

# THE CANADIAN ROOM THAT SPEAKS CHINESE

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## ABSTRACT

One cannot call a house a 'home' unless one truly 'lives' there, is at ease doing all sorts of everything in it, places personal treasures here and there, and most importantly, has certain feelings towards it (both positive and negative considered) - excitement, harmony, secure and relaxed are the emotions a home contains. Through people living them, "*we can transform houses into homes, spaces into places, things into belongings*" (Don Norman, Epilogue: We Are All Designers, Mar, 2003). It is believed that rooms do speak out for the users, using the user's specific language and vocabulary that links to the user's own values, experiences and culture.

This paper reports the findings of a study on changes in the layout of newly-built houses in the areas of Mississauga, Markham and Bayview area, and users' emotions in rooms of homes of Canadian-Chinese homes in Toronto. The findings also help to develop a new set of emotional functions and a model that relates the rooms, the emotional functions, and the core values of Confucian thinking – harmony, filial piety, benevolence, forbearance, reciprocity, balance and trust/mistrust, which are values that sustain the Chinese culture.

*Keywords: Design emotions, homes, Chinese culture, values, Practical functions, Emotional functions*

## 1 HOUSE, HOME AND ROOMS

Home and house are words we use to refer to dwelling in which one habitually lives, or which one regards as one's proper abode. In our everyday language, we speak of house when we refer to a confined space that answers to certain practical needs. But when we use the word 'home', it tends to carry emotional affect - "*A home is where the heart is*" (Pliny The Elder, c23-79 Roman Neoplatonist).

A house has different rooms serving different practical functions, but when a house becomes a home, the functions of rooms within extend beyond practicality and attain to the user's emotions. Kathryn Robin in her book 'Emotional House' (Newhabringer, 2005) also stated that, "*each room meets a corresponding soul need that matches the function like a metaphor*".

## 2 FUNCTIONS AND LANGUAGE OF ROOMS

Given the fact that emotional functions are established after the user(s) start living in a house/apartment, users play a major role in establishing them when they start placing their own belongings in the rooms, selecting the furniture and the matching home accessories. On building the house/apartment, architects can only work with a set of generic practical functions defined by size, activity, furnishings and navigation.

While architects can do little to determine emotional functions, interior designers/consultants (who usually get to learn of the user's preferences and needs before starting their work) seem to be the people that can help determine emotional functions of the rooms - and that is where empathy (design) comes in.

A research relating emotions and rooms conducted by interior consultants Kathryn L. Robyn and Dawn Ritchie published in their paper written some years ago derived emotional function for every room of typical North American houses, such as that the entry hallway is 'transition', laundry is 'new beginning' etc. But a research conducted in Canada in homes of overseas immigrants (mainly Chinese immigrants in Ontario and Victoria, BC), indicated that that preference for layout and styling of a home

are inextricably linked with their traditions and family values; thus emotional functions' may not be as 'universal' as what Kathryn L. Robyn and Dawn Ritchie have stated.

The notion hereby states that the emotional functions are defined by traditions, experiences, values, and preferences; and determine how comfortable they feel once they start turning the house into a home. So if rooms can speak 'the heart' (of the user) out; rooms of North-American homes speak English, while rooms of most Chinese-Canadian homes in North America could actually speak Chinese.

### **3 THE CONTEXT - CHANGES IN HOUSES IN TORONTO OVER THE LAST SEVEN YEARS**

With the influx of immigrants from Hong Kong and Mainland since 1997, the Chinese population in Canada grows from 1.3million in 2000 to close to 1.7million in 2006 (Overseas Compatriot Affairs Commission, Taiwan). The Chinese population of Toronto alone has grown from 4% to almost 15% in 2006 (The Daily, Statistics Canada, 2007). With more Chinese immigrants buying new homes after they landed, a lot more houses are built in new midtown/uptown areas like Mississauga and Markham in Toronto. It is observed that newly-built houses in the last ten to fifteen years have very different layout compared to those in the traditional residential areas like North York and Rosedale built twenty, thirty years ago. Builders indicated that many Chinese immigrants like to specify to knock down walls and rearrange the layout for their own reasons.

### **4 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This research process spans over a period of 7 years, initial research involves studying into over 30 homes include bungalows, detached and semi-detached houses. The Canadian-Chinese families who live in them have resided in Canada for five to ten years time. The families are bilingual and have four to six members of two to three generations living together. The second level of research includes visit to native-Canadian homes, model homes and newly-built ones in different residential areas. The third level concerns a comparative study of Canadian-Chinese houses to a traditional Chinese courtyard house. The three-level study addresses the following questions:

- a) how is the layout of Canadian-Chinese homes different from homes of native-Canadians
- b) how do the different generations of Canadian-Chinese see and feel about their homes
- c) how traditional values and emotional attachment of a particular culture influences setting in rooms and objects being placed inside them
- d) what are the commonalities of Chinese homes

Photo elicitation, observation and interview are the methodologies used. Photo elicitation is a graphic-based approach that encourages participants to use images to express their feelings by taking photos of corners in rooms that are emotional appealing to them. Apart from the photos, they are asked to include a short description of why they take the photo of that particular space. Other relevant facts are collected via email, phone interview, and spoken interview during home visits.

