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# THE SPACE IN BRIAN POWER'S THE FORD OF HEAVEN: A COSMOPOLITAN CHILDHOOD IN TIENTSIN, CHINA BASED ON EDWARD SOJA'S THIRDSPACE THEORY

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## ABSTRACT

*As the spatial turn in social science and humanities in the 1980s, space has become one of the basic terms for travel writing studies. Travel literature's historical and social research has overlooked the spatial perspective. Edward Soja's interpretation of Henry Lefebvre's spatial trialectics forms the basis of his Thirdspace. Soja expands upon Lefebvre's concept into an "Other space," which breaks the existing binary mode of thinking, starting from a mode of otherness and thirdness. The study adopts space as a crucial tool to complement contemporary social and historical perspectives and explores various solutions to the traditional framework of spatial binaries, drawing on Soja's concept of "Thirdspace". By the method of textual analysis, the research chose Brian Power's *The Ford of Heaven: A Cosmopolitan Childhood in Tientsin, China*(1984) as the primary corpus. The selection criteria is that the book is based on the author's real experiences in the early 20th century in British Concession, Tientsin, China. The conclusion revealed that the British settlers were in an Other status-a self-sufficient society being alienated from both British and Chinese societies and thus their cultural identity was in a dynamic process of negotiation in the Concession where different cultures overlapped.*

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**KEYWORDS:** Thirdspace; travel writing; British Concession; Tientsin.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

History provided the push for this clear transition from the imperial writing of the Other to the writing of the empire returning to itself. Two primary impetuses of this change are provided by Julia Kuehn and Paul Smethurst in their book *New Directions in Travel Writing Studies* (2015). One is that a counter-traditional wave swept through the humanities, leading researchers to shift their focus from the classical canon to minor books and dismantle the once-great legacy. On the other hand, the interdisciplinary approach made possible by literary theory revolutions opens up new avenues for travel writing studies, which in turn have closer ties to social, cultural, historical, and geographical studies. Travel writing is elevated in particular by the “post-theory critical consciousness from the spatial/geopolitical turn in the humanities”, and phrases like “displacement, (re-)location, (de-)territorialization, mapping, topology, boundaries, space, place, mobility” [7] become the basic terms for the studies of travel writing.

Based on this, this study explored the representation of space in travel writing.

As Clifford stated, “China is a country that for some centuries has occupied an important place in the Western imagination, reflected in a large body of travel writing that goes back at least to the Franciscan missionaries who made their way to the country in the mid-thirteenth century, even before Marco Polo”[4]. Therefore, there are works concerning travel writings focusing specifically on British travels to and in China. During the early 20th century, there were considerable changes worldwide, and within China and Britain as well. “Roughly a sixty-year period, from the late 19th century through the first half of the 20th, a time of considerable change both in China and within the countries from which its foreign observers came”[4]. The Sino-British relations during this period were complex and multifaceted. The Opium Wars—the First Opium War (1839-1842) and the Second Opium War (1856-1860)—forced China to be open to Western countries, signaling the beginning of British imperialism's territorial invasion and military occupation. The British residential zones in treaty ports were established on the community's extraterritorial rights and concessions (1843-1937). Since China was defeated in the First Opium War (1839-1842), Nanking was the first city to be forced to become accessible to international trade according to the Treaty of Nanking signed in 1842. The subsequent port cities were established by a series of unfair treaties that Western powers compelled to open up

to foreign trade. In China, the foreign settlements were dispersed across various regions. These included concessions, which were autonomous urban areas governed by British municipal councils in Tianjin(formerly Tientsin), Zhenjiang, Xiamen, Guangzhou, etc. They owned an independent system: “Settlers built large residential, commercial and industrial suburbs in the Chinese cities open to them, constructed racecourses, jetties, roads, harbours, parks (probably in that order), established public utilities, municipal administrations, faux hill stations on the Indian model, styles of architecture — such as Tientsin Gothic — newspapers, bodies of literature, publishers, schools, churches, Masonic lodges, hospitals, prisons and all the other social institutions and infrastructures that might be expected. The largest settler communities were self-governing; even the smallest were still self-replicating”[3]. Among those who possessed self-reliant and self-sufficient political, commercial, and cultural systems, some British settlers had great ties to China. Those who were born there would even produce autobiographical works inspired by their experiences as children or teenagers growing up in China, which remained in their thoughts and influenced their ideas and creations for the rest of their lives. Brian Power was one of them, who was from an Irish family but was born in Tientsin, China in 1918. His memoir *The Ford of Heaven: A Cosmopolitan Childhood in Tientsin, China* recounts the author's transcultural experiences growing up in Tianjin (formerly Tientsin), China, during the early 20th century (1918-1936). This study draws upon Carl Thompson's suggestions in his book *Travel Writing* (2011) and considers travel writing “as a constellation of many different types of writing and/or text” with the sub-genres like “guidebooks, itineraries, novels with a pronounced travel theme, memoirs, writings of place, descriptions of the natural world, maps, road movies and much else besides”[18]. Therefore, the study aims to explore the representations of space in *The Ford of Heaven: A Cosmopolitan Childhood in Tientsin, China*, a British travel writing of China, which was set in the early 20th century.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1. *Edward Soja's Thirdspace Theory*

