

Translating the Yellow Emperor's Classic of Residential Architecture (Huangdi Zhaijing)

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Abstract

This paper reflects on the author's mental journey of translating the historical Chinese text, *Huangdi Zhaijing*, or the *Yellow Emperor's Classic of Residential Architecture*, into English. It begins with an introduction outlining translation theory and defining the aim and contribution, then it follows a short background on *Huangdi Zhaijing* and its place in Chinese architectural history. Subsequently, it presents a section on textual sources and translation method, and then it offers a focused discussion of key concepts and passages from the book, while providing minor comparisons with Greco-Roman architectural history and theory. Finally, a conclusion explains the relevance of the translation for contemporary architectural scholarship, theoretical discourse, cultural heritage, and human-environment studies.

Keywords: translation studies, Huangdi Zhaijing, Fengshui, Chinese architecture, Chinese city planning, Chinese urban studies, cross-cultural studies

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1. Introduction

Translations make foreign literature accessible, fostering understanding between cultures. Translators must consider cultural nuances and context, rather than just words. Translation theory is a multidisciplinary field exploring the methods, challenges, and frameworks for conveying meaning between languages, bridging linguistic and cultural gaps. Key theories include Eugene Nida's [1] dynamic equivalence theory for Bible translation, and Hans Vermeer's [2] Skopos theory that prioritizes the purpose of the translated text in its new cultural setting.

Cultural translation is the practice of translating while respecting cultural differences, which deals with making systems of ideologies comprehensible for readers. Translation of cultures is thus linked to ethics and explains a new way of thinking, which must show the context and the stance through translated texts. The main issue that cultural translation must solve is translating a text and showing the cultural differences of the text while also respecting the source culture. The primary goal of a translator is to find conceptual equivalence between the source and target of what is meant to be translated [3].

Architectural translation functions as a form of constructive mediation rather than mere linguistic substitution. It prioritizes the reconstruction of the source language in the target culture, turning design into a living process that adapts to new contexts, rather than just providing a precise linguistic reproduction. By shifting focus from linguistic equivalence (word-for-word translation) to cultural and constructive transfer, architectural translation acts as an extension of the design process, highlighting how design intent is interpreted and modified [4].

The original text *Huangdi Zhaijing* is a historical and classic Chinese treatise on fengshui, usually called geomancy in English, and the principles of architecture. The aim of the research is to introduce and reflect on the translation of *Huangdi Zhaijing* as an important text for understanding traditional Chinese residential architecture and fengshui as a long-standing spatial and environmental framework. The manuscript is primarily a translation study, it also offers a theoretical framework on fengshui and architecture, and an interpretive essay on the significance of *Huangdi Zhaijing* for architectural scholarship. The paper connects translation, architectural knowledge, and cross-cultural interpretation that brings attention to a historically important Chinese text and highlights its possible significance for architectural thought, Chinese urbanism, heritage preservation, and contemporary environmental design discourse. The discussion of translation challenges, especially terms such as *zhai* and *mingtang*, contribute to new knowledge.

2. Huangdi Zhaijing in Chinese Architectural History

Ancient Chinese worshipped nature gods. Their main objects of worship were the gods of heaven and earth. This worship was related to the agricultural needs of the people. The gods of heaven included the gods of the four

cardinal directions: east, south, west, and north. The gods of earth consisted of the mountain god, river god, and most important, the local god. Trees were planted on the earth mound to represent the place of worship of the earth gods. The Supreme God was known in the Shang dynasty (c.1500–1066 BCE) as Di (帝), and in the Zhou dynasty (c.1066–221 BCE) as Tian (天). Being the highest of all heavenly gods, the role of Tian/Di corresponded to that of the King of the State, while the gods of the four cardinal directions could be regarded as his ministers [5]. Chinese courtyard architecture and cultural symbolism were later developed based on their reverence for nature [6–8].

Huangdi 黄帝, the legendary Yellow Emperor (also known as Xuanyuan 轩辕, reigned c.2697–2597 BCE) was a Sage-King and the reputed Ancestor of Han Chinese. According to tradition, he was exceptionally talented and knowledgeable, and fought a mighty battle against Chiyou (蚩尤, the tribal branch leader of the Jiang 姜 clan of the Yan Emperor 炎帝 Shennong 神农 clan) at Zhuolu, ultimately capturing and defeating Chiyou, and was revered as the “Son of Heaven” by the feudal lords, thus unifying China.

