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# The Spatial Practices of the Chinese Diaspora in Western Australia: An Investigation of Human-Nature Interactions Influenced by Feng Shui Principles

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## Abstract

Nature is an agent. It helps us assess the values in our life-experiences in places and reconstruct new spatiotemporal domains. Different senses of places are formed through daily sensory experiences in relation to the material world. From the perspective of the Environmental Humanities, this article explores the Chinese diasporic sense of place derived from individual and collective spatial experiences in the Western Australian natural environment. For the Chinese diaspora, the creation of sense of place involves forging a new spatial connection between homeland and host land as well as between past and present. In the context of the new diasporic space, sense of place becomes associated with a sense for the present through different embodied practices such as walking. In a shared diasporic space, collective spatial practices reinforce the social relations between individuals and evoke a communal sense of belonging. In this ethnographic research on the dialogical relations between Western Australia's Chinese diasporic people and the local natural world, Feng Shui is regarded as both an ancient system of traditional Chinese environmental philosophy and a key spatial practice transposed to the Perth environment. The discussion of Feng Shui is closely bound up with the Chinese sense of WA's natural world, traditional understandings of everyday spatial practices and the interdependent relationships between humans and nature within the new spatial assemblage.

## Keywords

sense of place; spatial practice; Feng Shui; diasporic culture; human-nonhuman interaction; environmental humanities; environmental philosophy; cultural geography; geohumanities

## Introduction

Nature is a space, and "nature is ordinary" (Giblett, "Nature Is Ordinary Too"). For immigrants, the sense of natural place is perceived dramatically differently in the host land from that in their homeland. This study investigates a transformed sense of place of the Chinese diaspora living in Western Australia through their daily spatial practice under the influence of the traditional Chinese environmental philosophy of Feng Shui. For background, the article reviews the Chinese sense of place and space related to Feng Shui practice and current urbanization issues in China. Additionally, the conceptual framework of the Environmental

Humanities underlays the in-depth analysis of the diasporic sense of place and space perception.

Through applying an ethnographic methodology, the research explores both personal and collective senses of WA's nature based on the diaspora's cultural background and migrant identity. Through participant observation and in-depth interviews with Chinese diasporic individuals and families in communities, the study describes and interprets the relationships between place, space and the Chinese people in Perth, the capital city of Western Australia. It aims to discover the impacts of cultural traditions, such as Feng Shui, on the transforming sense of place through the spatial practice of the diaspora from homeland to host land. Meanwhile, from the perspective of the Environmental Humanities, the article also aims to reveal the human-nature interactions in the context of the culture-nature binary. This study suggests that WA's natural world is part of a social space for Chinese diasporic daily experience. People's behaviors within the space can be regarded as varying levels of embodied practice that transform space into a living place. Therefore, the transformed sense of place gathers as a cluster of memories from a continuous and dynamic sense of diasporic space.

The first section of the article presents existing understandings of the concepts of sense of place, spatial practice and Feng Shui philosophy within the scope of the Environmental Humanities. Following the discussion of the ethnographic methodology, it outlines a shared sense of Western Australia for most urban Chinese immigrants by providing several spatial practice cases from their daily lives. The analysis is located in diasporic experiences concerning the traditional Chinese philosophy of Feng Shui in order to describe how cultural impacts are embodied in the process of perceiving diasporic space and formulating a sense of the environment.

## Background

### *Sense of Place and Spatial Practice*

The bilocular concepts of space and place enable us to understand human-environment relations. Place, in Hubbell and Ryan's work, is a space identified as meaningful and imbued with shared memories of individuals and communities. From the perspective of the Environmental Humanities, place also means home; a familiar space provides livelihood (Hubbell and Ryan 85). Compared to place, space denotes a location that "remains a geometric abstraction, or a featureless blank" (Hubbell and Ryan 77). Geographical abstraction of space is transformed into a lived place for human and nonhumans by inputs of cultural beliefs and

social connections. Therefore, place is "a spatial as well as a cultural phenomenon" (Hubbell and Ryan 85). Sense of place is a "distinctive feeling we have for particular places as experienced through our senses, bodies, minds, and memories; a sense of place is essential for a sense of belonging and identity" (Hubbell and Ryan 77). Experience of making place from space is obtained through our multiple senses, including vision, hearing, somatosensation, olfaction, gustation, proprioception, thermoception, nociception, and magnetoception (Hubbell and Ryan 80–81).

In this study, the process of perceiving space is closely related to specific living places, especially for the diasporic Chinese who have migrated from Chinese cities to Perth. Spatial practices in the natural world, such as walking, activities in parks and other engagements with outdoor locations, allow a greater sense of space for diasporic people who have lived in bigger cities in China with crowded populations. Although some Chinese residents in Perth do not realize that their lives are closely connected to the natural world, in fact, nature provides space on a daily basis, even if the people do not go outside frequently. Domestic and suburban places are lived spaces produced by community residents through activities associated with housing, property decorating, gardening, exercising or working.

