

Mellon Seminar (Spring 2015): The Public Practice of Immigrant and Minority Religion in Southern California

Topic:

How to Contextualize Hsi Lai Temple in Los Angeles Landscape

Graduate Student:

Shou Jen Kuo, Ph.D. Candidate, Department of Religious Studies, UC Riverside

This paper aims to contextualize one of the major immigrant religious places in Los Angeles region called Hsi Lai Temple (a.k.a. HLT) for further ethnographic investigation. This Asian Buddhist temple is constructed in 1988 by Fo Guang Shan monastic order from Taiwan as its missionary headquarters in western hemisphere. Standing on the hillside abutting a busy county highway, HLT's visibility is undeniable (Fig. 1). It catches people's attention through its exotic architecture and grand size. The pause of eyes at HLT is time enough to create an image of religious place that weaves people's affective and cognitive experience together to a part of Los Angeles landscape in their mind.

While religious studies scholars have shown interest in religious place as a category of analysis, many of them continue the discussion around Mircea Eliade's conception of sacred space and Emile Durkheim's theories of sacred-profane dichotomy. David Chidester and Edward T. Linenthal in their edited essay collection of *American Sacred Space* provide three dominant themes in contemporary scholarship in studying sacred space.<sup>1</sup> Sacred space is a constructed arena for performing religious rituals and reinforcing political or social authority. It also provides orientation for understanding individual's standpoint within a meaningful cosmos. Lastly, sacred space involves power dynamic to contest its ownership.

Here my discussion of HLT extends the conception of sacredness beyond this traditional unit of analysis on space. I try to attend to the dynamic of making HLT to be an immigrant

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<sup>1</sup> DeRogatis, Amy. 2003. *Moral Geography: Maps, Missionaries, and the American Frontier*. New York: Columbia University Press. p.8.

religious place on a changing and contested Los Angeles landscape. In one respect I am planning to forge a new framework for defining HLT as an indivisible part of the sacred landscape in Los Angeles that can be understood precisely in relation to other parts, much as the significance of any religious symbol can only be understood through its relation to other symbols shown within the same occasion. In doing so, I place a much-needed context in spatial term in the approach forged by many scholars who attempt to develop universal models of immigrant religion that more often view its place of worship and other gatherings as an autonomous subject than a indivisible component of American landscape. Specifically, I am asking what particular features of HLT are seen in Los Angeles landscape, physically and religio-culturally, from a native viewpoint. What expressive actions in local caused by this native viewpoint have conditioned the making of HLT in its early stage of development?

There are many theories of defining “landscape” in current scholarship, and I do not intend to make a comprehensive review here. I would take American Geographer Yi-Fu Tuan’s humanistic perspective of landscape to perceive the development of Los Angeles landscape.<sup>2</sup> Landscape in Tuan’s view, is a reality “out there.” Although it is made up of individual objects, a landscape like Los Angeles region cannot to be defined by itemizing its components respectively. The spatial relation or order among these individual parts tell one snapshot of what we see Los Angeles today on the ground. In addition, the change of landscape is a construct of human thought and action to manifest people’s spatial conception of cosmic order and organization. In this regard, the history of Los Angeles’s land development is a spatial practice of local residents’ thought on how to make their land fit their worldview in a temporal perspective.

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<sup>2</sup> See Tuan, Yi-Fu. 1979. “Thought and Landscape: The Eye and the Mind’s Eye” in D. W. Meinig, eds. *The Interpretation of Ordinary Landscape*. New York, Oxford University Press. pp. 89-102.

Therefore, in this paper I start with a brief review of the land development history of Los Angeles. It certainly involves a continuous process of public and private endeavors to shape Los Angeles look like today. Next I bring in the event of HLT's construction application in early 1980s to further explore the dynamic of contested landscape in Los Angeles. The confrontation between Taiwanese Buddhist developer and local residents in such land development case would serve an interesting showcase to reveal the sacred landscape in Los Angeles in native mind. The zoning code as weapon and Board of County Supervisor meeting as field to stand against the construction of one Buddhist temple in community would be deemed the protection action of existing spatial order in thought, and final modification of approved construction plan would indicate the action to alter such order and add a new image of immigrant religious place in native mind to continuously perceive their Los Angeles sacred landscape.

