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Institutional Terrains and Tactical Mobility: Two Modalities of Mobile Homemaking between Hainan and Bangkok

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Abstract: *This article asks why broadly similar mobile subjects develop sharply different ways of making home across destinations. Drawing on comparative, multi-sited ethnography with Northeastern Chinese sojourners in Hainan (China) and Bangkok (Thailand), it argues that divergent homemaking patterns are generated by institutional terrains. Rather than serving as a neutral backdrop, institutional terrains organize access, infrastructures of support, and everyday uncertainty, thereby producing distinct practical possibilities for residence, care, and belonging. The analysis identifies two ideal-typical modalities of mobile homemaking. In Hainan, where mobility unfolds within domestic continuity and citizenship-based entitlements, sojourners cultivate embedded homemaking through repeated co-presence, shared routines, and expanding interpersonal ties within residential communities and everyday public spaces. In Bangkok, where longer stays are organized through conditional residence under immigration regulation and linguistic difference, sojourners more often develop project-based homemaking. Here, livable routines are assembled through deliberate coordination across selected spaces, commercial services, and digital networks that translate rules and paperwork into manageable steps. The article conceptualizes these adaptive practices as tactical mobility, understood as skilled everyday navigation through uneven institutional terrains. It further shows how affective navigation—managing uncertainty, curiosity, and distance—becomes central to sustaining comfort and predictability in transnational settings. By linking ethnographic detail to institutional analysis, the study advances debates on homemaking under mobility and offers a structural critique of choice-centered accounts of lifestyle-oriented migration.*

Keywords: *institutional terrains, tactical mobility, mobile homemaking, lifestyle migration, affective navigation*

1. Introduction

In recent years, long-term sojourning has emerged as a prominent form of extended mobility among people from China. Beyond short-term tourism or permanent migration, increasing numbers of retirees, freelancers, and individuals in flexible stages of the life pursue seasonal or extended stays in destinations perceived to offer better climates, healthcare access, and overall quality of life.

This practice—often described in Chinese as lüju —refers in this article to a form of extended mobility that involves sustained everyday living in another place while maintaining an orientation toward eventual return, thus occupying an analytical space between tourism and permanent migration. By blurring conventional boundaries between mobility and settlement, sojourning raises a fundamental question: how is home made when life itself becomes mobile? More specifically, why do similar mobile subjects develop distinct forms of homemaking across different destinations?

This article addresses this question through a comparative ethnography of Chinese long-term sojourners in two prominent destinations: Hainan Island in southern China and Bangkok(Thailand). At first glance, these sites appear similar. Both are imagined as therapeutic southern spaces, associated with warmth, leisure, and bodily renewal, and both attract sojourners motivated by health concerns, lifestyle aspirations, and the pursuit of a more livable everyday environment. But they represent two distinct types of prominence on China's contemporary sojourning map: Hainan has emerged as the premier domestic destination for seasonal migration, attracting hundreds of thousands of sojourners annually, particularly from northern regions; Thailand, meanwhile, has become the most favored transnational destination for Chinese seeking extended residence abroad, supported by well-established visa regimes, medical tourism infrastructure, and Chinese-oriented service economies.

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Yet ethnographic observation reveals a striking contrast. In Hainan, sojourners commonly describe their lives in terms of dense sociality, transplanted hometown networks, and a sense of being "at home again, but in another place." In Bangkok, by contrast, sojourners often frame their lives as carefully managed projects, organized around visa regimes, international services, and a cultivated distance from local society. If home can indeed be made in mobility, why does it take such fundamentally different forms in these two settings? This puzzle invites a closer examination of how we understand homemaking in mobility.

Existing scholarship has offered important insights into this question. Research on homemaking emphasizes that home is not a fixed, bounded place but an emergent, processual phenomenon constituted through daily practices, relational ties, and lived experiences [11].

Studies of lifestyle migration further highlight how mobile individuals pursue better ways of living through relocation and extended stays, often emphasizing personal aspirations and quality-of-life concerns. However, much of this literature treats the institutional environment as a background condition, focusing primarily on subjective meanings or individual motivations. As a result, we still lack a systematic explanation for why similar actors, pursuing broadly comparable goals, develop sharply divergent homemaking practices across different destinations.

This article argues that the answer lies in the institutional terrains within which mobility unfolds. By institutional terrain, I refer to the configuration of access rules, welfare arrangements, market infrastructures, and cultural boundary regimes that structure that shape which forms of residence, support, and belonging are practically attainable for mobile subjects.

Drawing on a most-different-systems comparative design, the study holds the actors relatively constant—Chinese long-term sojourners—while maximizing variation in institutional context. Hainan represents a setting of high institutional accessibility and low cultural alterity, where sojourning takes place within an extended domestic framework of social citizenship, interprovincial healthcare, and transferable social networks. Thailand, by contrast, represents a setting of low institutional accessibility and high cultural alterity, where sojourning is mediated by visa regimes, global service markets, and a condition of legally and socially provisional presence.

Through this comparison, the article develops the concept of two modalities of mobile homemaking. In Hainan, sojourners engage in what I term embedded homemaking, characterized by institutional incorporation, relational infrastructures, and the reproduction of familiar social forms. In Thailand, sojourners practice project-based homemaking, in which home is assembled through marketized services, managed temporality, and the careful maintenance of cultural distance.

Crucially, these modalities are not expressions of cultural preference or personal disposition. Rather, they are tactical achievements, produced through the ways actors tactically navigate distinct institutional terrains in order to secure everyday livability, emotional comfort, and a workable sense of belonging.

By foregrounding institutional mediation, this study contributes to anthropological debates on home and mobility in three ways. First, it reorients homemaking research toward the political–economic conditions under which domestic practices become possible under mobility. Second, it complicates lifestyle migration theory by demonstrating that mobility choices are always structured through uneven regimes of access and entitlement. Finally, it shows that distinct modalities of homemaking are generated through the institutional terrains within which mobile lives unfold.

2. Conceptual Framework

2.1 Homemaking as Practice and the Limits of Lifestyle Migration

A foundational shift in the study of home has moved analytical attention away from fixed locations toward ongoing processes. Across anthropology, human geography, and sociology, scholars increasingly conceptualize home not as a stable place to be inhabited, but as something actively made through everyday practices [9]. This perspective treats home as a verb rather than a noun: a continuous effort to render life livable through routines, material arrangements, affective ties, and social relations, rather than a pre-given spatial container. For the study of mobility in particular, this shift is crucial, because home cannot be assumed to coincide with permanent settlement, ownership, or formal membership; it must instead be traced through what people do to stabilize everyday life in and across places.