In the last decade, Perth has become the second fastest growing capital city in Australia, yet its population of 2.68 million (Australian Bureau of Statistics, Summary section) is far smaller than that of most Chinese cities. In the view of Chinese people, the sense of lived place varies according to changes in economic and political policies. Chinese urban residential space shaped by the segmentation of different work units (*Danwei*) in the era of Planned Economy has been replaced with space shaped by personal socioeconomic status after Housing Reform commenced in the 1980s (Fang 109). According to Fang (101–102), before the 1990s, the homogenization of personal residential living space was the main feature of housing provision in Chinese cities. During a long period (the 1950s–1990s) of economic planning by the Chinese government, the housing provision system came to be based on a socialist welfare model and work unit ownership to meet the demands of industrial development and increased social stability. In practice, when the government planned residential housing, it usually located the dwelling area within, or adjacent to, the work place. In addition, housing facilities and community management were strictly designed in accordance with work units.

However, urban housing shortages and inequalities have persisted in China because of the growing population and increasing urbanization. Although new policies of Housing Reform were promulgated to solve the housing shortage and overcrowding problems and improve

inefficient use of land by commercialization, until the new Century, these guidelines still could not match the demand for housing of a rapidly increasing urban population, especially in large cities such as Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou. Additionally, with the drastic increase in house prices in large cities, housing policies gradually shifted to support middle and high-income families through various financial arrangements. The residential spaces for these groups were spacious houses or apartments located in the central areas of cities, while the low-income groups could only afford small flats in suburbs. The differences in socio-economic status changed the previous structure of urban residential space, which was distributed according to industrial classification. In modern Chinese cities, residential space differentiation is caused by the inequality of individual socioeconomic resources.

Additionally, new environmental problems, such as smog, land shortage, air, soil and water pollution, and loss of green spaces, appear with urban sprawl, as are happening in most developing countries and cities (Fang and Wang 147). In recent years the concerns of city planning have turned to green spaces for inhabitants. To experience the natural world more fully, people still need to go far beyond cities' boundaries. However, for most urban Chinese, exposure to nature in daily life occurs through domestic space, such as balcony planting, a simple way to engage with nature. Nowadays, the percentage of green land has become an important criterion for allocating housing. Rich people can enjoy more living space with lower residential density. Therefore, an intimate relationship with the natural world achieved in the host land involves a new perception of residential space through people's everyday experiences. In the interviews conducted for this article, Chinese immigrants acknowledged that Australia's natural environment is one of the primary catalysts for immigration.

### *The Idea of Feng Shui*

The philosophy of Feng Shui, including its history, tenets, values, and principles, has been deeply practiced in Chinese culture and history. Feng Shui is also an academic discipline. In Wang, Joy and Sherry's work, "the 3500-year-old discipline known as Feng Shui—literally "wind and water"—has roots in *Yijing*, a sourcebook on archaic systems of cosmology and philosophy" (242). The name "wind and water" of Feng Shui is regarded "more than natural forces;" rather, "they are prime movers of *chi* [*qi*]", "the universal and positive energy that overwhelms every form of animate and inanimate life" (Bonaiuto et al. 26). *Qi* is the key point to explain the basic theory of Feng Shui. It is composed of the configurational force of matter; thus, it is regarded as a physical, rather than a spiritual, phenomenon, despite its invisibility

(Wang 12). *Qi* is never still but transformative. Paton comments that *qi* is "formless and soundless and floats between heaven and earth, manifesting life from its connection with material form" (90). *Qi* integrates heaven and earth, while it is "the core of Chinese cosmology" (Giblett, *The Body* 180). This perception of the intertwined relationship between the human body and the Earth is essential to understanding the practices of Feng Shui principles.

Referring to the relationships between humans and the physical environment, Feng Shui is the earliest Chinese scientific textbook of environmental knowledge (Wang 4). In practice, the geomancy of Feng Shui emphasizes the material properties of wind, water, landforms, and the art of maintaining a harmonious relationship between humans and the physical environment. Since the very early centuries, Feng Shui has inspired sacred constructions, such as temples, imperial residences, and tombs, which symbolize the supreme powers and utmost dignity of the ruling classes. The designs mainly concerned "integrating the building with the surrounding environment" (Bonaiuto et al. 27). Its basic aim is to achieve a *yin* and *yang* balance between natural elements to maintain the vital energy of *qi* which is believed to support all life (Wu et al. 502).

Feng Shui has "positive values for human well-being in a pragmatic rather than a strictly superstitious way" (Han 76). Indeed, the application of Feng Shui principles is rooted in the view of harmonious *yin*/*yang* relations. In contemporary societies, the popularity of Feng Shui has increased not due to its original purpose of survival but to improve the quality of social life because Chinese people believe that only when the *qi* of *yin*/*yang* becomes balanced, will the human body and its physical environment be considered healthy and harmonious. 'Harmony' is the central achievement for the practices of Feng Shui. The main values of traditional Chinese beliefs, Confucianism and Taoism, are situated within the concept of 'harmony', which is a pervasive theme in ancient Chinese philosophy. Harmony is "the most important element Chinese people use to regulate the transforming, cyclic, and never-ending process of human communication" (Chen 2). Particularly, Taoism is a theory with a cosmic view emphasizing self-cultivation to achieve harmony between the individual and the environment (Giblett, *The Body* 160). The role of Feng Shui in modern society has not been replaced by developing science and technology. Instead, it is taken into account by modern science because of its positive contribution to humanities, environmentalism and psychology through "the Chinese concept of space and form regarding Confucian principles and Taoist ideas" (Lip 11).

