

Reconceptualising home in seasonal Chinese tourism mobilities

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ABSTRACT

This article has sought to contribute to the study of home in tourism studies by conceptualising how Chinese seasonal tourists to Sanya make sense of their own practices of home in doing health-related tourism mobilities. Qualitative research was conducted with 43 retired ‘snowbirds’ over three years in Sanya. It is found that the interplay of both mobile and located homes and identities has destabilized the singularity in understandings of home. This paper suggests examining home in Chinese tourism mobilities as a juxtaposition of three related dimensions – the physical, the social and the personal. The interactions between the multiple affordances of home are fostered through continual corporeal, material and imaginative mobilities, through which a sense of belonging is sustained.

Introduction

Lao Yu labels himself as a ‘snowbird’ – a seasonal retirement migrant from Harbin to Sanya in China. Although he experiences no jetlag there is nevertheless a period of disorientation and reorientation of home as he commutes between his permanent home and his second home seasonally every year. This involves three days of train-taking spanning approximately 4000 km from north to south in winter, followed by four to five months dwelling in the tropical city of Sanya, before he returns to his family in Harbin in the following spring. Originally a tourist to Hainan Island, he found Sanya to be a desirable place for health tourism – visiting only occasionally, but *Lao Yu* is now a mobile frequenter. He feels comfortable with the warm weather and out-door activities, alongside growing familiarity brought about by increasing numbers of tourists and seasonal migrants from northern China that share similar lifestyles. He used to hold a strong belief in the stability and uniqueness of a permanent home, but now, what used to be a temporary ‘second home’ and a ‘home away from home’ are growing into central localities in life where the relationships between home, place and identity are contested and being reconstructed.

Lao Yu is not alone. Demand is growing and it is estimated that when the ratio for retirement tourism reaches 5% in 2030 the number of Chinese retirement tourists will reach 18 million with a market value in excess of 108 Billion RMB (Huang, 2013). Contemporary China has arguably seen a more accelerated and complex pattern of mobilities as a consequence of modernity (Chang, 2010). The siren call of tourism-led seasonal retirement mobilities is appealing for Chinese elderly in providing alternative ways of aging in place. However, this resurgence of mobilities in the old age cohort is embedded in the macro-economic-cultural background and social tensions in China, which makes it markedly different from the western context. Traditional perceptions of filial piety governed by Confucianism, the restrictions of the static Household Registration System (*hukou*) (Bosker, Brakman, Garretsen, & Schramm, 2012), alongside increasingly individualized mobilities and changing family structures affected by modernization,

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urbanization and the one-child policy (Yu & Rosenberg, 2017), have led to greater demands for health, well-being and mobilities in the Chinese context. Importantly, the emergence of a new middle class and a consumerist society has influenced a ‘mobility shift’ (Xu & Wu, 2016), which has been marked by major transition from family orientated production-led peasant worker migration to individualised lifestyle-led tourism and retirement mobilities.

The study of ‘home’ is central in tourism studies, since tourists’ attachment to ‘home’ is often complicated because of tourism mobilities which involve various combinations of work, travel, and play (Willis, Ladkin, Jain, & Clayton, 2017). Research into tourism related migration practices, diasporas and transnational citizenship have emphasised acts of ‘homing’ (Brah, 1996; Fortier, 2003) and ‘re-grounding’ (Ahmed, Castaneda, Fortier, & Sheller, 2003), which point towards the complex interrelationships between travel and dwelling, home and not-home (Hannam, Butler, & Paris, 2014; Hannam, Sheller, & Urry, 2006). Contemporary mobilities have transformed the ways in which both tourists and migrants relate to their home, place and identity such that it becomes difficult to distinguish between tourists and migrants in some contexts (Coles & Timothy, 2004; Hall, 2005; Hannam et al., 2014).

Home is critical in Chinese culture. It is originally considered as the root of life, the philosophical source of ‘benevolence’ and ‘propriety’, and the carrier of filial piety in classical Confucianism. Zuofu Lu (1934) argued that, ‘family life is the most important social life for the Chinese. The Chinese are blamed that they only care about the home and know little about the society. But in reality, without home, there is no place that is regarded as society for them’. Home is traditionally understood as a stable, fixed site grounded in specific place or providing a particular sense of identity (Kochan, 2016). However, having to reconceptualise home has been confronted by the increasing contemporary retirement migrants, who have grown up in a society of limited mobility (Fei, [1947] 1984). For this new generation of retired population, health and accessibility to a better environment are often important factors influencing decisions to move, but the movement is ‘not necessarily individual’s active and voluntary decision but a constrained outcome forced by certain Chinese social contexts and structures’ (Kou, Xu, & Hannam, 2017). Understanding home in multiple places has generated different meanings for Chinese seasonal tourist-migrants, arguably placing them in a complex state of ‘in-betweenness’.

