

Transcultural Communication and Investigation in Global English: Nury Vittachi's *The Feng Shui Detective's Casebook*

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Abstract

In *The Feng Shui Detective's Casebook*(2003), Sri Lankan Hong Kong writer, Nury Vittachi, portrays a middle-aged Singaporean (a Chinese immigrant) Feng Shui master and amateur detective CF Wong, who accepts clients' commissions and participates in transnational investigation of crimes and mysterious affairs together with his white and young Australian assistant Joyce. Living in Singapore, they often fly from Singapore to several Asian Pacific countries, including the Philippines, Thailand, Malaysia, India, and Australia...., to pin down the truth behind unresolved mysteries through ratiocinations by principles of esoteric Feng Shui. In the process of their investigations, English is the language they use for a global communication with people in different cultural backgrounds and in different countries. Yet, the English spoken in these Asian Pacific countries has been entwined with different local languages or accents and turned into various forms of colloquial English like “Singlish,” “Aussie English,” “Indian English,” “Malaysian English,” “Philippine English.” Although people in these different countries may communicate with one another in English, they are still troubled by cultural shocks and language misunderstanding caused by different uses and expressions of English. How can various forms of English spoken in global circumstances be tightly connected with local culture of Asian Pacific countries? How can the Feng Shui detective break mysterious cases by a trans-cultural communication through using global English? This paper aims to probe into these questions and find out possible answers.

Key Words : Nury Vittachi, Feng Shui, detective, global English, transcultural communication

全球化英語情境下的跨文化溝通與查案：紐利·維大奇的 《風水偵探案例》

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摘 要

斯里蘭卡裔的香港作家紐利維大奇(Nury Vittachi, 生於 1958), 在其所著的《風水偵探之案例》(*The Feng Shui Detective's Casebook*, 2003)這本英文偵探小說裡, 塑造了一個由中國廣東移民至新加坡, 且年逾半百的華人風水大師兼私家偵探黃大師(C. F. Wong), 他和他的澳洲籍且深受英國教育影響的白人年輕女助理喬依思(Joyce), 以新加坡為中心, 接手委託前往亞太各國, 例如菲律賓、泰國、馬來西亞、印度及澳洲, 以風水解說為名義, 實際上是藉著全球化英語來進行跨國間的語言文化溝通與犯罪調查及辦案的過程。維大奇的黃大師兼偵探在這些亞太國家中, 運用中國秘傳的風水及易經五行八卦運行的原理, 來找尋事情疑雲的真相及推測罪犯的行兇動機與犯罪行徑。然而在他們的調查中, 他們自己以及所接觸的亞太各國人民所說的英語, 實質上已融合了各國的方言及口音, 而逐漸變成不同的口語英語形式, 像是新加坡英語(Singlish)、澳洲英語(Aussie English)、印度英語(Indian English)、馬來英語(Malaysian English)以及菲律賓英語(Philippine English)... 等等。雖然這些人在不同的國家中, 彼此之間藉英語來做溝通, 但他們仍然會因英語在不同國家間的不同用法及表達產生困擾, 進而造成彼此間的文化衝擊與語言的誤解。小說裡所呈現的全球化情境下, 不同形式的口說英語如何與亞太國家的當地文化產生緊密的結合? 風水偵探黃大師要如何藉由全球化英語以及跨文化溝通來找出懸案的真相? 本篇文章會探討這些問題並找出可能的答案。

關鍵字：紐利·維大奇、風水、偵探、全球化英語、跨文化溝通

Sri Lankan Hong Kong writer Nury Vittachi, in *The Feng Shui Detective's Casebook* (2003) containing series of detective stories, portrays a middle-aged Singaporean (a Chinese immigrant) Feng Shui master and amateur detective CF Wong, who accepts clients' commissions and participates in transnational investigation of crimes and mysterious affairs together with his white and young Australian assistant Joyce. Living in Singapore, they often fly from Singapore to several Asian Pacific countries, including the Philippines, Thailand, Malaysia, India, and Australia...., to pin down the truth behind unresolved mysteries through ratiocinations by principles of esoteric Feng Shui. In the process of their investigations, English is the language they use for a global communication with people in different cultural backgrounds and in different countries. Yet, the English spoken in these Asian Pacific countries has been entwined with different local languages or accents and turned into various forms of colloquial and "localized" English like "Singlish," "Aussie English," "Indian English," "Malaysian English," "Philippine English."

