"AT HOME NOWHERE AND EVERYWHERE": MUSINGS OF THE POSTMODERN HONG KONG CITIZEN*

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Home connotes a living space that marks a place. The construction of "home" involves not only a spatial arrangement, but also a transformation of the space into a meaningful place where the occupant inscribes his or her values. Subsequently, it becomes a cultural index. It cannot be encapsulated solely by physical architecture. Its formation indexes the relationship between the occupant and home as a concept or as a physical presence of spatial arrangement, a place where people can locate their identities. The article aims at looking into the (re)organization of spaces and the conditions of the prescription of boundaries in contemporary fiction and films to elaborate the relationship between the idea of home and the sense of belonging generated.

Pico Iyer begins his interesting book *The Global Soul: Jet-Lag, Shopping Malls and The Search for Home* with a quotation from the Jewish-born philosopher Simone Weil. He quotes, "...The city gives one the feeling of being at home. We must take the feeling of being at home into exile. We must be rooted in the absence of a place." Inevitably, a biblical subtext can easily be read into and be regarded as central to this statement, which bears an interesting relation to Weil's Jewish origin. Notwithstanding this, a powerful notion associating her words with the concept of diaspora begins to surface. Simply put, diaspora indexes transnational mobility. This ultimately complicates the entwined relationship between the ideas of home, exile and place. However, home can be understood as a concept nested in a place, or as the existence of home that significantly inscribes space into a place with meanings. Exile suggests mobility, which signifies leaving home, crossing circumscriptions and thus both solidifying and challenging the existence of borders. This action of leaving, as expressed in Weil's statement, underlines the paradox of place and the absence of place. This paradox recapitulates a part of the theme of this paper of being "at home nowhere" as the existence of borders becomes a problematic.

Interestingly, Georg Lukács in his illuminating book *The Theory of Novel* makes use of the German pioneer of Romanticism Novalis' famous quotation to elucidate his notion of novels. He quotes, "'Philosophy is really homesickness,' says Novalis: 'it is the urge to be at home everywhere'" (Lukács 1971: 29). Philosophy will have no place, as Lukács suggests, in the "integrated civilizations" as the soul feels at home everywhere. The demarcation enforced by the binarism of exteriority and interiority, disappears when one is "at home everywhere;" this indeed constitutes a part of the theme of this paper.

What captures our attention here is the adoption of home as a distinctive metaphor. This metaphor suggests more than simply a cognitive transfer involving analogy in the Aristotelian sense. It does not suggest any ornamental or decorative function. Rather, it speaks of a relationship between people and their environment. It endorses the significance of place and individual as what Weil has suggested; it also expresses the importance of the external factors in the determination of home. It acknowledges implicitly the presence of borders, and the binary oppositions such as inside/outside, and self/world. The changes in the idea of home articulate an alternation in how human beings view the landscape of home. This landscape is largely a product of a sense of belonging. These connotations of home become platforms for psyches to attempt to constitute the sense of belonging. Thus, the discussion of the aporetic suggestion of place and the sense of belonging to elucidate the elusive nature of home is the prime concern of this paper.

The concept of home finds its resonance in the etymological origin of the word (heima) which contains the idea of both the architectural or physical construction and the being in it.[1] Witold Rybczynski in his book *Home: A Short History of an Idea* points out in a more pithy way that the meaning of home is multiple. Physically, it points to the building, its environment and the lodging people; metaphysically, it means a sense of satisfaction and comfort.[2] This sense denotes the presence of an intimate space which captures a more subjective emotional landscape of the dweller who produces meanings involving the space within the physical structure. This emotional landscape is essential to the production of belonging.

This emotional landscape resembles any landscape in Lowenthal's understanding that its presence seemed to offer the "sense of completion, of stability, of permanence" (Lowentha 1985: 62). Home can be seen as a site of "territorial satisfactions" (George 1996: 21). Moreover, it is the existence of distinctive presence that constitutes home as a terrain different from the outside world consolidating once again the presence of borders. Such an idea also characterizes nostalgia. Gaston Bachelard defines home as a place of strong memories:

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[1] Please refer to Witold Rybczynski, *Home: A Short History of an Idea,* trans Tan Tin. (Taiwan: Owl Publishing House, 2001), p. 91.
[2] ibid.