This paper investigates how Chinese tourist-migrants have re-grounded their lifestyles through multiple dwellings, and how the deeply ingrained meanings of home for them have changed through contemporary mobilities. Taking home from a geographical perspective, it facilitates understandings of the multiplicity of home, in terms of the physical, social and personal domains that are interwoven into processes of home-making. Specifically, the paper investigates how Chinese seasonal tourism-retirement migrants rebuild their physical home through material practices and how home-making processes have reshaped the meanings of home, both socially and personally through tourism mobilities. We conclude by highlighting how changes in home cultures and tourism-led retirement mobilities echo to wider structural changes in Chinese society.

Tourism mobilities and (second) homes

Research into second homes has been conducted in North America and continental Europe since the mid-20th century providing insights into circulation and dwelling, the relations between the city and the countryside, as well as into the wider impacts, planning, and governance issues of second home ownership (Hall, 2015; Hall & Müller, 2004; Strapp, 1988; Wolfe, 1965). Studies of elderly ‘snowbirds’ migrating from Canada and the northern US to Florida and Mexico, from France to Morocco as well as Australian ‘grey nomads’ have emphasised their high levels of recreational activity, social interaction and geographical mobility (Coates, Healy, & Morrison, 2002; Mings, 1997; Onyx & Leonard, 2005; Smith & House, 2006; Viallon, 2012). In the 21st Century, the possibility for individuals to live more ‘mobile lives’ allows people to alternate between leaving home, moving between homes and searching for home (Chan, 2003; Hui, 2008; White & White, 2007).

Research into the theoretical conceptualisation of homes has tended to highlight issues of dislocation, displacement, disjuncture and estrangement as widespread conditions of migrant subjectivity and ‘nomadism’ (Ahmed, 1999; D’Andrea, 2006). Through increased mobility there is no ‘one’ place to which to return, but rather there may be multiple ‘homes’ that can be revisited (Cohen, Duncan, & Thulemark, 2015). Further, the continual reprocessing of home across different sites of mobility demonstrates the never fully achieved status of home (Taylor, 2015). As migrants move the disjuncture between their mobility and the locality of their home (s) demands a conceptualization of home that transcends the local context, to include wider social and spatial networks (Mallett, 2004). The interplay of both mobile and located homes and identities has destabilized the fixity and singularity of understandings of home (Blunt & Dowling, 2006; Ralph & Staeheli, 2011).

White and White (2007) consider that the tourist experience of being away is referenced to constructions of home. Easy and frequent contact with friends and family members are associated with a feeling of being simultaneously at ‘home’ with continued involvement in previous social networks, while also being ‘away’. More recent work by Wilson and Hannam (2017) and Leposa (2018) have further challenged the dichotomy between home and away in tourism studies by focusing on the material affordances of the campervan and leisure boats respectively as mobile places of home and away.

Drawing on the tourism-migration nexus, Marschall’s (2017) work has further revealed that migrant return trips to their homes can lead to shifts in identity and a sense of self. She highlights how memories and comparisons with previous homes arguably lead to greater self-reflection and self-transformative experiences. Recently, Willis et al. (2017) have demonstrated that the desire of business travellers to reconnect with their homes and to be virtually present to take part in the ‘mundane’ rituals of everyday life, develops a ‘business tourist gaze’. Such research shows a much more nuanced picture of how processes of tourism mobilities help shape the relationships between people’s movement and the ongoing ‘spatialities of social life’ (Sheller & Urry, 2006, 208).

The meaning of being ‘at home’ (or conversely away) is highly relevant for frequent seasonal retirement tourist-migrants between multiple homes (Hui, 2008). Hall and Müller (2004) have argued that the relationships between second homes and mobilities will

become a significant topic in Asia. Despite the unprecedented scale of retirement migration in China there is a need to examine seasonal migrant's home-making practices in order to give a fuller picture of how Chinese retirees experience tourism mobilities. This paper thus focuses on the question of how retirees carry along particular memories tied to their families and friends 'back home', while at the same time rebuilding new understandings of home and reconfiguring their relationships between multiple homes. It is argued in this paper that employing a dynamic and multidimensional approach to study the complexities of home for the Chinese retirement migrants is particularly fruitful in order to move beyond the conventional 'home and away' dichotomy in tourism research in light of tourism mobilities theory (Hui, 2008).

Conceptualising the Chinese home

The Chinese character of 'jia' (home) is deeply embedded in Han Chinese traditional culture and Confucian beliefs. The traditional home is regarded as the basic unit of family production, sustaining wealth and power and implying meanings of equality (Fei, [1947] 1984). Members of the same clan would live together to share the risks of agriculture and provide for one another (Huang, Dijst, Weesep, Jiao, & Sun, 2017). The rootedness nature of home was also connected to the ancestral land where clans were based (Li, 1988). The older generations have been educated to be loyal to their ancestral land and dutiful to their familial lineage, for nourishment, security and enrichment as well as a source of identity (Liu, 2014). In particular, the elderly hold tightly to clanship for security and shelter (Fei, [1947] 1984), as reflected in the idiom of *Yeluo Guigen* from the classic of Zen Buddhism in the Northern Song Dynasty, meaning 'fallen leaves return to the roots' – to revert to one's origin.

