

## **The Near and The Related: Positioning and Bounding Knowledge Spheres**

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In his keynote lecture for the inaugural event of SFU's Institute for Transpacific Cultural Research, Chua Beng Huat spoke of the difficulty of using Western benchmarks to demarcate a new area of Asian studies. A concept like *transnational* comes with questions already attached regarding the flow of resources or capital between nations. But which nations? From or towards the Global North or the Global South? Westwards towards the US? Or further East towards China? For Huat and the founders of the Institute, if they were to open up new areas of research and discussion, it would be necessary to create a new term, *inter-Asian*, as well as a new methodology, *Asia as Method*.<sup>1</sup>

Huat's account suggests that a sphere of knowledge production can be an imagined space—an area of discourse that can have its coordinates reset from time to time according to current needs, circumstances and objectives. But after pressing reset, what are the influences that keep the boundaries of a field of research intact? One possible influence is a researcher's positionality which is the subject of this paper.

For instance, as I listened to Huat's keynote, I was struck by two things: first, the use of particular words and phrases denoting, describing or circumscribing movement across or through a field. This point interested me because I had considered transnationalism mainly in terms of the relationship between country of origin/host country or home/away but not necessarily the spaces in between. Being fairly new to this knowledge community, I began to wonder how I should even begin to conceptualize this interim space *between* point A and point B? How did this concept stack up against my personal experience?

Secondly, I noted the use of geographical terms: *flows*, *boundaries*, *locality*, and *designated spaces*. This observation is unsurprising considering that any discussion of nationalism carries within it a discussion of the state and its physical boundaries. However, Tobler's First Law of Geography argues that "Everything is related to everything else, but near things are more related than distant things" (Tobler, 1969). This simple principle offers a more nuanced perspective on transnationalism in that it allows for discussion of the near and the related, as well as the spaces in between. It serves as a useful framework for positioning myself as well as the boundaries of my research in locating situated notions of "home" within the context of transnationalism.

### **The Politics of Locating "Home"**

British Columbia's recent reforms to provincial real estate regulations, known as Bill 28, are intended to address the issue of affordable housing. Public debate that took place in the lead up to this reform continued a longstanding discussion in BC about who has the right to own a home. These issues can be difficult to discuss in a local context where the meaning of "home" has been challenged by transnationalism. In addition, Vancouver's Chinese diaspora is particularly affected by these reforms as, historically, this community has been the victim of discriminatory practices.

In 2016, debate about the proposed reforms was further complicated by a Provincial government initiative to collect real estate ownership and occupancy data. It is not clear whether this data was collected in an inclusive or discriminatory way. Regardless, this question is an important one because it speaks to how individuals of East Asian origin have negotiated the assignment of various roles: immigrant, investor, buyer, home owner. Their consent or resistance to these roles affects how the notion of "home" is renegotiated in a transnational landscape.

I argue that a temporary (de)racialization of the "Asian foreign buyer" was necessary in order to implement changes to Property Transfer Tax Return Form (Version 26) on June 10, 2016. These changes allowed for the collection of data regarding a property owner's nationality. The need for data was campaigned for under the hashtag #giveusdata and at a public rally in June 2015; but in the preceding months, articles in mainstream media were already discussing the issues in racialized terms. What passed as discussions about the right to affordable housing cited an industry report by Andy Yan that highlighted the occurrence of "non-anglicized Chinese names" among homeowners in Vancouver's West Side.<sup>2</sup>

Meanwhile, a 2015 report by the China Institute of the University of Alberta advocated a foreign investment tax even before foreign ownership was confirmed as a major causal factor in Vancouver's housing market. When a white paper proposes that data be sought in order to implement the policy it advocates, it suggests an after-the-fact approach to investigation and policy-making.

Official data soon did confirm that a large percentage of new homeowners were of Chinese nationality. Newspaper headlines were then quick to feature the term "Asian foreign buyer," and less than eight weeks later Bill 28 became law.