At the same time, theorizing home as practice does not imply coherence or harmony. Existing work

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emphasizes the ambivalences and tensions through which homemaking is accomplished—between immersion and distance, structure and agency, enclosure and permeability [9][10]. Home can reproduce social norms and inequalities through seemingly ordinary arrangements, even as it remains a site of improvisation and self-fashioning. Domestic spaces also shape daily life while remaining porous to external relations and disruptions. This literature thus offers a powerful account of what home is: an ongoing, relational, and often contested achievement.

However, the same literature tends to be less explicit about why particular forms of homemaking emerge in specific settings. If homemaking everywhere involves negotiating similar tensions, why do comparable mobile actors develop dense social embedding in some places, while relying on provisional arrangements, contractual services, or managed distance in others? In many accounts, the institutional, economic, and geopolitical conditions within which homemaking unfolds appear mainly as a backdrop. As a result, the question of conditions of possibility—what makes certain modes of homemaking viable, sustainable, or risky in a given environment—often remains underdeveloped.

Lifestyle migration scholarship has offered one influential way of explaining mobility oriented toward "better ways of living." Pioneering studies define lifestyle migration as relocation motivated by quality-of-life aspirations—such as climate, health, pace of life, or cultural environment—rather than immediate economic necessity [1][2]. Subsequent research has importantly complicated the voluntarist tone of early formulations, showing how lifestyle-oriented mobility is entangled with inequality, privilege, and postcolonial relations, and how "choice" itself is patterned by class, citizenship, and mobility regimes [1][8]. Yet even with these refinements, lifestyle migration accounts often remain anchored in a choice-centered explanatory logic: motivations, aspirations, and imaginaries of the good life tend to function as the primary drivers, while the practical conditions that make certain forms of everyday life possible in destination contexts receive less sustained attention.

This limitation becomes particularly visible in cases of seasonal or recurrent mobility. When people pursue similar goals—warmth, comfort, and livability—yet develop sharply different practices of settlement and belonging across destinations, preference alone cannot explain the divergence. The question becomes not only why people move, but how different environments configure the concrete repertoires through which mobile subjects attempt to make life workable: how residence is maintained, how healthcare and housing are accessed, how support is secured, and how uncertainty is managed. In short, homemaking research is strongest in explaining what home is and how it is made, while lifestyle migration research is strongest in explaining why people move; neither fully specifies the conditions under which particular modes of homemaking become viable.

This article takes these bodies of scholarship as points of departure and brings their limits into the center of analysis. By reframing lifestyle-oriented mobility as a practice that unfolds under uneven institutional conditions, it shifts the analytical focus from choice to condition, and from destination attributes to the institutional environments that structure everyday navigation. The next section develops this comparative framework by introducing the concept of institutional terrain as a way to specify how different environments generate distinct practical possibilities for mobile homemaking.

2.2 From Choice to Condition: Institutional Terrains

To move from motivations and meanings to conditions and mechanisms, this article introduces the concept of institutional terrain. The term is used to specify how environments actively organize the practical possibilities of mobile life. Rather than treating institutions as static rules or a neutral background, the metaphor of terrain emphasizes unevenness: differentiated pathways of access, points of friction, and practical obstacles that make certain forms of residence, support, and belonging easier to sustain than others.

Institutional terrains are composed of interlocking arrangements that shape everyday navigation. These include, but are not limited to, welfare and citizenship regimes, immigration policies, housing markets, healthcare infrastructures, service economies, and language-mediated boundary regimes that structure interaction. Together, these arrangements define not only whether mobility is formally permitted, but also how it can be lived: what kinds of dwelling are feasible, how support is secured, and what forms of sociality become sustainable over time.

Two implications follow from conceptualizing institutions as terrain. First, the terrain perspective foregrounds the conditions of possibility for homemaking. It helps explain why comparable mobile subjects may pursue similar aspirations—comfort, warmth, livability—yet develop sharply different ways of organizing daily routines and relations. If homemaking is a practice, then terrains specify the

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practical limits and affordances within which that practice unfolds. Second, the terrain metaphor highlights the embodied and situated character of navigation. Mobile subjects do not encounter institutions primarily as abstract systems; they encounter them in the form of appointments, documents, eligibility requirements, queues, service encounters, language barriers, and the everyday work of securing continuity.

This focus resonates with mobility studies that treat movement as a socially organized and politically differentiated practice. As Cresswell [4] argues, mobility is never simply movement; it is structured through relations of power that determine whose movement is enabled, valued, regulated, or rendered precarious. The concept of institutional terrain builds on this insight by specifying the concrete institutional configurations through which mobility is lived on the ground. In this article, terrains are not merely contextual variables but structuring environments that organize what can be done, sustained, and stabilized in everyday life.

The analytical value of the terrain perspective lies in its comparative leverage: it invites attention to how similar forms of mobility are lived differently when the institutional environments that organize everyday life change. To make this variation visible, the article follows a relatively consistent group of mobile subjects—Northeastern Chinese sojourners—across two destinations that differ sharply in their institutional configurations. This focus is not intended to define Northeastern sojourners as a seasonal category, but to highlights a group whose mobility is often shaped by uneven resources and constrained options, and whose everyday navigation depends on practical work such as maintaining livable housing arrangements, accessing healthcare, managing paperwork, and building workable social ties.

Comparing Hainan and Bangkok allows the analysis to trace how different institutional terrains configure the practical conditions of homemaking. In Hainan, mobility unfolds within the continuity of social citizenship and domestic welfare arrangements; in Bangkok, longer-term residence is organized through conditional access under immigration regulation and linguistic difference. Rather than mechanically determining action, these terrains structure uneven pathways of access and friction that sojourners must navigate—thereby generating different practical possibilities for how home can be made and sustained in mobile life.

The next section develops this argument by introducing tactical mobility as the mechanism through which sojourners respond to uneven institutional terrains in practice.

2.3 Tactical Mobility as Institutional Navigation

If institutional terrains specify uneven conditions of possibility, a further question follows: how do mobile subjects act within such terrains in order to make everyday life workable? Mobility studies have long emphasized that movement is never merely the act of going from A to B. As Cresswell [4] argues, mobility is politically and socially differentiated: it is enabled, valued, regulated, or rendered precarious through power-laden arrangements that distribute access unevenly. From this perspective, mobility is not only something people have, but something they must accomplish—often under conditions they do not control.

To conceptualize this active dimension of mobility, this article introduces tactical mobility as an analytical mechanism. It refers to the skilled, adaptive work through which mobile subjects navigate uneven institutional terrains and align everyday life with what is practically possible in a given setting.

The concept draws on de Certeau's distinction between strategies and tactics[5]. Strategies refer to forms of ordering produced by institutions—states, markets, and bureaucratic systems—that define legitimate pathways, eligibility categories, and infrastructures of access. Tactics, by contrast, are the situated practices through which individuals reconfigure everyday routines within these imposed arrangements: they seize opportunities, work around constraints, and reconfigure everyday routines without the ability to redesign the terrain itself [5]. Tactical mobility, in this sense, refers to the practical and adaptive ways people organize movement, residence, and everyday life within uneven institutional terrains.

