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Jane M. Jacobs (2006) *Too many houses for a home: Narrating the house in the Chinese diaspora*, online papers archived by the Institute of Geography, School of Geosciences, University of Edinburgh.

The scale and extent of human mobility in contemporary times has added a new inflection to a question that has long pre-occupied scholars: this being the matter of ‘what is home?’ or, more precisely and following Agnes Heller (1995), ‘where are we at home?’. These questions are both minor and major. They implicate something as ordinary as ‘the house’ and as extraordinary as our sense of belonging. Martin Heidegger’s well known essay from 1951, ‘Building Dwelling Thinking’, provides one starting point for thinking about how a building like a house is attached to an experience like dwelling (Heidegger 1975). He investigates how dwelling requires building (as a process and as a thing) and how, in turn, building helps constitute our sense of dwelling. Heidegger draws at one point on the example of a farmhouse in the Black Forest, which he uses to illustrate how building both cultivates and expresses dwelling. His conception of ‘proper dwelling’ relies, then, on the example of a house that is embedded in its place of origin -- where building and dwelling and location are co-constitutive. Through an architectural diagnostic, a dwelling such as Heidegger’s farmhouse might occupy the category of ‘the vernacular’. Through a sociological diagnostic, we might think of it as a type of ‘ancestral home’. Such models of ‘proper’ dwelling are being radically transformed in contemporary times. Not least, current levels of mobility act as a force of compromise. Mobility compels our lives to be full of radical open-ness, proliferating differences and multiplying loyalties. It produces flows of information, people and things that do away with, or render residual, what might be thought of as monogamous modes of dwelling. Within this restructured world, both vernacular architectures and ancestral homes come to assume new positions and are sutured into our modes of dwelling in quite different ways.

Although ending with the example of the deeply embedded Black Forest hut, Heidegger’s essay is, in spirit, not especially prescriptive about the geographies and architectures of ‘proper dwelling’. Indeed, part of his concern is with the matter not

simply of 'how' we dwell but '*how far* the nature of dwelling reaches' (Heidegger 1975: 147). Current levels of mobility suggest that the idea of 'reach' touched upon by Heidegger needs to become fully activated in our explanations of dwelling and home. Reach was certainly something that geographer Anne Buttimer felt necessary to consider in her 1980 account of 'home' and sense of place. Buttimer (1980:170) proposed that places should be thought about by way of two 'reciprocal movements': on the one hand an inward-facing concept of 'home' and, on the other, what she called the 'horizons of reach' that extended outward from that home. Buttimer proposed this binarised model as a way of diagnosing the extent to which a place was 'centred' (a good thing, from her perspective) or decentred (an undesirable thing). But perhaps the potential of the idea of reach is not as an opposite force to the idea of home, but as a constitutive force in contemporary home making. For example, we might think about applying a concept of 'reach' to the ways in which mobility often stretches the idea of 'home' well beyond any pre-given notion of origins. In a complementary manoeuvre, we might draw our attention to the processes by which we reach, through a range of everyday practices, not only for certain houses but also for certain ideals of 'home'. Elspeth Probyn (1996: 19) calls this the 'movement of desiring belonging'. Her phrase points, in the first instance, to the way in which dwelling is built out of spatial, affective, and sociological efforts. Furthermore, it confirms that one's sense of being 'at home' is not something simply bequeathed by long association with one place, but an active matter of becoming that can reach across far more complex spatialities and reflect more expansive relational ranges. In a mobile world, one's sense of home is not a geographical given, but emerges out of various building activities: how we respond to the strangers with whom we come to be proximate; the ways we orient ourselves in unfamiliar places; the things we assemble to make the houses we live in feel homely; the multiple scales that we negotiate to gather to us that which is familiar.

This chapter seeks to explore not simply the matter of how we come to feel ‘at home’ in a mobile world, but how *the architecture of home* is implicated in that process. My concern is specifically with the interface between the emotional experience of feeling at home and the architectural materiality of the house as formed through the drama of mobility. I do not explore this interface sociologically, but by way of the feature film *Floating life*¹, which charts the sometimes comical, sometimes tragic experiences of one diasporic Chinese family. Pina Werbner (2000: 8) has argued that diasporas ‘produce and reproduce themselves socially, culturally, and politically’ and that they do so through strategies that are ‘embedded in cultural technologies and underpinned aesthetically’. In short, being diasporic entails ‘cultural work’. I offer the film *Floating life* as one example of such cultural work, as undertaken by the recent Hong Kong diaspora. It provides an illustrative narrative of the experiences of the Hong Kong diaspora, and tells us specifically of the way the architecture of the house is drawn into contemporary narratives about, and representations of, home and transnational sociality for this group.

The house is (not) a home

It has long been accepted that the concept of ‘home’ is far more than a synonym for the architectural thing called a ‘house’. The question of ‘being-at-home’ transcends the matter of ‘house’ to incorporate the wider question of dwelling. For Mary Douglas (1991) the house is merely a physical space that is animated into the state called ‘home’ by the regular doings of its residents. Home emerges, she suggests, out of social processes (*processes in time*) that are always more than the architectural container of the house itself (*something in space*). So having a house is not sufficient in and of itself to provide one with a sense of being ‘at home’. In the context of this observation, we might speculate about the ways in which the contemporary phenomenon of widespread human mobility might be transforming this socially

produced relationship between house and home. Does mobility increase the 'distance' between the architectural entity called 'house' and the social and affective state of being 'at home'? Or does mobility simply transform the logic of the processes by which homely dwellings are built out of the raw material of the house?