Although people in these different countries may communicate with one another in English, they are still troubled by cultural shocks and language misunderstanding caused by different uses and expressions of English. How can the Feng Shui detective break mysterious cases by a trans-cultural communication through using global English? How can a teacher define "global English" and instruct students to understand the complexity of cultural interaction and English communication in the global world by teaching this novel? How can trans-national and trans-cultural communications result from the overlapping and displacement phenomenon of "cultural interstices"? ¹This paper aims to probe into these questions and find out possible answers.

The using of Feng Shui by speaking English becomes a means of trans-cultural communications and breaks the barriers of international border through the global

¹ The term "cultural interstice" is from Homi Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* (1994). p.2. It refers to the overlap and displacement of domain of difference, an abstract and complicated "in-between" space located in a domain full of cultural similarities and differences.

English spoken by the trans-national characters presented in Vittachi's *The Feng Shui Detective's Casebook*. The esoteric thought and practices of Feng Shui cannot be separated from Chinese living habits and residential circumstances. Yet, from early to middle twentieth century (from early years of the Republic to communist China periods), the practice and research of Feng Shui were regarded as a pedantic and old-fashioned custom and even "feudal superstition"(Brunn 232) by Chinese governments. Accordingly, the scientific study of Feng Shui stays fragmentary and unorganized in China and other Asian countries.² Curiously enough, many western scholars show enthusiastic interest in this oriental and esoteric geomancy, they regard Feng Shui as a systematic science and "an invisible metaphysical space" (Brunn 7). They actually view Feng Shui from a brand new western science angle and make possible a trans-cultural communication in a global perspective through different approaches of studying Feng Shui.

In recent years, western scholars focus their studies of Feng Shui on a systematic social science approach, emphasizing the harmonious relationship between human being and natural environment around him.³ Feng Shui is essentially a cultural practice of human-centered thought and human's exploitation of natural environment. Ostensibly, it manifests a harmony between human culture and natural environment. Yet, it is actually a control of man-made systematic science over the natural world. This "artificially" dominating, normalizing, and homogenizing process of the non-human world and constructing Feng Shui principles are the features of modern civilization, which manifests the "dominant modernist rationality" (Brunn 29), an important phase of constructing homogenization especially in a global world.

² After 1960s, the study of Feng Shui was mostly combined with anthropology and popular culture and began to be prevalent in China, Hong Kong, Singapore, and Taiwan. In other Asian countries like Japan, Korea, and Vietnam, some scholars also study Feng Shui, but they seem to probe into the issue of its localized practices in their own countries.

³ These scholars are including French sociologists Emile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss, American scholars of Asian study Benedict Anderson, American anthropologist Edward Bruner, and British historian Eric Hobsbawm in the twentieth century.

Due to the rapid and high development of industrialization and urbanization, people nowadays seem to pay much attention to Feng Shui. It enables people to comprehend further how progression of modern civilization and industrial pollutions may lead to ecological disasters and destroy human living space. In late 1960s, some travelling columnists brought the basic ideas of Feng Shui onto the international stage, introducing oriental geomancy to western world.⁴ This also caused a trend of adapting oriental Feng Shui into western bourgeois urban culture and accelerated the pace of trans-national application of Feng Shui. After 1990s, it gradually became part of the popular culture and “was ushered into modernity through its circulation” (King441) in global communication and trans-national culture interaction fields.

Nury Vittachi interconnects the issue of contemporary Feng Shui culture with that of global English through writing this book, which contains several correlated detective cases under investigation in Asian-Pacific countries. These detective stories focusing on a non-western and non-white detective who seeks to solve mysterious cases in a transnational and global setting makes Vittachi's work redolent of “ethnic detective fiction.” Vittachi's detective stories demonstrate cultural diversities and transnational communications through different English languages spoken and localized by people in different countries. More relevantly, Vittachi's Feng Shui detective does not only attempt to crack entangled puzzles but plays a “cultural mediator”(Gosselin 3) by applying Feng Shui principles in multicultural environments.