Philosophically understandings of the Chinese home are rooted in Confucianism which places great importance on consanguinity and ancestry, where home is regarded as crucial in the inheritance of ancestral traditions and parent–child relationships. In a traditional Confucian sense, filial piety stresses submission to parental authority and children's duty of caring for parents in older age, especially the eldest son in a patriarchal system. Filial piety remains important virtue for Chinese society and older people's well-being, however its form and manifestation have changed greatly over the past century. The restructuring of the patriarchal clan system since the reforms of the 1990s has resulted in greater independence of both small families and individuals. Apart from changing the mode of performing filial piety, home as a process of localized everyday practices secured by concrete familiarity is subject to change in an era of increasing mobilities (Wang & Huang, 2006).

In the wake of intensifying consumption-led mobilities - characterized in China by the retirement migration, attachment and sentimental connections with home have been further complicated. Since the elderly are richer and more mobile than ever (Hjorthol, Levin, & Sirén, 2010), the vast majority of the elderly in the (near) future will not 'age in place', meaning that a life worth living will usually demand at least some mobility. The intention to maintain physical health and to relieve the old-age caring burden of their younger children are also pushing the retired to start a new life, at least seasonally, in their second homes (Kou et al., 2017). Through their engagement in one or more residential migrations, they hope to attain their ideal home.

Although Chinese elderly are still inclined to idealize a home of integrity and togetherness, the tremendous changes in contemporary social life have more or less shattered it. The central question remains as to how migrants build homes (both as a location and a set of relationships) and identities through complex tourism relationships that are plural, flexible but nevertheless localized. This paper thus aims to contribute to our understanding of Chinese home cultures and Chinese tourism mobilities. The theoretical lens of mobilities will help illuminate the challenges for seasonal retirement migrants in terms of their relationships between home and away, between individuals, families and communities and between aspirations for a tourism lifestyle elsewhere and obligations to be fulfilled in their home areas.

Research methods

The case site

Sanya is located in the southernmost of Hainan Island and has long drawn tourists to its beaches and year-round balmy weather conditions. It is a prominent destination for domestic retirement migration. Retirement tourist-migrants initially came in the late 1990s and early 2000s (Huang, 2013), and the number have increased rapidly in successive years under the influence of tourism marketing and favourable policies launched by the Chinese central government to develop Hainan into an 'International Tourism Island Resort Destination' (Xu & Wu, 2016). In 2016 it was revealed that over 200,000 Chinese tourist-migrants stayed in Sanya per annum and 80% were from the 'Ice City' of Harbin (Chen, 2015). In 2016, Sanya was estimated to accommodate over 450,000 seasonal migrants (Kuang, 2016).

The distinguished characteristics of second homes in Sanya make it a special case site compared to previous studies. Firstly, the layouts of properties are purposely-built new apartments in high rise buildings located within high-density, self-contained gated communities, different from the 'summer cottages' in parts of North America and Europe, mobile homes or caravans, or the 'dascha' of Russia (Hall & Müller, 2004). Secondly, the majority of the second homes are purchased by the new generation of retired 'snowbirds' who are sometimes funded by their younger children, while none of the houses are inherited by the families (Wu, Xu, & Lew, 2015). This is connected with the relatively short history of second home in China compared to the western counterpart (Müller & Marjavaara, 2011), that the rush for property investment rather than owning for family heritage is the ultimate lure of second home property ownership. Thirdly, owing to the frequent transaction of properties, it is difficult for the owners to cultivate a strong emotional connection with their 'second homes', and thus leading to vulnerable place attachment and weak sense of home coming of their own.

Data collection and analysis

With a focus on the experience and perception of the meanings of home, a qualitative research methodology was adopted using in-depth and semi-structured interviews, supplemented with participant observation in Sanya. The fieldwork was conducted over three years from 2013 to 2015. The first stage was from December 2013 to February 2014. A random sampling method was employed in order to reach potential respondents in the seasonal retirement tourism-migrant communities. The interviews were conducted in their residential places and daily activity venues including Bailu public green park and seaside public squares in Sanya Bay, Dadonghai Bay, Yalong Bay, multiple suburban gated communities and replacement communities, and multiple urban villages including Gangmen, Xia Yangtian, Yuechuan, and Tuanjie Urban Village. The informants were identified through their unique Mandarin dialect, which was different from the local Li dialect in Hainan Province. Through the first stage, the researchers grasped a general understanding of the motivation and pattern of migration, perceptions concerning home and away, connections to multiple homes, their socialization behaviors, their sense of belonging, as well as the general distribution of the ‘snowbirds’ in Sanya.