In her article 'Where are we at home?', Agnes Heller (1995) specifically contemplates the implications of extreme human mobility for the modern sense of being at home. She identifies (1995: 7) two 'representative kinds of home-experience': 'the spatial home-experience' and the 'temporal home-experience'. The spatial home-experience is 'geographically monogamous' (2), there is no movement. In this example of 'home-experience' it is place that furnishes one with the sense of the 'familiar' (5) and ensures life proceeds in such a way that there is a maximum level of transparency. Heller usefully provides us with a caricature of someone who might just live such a life: this is the old man who has stayed in the same rural village all his days. Heller depicts a *mode* of dwelling as opposed to an actual dwelling type, but it is not too difficult to see that we are being called back to the idea of Heidegger's Black Forest hut and, if not actual vernacular architecture, then certainly the idea of it.² In contrast, Heller (1995: 7) posits the 'temporal home-experience' as something that is decidedly modern (or as she suggests, postmodern). This is the experience had by the person who travels incessantly: staying in hotels, speaking many languages and being 'geographically promiscuous' (Heller 1995: 1). Such folk live in the 'abstracted place of nowhere and everywhere' (Heller 1995: 6). This example of home-experience is brought to life by Heller through the figure of a female professional whose concept of home is defined not by walls or localities but simply by where her pet cat lives. This figure and her way of life suggest a world in which house and home are radically uncoupled.

If one were to take this literally then it might be imagined that a mobile world eschews the architecture of the house entirely. But is this really the case? People on

the move are not all the same and it is important to register here that much contemporary human mobility is not associated with the stratospheric lifestyle represented by Heller's transnational professional. For the refugee and the migrant being housed is often an imperative, and coming to feel as if one belongs a yearned for future state. For many migrant groups home ownership is an obsession. In Australia, for example, high rates of home ownership have for some time been recognised as a defining feature of a range of post-war migrant groups, including recent arrivals from Hong Kong (Bourassa 1994, Pulvirenti 2000)). Migration, in particular, involves a complex system of inhabitations that incorporate architectures as various as the ancestral home, the departure lounge, the vehicle of passage, the temporary shelter, and the new house. As such, architecture is always being called upon to structure the spatiality of a mobile world. And when the migrant comes to that point when journeying stops and settling begins -- be it reluctantly, precariously, temporarily or even dispersedly -- the architecture of the house is specifically implicated (for better or worse) in one's efforts to reinstate a sense of being 'at home'.

Migrancy places into question monogamous modes of dwelling, but it does not do away with the matter of 'the house' or locality. Recent accounts of 'home' within the specific context of the changes generated by an intensification of human mobility tend to emphasise the ways in which the migrant's sense of 'home' is split between here and there (see for an overview Rapport and Dawson 1998: 6-9). Once one's concept of home comes to be understood as 'plurilocal' (Rouse 1991) then the role 'the house' has to play in one's ability to be at home needs rethinking. Under such conditions does the house matter more, or less? John Berger (1984: 64) acknowledges that the idea of 'home' has been so irrevocably transformed by modern intensities of mobility that it can no longer function as the stable physical centre of one's universe and, as such, is 'no longer a dwelling'. Rather it transforms itself into a far more mobile and adjustable concept, as Rapport and Dawson (1998: 27) put it: 'a home that

can be taken along whenever one decamps ... a mobile habitat and not ... a singular or fixed structure’.

The house so conceived becomes one point in a more dispersed and disjunctive geography of dwelling, one that is no longer bound to a single place but sutured into a relationally linked range of localities. For the migrant it is this dispersed relational geography that must be negotiated in the building of dwelling. It shapes the affective scope of home, it constitutes the materialities of taste that come to be displayed in the house, it determines the extent of various economies of exchange, and it stretches the home’s rituals of living. As such, the initial journey made by a migrant is but one ‘shift’ in the many shifts that come to characterize life after migration. Settling is not simply about coming to terms with one new place, but about many places. Once re-settled, the house becomes a point in a widely orchestrated set of what Elspeth Probyn (1996, 19) calls ‘surface shifts’. These might entail overseas communications, far away memories, long-distance travellings, re-inventions of traditions, and much more. It is from the base provided by the house that the newly arrived migrant negotiates their new circumstance. This is the pivotal point from which one re-orientates oneself, not simply to one’s new neighbors, new nation, and new society, but also to one’s old home, one’s memories, one’s responsibilities to family left behind or moved on elsewhere. This is a concept of home which replicates a version of Doreen Massey’s (1994) ‘progressive sense of place’, a spot that is articulated with multiple sites and scales. This is not the vernacular house, although it is a house that may well contain any number of ‘shifted’ vernacularisms. This is not the ancestral home, although it may be a home that comes to embody that idea in any number of ways and localities. This is the mobile house and regardless of what kind of house it is, it calls into being flexible architectures of inhabitation.

Homes that are (not) homely

How are the houses drawn into experiences of modern mobility animated by this new geography of shifting surfaces? And what diagnostic concepts are available for us to understand the architecture of home brought into being by such mobility? Freud's concept of the uncanny has provided many contemporary commentators with a useful conceptual frame for thinking through the unsettled (and often anxious) experience of home in an age of migrancy. The uncanny, as outlined by Freud in his famous essay of 1919, bears directly upon the question of one's sense of home in a modern changing world. Freud elaborates the uncanny by way of two words whose meaning, which at first seem diametrically opposed, in fact circulate through each other: these being, *heimlich* ('home') and *unheimlich* ('unhomely', meaning unfamiliar or strange). According to Freud, an uncanny experience occurs when something familiar (like one's home) is rendered somehow and in some sense unfamiliar; one has the experience, in other words, of being in place and 'out of place' *simultaneously*.