Recent research has begun to apply this sensibility to forms of later-life and circular migration that are often misread as purely voluntary. Kahveci et al. [7], for instance, describe the flexible and improvised cross-border practices of older migrants moving between Germany and Turkey as tactical mobility—a way of sustaining livable conditions under constraints posed by visas, pensions, and healthcare regimes. What matters in such cases is not only where people go, but how mobility is used to manage institutional requirements, minimize uncertainty, and maintain a workable sense of stability.

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This article extends the idea of tactical mobility to the context of Chinese sojourning. For Northeastern sojourners, mobility is a proactive way of crafting everyday stability and comfort across places. Yet the specific tactics they deploy vary with institutional context, shifting between navigation within domestic welfare continuity and navigation under transnational regulation and linguistic difference. Tactical mobility therefore names the skilled adjustments through which sojourners align everyday life with what is practically possible in a given environment. They do so by maintaining housing arrangements, accessing healthcare, managing paperwork, selecting spaces, and securing support through relational or commercial infrastructures. Importantly, tactical mobility is not reducible to individual preference, nor does it imply unlimited agency. It is a form of practice produced in relation to constraint: a way of maneuvering within terrains that remain structured by institutions and unequal access. Conceptualized in this way, tactical mobility provides the missing link between the conditions described by the terrain perspective and the divergent homemaking practices observed ethnographically. It enables the analysis to move from "choice" to "condition," and from destination attributes to the practical work through which mobile subjects assemble everyday life.

Seen in this light, the central puzzle posed at the outset of the article can be reframed in mechanistic terms: why do broadly similar mobile subjects develop sharply different ways of making home across destinations? The terrain perspective suggests that the divergence is not accidental, nor reducible to cultural preference. It emerges because institutional environments configure uneven conditions of access, support, and uncertainty, and sojourners respond through tactical mobility by adjusting how they organize everyday life.

Where institutional terrains provide continuity of entitlement and culturally familiar interaction, tactical mobility more readily takes the form of building social continuity through co-presence and participation. Where terrains are organized through conditional residence, language-mediated uncertainty, and reliance on market services, tactical mobility more often takes the form of assembling everyday life through coordination, planning, and selective distance. This is the causal mechanism the analysis traces: distinct institutional terrains generate different practical problems, and the tactical ways sojourners solve them crystallize into two distinct modalities of homemaking—what I later term embedded homemaking and project-based homemaking.

3. Comparative Ethnographic Design

3.1 Research Sites and Fieldwork Trajectories

The comparison between Hainan and Bangkok(Thailand) is neither arbitrary nor simply based on their popularity as destinations. Rather, it follows a deliberate most-different-systems design intended to generate maximum analytical leverage. By selecting two sites that differ sharply in legal status, welfare arrangements, linguistic and cultural context, and the infrastructures through which everyday life is organized, the study examines how broadly comparable forms of mobility are lived differently across distinct institutional terrains. This comparative strategy shifts analytical attention from why people move to how different environments configure the practical conditions under which everyday life can be assembled and sustained.

Fieldwork was conducted in two primary locations: Hainan Island in southern China and Bangkok, Thailand. Research in Hainan was carried out across multiple periods between 2021 and 2025, including January 5–30, 2021; March 15–April 5, 2022; January 12–23, 2023; and November 10–December 15, 2025. The research focused on sojourner-oriented residential communities distributed across the island, where residents from northern China gather during winter months. Rather than concentrating on a single neighborhood, the fieldwork followed mobile actors across different residential clusters, enabling an island-wide perspective on everyday practices of settlement, social interaction, and spatial adaptation.

Fieldwork in Thailand was primarily conducted in Bangkok during several research visits (July 15–24, 2019; December 1–29, 2023; and December 25, 2024–January 5, 2025). Bangkok was selected due to its prominence as a hub for Chinese long-term sojourners seeking extended residence abroad. Its dense concentration of international housing, healthcare services, and Chinese-oriented service economies provided a contrasting setting to the domestic institutional environment of Hainan, allowing the study to trace how similar actors navigate markedly different regulatory and cultural terrains.

Across both sites, the research followed a trajectory shaped by repeated visits rather than continuous residence. This iterative approach enabled the observation of seasonal rhythms, shifting mobility patterns, and evolving social networks over time. By revisiting the field across multiple years, the study captures

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not only snapshots of mobile life but also the processes through which homemaking practices stabilize, transform, or dissolve in response to changing conditions.

3.2 Research Participants: Northeastern Sojourners as a Methodological Anchor

This study focuses on Northeastern Chinese sojourners as its primary research participants. The decision to define the research population in regional terms is not meant to essentialize China's Northeast as a fixed cultural category. In this article, Northeastern is used as a broad regional descriptor rather than a single administrative label; it refers to participants with long-term residential and social ties to China's Northeast (primarily Liaoning, Jilin, and Heilongjiang), whose shared regional background provides a practical methodological anchor for comparative analysis. By holding the actors relatively constant across sites, the study is able to examine how different institutional terrains shape the practical conditions under which homemaking becomes possible.

This regional emphasis is not intended as a cultural categorization but as a research strategy. Northeastern mobility toward southern locations has developed through dense migration networks, shared infrastructures of information, and historically shaped patterns of seasonal relocation. By concentrating on this population, the analysis stabilizes actor background while foregrounding how different environments structure the practical conditions of everyday life. In this sense, participants serve as a diagnostic lens through which variations in rules, infrastructures, and social expectations become analytically visible across terrains.

Importantly, focusing on Northeastern sojourners also reflects an analytical interest in conditions of constrained mobility. Unlike highly affluent global migrants whose resources may buffer institutional limitations, many participants in this study navigate mobility within narrower margins of access. Decisions about where and how to live are therefore closely entangled with healthcare systems, housing affordability, visa regimes, and everyday infrastructures. This positioning makes them particularly sensitive indicators of how institutional terrains shape the organization of homemaking practices, allowing structural conditions to become analytically visible rather than masked by extensive personal resources.

Across both Hainan and Bangkok, participants pursue extended or recurrent residence through iterative patterns of movement, often returning to the same locations across multiple years. Their trajectories are shaped by practical considerations such as climate, healthcare access, and everyday livability, yet the ways in which these goals are realized differ markedly between domestic and transnational contexts. By following this regionally anchored yet highly mobile population, the study examines how similar actors assemble workable forms of dwelling under contrasting institutional conditions.

Participants were primarily recruited through qualitative, snowball-based fieldwork. Initial contacts were established through residential communities, informal social networks, and everyday interactions in sojourner-oriented environments such as housing compounds, cafés, public gathering spaces, and leisure activities. Subsequent participants were introduced through peer networks, reflecting the relational nature of sojourner communities themselves.

