

YI FU TUAN: A SENSE OF DIRECTION

S1 EPISODE 3 TRANSCRIPT 1/24/21

Yi Fu:

"I mean, I liked them. They have made my life pleasant, but somehow all of it, they seem indifferent. Okay. You could be gone. We're going to be here, and so there's the sudden awareness that ultimately one doesn't matter at all, not even to one's furniture."

Nina:

I'm Nina Freedman. And this is WHEREING. WHEREING explores where we are. It is dedicated to those who believe in the inherent right of belonging and all the ways we feel we belong and connect, to ourselves to each other, and the spaces that hold the stories where all of this comes alive....where each experience of belonging is a work of art, created by chance or by design. Dare I ask: Is belonging where you are, not what matters most? WHEREING is the spatial story. Welcome.

Nina:

In the week of his 90th birthday, I spoke to Yi Fu Tuan, a Chinese scholar and philosopher. His family migration from China to Australia as a result of the Chinese famine in the 1940s, was the beginning of a lifelong nomadic experience. Yi Fu now lives in the American heartland and is a Professor Emeritus of the University of Wisconsin, Madison. He invented the phrase 'humanist geography' as a way to explore how geography reveals the quality of awareness. He writes about the contradiction of space and place as the necessary tension of the human experience for both adventure and movement, and then, for safety and pause. Educated at the university of Oxford England, and then at the University of California in Berkeley, his lifelong work intertwines a love of landscape with the philosophical questions of existence. Among the long list of his books are *Humanist Geography, Space and Place, Landscapes of Fear, Morality and Imagination, Passing strange and wonderful, Place, Art and Self, Human Goodness*, and more.

Nina:

You have been known as a deep explorer of humanist geography. Did you actually invent that word?

Yi Fu:

Pretty much. I mean, there's always been human geography, but humanist geography refers to what concerns us more deeply as humans.

Nina:

I was doing some readings of your books, and fascinating, really, really inspiring. You explain humanist geography as this path to self-discovery and understanding one's place in the world and that this kind of, "who am I" question very much ties into the, "where am I" question. You were asked many times in your life: why did you choose to be a geographer? And I found your answers to be very interesting. If you'll indulge me, I want to read from your autobiography written in 1999.

Nina:

You say *"I have always had an inordinate fear of losing my way. Life with no sense of direction is drained of purpose. So even as a child, I concluded that I had to be a geographer, so as to ensure I would never be disoriented."* And then you go on to explain this idea, and you reference the American town. The patterns in the streets - there's a geometry in a recognizable grid, that seems to say, "Welcome stranger." You see the purity of it. And there's a sense of orientation. Do you want to speak to this idea?

Yi Fu:

Well, orientation, that's eminently geographical, yeah. But I came to this country as a student. And I immediately found that Americans admire the European towns (Italian) with its winding streets, and so American towns seem pretty boring. And I disagreed with that. I said, as a stranger, newcomer, it's just the opposite. When I was in Europe, I found the Italian towns very unfriendly, because I never knew where I was, all these steep, winding streets. In American towns, I could find my way immediately, because it's very clearly structured. I mean, even now I live on West Main Street. West, North, South, so that's good for me. "Welcome, welcome stranger."

YI FU TUAN: A SENSE OF DIRECTION

S1 EPISODE 3 TRANSCRIPT 1/24/21

Nina:

The arc of your experience has centered so much on education and learning and teaching, which I believe you did for about 40 years. You still continue to do that by writing. But school has always been very, very central to you. And in fact, you wrote that you belonged in school. It was like your place of belonging, in a way. You were maybe always this nomadic scholar: you were born in China, followed by Sydney, Australia, and Oxford in England, then America to Berkeley, and various universities in America, Canada. Now, your home, where you are living now in Madison, Wisconsin, interestingly, was a former school, which is a wonderful circle to this whole story. And I love the story of how you selected this apartment, this home. Do you want to tell it?