A number of scholars have associated the uncanny with the ambivalent sense of home or place associated with change, including of course the changes that accompany migration (e.g. Kristeva 1991, Bammer 1992). For architectural critic, Anthony Vidler, the uncanny is an especially useful category for thinking about the contemporary world. It acts, he argues, as a 'frame of reference that confronts the desire for a home and the struggle for domestic security with its apparent opposite' (1992: 12). For Vidler the uncanny is a pertinent trope for thinking about contemporary architectural and urban practice because of its capacity to capture the 'peculiarly unstable nature of "house and home"' in a world characterised by 'social and individual estrangement, alienation, exile, and homelessness'. Vidler's concern is the specific ways in which architecture 'works with respect to the dedomesticated [modern] subject' (1992: x). Vidler assembles an expansive collection of

architectural, artistic and urban projects that speak to the unhomely in modern times. Inspired as these works might be by the conditions that invoke the uncanny as a trope of our time, few directly touch the experience of migrancy or indeed the matter of the architectures of migrant living.

In what follows I wish to capture a more everyday sense of the architectural uncanny as it relates to and reflects the migrant experience of housing and home-making. Freud's essay on the uncanny is particularly relevant to the migrant experience because it has at its heart a concern with the consequences of disorientation. That is, the anxieties that arise when one is exposed 'to a world one does not fully know one's way about in'. As Freud (341) noted, '[t]he better orientated in his environment a person is, the less readily he will get the impression of something uncanny in regard to objects and events in it'. As shown in the film *Floating life*, it is often a very ordinary domestic architecture that becomes central to the worlds (new and old) migrant families negotiate. Often enough this architecture is 'foreign', but in many ways it is also a 'familiar' architecture, taking up increasingly standardized domestic architectural features and reflecting suburban architectural types that travel the globe through various virtual circuits. Yet under the disorienting effects of migration, this entirely ordinary architecture can often come to feel extraordinary and can give rise to an uncanny experience. The house is both familiar (it is a house onto which one's movable idea of home might be traced) and unfamiliar (not the home one remembers or feels one might need).³ Furthermore, when one migrates one does not simply leave one place and start up another place afresh. In moving, one's former homeland is not simply abandoned, nor is one's former dwelling simply forgotten, nor even many of its appurtenances left behind. Some things, some family, some memories, and some routines go with the migrant into the new context where they must be reassembled within the opportunities as constraints of new types of housing. Other people and things stay behind or move on to other places and so one engages in an on-going process of re-orientation. Notions like the uncanny -- the unhomely home -- provide a

useful tool for diagnosing the logics of migrant dwelling for it registers the ‘surface shifts’ that vibrate through stable homes that migrants strive to build in their new worlds.

The surface shifts of *Floating life*

The film *Floating life* depicts such processes of transnational disorientation and reorientation as they occur in relation to a family -- the Chang family -- cast to the four winds by the 1997 return of the British Crown Colony of Hong Kong to the Chinese. The Changs are typical of what some commentators have described as ‘reluctant exiles’ (Skeldon 1994). Like many recent Hong Kong ‘exiles’, they follow in a much longer tradition of Chinese migration. Their departure from Hong Kong, we are told, is just one more step on a journey that began many years before when the parents, as young adults, fled from their Chinese homeland. Significantly, then, Hong Kong does not operate in this film as ‘the homeland’, that status (of *the* originary place) is preserved for mainland China.

The Chinese have long been associated with mobility such as this, and it is not surprising that their migration experiences have come to define and extend two of the key analytical categories associated with human mobility: ‘diaspora’ and ‘sojourner’. The term diaspora, has itself experienced a ‘dispersion’, spreading from being a term specific to the Jewish exile, to one applicable to any number of peoples -- including the Chinese -- subject to similar experiences (Schnapper 1999: 225). A number of the features assumed to define a ‘diaspora’ fit the experiences of the overseas Chinese. Most notably, their dispersal has been understood to have been from a ‘specific original centre’ (China). Furthermore, those dispersed retain a collective memory (often mythologized) of that original homeland and see it as the place to which they or their descendants would (or should) eventually return. As Safran (1991: 83-4)

suggests, diasporic groups have a specific ‘ethnocommunal consciousness’ which ensures that a (real and imaginative) relationship to the ancestral home is sustained despite their mobility (see also Werbner 2000, Anthias 2001).

McKeown (1999) notes that such nominal uses of the term diaspora not only names a social group (in this case the ‘Chinese diaspora’) but also activates an essentialized understanding of homogeneity within the diasporic group. This he calls ‘diaspora-as-exile’ (McKeown 1999: 311). McKeown distinguishes the nominal use of the term ‘diaspora’ from more recent ‘adjectival’ extensions that have emerged in response to transnationalism, globalisation and deterritorialised identity formation. This extended application of the term ‘diaspora’ gestures towards a non-essentialized notion of diasporic identity. McKeown (1999: 309) refers to this as ‘diaspora-as-heterogeneity’.

