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TRANSLATING CORRELATIVE THINKING FROM CHINESE INTO ENGLISH: THE VARYING FATE OF YINYANG, WUXING, FENGSHUI AND CHINESE MEDICINE

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ABSTRACT

This talk explores the varying success of the translation into English of four interlocking conceptual systems that make up part of the traditional Chinese worldview, which is a highly-correlative system of thought. We may consider *yinyang* and *wuxing* to be more basic, applicable in a wide variety of situations; some would even claim that they are universals, able to help us understand everything in the universe. *Fengshui* and Chinese medicine, on the other hand, are two distinct but related specific domains of knowledge that are based on *yinyang* and *wuxing*, and yet also draw upon a variety of other concepts and practices, so that they are at once more restricted but also more complicated. The fate of these four conceptual systems in English provides much food for thought relating to translation as it relates, not to individual concepts, but to entire conceptual systems or worldviews. I will argue that *yinyang* theory and *fengshui* have been more successfully translated and assimilated into English than *wuxing* and Chinese medicine because they have been somewhat detached from the larger context of correlative thinking and a traditional Chinese worldview. In the process, they may also have been subject to a greater degree of change, especially *fengshui*, which as practiced in late twentieth century North America is radically different from the Chinese tradition. On the other hand, *wuxing* and Chinese medicine have struggled to be accepted in English. This is because they remain more firmly attached to the larger worldview of Chinese thought, in particular the dense web of correlative thinking that underlies so much of Chinese thought since the Han dynasty. At the same time, to the extent that they are translated, they have tended toward a more faithful representation of the original.

Along the way, I will also note how correlative thought in English, including Renaissance and early modern theories of medicine based on the four humors and astrology, intersect with the Chinese conceptual system in interesting and sometimes surprising ways.

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