Nina:

I was looking for a condo. But Madison in 1983, didn't have one. One was being converted and that was called the Doty School. So I went there when they were still converting it. And when I entered, I immediately liked the interior, the tall ceiling, the big windows. You know, I lived in apartments, cubicles, pretty much all my adult life. So this is a change. But what really made me decide in favor of it was that the workman was leaning out of the window. He was relaxing, and he was smoking, and I smelled the smoke and that decided me. My parents smoked; that signified glamour, sophistication.

Nina:

Yeah. And how you explain your home, it's almost like you were living in an intellectual salon. Where people would come and have conversations with your parents, and then the cigarettes would come out, and you would even help distribute the cigarettes. And so, what you imagined in this home in Madison was a romanticized view of potential social possibilities.

Yi Fu:

Right. Yes. Because as a child, I knew something was going on, because mother will get all dressed up, and the lights will be on in the dining room, but we were told to go to bed.

But of course I didn't always go to bed. I would track down and peep inside, and lo and behold, there was this magical world of adults, world of sophistication, wrapped in smoke, cigarette smoke.

Nina:

It's a beautiful image.

Yi Fu:

Yeah. So, the glamor of the city has always had an appeal to me. It's not just the home, but on the other side, is this larger world,

Nina:

The larger world. Yeah. Beautiful.

In 1977, you wrote your, probably most known work. You have written so many books, but in the book *Space and Place*, one starts to see this kind of exploration or comfort or discomfort with contradictions. You define space as adventure, openness, freedom, danger, a little bit. And you define place, something more stable and safe, nurturing, and not necessarily fixed, but rooted. Space is movement, and place is pause. And I thought that was beautiful because you said we are attached to one, but we long for the other. And this is the tension of the human experience for everyone. I think some people might choose to live in a much more stable way. And some people want to be more adventurous, but there's always this tension, and it's like the breath, really, of life. That's what you're talking about. We have to breathe out and breathe in. One cannot exist, right, without the other. I'm curious, these contradictions, right? If you could speak a little bit more about that, it appears in a lot of your work.

Yi Fu:

Right. All my adult life, I taught college students, but only once I was invited to a middle school to give a talk on *Space and Place*. It's a special environment day, where instead of regular classes, the middle school students

YI FU TUAN: A SENSE OF DIRECTION

S1 EPISODE 3 TRANSCRIPT 1/24/21

were given an offering that they can pick. One was a trip to a cinema that was showing a giant screen of nature. And another was a boat trip on Lake Mendota. But one of the offerings for that day was a talk by an Asian professor, me, on space and place. So I went to school; in front, children were piling up to school buses to go to one of these places. And I went to the classroom assigned to me, and there was nobody there. And finally two students came in and said, "Well, none of my friends are coming to your class. So I thought I would come just to keep you company." Seven turned up. So that was enough for me to give my talk on space and place. So, I didn't have maps or any of that. And I was trying to get the basic idea. So I said, now space is what's called "there." I mean, some of your friends are out in space and there are enjoying themselves. Oh, but there's the risk in space. On the other hand, I said, there's place. I mean, something that's familiar to you and that's safe. For instance, the classroom, I mean, this is your familiar place. On the other hand, it lacks adventure. It's kind of boring, isn't it? And there's shelter. Yes!

But then I went on to say, but nonetheless, why do you learn about the meaning of space and place, in this boring classroom, that we are intellectually exploring what it means to be in space and in place? As you correctly said, I've been playing with the space and place theme all my life. And my intense interest in it goes beyond geography, but it's somewhat related to it in this way. So place is not enough for me. Place is a sort of nurture and comfort. It also needs the big world of sight.

Nina:
And you want both?

Yi Fu:
Yes.

Nina:
You have said that, "Unlike most geographies, my landscapes are my 'inscapes.'" And there's the landscape of the earth and the landscape of the self. Can you share your understanding about landscape? I'd love to hear your viewpoint on this.

Yi Fu:
I'm glad you mentioned that, because it gives me an opportunity to boast! And that is, I think it was in 1985, I received the Cullum Medal from the American Geographical Society. The American Geographical Society gave the first Cullum Medal to Robert Perry for going to the North Pole. In 1984, I was the last one to be given that, but I didn't go to the North Pole! I didn't go to even much of a physical landscape! I was going inside. 'Inscape.' Yes, it's all inside the head. All I did was sit in my chair and think. But also, the mental world, in a way, is larger.