We comfort ourselves by reliving memories of protection. Something closed must retain our memories, while leaving them their original value as images. Memories of the outside world will never have the same tonality as those of home, and by recalling our memories, we add to our store of dreams. (Bachelard 1996: 6)

However, the conceptualization of home is metamorphosing as the world becomes more complicated because of connection and disconnection. Notwithstanding this complication, more and more space for interpretation of the idea is opened. Thus, the geographical and national affiliations in the formulation of this concept is being read not as the sole key factors in determining one's home, as well as the sense of belonging. Home as an "aura of stability and safety," (George 1996: 21) a place where one casts one's sense of belonging to, is actually fraught with exclusions and inclusions (George 1996: 2). The constitution of this related emotional landscape is, however, based on selections, which the individual identifies with. This contributes to the formulation of a special unique compact of the individual and the space.

Fredric Jameson's analysis encapsulates, in one way or another, the postmodern condition as an "over excessive commodification of late capitalism."[3] The consumer-oriented materialism and commodification, in the eyes of William Lim, a renowned Asian architect, "enhances the rationalization of the urban landscape as quantifiable commodities" (Lim 2003: 15). This comment on the postmodern world is found adequate in describing what Hong Kong has been long experiencing. The quantification of urban landscape is expressed by the transformation of the skyline of Hong Kong that is significantly marked by a competition of commercial skyscrapers. The dilemma between preserving the old districts and advancing the development of the city posits ultimate challenges not only to the government but also to the real giant estate developers. This tension in competing for the limited space in Hong Kong is manifested by the more patchwork like city that can also be found in Shanghai and Beijing. The collage and montage type of urban landscape alters not only the environment external to an individual but also the internal emotional landscape with relation to the sense of belonging as collective memories which are distinctive to the place efface. The disappearance alludes to what Hooks, in her book *Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics* states:

Postmodern culture with its decentered subject can be the space where ties are severed or it can provide the occasion for new and varied forms of bonding. To some extent, ruptures, surfaces contextuality, and a host of other happenings create gaps that make space for oppositional practices which no longer require intellectuals to be confined to narrow separate spheres with no meaningful connection to the world of the everyday. . . [A] space is there for critical exchange . . . [and] this may very well be

[3] Fredric Jameson, "Notes on Globalization as a Philosophical Issues" *The Cultures of Globalization*, eds, Fredric Jameson and Masao Miyoshi (Durham: Duke U P, 1998), pp. 54-77.

"the" central future location of resistance struggle, a meeting place where new and radical happenings can occur. (Hooks 1990: 31)

It is all about a new type of bonding both in/outside an individual. The urban landscape can be regarded as more or less the grand narrative which is but a social discourse of relationship. It dictates a kind of relation between individual and space. Home becomes an ontological mediation of a new bonding in which borders cannot form any circumscription. That may cause displacement or dislocation in an individual. However, the recognition of postmodern condition does not in any circumstances deny the existence of border, but furnishes the basis for constant reformation and reevaluation while continuity is always at stake. Individuals are more "prone to articulate complex affiliations, meaningful attachments and multiple allegiances to issues, people, places and traditions that lie beyond the boundaries of their resident nation state" (Vertovec and Cohen 2002: 2).

The relationship between individual and home evolves and so does the sense of belonging. The once closed and homogenous space of home becomes more metamorphic because of the alteration of social interrelations caused by the effacing borders suggested by the abstraction of distance "at multiple geographical scale" (Leung 2003: 241). Simply put, this situation describes globalization in which transnational mobility is depicted by a more constant travel. Travel evinces globalization in different aspects such as the flow of commodities and people.

