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CHINESE MIGRANTS IN MELBOURNE: THE CHOICE OF THE HOUSE

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Abstract

Meanings behind the choice of the migrant house are explored through an examination of twelve houses of migrants who emigrated from mainland China to Melbourne during the 1990s and 2000s. A qualitative investigation shows that there are three interconnected meanings behind the choice of houses in Melbourne: a desire to counter past experiences of housing in China, a desire to improve future opportunities through housing, and the wish to blend into Australian society. While much literature claims that migrant housing represents the ethnic character of their owners through architectural features, these Chinese houses do not resemble past houses in China in any physical way. The location of the house in a 'good' suburb was the most important factor when choosing the house. The house should be located near good educational, transport and shopping services before the built form becomes important. Chinese migrants wish to assimilate into Australian society through their choice of ordinary houses that do not communicate their ethnic identity through their external facades, while also adopting Australian ways of living that are focused around gardens and backyards.

Keywords: House, Migrants, Housing Choice, China, Melbourne.

Introduction

This paper seeks to understand the meaning behind the built form of the migrant house. The ways immigrants utilise the built form of their housing to help them settle in the city has not been fully researched and there is a need for more complex investigations of this matter. In order to unravel this question, the paper seeks to understand the reasons behind the choice of the migrant house: are there links between past houses in the homeland and present houses in the host land? Are houses chosen (or built) with the intention to duplicate a former house? What determines the choice of the house for migrants?

The paper investigates the houses of Chinese immigrants in suburban Melbourne. Much of the literature about houses of migrants from Mediterranean countries who migrated in the post-war decades claims that immigrants use their housing as a symbol of their ethnicity or immigrant status (e.i. Apperly, Irving et al. 1989; Borgo 2006; Willingham 2004). Conversely, a qualitative investigation of in-depth interviews with participants and observations of their houses show that Chinese

migrants choose their houses mainly because of three reasons: the desire to counter past experiences of housing in China, the desire to improve future opportunities and acquire social capital through housing; and the desire to integrate into Australian society.

Readings of the migrant house

Literature on the physical form of migrants' housing and its role in the migrant experience of settlement is scarce, and only a few studies have addressed this issue. In opposition to the rich body of literature on the meanings of home for migrants (e.g. Ahmed, S., C. Castaneda, et al. 2003; Blunt & Dowling 2006; Fortier, A.-M. 2001; Rapoport & Dawson 1998), the migrant house as a built form has not received such attention. In discussions about the migrant house and its built form, there is often an attempt to understand the nature of links between previous dwellings in the homeland and current dwellings in the host land, and whether these are physical and tangible or purely symbolic.

The meaning of the migrant house for its dwellers has seldom been investigated in Australia. Most of these few investigations have focused on the housing of post-war migrants from southern and eastern Europe (Lozanovska 1997; Levin and Fincher 2010), with some anecdotal writings emphasising the external appearance of the house. Apperly et al. (1989), in their architectural guide to Australian architecture, have dubbed the suburban migrant house built in the post-war decades 'Late Twenty-Century Immigrants' Nostalgic'. The authors explain that when southern European immigrants were in a position to build houses for themselves, they wanted the building to express two things: 'the fact that they had "made" it in a new country and a recollection of the culture from which they had come'. The typical house

...was [a]two-storeyed and symmetrical [house], with central external stair and verandah edged with bulbous Baroque balusters of precast concrete. The front elevation featured walls of buff or brown face brickwork pierced by large arched openings (Apperly et al. 1989, p. 271).

Similarly, both Borgo (2006) and Willingham (2004) demonstrate how southern European immigrants have modified their houses in a way which indicates, through the house's external appearance, that migrants live there. Willingham provides another detailed account of what he dubs 'The Mediterranean Idiom':

The Mediterranean idiom or sub-style in housing in Melbourne is characterised firstly by the heavily modified facades of suburban housing in the inner suburbs, and then by the grandiose pseudo-Italianate villas erected on standard building lots in the outer suburbs in the late twentieth century (2004, p. 473).