Nina:
I know you've been thinking a lot about landscapes recently. I was wondering if you wanted to talk about that.

Yi Fu:
Yes, I just had the conference. It was, you know, in honor of my ninetieth birthday. It was a marvelous occasion. The basic notion of landscape - it only came about when society has reached a certain level of development. When people lived in houses, take a ranch house, for example. That's typical. The front is the living room, and there's this picture window, and you look out and there is a view. When I was a new student to this part of the world, I was invited to American families with friends. And when we walked indoors, I found all of my American friends would gravitate toward the picture window and admire the view and I thought, "Well, isn't that rude? Shouldn't you be admiring the living room? How can you walk right to the picture window and look outside?" And then I realized that my American friends were admiring the prospect from the window, it's not just some space. It's future. Your future. The word prospect has double meaning: both a visual entity and your future. So when my friends stood at the picture window, they were hinting that the owner of the house has a good prospect.

YI FU TUAN: A SENSE OF DIRECTION

S1 EPISODE 3 TRANSCRIPT 1/24/21

So that's one thing. The other thing is that at the back of the house, there's usually a backyard as Americans know. And the backyard is fenced in, but it's much less formal. This is where the word landscape come in. Landscape, it says two parts separated by the house, so to speak. In the back is "land." Land is a bounded unit, it refers to a communal space. And that's captured by the backyard. It's not for showing off, it's communal, it's where the family and friends gather. So the backyard of the American home is like the land.

The front of the house is this formal landscape. And that's the "scape" side. I mean, the word landscape. Land scape. Scape means the formal part of the space in front of the house. That's your prospect. What I'm getting at is that landscape is divided in these three ways, and each of the three has a kind of moral meaning. So the moral, the ethical meaning of the backyard or land is community. In the middle is this house, and the virtue there is social. It's where you, you put on your better dress and act politely to friends that come. The front yard, the view and the prospect is your intellectual reach. So, if I say that this is our intellectual virtue, so landscape is not only these three units of fiscal entity, but has moral meaning: the communal, the social, and if you'd like, the intellectual. Landscape, the word captures all of them.

Nina:

So much of what you say circles back around to the idea, when we talk about prospects, potential is another way to talk about that. The intellectual reach. And one thing I was reading about, which was also somewhat ironic, where you talk about what being good is. There was a phrase that you suspected that being good could be bad for one's health. And then you, you proceed to define this, and you talk about it in terms of a good life and what is a good place. That a good place, which maybe, is a right landscape, is about the human striving and the ability to reach potential, right? Which is actually in what you're discussing here, tied to this idea of landscape, because in this house, you talk about three parts. But they all contribute to this idea of the inner and the outer, the 'inscape' and the landscape, the adventure of space, the idea of prospect and intellectual potential. Yeah. Is that true, what I'm saying?

Yi Fu:

Yes it is. It's also a self discovery. It's possible that I'd never left China. I could have lived in this town for the rest of my life. And I would be adapted to it and my sense of identity, it would be strong and all that. But interestingly, I thought that if I had not moved out of China, I would have missed something about myself. And so I discovered this deep sense of self. It was, as I explained in my autobiography, when I woke up - I was in Death Valley. It was three in the morning, in the dark and it was a dust storm, I couldn't see a thing. So I just got into my sleeping bag. And when I woke up, I was looking across the Death Valley, and it was just an astonishing view. I've never seen anything like it. Well, anyone would be impressed. But I wasn't just impressed in that way, in the usual way. I certainly recognize myself feeling it, that there's something in me that corresponds to that desert scene. I would not have discovered this aspect of myself if I had never left China. I would have totally accepted, you know, what I got there, but this notion that there's something of the desert in my 'inscape,' that's part of my being.

Nina:

And also these unexpected moments.

Yi Fu:

Yeah, right. That's another thing. I'm so impressed by how chance played through in my life. In so many important ways. I mean it does for everyone's life, but we don't think about it. I could have become a distinguished architect.

