

Research on Sense of Place: Theoretical Development and Practical Exploration

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Abstract

This paper systematically reviews the theoretical evolution and research progress of "sense of place" from the perspective of cultural geography, exploring its core connotations, multidimensional structure, and practical value. As a product of human-environment interaction, sense of place encompasses three core dimensions: place identity (cognition of distinctiveness), place attachment (emotional bond), and place dependence (functional connection). Its dynamic and polymorphic nature is highlighted by differences in disciplinary perspectives and among various groups. International research, with an earlier start, features a mature theoretical framework, emphasizes interdisciplinary integration and mixed methodologies (combining qualitative and quantitative approaches), and focuses on the differentiated experiences of groups such as immigrants, residents, and students. It has also expanded into areas like risk perception and historical heritage. Domestic research in China is primarily led by tourism geography, centering on case studies of scenic areas like Jiuzhaigou and Suzhou Gardens. It examines the influence of natural landscapes and place identity on tourism support but exhibits limitations such as insufficient theoretical originality, a narrow range of research subjects, and over-reliance on quantitative methods. Future research needs to strengthen interdisciplinary dialogue, integrating theories from sociology and anthropology to deepen the analysis of cultural embeddedness; innovate methodologies (e.g., big data, ethnography) to capture the impact of virtual spaces in the digital era; extend studies to emerging groups like transnational migrants and urban floating populations; and, based on China's urban-rural dynamics and traditional cultural context, construct localized theoretical frameworks to promote harmonious human-environment relationships and sustainable development.

Keywords

Sense of Place; Cultural Geography; Human-Environment Interaction.

1. Introduction

As a core concept in human geography, "sense of place" reveals the emotional connection and identity formation between people and specific environments[1]. Against the backdrop of accelerated globalization and urbanization, intensified population mobility and frequent local cultural transformations have made research on sense of place crucial for understanding human-environment relationships, fostering community cohesion, and promoting sustainable development.

International research in this field commenced earlier and has developed a mature theoretical framework. It emphasizes interdisciplinary integration and empirical analysis, encompassing the differentiated experiences of diverse groups such as migrants and residents. Domestic research in China, while predominantly led by tourism geography and focused on case studies of scenic areas (e.g., Jiuzhaigou), has elucidated the influence of natural landscapes on place

identity. However, it faces challenges including a lack of theoretical originality and a narrow range of research subjects.

Deepening research on sense of place can both enrich the theoretical understanding of human-environment interactions within a globalized context and provide guidance for practical applications such as urban-rural planning and cultural heritage preservation. Examples include optimizing tourism development strategies, facilitating the social integration of migrants, or exploring the reshaping of sense of place by virtual spaces in the digital era. Therefore, advancing theoretical innovation and methodological integration in this field represents a dual imperative-both academic and practical.

2. The Concept and Dimensions of Sense of Place

2.1. Concept

The term "sense of place" frequently appears in the field of human geography. Relph first proposed that "place consciousness" is a recognition of regional characteristics, a response to such characteristics, and an identity formed through long-term relationships between people and the land. In his book *Topophilia*, Yi-Fu Tuan pointed out that when an individual's "topophilia" reaches an intense degree, the locality and environment become the primary medium for emotional experiences [2]. Sense of Place refers to the comprehensive emotional experience formed by individuals or groups in a specific geographical environment, including feelings of belonging, identity, and emotional attachment. It is essentially a product of human-place interaction, encompassing both the perception of physical environmental features (such as architecture and natural landscapes) and the shaping of emotional bonds through personal experiences, cultural backgrounds, and social relationships[3]. Place often implies the existence of "home," representing a repository of beautiful memories and significant achievements that provide individuals with a stable sense of security and belonging[4]. Furthermore, different disciplines offer varying definitions. For example, environmental psychologist Canter (1974) defined it as a unity of activities, conceptual evaluations, and physical attributes, while Altman and Low (1992) emphasized the interaction between emotion and cognition.

2.2. Dimensions

Sense of place is a complex multidimensional construct, and there exist different views on its internal dimensions, generally categorized into 2 to 6 dimensions. Various researchers have explored the dimensions of sense of place, with concepts including: place attachment, place identity, place dependence, place meaning, satisfaction, belongingness, sense of security, rootedness, community sentiment, neighborhood relations, environment and health, social connections, and adaptability to place[5]. In their review of international progress on sense of place, Sheng&Yang[5] (2015) pointed out that when studying urban migrants, tourists, property owners, or the general public's sense of place toward residential cities, tourist destinations, or specific projects, it is more often divided into three dimensions: place attachment, place identity, and place dependence. When examining community sense of place, dimensions such as community belonging, community rootedness, and neighborhood relations are more commonly used. When studying people's sense of place toward the environment, dimensions like satisfaction with the environment, rootedness, belongingness, sense of security, and adaptability are more frequently applied. When investigating the influence of specific projects, physical environments, or social environments on sense of place, a two-dimensional structure (such as place attachment and satisfaction) is often employed.