Feng Shui is a sustainable environmental practice. It can be asserted that Feng Shui is an ancient Chinese form of the Environmental Humanities. In much literature, Feng Shui is understood as a specified method of spatial practice, both externally and internally, in parallel with modern environmental ideas. This understanding inherits the traditional view of Feng Shui as a spatial practice to maintain a harmonious relationship between the macro-universe of the environment and the micro-universe of human beings. In Tu's statement, the aim of Feng Shui is to "suspend not only our sensory perceptions but also our conceptual apparatus so that we can embody nature in our sensitivity and allow nature to embrace us in its affinity" (78). In this sense, the practices of Feng Shui have offered rich patterns that inform the idea of spatial experiences in the material surroundings through embodied and physical participation in the world. Feng Shui presents a paradigm of understanding nature's effects "on the human species by a subtle blend of observation and correlation with external phenomena" (Paton xi). Regarding the external balance and the inner harmony between human dwellers and their physical surroundings, the embodied spatial practice of Feng Shui enables diasporic people to adapt to the new environment of Perth in relation to their cultural traditions.

**Ethnographic Methodology**

Ethnography is regarded as both a methodology (a theoretical and philosophical framework) and a method (data collection technique) (Brewer 54). Brewer articulates two ways of defining ethnography, described as "big" and "little" ethnography. "The former equates it with qualitative research as a whole; the latter restricts its meaning to 'field research'" (10). He defines the field research form of ethnography as studying "people in naturally occurring settings or 'fields'" by exploiting their social meanings and ordinary activities by directly participating in the setting in a systematic manner but without imposing external meaning on the people (10). Ethnography explores the capacity of researchers for learning about cultures with an objective attitude of observation (Hammersley and Atkinson 9). It is a "powerful and easy-to-use" and "theoretic elaboration" tool to obtain qualitative research data about communities for sociologists, psychologists, and interculturally oriented scholars in the disciplines of social science and humanities (Matera and Biscaldi 1). Barker (25) avers that cultural studies research that uses ethnography should be centered on the "qualitative exploration of values and meanings in the context of a whole way of life." For Pink, ethnography is "a reflexive and experiential process though which understanding, knowing and (academic) knowledge are produced" (8). However, she adds that it does not require

ethnographers to reproduce reality, but to represent experiences of their reality "that are as loyal as possible to the context, negotiations and intersubjectivities through which the knowledge was produced" (Pink 8).

Data collection in ethnography is conceptualized by Quaranta (278) as a performative process for the production of cultural knowledge. Barker indicates that qualitative methods including participant observation, in-depth interviews and focus groups are the 'spirit' of ethnography (26). Pink argues that the ethnographic interview is a "social, sensorial and emotive" process "where multisensorial experience is verbalised through culturally constructed sensory categories and in the context of the intersubjective interaction between ethnographer and research participant" (85). Related to the idea of place, Evans and Jones (857) note that the method of the walking interview is a "highly productive way of accessing a local community's connections to their surrounding environment." Walking interviews engage with landscape as a spatial practice to provide intimate insight into place while engendering the self-reflection of the researcher (Evans and Jones 850).

This study employed ethnographic interviews, particularly walking interviews, and the classic participant observation for data collection. I interviewed thirteen individual participants from four Western Australian Chinese families, including parents and their children (see Table 1). All the interviews were conducted in Mandarin, and the interviewees were recruited through personal contacts (introduced by my friends and social networks such as Wechat), telephone contacts, and referrals to new people by the participants (also known as snowballing). These methods were suitable to the project because of the conventional and traditionally clannish Chinese personality, making friends within small groups according to regional or cultural background. The criteria for participant recruitment were determined according to the length of living in WA, knowledge of traditional cultures, and lifestyles of the families.

| Families | Participants | Activities | Locations |
|---|---|---|---|
| Duan's family | Duan Xin (husband)<br>Li Hong (wife)<br>Four children (4-16yrs) | Chinese New Year celebration | China Town, Perth CBD |
| | | Chinese community parties | Charles Paterson Park |
| | | Recreational crab fishing | Como, Swan River jetty |
| | | Breakfast invitation | Duan's house |
| Zhao's family | Zhao Ying (husband)<br>Yang Linlin (wife) | Home visit | Zhao's house |
| | | Chinese families catch-up | Function room, China Town |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Jane Zhao (daughter, 16yrs)<br>Kate Zhao (daughter, 14yrs)<br>Nicole Zhao (daughter, 11yrs) | Wine tasting events | Yang's winery company |
| Wang's family | Richard Wang (husband)<br>Ada Wang (wife)<br>Helen Wang (daughter, 15yrs) | Home visit | Wang's house |
| | | Shop visit | Wang's antique shop |
| Yang's Family | Yang Chunlong (husband)<br>Li Lijun (wife)<br>Yang Fan (daughter, 15yrs) | Home visit | Yang's house |
| | | Workplace visit | Yang's kitchen in a Chinese restaurant |