As a leading figure in the postmodern geography, Soja argues that “space in itself maybe primordially given, but the organization, and meaning of space is a product of social translation, transformation and experience” [13]. Human beings are fundamentally spatial beings, always busy with the production of places, spaces and dwellings, and in the process of

this spatial production, the human subject is also wrapped up in a complex relationship with the environment, and even human beings themselves are a special kind of spatial unit. Based on the triple dialectic of space, Soja categorizes space into three types: Firstspace (perceived space), Secondspace (conceived space), and Thirdspace (lived space). According to Soja, the firstspace is the real and independent space, the secondspace is the imaginary and fictional space, and the "third space" between the two is the space that represents the intertwined and mixed state of reality and illusion. According to Soja's interpretation, the thirdspace encompasses both the material and spiritual dimensions of space and at the same time transcends the first two kinds of space, showing great openness, which brings together subjectivity and objectivity, abstraction and figuration, imagination and reality, difference and repetition, and so on.

## **2.2. Literature on Edward Soja's Thirdspace Theory in Literary Analysis**

The application of Edward Soja's Thirdspace theory in literary analysis can be generally classified into three types. The first type is concerned with the explicating of gendered spaces in selected novels[16,19]. The second type is to highlight the set of relations between the concepts of spatiality, belonging, and identity in their characters' developments in selected novels[5,15,9,1,17]. The third type is related to places and spaces in selected poems[2]. It can be observed that exploring literary studies from the perspective of Soja's Thirdspace theory has been quite a flourishing tendency. The current study belongs to the second type of research, concentrating upon how British expatriates negotiate their cultural identity in a multinational setting in the selected travel writing.

## **2.3. Literature on Brian Power and His Memoir *The Ford of Heaven: A Cosmopolitan Childhood in Tientsin, China***

Brian Power was a British writer born in Tianjin, China, in 1918. He went to London for university in 1936 and lived in Tianjin for a total of 18 years. Later, he wrote about his experiences living in Tianjin as a memoir *The Ford of Heaven: A Cosmopolitan Childhood in Tientsin, China*. According to Li(2016), The Tianjin Concession in Power's memoir *The Ford of Heaven: A Cosmopolitan Childhood in Tientsin, China* can be seen as a contact zone between Chinese and Western ethnicities. Mary Louise Pratt describes the term "contact zone" as a space of colonial encounters, where geographically and historically

separated ethnic groups come into contact and establish ongoing relationships, often involving oppression, extreme inequality, and intractable conflicts. For foreigners in the concession, the contact zone implies alienation, both from one's own society and from the society of others, which reflected the absence of a sense of national belonging among the foreigners in the Tianjin Concession[8]. Zhu(2016) showed the memories of foreigners about old Tianjin, like Power's *The Ford of Heaven: A Cosmopolitan Childhood in Tientsin, China*, are filled with warmth, portraying Tianjin as their childhood hometown or "sacred port" with fondness. However, they still considered Chinese people as second-class "citizens" outside the concession. In summary, only a few critics and researchers have analyzed the selected travel writing. No studies to date have ever been done concerning the application of Thirdspace theory to Power's studies and his travel writings[20]. My study also followed the call for a fresh perspective on travel literature, which encourages literary studies in TLiE(travel literature in English) to be more dynamic and analytic.

## **3. METHODOLOGY**

The study enters the critical debate at a moment in which space is becoming a significant aspect of analysis in travel literature. My research places a special emphasis on providing a new interdisciplinary perspective and introduces a complex theoretical-critical approach that has not been applied to the study of this particular field yet.