In addition to in-depth interviews and participant observation conducted during multiple field visits, the research incorporates sustained observation of digital social spaces as an integral component of ethnographic engagement. This digital fieldwork focused primarily on Chinese-language messaging platforms (especially WeChat groups) and related social media channels used by sojourners to coordinate everyday life. These spaces were treated not as supplementary "online contexts" but as sites where practical knowledge and social relations were produced and circulated in real time. I observed how participants used group chats to (1) exchange time-sensitive information about housing, healthcare, and visa-related procedures; (2) seek ad hoc translation and interpretation help for Thai-language notices, forms, and service encounters; (3) share recommendations for intermediaries such as agents, clinics, and service providers; and (4) organize low-threshold social interaction and mutual support without requiring sustained face-to-face co-presence. Digital platforms thus functioned as infrastructures of coordination and uncertainty management that shaped how mobility was organized and how everyday stability was maintained, particularly in Bangkok.

3.3 Methods and Analytical Strategy

This study adopts a qualitative, multi-sited ethnographic approach to examine how homemaking

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practices unfold across different institutional terrains. Fieldwork combined semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and sustained engagement with everyday social environments across repeated research visits. Rather than treating data collection and analysis as separate stages, the research followed an iterative process in which emerging themes from early encounters informed subsequent observations, conversations, and site selection.

Interviews focused on participants' everyday routines, mobility trajectories, housing arrangements, healthcare practices, and experiences of social interaction in both domestic and transnational settings. Conversations were typically conducted in informal environments—residential communities, cafés, public leisure spaces, and shared social activities—so that participants could narrate their experiences in relation to ongoing practices rather than abstract or retrospective accounts. Participant observation extended beyond scheduled interviews to include mundane interactions, neighborhood encounters, and moments of negotiation with local infrastructures, enabling the study to trace how homemaking was accomplished in practice.

In addition to in-person fieldwork, the research incorporated sustained observation of digital social spaces as part of the ethnographic field. Chinese-language messaging platforms and social media groups, illuminating how coordination, information exchange, and support were organized across online–offline settings.

Analytically, the study adopts a practice-oriented strategy that foregrounds what participants do rather than solely what they say. Instead of explaining mobility primarily through stated motivations or lifestyle narratives, the analysis traces recurring patterns in how everyday life is organized: how routines are stabilized, how care and support are secured, how bureaucratic requirements are navigated, and how boundaries between familiarity and difference are managed. Through iterative coding and comparative interpretation across field sites, these patterns are examined in relation to the institutional configurations developed in Chapter 2.

The comparative analysis proceeds by holding actor background relatively stable while allowing institutional conditions to vary. This design makes it possible to identify how distinct modalities of homemaking emerge not simply as expressions of personal preference, but as patterned responses to uneven terrains of access and constraint. By moving between ethnographic detail and cross-site comparison, the study illuminates how mobile subjects assemble workable forms of dwelling within the practical limits and opportunities offered by different environments.

My positionality shaped both access and interpretation. I grew up in China's Northeast, which provided shared regional reference points with many participants and often facilitated rapport in interviews. Interlocutors frequently assumed a degree of mutual understanding in regionally marked idioms, humor, and everyday assumptions about mobility. In addition, my family has sojourning experience in Thailand, including the use of a sojourning apartment there. This familiarity offered practical insight into everyday arrangements and the service environments through which sojourners organized life in Bangkok, but it also risked normalizing certain assumptions about comfort and navigation. To mitigate this, I treated my familiarity as an object of reflexive scrutiny, actively sought moments of friction and disagreement in participants' accounts, and triangulated interpretations across sites, encounters, and modes of evidence. At the same time, fieldwork in Bangkok positioned me as an outsider to many Thai-language institutional interactions, particularly those involving immigration procedures and bureaucratic communication. This asymmetry sharpened my attention to uncertainty and reliance on intermediaries, while also limiting direct access to some contexts without mediation. Throughout the research, I approached positionality as part of the field relation, attending to how shared identities enabled particular narratives and how distance from local institutional settings shaped what could be observed directly and what had to be learned through participants' accounts.

4. Ethnographic Worlds of Sojourning

4.1 Hainan: A Day Structured by Participation

Mornings in the residential community usually begin outdoors. For many Northeastern sojourners, this already marks a departure from everyday routines back home. Winters in the Northeast are long and cold, and daily life often unfolds indoors. In Hainan's warm and humid climate, however, the day starts in shared spaces. Before the temperature rises, sojourners gather in shaded public areas such as the small plaza, the fitness equipment zone, and the open corridors between buildings. Northeastern accents fill the air. People greet each other using hometown nicknames—the kind only long-time acquaintances would

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know. In the chess and card rooms, tables fill quickly; those who arrive late stand behind players, watching, commenting, and waiting for the next game.

What matters about these morning hours is not any single activity but what the activities share: they require others. A person cannot dance alone to music played from a shared speaker, cannot play cards without opponents, and cannot sustain conversations about people and places from home without someone who knows them too. Life here unfolds as a fundamentally collective experience, where solitude appears more as an exception than a norm. As one sojourner put it, “In the Northeast, I stayed home most of the time after retirement. Here, I’m out the door as soon as I wake up. There’s always someone waiting.” (H1, Male, 63)

By mid-morning, small groups begin walking toward the Northeastern-style morning market located outside the residential community. The market feels familiar even before reaching it—the sounds of dialects used back home and the smell of foods rarely found in local Hainanese shops. Vendors call out prices in ways that invite response, and buying vegetables turns into extended exchanges. A conversation about the freshness of cucumbers becomes one about a doctor someone recently visited, a rental unit opening up next month, or news that someone’s cousin has just arrived from Harbin. One sojourner explained, “Back home, you go to the market, buy what you need, and leave. Here, you end up chatting for half an hour. You find out who needs help, who’s looking for something, who just arrived.” (H2, Female, 72)

Around noon, the pace slows. The heat makes outdoor activity uncomfortable, and most sojourners retreat to their apartments. Some nap, some prepare simple meals, and some call family members still in the Northeast. Phone calls in the afternoon often extend beyond practical updates to longer conversations about everyday matters. One woman in her sixties laughed when describing this routine:

“Every day around this time I call my daughter. She tells me what the kids did in school, what they ate. Sometimes she sends photos. I’m here in Hainan, but it still feels like I’m part of their day.” (H3, Female, 59). Such conversations help soften the distance between places. While seasonal migration creates physical separation, emotional continuity is maintained through everyday communication, allowing sojourners to sustain a sense of living across two homes rather than leaving one behind. “I’m here, but it doesn’t feel like I’ve left home.” (H3)

Late afternoon brings people back outside. Dance groups reform in the plaza, and card games resume indoors. New arrivals appear—recent Northeastern sojourners who have just settled into rented units. They are introduced through chains of acquaintances, gradually absorbed into existing circles of interaction. A man who had arrived only two weeks earlier remarked, “I didn’t know anyone when I came. But my neighbor from back home had a friend here. That friend introduced me to others. Now I have people to eat with, people to walk with.” (H4, Male, 42)

Evening plans take shape through scattered conversations: who will cook together, who will walk to the nearby night market, and who will simply sit and talk as the air cools. No single person coordinates these activities. They emerge gradually from overlapping encounters throughout the day. Many sojourners explain that they chose to spend winters here precisely because of this slower, more collective rhythm of living—one shaped by climate, mobility, and the possibility of everyday togetherness.

