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The Journal of Architecture

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rjar20

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To cite this article: Mengbi Li (2020) The evolution of the *zhaobi*: physical stability and the creation of architectural meaning, The Journal of Architecture, 25:1, 45-64, DOI: 10.1080/13602365.2020.1734049

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/13602365.2020.1734049

Published online: 18 Mar 2020.

The evolution of the *zhaobi*: physical stability and the creation of architectural meaning

The *zhaobi* is a piece of wall that usually stands at the entrance to the traditional Chinese courtyard. This simple and seemingly unnecessary structure ironically has a 3000-year history and is still in use today. Throughout this long history, the *zhaobi*, despite minor variations to its physical form, has been used by a variety of social classes and ethnic groups. How has the *zhaobi* retained its long-lasting charm and attracted different users? This study seeks to address this question by providing a comprehensive analysis of its history. This analysis reveals that the *zhaobi* experienced an evolution over at least three phases. Each phase bestowed on the *zhaobi* a different meaning by means of a fascinating process that includes finding new practical and ritual uses for it, and endowing it with new connotations as portrayed in art and literature. This paper demonstrates that the constantly evolving meanings of the *zhaobi* have contributed strongly to its enduring popularity, allowing it to adapt to a range of users and find a place in different cultures and societies.

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Introduction

As a wall at the entrance of traditional Chinese courtyards, the *zhaobi* has always been a prominent feature. It is popularly defined as a barrier at the gated entrance to maintain protection from visual intrusion. Culturally it is said to provide a protective shield, preventing bad spirits from entering.[1] The *zhaobi* has very long history and is still in use today. Curiously, literature rarely seeks to explain its longevity and enduring vitality. Throughout its 3000-year history, from one generation to another, what has been the fascination of this simple piece of wall? After all, if it were just a means of concealment, it is highly likely that the *zhaobi* would have been replaced with other structures or spatial configurations created for the same purpose.

The answer to these questions must be found in the history of the *zhaobi,* but there is very little information available and it is widely dispersed. This challenge can also be an opportunity, because even though the information from architec-

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tural remains is limited, those few relevant records that can still be collected from laws, ritual documents, paintings, folklore, and artefacts from each period reflect in detail the interactions between the *zhaobi* and its inhabitants. After examining available records, this research found its information from different types of sources that were dominant during different periods. A researcher might conclude that a phased change in the nature of the sources referring to the *zhaobi* reflects a phased evolution in the nature of the structure. The first objective would be to identify any physical evidence of a phased change in the *zhaobi's* appearance, but none of any consequence could be found. This suggests that any changes to the nature of the *zhaobi* must have been in its use, significance, and context rather than its appearance.

The present study proceeds to cross-check this suggestion against the historical relationships between the *zhaobi* and its users in each phase. Closer inspection supports the contention that the *zhaobi* experienced a phased evolution, with at least three distinct stages. The paper identifies a first phase of symbolising authority, a second phase of representing idyllic pursuit, and a third phase of affirming family tradition. What is fascinating about this evolution is that the *zhaobi*'s meaning was radically altered in each phase. The renewed meanings rejuvenated the *zhaobi*, allowing it to accommodate different groups of users and adapt to each period.

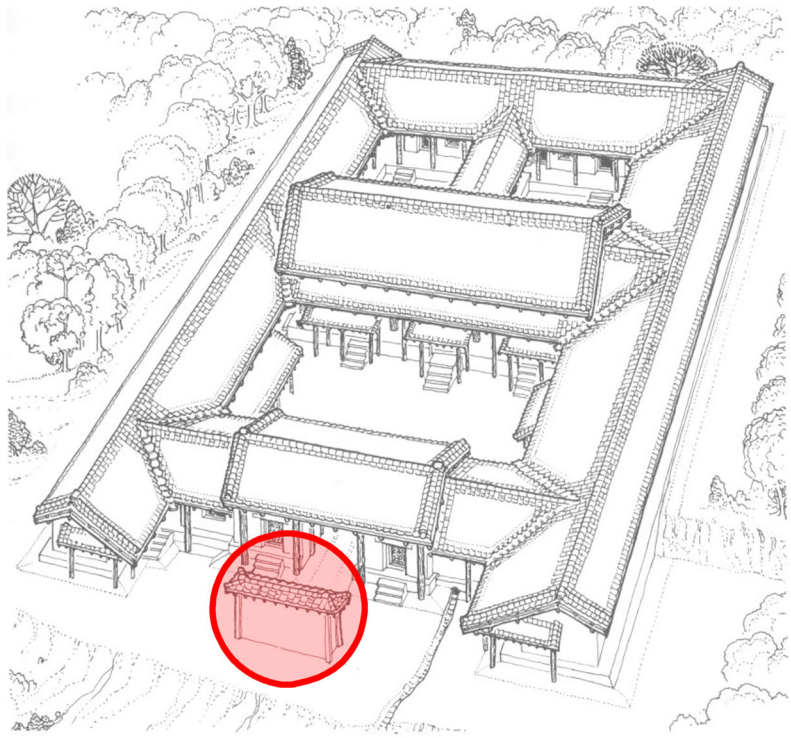

Figure 1.
Restored picture of Fengchu Architectural Relics of the Western Zhou dynasty 1046–771 BCE, Fu Xinian, *Fu Xinan Jianzhushi Lunwenji* (Beijing: Wenwu Chubanshe, 1998), p. 41.

Figure 2.
Left, the *zhaobi* of the Baba Islamic Temple, Sichuan Province, China, built in 1684 CE (photograph by the author); right, the *zhaobi* of Shouqiu, Qufu, China, built in 1992 CE (photograph by Vmenkov).

The *zhaobi* as a symbol of authority

Three thousand years ago, the Western Zhou dynasty's *zhaobi* (Fig. 1) was not very different from the *zhaobis* (Fig. 2) being built today. Even this ancient *zhaobi* (Fig. 1) presents a familiar form: it is located at a gateway and stands 4 m in front of the main entrance of a courtyard house.[2]

The oldest *zhaobi* found today was built in the early years of the Western Zhou dynasty (1046–771 BCE). At that time, the *zhaobi* was rare in China and its use was restricted. The oldest *zhaobi* was at the entrance of archaeological remains in Fengchu, Qishan, Shanxi province (Fig. 3). It was covered with a wooden roof and located 4 m in front of the main entrance of a courtyard. The wall was made of rammed earth and mortared by a mixture of lime, clay, and sand. This courtyard was part of an important royal building. A former national archives administration was housed in the courtyard's west wing, where texts relating to national politics, economics, and military affairs were inscribed on turtle plastrons and animal bones. Premium quality building materials were used, including a type of specially burned red earth and the mixture of lime, clay, and sand.