In the second stage, from January to February 2015, as the study progressed, a purposeful sampling method was used. Access to the Elderly Association of Snowbirds in Sanya (EASS, a partially official association co-organized by the seasonal migrants coming from northeastern China and the Department of Civil Affairs) facilitated the researchers to select participants that best represented the population from which they were selected. The respondents included key persons from different departments of the EASS, who were in the 60–75 age range and were familiar with the residential developments in Sanya. During this stage, snowball sampling was also employed, when other longer-term elderly migrants were introduced by people from the EASS. Staff and officials from governmental departments were also contacted, including the Bureau of Tourism, the Bureau of Land and Resources, the Department of Civil Affairs (responsible for the social welfare of the snowbirds and for managing the Elderly Association of ‘Snowbirds’ in Sanya) and the Sanya Real Estate Association. The interviews were carried out to obtain contextual facts about tourism and second home policies, land use and landscape transformation in second home development, and attitude of the government towards the snowbirds and the approaches to manage the seasonal communities and enhance their integration in local society. The interviews conducted during both stages were conducted exclusively in Mandarin and translated into English.

In total, 43 seasonal migrants were interviewed in the 58–82 age range, spanning younger retirees in relatively good health to elderly retirees encountering physical vulnerability. The respondents in the sample had a diverse socio-demographic profile such as age, marital status, previous occupation and second-home ownership (see [Table 1](#) below). The respondents shared a comparatively concentrated place of origin, which is also representative of the rest of the migrant population in Sanya. To be specific, 24 among them originated from the three northeast provinces including Heilongjiang, Jilin and Liaoning. 3 respondents were from Xinjiang and Inner Mongolia. 10 of them were from Beijing, Shanghai and Shanxi province, where high-end market real estate purchasers were generally located. The other 6 respondents were dispersed in the south provinces of China, including Sichuan, Anhui, Guangdong and Zhejiang. The respondents had relatively high educational levels, with 34 having high school or college education. They have retired from diverse types of former employment. Among them, 19 were from private companies, 16 were from government institutions, 8 were from state-owned enterprises.

There was a relatively high proportion of tourist-migrants from government departments and state-owned enterprises who had been generally provided with a stable pension and relatively better welfare in retirement and were more experienced in travelling due to previous education and work. More importantly, many of the interviewees had participated in corporate management or community work, which facilitated a pattern of social involvement and self-government in the destination community. 37 respondents were moving with their spouses and other relatives, and it was also revealed from the interviews that most of the tourist-migrants had been attracted and invited by their friends and relatives to join the special lifestyle of seasonal migration thus supporting the importance of VFR tourism.

Participant and non-participant observations of daily-life routines, friend-making behaviour and home-making practices in local communities were also undertaken. Participant observation specifically involved joining in exercise classes, eating food with participants and engaging with their daily journeys and practices. Non-participant observation involved sitting on benches and watching and recording the daily scenes in Sanya. The researcher (author A) used cameras, voice recorders and notebooks to record the content of their observations. Later, the researcher arranged the information into text by watching the photos and videos, listening to the audio, and re-reading the recorded data. We used analytical induction as the method to analyze the data collected. Themes were extracted, scrutinized and re-categorized according to the framework, and further interpretation of the qualitative materials was carried out to build the interrelationships between them.

Findings

Recreating the material home

The physical attribute of home in the form of ‘house’ or ‘apartment’ is of critical importance for the Chinese people. In fact, most of the decisions to move are concerned with considerations of home ownership. Frequently, retirement migrations are stimulated by previous property investment journeys to explore the local housing market which in turn enable tourist-migrants to gain knowledge of the local amenities and environment. The majority of the retired have attained their residences in Sanya through second home ownership or a long-term lease, rather than selling their original homes and migrating permanently. They then make significant attempts to reconstruct the physical conditions of home in the new destination, through which various social relations and social institutions are reconstituted and reproduced. To recreate a physical home in their new neighbourhood, two themes were identified

Table 1
Demographic profile of respondents.

No.	Age	Gender	Place of origin	Mobility commenced
A01	71	Female	Harbin	2002
A02	72	Male	Shanghai	2005
A03	69	Male	Harbin	2011
A04	76	Female	Beijing	2008
A05	60	Female	Shenyang	2012
A06	62	Female	Shanghai	2006
A07	66	Male	Inner Mongolia	2015
A08	79	Female	Harbin	2004
A09	82	Female	Harbin	2014
A10	68	Female	Harbin	2010
A11	70s	Male	Jiamusi	2008
A12	70s	Female	Heilongjiang Province	2013
A13	72	Male	Harbin	2007
A14	60s	Male	Datong	2015
A15	60s	Female	Shenyang	2011
A16	68	Female	Jiamusi	2009
A17	82	Male	Beijing	2006
A18	70s	Male	Chengdu	2003
A19	70s	Female	Daqing	2011
A20	50s	Female	Urumqi	2014
A21	60s	Male	Dalian	2007
A22	67	Female	Harbin	2010
A23	50s	Female	Shihezi	2006
A24	64	Female	Beijing	2010
A25	60s	Female	Beijing	2013
A26	70s	Female	Liaoning Province	2010
A27	64	Female	Shenyang	2002
A28	72	Female	Harbin	2002
A29	70	Female	Beijing	2013
A30	81	Male	Jilin Province	2010
A31	80	Female	Jilin Province	2010
A32	56	Female	Beijing	2010
A33	65	Male	Harbin	2013
A34	78	Male	Heilongjiang Province	2010
A35	76	Female	Liaoning Province	1983
A36	70s	Female	Harbin	2008
A37	58	Female	Guangzhou	2013
A38	73	Male	Zhengzhou	2012
A39	68	Male	Hefei	2010
A40	69	Female	Quzhou	2008
A41	62	Female	Chengdu	2012
A42	72	Female	Heilongjiang Province	2011
A43	60s	Female	Beijing	2009