#### From Mexican Pueblo to American Suburb

Southern California is a unique place in American mind. With its diverse cultural heritages, old and new ingredients of fields and buildings are syncretized by generations of human thought and action in its 250 years of land-use history.<sup>3</sup> Started in 1781 as an agricultural pueblo located at the bank of current Los Angeles River close to present day City Hall, *el pueblo de Nuestra Señora la Reina de Los Angeles* (the village of Our Lady the Queen of the Angeles) was found by the governor of Spanish California Felipe de Neve. Soon this small pueblo, which functioned as the foodstuff supply station for nearby military presidio and the Mission San

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<sup>3</sup> Two scholar works are referenced in this paper to describe the land development history of Los Angeles. Robert M. Fogelson in his *The Fragmented Metropolis: Los Angeles, 1850-1930* (1967. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press) provides a rich detail of Los Angeles before the WWII in a historical context. Michael J. Dear also supplies a unique profile of Los Angeles development from a urban planning perspective in his *The Postmodern Urban Condition* (2000. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers).

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Gabriel, prospered beyond Spanish government's expectation and ranked first in size among Mexican California settlement in the 1830s.

After the control of California passed from Spain to Mexico in 1822, the governmental ordinances of regulating settlement pattern were also redefined. Los Angeles departed from a tiny royal farmland and became the vast open land that invited Mexican citizens to move in, receive land title and develop it. Consequently, hundreds of private proprietors, known as rancheros, owned nearly all Los Angeles's arable and pasture land before the time of the Mexican-American War (1846-48). Due to the limited water supply and dry weather, the intensive cultivation was discouraged. Normally each individual rancho was divided into three functional zones: sprawling haciendas on which the rancheros built their residential hall; nearby vineyards and crop fields; and surrounding with larger chunk of land as pasture for the cattle.

Under American control, the atmosphere of "rancho" life style, economic autonomy and social self-sufficiency, still dominated Los Angeles landscape. "Yankee" American town of Los Angeles was surrounded by hundreds of segregated ranchos where many affluent residents were attracted to build comfort house and settle their household within Southern California's unique climate. At the same time the old residential neighborhoods, business districts and manufacturing areas in town were left behind to the poor and the ethnic minority groups for living ghettos. This outward-moving pattern was intensified by the introduction of street-cable railway in late nineteenth century and of automobile in early twentieth century. The endlessly expanding street and highway network enabled affluent families finding clean and quiet home outside the developed area. Living in distanced and aesthetic rancho setting with a single-family house that stood on a clear-designated lot became a social status that primarily belonged to the white and higher-income sects of Los Angeles population.

Between 1880 and 1932, Los Angeles grew from a town of 10,000 people covering roughly 29 square miles to a metropolis with 1.2 million people living in a territory of 442 square miles.<sup>4</sup> Such expansion is facilitated by the hegemony of local business interest that looked for real estate speculation to produce fast pace of growth. To convert rancho properties to building lots, private enterprise controlled the extension of domestic water, street railways, and public utilities to take the lead. As a result, the expansion of Los Angeles landscape always followed public infrastructure projects like “Shoestring Addition” in 1906, which annexed land tracts between Los Angeles and San Pedro and Wilmington and to build the Port of Los Angeles thereafter.<sup>5</sup>

Beside the land form of segregated communities with single-family lot clusters, which was configured along with original rancho property line, the private enterprise on real estate development also defined the homogenous character of each community block by exercising deed restriction. Originally functioning as marketing technique to promise certain life style within community, private developer and realtor established a variety of restrictions for potential buyer to purchase subdivided lot. Such restriction often corresponded not only to the prevailing image of the good community, which excluded races other than native white and classes other than middle, but also enclosed ethnic minorities to undesirable districts subdivided exclusively for them, such as Watts in South Los Angeles.<sup>6</sup> Later each community formed various types of homeowner association to continue these established deed restrictions in the name of

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<sup>4</sup> Dear, p. 103.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. p. 104.