Vittachi adds many elements which never appear before in his contemporary detective stories in *The Feng Shui Detective's Casebook*. In classic detective stories like Doyle's ones, Doyle seems to portray his Holmes as a detective hero entwined with “imperial and Enlightenment values”(Thompson 68) and regards non-western people and living customs as monstrous menaces threatening the security and consolidation of the British Empire. In Vittachi's detective stories, the detective hero is no more a white

⁴ These contemporary travelling columnists include British writer Derek Walters and American writer Sara Rossbach.

and Anglo-Saxon master sleuth with value system of western reason and is replaced by a private dick who seeks the answer to mysterious puzzles by old oriental philosophical thinking and wisdoms. Put simply, the detective hero's intensive superiority complex as an imperial colonizer and racial ideology cannot be found on a sleuth who uses oriental metaphysics and travels internationally for pinning down the truth. In past decades, the academic studies of detective genre are mainly on the review of narrative structure and genre studies.⁵ The studies of this Vittachi's work can expand the discussion of detective genre into a new field in which cultural diversities and confrontations in a transnational and a global setting can be viewed from different perspectives.

The trans-cultural communication in different (global) English(es) and in different ethnic groups prove to be the main plot and an essential issue in Vittachi's *Feng Shui Detective Casebook*. The academic studies of global English(es), the global spread of English to different countries in variant forms, are either focus on the influence of English in its worldwide diffusions as a means of communication at wide aspects of culture, economy, and many others or concentrate on the notion which can be linked to English used in international or intercultural settings as a means of communication both in the interactions between native speakers and non-native speaker of the language (Murata 3). As the nowadays prevalent use of English in a global world, English in this context can be discussed in the aspect of global English(es), of global language, and of world English(es).⁶ Moreover, if viewed in the perspective of interactant circumstance, most of English communications in international and intercultural settings is likely to be ELF or EIL communication,⁷ "where interactants who do not share a language cannot

⁵ These scholars include British critics who explore the forms and conventions of popular culture and literature—John G. Cawelti, Dennis Porter, William W. Stowe, and Tony Bennett.

⁶ The term global Englishes is from Pennycook's *Global Englishes and Transcultural Flows* (2007). The term global language is from Crystal's *English as a Global Language* (1997). The term world Englishes is from Brutt-Griffler's *World English: A Study of Its Developments* (2002). pp. 2-3

⁷ Defining global English(es), contemporary scholars usually focus on discussion of EIL (English as international language) communication and ELF (English as lingua franca) communication. Lingua franca, or bridge language, refers to a language or dialect systematically used to make communication possible between persons not sharing a native language or dialect. See Murata and Jenkins's *Global Englishes in Asian Contexts: Current and Future Debates* (2009). pp. 2-4

help using a language of their 'choice' as a means of communication" (Murata 4).

More importantly, the examination of intercultural communication cannot be separated from the discussion issue of the international uses and users of English, they have been discussed profitably in terms of three concentric circles—the inner circle, the outer circle, and the expanding circle.⁸ The story settings of Vittachi's *The Feng Shui Detective's Casebook* cover several Asian (Pacific) countries including Singapore, Thailand, India, the Philippines, and Australia. The using and users of English in these countries mainly facing a long history of institutionalized functions or once was colonized by the British or ruled by the American, which belongs to the outer circle (except Australia, the inner circle). The discussion of using English in these countries covers the ground of English as a global or international language as well as English as a lingua franca, especially when Feng Shui master and detective CF Wong comes to foreign countries and makes communication possible between persons not sharing a native language with him.

