Old Communities, New Buildings: Decoding the Home-imagining Narratives of Taiwan's Military Dependents' Communities

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Introduction

In his book *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*, Tuan (1977), a human geographer, has stated that living experiences is the key for people to perceive the spaces and places they live in, as well as to create the corresponding extensity. According to Tuan, the construction of space is abstract; the meaning of place, on the other hand, is the space that people are more familiar with. Therefore, people can establish a sense of coherence and strengthen their identification throughout the living experiences in any place they have known well. Tuan's statement emphasizes the relationship between space, living experiences, and people's self-identification. Accordingly, this concept is suitable to examine how the changes to the outer spaces influence people's inner home imagination and identity construction.

In the case of Taiwan, there are a great number of people who have faced tremendous changes to so-called "home" in the past 60 years. The Chinese civil war following the Second World War led to over six hundred thousand Chinese military soldiers and their dependents immigrating to Taiwan, led by the Kuomintang (KMT) government. The KMT then established 886 military dependents' communities around Taiwan and other off-shore islands to settle these soldiers and dependents. During the presidency of Chiang Kai-shek on Taiwan (1950-1976), the main goal of the KMT was to recover the Chinese mainland. For those Chinese soldiers and dependents, therefore, they had looked forward to "going back home." So they spent less attention on improving the poor living conditions of the military communities in Taiwan. In fact, the military dependents' communities were considered as temporary dwelling places at that time. However, following political reform during the 1980s and 1990s, these Chinese soldiers and their dependents came to realize that they had little chance of going back to mainland China. Further, more and more people have treated the military communities as their "home" because of the long-term living experiences. Their psychological recognition of "home," therefore, has become gradually hybridized, following the political reforms in Taiwan.

The approval of a remodeling regulation in 1996 was another stimulus to challenge these Chinese soldiers and dependents' concepts of "home." This remodeling regulation announced the decline of the military dependents' communities because the government finally decided to tear down the old communities, which suffered from poor living conditions. The residents of the old military dependents' communities, if they chose not to accept solatia, were relocated to large high-rise buildings built by the government. For these residents, their "homes," with both psychological and material meanings, were obliterated one more time, following the collapse of the old military dependents' communities.

In order to analyze the interrelationship between the changes to outer spaces and inner home imaginations, this project selected the residents who had lived in the old military dependents' communities and are currently living in the newly-built public housings in Pingtung City, the southernmost county in Taiwan. The purpose of the research was to investigate how the residents presented home imaginings and identity constructions while intertwining the space changes

between old communities and new buildings. The researcher used semi-structured interviews with 17 residents. Thematic narrative analysis was applied to examine the themes of the interview manuscripts. By analyzing the above cultural narratives, the research conclusions are helpful in exploring the intersections between the experiences of diaspora and the construction of belonging in the military communities in Taiwan.

Place and Self-identification

The interrelationship and connections between place and self-identification have attracted the attentions the researchers from diverse disciplines. In *Key Thinkers on Space and Place* (Hubbard, Kitchin & Valentine, 2004), the authors of each chapter introduce and review all of the contemporary scholars' works related to space and place, such as Benedict Anderson in Nationalism, Homi Bhabha in Postcolonialism, Judith Butler in Poststructural Feminism, Stuart Hall in Cultural Studies, Henri Lefebvre and Anthony Giddens in Sociology, etc. In all the disciplines of social science, the researchers of cultural geography have paid special attention to discussing the relations among people, the cultural people that have been created, and the place people that are living (Norton, 2006). According to Zhou, Kong and Zhu (2004), culture is the umbilical cord that connects people and place; in other words, the meaning of a place or landscape is given by how people create the semiological meanings, make historical connections and establish cultural identification toward the environment they are living. Therefore, as Crang (2005) states, the relationship between culture and place is indivisible because one essential factor by which people identify themselves is the place where they live and where they are from.

Fried (1963) also indicates that the construction of self-identity must not be separated from people's awareness of the place. Rather than an individual activity, identification is actually a psychological process that connects to others and place and allows interpersonal relationship to occur. Therefore, a group of people may establish a sense of belonging because they are living together in one place; they may also have feelings of separation when they have to leave the place. Of course, no matter that this sense of belonging or sense of separation is imagined, this kind of imagination is created on the basis of lived experiences in reality.