I do not debate the need for official data about home ownership in Vancouver, nor do I necessarily disagree with the use of foreign ownership taxes as policy instruments. My concern is with how the data was collected and presented, and how this shaped public debate. Setting aside the fact that a tax based on nationality may be unconstitutional, and possibly in violation of numerous international treaties, I am concerned with the speed with which Bill 28 was drafted and ratified in response to the preliminary data. I do not take issue with using data to support policy, but I do take issue with using data to curtail debate. Reading through the newspaper headlines surrounding the debated new law, it as if officials were saying, "Here are the numbers people. Now we can stop talking about race and immigrants and start taxing the foreigners."

The presentation of the data simplified the issue, making it a problem that can be easily resolved by enacting a tax on foreign investment, thus curtailing the need for further debate. But the causes of price inflation in a housing market are complex and not all housing bubbles are caused by indi-

vidual speculators. The thirty-five-year long upward trend in Vancouver's housing prices was precipitated by immigration during the 1960s, reinforced by a lack of regulations in the real-estate and financial markets, driven by land speculation from Hong Kong, Japanese, American and German investment conglomerates, and fuelled by a zealously-pursued immigration program that targeted East Asian migrants during the Eighties and Nineties (Gutstein, 1990; Ley, 2010; Mitchell, 2004).

I doubt that foreign investment is the only cause of BC's housing crisis. I do not even believe that it is *the* major factor. Articles published in real estate journals examine the housing bubble in terms of a segmented market, but none of the policy reports and few mainstream articles take up this theme. Market segmentation aggregates buyers into groups with similar needs but how are these differentiated needs to be addressed by a blanket policy? Is adding a one-percent Empty Homes tax really going to make that much of a difference to a Filipino family of four seeking an affordable basement suite for under \$1200? When we discuss the issue of affordable homes, whose budget are we addressing? Who should be able to afford a home in BC?

Ultimately, I believe that the data presented in June 2016 shifted the focus of the debate from affordable home ownership to foreign ownership. It is easier to tax foreign investors than to address issues of income inequality because the latter involves zoning, land use, mixed-use developments, infrastructure support, gentrification, domestic migration, and the rising costs of living, labour and construction. The very same issues that make it expensive to live in Vancouver also make it prohibitively expensive to build more housing stock.

I also believe that the data was presented in such a way as to vindicate a position that is marginalizing. The exemptions listed in the final legislation indicate a position that is both self-serving and hypocritical, exempting foreign corporations yet disregarding individual situations like the case of Jing Li who may technically fall under the category of "foreign buyer" but is hardly a speculator. Jing Li, a Chinese national who has lived in Canada since 2013, learned she would have to pay an additional \$83,850 on a \$587,895 Langley home that she agreed to purchase days before the tax announcement. In September 2016, a *Canadian Press* article identified Li as the main plaintiff in a class action lawsuit challenging the constitutionality of the tax, as it "perpetuates prejudice and stereotyping on the basis of national origin."

Jing Li's lawsuit alludes to discussions that occurred in the weeks prior to the tax implementation, when critics and lobbyists claimed that it is xenophobic to link housing prices to foreign money. What is the main issue here? On the surface, we can identify patterns of media coverage and shifting public discourses. But underneath there is a larger issue, which is *the effect of transnationalism on the idea of home*.

Race-baiting has previously entered the debate about the causes of Vancouver's real estate crisis. Stakeholders in the real estate, construction and financial markets successfully used race-baiting to limit debate in the aftermath of the Expo land sales (Ley, 2010). In 2016, this same approach arguably mobilized anti-neoliberal sensibilities that moved government to action.

Any issue is racialized when a group appears to be targeted by policy. There *should* be allowances for a discussion of the empirical categories that lead to notions of "othering" and difference. Collecting data in order to identify groups is not wrong, but it requires a perspicacity and delicacy that

up till now has been lacking. In presenting her case for an additional “tax residency box” on property tax forms, British Columbia Premier Christy Clark (2016) specifically referenced a position on “foreign buyers” with the following: “If there’s more information that we should be collecting that will be helpful to the federal government in policing money laundering, we are going to find a way to do that.”