Regarding the *Zhaijing*《宅经》(*Classic of Residential Architecture*), or the *Huangdi Zhaijing*《黄帝宅经》(*Yellow Emperor's Classic of Residential Architecture*), some believe it was written by the Yellow Emperor, but since writing had not been fully developed in his time, the claim is implausible. The books that have been historically attributed to the Yellow Emperor, such as the *Huangdi Neijing*《黄帝内经》(*Yellow Emperor's Classic of Internal Medicine*), were in fact using his name to elevate the status of the works.

Zhaijing lists the works by Li Chunfeng (李淳风, 602–670) and Lü Cai (吕才, 600–665), among others, indicating it is a work from the Tang dynasty (618–907) or later. However, the original author is unknown. The attribution of the book to the Yellow Emperor is based on the *Complete Library of the Four Treasuries*《四库全书》.

The *Annotated Bibliography of the Four Treasuries*《四库全书总目提要》states: “*Zhaijing* consists of two volumes, and the older edition proclaims it was written by the Yellow Emperor.” The *Zhaijing* is probably the oldest surviving book on geomancy. It is listed as *Zhaijing* in the *Book of Sui*《隋书》 and the *Old Book of Tang*《旧唐书》. A text with the title of *Zhaijing* is also found in Dunhuang, although the script is different.

3. Textual Sources and Translation Method

Translation cannot be considered solely as a process of language transfer, but also as a socially responsible and ethical activity. Any attempt to translate Chinese classics into a foreign language is a daunting task, not only because Chinese language is vastly different from a Western one, but also because this classic has been found with a variety of editions. To maintain truthfulness of translation, a cross-check of three available Chinese sources was conducted to validate and ensure semantic and conceptual accuracy. The three Chinese sources are as follows:

(1) *Illustrated Yellow Emperor's Classic of Dwellings: Understanding the Way of Living in China*《图解黄帝宅经: 认识中国居住之道》by Li Shaojun [9], who cites the Chinese source as from the *Complete Library of the Four Treasuries*《四库全书》. The translator is mainly based on its appendix, however, there are found numerous typos in it. Moreover, unlike the other two online sources, this one does not contain the parts on the timing of construction, which is considered an important component of the book. The translator thus added this part in the translation based on two other online sources and cross-checked the obvious typos using her tacit knowledge that exercised her professional judgment rooted in personal experience and context, and which was acquired through her over 20 years living in China (1967–1988).

(2) Canada International Fengshui and Fortune Research Centre - *The Yellow Emperor's Classic of Dwellings* (Parts 1, 2, 3, and 4) 加拿大國際風水命理研究中心《黄帝宅经》(一、二、三、四) [10–13]. This online source contains the parts on the timing of construction; however, it looks like a shortened version of it compared with the following online source.

(3) Knowledge of Ancient Books - *The Yellow Emperor's Classic of Dwellings* (Full Text Original) 识典古籍-黄帝宅经全文原文 [14]. This website provides a more complete text on the parts of the timing of construction, as shown in smaller fonts in the original scanned classic Chinese text. Although there are also misinterpretations in its vernacular Chinese text on the website, the translator was able to cross-check with the above online source and use her tacit knowledge to make intellectual judgment for her English translation.

The translator's decision to include the full text in the original Chinese classic contributes to a more comprehensive architectural understanding of fengshui's guidance on human intervention in the construction process both in space (location/position/orientation) and time (lunar dates and hours for building activities that will result in good or bad fortune).

To achieve a more objective translation with less human subjectivity, the translator first input written vernacular Chinese (*baihuawen*) into Google Translate to make a start. However, because the machine cannot fully read or comprehend Chinese classics even with the vernacular Chinese, the translator checked and edited word-by-word for content accuracy. Most often, the translator reworked on each translated sentence several times, double-checking

with other online resources such as Baidu, especially for translating the 10 heavenly stems and 12 earthly branches of Chinese lunar tradition.