As reflected through the records, the use of the *zhaobi* was regimented by social conventions and laws. The Western Zhou dynasty was a strictly hierarchical period. The king had sovereign powers that were legitimised through the Mandate of Heaven. This authority seems to have been absolute and divine in origin, but somewhat ironically it resorted to architecture to express itself and maintain its status. For example, the rule was for the pillars of kings' houses to be coloured red, while local feudal princes used black, and chancellors dark cyan and white.[3] Construction techniques were also codified: timbers prepared for a king had to be cut, planed, and polished. For local feudal princes, the timbers needed to be cut and planed, whilst for chancellors, they were simply cut.[4] The use and construction of the *zhaobi* was regulated, with only the king allowed to erect a *zhaobi* outside his gate. Local feudal princes had to place theirs behind the gate and chancellors were allowed to use curtains, but not *zhaobis*.[5]

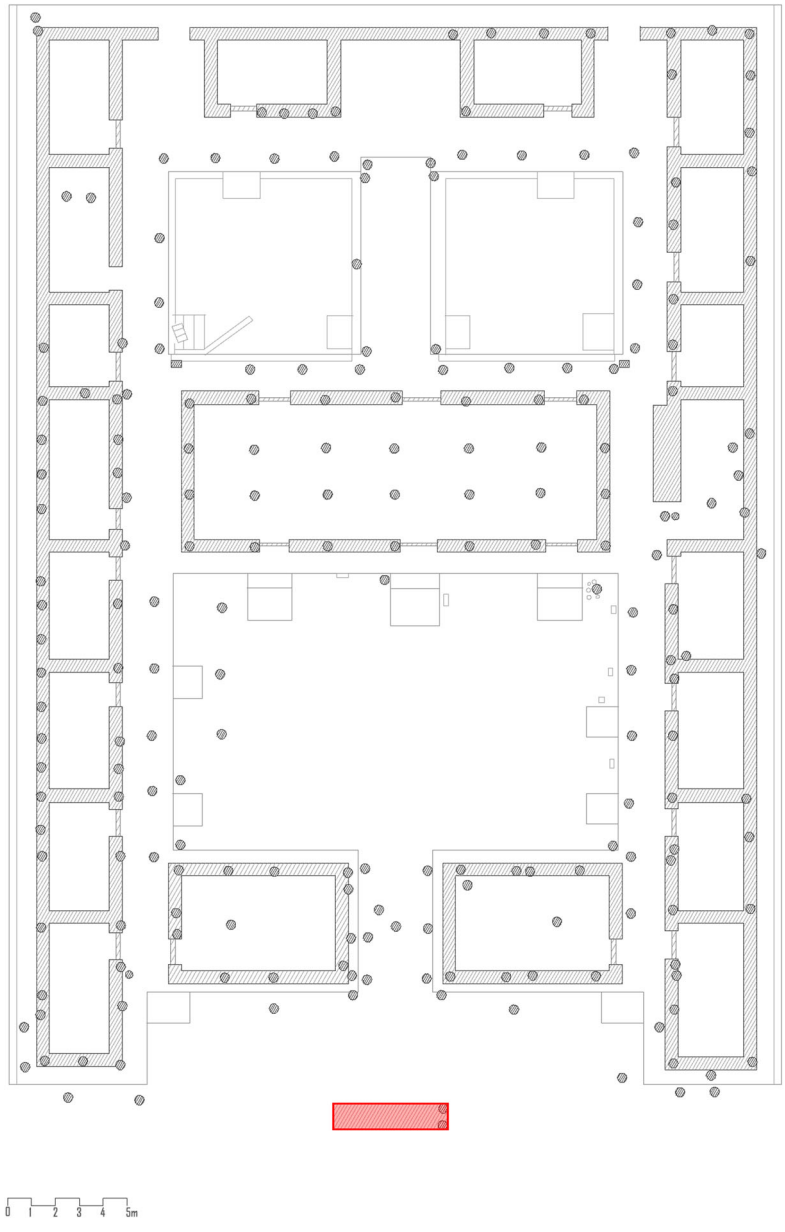

Figure 3.
The floor plan of Fengchu Architectural Relics of the Western Zhou dynasty (redrawn by the author).

The special status of the *zhaobi* was not only validated by the restrictions put on its use but was also enhanced by its ritual capacity for creating a formal atmosphere. The *zhaobi*'s early primary purpose was to serve as a privilege exclusive to the ruling classes. The *zhaobi* was termed as *xiaoqiang* 萧墙.[6] This comes from a combination of two Chinese characters: *xiao* 萧 and *qiang* 墙. The meaning of the second character *qiang* 墙 was wall.[7] *Xiao* 萧 was equiv-

alent to another character *su* 肃 meaning serious, solemn, respectful and discreet.[8] In practice, the literal meaning of *su* 肃 mirrors *xiaoqiang*'s role as a wall of solemnity and respect accorded to the ruling classes.

Ancient scholars such as He Yan and Liu Xi depicted the *zhaobi*'s original role of symbolising political power in their writings. He Yan (195–249 CE) was a respectable scholar and politician. Even as a child, he showed an understanding of etiquette and literature. Impressed by young He Yan, the local federal prince of the Wei vassal state brought him up as his son. As a result, He Yan was quite familiar with the living conditions and rituals of the ruling class. His status and background knowledge also provided him with a comprehensive understanding of the *zhaobi*, both of its literal significance and of its role as a symbol of political power. He Yan wrote in *Lunyu jieji*: '*Xiaoqiang* is regarded as a screen. *Xiao* 萧 is *su* 肃. To respect the etiquette between the monarch and his subjects during a meeting, the *zhaobi* is positioned in such a way as to impose an atmosphere of seriousness and formality, so it is called *xiaoqiang* 萧墙.'[9] Another scholar, Liu Xi (?–160 CE) was a glossary expert of the Han dynasty. In *Shiming,* a classic work looking 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 by its physical presence but also through the symbolic power of the *zhaobi*.