**Table 1.** Interview Participants and Locations

In data analysis, a sensory approach is deployed via the participants', as well as my own, engagements with the Western Australian environment. Embodiment and participation have long been universal ethnographic methods of data collection and analysis. According to Quaranta (281–282), participation helps ethnographers understand the ways in which social configurations generate meanings. The researcher then becomes an internal participant in the processes and a constituent element of the reality of research. The relationship between ethnographer and embodiment, therefore, demonstrates that "the ethnographer's body is the lived ground not only of the participation, but of the very understanding of the meaning produced through such participation" (Quaranta 282). Embedded experience is the source of knowledge that is capable of giving meaning to what the ethnographer observes in the field (Quaranta 282). Rather than a simple stage in the research schedule, analysis with inputs of ethnographic reflectivity is "a continuous and incremental process" which "moves between different registers of engagement with a variety of research materials" (Pink 128).

My data analysis employed two types of description. The first one was the description of the broad scope of the research background, including WA's natural environment and Chinese diasporic culture. My approach aimed to provide sufficient information for subsequent analysis of the diaspora's adaptation to the Perth natural environment. In this way, the data is presented in the form of 'thick description', historical contexts and the application of theoretical principles from the Environmental Humanities. The second form of description was

based on the data collected from participant observation and interviews. These materials are summarized, synthesized, and extracted to produce condensed theoretical insights gained through reading, interpreting and refining. The purpose of this analytic stage was to connect the phenomenological contexts to the ethnographic ways of knowing and producing.

## Spatial-Environmental Practices in Perth

In the book *Sense of Place*, George Seddon relates that, on first seeing Western Australia, he felt "cheated" (xiii) because "there was no landscape" (xiv). Nonetheless, he "learned to change focus" and "became interested in the structure of these landscapes," which come from "very small things rather than from 'scenery' as conventionally understood" (xiv). He understood that "this change in the scale of attention is also one of the moves of science" (xiv). A changing perception of Perth is also a common experience for new immigrants from different areas of China. During my interviews, I held in common with the participants many memories and experiences of immigrating to Western Australia.

Embodied, spatial practices offer direct means of attuning to the local natural world. Walking—and, in some situations, driving as a motorized variant of walking—are very common spatial practices that construct a sense of place with obvious differences of speed and exposure to the particularities of the environment. Many of the diasporic experiences of my participants involve combinations of walking and car travel; however, for diasporic subjects, "their story begins on ground level, with footsteps" (de Certeau 97). In addition to daily walking and motorized travel, another impressive diasporic experience I strongly perceived from the interviews is the memory of the first day the participants arrived. During their daily spatial experiences, Feng Shui acts as a conduit between the material place and the abstract space, between the physical and the spiritual, between the macro-cosmos of the world and the micro-cosmos of the human being. For the diasporic Chinese person, Feng Shui facilitates their embodied spatial experiences.

### *First Impression and Daily Walking*

For Chinese people who arrived from bigger cities, their first impression of Perth contrasts tremendously with their memories of their hometown. When I interviewed Li Lijun, wife of the master chef Yang who works in a Chinese restaurant in Mandurah (a remote seaside town in Western Australia), she had only been in Perth for one week from Shanghai, the most prosperous city in China, after two years of living apart from her husband:

> On the way to Mandurah from the airport, I felt more and more disappointed because of the scenes of desolation. In Shanghai, we used to have a walk after dinner. The first day here, we went out at about seven o'clock in the evening. It was getting dark, nobody else on the streets, not even cars. I was wondering why I came here. (Li, Lijun. Interview. By Li Chen. 20 April 2015)

Li's memory of Shanghai is not only nostalgic, which, as Seremetakis explains, "freezes the past in such a manner as to preclude it from any capacity for social transformation in the present" (4), but also a process of establishing a new sense of living space through the relationship with a new place. Both the memory of Shanghai and the memory of the first day in Perth are "moments of stillness" (Seremetakis 16) in Li's life.

The moments of "imaginary historicization of life-path and events" are individual as well as collective (Seremetakis 16). It also is evident in the experiences of earlier diasporic Chinese subjects, even those who moved to Perth from larger Australian cities. Zhao Ying and Yang Linlin have lived in Perth for over twenty years. In 2000, after they finished a two-year study in Sydney, they drove four thousand miles to Perth, across the Australian landscape. When they recall the day they arrived in Perth, they have a tactile memory of the hot weather. "It was November, the end of November. The deepest impression is the weather, very hot. I remember we parked the car outside a supermarket for a while. When we were going to drive, it was hard to touch the steering wheel as it was like burning" (Zhao, Ying. Interview. By Li Chen. 29 November 2014). Sydney is mild, but Perth is hot. The contrast is not between two countries but between two cities, revealing the distinction between cities in terms of climate. From these interviews, I found that most initial memories of Perth concern its natural surroundings and people's experience of seeing, hearing, touching, or smelling. As in Seremetakis's work, sensory memory is "a form of storage. Storage is always the embodiment and conservation of experiences, persons and matter in vessels of alterity" (28). The storage of previous memories carried from homelands or previous living places is awakened by the new experience obtained through new spatial experiences. The senses, as Seremetakis (29) argues, "defer the material world by changing substance into memory".