as important for the retired – the ‘physical affordances of place’ and the ‘re-design of space’. These two themes revealed, on the one hand, how the retirees developed spaces of belonging through perceived environmental quality and, on the other hand, how they re-designed their interior and exterior spaces in order to realise their homes in Sanya.

In terms of the physical affordances of place, the elderly were drawn to Sanya because of the warm climate in winter and desirable dwelling environment, which were considered to be positively contributing to personal health and well-being. As the following respondent illustrated:

I like the weather conditions here [Sanya]. The pollution smog generated by coal-burning for heat supply was so severe in Heilongjiang winter that I have been frequently struck by asthma these years. But when I came to Sanya for the first year, the illness alleviated. It is just like a miracle. Now I don’t need to take any pills when staying here and it cuts the medical cost. (A01, female, from Harbin).

The above resonates with the findings of Kou et al. (2017) in terms of Sanya being a healthy destination of choice. However, the tourist-migrants in this research attached significant importance to the overall touristic amenities and landscape in Sanya. For instance, respondent A05 stated that:

I stay here every winter with my husband for the past four years. The fantastic landscape as a coastal city and the delightful scenic spots here attracted us at first sight. We have introduced other workmates and friends in Shenyang to come (A05, female, from Shenyang).

The respondents agreed that their decision to migrate was a positive and health-promoting outcome. For some, Sanya was in

accord with their expectations of living in a smaller town with slower pace of life in contrast to the restless and noisy cities they come from. The traditional agriculture, tropical island village atmosphere and the indigenous *Li* ethnicity were considered novel but also helped to evoke memories of their own village homes from previous generations reinforcing a sense of ancestry (see Oakes, 1999). Respondent A33 introduced his experience of how the imagination of an ideal home was put into practice in his own backyard by physically planting a garden:

I like the blooming vigour of Sanya, it brings warmth and happiness. The local *Li* people in the village attracted my attention initially. Their special way of farming freshened up my imagination of this tropical island. So I decided to build the garden into my beloved home in the backyard when I moved in. I enjoy the gardening work with my wife everyday, this kind of mini farming evokes to me of my childhood, my parents and the home I grew up... I think this is my second hometown (A33, male, from Harbin).

The retirees thus employed various decorative strategies as means to reconfigure the spatialities of home. Physical re-designs including planning, building and modifying of the material residences were carried out in order to retrieve a sense of at-homeliness.

They also tried to convert their residences into space of familiarity by furnishing the new apartment into the former residence in their hometowns, inserting souvenirs, textures and photos to reassemble memories. Respondent A04's home in Sanya was reflective of the owner's attempts to bridge her memories in both places of home, in addition to signaling belonging:

I bring the photos that were collected through these years from Beijing to Sanya and frame them on the wall. These recall the warm and sweet time and bring me back to the enclosure of the whole family. They alleviate the home-sickness when I'm staying alone in Sanya (A04, female, from Beijing).

Thus we see the relationships between the past home, tourism and memories evoked from the above respondents in how they attempted to recreate the materialities of their new homes in Sanya. However, the rebuilding of the social context of home is also important as we discuss in the section below.

Rebuilding the social home

It has been recognized that many Chinese people place great importance on the inter-personal relationships and social networks that are nested upon the physical setting of home (Bian & Qiu, 2000). The retirees attempted to transform their second homes into meaningful places through multiple means of social connectivity, including 're-connecting with children and relatives', 'building a familiar social network' and 'political participation'.

The children, relatives and friends from their hometown still played significant roles for the retired. Long-distance communications using digital technologies were maintained between the retirees, their children and other relatives to share experiences, especially when they were frustrated with bureaucratic or health problems in Sanya. Support from the family was fundamental in this sense and Chinese children have become both financially and emotionally supportive in the retirement migration of their elderly parents as noted below:

When I encounter major trouble in Sanya, I choose to tell my children immediately rather than talking to the friends here. Relatives and family members are incredibly tight knit no matter where I am (A19, female, from Daqing).