The ancient *zhaobi* demanded respect. According to ancient etiquette, visitors were expected to prepare themselves with reverence once they saw a *zhaobi* at the gate. As a result, another term referring to the *zhaobi* came into common use during the Han dynasty (206–220 BCE). The term was '*fusi*' 罘罳, evoking the symbolic function of the *zhaobi*. *Fu* 罘 means 'again' or 'once more', and *si* 罳 means 'think' or 'reflect'.[10] To quote from *Gu jin zhu* (An Interpretation of Classics, published between 265–420 CE):

> If a minister comes and wishes to address the monarch […] once the minister steps into the gate behind a *zhaobi*, he needs to consider carefully how he will report. *Fusi* 罘罳 means stop and think again so you are able to prepare yourself with due gravity.[11]

Following the set rules for meeting the king, even local feudal princes needed to kneel behind the *zhaobi*. This would apply on the more solemn occasions, for example during the autumn rituals when feudal princes paid a visit to the king, as recounted by *Jingli* 谨礼 [Salute], a book about the etiquette for meetings in the Zhou dynasty.[12]

The *zhaobi's* association with royal authority receded during the Spring and Autumn period (770–476 BCE), largely due to the loss of political power of the king over this period. At the end of the Western Zhou dynasty in 771 BCE, the country was invaded by the Quanrong and the court experienced internal conflicts. King You was killed, and the new king Ping was forced to abandon the capital city of Haojin, fleeing to Luoyi in the east, where he established a regime known as the East Zhou dynasty. Whilst retaining its nominal power, the diminished royal family then controlled just a small tract of land. Meanwhile, the fiefdoms gained in authority and gradually formed new regimes that severely contested royal authority.[13] Even though the *zhaobi* was still a symbol of power and identity, its rules were occasionally challenged.

In *The Analects of Confucius*, when referring to the qualities of the *Li* (ritual), [14] Confucius criticises a non-royal dignitary's misuse of the *zhaobi*. As senior chancellor of Qi state, Guan Zhong was not entitled to build a *zhaobi,* but he did so anyway. Confucius viewed Guan's behaviour with sarcasm:

> Only the ruler of a state can erect a screen at his gate; but Guan Zhong too has set a screen at his gate. […] If you say that Guan Zhong knew the ritual, then who does not know the ritual?[15]

During those war-shattered years, a number of fiefdoms gained their independence. Often contemporary literature would use subtle ways to suggest that a particular state was in crisis. The *zhaobi* was usually used as a metaphor for a ruler's court. 'Behind the *xiaoqiang* (the ancient term of the *zhaobi*)' meant 'within the ruler's own court'.

Two students of Confucius were acting as consultants for a powerful family, the Ji, who governed most of Lu state. These two students came to Confucius (c. 551–479 BCE) seeking his opinion over the Ji family's plan to attack the small dependent state of Zhuanyu. They explained that Zhuanyu was strongly fortified and close to the Ji family's territory. It was felt that, if they did not occupy Zhuanyu, there would be trouble for the later generations. Confucius advised his students that, for the time being, any trouble for the descendants of the Ji family would come not from Zhuanyu, but rather from within the confines of their own court where there was division and strife. To express this, Confucius used a metaphor. He said their trouble was behind the Ji family's own *zhaobi* (*xiaoqiang*).[16]

When Han Feizi (c. 280–233 BCE) explained how a ruler should manage his country, he said the ruler should focus on more than just the city walls. Once he has fortified the borders of his country, the ruler should concentrate on what goes on behind his own *zhaobi*.[17] Han Feizi used the trouble behind the *zhaobi* as a literary trope for infighting within the ruler's own court.

The *zhaobi* as a symbol of serenity

Around the Tang (618–906 CE) and Song (960–1279 CE) dynasties, the *zhaobi* assumed the meaning of serenity. More people began to build *zhaobis*, and their symbolic meaning and function changed gradually with this democratisation. Because of the artistic and literary background of its new users, the *zhaobi*'s former role as an instrument of authority was weakened. Rather than a forbidding built form inspiring respect, the *zhaobi* had become approachable and appeasing. The *zhaobi* was regarded as an elegant architectural accessory appearing in poems, articles, and paintings. It was usually portrayed as a reflection of the owner's artistic tastes and an auspicious omen. In a broader sense, the *zhaobi* was seen as bringing good fortune to the household and it became a reflection of people's lives. It grew in significance to symbolically represent prosperity and long life. According to the theory of *feng shui*, the *zhaobi* was developed as a protective agent to defend a household against evil spirits and retain the *qi*.

The new meaning of the *zhaobi* was derived from the specific context of the Tang and Song dynasties. Over this period, a national recruitment system gained prominence where government officials were selected on the basis of their

imperial examination results rather than on the closeness of their blood ties with the imperial or royal family. This gave rise to an influential class: the Chinese scholar-official or scholar-bureaucrat. The literati, including artists, won significant respect and had a profound impact on society at this time. It is noted that the time when the imperial system was established is still being debated today. For example, scholars such as Huang Yanpei, Homer H. Dubs, and Franklin W. Houn contend that the Han dynasty emperors were the first to select officials by recommendation and on examination results.[18] Fan Wenlan holds the view that the recruitment system dates back to the Sui dynasty (581–618 CE) as the selection system was refined between 605 and 607 CE, but He Zhongli points out that it is difficult to define which senior officials were selected through the examination process.[19] Despite the debate around the starting time of the system, it is uniformly acknowledged that this system was consolidated and gained influence in the Tang and Song dynasties.

When the literati gained access to the *zhaobi*, it became a tool for artistic expression in the Tang dynasty. In the Song dynasty it was given another name, *yingbi* 影壁, *ying* 影 meaning shadow or image and *bi* 壁 meaning wall. Deng Chun, a scholar of the Southern Song dynasty (1127–1279 CE) recorded the origin of this term in *Huaji* (*A History of Chinese Painters Between 1074 and 1171 CE*).[20] While Guo Xi (a painter of the Northern Song dynasty (960–1127 CE)) was admiring a wall painted with landscape drawings by Huizhi (Yang Huizhi, an artist of the Tang dynasty), he was suddenly inspired. He began to paste mud onto the wall by hand, giving the wall an undulating effect of ripples. When the mud dried and solidified, he painted the wall following the shape of the daubed mud, thus creating a magical effect of mountains and forests. He went on to draw figures and pavilions in the landscape. The rugged surface projected shadows and gave the picture a three-dimensional appearance. Subsequently, painters coined a new name for the *zhaobi,* the *Yingbi* (a wall of shadows).

As well as paintings, the ancient Chinese literati also inscribed poems on their *zhaobis*. Generally, drawing and versifying were the favourite pastimes of this social class. In *Quan Song Ci*, the introduction to Guo Yingxiang's *Xijiangyue* depicted a scene where Guo was enjoying a lively birthday party. There happened to be a *zhaobi* at the place where the party was being held, so Guo composed a poem to mark the occasion and inscribed the poem on the *zhaobi*.[21] This custom is still current in some parts of China and one can frequently see paintings and poems on *zhaobis*.

In the literature of the Tang and Song dynasties, literati portrayed the *zhaobi* as an emblem of good fortune. Han Yu (768–824 CE) was a prominent intellectual, thinker and politician in the Tang dynasty. In 792, he was selected to the position of official through the imperial examinations. In 803, he was demoted to the position of magistrate in the remote southern area of Yangshan. During this frustrating hiatus, Han Yu kept closely in touch with the monk Wenchang. In a poem that Han Yu sent Wenchang, he described how he received the news of an upcoming promotion. He interpreted seeing a scorpion on a *zhaobi* as an invitation to return to the capital city in the north.[22] At that time, it is recorded

that scorpions only appeared in the north.[23] Han recounted seeing this insect on a *zhaobi* as a way of announcing the change of his status.

