



# From ‘Solidification’ to ‘Fluidity’: The New Possibilities of Reshaping ‘Place’

-- Centered on “Hotel on the Corner of Bitter and Sweet”

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**Abstract.** Jamie Ford, as a unique Chinese-American writer situated in the narrow space between “Chinese literature” and “Chinese-language literature,” reconsiders the identity and cultural conflicts of Asian Americans in his debut novel “Hotel on the Corner of Bitter and Sweet.” Focusing on the protagonist Henry, Ford shapes three sets of relational subjects that exhibit varying degrees of transition from “solidification” to “fluidity”: the relationship between Henry and his father, the romantic relationship between Chinese-American Henry and Japanese-American Keiko, and the father-son relationship between Henry and his son Marty. This paper will start with Yi-Fu Tuan’s concepts of “place” and “space” to reinterpret the true meanings of “solidification” and “fluidity” within a cultural context. On one hand, Henry and his father, born and raised in different cultural backgrounds of China and America, belong to two “large places” on the “nation-state” level and are connected through “home,” a “small place.” The father, as a “defender,” constantly “pulls back” and “sends out” Henry, causing him to be torn and ultimately become a complete “escapist,” thus presenting a dual “solidification” state of both “large place” and “small place.” On the other hand, Henry and Keiko establish a “fluid” “place” through “music,” “letters,” and other “third spaces,” overcoming the barriers of time to reshape “place,” eventually restoring a stable state with both Marty and Keiko.

**Keywords:** Place; Third Space; Cultural Conflict; Solidification and Fluidity.

## 1 Introduction

Jamie Ford, a renowned Chinese-American author, made a significant impact with his debut novel “Hotel on the Corner of Bitter and Sweet.” The novel highlights the identity and cultural conflicts of Asian Americans (primarily Chinese and Japanese) and the racial and familial contradictions and isolation within the Asian community. In fact, this is not a new topic. Before Jamie Ford, works such as Yan Geling’s “The Lost Daughter of Happiness” and Amy Tan’s “The Joy Luck Club” have touched on it to varying degrees. However, it is undeniable that Jamie Ford’s unique identity has brought some new elements to this topic.

Firstly, the name Jamie Ford follows the typical Western format of "given name first, family name/last name last," rather than the Chinese style of "surname + given name." The author explains this point as follows: "This easily misunderstood surname was randomly chosen by my great-grandfather, Zheng Min, when he came to America to 'pan for gold' in 1865."<sup>[1]</sup> On this level, it can perhaps be understood as a reluctant attempt by the first generation of immigrants to quickly integrate into a new environment. It is noteworthy that Jamie Ford is of mixed heritage, not purely of Chinese descent: "My father is Chinese, and my mother is white" , which means that he may experience greater confusion and a stronger sense of conflict regarding his cultural identity: "I worry that I'm not 'Chinese' enough to tell such stories. I haven't found my voice. I haven't figured out my identity. I don't know who I am." Therefore, his works cannot be strictly classified as "Chinese literature"; at the same time, as a writer who writes in English, his works cannot be categorized as "Chinese-language literature" either. In all these senses, Jamie Ford is a special writer, situated in the narrow space between "Chinese literature" and "Chinese-language literature."

"Hotel on the Corner of Bitter and Sweet" draws from Ford's father's childhood experiences, with chapters alternating between World War II and 1986. The three sets of relational subjects in the text exhibit three trends of change: the father-son relationship between Henry and Marty gradually moves from "solidification" to "fluidity"; the romantic relationship between Chinese-American Henry and Japanese-American Keiko, forcibly "interrupted" for half a century, resumes "fluidity"; the relationship between Henry and his father remains in a tense state of "solidification." How did the first two sets of relationships find their "fluidity" trigger points, and why did the last set remain "solidified"? What is the true meaning of the "fluid" state? This paper will interpret these questions starting from the concepts of "cultural place" and "cultural space."

## 2 The Distinction Between 'Place' and 'Space'

Yi-Fu Tuan, in his book "Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience," introduces the subjective concept of "feeling" into traditional geography's "human-land relationship," extending the "land" to "place" and "space," thereby overturning the prevailing trend of viewing sensations and thoughts as opposites—the former representing subjective states and the latter reflecting objective reality—and creating a new paradigm for place studies.