Meeting new friends and building new social network were considered important to alleviate feelings of homesickness. The relationships with fellow townsmen ('*laoxiang*' in Chinese meaning people from similar originating areas) were frequently mentioned by the respondents. The '*laoxiang*' were not only regarded as supportive, but also significant to sustain a familiar culture and way of life. As pointed out by one respondent, the everyday intimacy between '*laoxiang*' was important for those coming from north-eastern China:

We often come across *laoxiang* from north-eastern China. They are easily recognized through the familiar and common accent. The connections between *laoxiang* are closer and more intimate. Increasingly *laoxiang* are coming from Harbin these years. We organize a lot of functions and gatherings and these activities bring us a familiar sense of our hometown (A10, female, from Harbin).

Similar accents, dress styles and even bodily gestures could make them identifiable to each other. *Laoxiang* developed a sense of intimacy, which promoted a sense of familiarity and safety when living away from their native hometowns. As shared by informant A27:

I feel comfortable and more at ease with snowbirds from northeast China. I think we are in a community, sharing common hobbies and lifestyle. It deepens my understanding of building another home here (A27, female, from Shenyang).

Thus, the reproduction of the geographical social network through connecting with mobile *laoxiang* in Sanya helped to recreate a familiar living atmosphere for the retirees. The companionship, co-habitation and shared memories between *laoxiang* acted as important social mooring (Hannam et al., 2006).

Distinctive social features were also identified in terms of local participation. With increasing length of stay in Sanya, the tourist-migrants attained greater opportunities to participate in local public affairs. Their demands were initially expressed by some of the elderly that used to work as government officials who hoped to strive for their rights through achieving positions in the administration departments of Sanya. Later on, appeals emerged from the wider retirement population aimed at promoting greater local identification. They put forward proposals to the representatives of the National People's Congress of the People's Republic of China,

negotiated with different levels of government and organized public petitions. This resulted in a pilot reform of mobile seasonal migrant administration by the municipal government of Sanya in the Jiyang township where a partial autonomy experiment was carried out. Long-stay tourists meeting criteria of length of stay and property ownership were considered as residential migrants and were entitled to voting rights and paid positions in local government. Although subsequent controversy finally put an end to this pilot reform, the appeal and struggle for involvement in the management of public affairs has grown into a significant topic for the retirees. For them, with second home ownership in Sanya, stable seasonal mobility and growing experience of mobile living, they are beginning to view Sanya as a second hometown rather than as just a tourism destination.

Participation in the retiree's circle of friends has also been fruitful in the development of local associations and interest groups. Based on the collaborative attempts by *laoxiang* from northeastern China, the Elderly Association of 'Snowbirds' in Sanya (EASS) was finally approved by the Department of Civil Affairs in 2013. This association was founded with the support of the Foundation of Harbin Old Age Caring which aimed at managing the elderly migrants and facilitating their integration into the local society. The retirees treated the establishment of the EASS as a major event in local life. They were able to get access to the functional assistance and emotional support from the EASS which was previously unavailable. The EASS was effective in enhancing the information network based on *laoxiang* and further strengthening the confidence in managing their homes in Sanya.

Moreover, special interest clubs, folklore performance groups as well as volunteering activities were organized by the retirees to improve their sense of a social home. By participating in volunteering, for example, some elderly have moved a step closer to achieving a sense of control for home:

I'm not drifting like the uprooted duckweed, I'm unlike the tourists that are indifferent to local society. At our ages, we want to contribute and do something to help others. And life in Sanya as a volunteer makes me occupied and not feeling alone any more. It is my true feeling of home (A21, male, from Dalian).

Overall, by developing a *laoxiang* network and multiple local participation strategies in the destination, the retirees are making efforts to adapt their political citizenship. Through the reconceptualisation of a social home, the retirees are negotiating their identity and belonging both at the national and at local level and furthermore their politics.

Renegotiating the personal home

For most respondents, retirement migration initiated changes in the social relationships with both the families and the destination, but this was also manifested in a more personal way. The renegotiation of the personal affordances of home was a complex process and filled with emotional tensions for the retirees. Three themes, namely, 'home-making through sustaining routines', 'feelings of estrangement in the local society' and 'the desire to return' were identified from the interviews conducted.

Personal home-making practices were reflected in attempts by retirees to resume habitual everyday routines in the second homes. Based on participant observation, retirees were seen to have generally developed a scheduled life after two successive touristic stays in Sanya. After settling down, most of them began to rearrange their everyday activities and form a relatively fixed life routine. Participant observation also revealed that everyday practices were centred on one objective - to improve personal health. Wellness exercises and out-door activities such as jogging, walking, cycling and practicing *qigong* (breathing exercises) that promoted physical health dominated the daytime when they were residing in Sanya. A life enabled by warm weather and a lifestyle of leisure on the beach were stated as important components in feeling at home:

This is my home! I could absolutely not imagine a life as a 72-year-old sitting in Harbin outdoors at this time of winter. It is full, busy, every day... I really enjoy it' (A28, female, from Harbin).