The term *Diaspora* was originally used to describe the experiences of exile by Jews and their religious and cultural connections to their homeland; this concept is generally applied to all dispersed groups in modern postcolonial studies. According to Kalra, Kaur, and Huntnyk (2005), the concept of diaspora presents a close relationship with immigrant groups and other ethnic groups that have exile experiences. For those groups with diasporic experiences, they are swinging between the place they were originally from and the place they are currently living. For these diasporic groups also, this experience is, of course, not always peaceful, because they need to face different cultures between the place they have moved out from and the place they have moved into. Bhabha (1994) defines cultural difference as a "a process of signification through which statements *of* culture or *on* culture differentiate, discriminate and authorize the production of fields of force, reference, applicability, and capacity" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 34). Under this condition, diasporic groups may, on the one hand, strengthen their connection with the homeland; on the other hand, they are unavoidably influenced by other groups living on the place they immigrate to.

Therefore, diaspora can also consider being a transformation. As Hall (2006) indicates, the diasporic experiences address the "deep and significant *difference* which constitute 'what we really are'; or rather—since history has intervened—'what we have become'" (p. 435).

In the case of this project, the research object—the old military dependent's communities—is the place that has become a unique landscape in Taiwan and developed a hybridized identity among the residents who once lived in these communities within a diasporic context. For the first generation of these Chinese soldiers and their dependents, they have transformed the old military dependents' communities from "temporary housing" to "home" during the economic, cultural, and political changes between 1950s and 1980s. For the second generation, their concepts of home were originally established as they grew up in the old military dependents' communities. For them, however, they also have an imaginary home—China—based on family education and propaganda disseminated by the KMT. For both of the first and second generations, nevertheless, leaving the old military communities and moving to the new public housing meant deconstructing and reconstructing their concept of "home." By applying thematic narrative analysis, the results of next section will present the transformed and imaginary meanings of "home" while facing the changes to outer spaces and self-identities.

Thematic Narrative Analysis

As a rhetorical case study, the methodology of this project follows the suggestions in Foss (2004) for narrative criticism. First of all, a critic needs to choose the units, such as setting, characters, events and themes, to focus on. Then, he or she needs to identify the characteristics of the narratives by applying the selected units in order to achieve the research goals. In this project, therefore, the unit selected to focus on was the interview manuscripts. There are two major themes to be identified: the changes to outer space and the changes to interpersonal relationship. The purpose of this section is to report the characteristics of the above themes after the coding of the interview manuscripts.

The Changes of Outer Space
In Pingtung City, there were 19 military dependents' communities, and two public high-rise buildings to accommodate the residents of the old communities. As introduced above, the old communities were considered to be temporary housing, because the residents, Chinese solders and their dependents that had come to Taiwan after 1949, did not expect to stay on Taiwan for too long. Later, they gradually realized that they would not be going back to the Chinese mainland in the short term, however, most did not have the money to improve the living conditions. Most of the interviewees lived in simple and crude old houses. One interviewee said that her old house was rectangular with only one living room and one bedroom; her father built an attic later especially for girls. Otherwise, her family would not have had enough room to sleep.

Even though the living conditions were so poor, the houses were assigned by the government, and the residents did not spend any money on repairing or maintaining the public facilities. Therefore, the first thing that the residents could not get used to in the modern high-rise buildings were the general administrative

expenses and shared public electricity fee—the maintenance fee. Some interviewees of the complained of this issue and said that the advantage of the old houses was not paying anything, even if they had to tolerate the poor living conditions. After moving to the new public housing, they finally had the ownership of their houses, but they needed to pay any of their own maintenance costs as well as the compulsory maintenance fee.