Generally, sense of place includes three core dimensions: place identity, place attachment, and place dependence. Place Identity manifests as an individual's cognitive recognition of the uniqueness of a place, including sensory experiences (such as visual symbols), emotional

resonance (such as nostalgia), and reflections on the authenticity of the place[6]. For instance, Wang Hongyan (2019) suggested that tourists' perception of the characteristics of a destination reinforces their place identity[7]. Place Attachment emphasizes emotional connections, such as feelings of security, comfort, and belonging. This attachment accumulates through long-term interaction and may evolve into "place ballet" (the harmonious interaction between daily behaviors and the environment) [8]. Place Dependence focuses on functional connections, where individuals rely on a place due to specific resources or functional needs [9].

In summary, sense of place is a dynamic concept integrating emotion, cognition, and function. Its connotations exhibit diversity due to disciplinary perspectives, application contexts, and group differences. Understanding its complexity and dynamism is significant for promoting harmonious human–place relationships, cultural heritage preservation, and urban–rural planning.

3. Research Status

3.1. International Research Status

Research on sense of place abroad started relatively early, and both theoretical and methodological studies have matured, yielding fruitful results.

Early international studies on sense of place focused on spatial and local differences, often examining sense of place in different regions such as rural, urban, and suburban areas. In recent years, there has been increasing attention on sense of place among different subjects. For instance, Larson et al., using Australia's Great Barrier Reef as a case study, investigated the sense of place among surrounding residents and explored its impact on their attitudes toward the natural environment[10]. Gallina et al., through a study comparing sense of place between immigrants and local residents in Canada, found that locals exhibited a higher sense of place than immigrants, and factors such as gender, income, and length of residence also influenced sense of place[11]. Leah, taking southwestern Africa as a case study, analyzed the relationship between education and students' sense of place, observing that students' sense of place tended to strengthen after each semester of coursework[12]. In Gross's study on tourists' sense of place in a southern Australian tourist area, it was suggested that local tourism authorities should adopt appropriate measures to enhance tourists' place attachment given their currently weak sense of place[13].

Early international research on sense of place primarily employed qualitative methods, exemplified by humanistic geographers such as Yi-Fu Tuan, who contributed to the theoretical construction of sense of place. Main research methods included in-depth interviews, telephone interviews, participatory observation, photography, and visual materials. With the quantitative revolution in geography and the deepening of sense of place research, international scholars have increasingly relied on model construction and scale measurement to study specific issues such as the intensity and relationships of sense of place. For example, Jorgensen and Stedman constructed a sense of place measurement model to assess participants' attitudinal structures, based on awareness, cognition, and behavior related to place[14]. Deutsch et al. used survey questionnaires and structural equation modeling to compare differences in tourists' sense of place between two shopping centers in different locations in Santa Barbara[15]. In recent years, integrated qualitative and quantitative research has emerged as a new trend. Combining these approaches helps compensate for the limitations of each method, enabling both overall evaluation to understand the rich connotations of sense of place and individual-level analysis for in-depth exploration of specific themes, thereby enhancing the persuasiveness of research findings. For instance, Qian et al. employed methods such as in-depth interviews and structural equation modeling to study the characteristics of sense of place among migrants in communities and urban areas in Guangzhou[16]. Venables et al. utilized household interviews

and linear regression analysis to investigate the sense of place of residents living near different nuclear power plants in the United Kingdom and their perceptions of risk[17].

Furthermore, international applied research on sense of place emphasizes interdisciplinary integration, drawing from fields such as tourism studies, geography, environmental psychology, and sociology. For example, Durie et al. examined Scottish culture, people, and landscapes from a historical perspective and constructed a sense of place for Scotland across four dimensions[18]. Ryan et al. studied international students from Singapore and Australia in Australia and Singapore, respectively, focusing on their place attachment processes and adaptation to natural and social environments[19]. Twigger applied quantitative models to study residents' perceptions and attitudes toward their residential environments, finding that residents' place attachment significantly influenced their views. Those with a strong sense of place attachment tended to give positive evaluations of their living environment, while those without such attachment often expressed neutral or negative opinions[20].