Respondent A28 first came to Sanya in 2002 after her ex-husband passed away and she had been diagnosed with breast cancer. After surgery and therapeutic treatment in Harbin she decided to take a holiday in Sanya and has kept residing in Sanya for 7 months every year. She met her second husband and bought an apartment in the Gangmen urban village in Sanya in 2013. Currently she is managing a dance team, which is famous among the retirees.

Other personal home related activities were also sustained by the retirees, including carrying particular foods from hometowns and cooking in a home style to retrieve a direct sense of familiarity. Using food as a materialization of home was a common and an immediate practice in migration studies (see for example, Abdallah, Fletcher, & Hannam, 2018; Povrzanović Frykman, & Humbracht, 2013), since preparing and eating food evoked emotions and memories through multiple senses. Eating the same food in the new home as in the old one was an embodied practice of home-making that connected places of importance in migrant's lives. In Sanya, there was a frequent and everyday materialization of the common hometown through food. For instance, the tourist-migrants from northeastern China always prepared millet porridge and griddle-fried pancakes for the breakfast in the morning, and they organized dumpling making for the gathering of the '*laoxiang*' in Sanya. This ordinary food from their hometowns was transformed into a symbol of reconnection to the family life, enabling the practice of personal home-making. Thus, personal home-making was renegotiated through maintaining everyday practices and daily encounters that were already familiar.

Despite this emphasis on familiarity the experience of the personal home was more diverse amongst the retirees interviewed. For some, the experience of travelling was regarded as exciting and recollections of their travel experiences were highly animated. For others their seasonal retirement mobilities were not so pleasurable but characterized by loneliness, not being able to engage in normal routines and missing the 'amazing moment of gathering' as a family. Thus, most of the respondents had in mind the time of return when the warm spring comes the following year. The journey back home remained burdened with a longing and desire for their families to be reunited. Hongtao Jia (a department head of the EASS) in the journal of the association, wrote that:

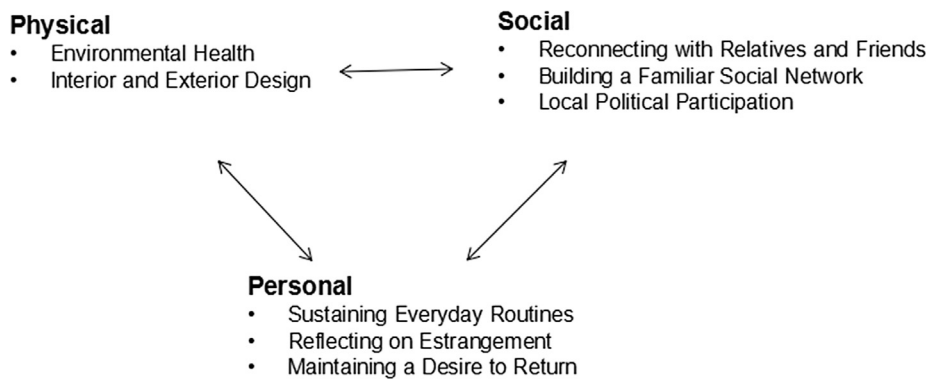


Fig. 1. A conceptual framework of home in Chinese tourism mobilities.

Metaphor is made of Sanya that regards it as ‘paradise on earth’. I understand that is not the reality of a paradise, but is representative of the longing for a glorious life. I love and yearn for my hometown, and I have always hoped the dreamed hometown can become the real paradise on earth.

This sentimental attachment to the hometown can be understood in the context of broader ‘homing desires’ (Brah, 1996, 180). Such homing desires can be seen as a return to a home that is remembered differently; through the lapse of time, the former home becomes detached from specific places, faces, bodies and emotions (Fortier, 2003, 130).

Discussion – towards a conceptual framework of home in Chinese tourism mobilities

Responding to the complexity embedded in the concept of home with regard to the findings and the literature reviewed above, this paper suggests examining home as a juxtaposition of three related dimensions (see Fig. 1 below). The first is the physical home, attending to both the sedentary and mobile dimensions of its materialities and spatialities (Leposa, 2018; Wilson & Hannam, 2017). The second is the social home, involving the relationships with others within a shared space which involves an adaptive citizenship under the governance of second homes in contemporary China (Kou et al, 2017). The third, the personal home examines the extension of the individual’s own desires, feelings, hopes, and actions which may be meaningful, blurred and renegotiated and self-transformative (Marschall, 2017; Pocock & McIntosh, 2013).

This paper has provided insights into seasonal retirement tourism mobilities in China where the relationships between multiple homes are rebuilt materially, recreated socially and renegotiated personally. Conceptually the paper advances our understandings of tourism mobilities by highlighting the overlapping materialities, socialities and everyday engagements with home whilst on the move. The paper thus argues for a new understanding of the experience of Chinese ‘snowbirds’ that are continually migrating and circulating between their native homes and new destinations. Whilst gazing upon familiarity the Chinese retirees highlighted in this study prefer to immerse themselves in a home of multiple affordances.