The memories of the first day in Perth involved the transformation of personal spatial practices as new arrivals. They began to know the natural surroundings of Perth through their

first sensory experiences, whether it was by a family walking in Mandurah or motorized forays from Sydney:

> Their intertwined paths give their shape to spaces. They weave places together. In that respect, pedestrian movements form one of these 'real systems whose existence in fact makes up the city'. They are not localized; it is rather they that spatialize. (de Certeau 97)

In Chinese culture, people believe walking after dinner can aid digestion. For modern Chinese people, walking with family members or neighbors in the evening is a way to relax after a long day and maintain close interpersonal relationships. While chatting, they walk to night markets, plazas, seaside or riverside, parks, or community gardens, with children riding bicycles and dogs running around them. The evening walking expands their living space and makes cities vibrant and amenable. An interviewee Richard Wang owns an antique shop close to Hyde Park, which is the biggest public park just north of the center of Perth. On sunny days, Richard enjoys walking alone from his shop to Hyde Park after lunch. He often takes photos of street views, such as flowers, trees, wall paintings, old buildings or even shadows under the sun. He is interested in the history and culture of Hyde Park, even in the legends of lingering ghosts. With all the posted pictures on his social networks, he shares interests with Chinese friends and develops his business networks. In Richard's experience, walking will "never become quite familiar" (Thoreau, para. 16) as in Thoreau's argument that "there is in fact a sort of harmony discoverable between the capabilities of the landscape within a circle of ten miles' radius, or the limits of an afternoon walk, and the threescore years and ten of human life" (Thoreau, para. 16). Ryan comments that Thoreau's view stresses "the relationship between the landscape and his ambulatory body" (55). Ryan defines walking as "a dynamic interconnection between being and becoming" (55). Although Hyde Park is very much a modified 'natural' place because it was formerly a wetland and landscaped as an English urban park and renamed after its namesake in London (City of Vincent), for Chinese people who come from crowded cities, the perception of nature is constituted by the natural elements such as plants, water and soil. In their understanding, nature is not limited to what is indigenous, but rather includes the entire natural surroundings with which they communicate. During walking, Richard became fascinated by Perth's environment via his seeing, hearing, touching, smelling and emotions, while these sensory memories construct his sense of place. Hyde Park is both a 'natural' place

and a performative space for his embodied practice. Walking links the landscape of Perth and the diasporic people "through the corporeal invocation of the senses, both in the moment and over time" (Ryan 55).

***Collective Spatial Practices***

Since the first moment in a new place, individual diasporic space begins to extend and overlap. In other words, in spite of different backgrounds, every diasporic individual shares similar experiences through personal bodily senses via a shared material environment. In Seremetakis's words, sensory memory or "the mediation on the historical substance of experience is not mere repetition but transformation that brings the past into the present as a natal event" (7). The local material world fuses in their sensory memories to create a new collective perception of communal living space. As Ryan indicates, "the content of memory varies with collective cultural meanings and values" (193).

In terms of collective spatial practices, I have become particularly interested in the fact that Chinese residents living in the suburb of Como have voluntarily elected a 'director of the neighbourhood committee'. A neighbourhood committee director is the most basic governor in the Chinese governmental system. The director, with the duty of helping the residents solve domestic problems, is elected from representatives of local residents under the supervision of the government. In China, the position is not superior but acts on behalf of the official power. The elected director in Como, Li Hong, is the wife of Duan Xin, the director of the Shandong Association in Perth. They live in Como, a suburb with over ten Chinese families. Since they met each other in the community playground, their geographical proximity has enabled all the families to communicate frequently. Instead of parties at home or gatherings at restaurants, this neighbourhood group is interested in outdoor activities. After a certain period, all the other families came to regard the couple as their neighbourhood leaders and consult with them about problems in life. In spring 2015, they went to John Forrest National Park for a wildflower tour. They walked through the bush while appreciating blooming native flowers and taking photos of the kangaroos they encountered on the paths. Their collective spatial practices establish another sense of place, in which a place becomes a landscape shared by people "when they take action to shape it in accord with their taste and needs" (Seddon xiv).

This kind of walking in a national park with fellow members also connects the sense of becoming and belonging. Walking becomes "a means of participation" (Ryan 55) when the bodily senses transform the natural world into a dwelling space. The "dwelling perspective" (a concept defined by Ingold as "an active engagement with the constituents of his or her

surroundings") suggests that "relations among humans, which we are accustomed to calling 'social', are but a sub-set of ecological relations" (Ingold 5). In diasporic experiences, spatial practices in the environment deconstruct the sensuous dichotomy of 'here' and 'there' and create a sense of equal belonging to the new land and a tangible, rather than imagined, sense of community. This spatial practice connects the dispersed diasporic individuals within collective networks, which is one aspect of Brah's definition of 'diasporic identities' of "transnational identifications encompassing 'imagined' and 'encountered' communities" (Brah 196). However, engagement with the natural world and culturally vibrant materials, such as the combination of Chinese and Australian foods at picnics in the forest, in individual and collective spatial sensory practice, complements Brah's notion of 'diasporic identities' as both tangible and abstract networks.