Studies which have focused on Chinese (or, more widely, Asian) immigration and housing in Australia and in other western cities have also explored the links between homeland and host land houses. They have found, however, that houses of Chinese migrants mostly do not represent houses in China. Jacobs (2004), for example, has looked into the boundaries between past houses and current houses, exploring how architecture is implicated in the processes of feeling at home in a mobile world. Jacobs investigates these processes as they occur in relation to a Chinese family shown in the Australian film *Floating Life*. She contrasts the ancestral homes with the modern Australian 'monster-house', and searches for the way 'migrant senses of 'homeliness' are made and remade' (2004, p. 181). King (1997, p. 77) observes how the traditional bungalow has been adapted by Chinese immigrants in Sydney's suburbs. Architectural features are erased to transform the multicultural bungalow into an ordinary Australian house as shown in real estate advertisements in Chinese newspapers. The architecture of Shaughnessy Heights, a wealthy suburb of Vancouver, Canada, generated public debate after many of the dwellings were purchased by a wealthy group of migrants from Hong Kong during the 1990s. The extra-large houses they built, termed 'monster-houses' by the local residents, were perceived as very different from the local landscape (Ley 1995; Mitchell 2004).

Thomas (1999), in her study of Vietnamese migrants in Australia, looks at the different conceptions of home as well as different physical house forms in the two cultures, and points to the tensions arising from those differences. Some of the difficulties are based on the fact that space in Australian houses is apportioned, as well as the fixed definition of each room, in terms of their functions. For instance, most houses in Vietnam had a larger kitchen than the average kitchen in Australian houses, and the preparation of food was sometimes done outside. Australian kitchens do not cater for this type of food preparation. Similarly in Vietnam it is usual for three generations to live under one roof and for several family members to share a bed with each other. For Vietnamese in Australia, much available housing is restrictive because it does not cater for large extended families. The choice of a house in Australia may

follow geomantic prescriptions and the physical environment may be examined for signs of prosperity (Thomas 1999, p. 98).

As opposed to meanings of the migrant house, meanings of gardens and backyards for migrants in Australia have been explored extensively. Various studies have concluded that tending a garden is valuable for the settlement process (e.g. Armstrong 1999; Graham and Connell 2006; Head, Muir et al. 2004; Morgan, Rocha et al. 2005). Armstrong (1999), for instance, examines the various types of gardens created by different migrant groups in Australia, including Mediterranean Europeans, eastern Europeans, migrants from the Middle East and migrants from Asian countries. She asserts that creating a garden in the host country is an early stage of accepting the new country. Not only does it make the unfamiliar feel familiar, but it also helps heal the experience of war and repression, especially for refugee migrants. Morgan, Rocha and Poynting (2005, p. 93) argue that many migrant gardens are places in which creative labour is expended to symbolise connections not only to homeland but also to Australia and other cultures. Graham and Connell (2006) found that gardens 'helped to emphasise and maintain cultural relationship, provide a space of nostalgia, and give a sense of ownership and control' (p. 375). All these studies examined the links between past and current houses and gardens, interpreting them as significant both in the settlement process in the host land and in the preservation of connections with the homeland.

Exploring Chinese migrants in Melbourne

This paper discusses a group of twelve migrants from mainland China¹ in suburban Melbourne. These immigrants settled in Melbourne during the 1990s and the 2000s, and were interviewed during the end of 2007 and the beginning of 2008. This is not a representative sample of all Chinese migrants in Melbourne, but is exploratory research looking at diverse backgrounds and processes of migration and settlement.² Participants were recruited through connections at work and snowballing. Of the twelve China-born participants interviewed, nine were women and three were men. Five migrated to Australia during the 1990s while the other seven migrated in the first half of the 2000s. All migrated as young adults and today most have families with young children. All the interviewees were married to a migrant from China at the time of the

interview, and their dwellings were concentrated around eastern middle and outer suburbs of Melbourne. It is important to note that the term 'Chinese' is used to indicate the birth country and ethnicity of participants but no other fixed qualities of the participants.