Evenings do not end abruptly. Portable speakers continue playing, and clusters of conversation persist into the night. Some sojourners stay out late, while others return indoors earlier, but the residential community rarely falls silent before midnight. Reflecting on this rhythm, one participant contrasted it with life in the Northeast: “Back there, the day is structured by work, by schedules, by things you have to do. Here, the day structures itself—around the heat, around meals, around when people feel like gathering. It’s not that there’s less to do. It’s that doing things together makes the time pass differently.” (H5, Female, 60).

4.2 Bangkok: Living Within Mobility

For some Northeastern sojourners, arriving in Bangkok is closely tied to changing family routines and new possibilities for everyday life. T1(Female, 65) described how her seasonal migration shifted after her son began working in Thailand. “We used to spend winters in Hainan,” she recalled, “but once my son moved here, we started coming to Bangkok instead. We can stay together, travel around, and everything feels convenient.” She spoke with enthusiasm about the city’s affordable food, easy access to regional travel, and the sense that there were always new places to explore. Bangkok appeared less as a place for long-term settlement than as a city that offered multiple possibilities—spaces to enjoy, routes

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to move through, and services that could be arranged with relative ease.

Daily routines often begin beneath high-rise condominium buildings. Shaded entrances function as informal coordination points where sojourners pause briefly before moving on. Some wait for ride-hailing cars while repeatedly checking phone screens, making sure the driver's message has been translated correctly. Others ask security staff short questions using simple English words, gestures, or translation apps. Several sojourners described feeling uneasy during these moments, unsure whether they had understood instructions correctly. T2(Female, 55) explained the feeling: "You're never really sure if you got it right. But then you see another Chinese face, and you think, if something goes wrong, at least someone here speaks my language."

In what follows, I use the term affective navigation to describe how sojourners manage uncertainty, curiosity, and distance in everyday situations. In Bangkok, language-related uncertainty often triggers this work. Routine situations can feel risky when meanings are unclear. Sojourners worry about misreading a driver's message, a building notice, or medical instructions. They respond by relying on translation tools, digital networks, and familiar spaces. These practices help reduce anxiety and keep everyday life manageable.

Inside the condominium lobby, comfort and transience coexist. Soft lighting, reception desks, and quiet seating areas create a sense of ease, yet few people linger for long. Sojourners move between elevators and entrances, adjusting their plans as messages arrive on their phones. When misunderstandings occur—missed deliveries or unclear notices posted in Thai—people often turn to messaging groups to ask for explanations. T3(Male, 47) who splits his time between Bangkok and Shanghai for work, described this everyday practice: "There's a WeChat group for almost everything here—our building, nearby restaurants, even the clinic. If something confuses me, I take a photo, post it, and someone explains within minutes." In this way, small uncertainties are often addressed collectively through digital communication.

On several occasions, I observed how these digital networks translated uncertainty into actionable steps. One evening, a condominium notice written entirely in Thai was posted near the elevators. A resident photographed it and shared it in the building's WeChat group with a brief message: "Does anyone know what this says?" Within minutes, replies appeared in quick succession: one person pasted a machine translation; another corrected key terms "This isn't a fine; it's a water shutoff notice." Someone else added a practical reminder about timing and storage: "Fill a bucket tonight; it starts early tomorrow." (Building WeChat group, Bangkok).

The original poster responded with a short "Got it, thanks," followed by an emoji. The exchange was brief, but its function was clear: it turned a moment of not understanding into a collectively managed routine, reducing anxiety through shared interpretation and practical coordination.

From the condominium, daily life extends into a network of cafés, shopping malls, and air-conditioned interiors scattered across the city. Cafés provide temporary anchors where individuals meet friends, work on laptops, or simply rest between errands. Conversations frequently return to practical questions: which clinic has Chinese-speaking staff, which restaurant has menus that are easy to order from, or which travel app works best without Thai language skills. Many sojourners remain within loosely defined Chinese-speaking circles, not necessarily out of deliberate exclusion, but because it reduces uncertainty in everyday interactions. T4(Female, 30), a young freelancer who has lived in Bangkok for two years, described this pragmatically: "I didn't come here to make Thai friends. I came because the cost of living is low and the internet is fast. My social life happens in Chinese—online mostly—and that's enough."

Medical visits and administrative tasks form another layer of everyday mobility. International hospitals and immigration offices appear regularly in sojourners' routines, yet they are also spaces where language barriers become particularly visible. Some arrive early, worried about filling out forms correctly, or carry screenshots of translated instructions on their phones. T5(Male, 38) mentioned feeling nervous before appointments, explaining that "even if the doctor is kind, you don't know if you've understood everything." At the same time, Chinese-speaking assistants or fellow sojourners waiting nearby often help interpret procedures, turning moments of anxiety into brief acts of mutual assistance.

Even leisure unfolds through carefully chosen spaces. Rooftop restaurants, night markets, and condominium pools host small gatherings organized through messaging apps. Plans change easily, shaped by weather, promotions, or spontaneous suggestions. T6(Female, 56), a retiree who has been coming to Bangkok for three years, described this flexibility as central to her enjoyment: "You wake up, you see a message—someone's going to a market tonight, want to join? You can say yes or no. No

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pressure. You choose where to feel comfortable today." This phrase: "choose where to feel comfortable"captures something essential about how sojourners relate to the city: Bangkok is not a place to belong to, but a landscape of options to be navigated, where familiarity with certain spaces reduces the stress of operating in an unfamiliar language environment.

Encounters with Thai culture often generate a mix of curiosity and hesitation among Northeastern sojourners. Night markets, temples, and street food stalls are frequently described as enjoyable places to visit. Yet few interviewees expressed a desire for deeper immersion. T2 explained this balance in simple terms: "I like walking around the night market. Everything looks interesting. But honestly, I don't really want to get too involved. If it becomes complicated, especially with the language, it's stressful." For many sojourners, everyday life in Bangkok depends on keeping this balance. They enjoy novelty, but they also preserve distance so that routines remain manageable.