4. Discussion of Key Concepts and Passages

In *House Form and Culture*, Amos Rapoport [15] eloquently states: “house form is not simply the result of physical forces or any single casual factor; it is the consequence of a whole range of socio-cultural factors seen in their broadest terms” (p. 47). Factors such as climate, site, materials, construction and technology, may exert influences on house forms, however, physical setting only provides possibilities, not imperatives, and it is human that decides. In many societies, their organizations, moral systems, worldviews, ways of life, religion (e.g., symbols, rituals, cosmological aspects), and so on, all play determinant roles in house forms. Even when the two correspond, as with fengshui theory of China, which is sometimes related to comfort, comfort will have to be compromised if it is contrary to the cosmological aspects. Certain aspects of human behavior and the way of life are constant or have changed very little since the beginning of humanity. The evidence regarding human biological nature is much more strongly in favor of constancy than change. Therefore, the built environment of the past may still be valid to satisfy human physical, emotional, and psychological needs and meet human behavior patterns. Understanding this will have a major impact on the reinterpretation of the built environments and their significances [15].

Zhaijing discusses the concept of harmony on four different levels: harmony between humans and their dwellings; between heaven, earth, and humans; between humans and the natural world; and between humans and the universe. The book comprises two parts: Jiang River One that concentrates on the theory, and Jiang River Two that focuses on practice.

It begins by emphasizing the importance of homes: “A home is the hub where *yin* and *yang* energies interact, and it is the model where human relations harmonize.” This statement illustrates the mutual interaction between people and their living environments. It then combines the 10 heavenly stems, 12 earthly branches, and 8 trigrams to form the 24 directions to create diagrams for the *yang zhai* (home for the living) and the *yin zhai* (home for the dead). It is said that the tombs of the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1911) dynasties were all built on auspicious sites according to the 24 directions determined using a compass.

This treatise weaves together ideas about geomancy and its relationship with homes for the living and the dead. The text is detailed in that it highlights the relationships of location/position/orientation, building structures, spatial arrangements and uses. Much of the emphasis is on pointing out patterns that enhance wellbeing and good fortune, and how transgressing ancient beliefs will lead to negatives.

The thesis accentuates a comprehensive examination when selecting a construction site and analogizes a house to a human: the topography is its body, springs are its bloodlines, the land is its skin and flesh, the vegetation is its hair, the buildings are its clothes, and the doors and windows are its hat and belt. If all these things are present, it will be extremely auspicious.

Ancient Chinese believed in the concept of “divine prophecy” (气运图谶 *qi yun tu chen*). So, before undertaking any construction project, they would carefully examine the geographical conditions of the site to determine whether it was “sheltering from the wind and receiving water” (藏风得水 *cang feng de shui*), or “sheltering from the wind and gathering *qi*” (藏风聚气 *cang feng ju qi*). Then, they would choose a setting with an interaction of *yin* and *yang* energies and an excellent form and milieu. This tradition is called fengshui (风水, lit. “wind and water”), often translated into English as geomancy.

According to archaeological discoveries, fengshui originated from ancient Neolithic Chinese cultures, specifically the Yangshao and Hongshan cultures, with roots dating back approximately 4,000 to 6,000 years ago. Excavations at the Banpo settlement (Yangshao culture) revealed that homes were deliberately aligned with specific stars (such as the asterism Yingshi) for solar gain and orientation, which is considered an early form of fengshui. A grave at Puyang contains mosaics of the Dragon and Tiger (key concepts in later Form School fengshui) and is aligned along a north-south axis, suggesting that the “heaven-round, earth-square” cosmography existed very early. The initial motivation for fengshui was survival, to locate safe, protected, and auspicious, flood-free sites for settlements, dwellings, and graves, according to the principles of “wind” (dispersing) and “water” (holding). The practice was further developed and codified during the later Zhou (c. 1046–256 BCE) and Han (206 BCE–220 CE) dynasties, matured during the Tang (618–907), Song (960–1279), and Yuan (1271–1368) dynasties, and reached its peak during the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1911) dynasties.