In addition, the group spatial practice provides the possibility of changing the perception of the director from the embodiment of a governor's power into the figure of a civilian leader. In contemporary Chinese society, there is always a contradiction between authoritative powers and civilian rights. Therefore, as the basic executor of the official power, a director of neighborhood committees is not a popular role in the lives of ordinary people. In the Como example, although Li Hong still regards her new title as a kind of joke, she is pleased to assume the responsibility of helping neighbors and Chinese friends. From a previously ordinary Chinese civilian to an accepted neighborhood director in Perth, Li Hong has experienced a transition in her social roles. The spatial practices integrate her individual identity into a collective sense of belonging while connecting diasporic natural and social spaces.

***Domestic and Suburban Spaces***

> Social space contains a great diversity of objects, both natural and social, including the networks and pathways which facilitate the exchange of material things and information. Such 'objects' are thus not only things but also relations. (Henri 77)

For Henri, social space is a network of relations involving the exchange of materials and information. Following his emphasis on relationship, I conceptualize 'diasporic social space' as a network of dynamic interconnections between places and people. Returning to the example of the couple Yang Linlin and Zhao Ying, several years after they moved to Perth from Sydney,

they bought a farm of 20,000 square meters in the south area of the city. They lived there with their three daughters and three horses. Riding training was the first activity for the young girls. In my interview with the family in 2014, they had moved back to downtown Perth for the girls' school education and rented out the farm. I was curious about their motivation for buying the farm in the first place. Zhao told me about his dream from his youth. He grew up in Beijing, the capital city of China. Despite a typical urban background, he was fascinated with riding horses like the old-style heroes in the movies. Since his adolescence, he has been to many places around Beijing for horse riding, such as the Inner Mongolian grasslands. Getting older, he had a dream of owning a big farm with several children and a herd of horses. Finally, he realized his dream of living on a horse farm in Perth. His children were exposed to the natural world on a daily basis, unlike living in the suburbs where parks would be their only outlets. Although now they live in the city, his wife still feels proud that her daughters are strong and open with a love for the environment after years of living on the farm. Their affection for the natural world is not inherited from their father as a natal capability, but rather, in Tuan's view, the appreciation of place for a young child "is certain to differ radically from that of an informed adult" because "feeling for place is influenced by knowledge" (32). In my view, a sense of place is formed via sensory memory and spatial practice involving tangible material engagement. Farm life presents not only the local natural place but also a domestic space for the diasporic family. In other words, the space of the farm is both abstract and embodied. It was an abstract dream for the father but later became a material reality and an embodied childhood memory for the children. The spatiotemporal configurations that comprise their diasporic space involve environmental and social domestic spaces.

Tuan (17) regards place as "a type of object." For him, places and objects "define space, giving it a geometric personality" (Tuan 17). The changing space of Zhao's family is of particular interest and relevance. After they moved into a downtown area close to the girls' school, their living space dramatically changed, but was not limited or static. More recently, they raised a German shepherd. After school and on weekends, they walked the dog along the riverbank, running, swimming, and meeting other dogs. Sometimes, Zhao accompanied his daughters to play netball at the school playground. Their sense of the new place embraced outside space as well as living space through everyday practices. "Place is not static" (Pink 30) but an "event" (Pink 31). In this formulation, the changing places of the family are the dynamic processes of events enacted through their spatial practices involving social and material

relations. Although they have moved far from the farm, in their new urban life, nature is not remote as they can enjoy the blue sky and bright sunshine within the Perth environs.

For de Certeau, space is "a practised place" (117). In terms of the interrelated concepts of place and space, Tuan asserts that "spatial ability becomes spatial knowledge when movements and changes of location can be envisaged" (Tuan 67–68). Compared to the geography of crowded Chinese cities, the natural features of Perth provide a sense of unrestrained place to local diasporic Chinese. The family of Richard Wang has not had a lot of in-depth or immersive experiences of the local environment, but they greatly appreciate the city's natural elements. Their thirteen-year-old daughter, Helen, was born in Sydney. Every year, she goes back to Beijing to visit her grandparents. She gave a very interesting reply to the question of her impressions of Perth and Beijing. "Here [Perth] is quite far from China, the environment is more natural and healthier…[Natural] means you can see the blue sky, many trees, and fewer people" (Wang, Helen. Interview. By Li Chen. 16 November 2014). Richard told me, although they have lived here for over ten years, they have never been to Kings Park in the CBD area during the annual Spring Wildflower Festival because of the crowds. His wife Ada said that, in fact, they like the beautiful park but go there avoiding any festivals. Moreover, the reason why they moved to Perth from Sydney was that Sydney is too crowded. For them, space is very much linked to place as different places present distinct senses of space. Their perception of nature is as an interchangeable term for space, which is not beyond the city limits. Their sense of place from both domestic and urban spaces, constructed by the entanglement of all daily senses experienced in cities, challenges the traditional Western/Australian conception of nature, in Giblett's understanding—"a full bodily interaction with land" (Giblett, "Nature's Fairest Forms" 4).