### **5 THE FINDINGS - THE CHINESE-SPEAKING ROOMS IN THE CHINESE-CANADIAN HOMES**

Changes in the layout and zoning of the spaces in houses built in the 70's, 80's and the Millennium (particular in areas like Bayview, Richmond Hill, Mississauga and Warden, Ontario.) are noted during the research.

The points below highlight some of the major changes:

- 85% of houses visited built in the 70's and 80's have staircase to second level/basement directly facing the main entrance. Over 60% of detached houses with two levels built in the last five to eight years have the staircase shifted to one side.
- Most Master Bedroom of houses built twenty years ago in Bayview area is located on the ground level facing the front of the house. Nowadays, over 80% is located at the rear of the house on the ground/

second level.

- Over 40% of houses built after year 2002 have bedroom suites. Houses built twenty years ago with three bedrooms have only two bathrooms; with one attached to the Master bedroom and one to be shared by the two other bedrooms.
- 78% of newly-built houses have kitchen placed away from beneath Master bedroom.
- Family room where the family gathers are separated from the Dining and Living room in houses built twenty years ago, but they are now connected to the Dining room.

The changes well align with Chinese beliefs such as door facing directly to staircase draws money out, kitchen close to bedrooms causes a lot of arguments, dark areas attract bad spirits, and the tradition of hiding family affairs to the family then exposing them, etc. Chinese families have their own specific requirement of rooms, doors and windows alignment based on old Fung Shui theories and such are clearly reflected in here.

To validate the assumption, the second level of research involves a comparison study of the newly-built houses which are catered to the Canadian-Chinese market to that of the traditional Chinese courtyard home. The study also aims to discover common aspects and objects in Chinese houses. The traditional courtyard home of China (quadrangle) is a good example of practical and emotional functions that appeal to Chinese, and the old Yin Yu Tong<sup>1</sup> shown in Fig. 1 is an outstanding example of such. The home has a courtyard in the middle that is used as a space for the family members to gather, and is flanked by rooms to the east and west which serve as kitchens and servants' living quarters. On the northern end of the outer courtyard is the "Main House" which faces southward. One room located in the middle of the house is for living or community purposes with a smaller bedroom or studies beside it. Rooms on each side were for married children and guests.

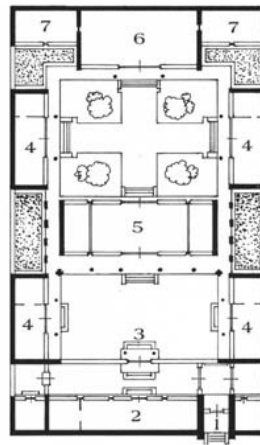


Figure 1

Yan Chongnian, *Beijing, The Treasures of An Ancient Capital* (Beijing: Morning Glory Press: 198)

source: <http://www.pem.org/yinyutang/>

The layout demonstrates order and balance with almost everything symmetrical, family hierarchy is observed. Rooms for the senior members of the family are in the inner part of the courtyard home, and that justifies why Chinese prefer to have Master Bedroom relocated to the back instead of facing the front in those newly-built houses in Canada. Although the house is based on a symmetrical design, the one key characteristic is the entrance of traditional Chinese courtyard house is shifted to one side, as

<sup>1</sup>Yin Yu Tong is a late Qing dynasty merchants' home was originally located in southeastern China and re-erected at the Peabody Essex Museum

Chinese believes that with door facing the centre of the house is bad for health as bad energies could enter straight into the ‘heart’ of the house; this also well indicates why Chinese prefer to have door and staircase not directly aligned.

**6 THE NEW DEFINITION - EMOTIONAL FUNCTIONS OF ROOMS IN CANADIAN-CHINESE HOMES**

A new set of ‘emotional functions’ is developed from the findings, in reference to Brent Dean Robbins’ (Duchesne University) theory of ‘Emotion, Movement & Psychological Space’ is listed in the chart below. The chart also shows how the new functions that can be applied to Canadian-Chinese homes are compared to those developed by L. Robyn and Dawn Ritchie.

Rooms	North-American homes	Chinese-speaking homes
Entryway/Hallway	Transition	Humanity (kindness)
Living Room	Fellowship	Benevolence
Dining Room	Bonding	Filial Piety
Kitchen	Nurturance	Balance
Master Suite	Intimacy	Harmony
Children’s bedroom(s)	Becoming	Reciprocity
Study	Accountability	Trust/Mistrust
Laundry/Working Area	New beginnings	Forbearance



**Entryway/Hallway – Sanction**

This is the first contact point of owner and guest. It is usually decorated to review the ‘wealth’ and ‘health’ of the family. This is also the point where Chinese are expected to express their kindness to the guest, or family members as they should greet each other with kindness there – manner is important! 42% of the families follow the traditional custom to hang a Chinese scroll that says ‘bless everyone who comes in and go out’. The entrance represents the Chinese value of Humanity and has the meaning of sanction.