This study is a textual analysis of Brian Power's memoir *The Ford of Heaven: A Cosmopolitan Childhood in Tientsin, China*. In terms of genre, the book belongs to travel literature. Power had real travel experiences in China from 1918-1936, which was set in a transnational background. The approach to the analysis of the work would be essentially textual analysis. In other words, the study does a critical reading of the work using the theme of British people's representations of Chinese spaces as a guide. This study, therefore, relies on the chosen texts as the primary sources of information along with other relevant secondary sources. The primary sources shall be Brian Power's *The Ford of Heaven: A Cosmopolitan Childhood in Tientsin, China*(memoir). Other non-literary materials including relevant textbooks, academic papers from respectable journals, book chapters, pertinent theses and dissertations, and online resources shall be utilized to verify the novelty of the study.

In the chosen primary sources for the investigation, using Edward Soja's concept of

Thirdspace, I seek to study how the space in British Concession, Tientsin where cultures intersect and negotiate was represented and how British expatriates made efforts to respond to binarism in a multinational setting in the selected work, which will be examined in the portrayal of the British people's movements in Chinese space in the work. The Chinese people will be excluded in the analysis. Besides, I aim to use a library survey, relevant publications, and academic opinions to ensure the authenticity and novelty of the in-depth critical research of the primary material chosen for this work.

#### 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

After the signing of the Sino-British Treaty of Beijing in 1860, the British arbitrarily delineated the preliminary British concession in Tianjin without any formal agreement or procedures. The area was defined as follows: from Zizhulin to Dajingzhuang, with a length of 31.5 Zhang (Chinese unit of length, 1 Zhang equals 3.33 meters); from Zizhulin along the river to Haidao Road, with a width of 115 Zhang; and from Dajingzhuang along the river to Haidao Road, with a width of 71 Zhang, covering a total area of 489.025 Mu (Chinese unit of area, 1 Mu equals 1/15 of a hectare or 1/6 an acre). According to the current urban streets, it extended east to the Hai River, west to Dagu Road, north to Yingkou Road at the border of the French concession, and south to Zhangde Road at the border of the American concession. They placed a stone pillar at each corner of the boundary, inscribed with the six Chinese characters "Da Ying Kan Ding Di Ji" (meaning "Great Britain claims this land") [6]. The British people living in the Tientsin concession had extraterritorial rights. According to Power, "In the so-called concessions of treaty port Tientsin and Shanghai, foreigners live off the fat of the land. They are exempt from the Chinese taxes, they stand above Chinese law. And all quite above board, their garrisons and police are there in force to protect their special status. To third-generation settlers this world of privilege is the only world they know" [11]. As Brian Power stated, he was "a young boy in a besieged city" [10]. In Tientsin, the fear felt by foreigners was even more intense than in Shanghai. This was because all political upheavals, such as the Boxer Rebellion and various revolutions, either originated in the capital or targeted the capital, and Tientsin was frequently threatened. Moreover, these events often brought severe disasters to Tientsin, putting the lives and property of foreigners at risk [12]. The vague threat and boundless fear were deeply ingrained in the hearts of the British expatriates living in the concessions. Therefore,

Power deeply understood this feeling, "The foreigners in Tientsin had long lived in the anxious atmosphere of a city under siege" [10].

In the concessions, British families deliberately preserved their own country's lifestyle. By means of interior design, the British settlers' conveys their attitudes in a non-linguistic fashion while also demonstrating their awareness of cross-cultural relationships. Power's depictions of the private houses of the British settlers he encountered show a blend of Chinese and European house types. For example, Captain O'Riordan transformed his home into a "little corner of Dublin...In the sitting-room a coal fire was burning in a small grate surrounded by blue and white tiles. On the walls were prints of Old Dublin: Trinity College, St Patrick's Cathedral and the Castle" [10], achieving the transplantation and preservation of cultural space. When Power came in his grandfather d'Arc's living room, "the entrance hall was small and dark and filled with Chinese things. There were painted screens, lacquered tables, vases, clocks and a gong with a stick beside it. The whole place smelled strongly of furniture polish. On the right was a European-style leather sofa and two armchairs" [10]. Power depicts the cultural choices made by British expatriates when decorating their private houses and examines whether there are expatriates who genuinely appreciate local cultures.