As a Chinese immigrant in Singapore, Wong does not explicitly articulates his national identity as a Singaporean;⁹ instead, he still considers himself as a Chinese Feng Shui master in Singapore but his English accent, possibly affected by Singaporean, is close to Singlish one. His ambiguous national identity perplexes the issue of trans-cultural communications in different localized English and in different countries

⁸ The *inner circle* comprises the old-variety English-using countries, where English is the first or dominant language, the United States, Britain, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. The *outer circle* comprises where English has a long history of institutionalized functions and standing as a language of wide and important roles in education, governance, literary, creativity, and popular culture, such as India, Nigeria, Pakistan, Singapore, South Africa, and Zambia. The *expanding circle* countries are those in which English has various roles and is widely studied but for more specific purposes than in the outer circle, including reading knowledge for scientific and technological purpose, such countries currently include China, Indonesia, Iran, Japan, Korea, and Nepal. See Kachru and Nelson's "World English" in Anne Burns and Caroline Coffin (Eds) *Analysing English in a Global Context: A Reader* (2001). pp. 13-14.

⁹ Although many Singaporeans consider "Singlish," the localized English, is full of grammatical errors and is informal in writing and speaking standard English, some scholars still contend that the preservation of Singlish helps manifest the Singaporean identity and bind Singaporean people and their nation together. See Phyllis Ghim-Liam Chew's "Remaking Singapore: Language, Culture, and Identity in a Globalized World" in (Eds) Amy B.M. Tsui and James W. Tollefson. *Language Policy, Culture, and Identity in Asian Contexts* (2007). p. 83.

when he goes to foreign countries including Thailand, India, the Philippines, and Australia for investigating mysterious cases by communicating or interacting in global English(es). These countries remain a spatial zone where different cultures and languages contact together without sharing a native (first) language.

In 1980s, Homi Bhabha argues that a cultural subject in a confrontation of two different cultures may produce “in-between” spaces where subjectivity of “self” and objectivity of “other” are oscillating between the homogeneity and heterogeneity of these two cultures in these ambiguous spaces. These “in-between” spaces, to Bhabha, provide¹⁰ the emergence of interstices: “the overlap and displacement of domain of difference—that the intersubjective and collective experiences of *nationness*, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated” (Bhabha 2). That is, the space of *inbetweenness* and cultural interstices is essential to the place where two or more different cultural subjects contact and interact with one another. In 1990s, Mary Louise Pratt further regards this cultural interaction within a trans-national space as a “contact zone,” where “disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination—like colonialism, slavery, or their aftermath as they are lived out across the global today” (Pratt4). Basing on the study of Spanish colonization of the Inca Empire in South America in the 17th century, Pratt applies the complicated issues of trans-cultural confrontations derived from western colonization of an old South America empire to the exploration of post-colonialism under the global contexts.

She observes that the contact of different cultures sparkles “relations among colonizers and colonized, or travelers and “travelees,” not in term of separatedness or apartheid, but in terms of copresence, interaction, interlocking understandings and

¹⁰ Bhabha does not only emphasize the issue of the ambiguous space where various cultures confront with one another but also the synchronic (ever-present) time that breaks away from a discourse of linearity of historical events. Bhabha’s conception of “time” is another big issues and the discussion of Feng Shui and confronting space of various cultures can be related more to Bhabha conception of spatial location. See HomiBhabha’s *Location of Culture*(1994). Chapter 8: “Dissemination: Time, Narrative and the Margins of the Modern Nation.”

practices, often within radically asymmetrical relations of power”(7). What Pratt highlights here is to lay emphasis on cultural interaction and interlocking, the understanding and making advantage of cultural homogeneity as well as tolerance and juxtaposing of cultural heterogeneity (similar to Bhabha’s concept of cultural interstices), which are “co-presented” in a dominant culture practices and interactions among different cultural subjects or communities in a transnational or global world context. The notion of Bhabha’s “cultural interstices” or of Pratt’s cultural copresence or interlocking phenomenon can be applied to the discussion of the story plot and transnational settings in Vittachi’s detective stories.

More importantly, under global circumstances, the socially and nationally constructed boundaries are becoming more obscured while simultaneously, "making visible the spaces, dimensions, and strategies of being and becoming multiple people in multiple places"(Clark 1). Recently, the study on interlocking spaces (places) of two or more different cultures has been noticed and emphasized in discussing English used in countries for EIL/ELF communications. Vittachi's detective stories highlight the spaces or places where English has been taught but transformed into localized forms and where multiple cultures are confronted and intertwined.