Chinese retirees are pulled by the concerns of roots, kinship and families in their hometown which are regarded as indispensable elements in sustaining a complete home. The return journey in the late Spring each year is filled with a desire to hold on to stability. However, in Sanya they are attracted by the desirable living environment, and some are persuaded by their younger children to migrate to these ‘healthy’ places that are physically or socially ingrained with wellness connotations (Kou et al, 2017). The interactions between their multiple affordances of home are fostered through continual corporeal, material and imaginative mobilities, through which a sense of belonging is sustained.

Nevertheless it should be recognised that in contemporary Chinese society the concept of home is also subject to wider social changes in China. While contemporary mobilities have facilitated changes in the meaning of home from ‘the family-first home’ of Chinese tradition to ‘the state-sponsored home’ of the socialist regime and to ‘the self-actualization home’ in contemporary China (Huang et al., 2017), this has fundamentally reconfigured parent–child relationships and the expectation of filial piety of the elderly. As a result, old-age policies which were tied to a familialist track (He & Ye, 2014) are now outdated. The family-based support system premised on the assumption that co-residence or living nearby to family has been altered through the tourism mobilities of the elderly. Chinese retirees that are comparatively affluent in economic and social resources are planning for their new journeys and are relocating to cities of good amenity to take care of themselves and more importantly to alleviate burdens on their younger children.

In addition, a static social and political infrastructures, for instance, the static Household Registration System (*hukou*), geographically bounded health care and other welfare provision system continue to challenge traditional relationships between being at home and away, and between individual’s aspirations for life elsewhere and obligations to be fulfilled in their home areas. Currently, the Chinese institutional designation still limits the free mobility of the elderly. Except for urban social insurance schemes, most welfare provisions are still based on a *hukou* status (Huang et al., 2017). The local social infrastructure is only accessible to the permanent residents with *hukou*, not the mobile ones. The elderly are arguably ‘floating’ between places to make up for the differences between health-facilitating destinations and the social infrastructure that is registered in their original permanent home. This hinders a long term commitment to their ‘new’ homes and complicates their sense of belonging towards their multiple homes.

Most of the retirees leaving their homes are no longer belonging to a fixed locale, rather they are simultaneously confronted by multiple residential choices and are developing divergent orientations to places, reconstructing social spaces and seeking personal belonging through their tourism mobilities.

Conclusions

We began this paper by stating that *Lao Yu* is not alone. Research in Europe, North America and Australia has amply shown the scale and intricacies of retirement tourism and migration. Moreover, as people get older their homes and neighbourhoods arguably become even more important in their daily lives (Buffel, Phillipson, & Scharf, 2013). Although the Chinese context is different, the practices of Chinese 'snowbirds' mirrors those in the US in particular. The conceptualisation of tourism mobilities, though, is not just about the relations between different types of mobility such as tourism and migration, but about the development of new theory about the deeper interconnections at various spatial and temporal scales (Hannam et al., 2006). In this paper we have thus sought to contribute to the study of home in tourism studies by conceptualising how Chinese seasonal tourists to Sanya make sense of their own practices of home in doing tourism mobilities.

The qualitative data presented in this paper has demonstrated the changing conceptualisation of home for the seasonal retirees to Sanya. Their tourism mobilities help to maintain the flexibility to settle down and consequently the boundary between a permanent home and a second home is blurred as they seek various approaches to rebuild, recreate and renegotiate the familial as well as familiarity in both places. Although they are able to escape the relative privilege of living in cosmopolitan cities they are also not leaving the cosmopolitan city entirely as many earlier studies of second home usage have shown (Hall & Müller, 2004). The *Hukou* residential registration system limits their benefits but they are, nevertheless, also able to mitigate their exposure to the downsides of city life. Thus, having and dwelling in multiple homes has enabled these individuals to reflect further on being and becoming at home through their tourism mobilities (Hui, 2008; Marschall, 2017).

Dynamic relations are maintained between the three domains of home namely the material, the social and the personal. The reconstruction of a physical home is important for the Chinese elderly, in accordance with cultural beliefs about the rootedness and stability of home. Strategies have been employed by the retirees to engage with the multiple geographical scales of home, including developing physical attachment to the urban environment and materializing home into a familiar place through spatial reconstruction and an engagement with the environment. In the social domain of home attempts were made to recreate the social home by means of a new enhanced social network connecting with children and relatives and enhancing local political participation. The *laoxiang* network has been critical in facilitating social participation and achieving a more political sense of home. However, the family still plays a significant role even though the retirees have been leaving their homes to take care of themselves. Their children remain financially and emotionally significant in providing support and in sustaining traditional Confucius beliefs of filial piety albeit in a new form. Lastly, as Haldrup (2004) has also demonstrated the negotiation of a personal home is complex and suffused with more practice based tensions in terms of everyday routines.

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