Reconceptualising home in seasonal Chinese tourism mobilities

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

A B S T R A C T

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