**Living Room – Unity**

In the olden days, parents were greeted every morning by serving tea in this room. In modern Chinese homes, the Living Room is the place where the family members gather, and where tea is served upon guests’ arrival. This is the place where the Chinese character that says ‘福’ (good fortune ) and pictures of ancestors are usually hung/displayed. The room is usually decorated with warm colors, reflecting the value of Benevolence, and has the meaning of family unity.

**Dining Room - Order**

Chinese emphasize ‘don’t talk when you eat and sleep’. In modern Chinese homes, dining table is

where members of the family share their thoughts, but it is important to respect the seniority while talking, therefore active discussion might not be the case at tables; although they may not be told not to talk while eating. The room relates to the value of Filial Piety, and has the meaning of order.

#### Kitchen – Good Health

Chinese cooking is very sophisticated. The kitchen is a place where food is stored, like expensive dried goods, Chinese tea, herbs and Chinese medicine, etc. It is also where the female head of the household prepare the best for the family. Kitchen represents good health for the family, it reflects the value of Balance.

#### Master Suite – Privacy

Master bedroom is the sacred place of the parents - head of family, it is important that one knocks before entering. It also is the one place that parents retreat for their private moments. Harmony and balance is highly valued inside, and it carries the meaning of privacy.

#### Children’s Bedroom – Attachment

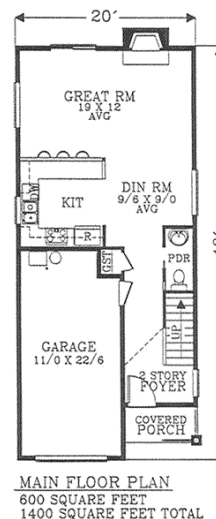
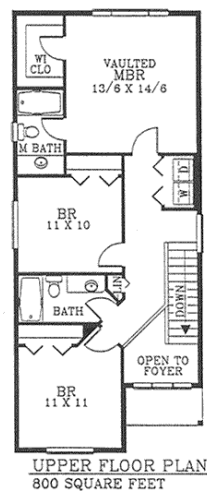
Out of the 30 families visited, 90% of the kids who are over 18 still live with the family – it is a Chinese tradition that the young ones stay around to take care of the elderly. Therefore the room shows value of Reciprocity, and has the meaning of attachment.

#### Study – Wealth

Trust is the foundation of Chinese business relationships. Study is a place where one acquires knowledge (through books in the past, and on the internet nowadays) in order to refine one’s morals and to nurture integrity. The place relates to the value of Trust/Mistrust, and has the meaning of wealth.

#### Laundry/Working Area - Trash

This area is usually used as a storage place for all sorts of things in Chinese homes. Busy and chaotic are the words that be used to describe this area in over 80% of the houses. Instead of representing a new beginning, the same place in a Chinese house should relate to the value of Forbearance and means trash emotionally to them.



## 7 CHINESE-SPEAKING ROOMS AND THE VOCABULARIES - OBJECTS IN THE ROOMS

In the design industry, there is growing awareness for empathy/emotional design in all different disciplines. Latest research on emotional design has also extended beyond products and human-

computer interfaces to experiences and emotional responses. Brent Dean Robbins of Duquesne University (1999) has proved that emotion is fundamentally relational, and the terminology of 'emotion' is an "*embodied, temporal and languaged movement in interpersonal space*". In the field of architecture and interior design, practitioners are also starting to seek approaches to cater to the new direction.

Chinese Fengshui - a Chinese method of situating houses according to such factors as sunlight and micro-climates, is one of the many ways that is being incorporated into architecture and interior design to help promote harmonious effects on the people living inside the house and to evoke positive emotions. Traditional Chinese courtyard home uses Fengshui as the foundation of good energy and force-field, and that explains why Chinese prefer houses that flow similar to the courtyard sample, thinking that they are more comfortable to live in and to navigate through. While flow corresponds to experiences, objects are interfaces that connect to the user's emotions. Objects are also things that are used commonly by Fengshui masters to create harmonious affect within spaces. In the research, it is discovered that Canadian-Chinese homes do have lots of things-Chinese that are in common apart from layout. For example, over 52% of the homes visited have the Chinese character '福' hung in the Living Room. There is always a Chinese wok in the kitchen as they believe it is better for stir-frying than non-stick frying pan. Over 48% of the homes still kept the ancestor tablet either in the Dining Room corner or the Study. So if homes can really speak different languages, the home accessories, including the furniture pieces are the vocabularies that make the language.

The model developed for this paper indicates the possible correlation between traditional values and emotional attachment of objects in the rooms, and can be used to hopefully shedding some light on empathy design in interior and architectural design taking consideration of the cultural perspective.

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