<sup>6</sup> Fogelson, p.200.

“community interest,” such as forbidding owners to improve lots for non-residential purpose and to build on them other than single-family house.<sup>7</sup>

Such real estate interest was further sanctioned by the land-use planning apparatus in government. Los Angeles was the first in the United States to introduce zoning code to separate residential and industrial land use in 1904.<sup>8</sup> Unlike other cities where public planning officials and private developers frequently became stand-off, land-use planners in Los Angeles always had business ethos in mind. As Fogelson recorded, one planning practitioner perceived that “A city plan should be prepared from the economic standpoint first, the social or human standpoint second, and the aesthetic standpoint last, ..... not in the reverse order.”<sup>9</sup> In this regard, the burgeoning land-use planning mechanism in early twentieth century was promptly pre-configured by real estate interest and provided the power of shaping the spatial order and organization in Los Angeles landscape.

Accordingly, the spatial arrangement of church lot in Los Angeles landscape is significantly different from other metropolitan region in the United States. Geographer D. W. Meinig argues that a mature nation like the United States has its symbolic landscape to represent nationhood and to evoke people’s memory and feelings which bind them together.<sup>10</sup> Such landscapes are perceived as being a particular place rather than a precise building like the White House or locality like Plymouth. Like in New England village landscape, the marker is always a slender steeple above a white wooden church that is surrounded by green common and houses. Clearly, church building is the focus point in a typical New England style of American spiritual

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid. p. 248.

<sup>8</sup> Dear, p. 105.

<sup>9</sup> Fogelson, p. 249.

<sup>10</sup> Meinig, D. W. 1979. “Symbolic Landscapes: Some Idealizations of American Communities.” In D. W. Meinig, eds. *The Interpretation of Ordinary Landscape*. pp. 164-192.

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landscape. Another typical American landscape in people's mind is Main Street of Middle America. Here a street, lined with low- or high-rise business building blocks, represent the components of business America. The typical order is the storefront and bank on the first level, and the professional offices of lawyers, doctors, and dentists are neatly sat above. At the end of Main Street a courthouse or municipal government building is placed, surrounding by green common. Closely parallel with it is always Church Street, lines with not one church but churches: Methodist, Baptist, Presbyterian, Episcopalian and Congregational, surrounded by residential area with walking distance, then small factories and warehouse far behind.

Such spatial order is largely disorganized in Meinig's vision of current American landscape, by which he point out is California Suburbia. In the scene of flat, sprawling, single-family lots standing on a gridiron of wide and narrow streets, church buildings or any religious image lose their visibility in people's mind. On the ground church building lot is zoned in the category of residential zone, or sometimes even in industrial area, to compete its standing and visibility with other single-family houses and industrial warehouses. With the restriction of standard lot size and common architectural style and façade ornament, religious building immerses in surrounding fields and buildings to form a typical image of suburban landscape of America.

Therefore, what we call Los Angeles landscape seen today is its historically suburban style of land development that is significantly different from other American major metropolitan areas like Boston-New York-Philadelphia and Chicago (Fig. 2). Such land form is primarily composed by a cluster of single-family residence communities chained by individual collector streets that hang on a network of major arterials. In-between the fragmented business and industrial areas are dotted, and no religious landmark is seen. Such homogenous but segregated

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land use pattern is enforced by government's zoning plan and subdivision codes that inherit those private real estate enterprises' vision of Southern Californian rancho setting in late nineteenth century. As Meinig concluded, the landscape of California Suburbia

... was a powerful image, for it combined a very attractive physical landscape designed to serve a very attractive new way of life; it was associated with a region which had a mythical quality about it as a part of the persistent deep psychological drives of the westward movement; and its depiction was carried to the American public by an unprecedentedly powerful propaganda medium: the cinema.<sup>11</sup>

In other words, the image of California Suburbia has been the fundamental framework of viewing the immediate living environment for Los Angeles residents since the early twentieth century. The spatial order and organization of segregated land-use categories become a sacred value in the name of "community interest" in native mind to watch over the new intruder who plans to alter this sacred landscape. In this perspective, the construction application of HLT in Hacienda Heights in early 1980s was one of the new intrusions of Asian immigrant religious groups to their home turf in some native Angelenos' mind.