Of particular concern is the role of the government in addressing the housing crisis, especially in terms of the limited scope of its investigation and response. In a July 2016 article in the *Province*, Christy Clark's cautious statement, “There is evidence now that suggests that very wealthy foreign buyers have raised the price, the overall price of housing for people in British Columbia,” suggests forced acknowledgement. In contrasting “wealthy foreign buyers” with the “people in British Columbia,” she leaves little room for the recently immigrated or those with the intention of immigrating.

### Positioning My Knowledge Production

Analysis of these issues requires a combination of discourse analysis and ethnographic methods. As a pragmatist, I am drawn to empirical approaches to research for the satisfaction of assessing numbers, texts, numbers as texts: the objects of an investigation from which a narrative can be drawn and critiqued. But I still wonder if my research is oriented more towards an examination of the cultural practices of property ownership and identity politics. Or am I exploring “how we talk” when we talk about “being” an immigrant/homeowner/racial category? Is this an ethnographic study of a discursive practice? Or a discourse analysis of texts that inform cultural practices? And does the blurred line between ethnography and discourse analysis render this distinction moot?

This brings me back to Tobler’s First Law of Geography: “Everything is related to everything else, but near things are more related than distant things.” In studying the effects of transnationalism on the idea of home, I find my role to be situated closer to one reference point than another.

I am *not* writing from the viewpoint of someone who identifies with the Chinese diaspora in Vancouver. I am a Canadian citizen with a Malaysian-Chinese background and I have spent much of my adult life overseas. Since my return to Canada, I have been addressed in Japanese more often than in Chinese. I am more proficient in Japanese and French than I am in Mandarin. Ien Ang’s rebuttal to the notion of racial categorization seems apt in my case: “If I am inescapably Chinese by descent, I am only sometimes Chinese by consent. Where and how is a matter of politics” (Ang, 2002, p.51)

At the same time, I am *not* white and *not* male. I may be perceived as belonging more to the category of “Chinese buyer,” and I am comfortable discussing the “racialized” because I do not have to make apologies for doing so.

Having spent half of my adult life as an expatriate, I have experienced the oddity of defining my residency status according to various criteria: the place where my family lives (British Columbia, Seattle), where my belongings were situated (Quebec), where I lived and paid income tax (Japan,

the Philippines). To save paperwork in my “home” country, I eventually changed my status to “Canadian non-resident” and was then confounded by the amount of paperwork it took to reinstate my status in my “country of origin.”

I do not disagree that the identity of the researcher is crucial to the research process. However, on the question of “which culture” I would like to offer one raised eyebrow and the comment, “It’s not that simple.” *Which culture should I mobilize when I construct the boundaries of my research about the effects of transnationalism on the idea of home?*

In my life, I have chosen to negotiate these terms according to the situation. In my case, this often involved an encounter between the *East* and *nearer-East* or *Southeast* and *north of Southeast*. I have been perceived as white in some *barangays* of Manila, where children approached me to touch my relatively pale skin. When I lived in Tokyo, it was natural for my Japanese co-workers to assume I was a *zainichi kankoku-jin* (an ethnic Korean with permanent residency in Japan) because the character of my last name (韩) means “Korean.” Touring parts of China and Southeast Asia, I was perplexed to find myself referred to as a *haigui*, a Chinese returnee now Westernized by my years “abroad.”

My point is that as someone with roots in many places, I have a somewhat flexible attitude towards racial and ethnic categories. If I identify with any particular group on the issue I address in my research, it is simply that of the “minor transnational,” meaning *someone engaged in a specific negotiation with state-ascribed categories from the position of a minority*. (Linnet & Shih, 2005) So, when I think about who I will address with my research, I imagine the prospective homeowner staring in bemusement at real-estate listings, people seeking a monthly rent under 50% of their monthly income, or those who fall outside of checkboxes like Jing Li. And when I imagine what form my research might take, I see a program evaluation, or perhaps a small appendix at the back of a much larger report. My work would fall under the heading *Additional Concerns* and it would list the channels through which major criticisms had been voiced, offer a list of the key stakeholders that were mobilized, present a mapping of the locations deemed impenetrable to outreach, and perhaps include a proposal for a longitudinal study.