This includes three key concepts: experience, space, and place, as well as the further developed 'sense of space' and 'sense of place.' Firstly, experience refers to a person's ability to learn from things they have already gone through, which is a combination of subjective, sensuous 'feelings' and objective, rational 'thoughts.' These are situated at the two ends of an experiential continuum and both belong to modes of cognition. Undoubtedly, this cognition overturns the common trend of considering 'feelings' and 'thoughts' as opposites, where the former represents a subjective state and the latter reflects objective reality.<sup>[2]</sup> As for the concept of 'space,' "considered from geometric units (area or volume), space is a measurable and definite quantity," but this does not

mean that 'space' is fixed. On the contrary, 'space' can extend, expand, and contract. From a broader perspective, it has undergone a transition from natural to humanistic, from physical space to mythical space. The 'body' plays a key role in defining this: "The body is a 'living body,' and space is constructed by humans." "The body not only occupies space but also controls and regulates it through the mind."<sup>[3]</sup>

Simply put, "space" implies a "space" with the presence of the body, while "place" includes any "stable" "object" that can attract our attention, transcending traditional geographical meanings and architectural space limitations. In one extreme case, a beloved armchair is a "place"; in another, the entire earth is a "place." Yet, "place" is "stable," a pause in motion where animals, including humans, linger in a location that satisfies certain biological needs. In other words, "space" is defined by activities with the "body" as a reference standard and is "fluid," while "place" is defined by "feelings" and "interpersonal relationships" and is "stable."

However, space and place are not two completely isolated or opposing concepts. This paper will explore the possibility of further "reshaping place" from "place" inward to "space," under the bridging role of "experience" and "culture."

### 3 'Solidified' 'Place': Defenders and Escapists

If we elevate our research perspective to the broader context of America during World War II, Asian Americans, as a minority group, had a "solidified" relationship with native Americans, especially the Chinese and Japanese, who were considered "third countries."<sup>[4]</sup> The text reveals a "solidified" state between different cultures, fundamentally stemming from their maintenance and defense of their inherent "place." A closer reading of the text reveals that Henry is the central figure in the three sets of relationships mentioned earlier. The relationship between Henry and his father was initially positioned in a "solidified" state, with a barrier formed by various factors: "Between him and his father, and everything else he knew, there was an invisible line, and he himself stood on the other side of it." Spanning 40 years, when Henry transitions from "son" to "father," the barrier between him and his son Marty does not disappear.

The value center deeply cherished by Henry's father is a two-story apartment in Canton Alley, Seattle's Chinatown—a "place" that brings a strong sense of security and familiarity to first-generation immigrants like Henry's father. Of course, the formation of such a "sense of place" is conditional: internally, it requires a complete experience of an object or a place, involving all senses and active brain reflection to achieve concrete reality; externally, it needs scrutiny and reflection based on personal experience to be endowed with a clear image. Henry's father satisfies both, with life experiences in China and external scrutiny as a Chinese-American, forming a special emotional bond with "China," a "large place," highlighting the emotional ties between people and land, the emergence of a "love for place."<sup>[5]</sup> Commonly, it is the deep attachment to one's hometown, a universal phenomenon unrelated to race and not limited to any culture or economy. Therefore, at this time, "China," under the influence of Henry's father's "mind," has become an "archive" storing beautiful memories and

glorious achievements. "Place is eternal, thus providing people with reassurance, allowing them to see their own vulnerability, the opportunities, and changes everywhere."<sup>[6]</sup>

In the sense of "nation-state," "China" no longer has strict physical geographical and territorial restrictions but becomes a "large place" under the influence of the "mind." Yi-Fu Tuan seems to echo Benedict Anderson here, who, in his groundbreaking work "Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism," views the "nation-state" as an "imagined community": "All communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined. The distinction between different communities is not based on their falsity/genuineness but on the way they are imagined."<sup>[7]</sup> Additionally, since the "large place" is now established on the basis of the "nation-state," its members naturally possess a certain national identity and express it through a conscious awareness of their status among other nations in the world, thus presenting a clear "defender" posture.