Two key criteria were that participants must have owned a home (the type of home did not matter) and the interview must take place there. The interviews were semi-structured and included a tour of the house and backyard (if it existed) with photographs taken during the visit. Interviewees were asked, among other questions, about their former house in the homeland, their immigration experience, their housing career in Melbourne, the choice of the current house and its construction, the meaning of home, and the most important space in the house. Participants were also asked to draw their former homes in China to provide another layer of information in addition to the verbal narratives. A survey of real estate agents was conducted to examine their perspective regarding immigrant housing needs.

Chinese immigration to Australia and Melbourne

Migrants from Asian countries have been an important part of Australia's history since British settlement, but as this immigration was banned in the 1880s the number of Chinese migrants declined massively from 37,000 in 1891 to 6,404 in 1947 (Ip, Bethier et al. 1992; Jupp 1991). Only with the end of the 'White Australia' policy in 1973, did Asian immigration to Australia increase. During the 1990s the immigration program experienced changes that favoured skilled and business migrants (Dharmalingam & Wulff 2008). Hence, a large proportion of recently-arrived Chinese migration are business migrants who come with capital for investment in Australia, as well as professionals and urban people. Recent migrants also have higher educational qualifications and incomes than the Australian average (Jupp 2002).

After Sydney, Melbourne is the capital city with the second largest population of China-born persons. At the 2006 census, there were almost 55,000 China-born persons in Melbourne, which represented 1.5% of the total population of the city (ABS 2006). Almost 60 percent of those who arrived in the last five years were aged 15 to 29 years against one-quarter of Australia-born (ABS 2006; Dharmalingam & Wulff 2008). This age structure can be explained by the majority of young families and the significant number of Chinese students who arrived recently to study in Australian universities.

Among Chinese migrants who arrived before 1996, 86 percent have taken up Australian citizenship, a percentage that is higher than other migrant groups. Home-ownership in Australia is highly valued and the rates of home-ownership of Chinese immigrants are even higher than those of Australia-born. For Chinese migrants who arrived in Australia prior to 1996 the rate is 75 percent, while for Australia-born the rate is 72 percent. Those who migrated in the last 10 years are more likely to be renting, but intending to eventually attain home-ownership, following the example of the older, established cohort (Dharmalingham & Wulff, 2008, p. 43).

Chinese built environments in western cities

Early settlement of Chinese immigrants in western cities was concentrated on Chinatowns in inner-city areas. Chinatowns became the physical manifestation of the 'Chineseness' formalised by European immigrants in western cities, evident in Vancouver as well as Sydney and Melbourne (Anderson 1990; 1991). Throughout the years traditional Chinatowns have been stigmatised and host societies have imposed various negative connotations on them (Li 2005; McConville 1985). However, a phenomenon that has recently generated discussion is the emergence of new suburban Chinatowns. The term 'ethnoburb' was coined to illustrate a new type of settlement of suburban clusters and economic activities of Chinese immigrants in America (Li 1998; 2005). In these areas, chain migration plays an important role in further agglomerating immigrants and the 'ethnic economy', illustrated in the case of 'Asian theme' malls in Toronto and other Canadian cities (Preston and Lo 2000).