Vittachi’s CF Wong and his white and young Australian girl Joyce (was born and learned English in UK) can represent two different cultural subjects confronting with each other in a transnational setting. They probably cannot totally understand his/her partner’s different ethnic value system, but they have to learn how to work together in a harmonious interaction and communication and to erase conflicts and prejudices between them. If they can coordinate and cooperate with each other through understanding the cultural homogeneity and respecting the cultural heterogeneity between them, they can henceforth incarnate the cultural subjects in Pratt’s contact zone of cultural confrontations who attempt to understand and compromise each other’s different customs and thinkings.

One of the major cultural barriers presented in these detective stories comes from the language communications. Joyce speaks English fluently, while Wong usually speaks Cantonese and Pidgin English to people who do not understand Chinese. Although most population in Singapore are Chinese, the official language for Singaporean is English due to the fact that she was once the British colony and there are still Malays and Indians living in Singapore. To Joyce, speaking to and communicating with her boss Wong in English is easy; but to Wong, whose mother tongue is Cantonese Chinese, has moved to Singapore for a short time and still tried hard to learn English by looking up or memorizing vocabularies in dictionaries and by reading grammar books. He has difficulties in understanding Joyce's colloquial English, English slangs, idioms, and phrases. That is the reason why there are cognition gaps and misunderstanding between them when they talk to and communicate with each other in English.

In the story of "The Case of the Fishy Flat," misunderstandings often occur in their English conversations. When Joyce tells Wong that the works he gives to her are easy by saying "piece of cake," Wong thinks that she needs to eat a piece of cake. Later, when Joyce wants to express her quick understanding of Wong's words and says her favorite phrase "piece of cake" again, Master Wong cannot help complaining to others why Joyce is often hungry and remains impatient by asking someone to give her cake to eat (182). Similarly, this language meaning confusion caused by being ignorant of English slang occurs in "The Case of the Late New Columnist." When Joyce notifies that the information about the death of a Filipino news columnist may be a red herring (false clue), Wong still feels quite puzzled about the weird correlation between a mysterious case and a fish with red color no matter how hard Joyce tries to explain to him the particular meaning of this English idiom.

Joyce's using of contemporary English idioms and slangs, to master Wong, are not English. He even considers that "she didn't speak English—at least, no form of English he had ever encountered" (35). The book *Dictionary of Contemporary English*

Idioms he bought prove to be “infuriatingly useless in analyzing Joyce’s speech” (36). As a non-native English speaker like Master Wong, he may regard the English grammar and rhetoric listed in reference books and taught in school as a standard and “right” using of English. “Normalized” and “standardized” by his English grammar and rhetoric books, Wong feels that Joyce’s colloquial English and using of contemporary English slangs and idioms deviate from the standard using of English. Under this circumstance, the Australian native speaker of English (in inner circle English user) Joyce, whose colloquial English is paradoxically and critically called into question by a Chinese-Singaporean whose mother tongue is not English. This makes the definition of standard English become more complicated.

Due to the fact that the English is broadly spoken as an international language or as lingua franca, the originally “localized” use of English in inner circle English-speaking countries gradually turns into a “globalized” use of English in various forms for non-native speakers in different countries. The global English, after being “localized” in various countries, may be inserted into and combined with local languages or expressions and creates a new form of localized English respectively in each of these countries. For example, Master Wong’s pidgin English, or Chinglish/Singlish, remains undetached from the oral expression of Cantonese. His English speaking often omits “subject” or “(be) verb” and habitually ends his speaking with the unique expletive *lah*. In addition, Wong is used to saying “can” and “can not” (291) instead of “yes” and “no” like other Chinese-Singaporean’s common but particular English oral expression in a global context. Although Joyce also gets confused with master Wong’s Chinglish or Singlish, she still can catch the key message from Wong’s “various” English oral expression through interaction and compromise between two different cultural subjects like them.