In terms of public sphere, The "concession society" was both hostile and indifferent towards Chinese issues, "neither the Marist Brothers in their white neck-bands nor the black-gowned masters and mistresses taught a single thing about China, its geography, its language or its history" [10]. Japan launched the War of Aggression against China and occupied 3 northeastern provinces on Sept. 18th, 1931. However, the British in Tianjin believed "we should be grateful that she (Japan), alone of the allies, has staved off the final surrender of foreign rights. Thanks to General Tanaka's positive China policy, the abolition of extraterritoriality is now in cold storage" [10]. Mr. Marsh, as a senior executive of a foreign company, personally took care of and educated his children. They told British fairy tales, discussed the latest news from London, flew European box kites, sent their children to school in England, all to prevent Chinese culture from entering their home. In *The Ford of Heaven*, it describes the reactions of Tientsin's expatriates after the outbreak of World War I, "to the Europeans in Tientsin, the fighting on the Western Front seemed unreal and far away. British residents still frequented Kiessling and Bader's café in Kaiser Wilhelmstrasse in the German Concession, where the orchestra played Viennese

waltzes"[10].

In spatial terms, each concession liked to construct a worldview centered around their own country using world maps. The world map hung in British schools indicated "what a different world...the British Empire stood out in bright red, dominating the world, but the pale green of France and her colonies was hard to make out in the background"[10]. However, the British expatriates in the Concession lived in separate, isolated circles from each other. The Powers adhered to Catholicism, but for various reasons, the Bower brothers were occasionally required to navigate through the opposing Protestant world, enduring spiritual anguish. Power received an invitation from the daughter of a U.S. Army captain to attend a Protestant tea party at her home. The captain's wife invited all guests to sing the "mission hymn"[10]. Brian felt guilty and uneasy about attending the Protestant tea party, recalling his Catholic upbringing at Saint Louis School. He "carefully avoided catching Brother Paul's eye"[10] upon returning to the Catholic world.

The British school is a Protestant school because Protestantism is the established religion of England. Every year, the school holds a bonfire and fireworks evening organized by Miss Wright, aimed at creating an atmosphere of Guy Fawkes Night for students who have never been to England. However, this celebration is undoubtedly an insult to Catholics. During the festivities celebrating the failure of the Catholic plot to overthrow King James, Power "hiding at the back of the noisy crowd, all celebrating the defeat of the Catholic against King James, I felt like a spy"[10]. In *The Ford of Heaven*, religion corresponds to nationality, with France representing Catholicism and England representing Protestantism, constituting a significant national identity. Therefore, being placed in an educational and living environment of a different faith constantly undermines the expatriates' sense of national belonging, which made them feel distanced from the Western group. Captain O'Riordan, hailing from Dublin's upper-class society, believed that mastering a refined English accent was a crucial part of British boys' education. He harshly criticized the Power brothers' English accents, remarking that their English "sounds more like a Siberian bandit every day"[10]. Due to the difference in their English accents, Brian felt like "more of an alien than ever"[10] at the British school.

The Power family's roots were in County Clare, Ireland. Stephen Power, the father, grew up in the rural areas of County Clare and arrived in China in

1912, at a time when Ireland was still a territory of the United Kingdom. His four children—including Brian—were born and raised in Tientsin. In 1922, 26 counties of Ireland (including County Clare) gained independence from the United Kingdom and established the Republic of Ireland. At that time, Brian was about four years old. The Power family spent their entire lives struggling to escape the fate of exiles, "it(expire) not only meant years of aimless wandering away from family and familiar places, but also meant being a sort of permanent outcast, someone who never felt at home, and was always at odds with the environment, inconsolable about the past, bitter about the present and the future"[14].

Grace, Power's mother, left Tianjin in 1946 and returned to the United Kingdom, spending the rest of her life in England. For a full thirty-six years, she deeply regretted leaving her hometown and her beloved Tianjin. In her later years, "now she whiled away her time in England thinking and speaking only of Tientsin in its heyday of the 1920s, as if nothing had changed since then"[10]. When the four sons in Power's family left China, they were all adults. However, as the third generation of British expatriate in Tianjin's concession areas, their connection with their European motherland had long been severed. They were alienated from both Western society and Tientsin society. The "motherland" seemed distant and ambiguous. Life in the concession made it difficult for them to unequivocally identify with the "motherland," resulting in a challenging relationship between their personal identities and the concept of the "motherland".

## 5. CONCLUSION

This research, under the guidance of Edward Soja's Thirdspace theory, elucidates how the British settlers in Chinese space reacted to the spatial dualism and make their cultural choices through textual analysis method. On one hand, most British settlers in China typically took precautions to preserve their British cultural identity and to retain their distance from Chinese people in terms of housing styles and way of life. On the other hand, the majority of British people treated Chinese issues with hostility and indifference. Moreover, the British expatriates in the Concession, were socially segregated from one another and lived in distinct circles. This is related with an-Other position of the community—a self-sufficient society being distanced from both British and Chinese societies. Their position of being physically away from the motherland and culturally away from China

undermines their interaction with both Britain and China.

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