



Influence of residents' place attachment on heritage forest conservation awareness in a peri-urban area of Guangzhou, China

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Ecologically responsible behaviour
Environmental attitude
Feng shui wood
Guangzhou
Heritage forest
Place attachment

ABSTRACT

This study explored the role of community place attachment on heritage forest (feng shui woodland) conservation awareness in the peri-urban areas of Guangzhou. Questionnaire surveys were administered to glean the views of the local residents living near heritage forests. The results suggested that residents' place attachment was significantly associated with positive perceptions, attitudes and ecologically responsible behaviours towards the heritage forests in their community. The findings revealed that traditional and cultural aspects can be an important focus of attention for local residents with higher levels of place attachment, as heritage forests offer not only ecosystem services but also feng shui value—a traditional vernacular belief in South China. This study clearly demonstrated that cultural bonding can be an important element in facilitating the environmental awareness of the local residents regarding heritage forest conservation.

1. Introduction

The scholarship on urban forestry has highlighted the benefits of proximal greenery to urban residents (Lo et al., 2017). As an urban greenery space, heritage forests embody cultural, historical and ecological values and are subject to human influence (Chen et al., 2008). Heritage forests (feng shui woods) situated near villages are commonly found in South China (Chen et al., 2008) and some Asian countries such as Japan and Korea (Chen et al., 2008; Whang and Lee, 2006). These forests play a traditional role in the geographical setting of villages according to “feng shui,” a Chinese philosophical system that harmonizes people with the surrounding environment and that stems primarily from Taoism (Hu et al., 2011; Marafa, 2003). These forests have been treated as sacred places, and thus, many have been preserved for hundreds of years. These forests have played an essential role in providing various ecosystem services—including economic, aesthetic, ecological and cultural—for communities (Hu et al., 2011). These heritage forests have provided various important ecosystem services (Jim and Chen, 2009). They can provide habitats for wildlife, particularly for birds and insects, and offer ecological corridors that link the natural and urban environments (Fang and Peng, 1997). Rich biodiversity has always been recorded in heritage forests, thereby justifying the existence of these green spaces (Chen et al., 2008). Other studies have reported that heritage forests can help improve air quality (Jim and Chen, 2008) and eliminate the urban heat island effect. With the

extremely rapid urbanization in South China, many of these heritage forests are under serious threat from urban development (Marafa, 2003). Capitalising upon the extant body of literature, which focuses on the connection between place attachment and pro-environmental behaviour, this study aims to assess whether an individuals' emotional and cultural attachment to heritage forests can be a predictor of pro-environmental behaviour. The views of the local residents on the conservation of these forests are important to inform local governments as to whether these forests should be destroyed for development.

This study therefore aims to explore residents' environmental attitudes and behaviour towards heritage forests in the suburban area near Guangzhou and to measure the degree of their place attachment. The findings of this study can provide an important reference for the local government in the conservation of heritage forests and inform the formulation of appropriate policies that account for the views of major stakeholders (residents of the local community). In addition, the exploration of the role of residents' place attachment on environmental attitudes and behaviours towards heritage forests can also inform the literature on urban green spaces and forests. Residents' place attachments have not been sufficiently studied to determine whether these attitudes are important determinants of environmental attitudes and behaviour towards the conservation of heritage forests, as these spaces hold a special historical status among the local residents of the community.

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2. Literature review—city forests and place attachment

The literature on urban forestry has highlighted how city forests can become an affective landscape for the local community. As asserted by Cecil Konijnendijk (2008), city forests are more than recreational spaces; rather, they can offer mythical and spiritual experiences. They are also imaginative landscapes on which different psychological responses, including inner peace and emotional attachment, can be solicited. Such an understanding can be linked to the wider body of literature on place attachment.

Essentially, as one form of the sense of place (Shamai, 1991), place attachment refers to “the emotional and psychological connections between people and place” (Walker and Ryan, 2008). The idea of place attachment can be traced back to the mid-1970s, when geographers made intellectual attempts to bring human perceptions into the geographical inquiry of place. According to previous studies, places should not be seen merely as utilitarian spaces for the capitalist process but should be viewed “as scenes of action, as strongholds of resistance, as areas of preservation, as seats of virtue or as nests of vice” (Jorgensen and Stedman, 2001; Raymond et al., 2017). Some scholars have provided a nuanced understanding by arguing that place has its humanistic dimension and that geographers should attend to the importance of emotion and thought when interrogating the practice of place-making (Tuan, 1975). As emphatically noted by Tuan (1975), the sense of place is essentially derived from those every day *in situ* experiences whereby people develop their spatial aspirations, dependence and attachments. Intuition, cognition, and subjectivity thus become central to the geographic inquiry insofar as the practice of place-making is concerned (Entrikin, 1976; Burgess, 1979). Since the 1980s, the concept of the humanistic-psychological understanding of place has been further developed by incorporating temporal elements into the inquiry. While place attachment remains a subjective experience, what should not be overlooked is the historicity of a place, which can in turn evoke a sense of familiarity (Rowntree, 1981). “Temporal” place attachment is also connected to the production of local knowledge whereby people can develop a “thicker” form of attachment with the place (Daniels, 1992). The attention towards the connection between place and people has been further expanded with the ascendancy of the “affective turn”, which concerns how human affects and place-making become co-constitutive (Scannell and Gifford, 2010). Given that place attachment has been tied to different epistemological traditions, it is not surprising that the concept is considered eclectic in its analytical orientation (Williams, 2014; Alawadi, 2017).