This more transnationally activated notion of diaspora does not simply bring into view any distinctions in the quotidian character of the diasporic group, such as the diversity within it, or the distinct circumstances of its formation. It also registers ‘the rising self-consciousness and status of diaspora as a way of life’, what McKeown (1999: 311) calls ‘the contemporary prestige of diaspora’. A film like *Floating life*, made as it is by an Australian-Chinese who has herself fled Hong Kong, is a product of just such a self-conscious moment. As a narrative of the recent Hong Kong ‘exile’ it extends the idea of the ‘Chinese diaspora’ and actively constitutes how that category is understood and how its experiences are seen. The film is itself an artifact of an emerging self-conscious culture of diasporic Chinese-ness. As will be shown, such narratives of the Chinese diaspora do not activate simplistic stories of a people exiled from a Chinese homeland (diaspora-as-exile) but instead a more complex social geography ‘circulating in all directions around the world’ (diaspora-as-heterogeneity) (McKeown 1999: 330; see also Werbner 2000).

Another term, and one that is more traditionally associated with the overseas Chinese is, of course, that of 'sojourner'. The 'sojourner' is that category of 'migrant' who is only away from their homeland *temporarily*, and who always assumes that one-day they will return. The term 'sojourner' came into common use within migration analyses by way of a study of the Chinese in America (Siu 1952, see Yang 2000). The 'sojourner hypothesis' outlined a type of Chinese migration in which the migrant came to America only in order to make and save money for the express purpose of returning home to a better life. Sojourners, it is argued, not only continue to cling to the culture of their own group they are, as a result, unwilling to establish themselves as a permanent resident in their new country.

The sojourner concept has been given a new vitality as a descriptor of overseas Chinese because of the way in which a very visible section of recent Hong Kong 'exiles' have behaved. These 'modern sojourners', as Skeldon (1994: 11) refers to them, have now been dubbed 'astronauts'. 'Astronauts' are migrants whose households come to be split across two or more countries. The term was first used to refer to those (primarily) male household heads who kept their jobs and/or businesses in Hong Kong while sending the rest of the family to an established residences in Australia or Canada. These men would then commute long distances in order to maintain contact between their work life and home life. An additional term has been introduced to account for another specific feature of the Hong Kong exile, this being the phenomenon of 'parachute children'. These are the children left behind to attend school in the new country while one or both parents return to work in Hong Kong (Pe-Pua et al. 1996: 1).

The term 'astronaut' was taken from the Cantonese term 'taikongren'. The term clearly evokes the incessant mobility (always spending time airborne) of this special kind of transnational worker/dweller. But the Cantonese term also plays on another meaning -- 'empty wife' -- a term that implicates the home specifically. In the case

of the house occupied in the migrant's country of destination, this meaning speaks of a home without a husband (a metaphoric 'empty wife'). In the case of the house maintained in the migrant's country of origin, this meaning speaks of a home without a wife. The 'astronaut' is not simply someone who is moving incessantly, they are someone who is seen to occupy an incomplete home -- be it the new home or the old home. Although not replicating the specific phenomenon of the astronaut family, the Chang family of *Floating life*, is itself spread across a number of households (some new and some old) that are represented as 'incomplete' or aberrant. Inhabited by incomplete households the houses of *Floating life* can not always be properly managed and become malevolent.

Fixing floating lives

I would now like to turn to the houses of the film *Floating life*. The idea of the house is centrally important in the film, structuring how we come to know this diasporic Chinese family spread, as it is, across three countries: Hong Kong, Germany and Australia. The seven short stories that structure the film are introduced through a title depicting either one of the four main houses in which the action is sited, the emotional states of those houses, or houses that are yearned for. The house, and specifically the presence of many houses, is the device that is used to confirm that this family is geographically dispersed. The houses they inhabit are also varied in style: a suburban 'monster house' (Australia), an apartment (Germany), another apartment (Hong Kong); a Federation-style house (Australia), an ancestral home (China), and a vernacular farm house (Germany). The range of houses and house styles that come to accommodate the dispersed unit of the Chang family raises the question of whether the house is now incidental to one's sense of being at home in the world or more central to it? Are there too many houses for a sense of home to be felt?

The many houses of *Floating life* are not simply the privileged *context* of action in this film. Interactions within and with the houses constitute a key part of the film's action. In this sense the houses are positioned as actants in the daily lives of their inhabitants: setting off thoughts, dictating action, mediating wellbeing, expressing identity. In structuring her film so, Law instates the house as central to the lives she depicts. And although the lives of this family 'float' they are also pinned to specific localities and negotiate the demands of those localities, including the locality closest in -- the house itself.

Of monster houses

Figure 1: The Chan family arrive at their new 'monstrous' Australian home.



A House in Australia. As Mitchell (1997, see also this volume) has observed, the Hong Kong diaspora, when taking up residence in places like Canada, often engages in a form of conspicuous housing consumption. Cities like Vancouver and Sydney have neighbourhoods that are dotted with what non-Chinese locals have come to call 'monster houses'. These houses are large and often have an aesthetic that, Mitchell's

research shows, is at odds with specific 'Anglo-Canadian' notions of suburban beauty. It is into one such 'monster house' that the elderly mother and father ('Ma' and 'Pa') with their two youngest sons move when they arrive in Australia from Hong Kong (Figure One). The house is not theirs. It is owned by their second daughter, Bing, and her husband, Cheung. Bing has been in Australia for some time; she migrated first with the express purpose of forging a new life so that her wider family could join her. This is her second house, one she has bought to accommodate the extended family. As Bing puts it: 'This is my second house. This is a 100 per cent clean tidy and secure house.' When the rest of the family first see the house they are duly impressed: 'It is like a movie' says one of the sons; 'Its so beautiful' says Pa; 'I'm glad I came, I like the kitchen best' says Ma. But this new house is not as it seems. It carries with it the after-effects of the traumas Bing experienced when alone in her first months in Australia. The house is infected by Bing's paranoias and fears about Australia. It quite literally takes on monstrous ways, interfering with the Chang's ability to settle.