Language barriers are frequently described as a source of quiet anxiety in everyday interactions. T1 recalled waiting downstairs for a ride-hailing car and repeatedly checking her phone to make sure the driver's message had been translated correctly. She laughed when recounting the experience: "You never know if you understood it right. Sometimes I just hope the driver finds me." Moments like this rarely lead to major problems, but they make uncertainty felt in ordinary routines. They also show why affective navigation matters here. Comfort is sustained not only through where one goes, but through how one manages hesitation, risk, and reassurance in an unfamiliar linguistic environment.

As night approaches, the condominium entrance once again becomes a site of quiet movement. Delivery riders arrive, cars pull in and out, and residents move between indoor and outdoor spaces with minimal interaction. Phones and message notifications structure attention. Some sojourners return indoors early, while others head out again toward late-night cafés. The day stretches across selected spaces. It is held together by mobility, digital coordination, and the ongoing effort to keep the city enjoyable without letting uncertainty take over.

4.3 Diverging Rhythms of Everyday Life

Although Northeastern sojourners in Hainan and Bangkok both describe their moves as seasonal migrations in search of warmth and comfort, the rhythms through which everyday life unfolds diverge once daily practices take shape. What emerges are not merely different patterns, but distinct ways of organizing time, relating to others, and managing the uncertainties of life away from home.

In Hainan, daily life accumulates through shared presence. Mornings begin in communal spaces : plazas, fitness areas, open corridors where repeated encounters gradually turn public areas into familiar social territory. The day unfolds through activities that require others: group dancing, card games, conversations that linger beyond necessity. Time appears to stretch through participation, and routines gain meaning through being done together. As interviewee H5 put it, "Here, the day structures itself—around the heat, around meals, around when people feel like gathering."

In Bangkok, by contrast, daily rhythms rarely coalesce into a single collective pulse. Movements are dispersed across condominium entrances, cafés, hospitals, and shopping malls, each functioning as a temporary node within a broader urban network. Instead of lingering in one place, sojourners organize their days through sequences of departures: waiting for ride-hailing cars, confirming appointments, and moving between air-conditioned interiors. The experience of the city emerges less from shared time than from navigating a landscape of options, where comfort is often found in the ability to move smoothly rather than in the act of staying.

These different rhythms become especially visible in the structure of social encounters. In Hainan, repeated face-to-face interaction produces familiarity even among newly arrived sojourners. Relationships deepen through routine participation. A person encountered at the morning market may reappear at afternoon card games, and acquaintanceship gradually thickens into something resembling neighborliness. Social life is sustained through co-presence over time.

In Bangkok, interactions tend to remain brief and situational, shaped by practical needs such as arranging transportation or seeking help with language barriers. Moments of connection still occur—particularly within Chinese-speaking networks organized through messaging apps—but they are anchored in specific tasks rather than sustained through ongoing co-presence. A conversation at the immigration office does not necessarily lead to a relationship; a helpful explanation in a WeChat group does not require ever meeting face to face. Social life is held together through coordination across distance, with digital platforms often substituting for shared space.

ISSN 2616-5783 Vol.9, Issue 8: 61-76, DOI: 10.25236/AJHSS.2026.090809

The two settings also differ in how uncertainty is experienced and managed. In Bangkok, language barriers and unfamiliar administrative systems introduce moments of hesitation that require preparation. Sojourners take screenshots of translated instructions, ask questions in messaging groups, and rely on nearby Chinese speakers when something feels unclear. These frictions do not prevent mobility, but they shape how movement is planned and executed. Everyday life is lived with a heightened attentiveness to what might go wrong.

In Hainan, uncertainty is less frequently articulated through language concerns. Shared cultural familiarity, reinforced through continuous interaction, absorbs many of the small anxieties that accompany life in a new environment. When questions arise—about medical procedures, rental arrangements, or local services—they can often be answered through conversations with neighbors or acquaintances encountered in daily routines. The need for explicit coordination is reduced. It is absorbed into the collective rhythm of a socially familiar world.

These contrasts point to different forms of affective navigation. In Hainan, people sustain comfort largely through continuity—through familiar interaction and the reassurance of a shared social world. In Bangkok, comfort depends more on managing uncertainty, balancing curiosity with distance, and relying on mediated forms of coordination that keep everyday life predictable and controllable.

Taken together, these observations suggest that seasonal life in Hainan and Bangkok is not defined solely by destination but by different modes of dwelling in mobility. In Hainan, everyday life gathers around shared time and repeated interaction, producing a rhythm of social familiarity and embedding. In Bangkok, life unfolds through movement across selected spaces, coordinated through digital networks and organized around sequences of managed circulation. These patterns are not necessarily articulated as conscious strategies by sojourners themselves. They emerge gradually through practical adjustments embedded in daily routines.

The divergence raises a question that the descriptions themselves cannot answer: why do these two modes take shape in these two places? What is it about Hainan that enables routines to coalesce into shared social time, and what is it about Bangkok that encourages movement across dispersed, task-oriented nodes? The patterns described in this chapter point beyond themselves toward the institutional terrains within which these distinct rhythms become possible, necessary, and livable. It is to this explanatory task that the next chapter now turns.

5. Diverging Practices of Homemaking

5.1 Access and Everyday Navigation

The ethnographic contrasts described in Chapter 4 raise a central analytical question: why do Northeastern sojourners experience everyday life so differently in Hainan and Bangkok, despite pursuing similar goals of warmth, comfort, and temporary relocation? As the previous chapter showed, daily rhythms in the two locations diverge sharply. Life in Hainan tends to accumulate through shared routines and repeated encounters within residential communities. Life in Bangkok is organized through movement across dispersed urban nodes and frequent moments of coordination. These differences cannot be explained by preference alone. They point instead to the institutional terrains within which mobility takes place.

One key dimension of these terrains concerns the conditions under which mobility is permitted and organized. In Hainan, relocation unfolds within a national institutional framework that allows citizens to move across provinces without fundamentally altering their legal or social status. Northeastern sojourners remain within the same administrative, legal, and welfare systems that structure life in their places of origin. Access to healthcare, housing markets, and everyday services is mediated through familiar bureaucratic procedures rather than immigration controls. Although certain adjustments—such as medical insurance portability or temporary residence registration—may be required, these procedures are often experienced as extensions of existing institutional arrangements, not as barriers that must be constantly renegotiated.

In this sense, mobility to Hainan operates within what scholars describe as social citizenship [3][12][13]. Seasonal relocation does not involve crossing into a separate institutional order. It is movement within a shared national framework that presumes continuity of entitlement. For many sojourners, this continuity shapes how relocation is imagined and lived. Hainan is often described not as a foreign environment but as another region in which everyday life can be reorganized without abandoning familiar institutional

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supports.