Fengshui theory is founded on observations of the natural world and the *Yi Jing* 《易经》 (*Book of Changes*). *Yi Jing* concerns human conducts in accordance with the universe to bring good fortune. It is commonly believed that *Yi Jing* was written by the legendary Chinese emperor Fu Xi (伏羲, 2953–2838 BCE), with commentaries added

by King Wen of Zhou (周文王, 1152–1056 BCE) and the Duke of Zhou (周公旦, r. 1042–1035 BCE). Allegedly, Confucius (孔子, 551–479 BCE) also revised *Yi Jing*.

Yi Jing stipulates that everything in the universe has a fixed number of its life expectancy (定数). In modern-day terms, it means that everything is progressing according to the laws of nature. Thus, in Imperial China, important dates such as building construction, moving, civil service examination, wedding and funeral ceremonies, and so on, were consulted with an astrological expert. But for critiques such as James Legge (1815–1897, a noted Scottish sinologist and first Professor of Chinese at Oxford University during 1876–1897), who translated *Yi Jing* into English in 1882, argued that the trigrams of Fu Xi did not receive their form and meaning with a deep intention that they should serve as the basis of a philosophical scheme concerning the constitution of heaven and earth and all that is in them, just as one “finds tongues in trees, books in the running brooks, Sermons in stones, and good in everything” [16].

Although *Yi Jing* was devalued as a divination book, the fact is that *Yi Jing* is the root of Chinese philosophy, from which other ideologies, such as Daoism, Confucianism, Sunzi’s *Art of War*, traditional Chinese medicine and acupuncture, *taiji*, *qigong*, martial arts, fengshui, forecast methods, and so on, derived. Chinese culture and civilization have been interacted with it through its rise, fall, and revival.

With the spread of *Yi Jing* to the West, Leibniz (1646–1716) and Hegel (1770–1831) became the first generation of Western philosophers to rediscover the truth of *Yi Jing*. More achievements in the fields of modern sciences have proven that *Yi Jing* is the initial source of modern science and technology, particularly in computer science and binary systems. The *Yi Jing* utilizes broken (*Yin*) and unbroken (*Yang*) lines in 64 combinations, mirroring the 0 and 1 binary logic that forms the basis of computer technology.

People may gain wisdom from *Yi Jing* for almost anything, including their healthy living and career success. The international efforts for restoring the truth of *Yi Jing* as “the sum of universal law” are getting more intensive and extensive. The Chinese Ministry of Education designated Shandong University as a national center for the research on *Yi Jing*. It is the first time in history that the study of *Yi Jing* has gained support from the state government, which marks the Renaissance of Chinese culture.

Also known as *Kanyu* (堪輿), *Buzhai* (卜宅), *Xiangzhai* (相宅), *Tuzhai* (图宅), *Qingwu* (青乌), *Qingnang* (青囊), *Xingfa* (形法), *Dili* (地理), and so on, fengshui had its earliest mention of “Buzhai” in the *Classic of Poetry* 《诗经》 [9]. Afterwards, it appeared in the *Book of Documents* 《书经》 or 《尚书》, *Eight Trigrams of Yang Zhai* 《阳宅八卦》, *Complete Guide to Yin Zhai and Yang Zhai* 《阴阳宅大全》, *Illustrated Lu Ban Manual* 《绘图鲁班经》, *Imperially Endorsed Treatise on Harmonizing Times and Distinguishing Directions* 《钦定协纪辨方书》, *Astronomical Bureau’s Correct Doctrines of Fengshui* 《钦天监风水正论》, *Secret Essentials of Judging Houses* 《卜居秘髓》, and *Golden Mirror for Peaceful Living* 《安居金镜》, among others. Moreover, the diagrams and explanations of *Taiji* and *Yin Yang Bagua* in Zhou Dunyi’s (周敦颐, 1017–1073) *Taiji Diagram Explanations* 《太极图说》, were also absorbed into and applied by fengshui theory.

During the Ming and Qing dynasties, the imperial family greatly promoted fengshui, searching far and wide for auspicious burial sites. Official compilations such as the *Yongle Encyclopedia* 《永乐大典》, *Complete Library of the Four Treasuries* 《四库全书》, and *Complete Classics Collection of Ancient China* 《古今图书集成》, all include fengshui texts, making the theory well preserved and publicly available.