We need a longitudinal study on the effects of access to housing on fostering a long-term sense of civic commitment among recent immigrants. We need longitudinal research on the effects of transnationalism on the idea of home. The consequences of Bill 28 are still very much in question. The number of individual home sales dropped by 26% in the aftermath of the new tax. And if the aim was to curtail foreign ownership, then the bill has been successful in reducing the number of purchases made by individual owners. But analysts had observed downward trends over a year before the tax was implemented, and it mostly affected sales of the most expensive homes. According to 2016 articles in the *Vancouver Sun* and *BNN*, the prices for single-family homes are not expected to drop by more than 10% in 2017 which means that home prices are still 20 times the average income of the region.

At least a part of my research will focus on a discourse analysis of government texts through which I hope to highlight a need to examine the connection between housing and immigrant inte-

gration, and what it means for that process when we use categories like home, investment or asset, and homeowner, investor or foreign buyer to describe it. What happens to public discourse when we make race into an issue or take it out of the issue? What permissions do we give to our governments through these word games? More importantly, *how are the wearers of these labels supposed to work with, through or beyond them as they locate the idea of home in their transnational experience?*

## **Bounding My Knowledge Sphere**

I like to think that the boundaries I have assigned to my knowledge enterprise have been placed there by universal concerns, mostly involving questions related to the interconnectivity of the world we live in. Kishore Mahbuban (2012) describes this interconnectivity as one that is currently expanding our “moral compasses... beyond national borders” at the same time as it is challenging our historicized and structured categories of race and ethnicity.

I say historicized because these categories are largely (re)produced by what Kuan-hsing Chen (2010) refers to as “the historical processes of imperialization, colonization, and the Cold War [that] have become mutually entangled structures, [and] which have shaped and conditioned both intellectual and popular knowledge production.” Chen expands upon this concept in his book *Asia as Method: Towards Deimperialization*, which once again brings us to the notion of the “near” and the “related.”

*Asia as Method* was the name of a 1960 lecture by Takeuchi Yoshimi in which an alternate model for discussions of the modern was outlined:

“It is important in analyzing Japan to refer to the United States and Western Europe, for they represent the advanced nations of modernization. Nevertheless, we must also look elsewhere. In studying China, for example, we should not limit ourselves to seeing this nation only vis-à-vis the West. It was at this time that I realized the importance of conceiving of modernization on the basis of a more complex framework than that of simple binary oppositions.”

(Yoshimi, 1960)

Yoshimi's work critiques the use of Eurocentric frameworks when examining the interconnectivity of Asian societies and issues in Asian cultural studies. In the late 1990s, 2nd generation inter-Asian researchers sought new theories to organize collaborative works situated in different localities throughout the region (Chen, 2010). Huat, Chen and others, eschewed Western notions of governance, civic participation and normative patterns of social behavior as reference points for the exploration of regional phenomena. *Asia as Method* developed out of a desire for a new standard of comparison.

As methodology, it encourages the use of local terms and non-exoticized explanations of concepts that have been popularized in the West (“Confucian capitalism” being an excellent example<sup>3</sup>)

