A Preliminary Exploration of Chinese Digital Nomads' Life and Workstyle

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Abstract

The rise of digital nomadism, driven by technological advancements, has redefined work and lifestyle flexibility. While much of the existing research focuses on Western contexts, the experiences of Chinese digital nomads remain underexplored. This study fills the gap by examining the workstyle and lifestyle of 15 Chinese digital nomads aged 23 to 34 years old, all of whom are well-educated, financially independent, and maintain a digital nomadic lifestyle. The study uncovers two key findings that contrast with Western experiences. First, participants pursue this new lifestyle while facing familial resistance rooted in traditional Confucian values, which emphasize stability and family proximity. Despite this, they actively seek a family bond and a sense of home within their mobile lifestyle, creating a tension between the desire for freedom and the longing for familial bonds. Second, despite engaging in nomadic behaviors, participants lack understanding of the concept of digital nomad, unlike their Western counterparts who tend to have a clearer sense of identity. The predominance of Western-centric perspectives on digital nomadism has not been fully expanded into the Chinese context. The study contributes to a broader understanding of digital nomadism workstyle and lifestyle in non-Western cultural contexts.

Keywords: Chinese digital nomad, digital nomad, digital nomadism, remote work

The Background of Digital Nomadism

The development of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) and globalization has opened the possibility of new flexible working arrangements (Šímová, 2022). Remote work has long been a popular way of flexible working. The convergence of leisure and work has become increasingly prominent with the rise of remote work accompanied by advanced digital tools. Beatty and Torbert (2003) postulate that the new world of work has seen an increase in work perceived as a positive, intrinsically determined, and meaningful activity, more similar to leisure, and leisure as an attitude rather than an amount of time off (Rainoldi et al., 2022). This shift reflects a broader change in mentality, with people prioritizing freedom and flexibility over the rigid working structures of the past. Today, many people are looking for opportunities to combine work and travel either to gain skills or simply to have exciting and fun experiences (Šímová, 2022). Based on this premise, digital nomadism is one of its outcomes. According to the statistics from The Instant Offices (Instant, 2023) portal, the number of digital nomads worldwide has reached 35 million, and this population is expected to exceed 1 billion by 2035. The MBO Partners State of Independence found that in 2024, 18.1 million American workers currently describe themselves as digital nomads, an increase of 4.7% year over year (MBO Partners, 2024). These numbers attest to the growing numbers of digital nomads every year.

The Three Evolutions of Digital Nomad

From around 1990 to 2009, the first stage can be seen as the birth of a technological utopia and a fantasy of freedom. Makimoto and Manners (1997) foresaw that advances in technology would allow people to work from anywhere, leading to the rise of a mobile, location-independent workforce. They were the first to conceptualize the notion of the "digital nomad," which means that technological development would liberate human beings from spatial constraints and enable individuals to work while traveling globally. Makimoto and Manners' (1997) exploration of digital nomadism emerged during the ascendancy of globalization, following the end of the Cold War and the increasing infiltration of neoliberal thought into policy-making and corporate management. As a result, individual choice and autonomy began to attract growing attention, and workers were increasingly imagined as creative agents capable of freely choosing their lifestyles. On the one hand, this vision offered both enterprises and individuals a new imaginary for talent mobility and work arrangements, encouraging remote work, co-working spaces, and the rise of digital freelancers. On the other hand, the imagination of digital nomads also embodied the illusions of neoliberalism by intertwining technology, personal freedom, and labor creativity, while overlooking the deep structural inequalities in class, ethnicity, gender, and geographic mobility.