The basic fengshui principle is to establish an optimal balance of *yin* and *yang* on a site. It recommends waiting for “the right time, the right place, and the right people” (天时, 地利, 人和) when constructing a house, to achieve the “unity of heaven and humans” (天人合一). Fengshui advises carefully and thoroughly observe the surrounding environment to be in harmony with nature, and to modify and utilize nature to create favorable conditions for human existence, because the living environment has the greatest impact on the humankind, a good environment not only benefits human health, but also provides a stable foundation for human development.

Archaeologists have discovered that early human settlements were mostly located in basins, the plains of alluvial fans, river terraces, confluences of rivers, sandy areas along lakes, and coastal regions. These places are generally sunny, often sheltered from the wind, close to water, rich in resources, and can provide food and water for survival. These terrains can positively influence the microclimate and the local environment, which can be said favorable site patterns, likened to “acupoints” (穴 *xue*) in acupuncture. These caverns or spots are typically inward-facing basins surrounded by mountains on three or four sides, with a higher elevation in the north and lower in the south, facing the sun and away from the shade. This archetypal configuration is thought to gather and retain energy, creating best fengshui layouts conducive to human survival and development [9, 17]. Thus, fengshui combines empirical observation of patterns in the land with cultural and legal understandings of the land’s management.

In *Laws of the Land: Fengshui and the State in Qing Dynasty China*, Tristan Brown [18] argues that from the Song dynasty onward, a convergence of forces elevated fengshui to a status akin to statute within Chinese law. By

the Qing period, fengshui was deeply embedded in legal culture and governance at multiple levels. It permeated land administration and education, intersecting with official institutions rather than existing outside them. Local officials, judicial practices, cartography, and networks of technical specialists all engaged with fengshui as part of routine governance. Its principles were codified in technical manuals grounded in accumulated case experience and were practiced by experts appointed by the state. Fengshui was debated in society, invoked in disputes, and selectively recognized within legal proceedings. It informed the management of a wide range of spaces and infrastructures—houses, graves, temples, schools, government offices, commercial sites, forests, bridges, railways, telegraph lines, and mining operations—as well as the broader social logic surrounding the examination system. Qing administrators drew on fengshui to adjudicate disputes, maintain social harmony, and regulate rural life. In this context, the boundary between law and fengshui became increasingly blurred. While its economic impact is difficult to quantify, its influence was nonetheless substantial [18].

In cases involving land disputes and fengshui-related litigation, local officials documented changes in topography—mountain formations, watercourses, and subterranean “earth veins”—as well as damage to ancestral graves or disruptions caused by activities such as mining. These observations were incorporated into legal records, case reports, and maps. Such matters could not be resolved through measurement alone, yet they bore directly on social stability and public sentiment. Fengshui functioned as a kind of translational framework, rendering affective concerns—fear, unease, and perceived imbalance—into forms legible to administrative and legal processes. In this sense, it operated as a set of “laws of the land,” mediating relationships between heaven and earth, the living and the dead. Domestic spatial arrangements, for instance, were understood not only in terms of physical wellbeing but also in relation to legal and social order. Although formal legal systems changed after the fall of the Qing, these “laws of the land” proved remarkably resilient. The continued reproduction of fengshui principles in traditional dwellings reflects the persistence of a spatial logic centered on the home [18].

In “Feng-Shui Models Structured Traditional Beijing Courtyard Houses,” Ping Xu [19] analyses the influence of fengshui on the design of Beijing *siheyuan* from a historical and cultural perspective. She argues that the spatial form of Beijing courtyard houses has emulated the landforms of an ideal fengshui site, which represents the ideal fengshui habitat. The layout of Beijing *siheyuan* emphasizes orientation and position, and manifests the soundest fengshui model of placing *qi*, which is derived from the *Yi Jing*, expressing Chinese cosmological beliefs such as the *Luoshu* (Luo River Writing), *Jiugongtu* (Nine-Square Matrix), and the Postnatal *Bagua* (Eight Trigrams). Through architectural representation, these fengshui beliefs functioned in a way that reflected and reinforced the stringent stratification of traditional Chinese society and the Chinese family. Establishing the material integration and exhibiting fengshui patterns in the design of Beijing courtyard houses, the study demonstrates that traditional beliefs and popular rubrics hold great importance and influence in the design of Beijing *siheyuan* because they reflect cultural characteristics, appropriate the house into its social and historical milieu, and offer imagery shared by its inhabitants [19].