As there are no surviving *zhaobis* from this period, *mingqi* (pottery building models buried with the dead) and drawings from that time provide valuable information on the architectural form of the *zhaobi*. In a Tang dynasty tomb in Shanxi province, a pottery building model was buried with the dead. According to the inscription on the gravestone, the deceased was a medium or lower level local county official. This position was usually allocated at the entry level to scholars who passed the imperial examination. The layout and architectural form of this excavated building model are shown in Fig. 4. It can be seen that there was a *zhaobi* built inside a traditional Chinese courtyard behind its main gate. Figure 5 is a section of a Song-dynasty illustration of a story in the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE), Lady Wenji Arriving Home. It portrays an urban landscape with a roofed *zhaobi* shown behind the main gate of the courtyard house. *Qianli-jiangshantu* (literally, rivers and mountains expanding for thousands of *li*) was drawn in 1113 CE and depicts the broad expanses of China. In this painting, there were two courtyards with the *zhaobis*. The *zhaobi* also appeared in *Qingmingshanghetu* (Along the River During the Qingming Festival), which was drawn in the Northern Song dynasty (960–1127 CE). All these records show that the form of the *zhaobi* was kept simple and remained almost unchanged.

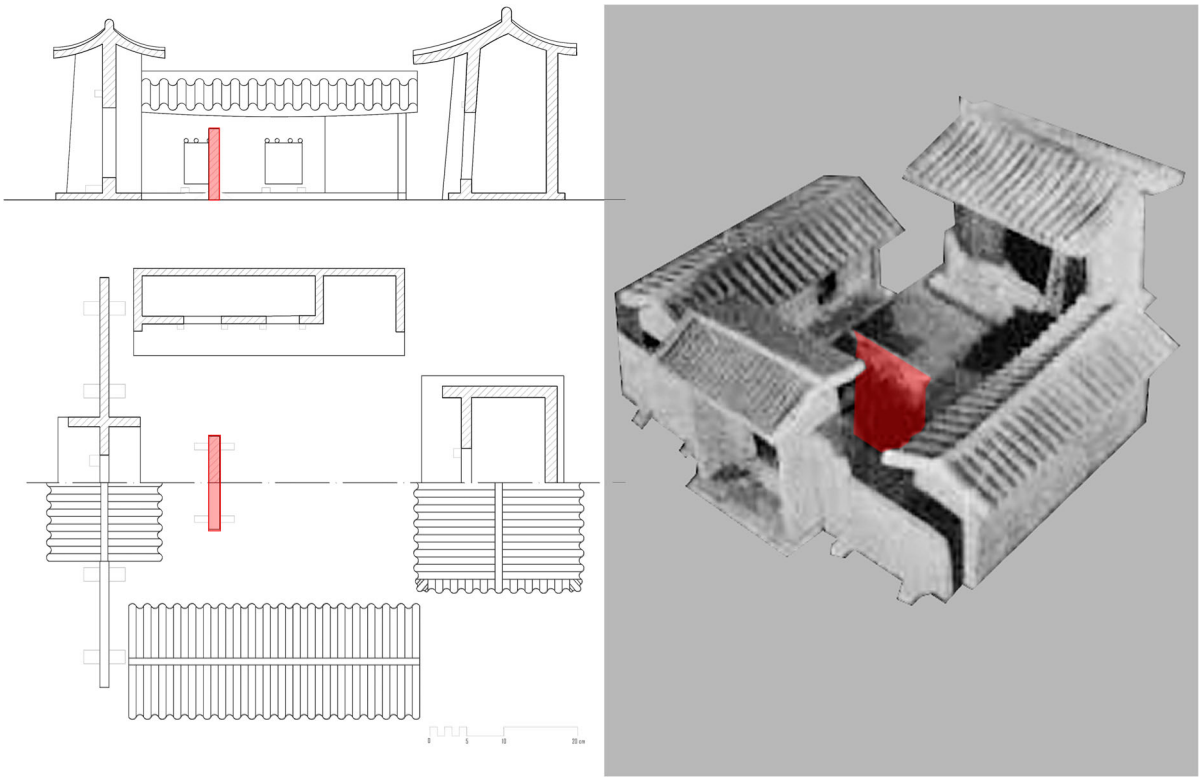

Figure 4.
The roof plan, section and three-dimensional views showing the *zhaobi* in a pottery building model buried in a Tang dynasty tomb found in Shanxi province (drawings by the author; the photograph from Shanxi archaeological team and the *zhaobi* highlighted by the author)

Figure 5.
The *zhaobi* in Lady Wenji Arriving Home (Metropolitan Museum of Art, the *zhaobi* highlighted by the author)

Many metaphysical powers and auspicious attributes have been associated with the *zhaobi*. It has been portrayed as a favourable geomantic tool for *feng shui*. In *Zang shu* (The Book of Burial), Guo Pu (276–324 CE) wrote:

> *Qi*[24] 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 *feng shui*.[25]

This means that the gathering and protecting of *qi* was regarded as an auspicious activity. *Qi* is the *sine qua non* for the Chinese building tradition. It is believed that all material and human fabric as well as a multitude of objects are composed of *qi*. In Chinese philosophy, *qi* forms the weather (wind, rain, and cloud).[26] Not only the human body but also its consciousness and spirits are maintained by *qi*.[27] This invisible element can however be retained by special walls, thus opening the way to an auspicious future. So the *zhaobi* was translated figuratively as 'protective screen' or 'spirit wall' in English.[28] In *Yangzhai shishu* (published between 1368 and 1644 CE), the protective function of the *zhaobi* wall was described as being able to divide space without completely enclosing it. The result was that auspiciousness and inauspiciousness would be kept confined to specific spaces and segregated from each other.[29] In recent dynasties, particularly during the Ming and Qing, mainstream thought associated the *zhaobi* with good fortune and used it as a tool for *feng shui*. As Knapp documented, in some places like Shanxi province, people call the *zhaobi* the '*feng shui* wall'.[30]

Figure 6.
Zhaobi with '福' (good fortune or blessing) (photographs by the author)

The myths surrounding the *zhaobi* also point to its auspicious nature. The prevailing myth about the *zhaobi* is raised in many documents like *Beyond the Great Wall*, *The Insider's Guide to Beijing, China's Living Houses* and *The Wall Behind China's Open Door*.[31] It was said that wandering ghosts or evil spirits might access houses through their entrance, so the gate was vulnerable. The *zhaobi*, however, could act as a mirror to deflect such dangerous interference. When the ghosts or evil spirits saw their own image on the *zhaobi*, they should be terrified and retreat. In this way, the house was protected. The calligraphic character, *fu* 福 (good fortune or blessing) is effective in representing various kinds of good wishes, so this is what villagers generally use (Fig. 6). Symbols like sun, moon, dragon, turtle, peony, deer, and pine tree have particular meanings.[32] They also frequently appear on the *zhaobi*.