The second stage, from 2010 to 2019, witnessed an economic globalization, and the reconstructed fantasies of free labour within the digital nomad discourse at the individual and organizational levels. At the individual level, Reichenberger (2018) found that many respondents perceived "becoming a digital nomad" as an act of escaping office culture, corporate norms, and urban pressures, which frames it as a form of identity construction and

lifestyle de-institutionalization. However, this pursuit of freedom also came with risks of loneliness, marginalization, and income insecurity. Furthermore, in digital nomad practices, the boundaries between work and life, mobility and residence, and privacy and publicity became increasingly blurred and difficult to define (Gregg, 2013). At the organizational level, even though digital nomads are not directly monitored by traditional employers, they remain embedded in dual mechanisms of platform control and market competition (Wood et al., 2019). While platforms ostensibly free workers from corporate hierarchies, they themselves function as new centres of power. Platforms regulate visibility and access to job opportunities by adopting user ratings, task matching, and ranking algorithms. To remain competitive, digital nomads must engage in large amounts of "invisible labour" (e.g., responding to messages, bidding for tasks, revising profiles, etc.) which often go unrecognized as official working hours. As a result, digital nomads are not truly "free subjects," but are instead bound by neoliberal forms of self-governance and productivity anxiety (Mancinelli, 2020).

Due to the post-pandemic social transformation, the third stage of digital nomadism has entered into a major transformation. In particular, the impact of COVID-19 has blurred the boundary between "digital nomads" and "remote workers." Mobility is no longer confined to freelancers in tech or creative industries, but full-time employees in traditional corporations have also begun to participate in global remote work (MBO Partners, 2021). As a result, the digital nomad identity has shifted from a countercultural lifestyle to an instrument of urban marketing and digital governance. Many countries have ceased to regard digital nomads as marginal anomalies and have instead actively crafted policies to attract this highly mobile, well-educated, and affluent group. Examples include Portugal's "Digital Nomad Village" in Madeira, which provides high-speed internet, co-working spaces, and housing support; long-term nomad visas introduced by Thailand and Indonesia (Bali) that permit legal residence for several months to a year; and remote work visa schemes with tax exemptions offered by Dubai, Georgia, and Estonia. As an increasing number of digital nomads gather in cities across the Global South such as Chiang Mai, Ubud, and Mexico City, there are the latent issues underlying this trend. As Nash and Gorman-Murray (2018) noted, digital nomads' "free mobility" seemingly depoliticized and gender-neutral conceals deep-rooted forms of cultural hegemony and exclusion. Digital nomad enclaves, such as those in Bali or Chiang Mai, often produce "Western lifestyle bubbles" that reproduce colonial legacies and class stratification in local contexts.

Table 1

Three Evolutionary Stages of Digital Nomadism

Period	I 1990-2009	II 2010-2019	III 2020-present
Evolution	Birth of Technological Utopia	Free Labour Fantasy	Major Transformation
Practice	1. Digital nomads are firstly conceptualized 2. Imagination of talent mobility and work arrangements	1. Individual escaping office job 2. Subject to algorithmic control and market competition of platform	1. Digital nomads are expanded to the Traditional corporations 2. Digital nomads are not marginalized phenomenon in many countries
Context	Neoliberalism	Economic globalization	Post pandemic

The Current Digital Nomad in a Chinese Context

Digital nomadism has increasingly emerged over the past few years and is now a recognized global phenomenon (Müller, 2016). The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2019 led to economic stagnation in the world. It has simultaneously highlighted the significance of remote work, catalyzing a re-evaluation of traditional work structures and amplifying the allure of a more flexible, digital nomad lifestyle (Orel, 2023). Even though digital nomads are often seen as a rather homogeneous group of Westerners with powerful passports (Hannonen, 2024), the number of digital nomads in China has also shown a rapid growth. China's status as a technologically advanced country with a robust internet infrastructure has significantly contributed to the rise of remote work and digital nomads. According to the 50th Statistical Report on the Development of China's Internet, as of June 2022, the number of online office users in China has reached 461 million, accounting for 43.8% of the total Internet users (CNNIC, 2022). In China, an increasing number of young people are choosing to become digital nomads in order to strike a better work-life balance, following the steps of their Western counterparts (Linao et al., 2024). This shift towards flexible and location-independent work lifestyles highlights the importance of studying digital nomadism in China with a non-western perspective.