In Australia, as in the US, new immigrants in the past concentrated first in ethnic enclaves and moved to better neighbourhoods only after they improved their socio-economic position in the host society (Zang 2000). Conversely, recent Chinese immigrants tend to concentrate in established neighbourhoods³ in Sydney and Melbourne shortly after their arrival in Australia. Little research exists on Chinese 'enthoburbia' in Australia, other than in Brisbane. Here, Chinese immigrants from Hong Kong and Taiwan settled around the 1990s in suburbs around Sunnybank and formed what can be dubbed an ethnoburb (Ip 2005). This is an established and affluent neighbourhood which has a good reputation for education and, at the same time, pockets of relatively 'affordable' housing. These features have attracted new middle-class Chinese immigrants to this area, and led to a progressive influx since they first settled there in mid-1980s. Similarly the eastern suburbs of Box Hill and Doncaster in

Melbourne are ethnoburbs due to their high percentage of China-born residents (ABS 2006).

Meanings of houses in Melbourne

The analysis of the in-depth interviews identified three interconnected reasons, or meanings, behind the choice of the houses' built form, which are discussed below.

1. The desire to counteract past experiences

All Chinese participants resided in urban apartments before migrating to Australia. In most narratives these apartments in various cities of China were illustrated simply as places of dwelling, without significant emotional attachment. Their apartments were located in large apartment blocks, owned by the workplace, without a history of past generations and family ties to the buildings, and most perceived them as being quite small. They usually contained three bedrooms, and the participants portrayed them as simple and basic. After living in Australia and being exposed to other standards of housing, some felt that their Chinese apartment was too small and poorly organised. Julie⁴ explained that the living area was very small and was not designed properly; it was more like a hall and they could not even fit the television into it. The television, instead, was located in the master bedroom. The actual size of these apartments, according to other participants, varied between 75, 100 and 130 square metres.⁵

One important aspect was that the apartment was part of a building, a fraction of a bigger structure that included many other similar apartments. In many of the participants' drawings the apartment block was drawn as well, as a significant aspect of the apartment itself, and the floor level was an important part of the experience of dwelling. Lara's drawing (Figure 1) illustrates that the building held at least the same significance as the apartment itself. Lara drew both of them with the same rough manner, without providing many details, not even where the apartment was located in the block. But the fact that the block was drawn shows that the apartment was not isolated in space – it was part of a larger configuration that held a meaning as a whole and not only as numerous singular units. Lara noted that she liked living there because even though she and her husband lived in a very small apartment in university dormitories, they had staff neighbours so social life was satisfying. Thus, the apartment

block was valuable as a facilitator of social life. Most of the participants were then content with this standard of living.

INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE

Participants' Melbourne houses demonstrated the widespread desire to negate their experience of urban apartment living. In Melbourne, ten participants lived in detached houses and two lived in semi-detached houses, while none lived in an apartment. For three of the participants this house was their second house in Melbourne, while for the rest it was the first.

The nature of the Chinese housing market was frequently discussed during interviews. As participants explained, before the housing market had been commercialised in the last decade, apartments were allocated according to academic qualifications or professional status. Before embarking on a series of housing reforms in the past two decades (Huang 2004), Chinese dwellings did not belong to the residents but to their workplaces. Normally, apartments were allocated by the workplace and were usually located nearby. They were bought by their dwellers below market price, but could not be inherited by family members. After the market was commercialised, people could buy another apartment and also keep their allocated one, until they finished working at that workplace when they needed to return that property. When the tenants returned the property to the workplace they received back the original purchase price.

Some of the participants were allocated very small apartments because they were still young and their professional status was relatively low, or they were students or young lecturers and lived in dormitories on campus. These campus apartments were particularly small, and in the case of Jane and her husband, consisted of one room in a shared apartment with two other couples, where they had to share their kitchen and toilet:

So basically our room was 11 sq metres, and we had to fit everything, like a double bed, and a small couch and a desk and a book shelf and even a washing machine. So as you can imagine we didn't have that much space to walk through... shocking. [...] I can't believe it, and now every room in this

house is bigger than 11 sq metres. We have like tens of them. It's just shocking.

Jane's words reveal her realisation that before migrating to Australia she had experienced very different living conditions, and that Australia offered her broader housing opportunities. Her perspective had changed as a result of living in Australia and she implied that at the time of living in China she was ignorant of other housing options. Moving to Australia opened up more possibilities than she could ever imagine.