### HLT in Hacienda Heights

The institutional presence of one Asian Buddhist temple on the skyline of the Puente Hills in Hacienda Heights was an unimaginable crush of hometown landscape in local resident's mind (Fig. 3). It was the time in early 1981 when HLT first submitted the application for a conditional use permit (CUP) to begin construction. Strong opposition from local residents, coordinated by Hacienda Heights Improvement Association (HHIA), flared up immediately. In one public hearing meeting for discussing temple's CUP application, HHIA representatives argued that "the most important issue regarding the temple is not religious freedom, but the

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<sup>11</sup> Meinig, p. 171.

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impact it would have on the community.”<sup>12</sup> Besides the burden of existing utilities and road system, “the temple would be an eyesore because of disproportionate height, size and prominent location on a hillside in the 3300 block of S. Hacienda Boulevard.”<sup>13</sup> To make the objection against HLT’s coming to their community clearer, one homeowner who lived near the proposed temple site said, “It’s not just a community church. As residents, it’s not fair to have something that big in our backyard.”<sup>14</sup> Another objection to the temple was that “the temple’s hillside location will make it visible throughout the community.”<sup>15</sup>

There are several issues that can be summarized from those objections mentioned above, such as the critical spot HLT occupies and the proposed size of construction. But it is clear that the emplacement of an Asian Buddhist temple on that particular hillside location stirs the most negative feeling in native resident’s mind. It creates a highly visible landmark like a monument, so prominent feature on the horizon that it compels people’s attention, and to reorganize the image of Hacienda Heights’s landscape thereafter.

Hacienda Heights is an unincorporated place in Los Angeles County. Its territory of 12 square miles lies below the Puente Hills of San Gabriel Valley on the south and west, borders California Highway 60 on the north, and opens to inland on the east. Historically this hilly area was a part of Rancho La Punte back to Spanish rule. Originally as farmland of orange, avocado and lemon groves, Hacienda Heights began its suburban residential development in the 1950s and became a typical bedroom community in Los Angeles region. Before the 1970s, this community maintained its homogeneous characters of residents in white, young and at least

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<sup>12</sup> Valle, Victor. “Temple as ‘Square One’ On Its County Permit.” *Los Angeles Times*, September 26, 1982.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Barker, Mayerene. “Buddhist Vision of Temple Complex Clashes With Real World.” *Los Angeles Times*, February 21, 1982.

<sup>15</sup> Birkinshaw, Jack. “Buddhist Temple Gets OK to Build.” *Los Angeles Times*, June 2, 1983.

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some college education.<sup>16</sup> Later the ethnic composition began to change. Latino population comprised about one-fourth of its nearly 50,000 residents in the 1980 census. However, they lived primarily in two barrios abutting Highway 60 on the north. “The number of black and Asian American residents is still almost negligible.”<sup>17</sup> Therefore the solid chunk of Hacienda Heights was still maintained its traditional single-family with segregated land-use characters in the early 1980s when HLT was proposed.

The construction of HLT in Hacienda Heights was not the first application for setting an Asian Buddhist place in the United States by Fo Guang Shan Buddhist Order in Taiwan.<sup>18</sup> In 1978 the Order converted a community church in Gardena as its first missionary post in Los Angeles region. Soon in 1981 the Order followed the eastward movement of Chinese American communities out of Monterey Park, the Little Taipei - the mainland’s first majority-Asian city in the United States.<sup>19</sup> It purchased several hillside properties in Hacienda Heights to initiate construction project for a brand new temple complex as its overseas missionary headquarters. In the meantime the Order also purchased a church building in Maywood in 1982, kept its white, slender steeple and renamed this new missionary station as White Tower Temple.