A house in Germany. The first-born daughter of the Chang family lives with her German husband and their daughter in Germany. Their house is an apartment. Yen and her small, immediate family have just moved into the apartment, and we are introduced to this home at a point where settling in is very apparent: boxes are being unpacked and walls painted. Yen's household is generally happier than the other households represented in the film. It too has its monsters, but they are of their own making. Yen's husband, for example, joyfully plays 'monster' with their daughter. But this house also has its share of unwanted disturbances that must be dealt with in order for Yen and her family to feel properly settled. Not least, Yen is tortured by the thought of her increasingly unhappy mother in Australia, and racked by her sense of guilt for not properly fulfilling her sense of filial duty. At one point she despairs: 'The happier I am in Germany, the more it hurts'.

A house in Hong Kong. With one branch of his family in Germany and another in Australia, Gar-ming, the ‘spoilt’ eldest son, has been left in the family apartment in Hong Kong. This is an almost deserted house, and Gar-ming lives in it ambivalently. He often sleeps (and fornicates) in his glass-walled skyscraper office. When he is at home he is overwhelmed by loneliness and incessantly recalls happier (although entirely short-lived and autonomous) moments when he masturbated. He, too, is trying to move to Australia but is weighed down by an unaccountable apathy. In one scene he is lunching with his girlfriend and announces casually that his application to enter Australia had at last been approved. His girlfriend, as if aware that he is not serious about leaving says, without looking up from her magazine, ‘Let me know when we leave’. He prevaricates, ‘I might not go ... my company might not let me go’.

Figure 2: Bing terrified by the noises she hears at night in her first Australian home.



A house without a tree. This is the first house that Bing, as the lone first migrant of the family, occupies in Australia, and it is introduced by way of a flashback. This is the house that stands at the frontier of this family’s movement to Australia and, appropriately, it is located right at the edge of the city -- beyond its fence is a treeless

expanse and even the odd kangaroo. Bing initially came with her husband, but he has returned to his job in Hong Kong leaving Bing alone to establish a base for those to follow. Her's then is the quintessential 'astronaut' home, a household without a husband and she the 'empty wife'. Bing feels out of control in this house, frightened by its isolation, scared of the unfamiliar creatures that she hears crawling through it at night (Figure Two). In her loneliness Bing allows herself to be befriended by a Chinese Australian man, who helps her by installing locks and an alarm in order to make the house safe. Of course, the more he does for this 'empty wife' the closer they get and the more imperilled is Bing's status as a loyal wife. At the moment she is tempted to turn this friendship into something more, she bans her new friend from the house and returns to the isolated discipline of carving out a life resourced enough to receive the rest of her family from Hong Kong.

Detailing a *Floating life*

Brick veneer. Architecturally speaking the walls of a house offer protection, managing the interface between inside and outside, the domesticated and the wild, the private and the public. The walls that structure the houses of *Floating life* do not always function in this way. The part they play in an architecture of security is unreliable: some walls are not what they seem, others create discomfort, some entrap instead of protect, others open the way to sheer horror. One of the key architectural features of contemporary suburban architecture in Australia is the use of relatively cheap and light construction materials. Exterior walls are commonly brick veneer and interior walls constructed from plasterboard, each covering a timber frame. No sooner had the newly arrived Ma and Pa and the boys decided their new home was 'beautiful' than their daughter Bing abruptly delivers the 'truth' about this suburban house and its failings in terms of providing a safe a secure haven from the hostile world out there.

Two scenes establish this fact, the first involves Bing reprimanding her excited, newly arrived, younger brothers about the amount of noise they are making: 'Stop the noise, I said 'stop!'. I'm telling you, houses here aren't very solid' (as she taps the plaster board walls) 'Thin as paper!'. The second scene gives us our first real insight into the intensity and scope of Bing's paranoias about life in Australia. Ma and Pa have brought the family alter all the way from Hong Kong, and one of the first things they set about doing is unpacking it and finding an appropriate spot for it. Once again Bing warns her family that the house cannot accommodate their usual ways: 'It's a wooden house, you can't burn incense. A little fire would burn it down'. Ma and Pa are mystified. Ma asks curiously 'That flimsy?'. Pa, who has noticed that the house was brick is even more sceptical: 'The outside wall is brick' he says, and he goes to open the large sliding glass doors in order to look again at the outside of the house and confirm that his eyes were not fooling him.

The large sliding glass doors of this house represent an emphatic visual and actual opening in the wall membrane between inside and outside. It invites passage from one space to the other. Suburban Australian homes often have such generously proportioned apertures that work to seamlessly join the inside rooms to the outside. But in Bing's house such openness is not encouraged. The glass door, Pa finds, is locked. Bing explains: 'There are lots of burglaries. We've got locks on the windows and doors. Plus an alarm and a smoke detector'. Bing's husband, Cheung, unlocks the door so Pa can go out, nonetheless. Bing gets even more anxious: 'Got a hat, Pa? The sun's dangerous. That hole in the Ozone layer ... three out of ten Australians has skin cancer, a terminal disease.' Bing's husband hands hats out, but Ma is already worried: 'don't go out', she implores. As Pa and the boys start to exit Bing builds her case as to why the family should not go outdoors, including the dangers of killer wasps, redback spiders and vicious dogs. In Bing's '100 per cent clean, tidy and secure' second home the walls are so impenetrable that they come to entrap the newly arrive parents and their sons who rarely go out and, when they do,

get lost, attacked by a dog and even frightened by a ‘boxing kangaroo’. (Figure Three).