The *zhaobi* as a manifest of family tradition

The vitality of the *zhaobi* is further demonstrated through its long standing in the architecture of the Bai. The Bai is an ethnic minority living in southwest China. Its territory is mountainous and hard to access. Given the distinctive historical and cultural background of the Bai, it seems improbable that they would

have come up with the tradition of the *zhaobi*. Nonetheless, the *zhaobi* has not only developed into a symbol of the Bai, its vitality remains undiminished until the present day. It can be argued that beyond some minor physical changes, it is the *zhaobi*'s new architectural meaning that is largely responsible for its prolonged popularity among the Bai.

The Bai's use of the *zhaobi* is so prominent that it has become indispensable to Bai architecture. Any family who can afford it will construct a *zhaobi* for their house. The Bai's houses are widely known as *sanfang yi zhaobi* 三坊一照壁 (three buildings with one *zhaobi*). Essentially, the home of the Bai is usually a courtyard house. Around the central courtyard are three rows of buildings forming a 'U' shape and the open side is enclosed by a *zhaobi* to form a quadrangle (Fig. 7). According to the locals, the popular tradition of constructing the *zhaobi* as a part of the perimeter wall is both utilitarian and economical (Fig. 8). As the Bai's *zhaobi* is usually whitewashed, it reflects light into the courtyard and the central hall. At the same time, it shields against the strong wind from the Erhai Lake, as most of the Bai houses face the lake.[33]

The *zhaobi* is believed to have spread to Bai territory as early as the Tang dynasty. *Xin Tangshu* 新唐书 (*New Standard History of the Tang*) is an official history of the Tang dynasty. This book that took 17 years to complete by a team of Song-dynasty historians, including leading scholars such as Ouyang Xiu and Song Qi. It records that the Bai's capital city in the Tang dynasty was *Yangxiemie*, located around the eastern area of today's Dali where the Bai still live today. The book provides a description of contemporary local buildings and infrastructure and states that 'after entering the gate, there is a *zhaobi*. Further inside, there is a big hall located on a high platform with steps.'[34] For the Bai, the Tang dynasty was a prosperous period. Several records show that in this period, the Bai made great efforts to learn from the Han people and even sent students to study in central China.[35] This is recorded in *Quan Tangwen* 全唐文 (*A Collection of Tang Literature*), a book of articles written in the Tang dynasty and Five dynasties period (907–960 CE). The compilation was completed by scholars sponsored by Emperor Jiaqing of the Qing dynasty. The Bai also sought to recruit Han professionals such as craftsmen,

Figure 7.
Model and sketch of *sanfang yi zhaobi* (three buildings with one *zhaobi*) (photograph and drawing by the author)

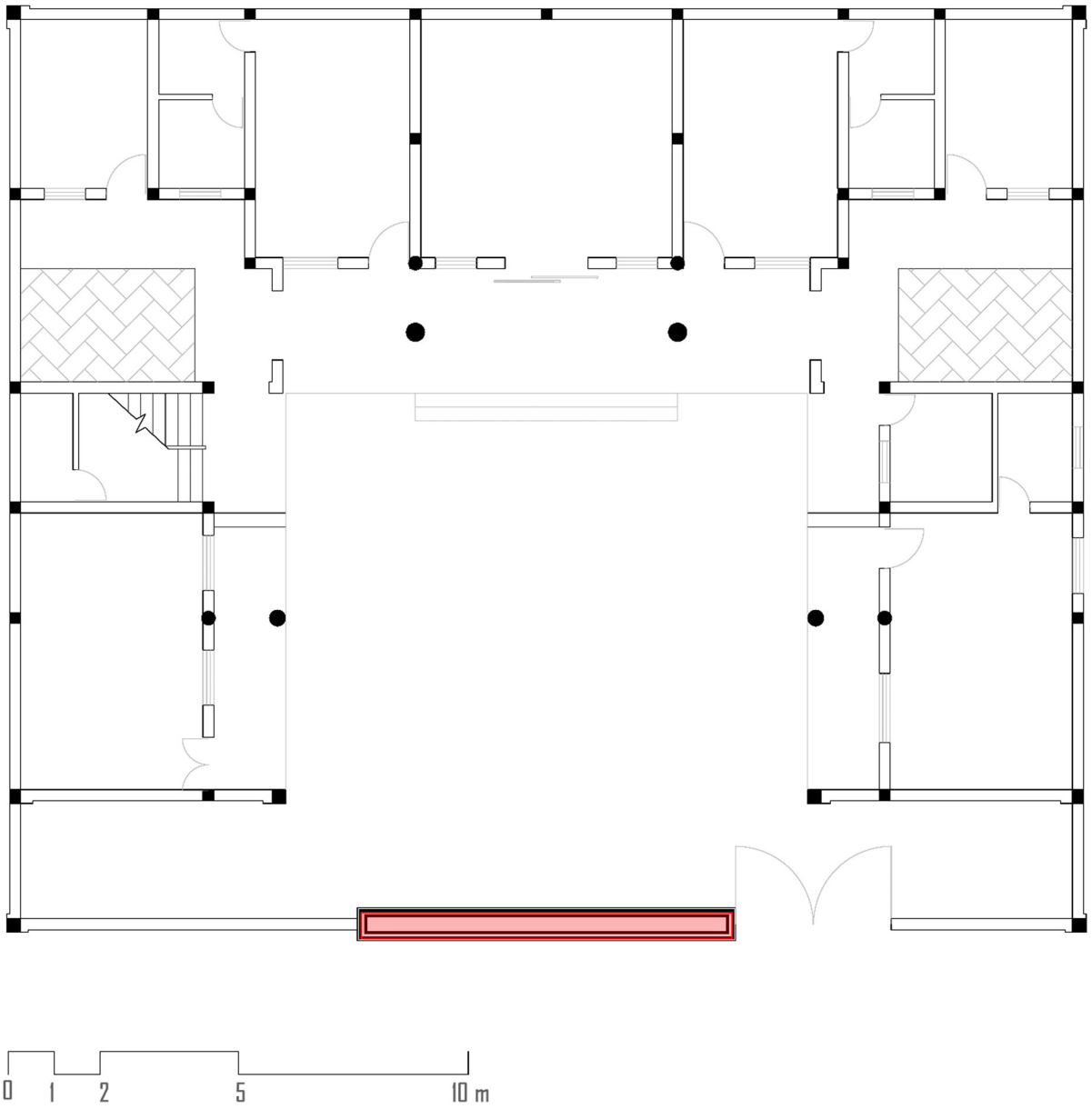

Figure 8.
Ground level floor plan of a Bai house, which is also a typical *sanfang yi zhaobi* (drawing by the author)

artists, and musicians, even using violence to convince them to move to Bai territory, which was less developed than their own.[36] Both *Zizhitongjian* and an official report documented by Li Deyu (787–850 CE) agree on this point. *Zizhitongjian* 资治通鉴 (an important source of Sui, Tang, and Wudai Shiguo history) was authored by Sima Guang, a notable historian in the Song dynasty. Li Deyu was an influential politician in the Tang dynasty.