Laughter

YI FU TUAN: A SENSE OF DIRECTION

S1 EPISODE 3 TRANSCRIPT 1/24/21

Nina:

Building in the sand dunes! And something you do say is when you think about designers, that they really need to think about what places can be planned and what cannot. And you talk about human encounter, that is unplanned. Right?

Yi Fu:

Right.

Nina:

But this happens as the question about design as well. Maybe the things we just don't need to touch.

Yi Fu:

Yes. Well, there are things that go beyond the physical.

Nina:

As you said, you've just celebrated your 90th birthday. And I'm wondering if you're seeing a new perspective or even a relationship to your home, which will hopefully continue to be your home.

I'm wondering how you feel about this process, and maybe it's not only today. It's aging, it happens all along. Can you speak about that in relation to place and the process of aging and the insights that you have because you've worked on Space and Place, for so long, it must be a different kind of 'inscape' now.

Yi Fu:

You know, the human warmth I encountered, and that's so important. And that makes it home. I had a shock of recognition a couple of years ago, when I thought that I was having a heart attack. I had this pain, three in the morning. So I pressed something that calls up the maintenance guy. And he came up - then he left me, you know. The ambulance would come anytime. I looked around and I was, frankly, scared. I said, you know, I could die. But what made me so abandoned was that I couldn't see even friendliness in the furniture I bought. I mean, I bought them. I liked them. They have made my life pleasant, but somehow, they seem indifferent. Okay. You could be gone. We're going to be here, and so the sudden awareness that ultimately one doesn't matter at all, not even to one's furniture.

Nina:

You lost trust in your furniture?

Yi Fu:

Yeah. Right! Because I mean, they've been supportive. They're comforting. Suddenly they're just blank, but at that moment there was a lot of clutter of feet and that's the ambulance guy. Suddenly I was reinserted into a caring world. And I, I felt all okay. Even if I conk out now, you know, it's great to have all of these people come in to help total strangers, hovering over me.

Nina:

Wonderful.

Is there anything else?

Yi Fu:

Maybe this thing, although it sounds rather peculiar and that is, the wonder of existence - that something exists or doesn't. I mean, that there was this big bang and later, there's this, little planet earth, and eventually human intelligence develops. And that intelligence includes Einstein, this extraordinary brain that can understand so much of the universe. So, that's remarkable. Everyone would think so.

YI FU TUAN: A SENSE OF DIRECTION

S1 EPISODE 3 TRANSCRIPT 1/24/21

But that's not what I have in mind, when I talk about what seemed to be the miracle of existence. It's not the existence of Einstein that is inspiring. It's the existence of Yi Fu, who likes waffles for breakfast! *Laughter* I mean, this really happened. I mean, I really exist and I really did eat waffles! That to me is what's really extraordinary, at what seems to me now just ordinary, even trivial. But it happens. It happens.

Nina:

I'm going to circle back. You speak about individuality and originality, as something that is spontaneous, and it's tied to freedom and finding one's own way, which is how we began today. Talking about humanist geography is finding one's own way. I would like to read from your book which brings this all together.

Nina:

"I was alone driving west late, well, past midnight across the sparsely settled landscapes of Nebraska. My car, and another one ahead, were the only two on the narrow highway. We kept each other company. I was never a confident driver, least of all in the dark. So I appreciated the front car's taillights, which guided me and made me feel safe. Just when I was beginning to take my companion for granted, his right turn signal started to flicker. A friendly gesture, I thought, but also regrettable, because I was going to be left to myself. The car turned into a country lane. Henceforth, I had only my own headlights to show me the way."

Nina:

Dear listeners. Thank you for being here. I invite you to reflect on what you've heard today and send your thoughts or stories. We would love to hear from you. Stay in touch on Facebook, Instagram, or on our website, thewhereing.com. Subscribe free to WHEREING wherever you get your podcasts so that you are alerted when the next episode airs. WHEREING is a pro bono initiative of Dreamland Creative Projects, which provides architectural and interior design services for the places where we live, heal, age, and inspire. If you wish to have a design consultation, visit dreamlandcreativeprojects.com or email me at nina@dreamlandcreativeprojects.com.

Until we meet again, goodbye from WHEREING.