### *Feng Shui as an Everyday Spatial-Environmental Practice*

> In history, China is a country of Feng Shui, following the Feng Shui principles from the ancient generations. The Feng Shui masters have even written the whole history of our country. (Wang, Richard. Interview. By Li Chen. 16 November 2014)

Feng Shui is not simply an instrument of ancient masters' rites. Some of its doctrines have intermingled with universal guidelines of everyday life for Chinese people. Most Chinese people know more or less the Feng Shui principles with greater or lesser degrees of accuracy.

In Australia, with its growing population of Asian immigrants, Feng Shui has become an acceptable idea as a part of traditional Eastern culture. In the mid-1980s, when foreign banks were allowed to set up in Australia, one of the leading banks in the world, the Hong Kong and Shanghai Banking Corporation, "sent out teachers of *feng shui* to advise on the siting and building of its subsidiaries" (Rolls 308). Rolls affirms that Australian real estate agents employ Chinese "who have some knowledge of *feng shui*" to sell properties to Chinese clients (Rolls 309). Rolls insists that, apart from its obscure and mysterious components, Feng Shui is a science of "land arrangement"—"it is reasonable to call it a science since it devises such beautiful building positions" (Rolls 307–308). From the perspective of environmental balance, Feng Shui is universal because it aims to cultivate "scenic beauty and [a] serene environment" (Lip 137). For overseas Chinese people living in Perth, their understanding is simple but practical. Richard Wang, the antique collector and dealer, has immersed himself in traditional Chinese cultures for many years. He regarded good Feng Shui in a house as mainly meaning "a neat and tidy place, no matter how big and luxurious the house is" (Wang, Richard. Interview. By Li Chen. 16 November 2014). Richard related Feng Shui to cultural phenomena in every aspect of life, especially housing. Ada completed Richard's view with examples drawn from people's behaviors:

> To (local) Chinese, Feng Shui more or less influences their lives because most Chinese immigrants have lived in China for many years. For instance, when they buy a house, they may choose the one on a quiet street instead of on busy roads or right on an intersection. They may choose a house facing the sun, i.e. towards the north [in the southern hemisphere], with more sunshine thrown into the rooms. It would be very comfortable. About home ornaments, they may place some vases and green pot plants. (Wang, Ada. Interview. By Li Chen. 16 November 16 2014)

Ada's opinion reflects the common criteria of most local Chinese people in house purchasing, although some of them may not realize that the criteria originates from Feng Shui principles. Different from property purchases in Chinese cities, where most people can only afford apartments in residential blocks, in Australia there are more private houses available on the real estate market. This market offers more possibilities for the practice of Feng Shui principles when people make decisions. From a scientific perspective, their choices in line with the principles of Feng Shui can also be regarded as "the understanding of how the geographical

features of a site and its topography affect buildings internally and externally" (Lip 75). The first consideration is the location. As Ada said, Chinese people prefer quiet streets to the main roads and avoid roundabouts as these places are noisier with more traffic, which will adversely affect the sleep of the residents. In addition to traffic conditions, the presence in the surrounding environment of parks, good public schools, close hospitals, or convenient shopping areas is also taken into account. Moreover, if the land is uneven, it is better to live on the higher side to get better views and to be safer on rainy days. Some of these criteria, seemingly derived from Feng Shui principles, are similar to the ideas of "the spatial configurations and physical features" described in modern evolutionary theories (Han 77). For instance, "an even, uniform, and continued ground texture will provide more depth cues and a sense of continuity which will reduce spatial ambiguities, enhance accurate estimates of spatial extent, and allow more information to be extracted" (Han 81).

In addition to the external environment, the examination of properties also includes "the internal spatial arrangement and directional aspects of the housing" (Wu et al. 503). Lip states that architectural elements and landscape are "combined with natural spaces in harmonious settings" (Lip 141). Regarding the quality of a house, wind and sunlight are the most fundamental elements, and they are also key factors in Feng Shui, such as *qi* is easily scattered by the wind. In Feng Shui principles, "to provide both heat and light, sunshine in front of the building is very important, which means that in the northern hemisphere the home should face south" (Wu et al. 503). However, in the southern hemisphere, in Perth, with its sunny Mediterranean climate, this requirement is not necessary as the sunshine is too strong, and people do not want the temperature to be too high at home. However, the house buyers still prefer a wide sphere of vision from the windows to "accentuate the beauty and intuitive quality of nature" (Lip 141).

Feng Shui principles emphasize that "the flow of Qi within a structure will affect its occupants" and "which directions the property faces and sits are fundamental issues with regard to making the flow of Qi smoother and more appropriate for the internal spatial environment" (Wu et al. 504). Many local Chinese renovate the house to cater for their living habits. I noticed that the houses of the interviewees have two common features: a second Chinese-style kitchen and the reconstructed yards with less lawn. The reason for the Chinese kitchen is that in Chinese diets, there are many fried dishes, which cause kitchen fumes during cooking. This cooking method is not well-suited to the Western-style kitchen with its open design, often connected to

living areas. Generally, a Chinese kitchen is enclosed with strong ventilation; in Feng Shui thought, the kitchen fumes are harmful *qi*.