When asked why she wanted a double-storey house (Figure 2), Jane answered, laughing: 'we think it looks fancier'. She explained, however, that they wanted a large house because of their former experience in China, living in a small apartment. She clarified relations between former and current houses when asked if finding a house has been a difficult process:

Not really, because with that prior experience we don't expect too much, everything bigger we are happy, I know because we compare and we have to appreciate the current situation, how lucky we are now.

For Jane and her husband, any home was better than their previous experience and they were relatively easily satisfied.

INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE

Most participants desired to live in large houses as a result of their former living conditions in China, where they lived in small apartments. This was discussed by local real estate agents, who pointed out that migrants from China looked for larger built structures with minimal open land. The reasons, according to them, were the Chinese immigrants' lack of interest in gardening, their desire to live in large houses due to their experience in China, and the need to accommodate family relatives such as parents or students who temporarily stay in their homes. Both David and Hui accommodated their relatives in their homes, living with their parents-in-law. A few others, however, did maintain large gardens. Jane had a large backyard with many fruit trees and so did Jan, Jin and Lilly. Most importantly, notwithstanding the common theme appearing in the literature about the migrant house, which sees it as a representation of the ethnic origin of its dwellers (e.g. Apperley et al. 1989; Willingham 2004), houses of participants did not resemble any archetypal house in the homeland. On the contrary, one of the

reasons participants' houses in Australia were chosen was because they were very different from previous housing.

2. The desire to improve future opportunities

All the twelve participants reside in established middle and outer suburbs around Melbourne. When they first arrived, most participants followed family or friends and settled in rented housing, as chain migration played an important role in settlement in the area (Li 2005). When they decided to buy their own home, most started looking for a house in their immediate surroundings, in the middle suburbs where they were living in rented houses. Later, the participants extended their search to outer suburbs due to increased housing prices in the middle suburbs.

The most important features desired in a house for most participants, as also in Brisbane (Ip 2005), were not its size or garden but the high quality of education in the suburb, public transport and proximity to shopping centres and workplaces, and only then was the house itself considered if it were within the price range. Previously, most apartments in China had been appreciated because of their location and close proximity to urban facilities such as shopping centres and public amenities. For instance, Annette liked her apartment complex in China, built in 1986, because it provided many facilities and services and was newly designed. Many other participants liked their apartments' location because it was conveniently located near their workplace and shops. This pattern was largely preserved in Melbourne, where houses were chosen primarily for their location. Houses in Melbourne were viewed in a utilitarian way, and seen as practical means for achieving goals such as social mobility or the accumulation of objectified cultural capital (Bourdieu 1990; Ong 1999), thus their location was most important.

Many of the participants, as educated professionals, had done research before buying a house. Jane, for example, explained that before choosing the suburb they had read statistics that around 70-80% of the residents in that specific suburb had a Bachelor's degree. Some of their friends were already living in that suburb and houses were still affordable. Similarly, Lilly clarified her choices:

Because [this suburb] is quite convenient, it has a shopping centre, train station and many facilities around and so before we looked for houses for buying we did a lot of research. [...] so finally after about half a year of

hunting, finally we found the house here so this is the current house, so this is quite a good house that meets our requirements. Like close to public transportation and quiet and nice area and house you know with plan quite generous with land size and the house itself not so big, 3 bedrooms, but still quite OK for us because we are still a couple here, so yeah, in the near future it still fits our needs so that's why we chose that.

In Lilly's list of demands for the house, the house itself (its size and design) was of lesser importance than other considerations. Hui's list of demands also supports the notion that the house itself comes last:

Yeah, we were told we are very fussy, and because we want first public transport, so we have a bus stop just outside the garden, we need a primary school within a walking distance, we need a shopping centre nearby, and we need [...] a double-storey house. So with all these requirements, and around the price range, ah, yes, so it's not easy at all...