In *Fengshui Theory and Modern Residences* 《风水学与现代家居》, Luò [20] summons that modern scientists have discovered that fengshui encompasses multidiscipline, including geophysics and geomagnetic field, astronomy and meteorology, hydrogeology, landscape architecture, human life informatics, along with cosmology, philosophy, aesthetics, ethics, religion, folklore, and so on. Thus, it is a comprehensive system with rich cultural connotations.

A contemporary interpretation is that fengshui has links to landscape architecture, which is a branch of architecture extended from ecology that investigates how human activities and all the living things on earth can promote sustainable development. On the one hand, landscape architecture regards human habitat as a part of the whole ecosystem and commands that buildings should accord with the laws of ecology and coexist with it. On the other hand, landscape architecture views the ecosystem as a particular organic architecture that influences humans and requires that when selecting and planning a building site, one should consider its impacts on humans and rationally utilize, adjust, and conform to the ecosystem. It has been proved that location, material, form, scale, style, orientation, color, and so on, have either positive or negative effects on humans. Thus, fengshui theory has a resonance with landscape architecture.

A historical belief is that fengshui has connection with human life informatics. Humans are constantly affected by various earthly elements, information, and energy in the universe. As the Chinese philosopher Zhang Zai (张载, 1020–1077) in *Western Inscription* 《西铭》 states: “Heaven and earth are the parents of all organisms. Humans should coexist with all the creatures in the world; they should follow the virtues of heaven and earth, be as bright as the sun and the moon, and be in accord with the four seasons” (天称父，地称母，予兹藐焉，乃浑然中处。与天地合其德，与日月同其明，与四时合其序)。

The Unified Theory of Holographic Universe, first proposed in 1993 by Gerard 't Hooft (b.1946), has a hypothesis that the cosmos has channels; it is a network of passages through which vital energy circulates. The cosmic

channel theory is deduced from the human body channel theory that part of the human body contains holographic information of the whole body. Such a theory existed in ancient China as expressed in the phrase: “Unity of Heaven and Humans” (天人合一).

Orientation is especially important in fengshui because of the quality of sunlight, whose intrinsic property is electromagnetic wave. China situates in the northern hemisphere of the globe, in the east of the Eurasian continent, where most of its parts are in the north of the Tropic of Cancer (northern latitude 23°26'). Sunlight comes from the south all year round. This is why fengshui advocates “sitting north and facing south” (坐北朝南) or “carrying *yin* at the back and encompassing *yang* in the front” (负阴抱阳), or “with hills behind and river in front” (背山面水). It is not only for receiving sunlight but also to avoid the wind. Nevertheless, the application of this varies by latitude in China.

Sunlight provides many benefits to humans. It can give warmth in winter, and the temperature in south-facing rooms can be 1°C - 2°C higher than that of north-facing ones. It participates in the synthesis of Vitamin D in human bodies, which can prevent children from getting rickets and help elderly people strengthen their bones. A moderate amount of ultraviolet ray in sunlight can kill bacteria, especially good for people with diseases in the respiratory system. And it can improve human immunity.

The geographical location of China determines its monsoon climate. Generally, in winter there are cold currents from Siberia, and in summer there are breezes from the Pacific Ocean. However, there are variations from one latitude to another as well as from coastal areas to inland areas. Moreover, the wind directions vary with the seasons. Winds can be differentiated as the *yin* winds and the *yang* winds. East and south winds are warm that are *yang* winds and are harmless. West and north winds are cold that are *yin* winds and should be avoided; otherwise, they could chill to the bone.

For a cross-cultural comparison, the Romans likewise laid out their streets to avoid direct winds. In the *Ten Books on Architecture*, Vitruvius (flourished 1st century BCE) observes: “Cold winds are disagreeable, hot winds enervating, moist winds unhealthy” [21]. The Romans thus let the directions of their streets and alleys “be laid down on the lines of division between the quarters of two winds” and the lines of houses “be directed away from the quarters from which the winds blow, so that as they come in they may strike against the angles of the blocks and their force thus be broken and dispersed” [21].