Except the financial issue, the changes of outer space also led the residents to experience a new lifestyle. Moving from the one-story houses to high-rise buildings means that the residents' living spaces are now vertical. For the first generation, living in the old communities was easier and more convenient. If they needed to borrow something from a neighbor, they only needed to open the back door and ask. However, they have had adjust to a new lifestyle living in the high-rise buildings with modern technology. For instance, several second generation residents described their observations of daily lives in the interviews. According to them, many of the first generation did not know how to use elevators; of course, they did not need to know in the old communities. Many of the older generation think learning how to use elevators is very troublesome because they are confused about how to make the elevator go up or down. The new technology, therefore, has become a barrier to going out.

One second generation female interviewee explained that she had moved from a northern city to Pingtung City to take care of her mother because, on one occasion, her mother got lost for two hours. The old lady did not know how to use the elevator. One day, when the elevator went up to the top floor, she did not know how to make the elevator down, and she stayed up at the top floor for two hours. Then, when a neighbor from the top-floor unit came home, he found the lady stood outside of his apartment. The neighbor finally took the old lady home. After this event, the old lady's daughter decided to live with her mother. As she indicated, "my mom is over 90 years old; I would rather to do things by myself than teach my mom to adopt this new life style." Similar cases were repeatedly described in the interviews. For the residents of the old military dependents' communities, especially the first generation, accommodation of the changes of life style is an important lesson for them after leaving their old housings.

The third characteristic following the changes of outer space is the separation between public space and private space. In the old communities, the flat-surface space arrangement made it easy for people to reach to each other. Many interviewees mentioned how close their relationships were with their neighbors. Most of them cherished positive memories of the milk of human kindness in the old communities; however, they agreed that the space design of the old communities meant there was no privacy. In the old communities, people lived too close to each other; therefore, there were almost no secrets from the neighbors. According to the interviewees, the living style of the old communities presents an entanglement between public and private space. The vertical design of the new public high-rise buildings, therefore, secures the residents' privacy and has changed the residents' perception of public and private space.

The last characteristic of the changes to outer space is the representation of class character. In the old military dependents' communities, the size of the residents'

houses depended on military rank. For instance, one female interviewee married to an air force pilot; so her old house contained one living room, one bathroom, one kitchen, two rooms, and a front yard. Her old house was actually bigger and better than other ground-duty officers and sergeants. On the other hand, one second generation female interviewee mentioned that she was aware of the class character when she was a little girl. According to her, she realized that her old house was smaller and cruder than some of her friends' houses, because her father had lower military rank than her friends' fathers. This fact gave her a sense of inferiority.

After the residents moved to the new buildings, the government still assigned the size of units based on military rank, and the residents picked the unit they were allowed to live randomly. However, if they were not satisfied with the size or floor they were assigned, they were allowed to buy a larger unit by paying extra fee or switching with other people. Therefore, the class character still exists at the stage of assigning living units, but, rather than the rigid military ranks, it can be changed with effort.

The Changes to Interpersonal Relationships
As mentioned in the above section, many residents of the old military dependents' communities were not familiar with a clear separation between public and private spaces. They were used to the life style that allowed communicating with others by simply opening their house doors. So when they lived in the old communities, they frequently shared food with their neighbors or took care of their neighbors' children. After moving to the new public buildings, those old neighbors still lived in the same communities but in different buildings. Many interviewees said that they realized that the physical distance between them is not so far, but the high-rise building design makes them feel that they live far away from each other. Some of the second generation noticed that many of those of the first generation feel isolated and have become depressed. One interviewee even concluded that this negative feeling had caused some of the older residents to pass away earlier.

Moving to the new high-rise buildings also caused changes to communication and the connections between residents. In the old communities, the residents could communicate with people at any time and anywhere. If these residents wanted to interact with their neighbors, they could just open the house door and yell. In the new public housings, however, if the residents want to interact with their neighbors, they need to leave their units, go downstairs by taking an elevator, and gather in the courtyard at a particular time. Many of the interviewees stated that this new communication style has reduced the milk of human kindness of the old communities. The friendliness among the residents, however, is considered to be the most important characteristic of the culture of military dependents' communities. In the interviews, several interviewees suggested that losing the milk of human kindness meant the loss of the root of their culture.