Figure 3: The Chan family trapped behind the glass doors of their suburban home.



Not quite an attic: Bing's own paranoia stems, as stated, from her experiences when she was alone in the very first home she had in Australia. Bing experiences a building sense of terror in this house, and the greater the anxiety the more she tries to 'secure' the home: by adding locks and alarms, security doors and cleaning incessantly. One day Bing decides to open the 'manhole', the name given to the trapdoor in the ceiling of Australian homes that leads to the cavity between the ceiling and the roof. In Bing's house this is the only unsecured entranceway left and it leads to the only unclean space. Unsecured and dirty, this roof space is a source of genuine anxiety for Bing. Overcoming her own fear and armed with a torch and a hand held vacuum cleaner, she opens the 'manhole' in order to enter the space and clean it up.

In suburban Australian homes the space between the ceiling and the roof is largely unoccupied. It generally carries some utilities, including insulation material to ward off the searing rays of the sun. This roof cavity is too compressed to be allowed the name 'attic'. For Bachelard the attic and roof were 'rational' spaces (as opposed to the irrationality of the cellar). 'Up near the roof', Bachelard (1969: 18) suggests, 'all our thoughts are clear. In the attic it is a pleasure to see the bare rafters and the strong framework'. As Bachelard (1969: 19) goes on to suggest (drawing on Jung) '[i]n the attic, fears are easily rationalized'. Not so for Bing in this house. As she enters the roof cavity she is faced with darkness, through the torchlight she makes out what for her is an illogical assembly of roof supports, cobwebs, and other detritus. Utterly traumatised by this glimpse of irrational filth secreted away in this cavity, she exists and frantically seals off the manhole with tape (Figure Four).

Figure 4: Not quite Bachelard's attic.



Surface effects: The Eldest daughter, Yen, has, as noted, a happier home than that inhabited by her Australian-based family. She and her German husband have just moved in and are in the process of actively making it a home: unpacking boxes, arranging things, buying a bed for their young daughter, Mui-Mui. We first see the family together painting the walls a bright yellow. As Yen paints she talks to her husband about her concerns for her family newly arrived in Australia: how Bing won't let the boys speak Chinese, how Ma and Pa can't drive and how they can't afford to buy their own place in Australia because they have not yet sold the house in Hong Kong. In the midst of her painting and fretting Yen's skin begins to itch. She is increasing 'irritated' in her new house, and it is unclear if it is the house paint or the trouble her family is experiencing in Australia that is the root cause. As Yen's itch worsens she decides that there is something wrong with the house and that it needs to be set right. By subjecting it to the corrective powers of feng shui.

The furniture rearranging does not appease her growing sense of discomfort: she suggests to her husband they move to Australia, she frets that her daughter Mui-Mui is reluctant to speak Cantonese and to know Chinese ways. One night she breaks down and the inability of her newly painted and properly arranged house to provide a sense of home is made clear: 'I don't know where my home is', she laments, 'Where is my home?'. Her 'roots' she decides are with her parents. Yen does the only thing left for her to do as eldest daughter, she 'returns' to her parents, a journey that takes her not to China or to Hong Kong, but to Australia.

The stairs: I have suggested that under conditions of mobility the house acts as a point at which one takes up residence and from which one negotiates one's condition of movement. It is a structure through which the effects of moving flow, sometimes resolving themselves, other times setting up irritations that cannot seem to be calmed. But what of some of the structures that are themselves designed to facilitate flow into and through the house? What role do they come to play in the narration of the diasporic house in *Floating life*? In the Australian monster house, where most of the action of the film takes place, the stairway becomes the location for two key points of action: one which represents a profound rupturing of the Chang family, another which represents a point at which the family becomes reconciled in their diasporic condition.

The stairway is, of course, a kind of passage way, a transit point within a house that takes one somewhere else. It is not a space for permanent occupation. As an architectural feature designed for upward and downward movement it has a certain risk built in to it. Yet it has certain features that reduce that risk like the balustrade. And it has other features, like the landing, that provide rest points in order to make the up and down journeying more manageable. In this sense the stairway offers an architectural metaphor for the dynamic of the migrant family, and perhaps for the migrant house as a whole. It is perhaps not surprising that it is this space that carries

the key two dramatic moments for the Chang family's diasporic experiences. It is on the stair that the pressures of 'assimilating' boil over and set the family asunder. It is on the stair that certain vernacularisms return to reinstate order and well being.

When they first arrived, Ma and Pa have little option but to accept the hospitality and advice of their daughter, Bing. Ma and Pa are quite literally in the 'care' of Bing, she being their official family-reunion sponsor, the main breadwinner (with her husband), and the owner of the house. This circumstance arose out of Bing's own thorough (and at times manic) sense of filial duty to her parents. But it resulted in a strange inversion of the relations of authority in the family. Bing assumes the role of the temporary 'elder' and Ma and Pa come to be treated without respect, like children. Ma, for example, even loses authority over the one space and the one task that was always understood to be hers, the kitchen and cooking. Bing, for example, does not allow Ma to cook with fat or to use too much chilli. The inverted order of authority in the house comes into crisis one day, a crisis that is acted out upon the stair landing.