Qi (气, vital energy) is the core concept in fengshui theory. For the Chinese, *qi* is a primary substance that all things, including humans, are made of, just as *aether* is the primary element for ancient Greeks. *Aether* was later revealed as atoms, but *qi* is not. Contrary to the common belief that *qi* refers to air or breath, it indicates the microwave radiation and celestial electromagnetic radiation from the universe, which has already been discovered by radio astronomers.

Land is very much like an antenna receiving microwave, and a large amount of this microwave forms a special gas field. In ancient China, people could not explain this phenomenon in a scientific way. So, the Chinese called it *qi*, making *qi* the most mysterious part of fengshui theory. *Qi* is the element from which the universe is originated. It changes endlessly to become mountains and water, and it moves above the air and below the earth to nourish all things.

There are various kinds of *qi*: heavenly *qi*, earthly *qi*, *yin qi*, *yang qi*, wind *qi*, water *qi*, smoke *qi*, and human breathing *qi*, all of which relate to living organisms. In fengshui, earthly *qi* is highly preferred, which refers to the size, level, soil quality, temperature, and humidity of a site. If the earthly *qi* is too strong or too weak, it may make the inhabitants feel uncomfortable, which requires the adjustment of *qi* entering from the gate, doors, or windows.

Chinese people have long recognized that there is a closed circulatory system among groundwater and surface water, wind, cloud, and rain. The hydrological cycle, or water cycle, is the continuous movement of water on, above, and below the earth's surface, powered by the sun's energy and gravity, involving changes in state (liquid, vapor, solid) and location through processes like evaporation, condensation, precipitation, runoff, infiltration, and transpiration. Water is stored in oceans, ice, groundwater, and the atmosphere, constantly moving between these reservoirs, shaping the planet's climate and ecosystems, and water collects the cosmic *qi*. As such, when selecting a site, fengshui pays particular attention to the relationship between orientation and *qi*. It emphasizes that “a site that is surrounded by mountains and encircled by water must have *qi*” because water absorbs microwave easily, and when *qi* meets water, it creates an enclosure.

Moreover, observe the flow, speed, color, and taste of the water, as Huang Miaoying (黄妙应, 820-? CE) in *Boshan Piece* 《博山篇》 suggests: “If the color of the water is blue, it tastes sweet and smells fragrant, this is excellent. If the color of the water is white, it tastes clear and feels warm, this is mediocre. If the color of the water is light and it tastes strong, this is lowest quality. If the water tastes sour and smells acerbic, then this is not worth pursuing.”

The Romans also had ways of testing water quality of a site. For example, in this passage from the *Ten Books on Architecture*, Vitruvius recounts: “In flat countries the springs are salt, heavy-bodied, tepid, and ill-flavoured, excepting those which run underground from mountains, and burst forth in the middle of a plain, where, if protected by the shade of trees, their taste is equal to that of mountain springs” [21].

So, a Chinese idiom says: “one place of water and soil nurture one place of people” (一方水土养育一方人), and “green mountains and clear water generate scholars, while barren mountains and unruly water produce slyboots” (山清水秀出秀才, 穷山恶水出刁民). Although these clichés may be exaggerated, they hint that the environments do affect its inhabitants to certain extent.

The book moreover reveals the difficulty of translating some Chinese words, especially “宅” (*zhai*) and “明堂” (*mingtang*), among a few others. The translator has used the more formal English term “Residential Architecture” for “宅” in the book title to set it in the discipline of architecture, with the awareness that the English word “residence” does not refer to a grave as the Chinese word *yin zhai* does. Still, the translator did not like to use “dwelling” too much because a traditional Chinese house was customarily built for an extended family and their descendants to reside “permanently,” rather than a place for an individual to dwell “temporarily.” However, since the book includes both the *yang zhai* and the *yin zhai*, the translation of 宅 is that in the *yang zhai* section, “house” and “residence” are used more often, whereas in the *yin zhai* section, “dwelling” and “home” are used more frequently. Home can refer to *yin zhai* because of the philosophical idea that “death is ultimately returning home.”