The new temple construction in the 3300 block of South Hacienda Boulevard was ambitious. HLT proposed a 50,000 square feet of building space with 15 buildings on more than 18 acres hillside lot. The tallest building was 65 feet high, plus a statue of Buddha at front gate and a pagoda at back yard, each nine stories tall. This type of construction plan certainly challenged the image of community church in California Suburbia landscape, which occupied a

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<sup>16</sup> Trounson, Rebecca. “Hacienda Heights: A City Aborning: An Area with Growing Pains.” *Los Angeles Times*. October 12, 1980.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> See *The Dharma Coming West 25 Years: Hsi Lai Temple 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Commemoration*. FGS Hsi Lai Temple.

<sup>19</sup> See Horton, John. 1995, *The Politics of Diversity: Immigration, Resistance, and Change in Monterey Park, California*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.

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conventional residential lot without harsh to the eyes. Furthermore, the top roof of all buildings used Chinese red tiles, sharply contradicting the surrounding green tree line to create an unescapable point of attention. In addition to these “eyesore” elements, HHIA presented a list of residents’ concerns in public hearing meeting, including “odors from incense and food smell, noise, animal sacrifice and the way-station.”<sup>20</sup> These evidences of oppositions to the construction project one time were understood and reinterpreted by HLT’s representatives in public hearing as religious prejudice and racism. One HHIA member responded that “The sad thing is that some of us are being called racial antagonists. .... We’re just concerned about what’s happening to our community. ... People don’t realize the community feeling among residents here.”<sup>21</sup>

On May 31, 1983, HLT finally obtained the approval of temple construction by the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors, over the objections of local residents represented by HHIA. But the original design was largely scaled down by the negotiation between HLT and county’s planning officials. Firstly, the high-rise statue of Buddha and pagoda were both eliminated. Secondly, the overall height of the project site was lowered by 15 feet. Thirdly, seven of 15 proposed buildings were eliminated, and the total size was reduced from 50,000 to 15,000 square feet. Lastly, Chinese red roof tiles changed to muted color in order to “be unobtrusive and compatible with the surrounding community.”<sup>22</sup>

### Changing Landscape in Los Angeles

The considerable controversy with local residents on the establishment of Asian immigrant religious place in Los Angeles region certainly cannot be studied merely from the perspective of inter-cultural clash or religious confrontation or even racism. I argue that the

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<sup>20</sup> Barker, *Los Angeles Times*, February 21, 1982.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Birkinshaw, *Los Angeles Times*, June 2, 1983.

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initial confrontation between local residents and immigrant religious group, exemplified by HHIA's objection to HLT's CUP application, always concentrates on the physical visibility, such as higher standing position and greater size of building complex. The monument-liked HLT creates an exotic image of immigrant religious place that steps in the spatial order and organization of traditional landscape in local resident's mind. Such encounter experience stirs the responsive action from local residents, which is represented by HHIA's expressive performance in public hearing occasion. To respond the objection to construction proposal from the local, HLT takes action to redesign the proposal in order to win the final approval. Based upon this year-round encounter and response practice between HLT and local residents, a new reality of HLT we see today is physically constructed and emplaced to the skyline of Hacienda Heights. Consequently, a new spatial order and organization is formed. Either gradually adopting it or continuously rejecting it, the image of HLT becomes a part of Los Angeles landscape that persistently conditions the lived experience of both native residents and new immigrants in a multicultural world like Los Angeles.