The Chang's teenage boys settle relatively well to Australian life. But older sister Bing is keen on her newly arrived brothers assimilating as quickly as possible, and to this end she will not let them speak Cantonese at home. Yet at the same time Bing is disturbed that her younger brothers are becoming a little too Australian: she scolds them for watching TV, for smoking, for being untidy and dirty, for having long hair, and for reading 'magazines'. One day she raids their room and removes a large pile of contraband, dumping it on the stair landing. The family gathers on the landing to witness Bing's rage: the boys are sullen and silent; Ma tries settling things down by suggesting everyone come to the table to eat. Bing spectacularly turns upon her mother. She tells her that while they are in her house that they must obey her rules: 'You're here as migrants, not to enjoy life. You're leaving your country, OK? My rules or back to Hong Kong!'.

This spectacular fight on the stair landing produces a such a rupture in the family that Ma and Pa decide to take the boys and move into their own home. Bing is devastated by her family's departure from the home she had worked so hard to make for them. She has a breakdown that sees her confined to her room, not eating and not bathing. It is at this point that certain vernacular artefacts and rituals come to be actively reinserted into the logic of homemaking in this Australian-based branch of the Chang family. Ma, resuming her proper place in the family structure, catches a bus to Bing's house and, once there, makes soup and, most importantly, sets up the altar that Bing had so adamantly discouraged.

The alter is set up at the base of the stair in front of the (opened) front door to the house. The altar is not secreted away in some corner, but established at the symbolic threshold to the house. It is in the midst of this architecture of apertures, thresholds and thoroughfares, that Ma does her work of healing her daughter and making this house right again. Bing is drawn out of her bedroom and sits on the stairway listening to her mother pray.

‘All ancestors of the Chan family, my family and I are now in Australia, far away from you all. We've been unable to offer you incense. Please do not blame us. ... Forgive us for disturbing you from such a distance. ... We have not paid you enough filial respect. We are not at your side. We can't clean your grave on ancestral days. Forgive us. But why? Why after all these years of not having a homeland? We are used to hardship. Now we have achieved our goal. The whole family is together in Australia, this paradise on earth. Why can't we have any joy? Why can't we put down our burden and plant our roots in this soil? Why? Why?’

Let me linger here with this scene on the stairwell, with a mother praying to distant ancestors at a movable alter positioned between the stair and an open front door (Figure Five). At this point in the film the narrative tells us, much as it did with Yen's

use of feng shui, about how Chinese traditions can not just travel, but inhabit new houses and be used to bestow upon those new houses and those that live in them a proper sense of belonging. This is of course a very inviting, empowering and, some might say, romantic migrant story. By depicting an adaptable tradition-on-the-move an idea of ancestral Chinese-ness is not simply sustained as some residual thing back there, but as an enlivened thing that can be set to work in what ever here and now it is required to work in.

Figure 5: Vernacularizing the threshold of the new house.



The idea of the ancestral home

The scenes on the stairway offer then a way for this film to narrate a mobile and adaptable ‘tradition’ into the core of movement itself. There is one other figure that is called upon to demonstrate a similar point, and in a way that is explicitly (as opposed to metaphorically) architectural. This is the figure of the ancestral home. I use the term ‘figure’ here because the narrative of *Floating life* suggests that, contrary to what we might imagine, the ancestral home is more than a single, non-replicable

thing. As noted earlier, the ‘overseas Chinese’ have long been seen as retaining attachments to the homeland. In terms of the house, this translates into the idea of the ancestral home. One might imagine that in a film that depicts the Chinese diaspora, there would be just one ancestral home. But in *Floating life*, there are three houses that come to assume the role of ‘ancestral home’. This film deals with the idea of the ancestral home under diasporic circumstances, not by doing away with it altogether, but by multiply it. The idea that an ‘ancestral home’ can only ever be unilocal and bound to one place is dispensed with. The first ancestral home we see in *Floating life* is the house we might imagine to be *the* ancestral home, the one that retains the aura of the authentic. This house is back in China and the family have not lived in it for over 50 years. We come to know of this house through the reminiscences of Pa and one of his old friends, and we see it only through a snapshot taken by Pa’s friend (Figure Six, a). It is in this sense more of an idea than part of the lived social geography of the family. It is an ancestral home that is not known through dwelling as such but by way of various mediated experiences. It is *the* ancestral home, but it is at the same time a virtual ancestral home.

When Pa and Ma leave Bing’s house with the boys they move into a Federation-style house in the countryside. Made of stone, with a typical corrugated iron roof, surrounded by a wide veranda and located in a picturesque garden setting with established trees, the house is utterly different to the house Bing provided for her family. It is in this solid, older home that Ma and Pa reconstitute their family and the practices and rituals they feel appropriate to sustain it. It is here that Pa sets about planning and building a lotus pond just like the one that he remembers near the ancestral home in China (Figure Six, b). In this new ‘old home’, Ma and Pa create another ancestral home for their family. Of course the ability of this house to play convincingly the part of the new ancestral home in *Floating life* depends not simply upon us being told it is so, but upon the way its architectural features furnish it with a certain authenticity relative to the architecture of the suburban monster house. The

older, Federation-style house assumes an air of authenticity that we imagine surpasses anything that might emerge from a suburban house with its brick veneer, its paper thin walls and its balustrades that stop short, in a space somewhere between function and ornament (see Figure Five).

Figure 6: As many ancestral homes as you need: (a) virtual; (b) local; (c) oneric.