The last characteristic of the changes to interpersonal relationships is the separation between the insiders and the outsiders. Originally, all units of the two public housing buildings were assigned to the residents of the old military dependents' communities. According to the remodeling regulation, however, the owners could sell their units without permission after a certain number of years. Currently, some units of the new public housings are sold or rented to the people who have no military background or no experience living in the old military dependents' communities. By analyzing the

narratives of the interviews, the results show that the residents from the old communities have formed their own insider groups after moving to the new public housings. The residents who have recently moved in are excluded, and the newcomers show no interest in joining their small groups. Therefore, the interpersonal relationship in the new public housing is separated into the insider and outsider groups. The ones who are considered to be outsiders rarely join the regular inter-community activities. The original residents of the old communities do not show a strong interest in inviting the newcomers. In the interviews, some interviewees actually referred to these newcomers as "outsiders" y, and the living habits and behavior of those "outsiders" were described negatively. Some of the interviewees even said by way of conclusion: "that's the reason we are different."

Discussion

In the research process, when I asked the interviewees to recall their memories of living in the old military dependents' communities, all of them mentioned the 1949 retreat and the difficult time living in the old communities. However, as one first generation resident stated, the same experiences of living far away from home had meant the neighbors built closer relationships. As she said, "we were voluntarily helped each other because we knew that all of us had no support from other family members." In the interview, she shared her life story: she was from a rich family in Beijing, so she did not know how to cook and or perform other household duties when she arrived in Taiwan. After she got her house in the old communities, the neighbor who lived next door actually took care of her household affairs at the beginning, without any charge. So the interviewee concluded the story and stated that "this is so-called the milk of human kindness."

Other interviewees also shared similar stories. In the interview narratives, most interviewees believed that the establishment of a kindness atmosphere inside the old military dependents' communities was mainly based on their diasporic experiences of leaving home. The character of the milk of human kindness became one of the most obvious factors to identify a collective "We." So in their narratives, the following could be easily found, such as: "people from the old communities always know the importance of helping each other"; "we can identify people who are from the old communities or not"; "we did not need to consider the issue of public security because we had neighbors," etc.

However, even though the residents of the old military dependents' communities have a close relationship with the Chinese mainland, their self-identities as either Chinese or Taiwanese were full of different meanings in the interviews. Few of the first-generation who were born in China identified themselves as Taiwanese. One first generation female interviewee shared her life story and stated that, "I did not feel safe while I went to the Chinese mainland. It was good to see my family members, but I did not recognize the outer environment at all. At the end of my journey, I had the feeling of 'coming home' when the flight finally landed in Taiwan." So she concluded that "Of course I am Taiwanese. When I went to China, I also told them that I am Taiwanese." But she also added "we do not need to separate Chinese and Taiwanese because our ancestors were from China."

The political and cultural identities of the second generation were also diverse. Few of the second generation who were born in Taiwan presented their strong Chinese identities, culturally and politically. Others of the second generation presented their cultural identities as Chinese and national identities as Taiwanese. Most of the second generation was born in Taiwan, and their closeness toward China is based on family education and political propaganda. They grew up in the old military dependents' communities, which were man-made isolation spaces that were located in Taiwan but from which Taiwanese local factors were excluded. Therefore, those second generation residents' senses of "home" lacked   sense of being Taiwanese. However, because of political separation, they could not link to the Chinese mainland directly. The old military dependents' communities, therefore, became a relay unit to bear their imagination of "Hometown." After moving to new public housing, the new, modern living units were not considered to be a continuation of the old communities. Many interviewees, especially those of the second generation, argued that these new buildings are actually a breach from their original culture and the friendliness of the old communities.

In conclusion, the narratives of this project show that the living experiences of the old military dependents' communities helped gave the residents a sense of "Home." Even though they mentioned negative issues of old communities in the interviews, in general, they still valued the life style of the old communities. For those residents who moved into the new public housing, they forced themselves to accommodate the changes of a new life style and interpersonal communication. However, they still an effort to keep their old life styles. Some residents like the convenience of the modern life style in the new buildings, but many also believe that changing places to live means the start of losing their culture. Most interviewees shared a similar sentiment: if the living conditions of the old communities could have been improved, they would have liked to move back to the old communities rather than live in high-rise public buildings.

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