In discussing the localization use of English in a global world, Vittachi takes Hong Kong English as an example to elaborate the fact that the “localized” English language

is essentially a hybrid language”(Vittachi, 2002, 210). He even points out that “academics know that there is no such thing as standard English”(Vittachi, 2002, 208). What Vittachi argues here seems to demonstrate the localized English users’ possible challenge and questioning about the so-called orthodoxy and correct use of English spoken by standard English users (inner circle English users?). This also stands out the ambiguity of the distinction between globalized English and localized English in a transnational setting.

This ambiguity of English language can be associated with Bhabha’s “cultural interstices” which indicates a spatial location of confrontation and oscillation of two cultures. More relevantly, after some non-native English-speaking countries (like Singapore and India) had been taken as colonies by native English-speaking countries (like the Great Britain), English language replaced dialects in colonies and became the dominant and official language in these colonies when they are colonies and even after they are independent. Yet, after the so-called standard English becomes “localized” in colonized countries, most of English expressions, grammars, and rhetoric remain intact, however part of English is coalescent with dialects and unique expressions and finally turns into a “localized” English spoken in these colonized and later independent countries until now. In terms of Bhabha, this “localized” English is displaced from its overlapping with colonizer’s standard English language but further differentiates from standard English and juxtaposes itself in a realm of “localized” English as a part of globalized Englishes.

In “The Adventure of Offstage Actors” with the story setting in Thailand, Joyce takes it for granted that she should speak English as an international language for communicating with Thai people. Yet, when she first encounters and talks to Thai people in English in a transnational setting, she questions the correctness of the Thai English, which differentiate from the standard English and is added or mixed with many unique oral expression and pronunciations of Thai. For instances, “thing” is pronounced

as “t’ing,” “passenger” as “patsenjer,” “with” as “wit,” “without” as “wit lout,” “amount” as “amoun,” “stop” as “s’top,” and “world-wide” as “wort-white”... (254-258). The standard English, after being “localized” and combined with Thai pronunciation, turns into a Thai English which puzzles Joyce to question the orthodoxy of the standard English. Moreover, the fast speaking speed and weird pitch sound amaze Joyce. When she tries to find out a missing Thai actor with master Wong and the police in Bangkok, a police officer tries to explain to her the differences of “subject” in Thai from that in English. Before the officer’s explanation, Joyce cannot wait to share what she feels about the weird and strange Thai oral expression and rhetoric to Wong.

There are 13 words for *me* or *I*. The word for *me* if you are a guy is *pom*.

Can you believe it? And if you are speaking to your younger sister, the word for *I* is *pee*. If you are talking to a mate, you say *goo*, and you are a woman talking to an older person you say *noo*, which means *mouse*.

Who made up these languages, anyway? (263)

When Joyce is eager to talk about her novel transnational experience of learning Thai culture and language, Wong is indifferent to her words because he does not regard the strange expression and the hidden sexist implication in Thai language as a big deal.

In “The Case of the Late New Columnist, Joyce feels that the Philippine English sounds like a “monstrous” English due to the fact that her first impression of the dialect Tagalog, the most-spoken language spoken by Filipino as a first language, is weird, and sounds “like a monster from a children book” (308). As a foreigner in the Philippines, Joyce seems to stand in a subject position of a superior and dominant culture, or in terms of Pratt’s imperial traveler, who observes and feels weird about non-native English speaker’s (the “travelee’s”) living culture and language.

If the inner circle English user can represent the subject of a superior culture and who looks down (or feeling unusual and strange) on other culture, the Australian (including Joyce) in the story “Fit for Life or Death” can stand for a dominant cultural

subject who lacks understanding of other cultures in Asian countries. When Joyce goes back to her motherland Perth in Australia for investigating a murder case in a local gymnasium, she encounters a white Australian male and tells him she currently lives Singapore. To Joyce's big astonishment, this man should ask her the question "do you speak Japanese (in Singapore)" (73)? Joyce, compared with her fellowman in Perth, cannot understand better the other cultures in other Asian countries either. When she and Wong go to other Asian countries like the Philippines, Thailand, and India, she often remembers that their localized English is awkward and their diets are disgusting. Joyce actually still embraces a superior sense of being a "westerner," not being able to identify with the Asian culture.

