Dali state, Yunnan province, Bai who have gained honour (such as an outstanding rank gained from imperial examinations or exceptional performance in the national army) record the experience on their *zhaobi*. In Nuo Deng, villagers recalled an incident which happened in about 2011. A young villager was accepted by one of China's best universities and her family built a *zhaobi*, which was similar to the one at the home of an ancient *Jinshi* (进士, a successful candidate in the highest imperial examinations). Patriarchs of that village took the newly built *zhaobi* as a disrespectful construction, because they felt that the characteristics of that particular *zhaobi* were reserved for the family of *Jinshi*. Eventually the university student's family modified their *zhaobi*.

27 In ancient China, zither and crane (a bird) are inexpensive, but are generally regarded as elegant and graceful.

28 Tuo, Tuo 脱脱, Su Shi 宋史 [A History of the Song Dynasty] (Zhong Hua Shu Ju, 1985); Shen, Kuo 沈括, Meng Xi Bi Tan 梦溪笔谈 [Dream Pool Essays] (Shanghai Guji Chubanshe, 2013). Also see inscription on the painting named *Zhao Bian with His Zither and Crane*.

29 Maybe the number of generations has been exaggerated, but it is not important to the theme of this paper.

For the Bai, *zhaobi* is not only an important symbol for marking the family's identity and history, but it also possesses a power to guide people's behaviour in everyday life. In the town of Jian Chuan, Dali state, Yunnan province, the elderly frequently kowtow and burn joss sticks piously in front of the *zhaobi* (fig. 6). Moreover, if a stranger shows interest in a house's *zhaobi*, its owners are generally keen to relate their family history to the unfamiliar person. This is a common phenomenon experienced by the author. In some friendly families, the owners even bring their genealogical records out in order to present more exhaustive stories.



Fig. 6. Old lady finishing her worship in front of the *zhaobi* (image by author).

The Bai could be regarded as the ruling class in the Yunnan area and this might be a reason for the Bai's own emphasis of *zhaobi* translation. The Bai are comparatively more powerful in population, history and politics than the other 25 ethnic groups in Yunnan. More than 80% of the 1.86 million Bai people in China live in Yunnan province<sup>30</sup> and they have a long history which can be traced to 2000 BC.<sup>31</sup> The Bai established local authority and ruled other ethnic groups in Yunnan. Initially, in 902 AD, they founded the Bai Zi Kingdom<sup>32</sup> and in the following 1000 years, they successively established the Nan Zhao and Da Li Kingdoms. Their prominent status enabled the Bai to communicate more frequently with central China and, at the same time, focus on building their own style of architecture. The Bai's ethos and confidence can be determined from the architecture details manifested in their *zhaobi*.

However, this is not the whole story. At a deeper level, *zhaobi*, contrarily, also signifies that the Bai lacked real political power and attempted to establish their own identity by pretending to be Han, which has been the dominant population in China, ruling the country for thousands of years. The Bai only account for 0.13% of China's population. During the Bai's lengthy history, mainly because they possessed a little political power, they were fiercely suppressed by the Han, especially in the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644 AD).<sup>33</sup> Therefore, the Bai are psychologically awed by the Han. Family stories written on Bai *zhaobi* often cite the classics of the Han and most so-called Bai ancestors are actually

30 The population data is from the Census Office of the State Council, *Zhongguo Diwu Renkou Pucha De Zhuyao Shuju* 中国第五次人口普查的主要数据 [Data from the Fifth Population Census in China] (Beijing: Zhongguo Tongji Press, 2000).

31 Zhang, Zhenke et al., "Lacustrine Records of Human Activities in the Catchment of Erhai Lake, Yunnan Province," *Acta Geographica Sinica* 55, no. 1 (2000).

32 Yang, Zhonglu *The Treatises on Culture of Nanzhao Kingdom* (Yunnan People's Publishing House, 1991); Aimin Yang, "Reconsideration of the Causes of the Tianbao War," *Journal of Kunming Teachers College* 30, no. 1 (2008): 64-67.

33 Duan, Yuming 段玉明, *Da Li Guo Shi* 大理国史 [A History of Dali Kingdom] (Yunnan Renmin Chubanshe, 2003), 66-92.

from the Han group.<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, during census (recorded in 1808 AD), many native-born Bai claimed that they had migrated from central China, a wealthier Han-dominated area.<sup>35</sup> The author thus suggests that, on the one hand, the revival of *zhaobi* in the Bai region displayed the minority group's notable power and confidence about their identity. On the other hand, paradoxically, the increased assertiveness of their architecture and its actual contents, especially regarding the *zhaobi*, compensated in practice for a lack of real power to underpin their own identity.

## Conclusion

Between different social groups and over extended periods of time, the invisible power lying beyond physical architecture has been translated in many ways. The patterns of change in *zhaobi*'s meaning was not directly embodied through its physical expression, but more accomplished by non-material changes, such as laws, conventions, rituals, stories, poetry and designations. Through these means, the needs of different social groups have been accommodated with *zhaobi* being a special example of how architectural translation has occurred in traditional Chinese architecture.

This case study of *zhaobi* in pre-modern Chinese architecture, and its prolonged life in the houses of Bai, shows that the potency of architectural meaning lies not in the variation of form but in the way in which a particular meaning is attached to the same form. Unlike the modern doctrine of *zeitgeist* - new form must be invented to represent the change of time and fashion - the "translation" of *zhaobi* in time and space provides a timely lesson to understand the interaction between the occupation of an architectural form and the intended meaning of it, within which any "translation" of the intended meaning does not necessarily depend on the physical change of form. This study may add a salutary dimension to the pursuit of sustainability in our time - the static nature of the built form and *zeitgeist* are not, and should not be, mutually exclusive.

## Acknowledgements

This paper has been made possible through the exceptional editorial assistance of Dr John Blair. I wish to express my heartfelt gratitude towards my supervisor, Professor Xing Ruan for his invaluable suggestions and help.

---

34 Jinpeng Zhang and Yunji Cun, *Baizu Juju Xingshi De Shehui renleixue Yanjiu* 白族聚居形式的社会人类学研究 [a social anthropological study on the inhabitant form of the Bai] (Yunan Meishu Chubanshe, 2002), 97.

35 *Dian Xi-Dian Gu Xi Liu-Mu Ying Zhuan* 滇系·典故系六·沐英传 [Yunnan - the classic volume six - the story of Mu Ying] (1808), 32.