Home is where I lay down my hat? The complexities and functions of home for internal migrants in contemporary China

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how the changing and complex notions of home in the context of China's internal migration can influence migrants' belonging and identity formations in the urban context. Tracing the evolution of migrants' conceptualization of home through three interrelated perspectives – the ancestral home (*laojia*), the city home, and the material home – it is becoming possible to challenge the dominant perceptions of migrants' home as an emblematic representation of their precarious urban position and its traditional association with formal and fixed alignment between place and identity. Employing a translocal approach to study the complexities and functions of migrants' home, this paper expose migrants' alternative home-making practices, highlighting their strong connection to flexibility and mobility, and the making of migrants' home a meaningful space for subjective transformations, within the limiting environment of powerful socio-spatial urban regimes. Reexamining the reliance on the traditional established connection between place, home, and identity, these new conceptualizations are important not only to better understand the development of migrants' urban identity and belonging, but can also as be used as a practical element in devising future urban development policies that will better address migrants' needs and integration into urban space and society.

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1. Introduction

The notion of home is a complex subject of study in the context of migration (Ralph and Staeheli, 2011; Rapport and Dawson, 1998). As migration fundamentally entails a change of home or even multiple homes, it challenges the traditional imagination of home as a stable, fixed site that grounds one in a specific place or provides a particular sense of identity. Conceptualizations of home as a more porous, dynamic, and contested site have animated new studies examining a more diverse range of sites, practices, and relationships that produce intersecting forms of attachment, identification, and subjectivity (Datta, 2008; Levin, 2014; Long, 2013; Savaş, 2010). The increasingly transnational framing of such research remains structured, nonetheless, by the assumed duality between migrants' place of origin and their destination (Al-Ali and Khalid, 2002; Levin, 2014; Boccagni, 2014). This dual frame of reference (Guarnizo, 1997), however, obscures how home, both as a physical location of dwelling and a site of identification and belonging, is constructed through various spatial, social, and cognitive practices that are multiscalar and translocal, not necessarily or only transnational (Brickell and Datta, 2011).

In this paper I argue that employing a translocal approach to study the complexities and functions of home is particularly fruitful in China, a context that has seen massive internal migration since the 1980s. Despite the unprecedented scale of this migration, few studies have examined migrants' home-making practices or their effect on migrants' identity and sense of belonging. Instead, most research tends to highlight discrimination against migrants within and/or exclusion from formal housing markets, the emergence of marginal enclaves, or migrants' development of self-help housing strategies (e.g., Huang and Jiang, 2009; Hui et al., 2014; Li et al., 2009; Wu, 2004, 2006; Yu and Cai, 2013).

This focus results, in part, as a response to the *hukou* or household registration system, which affixes social service attainment to the place of registered residence and thus creates an exogenous definition of migrants' identity and belonging through a formally defined alignment between place and identity. From this perspective, migrants' urban homes are not seen as meaningful places for subjective transformations, adaptation, or integration; rather, they are viewed as temporary and problematic. However, given the difficulty in attaining a formal *hukou* transfer, internal migrants in China have developed alternate home-making practices and competing narratives of belonging that allow them to contest their position within a hostile and excluding urban environment (Suda, 2014). The resulting tension or gap between these formal

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and informal modes of belonging is what I examine in this paper. I do so by extending the discussion of home from its focus on structural limitations, economic models, or bureaucratic and legal regimes as directing migrants' practices and subjectivities (Liu et al., 2013) toward a consideration of migrants' everyday practices, social agencies, and alternative forms of belonging.

The paper begins with a short discussion of the connection between home and migration and how the complexity embedded within this connection is being addressed in this paper. I then continue to explore the limitations of existing methodologies and the benefits of employing multiple, innovative methods. This is followed by an exploration of how migrants construct a sense of home through three interrelated lenses: the ancestral home (*laojia*), the urban home, and the materiality of migrants' urban dwellings. Finally, I conclude with an evaluation of how it is possible to integrate these three components to provide a more functional conceptualization of migrants' home(s).