Another difficult word to translate is “明堂” (*mingtang*, lit. “bright hall”). Originally, *mingtang* was a place where emperors of pre-Qin China (Qin, 221–206 BCE) met with feudal lords, conducted sacrificial ceremonies, and proclaimed their political and educational doctrines. In the context of fengshui, *mingtang* refers to the area in front of the main gate of a palace, temple, large residence or grave, a place where the earth’s energy gathers. Ideally, *mingtang* should be clean, open, spacious, sheltered from the wind, and able to gather *qi*, often in circular, square, or half-moon shape, symbolizing clarity and good fortune.

Site selection involves choosing a good *mingtang*. Then, the *xue* (穴 spot) is located to achieve the goal of attracting good fortune and avoiding misfortune. *Mingtang* can be categorized into “小明堂” (*xiao mingtang*, “Minor Bright Spot”), “中明堂” (*zhong mingtang*, “Middle Bright Spot”), and “大明堂” (*da mingtang*, “Large Bright Spot”). 中明堂 can also be called “内明堂” (*nei mingtang*, “Inner Bright Forecourt”), and 大明堂 can also be called “外明堂” (*wai mingtang*, “Outer Bright Frontage”). In this book, 明堂 is translated as “Bright Forecourt” or “Bright Frontage,” depending on the context.

Noticeably, the transliteration of the Chinese characters “风水” (fengshui) is not italicized in this manuscript because fengshui as an adopted foreign term has been absorbed into the English language, treated as a regular English word, appears in standard English dictionaries, and has been widely used in the Western world. Moreover, “fengshui” (one word) and “feng shui” (two words) both refer to the same concept. The difference between them is primarily a matter of spelling conventions rather than a difference in meaning. Fengshui as one word is often used in scholarly studies, specific academic analyses, or when strictly translating Chinese text, as it reflects the *pinyin* romanization system more directly.

5. Conclusion

This article traces the author’s intellectual voyage of translating the historical Chinese manuscript *Huangdi Zhaijing* into English as the *Yellow Emperor’s Classic of Residential Architecture*. This text adds to current understandings of Chinese spatial thought, which represents a synthesis of deep-rooted traditional philosophical concepts of *yin* (*zhai*) and *yang* (*zhai*), and which is characterized by a cyclical concept of time and space. The translation is mainly for Western academic audiences in architecture and urban planning related disciplines. The work is important in contemporary world because of the critical environmental issues caused by human misconduct on the planet earth. The book emphasizes harmony on four different levels: harmony with the universe; with the natural world; with the residence; and with other humans. To do so, humans should be in tune with the space and time when constructing their homes and graves. The book provides a guidance on site selection and timing of construction for optimum results to obtain good fortune and avoid misfortune. This cosmological idea, fengshui, is the key concept discussed in the article. Fengshui theory and practice have been widely applied when building houses, gardens, medical premises, educational institutions, commercial spaces, religious monasteries, and so on, in China and elsewhere where are large groups of Chinese diasporas [6, 17, 22, 23].

This bilingual edition of the *Yellow Emperor’s Classic of Residential Architecture* (*Huangdi Zhaijing*) is for scholars and students of architecture, landscape architecture, and urban planning and design in Western academia who are interested in learning about Chinese architectural culture. It is also for the public who want to apply fengshui principles in their home environments for health and wellbeing. However, for those who are interested in

learning how fengshui can be implemented within their homes, they need to look elsewhere as that is beyond the scope of this book. Still, what this book covers are important since it lays out the foundational aspects of fengshui theory and practice rather than contemporary searches for relevance.

Future research could further explore how fengshui is interconnected with neuroscience in architecture. Fengshui and neuroscience in architecture intersect by validating ancient environmental design principles through modern scientific understanding of how space affects human physiology, stress levels, and cognitive function. While traditional fengshui uses cultural terminology like *qi* to describe environmental harmony, neuroarchitecture uses brain imaging and hormonal data to explain the same phenomena. Neuro Fengshui is an emerging field that blends these two disciplines, utilizing technical measurements for air quality and electromagnetic pollution, alongside traditional environmental design to create spaces that are both culturally balanced and scientifically proven to enhance well-being. Studies using Virtual Reality (VR) and Heart Rate Variability (HRV) have shown that rooms designed with fengshui principles produce more positive emotions and lower stress levels [24].

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