Henry, born in America, differs from his father's first-generation immigrant status. As a second-generation immigrant who has never set foot on Chinese soil, he fundamentally lacks the complete experience necessary to form a "sense of place" mentioned earlier, let alone a "love for place." For Henry, "China" has always been an external perspective of the other and a tourist who knows China only from reading guides, with no essential fundamental difference. For Henry, "China" is merely a cultural symbol lacking real significance, a "concept" rather than an "experience" of place.

In summary, Henry and his father grew up and were born in the "large places" of China and America, connected through "home," a "small place." However, the father's constant "pulling back" and "sending out" of Henry turns him into a complete "escapist": On one hand, he assumes that Henry, like himself, has a natural identity construction as a "Chinese" and an instinctive aversion to "Japanese," and he hopes that Henry will return to "China," the "great place," which can almost be considered his ultimate dream. On the other hand, he desperately wants Henry to be a thorough "American," to the extent that he even forbids Henry from speaking Cantonese at home and feels honor and pride under the pretense of Henry's lies about integrating into a white school. The turning point towards 'solidification' in the relationship between Henry and his father was precisely when he discovered Henry's relationship with Keiko, a Japanese-American, and his assistance in preserving her family photos: "Shocked, ashamed, and betrayed, their expressions hardened into an iron plate". Following this incident, Henry's parents ceased to have any substantial communication or interaction with him, effectively marginalizing Henry's position within the 'home,' a 'place,' and attempted to use the method of 'returning to China' to forcibly, at least temporarily, expel Henry from the 'place,' in order to defend the absolute safety of the 'home.' preventing any connection between father and son even on the "small place," resulting in an irreparable "so-lidified" situation.

#### 4 'Fluid' 'Place': Constructing the Cultural Third Space

The relationship between Henry and Keiko differs from the aforementioned father-son relationship, being in a "balanced" and "fluid" state. Even when temporarily "interrupted" by external forces, it can overcome the barriers of time to resume "fluidity" and reshape "place." From this perspective, the key to "reshaping" lies in the "fluid" state. In other words, "fluidity" brings "stability," avoiding the "solidification," "hostility," and "segregation" caused by an overly tilted balance.

Returning to the narrative in 1986, forty years after World War II, Henry finds himself widowed and prematurely unemployed. The Panama Hotel, sealed with wooden boards since 1950, is reopened, bringing to the surface time capsules from the war years—white communion dresses and dimly-lit silver candlesticks hidden in boxes by 37 persecuted Japanese families. These items become places that hold people's emotions and memories, encapsulating the unique cultural snapshot and human warmth of the Japanese-American experience. Perhaps these items are merely catalysts for overcoming temporal barriers and restoring the fluidity of 'place.' However, due to the nature of the time-space continuum, reshaping 'place' is not an easy task: "Spatial movement may be directional or circular. Common symbols for time include arrows, while other symbols include circular orbits and swinging pendulums." For Henry, Oscar Holden's old records serve as 'awakeners,' places that can pause time. Moving back in time, the Black Elk Nightclub, encapsulating Henry and Keiko's memories, becomes a haven—"they came for the music." The Black Elk Bar can be seen as a stable and safe 'space,' as well as a venue for cross-cultural, cross-linguistic, and cross-racial music, possessing both stability and fluidity.

Homi Bhabha, in his essay "The Revision of 'Race,' Time, and Modernity," emphasizes the concept of Time-lag, which not only suggests the literal meaning of time but also implies spatial connotations—a new space opened within paused time—breaking binaries and creating a blended 'third space.' In the text, 'music' as a 'third space' undoubtedly connects Keiko, Henry, and others of different races and identities, fostering a sense of 'openness' and 'interaction.' The functions of 'transfer' and 'displacement' play a crucial role, moving the past into the present, exchanging memories across different times. Similarly, the record as an object plays a key role in restoring the 'fluid' state of their relationship, marking the reactivation of the 'third space.' During Henry's two internment camp visits to see Keiko, they are separated by the camp's barbed wire: "She stood on the other side of the fence, separated by the cold, sharp barbed wire, her face pale from thallium poisoning, smiling like a trapped butterfly." But when the music from Oscar Holden's record plays in the night, Henry and Keiko seem to return to the past at the Black Elk Bar, thus elevating 'place.' It even restores the 'fluid' state between Henry and his son Marty. This is thanks to Henry's 'communication' with Samantha—"He said you love jazz... not just any jazz, but the origins of West Coast jazz and swing, like Floyd Standifer and Buddy Catlett—and you're a huge fan of Dave Holden, and more so, a true fan of his father, Oscar Holden."<sup>[8]</sup> From that moment, Samantha's inclusion reconstructs the 'third space' between father and son, their relationship begins to 'flow,' and real communication and interaction start.