The desire to live in an area with good schools enhances the sense of possibility through the accumulation of cultural capital in the form of education, as also discussed by Waters (2006). Jane, too, noted that they chose their house mainly due to its location in that specific suburb, it being near a freeway, its orientation and the garden. First on the list were location and transport considerations, and only then the house.

Another aspect of the desire to improve future opportunities is the meaning of home-ownership. Jin explained how she saw the different home-ownership experiences in China and Australia:

The way it is here, I mean you come here you have to be adjusted to this environment, so yeah, this is very different like in the apartment in my hometown, we bought some cheap stuff because we didn't have much money back then, [...] but here we chose good quality stuff that are expensive but I think that was worthwhile, and the difference is that in China, the house like the apartment you bought does not belong to you, it will be taken away by the government after 70 years. You pay a lot of money but it doesn't belong to you. [...] But the house you buy here belongs to you forever! If you don't sell it you can give it to your children, your grandchildren, whatever. That's the difference and that's why we put a lot of energy in this place, a lot of effort to make it right, like comfortable. Comfortable and up-to-date, I mean if we try to sell it we can still make money of it.

Jin did not want to pour money into her Chinese apartment even though she did renovate it, whereas in Melbourne she felt connected to her new home in which she had invested a great deal of time and money. The house, with its built form, was conceived as objectified cultural capital that could be transformed into monetary or social capital one day, opening future opportunities to gain social status (Bourdieu, 1990; Dovey 1999; Hage, 1997). Houses are powerful mediators of class relations, and because Australia is an immigrant society, the quest for status and identity is particularly focused on the housing market (Dovey 1999). The house is a symbolic package that both establishes status and communicates this to others.

Lara was the only participant who had demolished a house and rebuilt on the same plot of land. Lara and her family loved their previous house from first sight, because the house and the garden looked 'very nice' and felt 'like home'. The house was single-storeyed and integrated with its environment. Despite its homeliness, after living in this house for eight years, Lara and her husband decided they wanted a larger 'activity space', as their children had grown up and had different needs. Since housing prices had increased, buying another house would have cost more than rebuilding the house. In order to simplify the process of building, Lara and her husband decided to use the services of a building firm and chose a house from a display-home catalogue. The new house was larger, double-storeyed and occupied most of the land area (Figure 3), and would be considered a 'monster house' by some (Ley 1995; Mitchell 2004), because it was a large structure with little garden space. The front yard was very different from the previous English-style front yard of the old house. Designed by Lara's husband, it was mainly paved, with small beds for gravel, rocks and fruit trees, and a Chinese-style statue.

Explaining why they decided to rebuild and not to invest money in another property, Lara pointed to their desire to enjoy the investment in their life time. Utilitarian considerations were important here – it was a financial and practical decision that is not influenced by the desire to design a house in a particular form or according to a certain fashion. The new house provided Lara and her family with a set of new opportunities – stepping up the social ladder or accumulating monetary capital if the house was later sold.

INSERT FIGURE 3 HERE

3. The desire to blend into Australian society

The last reason behind the choice of the house was the desire to integrate into Australian society and therefore, to adopt a prevalent cultural norm. Interview narratives demonstrate that participants did not wish to communicate their ethnicity through the built form of the house and instead wish their houses to form part of the existing streetscape. One aspect of blending in is the adaptation of the backyard culture so widespread in Australian cities. For instance, Lilly and her husband were pleased with the house's location as well as its generous block size. They had a backyard that Lilly took care of, with the help of her father who visited them from China every so often. She noted that the large backyard actually hindered them from buying the house, as they were both working and did not have time to maintain a garden (and without any previous experience, coming from apartment living). The agent advised them, however, that it would be best to embrace the Australian lifestyle if they chose to live in a detached house. Lilly mentioned that the design of the backyard had been inspired by her Greek neighbour and, following her advice, she had purchased various objects for the garden from flea-markets. Lilly's house was an ordinary brick veneer post-war suburban house (Figure 4).