To operationalize the idea of place attachment, scholars have developed different analytical frameworks that capture its multidimensionality (Hernandez et al., 2013). This study adopts the analytical framework developed by Ramkissoon et al. (2012), who identified four dimensions of place attachment, namely, place dependence, place identity, place affect and place social bonding. Adopting a “transactional view” between people and place, Stokols and Shumaker (1981) argued that place dependence concerns the extent to which individuals and groups have a functional attachment to a place. In a sense, place dependence can be considered as how far an existing place can satisfy the spatial needs of the people. Place identity concerns how an individual identifies himself/herself “in relation to the physical environment by means of a complex pattern of conscious and unconscious ideas, beliefs, preference, feelings, values, goals, and behavioural tendencies and skills relevant to this environment” (Proshansky, 1978). Place identity acts very often as a “glue of familiarity that binds people to place” (Hull et al., 1994). Place affect concerns how individuals and communities develop their emotional ties with the place. Such ties may be related to historical memories (Marcus, 1992) or public safety (Scannell and Gifford, 2010). Finally, place social bonding refers to the extent to which the place can act as a spatial medium for interpersonal interactions (Hammitt et al., 2009; Mak et al., 2017). In a sense, place social bonding can be likened to the availability of a social network in a

specific place. These four dimensions have a strong impact on the overall degree of place attachment.

Previous research has sought to extend the analysis by looking at the theoretical connection between place attachment and pro-environmental behaviours. As defined by Halpenny (2010), pro-environmental behaviour is “an action by individual or group that promotes or results in the sustainable use of natural resources”. Lee et al. (2013) suggested that pro-environmental behaviours involve not only those behaviours that strive to limit environmental impacts but also other behaviours that can lead to environmental preservation and conservation. Smith-Sebasto and D’Costa (1995) further suggested that pro-environmental behaviours can be categorized into six groups, namely, civic action, education action, financial action, legal action, physical action and persuasive action. From a theoretical perspective, one may come to the intellectual speculation that there is a positive relationship between place attachment and pro-environmental behaviour. Here, the notion of “field of care” from Tuan (1975) is germane to this relationship as it indicates how place attachment gives rise to a sense of care and ethical responsibility. Place attachment is thus likely to elicit positive environmental concerns from individuals living therein. Meanwhile, such a positive relationship has been confirmed by various studies. The study conducted by Vaske and Kobrin (2001), which surveyed the participation of a group of local youth in Colorado, found that place dependence has a significant positive effect on responsible behaviour. Likewise, in the study conducted by Buta et al. (2013), it was found that the level of place attachment “positively contributed to the ascription of self-responsibility for environmental protection”. Cheng et al. (2013), in a study of island tourism in Penghu, also found that place attachment had a direct relationship on environmentally responsible behaviour. Interestingly, the study by Ramkissoon et al. (2013) confirmed that while place affect and place social bonding had significant associations with pro-environmental behaviours, place identity did not exert a significant influence on pro-environmental behaviours. Kyle et al. (2003) also did not demonstrate an association between place dependence and tourists’ support for spending money on environmental protection. However, place attachment has been considered an essential determinant of pro-environmental behaviour in general. Thus, the limited research and contradictory findings regarding the association between place attachment and environmentally responsible behaviour demands further investigation. In addition, limited research was found that accounted for the role of place attachment of local residents in predicting residents’ views towards heritage forests. Here, we attempted to explore the impact of residents’ place attachment on the attitudes and behaviours towards heritage forest conservation in a metropolitan area in South China.

3. Methodology

3.1. Study areas

Guangzhou is the capital city of Guangdong province, which is situated in southern China. Guangzhou, one of the most important cities in South China, is located on the Pearl River and has a population of over 14 million people. Guangzhou is a heritage city with over 2000 years of history and is regarded as the terminus of the Maritime Silk Road (Lee, 2016; Lyu and McCarthy, 2015). Guangzhou has a humid and subtropical climate with an annual average temperature of approximately 21 °C and an average annual precipitation of approximately 1700 mm. The climatic conditions are favourable for the establishment of evergreen broad-leaved rainforests.

Many traditional villages can be found in the peri-urban areas of Guangzhou. However, many of these villages have experienced rapid transformation with urbanization (Du and Li, 2010). These villages have begun to be urbanized due to the improvement of transportation networks, such as the establishment of the subway. While traditional buildings have not been excluded from the urbanization process,

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