Figure 9.
Zhaobi of the Zhao family with '琴鶴家声' (a zither and a crane) (photographs by the author)

The *zhaobi* not only gained prominence in Bai architecture but also gained a new meaning from the Bai. The Bai like to inscribe a family story on their *zhaobi*. This practice is especially prevalent in the administrative and political centre of the Bai, Dali city running along the shore of Erhai Lake. Each story relates to the family dwelling in the house. Local people are able to identify a family from the story inscribed on its *zhaobi*. Usually, the family story is condensed down to four characters. Among many examples, *Qinhejiasheng* 琴鹤家声 (a zither and a crane)[37] represents the Zhao family (Fig. 9). Zhao Bian was a frank and honest censorate who diligently served the people. He never used his authority for personal benefit and led a thrifty life. Though Zhao Bian was not wealthy, he had a good taste and always brought his zither and crane with him. Respected as an ancestor of the Zhao family in the Bai region, Zhao Bian's legacy to his descendants was simply the zither and the crane.[38] Conse-

Figure 10.
Zhaobi of the Zhang family with '百忍家风' (a family tradition of tolerance) (photographs by the author)

Figure 11.
The *zhaobi* of a *jingshi* (successful candidate in the highest imperial examinations) (photograph by the author)

quently, the Zhao family used these two objects to identify themselves and set a model for their descendants.

Other examples include the Zhangs who wrote *bairenjiafeng* 百忍家风 (a family tradition of tolerance) as their family symbol on their *zhaobi* (Fig. 10). It is said that there were nine generations[39] living together at Zhang Gongyi's home. One could have expected conflict to arise in the home because of the contrasting ages and lifestyles, but the Zhang family lived together in great harmony. Zhang Gongyi's secret to managing this big family was tolerance and magnanimity.

Apart from writing family tradition on the *zhaobi*, the Bai use the walls to symbolise their family identity in many other ways. In the town of Xi Zhou in Dali State, Yunnan province, some Bai families record honours on their *zhaobi*. The honours could be an outstanding result achieved in imperial examinations or an exceptional merit award gained in the nation's army (Fig. 11). In Nuo Deng, the villagers recall an incident from 2011. A young villager was admitted into one of China's best universities and her family built a *zhaobi* similar to the one at the home of an ancient *jinshi* (a successful candidate at the highest imperial examination). Patriarchs of the village took exception to the newly built *zhaobi,* finding it disrespectful to usurp the characteristics of a *zhaobi* believed to be reserved for the *jingshi's* family. Eventually the family of the university student capitulated and modified its *zhaobi*.

For the Bai, the *zhaobi* is not only an important symbol marking the family's tradition and identity, it also has the power to guide people's behaviour in everyday life. In the town of Jian Chuan in Dali State, Yunnan province, the elderly frequently kneel and piously burn joss sticks in front of the *zhaobi* (Fig. 12). Moreover, if a stranger shows interest in a house's *zhaobi*, its owners are usually happy to share their family history with that person. This has been a common experience for the author. In some friendly families, the owners

Figure 12.
An old lady completing her worship in front of the *zhaobi* (photographs by the author)

Table 1. The building materials of the *zhaobi* (table and photographs by the author)

Material	Examples
Adobe/rammed earth  	 
Timber 	
Stone 	
Brick  **Glazed tile finish** 	 

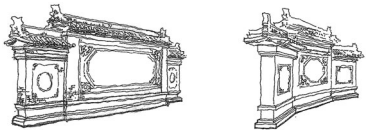

Figure 13.
Zhaobis flanked with two wings (sketches by the author)

even produce their genealogical records to showcase the history of their families.

It may be bold to assert that any individual architectural element is exclusive to a certain culture or society. Indeed, interaction in history is the very source of richness of architecture. On closer inspection into the inscriptions on Bai *zhaobis,* one may have questions about the origins of Bai family traditions. The family stories written on Bai *zhaobis* often relate classic stories of the Han. Indeed, many of the people whom the Bai respect as their ancestors seem to have Han backgrounds, such as Zhao Bian and Zhang Gongyi, the two protagonists in the ancestral stories mentioned earlier. Zhao Bian (1008–1084 CE) was born in Zhejiang province, where the majority of residents were Han, and Zhang Gongyi (578–676 CE) lived in Henan in central China.[40]

What attracted the Bai to these stories on their *zhaobi* was not the genealogical details they might contain, but rather the virtue and goodness found in the family traditions they relate. Similarly, what attracted a variety of people to the *zhaobi*, overcoming the boundaries between social classes and ethnic groups, is not the originality or complexity of its physical form but rather its profound and perpetually renewed architectural meaning.

Compared to the evolution of its meaning through the ages, the form of the *zhaobi* has remained simple, just a piece of wall with only minor changes. The materials, ornamentation, and scale of the *zhaobi* usually match those of the courtyard house. Traditional courtyard houses were often built using local materials, so *zhaobis* could be built in adobe, timber, stone, brick, etc. (Table 1). Some brick *zhaobis* may be decorated with glazed tiles. Other *zhaobis* may be flanked with a wing on either side. These two wings may be aligned with the main body of the wall or slightly kink out (Fig. 13). These features are mainly dictated by the local availability of materials and the owner's tastes and budget. Less tangible but comparatively more meaningful is the location of the *zhaobi*. For example, in the first phase of the *zhaobi*, different levels of authority were displayed by its location either inside or outside of the gate. When the authoritative connotation to the *zhaobi* faded, the position stopped being so strictly regulated. Many Bai people now choose to build the *zhaobi* as a part of the perimeter wall of the courtyard house for utilitarian and economical reasons.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that there has been a long and fascinating evolution of the *zhaobi* despite its unchanging physical appearance. Ever renewed connotations have significantly contributed to its evolution and revitalised it over its long life. The *zhaobi*'s evolution may provide some incentive to re-read traditional Chinese architecture.