These two factors affect the realization of belonging. Externally, it is materialized by commodities selections of the home interior. Apart from this, the transnational mobilization of people reiterates a spatial relationship that obfuscates the placed-fixity of belonging. This detachment of the place is a result of the pursuit of a more personal definition of stability or fixity in the ever-changing world. That means it is internal.

The sense of belonging is characterized as the selections or choices reflect the personal particularity, and in return mediate the material side of belonging. Also, the consumption of the space exemplifies the formation of place through the resident's décor displaying what Nuala Rooney proclaims, "an essential quality of insideness, which is a profoundly existential tie to a place" (Rooney 2003: 176). Home becomes a synonym of belonging. More specifically, this sense of belonging to the home mediates the control exercised over the interior design of the house. This turns the space conscripted into a meaningful place that makes the realization of self possible; it is affected through a kind of "self-expression," as home is a place that "encapsulate[s] and communicate[s] identity. At the finest scale, a house may be an expression of individual selfhood" (Mills 1993: 150). This self-expression is reflected by the way individual domesticates the spaces through transforming it into habitable places (Wigglesworth 2000: 99). It is achieved through a "continuous process of social life in which men reciprocally define objects in terms of themselves and themselves in terms of objects" (Sahlins 1976: 169). The presence becomes the particularity that contrasts the simple, homogenous and external grids of the buildings.

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Compellingly, "we are buying identities and dreams" (Short 2001: 147). The consumption of space echoes the consumption of spatial décor. It is also a consumption of floating signifiers in the Lyotardian sense showing the individual's interpretation of "home" in the absence of stability. The consumption of these signifiers denoting the global flow of commodities shows the multiplicity. Chan Po Chun's story "In Search for a House" which gives the title to the collection of her short stories, well demonstrates the significance of interior décor of a place to form a home which is essential to the formation of a woman's self.

The decoration of the space inside the house, a way to exhibit the self in the female protagonist, is thwarted by the existence of a more powerful domination of relationship inside the house. This relationship forbids her to develop her self which must be suppressed and be subjugated to the patriarchal structure of a traditional family and thus of the society. Inside the house, she must stack up her "belongings" rather than displaying her favourite home accessories or books because there is simply no position for them. These things of hers represent her emotional landscape, which locates her at the core of a type of stability. They also signify a type of locality metaphorically. Her dislocation is demonstrated by the transformation of these identifying belongings into burdens to her Father and Mother in law who refuse to integrate her into the family. She sees the analogy between marriage and the denial of a place of one's own. What make her place are her belongings for which she has invested her identification.

Her "intrusion" undermines the recognized spatial homogeneity within the house. The female protagonist sees the overlapping of her self and her belongings. Just like the piled up boxes of belongings, she must "fold her self up" so as not to cause any trouble or argument which infringes the established space inside the house (Chan 1990: 128). The minimization of spatial occupation symbolizes her inevitable determination to bury her self. However, it does not mean that self is objectified or quantified, but rather projected onto the objects. The interconnection between her self and the objects is apparent. Compellingly, she is being deprived of her space and thus place, which means to become disincarnated. Simply, she has no home or she is alien to home. Her sense of belonging is registered on her belongings, which can help to inscribe meaning to the new space forming a place of her home. She is at home nowhere. She is experiencing what Weil suggests regarding the absence of place.

Echoing this circumstance in Chan's story is a more real condition in China, which is seen through a research conducted by Deborah Davis during mid eighties in China. Despite Davis' focus is on the male and female position inside a house, she finds that Chinese urban homes in 1987 were best depicted as "my mother's house" (Davis 2002: 233). In Chan's story, the female protagonist is living in "father in law's house." In both cases, the labelling displays a deprivation of the sense of belonging, which thwarts the formation of a home of individual. It is always someone else's place that indicates a weaker sense of belonging as less individual self is articulated in the place. Before the nineties, the minimal and utilitarian decoration of the house affected self- enunciation because of the fear of being criticized. This scenario changed from the nineties on-

wards, more individual articulations are being perceived in the house through consumption as promoted in magazines and books that "home is a happy nest, a warm cozy place, in which residents display their cultivation, personality, and economic power" (Davis 2002: 238). This advocacy can be regarded as encouragements to voicing individual choices in the creation of a home through consumption.