3.2. Current Status of Domestic Research

Domestic research on the sense of place has a relatively short history, yet it has developed rapidly since the concept was introduced into China. In terms of theoretical construction, domestic efforts have primarily focused on introducing and analyzing the concept, with no significant theoretical breakthroughs achieved thus far. Furthermore, research within China is predominantly concentrated in disciplines such as tourism studies, sociology, and geography. Methodologically, domestic research relies mainly on quantitative and case studies, with quantitative research largely involving the adaptation and application of foreign scales, indicating a relative lack of methodological diversity. Finally, research hotspots are centered on applied tourism studies, with the main subjects being residents, tourists, and migrants. For instance, Tang Wenyue et al. (2007) employed questionnaires and quantitative models to study tourists' sense of place at Jiuzhaigou, finding that its natural landscape was the primary factor fostering emotional place attachment among visitors[21]. Xu Zhenxiao (2009) constructed a theoretical model of the influence path between residents' sense of place and their support for tourism development, based on five structural variables including sense of place, tourism development expectations, and perceived benefits from tourism. An empirical study in Jiuzhaigou revealed that residents' sense of place enhanced their support for tourism development through the mediating role of development expectations[9]. Scholars such as Su Qin et al. (2012), taking the Classical Gardens of Suzhou as a case study, explored the antecedent variables and consequential effects on tourists' sense of place by introducing variables like tourism involvement, tourism attractiveness, attitudes towards heritage conservation, and heritage conservation behaviors [22]. Additionally, Yin Lijie et al. (2012) designed a questionnaire to measure the sense of place from the two dimensions of place identity and place dependence, and constructed a theoretical model of "sense of place – development expectations – impact perceptions" to study the sense of place among residents in Tiantangzhai, Anhui Province[23]. Li Yicong (2014), from a stakeholder perspective and using the Mount Sanqingshan Scenic Area as the research subject, constructed a structural equation model to explore the influencing mechanisms among residents' sense of place, their perceptions of tourism impacts, and resident satisfaction[24]. Dong Xuewang et al. (2018), based on a tourist experience perspective, conducted a comparative analysis of tourists' sense of place in the Dongzha and Xizha sections of the ancient town, attempting to explore the potential for replicating the Wuzhen model elsewhere. The results indicated that the Wuzhen model faces contradictions between development and preservation, possesses strong cultural embeddedness, and thus careful consideration of local constraints is required for its replication in other locations [25].

Furthermore, regarding research on the influencing factors of the sense of place in China, studies can be categorized into those focusing on individual internal factors and external environmental factors. Individual internal factors mainly include gender, age, occupation, education level, and length of residence. For example, Jin Ruwei et al. (2017), in their study on new rural migrants, argued that differences in age, education level, and income level lead to variations in their sense of place[26]. Subsequently, Zhu Hong et al. (2016), in their original research on the sense of place among migrants in urban villages in Guangzhou, found gender differences, with women exhibiting a weaker sense of place than men, both in the urban villages and in their hometowns[27]. External environmental factors include physical environmental factors such as the residential environment and place characteristics. For instance, Song Zongyuan et al. (2022), using methods like in-depth interviews and questionnaires to study the sense of place among African migrants in Guangzhou, found that the material and resource environment contributed to the formation of a positive sense of place among migrants[28]. Social environmental factors include social belonging and community participation. For example, Bao Jigang et al. (2012), through case analysis, found that changes in tourism commercialization could lead to transformations in residents' place attachment[29], while Xiao Xiao (2012) suggested that the socio-cultural atmosphere is a major factor influencing tourists' emotional attachment[30].

4. Conclusion

Research on "sense of place," both domestically and internationally, has established a certain framework, yet disparities persist in theoretical depth and practical application. International studies, with an earlier start, exhibit greater maturity in theoretical construction and methodology, characterized by interdisciplinary approaches and multidimensional exploration. The research perspective has shifted from the philosophical reflections of early scholars like Yi-Fu Tuan and Edward Relph towards empirical analysis, emphasizing the integration of qualitative and quantitative methods. For instance, Gross's quantitative study on tourists' sense of place and Larson's qualitative analysis of residents' environmental attitudes demonstrate the diversity of research methodologies. Furthermore, international scholars focus on group differences (e.g., immigrants, students) and their mechanisms of interaction with the environment, attempting to reveal the internal structure of sense of place through model construction (e.g., Jorgensen's measurement model). Their research extends beyond urban and rural spaces to areas such as risk perception and historical heritage, highlighting the inclusiveness and broad applicability of sense of place theory.

In contrast, although domestic research has developed rapidly, it has yet to break free from the path dependence of "introduction and verification." Research primarily concentrates within tourism geography, often using case studies of scenic areas like Jiuzhaigou and Suzhou Gardens to explore the relationship between the sense of place of tourists or residents and tourism development. For example, scholars such as Tang Wenyue and Xu Zhenxiao have employed structural equation modeling to verify the impact of natural landscapes and place identity on tourism support, providing an empirical foundation for localized research. However, theoretical innovation remains insufficient domestically. Scale development often relies on adapted foreign frameworks, and research subjects are mostly limited to groups like tourists and immigrants, with less attention paid to emerging subjects such as urban floating populations or cross-cultural groups. Methodologically, quantitative approaches dominate, lacking in-depth qualitative exploration. Consequently, the emotional dimensions and cultural contexts of sense of place are often simplified into variable relationships.

Future research needs to seek breakthroughs in the following directions: First, strengthen interdisciplinary dialogue, integrating theories from sociology and anthropology to deepen the

analysis of the cultural embeddedness and dynamic nature of sense of place. Second, innovate research methods by combining approaches like big data analysis and ethnography to capture the manifestations of sense of place in the digital age (e.g., the impact of WeChat usage on the sense of place among migrant youth). Third, expand the scope of research subjects, focusing on the reconstruction of sense of place among groups such as transnational migrants and virtual communities within the context of globalization. Fourth, emphasize theoretical originality by extracting the localized connotations of sense of place from China's unique urban-rural relations and traditional culture. This will advance research on sense of place at both theoretical and practical levels, ultimately promoting harmonious human-environment relationships and sustainable development.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declare that he have no conflict of interest.

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