There is yet one more ancestral home suggested in *Floating life*, this being an aged, two-story, stone farmhouse in Germany (Figure Six, c). This is the house of Yen's German mother-in-law, Mui-Mui's grandmother, and it functions in the film in a way that is reminiscent of Heidegger's Black Forest hut with which I opened this paper. In the film this house is called 'Mui-Mui's house' and the final scene of the film shows this as the home that we presume will become the locus of Yen's Chinese-German daughter's 'rooting' in her birthplace. The final scene of the film shows Mui-Mui running towards this house and metaphorically running towards a future that incorporates a house grounded in someone's local tradition and linked to someone's local ancestry. Again it is an architecture constituted out of stone, solid walls and age that allow this home to take up the role as one of the many 'ancestral homes' now needed to service a family as dispersed as the Chans. But for all of the solidness that seems to be required of the architecture that comes to fill the category 'ancestral home', we see also in these examples the way in which most foundational of dwelling figures – the ancestral house – undergoes routine surface shifts in the making of the migrant dwelling.,

Conclusion

Floating life is part of a representational field that does much more than depict a certain diasporic condition. It is a film that actively constructs a narrative about how such a diasporic experience might be seen and understood. In so doing it plays its part in constituting the Hong Kong diasporic identity. It is part of the 'cultural work' that such migrant groups do in order to adjust their narratives of self so that they properly reflect the expanded field of associations and experiences that come with migration.

This paper has argued that the materiality of the house matters in the stories told about how migrant senses of 'homeliness' are made and remade. To say this need not return us to that notion of 'proper dwelling' that privileges a notion of embeddedness, geographical monogamy and an architectural vernacular. The architecture of the house is actively called into the service of home making in a geographically promiscuous world that is defined by movement, networks of association and multi-local loyalties. The arrangement between the architectures of the house and senses of identity, homeliness and belonging may be complicated and made more self-conscious under migrant conditions, but it is certainly not done away with. Indeed, it might be argued that under the pressure of the disorientations and estrangements created by migration the house is called upon both more intensely and more flexibly to underscore identity. This then, is not Heller's transnational who has little apparent need for either a house or architecture of home. It is a migrant condition in which the materiality of the house remains fundamental to the building of more flexible and geographically promiscuous modes of dwelling. Home becomes an array of houses threaded like beads upon a string that links these floating lives.

In this system of house and home, ideas of tradition as well as vernacular things and modes, are activated in novel ways. In *Floating life*, for example, they are given an

important role in the ways the Chan family come to settle properly in their new homes. Moveable alters, long-distance prayers to the ancestors, and transnationally applied techniques of geomancy, all play a role as specifically 'Chinese' vernacularisms that are imported into these new settings in order to make the Chan's various new houses properly inhabitable. It is only those houses from which Chinese tradition has been vanquished (Bing's houses and the half-empty Hong Kong apartment) that are hostile, and where family members feel unsettled and disoriented.

Floating life so fully implicates the architecture of the house in its depiction of how Chinese diasporic identities are formed and diasporic senses of belonging are constituted that there seems to be no limit to the number of houses that might be threaded upon the irregular lines that join the Chan family. This capacity of the diasporic condition to thread into a meaningful chain a seemingly limitless number of houses, is best illustrated by the case of the ancestral home. It might be imagined that a diasporic condition would make the idea of the ancestral house fade away (as hinted at by the depiction of the ancestral home in a snapshot). Or, alternatively, that nostalgia and longing might enhance the power of authenticity that can be claimed by the never-seen ancestral house. But *Floating life* depicts yet another diasporic strategy for dealing with the distant ancestral home. In this film new ancestral homes are made by the appropriation of existing houses by the dispersed branches of the Chan family. So while the Chans are estranged from their 'real' ancestral home, they actually draw to their family two more, one in Australia and one in Europe.

This account of one narrative framing of the role of the house in the home-making of a diasporic family is intended to leave us with a restructured sense of how we dwell in a mobile world - one that is more suited to the geographical, sociological and affective peculiarities of the condition of migrancy. Migration transforms the way we think about Heidegger's original formula of the co-constitutive nature of building,

dwelling and location. It forces us to activate his useful asides about ‘how far’ and ‘reach’, and place them actively and constructively into the formula of building, dwelling, location. By so doing we are not captured by the yearning for monogamous modes of dwelling, authentic vernacular architectures or ideas of lost ancestral homes. Rather we can be captivated by the array of surface shifts that allow the complex and multi-local material and affective assemblies necessary to sustain meaningful modes of dwelling in the condition of migrancy.

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Figure Captions

Figure One: The Chan family arrive at their new ‘monstrous’ Australian home.

Figure Two: Bing terrified by the noises she hears at night in her first Australian home.

Figure Three: The Chan family trapped behind the glass doors of their suburban home.

Figure Four: Not quite Bachelard’s attic.

Figure Five: Vernacularising the threshold of the new house.

Figure Six: As many ancestral homes as you need: (a) virtual; (b) local; (c) oneric.

¹ *Floating life*, 1995 Australia, 95 mins. Production Company: Southern Star/AFFC/Hibiscus Films.

Producer: Bridget Ikin. Director: Clara Law. Screenplay: Clara Law, Eddie Ling-Ching Fong.

² This parallels what Marc Augé (1995: 47), writing around the same time, describes as ‘anthropological place’, which is something constituted not only by experiential fact but also by a compelling mixture of ‘indigenous fantasy’ (the desires of those who ‘belong’ to imagine themselves as always ‘belonging’) and ‘ethnologist’s illusions’ (the desire of those outside to see those who ‘belong’ as always ‘belonging’).

³ Mandy Thomas’s (1997) study of Vietnamese home-making in Australia has shown how the typical suburban house often does not comply with a varied array of Vietnamese criterion about what a ‘proper’ home should have.