Seen in Bhabha's light, Joyce may possess a "concept of 'fixity' in the ideological construction of otherness" (Bhabha 66) toward Asian culture. More precisely, she is confined to her own western cultural subject's habitual or deep-rooted thinking and henceforth cannot tell the difference or fail to recognize other non-dominant cultures. Compared with another traveling and investigating subject in a transnational and transcultural setting (based on Pratt's concept of travelers and "travelees"), Master Wong, unlike Joyce's fixed and rigid thinking, can negotiate with himself and oscillate between two different cultural circumstances mainly due to the fact that he can apply his Feng Shui principles to seek the truth of mysterious cases in other countries and adjust himself to different languages, diets, and living customs settings. His mode of thinking and doing can be considered as what Bhabha calls "a kind of fluidity" (3). That is, his ways of Feng Shui thinking will not stick to his own cultural value systems and can be applied to various situations if necessary.

The Feng Shui principles used by Wong in Vittachi's detective stories actually follow the principle of "fluidity" owing to the correlations between the flowing fluidity in a natural world and the movement of the "*flow of ch'i* energy" (122).¹¹ To master

¹¹ Besides a writer and an editor of newspaper columnist, Nury Vittachi is also a Feng Shui master. He was once a pupil to a well-known Feng Shui master Raymond Lo in Hong Kong. He also dabbled in

Wong, the *flow of ch'i* comes from the circulations of *wu-xing* (known also as five elements: wood, fire, earth, metal, and water) in a natural world. In his opinion, inadequate layout of furniture, inappropriate room partition, and pots full of dead water within a house can lead to stagnations of the flowing *ch'i* and bad circulations of *wu-xing* and the final *cutting ch'i* (47). As a consequence, they will result in the accumulation of bad *ch'i* and even cause the death of a person and the downfall of a family. Besides, Wong's Feng Shui principle emphasizes that a good flowing *ch'i* within a housing space should avoid jutting corners and angled space, because they will bring about uneven flow of *ch'i* and therefore bad luck will befall the persons living in this house.

In "The Cars That Flew Away," Wong points out a fact that the constantly flowing and restless circulation of *chi* is the vital power for all kind things, especially for making fortunate, to a client who runs a carpark tower in Singapore. Wong insists that "[t]wo ways systems achieve more turnover" (123). Likewise, the "flowing" of massive entering cars and leaving cars ensure the constant moving of the *ch'i*, and they make the carpark tower owner earn more money than ever. Wong further reminds the carpark tower owner that he should avoid unnecessary angled spaces in a tower, for they will confuse the drivers and disturb the flowing of *ch'i*. He further explains the importance of constant flowing of *ch'i* by mentioning the ancient Chinese wisdom of putting water-flowing layout for accumulating family wealth due to the fact that flowing water is related to making more money (55).

Viewed in this perspective, it is no wonder when Wong goes to Bangkok (in the aforesaid story "The Adventure of Offstage Actors," the spiky and triangle building makes him shiver, believing that "pyramid-shaped buildings [are] always unsuitable for personal dwellings"(257). To him, the design of spiky and triangle architecture resembles the floor plan of angled space within a carpark tower, both of them may result

vaatstu shastra—an esoteric Indian geomancy.

in bad circulations of *ch'i* energy and bring bad lucks to the persons who live in or own the building.

Vittachi's flow of *ch'i* energy, to a larger extent, can be associated with Henri Lefebvre's thought of dynamic of fluids in his discussion of production of space. In Lefebvre's opinion, space is not a static conception, especially to its users. He takes a housing home as an example, observing that water pipes, gas pipes, electric wires, phone cords, and even radio waves or television signals within a house can constitute an invisible "streams of energy" (Lefebvre93). Viewed in Lefebvre's perspective, the natural and dynamic fluids of energy flows spreading over artificial pipes, wires, and cords manifest the fact that natural energy flows are subjected to man's control use as sciences for living and demonstrate an "anti-nature" (Lefebvre 71) features of all kinds of things in the world. In a similar vein, although Wong's discourse of Feng Shui highlights the circulation of *ch'i* and inner harmony of *wu-xing*, it also focuses on its application to the good interrelation between a man and his living environment in the natural world. In this sense, the Feng Shui principles share some similarities to western science of streams of energy in a natural world.