2. Home and migration

As migrants move, the disjuncture between their mobility and the locality of their home(s) (Mallett, 2004), demands a conceptualization of home that transcends the local context to include wider social and spatial networks (Easthope, 2004). In recent years, several studies have explored the concept of migrant's home as one built through translocality and mobility and acknowledging its structuring as "a metaphorical and potentially multi-sited space of personal attachment and identification" (Brickell, 2011:24). Blunt and Dowling (2006) and later Brickell (2012) have argued that home must be understood as simultaneously material and imaginative, a multi-scalar nexus between power and identity. Others emphasize the importance of trying to capture the spatial nature of home through various social and geographical scales (Fenster, 2013), attending to both its sedentary and mobile dimensions (Ralph and Staeheli, 2011), and its sociality and materiality (Ho and Hatfield, 2011; Tolia-Kelly, 2004; Savaş, 2010). These studies also emphasize home as the main spatial register of affiliation, and the importance of attending to the everyday practices that engage home locally (Cieraad, 1999). At the same time, this embodiment of migrants' spatial everydayness has to be conducted in relationship to extra-local references, ties, and practices and how concepts of home that are developed at different times in different places are linked (Klaufus, 2012; Boccagni, 2014).

Responding to the complexity embedded in the concept of home with regard to migration, this paper suggests examining home as a juxtaposition of three perspectives through which migrants conceptualize home. The first is that of ancestral home (*laojia* in the Chinese context) and its changing role in the urban context, the second relates to the choices, locations and moves that characterize migrants' urban home(s), and the third looks at the material dimension of migrants' urban home.

The most intuitive point of departure is to examine migrants' home in relation to their place of origin. Many migrants' narratives follow traditional and also politically-powerful conceptualizations of home that link it, emotionally, socially, and politically to their place of origin. This shared collective concept of home provides a geographically and cognitively stable definition of home that has traditionally defined identity and belonging, upon which the dominant value system and social ordering mechanism were based (Goodman, 1995). This deep-rooted definition is critical in preserving contemporary core social, cultural, and political structures and institutions (such as familial ties and their social roles, the hukou system and its associated social service provision, or land use and allocation rights) that are important components in maintaining social stability, at the same time when the functioning of these institutions are undermined by the realities of migration. This imaginative projection of home, usually termed in nostalgic and idealized form, helps to define the much discussed myth of return, as well as home's functions at the place of destination. Yet, returning home has been recognized as a complicated process that only rarely brings about the stability and sense of belonging that has been attached to it in migrants' narratives (Liu, 2014; Zhang, 2013). As place of origin realities are negotiated by migrants, the nostalgic and simplistic representations are replaced by new definitions and functionalities of home that represent the complexity of the relationship between home, identity, and belonging.

Secondly, while place of origin is defined in singular terms and thus lends itself more easily to inclusive definitions of home and belonging, the place(s) of migrants' destination, especially in the context of China's internal migration, are increasingly plural, requiring a novel configuration of identification. While it has been well established that migrants use the notion of home to refer to both place of origin and destination, especially in the transnational migration framework (Christou and King, 2006), this somewhat simplistic bi-local relationship is not sufficient to describe the relationship between these proliferating home(s). As migrants become less spatially bound by place of origin ties, they produce a multiplicity of home(s) through which they develop a varied set of everyday relationships, practices, and experiences. These are then used as key components in building migrants' representations of home(s) and the varied forms of home(s) identification and belonging functions.

Thirdly, negotiating these multiple home(s) locations brings forth the need to explore migrants' home(s) materiality, since the way home is intentionally or implicitly produced and the material objects it includes play an important part in the construction of the meaning of home (Datta, 2008; Miller, 1998; Tolia-Kelly, 2004; Savaş, 2010). The meanings that are inscribed within the home can be instrumental to our understanding of the individual's lived experiences and social relations, as well as spatial connections that reach outside the home itself. The materiality of migrants' urban home(s), whether represented by the abundance of place-of-origin items or their relatively impoverished material emptiness, often reflects the perception, evident in both practice and discourse, of migrants as different from the dominant others (Ralph and Staeheli, 2011). Yet, these interiors don't just physically mirror migrants' connectedness with their place of origin (Levin and Fincher, 2010; Tolia-Kelly, 2004), or their precarious urban socio-economic position. At the same time, this materiality reveals migrants' attempts to incorporate dominant representations of belonging or yearning, with their own, alternative conceptions that do not fully adhere to here/there, place of origin/destination classifications (Savaş, 2010) imposed by the socially powerful host community.

This trifold perspective highlights the dynamic process of home-making, challenging the somewhat artificial conjuring between home as a location and as a place of identification (Blunt and Dowling, 2006; Hammond, 2004) or its representation as a necessary stepping-stone toward the attainment of local services and eventually a local *hukou*. Thus, the relationship between these three modes of conceptualizing home is not one of evolving consecutive stages, nor is it a stable produced bond. Rather, this dynamic form of interrelationship is a key factor in creating a mobile and flexible conceptualization of home that can serve migrants when addressing changing group attachments, economic conditions, and social relationships, as well as the on-going structural limitations and exclusions that utilize rigid social, cultural, and spatial definitions of home.