In Chinese homes, front and back yards are usually another focus on renovation. In traditional Chinese architecture, a landscaped garden is a critical issue to be taken note of, embodying the harmony between natural elements and people. Chinese people appreciate yards that evoke the sense of "anticipation and excitement," which "must be present in a well-conceived garden design" (Lip 141). Although in Perth, the landscaping principles related to Feng Shui are less applicable to small, modern properties, spatial arrangements are still required to be in "harmony, continuity, contrast, balance and rhythm" (Lip 120). Local Chinese prefer the presence of indoor plants named with auspicious meanings, such as kumquat, money jade or lucky bamboo, as they can produce positive energies. Some traditional families are also willing to place a fountain in the yard that they believe water is "a purifying element that can regenerate energy, turn a negative force into a positive one" (Bonaiuto et al. 30). For the Chinese, an ideal yard is "a part of a harmonious system" (Wu et al. 503) in the residential property.

If we acknowledge Feng Shui supports material existence, the practice of Feng Shui involves "spatial organisation" to promote place-human harmony and wellness through residential design (Bonaiuto et al. 27). Richard Wang understands Feng Shui as associated with personal feelings, because Feng Shui is more an interior idea than an exterior one. As So and Lu argue, Feng Shui "declares that what you make of your location and environment on the face of the earth also affects your interior peace" (61). My interviewees, Richard and Ada, agree that, to modern Chinese people, the perception of Feng Shui involves ideas of environmental balance between all the natural elements and human lives. "Actually, there is no identical word for 'Feng Shui' in other countries. I think a similar concept is the idea of environmental conservation" (Wang, Ada. Interview. By Li Chen. 16 November 2014).

In contrast to the complex principles of Feng Shui, the ordinary Chinese people have simple and basic understandings of the system: it means a 'personal feeling' to Richard and 'environmental conservation' to Ada. Within the local cultural environment, it is more acceptable to explain Feng Shui from a scientific perspective. With Feng Shui practices, people are not "passive victims of environmental characteristics" but the ones who "focus on the interactive nature of the people-environment relationship, which views physical settings as a vehicle to promote human effectiveness and well-being" (Bonaiuto et al. 29). Local Chinese diasporic people select and redesign houses to alter the balance between the indoor and outdoor

spaces. This callibration enhances direct contact with green areas to "improve environmental satisfaction and reduce stress" (Bonaiuto et al. 30). Feng Shui can be understood as a spatial practice oriented towards perceiving and pursuing harmony in place and with all its geographic, social, and cultural elements.

**Conclusion**

The Chinese diaspora associates the sense of Western Australia with their daily spatial practices via their bodily experiences. They chose Perth as the resettlement destination because of its comfortable environment. In contrast to the big Chinese cities, there are more lawns, parks and playgrounds, as well as long, clean, accessible coastlines. For them, *place* is an interchangeable term for *space*: the Perth environment is larger, cleaner, quieter and more comfortable. Notably, their view of nature is not in accordance with that in Western philosophy and culture, which is concentrated on "the material world itself, taken as including or not including human beings" (Williams 219). However, in such an everyday space, people engage with nature routinely—smell flowers, listen to birdsong, face the seaside wind, and sweat in the warm sunshine—building perceptions of the new place. Nature as a vibrant object makes place alive and vivid. Therefore, the relationship between diasporic Chinese people and place becomes intimate, dialogical and interactive through embodied spatial practices engaging the natural environment.

Besides the urban and domestic space of daily life, collective spatial practices extend the urban living space by blurring the distinctions between city and wildness. Nature has become a substantial part of their everyday spatial practices. The interactions between the natural world and the diasporic Chinese are dynamic. Cultural meanings of landscape, as Convery, Corsane and Davis argue, are "not universal but specific to particular societal groups" (4). For the Chinese diaspora, the sense of place comprises the way they engage with current life as well as the sensory memories carried from previous experiences, both individual and collective. In their perception, the new place is constituted as an everyday space for their dwelling, remembering and expecting. In the process of transformation, the pivotal point is "understanding how people construct their sense of self in place" (Convery et al. 4). In this way, nature is an agent in the ongoing construction of peoples' own perceptions of becoming and belonging.

Their conception of nature as clean and orderly, moreover, adheres to the principles of the ancient Chinese philosophy of Feng Shui. In the construction of living space, engagement

with the natural environment provides a sense of comfort and health. This sense of nature is beyond the geographical division between urban and rural, originating in everyday spatial practices and daily sensory experiences in lived places. Convery, Corsane and Davis regard a sense of place as "evoked precisely to explore the difficulty of grasping the 'livedness' of place, places as they are experienced through everyday life" (4). For the Chinese people of Perth, their traditional cultures greatly influence their sensory practices and diasporic knowing. Feng Shui enables them to explore physical settings while constructing an interactive relation to the new place with a culturally adaptive approach. The application of Feng Shui to diasporic life aims to create harmony between external environmental factors and internal bodily elements. Feng Shui is both an energetic and embodied spatial practice. Its principles teach the people to evaluate every single element of the new environs: earth, sunshine, wind, plants, and water. From a broader perspective, Feng Shui requires the study of the local environment, such as seasons, weather and geography. Therefore, by observing some Feng Shui principles in their everyday lives, diasporic Chinese people gradually come to understand their material surroundings through the process of place perception.

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