and tends to focus on transnational flows into local spaces (both social and physical). The removal of a Western “filter” allows the researcher to engage with the subject in a process that acknowledges “the diverse historical experiences and rich social practices of Asia ... to provide alternative horizons and perspectives” to that found in a binary East-West opposition (Chen, 2010). At the same time, the shifting dynamics of political and economic entities in and pan-Asian region require continual enquiry into the notion of “Asia.” Asia is not only a product of colonial, imperial history. It is constantly reinventing itself along new lines of relationality (Chen, 2010; Huang, 2011). Thus *Asia as Method* serves as a model for situating the subject among reference points that are the “most near” and the “most related.” For in comparing societies that are geographically closer or share similar historical experiences, there is the possibility of an approach that seeks out commonalities rather than differences, collaboration in collocation, patterns among proximate causes. *Asia as Method* and the concept of the near and the related serve as models for my understanding of transnationalism and my positionality as a researcher. Just as we need to keep a critical distance from “uninterrogated notions of Asia,” (Chen, 2010) a researcher in the transnational field should maintain a critical distance from uninterrogated notions of the nation-state and the agency of its citizens or would-be citizens. Transnationalism is a place of enquiry where the line of relationality *can* be described as a flow between point A and B, in which the boundaries of a nation-state can serve as a floodgate. But from my perspective it is a designated space for exchanges of human and financial capital circumscribed by the regulatory controls situated at points A and B, but not excluding the negotiated spaces in between or the nearby spaces (fields both social and physical). This last point has been critical to my notion of home.

Traditionally, “home,” the site of social reproduction for the family would be at a fixed point but as we have seen in the “flattened” space of transnationalism, there is no fixed point except for the reference of “away.” Taking a utilitarian view of things, “home” can be *any* site of social reproduction where the “meaning” of “home” becomes relevant. Therefore, in a globalized context where technology has compressed time and space to make it possible to “share” across borders, “home” too can exist beyond the boundaries of a checkbox. It is wherever you (re)create meaningful social interactions.

*Asia as Method* rebuilds subjectivities through deconstructive and interrogative dimensions that are curiously purposeful rather than destructive. In interrogating the notion of “Asia” it does not seek to erase the “Asian” in proximate cultures. I feel naturally inclined to use this approach because of the complexity of the discussions encountered within this paper and throughout the course of my research to date. “Asia as method” currently serves the purpose of framing my positionality better than any claims to a particular category of gender, race, status, ethnicity or nationality.

## Postscript

This paper was written early in my research process, as an exploration of my background and position in relation to my capstone topic. At the time, I was intrigued by the way “property” was being

differentiated from “home ownership” in public debate on Vancouver’s real estate market, so I knew that I wanted to explore the concept of “home” from a sociological perspective that took into account its value as an asset, both financially and as a symbol of class, community and belonging. Since then, my research has led me to question the systematic, scientific approach used to inform the debate through calls for data and a rather expensive publicly-commissioned study. Now in the process of drafting my final extended essay, I find myself recognizing what it was that drew me to these topics in the first place: a sense of discomfort with the assumptions made about foreign buyers, objective data, and the goal of private home ownership. Many of these assumptions revolved around questions of culture and identity. Why, for instance, should the private home be seen as the only desired form of housing in Western society? I also question the objective ethos of data as given: why should we assume that information presented as data increases our objective understanding of a complex issue? While I do not explicitly reference *Asia as Method* in my capstone I see now where it has led me. *Asia as Method* serves as a reminder to myself to question the cultural roots of knowledge production. In the same way that we can take an interdisciplinary approach in our methodology, it should be possible to take an intercultural approach to our positionality as researchers.

## Notes

1. Notes taken as an audience member of Chua Beng Huat’s keynote lecture at the public symposium, “New Directions in Transpacific Cultural Research.” February 9, 2017. SFU Vancouver.
2. The full title of this report for BTAWorks is “Ownership Patterns of Single Family Home Sales on Selected West Side Neighbourhoods in the City of Vancouver: A Case Study.” Published online in November 2015, it became one of the most cited sources in mainstream media, “proving” overwhelming foreign ownership of Vancouver property.
3. Donald M. Nonini and Aihwa Ong discuss “Confucian capitalism” as a conflation of Confucian ethics and Asian economic success in their introduction to *Ungrounded Empires*. While Confucian capitalism is described as a discursive trope, it is also included as part of a larger discourse on what constitutes “Chineseness” in transnationalism (Nonini, Ong, 1997).

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