Bangkok presents a markedly different institutional terrain. For Chinese sojourners, residence in Thailand is governed by immigration regimes that frame mobility not as a right attached to citizenship but as a privilege contingent on legal eligibility. Longer stays are commonly organized through non-immigrant visa categories such as retirement visas, education visas, or elite residence programs. These arrangements define residence through regulatory conditions, including financial requirements, documentation procedures, and periodic reporting obligations.

The implications of this framework become visible in ordinary routines. Maintaining residence often requires proof of bank deposits, regular visa renewals, and compliance with reporting schedules. Everyday decisions—from signing rental contracts to seeking medical services—are made with an awareness of visa conditions and legal status. In this setting, uncertainty becomes a routine object of navigation. Small misunderstandings can carry higher stakes when eligibility is conditional and when communication is mediated through unfamiliar language and administrative forms.

These differences in access regimes shape how sojourners move through their daily environments. In Hainan, institutional continuity allows mobility to be experienced as relocation within a familiar system. Administrative procedures may occasionally require attention, but they rarely dominate everyday concerns. In Bangkok, by contrast, institutional rules remain an active presence in daily life. Visa expiration dates, documentation requirements, and the need to maintain legal status enter routine conversations and planning. Mobility therefore includes not only movement across space but continuous attention to the conditions that make residence possible.

The contrast can be summarized as a difference between mobility sustained by citizenship-based entitlement and mobility governed by conditional residence. In the former, movement occurs within an institutional framework that presumes belonging and continuity. In the latter, residence remains contingent and reversible. It must be maintained through periodic compliance and practical workarounds.

Seen from this perspective, access regimes do not simply regulate mobility at a formal level. They shape everyday navigation in practice. Sojourners adjust how they organize residence, paperwork, healthcare access, and daily routines in response to what each setting makes feasible. This article conceptualizes such practical navigation as tactical mobility: the skilled, adaptive work of aligning everyday life with what is institutionally possible in a given environment. The next section shows how this tactical dimension becomes visible through the infrastructures that sojourners rely on to secure housing, information, care, and support.

5.2 Infrastructure and Support Systems

While access regimes define the legal and administrative conditions under which mobility becomes possible, the practical organization of everyday life depends on the infrastructures through which essential needs—housing, healthcare, information, and social support—are obtained. These infrastructures translate institutional conditions into concrete resources that sojourners rely on to navigate everyday life. In Hainan and Bangkok, such infrastructures take markedly different forms, shaping how Northeastern sojourners secure stability after arrival.

In Hainan, everyday life is supported primarily through relational infrastructures that operate through informal networks of trust and familiarity. Northeastern sojourners rarely arrive on the island without prior connections. Information about residential communities, rental opportunities, and medical services circulates through acquaintances, hometown associations, and extended friendship networks that link Northeastern migrants across winter destinations. For many sojourners, relocation begins with a recommendation from someone who has already spent several seasons in Hainan.

These networks continue to function after arrival. Within residential communities, introductions are often mediated through acquaintances from the same region. A newly arrived sojourner may be brought into social circles through a friend of a friend. Practical matters—locating rental units, identifying clinics, navigating local procedures—are commonly resolved through recommendations circulating within these networks. In this setting, everyday problem-solving relies less on specialized intermediaries than on the circulation of knowledge and small acts of assistance among people who share similar backgrounds.

The operation of these relational infrastructures is visible in the everyday spaces described in Chapter 4. Residential plazas, morning markets, and community activity rooms serve not only as sites of leisure but also as venues where information is exchanged and ties are maintained. Advice about doctors, rental arrangements, and transportation options circulates through casual conversation embedded in routine

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interaction. Through repeated encounters in these spaces, practical knowledge accumulates collectively. Interpersonal trust and shared social connections, rather than direct payment, often become the primary resources through which support is mobilized.

In Bangkok, by contrast, the infrastructures that sustain daily routines are more strongly shaped by commercial services and professional intermediaries. Because residence is organized through immigration regulation and language barriers often complicate interaction with local institutions, many practical needs are addressed through paid service channels. Real estate agents, visa consultants, bilingual legal offices, and international hospitals form a landscape of specialized providers that mediate access to housing, healthcare, and administrative procedures. Renting a condominium, renewing a visa, or arranging medical appointments often involves service workers who translate institutional requirements into manageable steps. Here, payment and contractual relationships frequently replace personal familiarity as the primary mechanism through which assistance is obtained.

Digital platforms further reinforce these infrastructures. Chinese-language messaging groups function as information hubs where residents exchange recommendations for clinics, visa agents, and other services, and where uncertain situations can be quickly clarified through shared interpretation. These exchanges are typically task-oriented and low-threshold. They do not necessarily produce durable obligations, but they do provide a practical means of coordination. In this sense, digital platforms operate as infrastructures of navigation, turning unfamiliar rules, documents, and encounters into actionable guidance and reducing the uncertainty that accompanies everyday life in a foreign institutional environment.

The contrast between these two infrastructural arrangements reflects the institutional conditions described in the previous section. In Hainan, continuity of citizenship-based rights allows everyday life to be organized through social relationships that extend across places of origin and seasonal destinations. In Bangkok, the conditional nature of residence and the challenges of operating across linguistic and administrative difference encourage reliance on commercial service channels and mediated forms of coordination.

These infrastructural differences also shape broader patterns of social organization. In Hainan, reliance on relational infrastructures tends to reinforce community-based interaction in which social life and practical support become intertwined. In Bangkok, dependence on paid services and mediated coordination enables greater individual autonomy, but it also encourages more fragmented patterns of sociality. Rather than relying on dense interpersonal networks, individuals often assemble everyday life through a combination of purchased services, messaging-based coordination, and selective engagement with familiar spaces.

In this way, infrastructures do more than facilitate mobility. They shape the forms of everyday life that become possible within different institutional terrains. Relational infrastructures in Hainan support routines grounded in shared presence and repeated encounters. Commercial infrastructures in Bangkok enable patterns of movement organized around flexible access to services and predictable channels of support. These differences provide an important foundation for the contrasting strategies of belonging and homemaking developed in the next section.

5.3 Belonging Strategies and Modalities of Homemaking

While the previous sections have examined the conditions of access and the infrastructures that sustain everyday life, the analysis now turns to how sojourners cultivate belonging within their destinations. The ethnographic chapters showed that Northeastern sojourners do not reproduce identical social worlds across places. Instead, different institutional terrains and support systems give rise to different practical pathways through which everyday life becomes stable, comfortable, and socially meaningful.

In Hainan, belonging is cultivated through community participation and co-presence. Residential communities, morning markets, and neighborhood plazas become central sites where daily routines unfold through repeated encounters. Over time, these interactions transform unfamiliar surroundings into socially recognizable spaces. Casual conversations develop into more durable ties, and newly arrived sojourners are incorporated into existing circles through acquaintances and everyday interactions. Through such processes, routines become collective rhythms. People come to feel that they know the place through the people they regularly encounter there.