The overall stationary physical nature of traditional Chinese architecture has long been recognised by many influential scholars, including Liang Sicheng (Liang Ssu-ch'eng), Pan Guxi, and Banister Fletcher.[41] This characteristic may give the impression that traditional Chinese architecture lacked variety

through the millennia.[42] The tangible evolution of the architectural form of traditional Chinese architecture appeared to be gradual and minimal, but interestingly, this apparent architectural inertia did not seem to restrain the civilisation that it was serving. Today, scholars increasingly recognise that there is a large cultural envelope that transcends the physical form of traditional Chinese architecture.[43] This suggests that a new approach to the study of Chinese traditional architecture needs to be established. As demonstrated by the evolution of the *zhaobi*, the solution lies in giving consideration to renewed architectural meaning as it applies to static physical form.

The *zhaobi*'s perpetually revitalised longevity suggests that the potency of architectural meaning does not necessarily lie in the variation of form but lies in the way the contextual meaning is attached to that same form. No architect can claim to have created the *zhaobi*. To paraphrase Bernard Rudofsky, this is truly a case of architecture without architects. Or perhaps more accurately one could say that everyone involved, by consciously or unconsciously giving the structure meaning, has a claim to authorship. Different social groups have repeatedly created new meanings for the *zhaobi* and this process served to rejuvenate it over its 3000-year life. This was not conventionally achieved through architectural design, but instead through the creation of new architectural meaning. If vernacular buildings can be recognised as architecture, what is to prevent the creation of architectural meaning being accepted as a form of architectural design?

Notes

1. See the descriptions in Piper Rae Gaubatz, *Beyond the Great Wall: Urban Form and Transformation on the Chinese Frontiers* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996); Ronald G. Knapp, *China's Living Houses: Folk, Beliefs, Symbols, and Household Ornamentation* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1999); Jeanne Boden, *The Wall Behind China's Open Door: Towards Efficient Intercultural Management in China* (Brussels: ASP, 2008); *The Insider's Guide to Beijing*, ed. by Adam Pillsbury (Beijing: True Run Media, 2008).
2. 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 [A Brief Report on the Excavation of Western Zhou Dynasty Architectural Relics, Fengchu Village, Qi Mountain, Shanxi Province', *Wenwu* 文物 [*Cultural Relics*], 10 (1979), 33–45.
3. Yang Shixun 杨士勋 and Fan Ning 范宁, *Chunqiu gu liang zhuan* 春秋-谷梁传 [*A Commentary on the Annals of the Spring and Autumn Period*] (Jinan: Shandong huabao chubanshe, 2013) (first written between 206 BCE–9 CE), p. 100.
4. Ibid., p. 101.
5. Dongfang Shu 东方朔 and Yang Liang 杨倞, *Xun Zi* 荀子 (Shanghai: Shanghai shiji chuban jituan, 2010), p. 126. *Xun Zi* is a collection of writings attributed to *Xun Zi* (c. 314 BCE–238 BCE), a celebrated thinker, politician and scholar.
6. Zhongguo shehui kexue yuyan yanjiusuo cidian bianjishi 中国社会科学院语言研究所词典编辑室 [Dictionary Department of the Institute of Linguistics, CASS], *Xiandai hanyu cidian* 现代汉语词典 [*Modern Chinese Dictionary*], 5th edn (Beijing: Shangwu yinshu guan, 2005), see under '萧墙', p. 1494.
7. Ibid., see under '墙', p. 1096.

8. Wang Junrong 王君荣, Xu Yiping 许頤平 and Chen Zihe 程子和, *Tujie yangzhai shishu* 图解阳宅十书 [*Fengshui for the Built Environment with Illustrations*] (Beijing: Hualing chubanshe, 2010), p. 277. See also in *Han Feizi*, and *Dexunmiaobei,* and *Ganshi.*
9. He Yan 何晏 and Huang Kan 皇侃, *Kongxue sanzhong Lunyu jieji yishu* 孔学三种论语解集义疏 [*Three Classics of Confucianism: Hermeneutics of the Analects*] (c. 240–249 CE), vol. 8, p. 20.
10. Liu Xi 刘熙, *Shiming* 释名 [*Explanation of Words*] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1939, originally published between 206–220 BCE), p. 15; Li Fang 李昉, *Taiping yulan* 太平御览 [*Imperial Encyclopaedia of the Taiping Era*] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2011, originally published in 984 CE), p. 189.
11. Cui Bao 崔豹, *Gu jin zhu* 古今注 [*An Interpretation of the Classics*] (Shenyang: Liaoning jiaoyu chubanshe, 1998, originally published between 265–420 CE), p. 3.
12. Dai Wei, *Guoxue yuandian daodu* 国学原典导读 [*Sinology Classics Review - Etiquette*]: *Jingli* 谨礼 [*Salute*] (Chengdu: Bashu shushe, 2003, originally published c. 770–476 BCE), p. 122.
13. Gu Derong and Zhu Shunlong, *Chunqiu shi* 春秋史 [*The History of the Spring and Autumn Period*] (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 2001), pp. 46–53.
14. *Li* is important in China. It can be understood as etiquette, proper behaviour, or ritual propriety.
15. Translation based on *The Analects of Confucius*, trans. by Simon Leys (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997), p. 13.
16. *Lunyu* 论语 [*The Analects of Confucius*], ed. by Zhang Yanying (Zhonghua Shuju, 2007, originally published between 771–256 BCE), p. 250; translation is by the author based on A. Charles Muller and James Legge's translation.
17. Tu Rihuan 涂日焕 and Cang Shengmai 仓圣脉, 'Han Feizi 韩非子 [The Complete Works of Han Fei Tzu]' in *Qinding siku quanshu* 钦定四库全书 [*Annotated Catalogue of the Imperial Library by Command*] (1773–1782), vol. 8, section 27, p. 19. *Han Feizi* is a collection of the ideas and arguments of *Han Feizi* (also known as Han Fei Tzu, c. 280–233 BCE).
18. In 196 BCE, Emperor Gaozu of the Han dynasty began a new system for selecting officials by recommendation and examination. Following Gaozu, in 134 BCE, Emperor Wu of the Han dynasty implemented Minister Dong Zhongshu's proposal and used Confucianism as the basis for the imperial examination. Huang Yanpei 黄炎培, *Zhongguo jiaoyu shi yao* 中国教育史要 [*A History of Chinese Education*] (Shanghai: Shangwu yinshu guan, 1930), p. 28; Homer H. Dubs, *The History of the Former Han Dynasty* (Baltimore, MD: Waverly Press 1938), p. 259; Franklin Houn, 'The Civil Service Recruitment System of the Han Dynasty', *Tsing Hua Journal of Chinese Studies*, 1 (1956), 138–64.
19. In 605, Emperor Yang of the Sui dynasty started encouraging local talent to sit for the examination. Fan Wenlan 范文澜, *Zhongguo tongshi jianbian* 中国通史简编 [*A Brief History of China*] (Shanghai: Renmin chubanshe, 1955), pp. 262–72; He Zhongli 何忠礼, 'Kejuzhi qiyuan bianxi 科举制起源辨析 [An Analysis of the Origin of the Imperial Examination System],' *Lishi yanjiu* 历史研究 [*A Study of History*], 2 (1983) (p. 8).
20. Deng Chun 邓椿, *Huaji* 画继 [*A History of Chinese Painters Between 1074 and 1171 CE*] (Shanghai: Renmin meishu chubanshe, 1964), p. 119. Originally published in the Southern Song dynasty between 1127–1279 CE.
21. Guo Yingxiang 郭应祥 (1158 CE—?), 'Xi jiang yue 西江月', in *Tangsongci baike dacidian* 唐宋词百科大辞典 [*The Encyclopaedia of Tang and Song Poems*], ed. by Wang Hong 王洪 (Beijing: Xuyuan chubanshe, 1990), p. 209.
22. Han Yu, *Song wenchangshi beiyou,* 送文畅师北游 [*To Wenchang on a Trip North*] (c. 806) in Wang Boda 王伯大 and Zhu Xi 朱熹, *Bieben hanwen kaoyi* 别本韩文考异 [*An Analysis of Han's Works*] (c. 1127–1279), vol. 2, p. 20.