INSERT FIGURE 4 HERE

Having large backyards with gardens might be explained by a strong desire to adapt to local ways of living, even if that included gardening work. This adaptation was perceived by participants as improving their prospects in Australian society. Hui had become accustomed to the Australian style of design of local stone and brick, but has had to overcome opposition from her husband and son. In her house, the entrance was paved with slate and the adjacent wall was made of bricks:

Slate is Australian right? But Chinese never use it, they don't like it, it's too natural. So [my husband and son] were trying to do something but I stopped them. They don't like this and that. They want to cover it, cover it with a carpet, yeah but I think that's the original style...

Hui defined a 'Chinese taste' that is different from 'Australian taste' in regard to the use of natural materials in the house. Most real estate agents noted that Chinese preference for large houses with small gardens stems from their relative lack of bonding with nature. Chinese gardens in the past were embedded in the social and aesthetic life

in China not only of the elite but also others (Wang 2005, p. 73), however this practice of gardening has long been forgotten amongst Chinese urban dwellers. Hui had a large backyard with a fountain and vegetable garden, a legacy of the former owner (Figure 5). She employed a gardener to maintain it, mentioning she wished to keep the garden but saw herself as 'a bad gardener'.

INSERT FIGURE 5 HERE

A number of the participants referred to Bunnings Warehouse, the Australian chain-store for home maintenance goods with a large number of stores spread around suburban Melbourne. Jin renovated her home with the help of Bunnings, Jan bought building materials for his backyard and Shu obtained her patio fountain there. Jane also bought a fountain, now in front of her house, at another similar store. Though the role of backyards in immigrants' lives in Australia has been explored (e.g. Head, Muir et al. 2004; Morgan, Rocha et al. 2005), Chinese immigrants and their attitudes towards backyards have not been studied. As the maintenance of backyards and front yards is a central aspect of suburban Australian living, and the role of these stores is quite substantial within Australian society, Chinese migrants had adopted similar Australian practices.

Another aspect that can influence the choice of the house is fengshui. Fengshui is a Chinese ancient practice that is rooted in the action of 'sitting and situating a building', that is choosing a spatial setting that involves the actual space occupied by the structure, as well as the location of the site in relation to its broader surroundings (Knapp 2005, p. 99). As in California (Ong 1999), all real estate agents mentioned fengshui as a crucial aspect influencing migrants of Chinese origin when buying a house. The agents mentioned such issues as the position of the house, the location in relation to the road, and the house number, as some numbers are considered better than others.

None of these issues, however, was mentioned by participants. Fengshui was mentioned in relation to the organisation of rooms, furniture and elements in the house and around it, with the aim of improving energy flow. None of the participants declared they believed that designing the house according to fengshui principles was imperative, but some considered these principles in organising the space or locating furniture. As explained by the real estate agents, **fengshui principles were chiefly important for**

elderly people and those who did not speak English well. All this group of migrants spoke English well and were relatively young. However, Cathleen stated that in terms of fengshui she did not like the fact that the bedrooms were located upstairs and the living areas downstairs, but this was not so important and the house had a pleasant view which was more significant. Jane commented that, according to fengshui, it is advantageous to have a water feature in front of the house or inside it. She, in fact, had both: a small wooden dog-sculpture with running water in the house and a fountain in front of the house (see Figure 2). Such fountains are very popular around Melbourne and installing them in the front yard suggests an adoption of Australian cultural practices. As noted in the previous section, this adoption signified a desire to gain, through the house, cultural capital that would improve participants' advancement in Australia.

Conclusion

This investigation of twelve houses of Chinese migrants in the suburbs of Melbourne, demonstrates the reasons behind the choice of the house and the meanings ascribed to it. In contrast to the common understanding expressed by the literature on migrant houses in Australia, which sees houses as representations of the ethnic identity of the inhabitants through architectural design of the facades, this is not the case for this group of migrants from mainland China. There are three interconnected reasons behind the choice of the house for Chinese participants which lead them to choose their houses regardless of any architectural qualities it may represent.