In Bangkok, belonging rarely develops through sustained interaction within a single community.

ISSN 2616-5783 Vol.9, Issue 8: 61-76, DOI: 10.25236/AJHSS.2026.090809

Everyday life is organized through movement across dispersed urban nodes and frequent acts of coordination. Sojourners circulate between condominium buildings, cafés, hospitals, shopping malls, and transportation hubs. Encounters with others are often brief and task-oriented, shaped by practical needs such as arranging transportation, interpreting instructions, or locating services. Social connections are frequently maintained through messaging platforms and short-term coordination rather than through repeated co-presence. Belonging, in this context, is less a matter of being socially embedded in a single locale than of becoming oriented within a network of spaces that feel usable and predictable.

These contrasting practices point to two distinct modalities of homemaking. In Hainan, home is more often cultivated through embedded homemaking. In Bangkok, it more often takes the form of project-based homemaking. The terms name ideal-typical patterns that emerge from repeated ethnographic contrasts. They do not describe fixed cultural preferences. Rather, they capture how sojourners' practical responses to different terrains stabilize into recognizable ways of making home while mobile.

Embedded homemaking refers to the construction of home through sustained participation in shared social environments. A sense of belonging develops gradually through repeated interaction, collective routines, and expanding interpersonal networks within community spaces. The term "embedded" resonates with sociological discussions of social embeddedness [6], but it is used here more specifically to describe how sojourners cultivate familiarity through ongoing participation in local social worlds. In Hainan, this is visible in the way daily life is organized around community activities—morning market visits, plaza gatherings, and collective leisure practices. These interactions provide companionship, but they also function as channels through which information, assistance, and support circulate. Over time, residential communities become experienced not simply as places to stay, but as socially meaningful environments in which everyday life can feel continuous. This modality is also supported by affective navigation oriented toward continuity, as sojourners sustain familiar ties and routines while extending social life into new settings.

Project-based homemaking, by contrast, refers to the construction of home through the deliberate organization of everyday life across selected spaces, services, and mediated networks. Instead of emerging from dense interpersonal embedding, belonging is assembled through coordination and planning. In Bangkok, this pattern is shaped by the institutional and linguistic uncertainty of living in a foreign country. Sojourners often rely on commercial infrastructures and digital platforms to translate institutional requirements into manageable steps, from visas and paperwork to healthcare access. Living arrangements are chosen for proximity to transportation systems, clinics, and familiar service environments. Within this modality, home emerges less as a socially embedded community than as a configuration of resources that can be activated, combined, and adjusted as conditions change.

Affective navigation is central to this modality. As Chapter 4 showed, many sojourners sustain everyday comfort in Bangkok by managing uncertainty, curiosity, and distance. Language barriers and administrative ambiguity make routine interactions feel higher-stakes, and digital coordination becomes a way of turning hesitation into actionable guidance. At the same time, cultural engagement is often organized through a balance between enjoyment and distance: the city remains, as participants often put it, "interesting" and "easy to enjoy"(T4) precisely because deeper immersion is not required for daily life to function. In this sense, project-based homemaking is not only a way of arranging services and spaces. It is also a way of managing exposure to uncertainty so that mobility remains desirable and everyday routines remain predictable.

The contrast between these two modalities does not imply stronger or weaker belonging. Rather, it shows that home can be stabilized through different practical means under different conditions. In Hainan, stability is supported through social continuity and collective participation in familiar interactional worlds. In Bangkok, stability is supported through coordination across spaces and services, mediated infrastructures, and affective navigation under uncertainty. What appears as two different lifestyles can therefore be understood as two patterned ways of making home within uneven institutional terrains.

6. Conclusion

This article set out to explain why broadly similar mobile subjects develop sharply different ways of making home across destinations. Comparing Northeastern Chinese sojourners in Hainan and Bangkok, it argues that these divergent homemaking patterns are generated by the institutional terrains within which mobility unfolds. Institutional terrains are not a neutral backdrop. They are generative structures that organize access, infrastructure, and uncertainty, and they produce distinct modalities of homemaking through what this study conceptualizes as tactical mobility—the skilled, adaptive navigation through

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which sojourners align everyday life with what is institutionally feasible in a given setting.

The analysis identified two contrasting modalities. In Hainan, sojourners cultivate home through embedded homemaking. Mobility unfolds within a domestic terrain characterized by continuity of citizenship-based entitlements and culturally familiar interaction. These conditions enable daily life to stabilize through repeated co-presence, shared routines, and expanding interpersonal ties. Residential communities, public markets, and collective leisure spaces become the settings through which familiarity accumulates and support circulates. Temporary relocation is thus turned into a socially embedded form of dwelling, where belonging is produced through sustained participation in local social worlds.

In Bangkok, by contrast, homemaking more often takes the form of project-based homemaking. Residence is organized through conditional access under immigration regulation, linguistic difference, and unfamiliar administrative procedures. These conditions generate higher levels of everyday uncertainty and make institutional navigation a continuous task. Sojourners stabilize daily life by coordinating across selected spaces, services, and digital networks. They assemble workable routines by relying on commercial infrastructures and mediated channels of support that translate rules and paperwork into manageable steps. Here, home is produced less through dense social embedding than through an organized configuration of resources that can be activated, combined, and adjusted as conditions change. Affective navigation is central to this modality: managing uncertainty, curiosity, and distance becomes part of the practical work through which mobility remains desirable rather than exhausting.

By foregrounding institutional mediation, this study contributes to debates on homemaking under mobility. Existing scholarship has shown that home is processual and can be made through everyday practice rather than fixed territorial attachment. The findings here extend this perspective by demonstrating that the forms such practices take are systematically patterned. They are produced through uneven terrains of entitlement, infrastructure, and mediated certainty. Homemaking, in this sense, is not only a cultural or emotional process; it is an institutional achievement realized through practice.

The comparison also sharpens a critique of lifestyle migration. While amenity-oriented motivations such as climate, comfort, and quality of life matter, they do not explain the patterned divergence observed here. What requires explanation is how different environments make certain ways of living feasible and others costly or risky. From this perspective, “choice” is enacted through access regimes, infrastructures, and the everyday constraints that shape navigation. Sojourners do not simply select among lifestyles; they practice tactical mobility, continually adjusting routines, dependencies, and attachments in response to what institutional terrains enable and demand.

Finally, the argument of this article is not that one modality reflects stronger belonging than the other. Rather, it shows that both embedded and project-based homemaking are expressions of agency under constraint. They are the practical and creative ways through which sojourners craft livable lives within the limits and opportunities of the terrains they inhabit. Bringing this tactical dimension into view clarifies how home, mobility, and belonging are co-produced in everyday life under unequal institutional conditions.

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