23. Han Yu stated that there were no scorpions in the south (see Ibid.) *Peiwen yunfu* 佩文韵府, mentions on three occasions that books written in the Tang dynasty would affirm that there were no scorpions in the south. Chen Tingjing 陈廷敬 and Zhang Yushu 张玉书, *Peiwen yunfu* 佩文韵府 [*Rhyming Treasury of Peiwen Library*], 444 vols. (1711), vol. 1, section 2, p. 9; vol. 37, section 5, p. 47; vol. 9 5, section 6, p. 31. *Peiwen yunfu* is the most comprehensive imperial premodern dictionary of phrases arranged under the rhyme. *Peiwen Zhai* was the name of the Kangxi Emperor's library.
24. *Qi* is similar to the Greek *pneuma*. *Qi* has many broad meanings in Chinese culture.
25. Guo Pu 郭璞, *Zang shu* 葬书 [*Book of Burial*], trans. by Stephen L. Field (Taipei: Huaning chubanshe, 2010), pp. 358–59.
26. Guo, *Book of Burial*, pp. 588–92, 96–98; 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), pp. 28–31.
27. Barbara Hendrischke, *The Scripture on Great Peace: The Taiping Jing and the Beginnings of Daoism 3* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2007), p. 190.
28. Knapp, *China's Living House*, p. 68.
29. Wang, *Fengshui for the Built Environment with Illustrations*.
30. Knapp, *China's Living Houses*, pp. 68–72.
31. Gaubatz, *Beyond the Great Wall*; Pillsbury, *The Insider's Guide to Beijing*; Knapp, *China's Living Houses*; Boden, *The Wall Behind China's Open Door*.
32. For example, the symbols of the turtle and pine tree represent long life whilst the peony and deer represent wealth.
33. Historical literature does not explain the positioning of the Bai *zhaobi*. According to craftsman Li Guanwen and several villagers interviewed by the author during the fieldwork between 2012 and 2013 and January 2015, lighting and protection from the wind are the main concerns of the local population. This also provides some explanation of their choice in *zhaobi* design.
34. Ouyang Xiu 欧阳修, and others, *Xin Tangshu* 新唐书 [*New Standard History of the Tang*] (1060).
35. Dong Jie 董诰, Ruan Yuan 阮元 and Xu Song 徐松, *Quan Tangwen* 全唐文 [*A Collection of Tang Literature*] (1808–1814 CE).
36. Sima Guang 司马光, *Zizhi tongjian* 资治通鉴 (1084 CE); *Zizhi tongjian* is an important source of Sui, Tang, and Wudai Shiguo history.
37. In ancient China, the zither and crane (a bird) symbolise a simple but elegant and graceful life.
38. Shen Kuo 沈括, *Mengxi bitan* 梦溪笔谈 [*Mengxi's Essays*] (Guiyang: Guizhou renmin chubanshe, 1998, originally published in 1088 CE), pp. 339–40; See also Su Dongpo 苏东坡, 'Ti Li Boshi hua Zhao Jingren qinhetu ershou 题李伯时画赵景仁琴鹤图二首 [Inscription on the Painting Titled Zhao Bian with His Zither and Crane Drawn by Li Boshi]' in *Dongpo shi* 东坡诗 (Changsha: Yuelu shushe, 1992, originally published between 1037 CE—1101 CE), p. 33.
39. The number of generations may have been exaggerated, but that is not important to the theme of the study.
40. Liu Xu 刘昫, *Jiu Tangshu* 旧唐书 [*Old History of the Tang*] (941 CE), vol. 1, section 88, p. 4.
41. Liang, Ssu-ch'eng and W. Fairbank, *A Pictorial History of Chinese Architecture: A Study of the Development of Its Structural System and the Evolution of Its Types* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1984); Pan Guxi 潘谷西, *Zhongguo jianzhushi* 中国建筑史 [*A History of Chinese Architecture*] (Beijing: Zhongguo jianzhu gongye chubanshe, 2009); Banister Fletcher, *A History of Architecture on the Comparative Method*, 5th edn (London: Batsford, 1905).

42. Oskar Münsterberg, *Chinesische Kunstgeschichte* 2 (Esslingen: Paul. Neff, 1924); Fletcher, *A History of Architecture*.
43. There are several examples of this in literature. Peter Blundell Jones and Xuemei Li explain how the wind and rain bridges of the Dong go much beyond their utilitarian or physical purpose because of their rich symbolic meanings (see Peter Blundell Jones and Xuemei Li in 'What Can a Bridge Be? The Wind and Rain Bridges of the Dong', *Journal of Architecture*, 13.5 (2008), 565–84). In both Xuemei Li and Kendra Schank Smith, 'Time, Space, and Construction: Starting with Auspicious Carpentry [开工大吉] in the Vernacular Dong Dwelling', *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, 70.1 (2011) and Yun Gao and Nicholas Temple, 'The Value and Meaning of Temporality and its Relationship to Identity in Kunming City, China' (Amsterdam University Press, 2018), the authors mention how beyond the physical body of buildings, cultural meaning is honoured during the process of material preparation and construction in traditional Chinese architecture. Also see Jing Xie, 'Transcending the Limitations of Physical Form: A Case Study of the Cang Lang Pavilion in Suzhou, China', *Journal of Architecture*, 18.2 (2013), 297–324.