The first reason is the participants' desire to contradict past experiences of housing in China. Most participants live in large houses with plenty of rooms, often double-storeyed, perhaps to overcompensate for living in small urban apartments in China. This parallels other studies that suggest that Chinese immigrants often build or purchase large houses with larger built areas and small gardens, which have often been dubbed 'monster houses' in Canadian and Australian cities (Jacobs 2004; Ley 2004; Mitchell 2004). However, as opposed to literature on the migrant house in Australia (e.g. Apperly et al. 1989; Borgo 2006; Willingham 2004), mostly focused on immigrants from southern and eastern Europe who migrated in the post-war decades, houses of Chinese participants do not resemble in any physical way past houses in China; quite the opposite, they are very different from these past houses.

The second reason that affects the choice of house was the participants' desire to improve future opportunities through their housing. This meant that participants considered, when buying the house, first its location and only then its built form, size and design. The suburb chosen had to be near good education, transport and shopping centres. This supports other studies that have focused on recent Chinese immigration, mostly in the US (Li 1998; 2005) but also in Australia (Ip 2005). Findings suggest that houses of participants are also chosen because they serve as a tool for improving the social and financial positions of their owners, and consequently their future opportunities within Australian society.

The third reason involved in the choice of house was the participants' desire to be accepted into Australian society. Literature on backyards and gardens of immigrants has neglected Chinese migrants, perhaps because of the common perception - also expressed by real estate agents - that recent Chinese migrants come from an urban background in their homeland. Most (though not all) participants, however, desired to maintain their backyards and worked in their gardens without previous experience, as is customary in suburban Australian cities: an adaptation of their cultural habits to those that are common in Australian society. Participants also did not make changes in the external facades of their houses, wanting to fit in with the ordinary Australian suburban streetscape. The high rates of Australian citizenship take-up and home-ownership by Chinese migrants (Dharmalingham & Wulff 2008) further suggest that participants sought to integrate into Australian society.

Recent Chinese migrants preferred to conceal their ethnic identity and not show it through their houses, as often described in the literature about migrants from south and east Europe, because unlike in the post-war decades, they were not expected to forgo their cultural heritage. They have migrated to a multicultural Australia, where cultural differences are recognised and respected. Therefore, preserving their cultural heritage can be done within the four walls of the home and ethnic markers can be kept outside of the public realm. They differ from Vietnamese migrants (Thomas 1997) in their middle-class and urban background and therefore better adapt to Australian stock of housing that does not cater for extended families living together. Moreover, these Chinese immigrants perceived their homes in China in a utilitarian manner, enjoying urban amenities and location, and this attitude has been kept in Australia. The house in Australia was seen by participants as a rung in the housing ladder that will eventually

lead up to the next rung. In a similar way to Australian citizenship, houses were perceived as a tool to advance future opportunities and accumulate objectified cultural capital in order to become part of Australian society.

Figures

Figure 1 – Lara’s drawing of her past home in China.

Figure 2 – Jane’s double-storey house.

Figure 3 – Lara’s newly built home.

Figure 4 – Lily’s brick-veneered post war suburban house and Greek inspired garden.

Figure 5 – Hui’s vegetable garden and fountain.

All photographs have been taken by the author.

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Notes

¹ China was defined as the ABS definition, excluding Hong Kong and Taiwan.

² This is part of a larger study that included four migrant groups in total; this paper is focused only on the group of migrants from China.

³ With high household income, occupational status and level of education of their residents.

⁴ All names are pseudonyms. Those who anglicised their names have been given English names, while those who kept their Chinese names have been given Chinese-like names.

⁵ The average suburban house in Australia in 2004 was larger than 150 square metres (Blunt & Dowling 2006).