Wong chances to find out that Indian conception of space flowing energy is similar to Chinese Feng Shui principles. In "The Cars That Flew Away," he tells keeper of carpark tower Mr. Puk about what the *ch'i* is. Besides, both Wong and Mr. Puk are Chinese-Singaporean. In their conversation, they speak typical Chinglish/Singlish, which is full of particular oral expression or grammatical errors (including run on sentence without conjunctions) differentiated from the so-called "standard English."

"The *ch'i* staff is what?" (asks Mr. Puk).

"Scientist call it bio-electrical energy. Philosopher call it life force.

Indian call it prana. Religious man call it God. I call it *ch'i*."

(Wong answers)

"Where does it come from?"

“From the center of Earth. From sun, moon, stars. From sky and from beneath our feet. From outside us. From inside us.” (150)

Wong's explanation delineates the fact that the thread of oriental metaphysics may hide in western science, while the features of the western systematic and scientific discourse can be traced to oriental esoteric thought.

Vittachi suggests in his detective stories that there are still similarities and commonalities located in different cultures (including languages), which can be perceived by a “cultural mediator” like Wong does. In “A Little Computer Trouble,” when Wong probed into a case of computer crime in India, he occasionally found something in common in Indian geomancy (*vaastu*) (192) and Chinese Feng Shui principles. Both *vaastu* and Feng Shui lay stress on the importance of natural landscape of surrounding hills and trees as well as a flat and vacant land in front of a house or building (*Ming t'ang*). When he goes to visit a woman suspect of the computer crime, he cannot help praising the excellent Feng Shui of the woman's house.

The two hills, their fingers touching behind the house, formed a perfect Dragon and Tiger embrace, protecting the house and encompassing it with the best fortune imaginable. Further behind the house were tall trees and, beyond, a much larger mountain.

Wong picked up the elements that made the location so magical. ‘Green Dragon one side. White tiger other side. At back is black turtle. *Ming t'ang* in front. Truly here is heaven. (192)

Wong regards an excellent Feng Shui, no matter in China or in India, is rooted in a picture of a perfect home which is surrounded by greenery, the world of great nature. He even further relates this image of perfect home to a “race memory” produced by “our brain that holds things that evolved over centuries and millennia” (191). Due to this common race memory, Chinese and Indian share a similar cultural and ethnic feature

through their discourse of geomancy perceived by Wong the Feng Shui master/detective in a process of transcultural communication and investigation in global English.

In Vittachi's detective stories, if Wong's wisdom and philosophy of Feng Shui principle can partake any significance of oriental esoteric value system, Joyce may relatively symbolize the western science value system and henceforth form a dualism for these two different cultural subjects. Yet, the theme of Vittachi's stories do not highlight the dualism; rather, the author attempts to find a way to reach harmonious coexistence and compromise in equal status in different value systems or cultural and language backgrounds.

Vittachi's setting of transnational and transcultural investigations through Feng Shui discourse by speaking global English provide an opportunity of dialogue for two or more different cultural subjects in the cultural contact zone of Asian Pacific countries. The various forms of "localized" English spoken in different countries in the global world should be reconsidered as multiple and cultural uses of the so-called "standard" English. The "deviant" uses of "standard" English may make people "rethink the way we look at languages and their relation to identities, geographical locations, discourse, and social practices" (Clark 2). More relevantly, by presenting a transnational conception of English language and interlocking space where different cultures confront with one another as well as a new way of deduction combining old oriental philosophy and western rationality and science, Vittachi makes his readers realize not only the importance of mutual interactions based on the similarities shared by two different cultures but the necessity of respecting and juxtaposing cultural differences to form a global world full of cultural diversities. Most importantly, the reader may perceive ambiguous "cultural insterstices" oscillating under the surface of a homogenizing process of a dominant culture and redefine English for disillusioning the myth of "standard" English. That is the true significance Vittachi aims to reveal in his Feng Shui detective stories.

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