Another finding in this paper is the critical role of local planning apparatus and construction codes to condition immigrant community's religious experience. Often such embodiment of American public power to regulate immigrant's religious practice in spatial term is overlooked in religious studies scholarship. If we go through the practice of any immigrant religion in everyday life, it would be noticed that the establishment of worship and gathering place is always the top priority of immigrant religious group. Therefore the application of constructing religious place is the first encounter to the American version of spatial order and organization that is represented by zoning plan and regulation. By conforming the zoning regulation that place its religious place into the designated area with compatible building exterior,

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immigrant religion performs a fit-in strategy in order to immerse in American sacred landscape.

On the other hand, every application for zoning variance to construct non-conforming religious place in local community is a contest strategy in order to alter American sacred landscape. In this regard, the study of how immigrant religious place is constructed is significant to understand American experience of multiculturalism, including the experience of “us” and “the other” through the contact and response between one another.

Figure

**Figure 1**

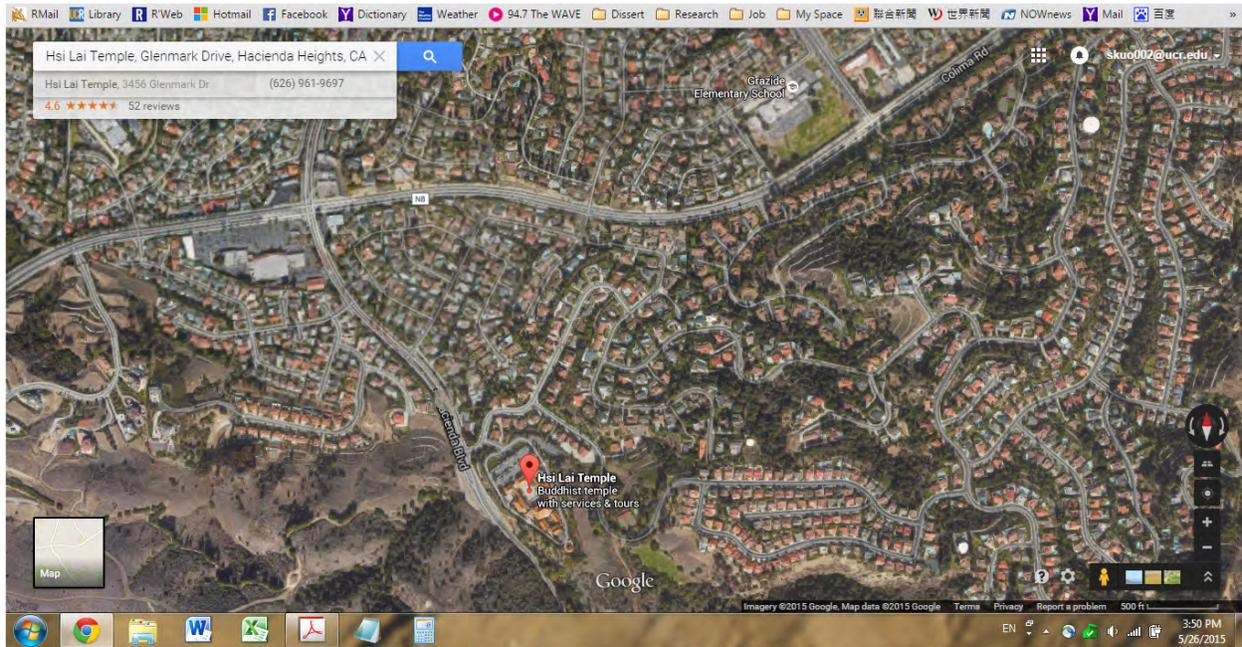


The visibility of Hsi Lai Buddhist Temple from South Hacienda Boulevard

Source: Photo by the author on February 19, 2015

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**Figure 2**



California Suburbia landscape - Hacienda Heights and Hsi Lai Buddhist Temple (red dot)

Source: Image taken from Google map, created on May 26, 2015.

**Figure 3**



Buddhist Hsi Lai Temple on a slope in the Puente Hills, in Hacienda Heights, California

Source: Photo by Geographe on July 23, 2005, downloaded from Wikimedia.org on June 14, 2015 under the Creative Common Attribution 1.0 Generic license.