After Keiko's half-century-long temporary absence, Henry includes Marty and Samantha in their 'place' composed of music, their 'third space.' The addition of new members means the reactivation of the temporarily stored 'third space,' so Henry begins to share his true thoughts, bringing his and Keiko's 'past' back to the 'present,' telling Henry and Samantha, no longer a 'silent' father burdened with regret. Half a century ago, Sheldon in the 'third space' helped Henry break geographical constraints and let 'place' 'flow' again, and now it's Marty and Samantha's turn. First, Samantha finds the record, sealed for half a century in the basement of the Panama Hotel. The record is now bent and broken in two, an inevitable fracture brought by time, but Henry doesn't care about its condition; finding it is more important. Although the record is broken, and Henry might not remember the songs, his memories with Keiko, their 'past,' begin to 'flow' again in the 'present.' And Marty becomes Henry's true son again, one who only wishes for his father's happiness, regardless of what image he holds. So, he finds Keiko for Henry, sending him back to the 'time' they had lost: "I'm sending you back to find what you missed. Sending you back to reclaim what you let go." This time, Henry, with the record sent by Keiko and the blessings of all members of the 'third space,' refuses to stay behind and retrieves the 'temporarily absent' member. And when Keiko is 'repositioned,' Henry completes a significant reshaping of 'place': "A natural extension—from the place left forty years ago, as if they had never been apart for a lifetime."<sup>[9]</sup>

Moreover, the new 'third space' formed by thoughts and language, represented by letters, transcends geographical distances and holds unique significance due to hope and anticipation. More importantly, letters allow Keiko and Henry to connect with a 'past' they never directly participated in, making the 'past' become 'present' at the moment of the letter's arrival, and directly adding new shared emotional experiences for Henry and Keiko, thus solidifying the construction of 'place.' However, this 'third space' is essentially still a 'space,' and its existence crucially depends on the interactive process of the letter's 'arrival' and 'sending out,' which allows it to 'expand' and 'flow.' But under the arrangements made by Henry's father, the letters between Henry and Keiko could not reach each other, leading to a second 'interruption' that lasted nearly half a century. So, why did this second 'interruption' have such destructive power? Does it mean that the 'third space,' which once played a key role, has now become ineffective? Initially, it is the 'third space' constructed by 'letters' that is playing an explicit role, not the 'music' third space of the previous phase. For the latter, its 'place' carrier, the 'record,' one sealed in the basement of the Panama Hotel, one in Keiko's hands, left Henry's 'third space' maintained only by 'memory' and 'imagination,' turning into an invisible subconscious 'third space.'

African-American artist Renée Green used the metaphor of the 'stairwell' to explain the third space: "I take architecture literally as a reference, using attics, boiler rooms, and stairwells to establish connections between certain binary divisions, such as higher and lower, heaven and hell. The stairwell becomes a threshold space, a passage connecting upper and lower regions, each marked with plaques representing black and white."<sup>[9]</sup> The 'third space' is not a static place but is constantly moving like a cable bridge, further ensuring its fluidity, overcoming temporal barriers, reshaping 'place,' and thus restoring a stable state between subjects.

## 5 Conclusion

In summary, Henry and his father, who grew up in the different cultural backgrounds of China and America, belong to two “great places” on the level of “nation-state” and are subtly connected through the “small place” of home. Yet, as a “defender,” the father’s constant “pulling back” and “sending out” of Henry has torn him apart, forcing him to become a complete “escapist,” thus presenting a dual “solidified” state of both the “great place” and the “small place.” On another front, Henry, as a “defender,” has established a “fluid” “place” with Keiko through “music,” “letters,” and other “third spaces,” and with the power of this “fluidity,” they have overcome the barriers of time to reshape “place,” restoring a stable state with both Marty and Keiko. However, due to time constraints, the author’s sorting and discussion of this issue are still quite limited, and if given the opportunity, they will delve further into the factors of “solidification” and “fluidity” in the text for a more comprehensive and in-depth exploration.

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