Such an increase signifies the opening up of more possibilities in displaying self through spatial arrangement. Moreover, the circumnavigation of these products is conveyed by consumptions, which ultimately turn the space into a site full of juxtapositions of different signifiers.[4] Gradually, as what Kenji Oki, a Japanese interior designer describes, "what had been at first portraits of different cultures became something that they [consumers] themselves could relate to, given the chance" (Oki 1994: 239). Home as a terrain of satisfaction is a refrain of a modified hybrid, which echoes the hybridization of market socialism in China signifying the presence of the other. Jeffrey Weeks sees identification as the sense of belonging that this sense is about a relationship between individual and others. It is about the similarity between individual and others and the differences exist among them (Weeks 1990: 88). It also manifests a coexistence of such from which the sense of belonging is projected.

Apart from the floating of commodities, the transnational mobility of people is also a characteristic of the postmodern world when technology helps to shorten distance between places. Stuart Hall has adopted a more global vision in the late eighties to say that we are all migrants now.[5] Surely, the concept of belonging is affected when home becomes a space of negotiation which demonstrates Vattimo's suggestion that, "to live in this pluralistic world means to experience freedom as a continual oscillation between belonging and disorientation" (Vattimo 1992: 10). This oscillation challenges the nationally based form of belonging. In the following observation of Appadurai, despite the fact that his ostensible focus is patriotism, he brings out the status of belonging in the postmodern world. He states:

> But patriotism is an unstable sentiment, which thrives only at the level of the nation-state. Below that level it is easily supplanted by more intimate loyalties: above the level it gives way to empty slogans rarely backed by the will to sacrifice or kill. (Appadurai 1996: 160)

Appadurai spells out the feebleness of the national affiliation. Though Anderson's imagined community gives sound elaboration of individual and the

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[4] The launch of Ikea in China is a good example. Ikea is opening up more and more stores in China. Within this decade, Ikea will open ten more stores in China. China becomes one of its biggest markets. For details, please refer to http://www.wwenglish.com/freeclass/009/200405/20040531 1768.asp and the article "Ikea to Open More Stores in China" from Asia Times on line http://www.atimes.com/atimes/China/EI13Ad03.html.

[5] Refer to Stuart Hall, "Political Belonging in a World of Multiple Identity," *Conceiving Cosmopolitanism: Theory, Context, and Practice*, eds. Steven Vertovec and Robin Cohen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 25-31.

nation-state, it has no definite position in the construction of a sense of belonging. National affiliation is important in the discussion as it suggests a more geographical and historical related presence of "home." Transnational mobility marks a departure from such a "home;" it also challenges the definition of home via geographic or imaginary location. This results a tension between disorientation and belonging that helps to conceptualize home as a "multi-place" embodiment. As quoted earlier, Gaton Bachelard suggests that home is a place related to our dreams (Bachelard 1969: 6). Dream does not only denote the past as what the word nostalgia suggests in a narrow sense. The diverse definitions of dream situate it in a position important to the discussion of belonging, as home defines a kind of belonging is not confined to a point in history; it may also be a desire for a future. Departure may be understood as disorientation while return may mean belonging. This "return home," however, is not a return to the home that one departed from, but to a home that one seeks. The editor of the book *Locality and Belonging*, Nadia Lovell illustrates that,

> Yet belonging, with all its pragmatic connotations and political for tying people to place and social relationships, also evokes emotions, sentiments of longing to be in a particular location, be it real or fictive. (Lovell 1999: 1)

A fissure with the geographical national based home is described by immigration. In a study of Chinese diaspora, Laurence Ma attributes to the appearance of "parachute kids," "astronauts," and "instrumental citizenship" in Hong Kong to a desire of having stability and a better environment, he states:

> They [migrants] are essentially voluntary political risk minimizers running away from the topophobia of a place of origin in the Chinese diaspora. In return for uprootedness from their homeland, these transmigrants are rewarded with a stable political milieu, a safe diasporic domicile, opportunity to work and live in an economically advanced and environmentally more attractive Western country, and with quality education for their children without the stressful and highly competitive entrance examinations to high school and college that are deeply dreaded by students and parents alike in Taiwan and China. (Ma 2002: 45)

The dream for a better future causes an individual to go beyond national borders. This can be seen as disorientation causing uprootedness metaphorically. Under the premise that the sense of belonging is produced by a space representing stability and protection, then this sense is generated elsewhere away from a "home" defined by the geographical denotation of nationality. Fruit Chan's movie *Hollywood • Hong Kong* indicates this proposition.

Not different from Chan's past movies, *Hollywood • Hong Kong* also highlights marginality; all the protagonists in this movie occupy marginal spaces. The juxtaposition between the newly built urban private estate and the poor squatter area inevitably occupies a central part in the movie. The change of the urban landscape highlights the incongruent presence of the ghetto. The chaotic condition of the place to a certain extent qualifies it to be a surreal site. What is more real is desire. It is also a place to be actualized by desires. The burning

lustful desires of the people inside the ghetto turns the place into an infernal which is dramatized by the process of making roast pork for sale as the father of the family of fatties operates a small shop selling this type of food. Dong Dong, the female protagonist is fuelled by her desire of departure for a better place, Hollywood where she dreams. Ironically the mall adjacent to her apartment is also named Hollywood Plaza. This spells out her dislocation. Hong Kong is just a transitional platform for her to stage her plan. Unlike the other residents in the ghetto, her marginality is not granted by her placement though according to Caroline Mills, "to 'place' someone, to 'know one's place': this language of social existence is unmistakably geographical" (Mills 1993: 150). She is housed in the new apartment opposite to the ghetto.

Dong Dong is energized by the agency to depart which conveys her disorientation. She deliberately masks as a prostitute to strive for her higher goal. She sees men as her agents, which marks her difference from other prostitutes in Fruit Chan's movies. There is an absence of the desire of returning to the nationality based home with monetary reward. Rather, her adoption of an "instrumental citizenship" furnishes her to return to her home, which is affiliated with her desired future.

Redevelopment and the sense of transit trigger mobility. Disorientation is a result of searching for better life. The embarkation of both the young pimp and the family of fatties finds resonant in Dong Dong's appearance in Hollywood. Departure signifies a disconnection and discontinuity between the relationship of individual and the space that was once being registered as a place. Dong Dong makes use of her Hong Kong citizenship to get money for her journey while many parents in Hong Kong take the citizenship elsewhere as a "security net" or a better hope. These "citizenships" highlight a type of manipulation. The disconnection with the geographical and historical home fosters disorientation as it only represents inferiority as compared to the newly established relationship in the destined places. One can easily agree with Appadurai's sceptical view on the national affiliation. Then, it seems to be a weak affiliation to link the sense of belonging to nationality that denotes a geographical presence of the state or country. On the contrary, it transcends borders. It is attached to dreams and values that one adopts. Then, one can be at home everywhere regardless of borders as one is travelling to have one's dreams realized.

The construction of "home" involves not only a spatial arrangement, but also a transformation of the space into a meaningful place where the occupant inscribes his or her values. Subsequently, it becomes a cultural index. It cannot be encapsulated solely by physical architecture. Its formation also depends on the ability to generate a sense of belonging. This sense of belonging indicates the relationship between the occupant and home as a concept or as a physical presence of spatial arrangement, a place where people can locate their identities.

The adherence to the idea of home consolidates the existence of boundaries bringing forth enclosure. This generates a close relation between home and locality with a geographical connotation. It also entails a spatial construction of social relations. Yet, in the face of globalization, boundaries and distances are

dissolving because of the flow of the capital and people. A new global space is created. The rigidity of the boundary circumscribing home is challenged. The (re)placing of boundaries, which re-negotiate the demarcation of inside and outside, becomes the point of interest. Clearly, one both belongs and unbelongs to "home".

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