Literature Review

Definition of the Term "Digital Nomad"

The term "digital nomad" originally refers to mobile professionals who perform their work remotely from various locations worldwide, driven by the "urge to travel" and the ability to do so (Makimoto & Manners, 1997). However, a digital nomad is distinct from traditional

migrants and expatriates. Migrants often face stronger institutional constraints and class backgrounds, such as seeking better economic conditions or fleeing conflict zones, with relatively lower agency. Expatriates carry a certain global privilege, often associated with multinational corporations, professional skills, and high social capital. However, digital nomads lie at the intersection of multiple identities, representing a lifestyle choice based on digital work models that is typically not tied to a specific country or organization (Reichenberger, 2018). In particular, they can be a remote worker in fields such as technology, design, writing, and consulting, or a producer and consumer of cultural content, such as travel vlogs, freelance survival guides, or online courses.

The Paradox of Work-Life Integration

With the increasing loss of control over time, and the imbalance in labour relations that characterizes contemporary work systems (Sennett, 1998), work and life have usually become clearly separated. However, this division leads to a confrontation and tension between the two, making it difficult for individuals to achieve true "work-life balance" (Lewis, 2003). Digital nomads, motivated by the desire to "escape the conventional social/work structure," idealize a lifestyle of freedom, anti-institutionalism, and de-responsibilization. However, while "flexibility" appears to be a key advantage of digital nomads, it also signifies the ongoing commodification of time and space. Digital nomads continually self-discipline to pursue high performance, and in reality, they have not truly escaped the control of "work ethics." Instead, there is a new lifestyle, and it is essentially a form of self-discipline (Foucault, 1979). The boundary between their "working time" and "leisure time" is becoming increasingly blurred, as people are forced to be "always online" wherever they are, and this has become the new norm. This shift alters their sense of time and work rhythms, as discussed by Gregg (2013) in relation to the cultural impact of "always being online" on modern workers, which applies to the context of digital nomads.

The Sense of Rootedness in Mobility

Digital nomads, who move freely around the globe and autonomously choose their residence and work locations, are often depicted as "unrooted workers" (Cohen et al., 2015). This "deterritorialization" of mobility is idealized by neoliberal platforms as a model of "self-governance" for workers, but it heavily relies on existing technological and spatial infrastructure, as well as practical visa systems (Gregg, 2013; Richards, 2015; Sheller & Urry, 2006). Therefore, as a "highly mobile subject," the digital nomad constructs a "sense of rootedness" through constant movement, while simultaneously facing the challenges and contradictions of local belonging, community connection, and the possibility of long-term settlement. Digital nomads experience two different types of rootedness in their mobility: one is a "virtual rootedness," based on a high reliance on stable digital platforms, and the other is a "real rootedness," from "settling for a period of time" in a specific city (Hannonen, 2020; Thompson, 2021). The vulnerability of the former is dependent on platform policy changes, algorithmic preferences, and digital infrastructure, while the latter's vulnerability is influenced by political, economic, visa, and community power relations (Cohen et al., 2015).

Burnout in the Pursuit of Achievement

As already mentioned above, digital nomads appear to have autonomy over time and spatial control. However, they heavily rely on self-discipline to maintain work efficiency and productivity in reality. Consequently, digital nomads often experience a profound contradiction between self-fulfilment and real-life burnout (Cohen & Gössling, 2015). First, remote work environments make it difficult to separate work from life, and being in a constant state of "always online" can easily lead to emotional exhaustion and occupational burnout (Thompson, 2022). Moreover, the identity of digital nomads often depends on continually "displaying achievements" and "performing a successful lifestyle" through social media, forming a performative self. This kind of identity management corresponds to what Hochschild calls emotional labour, in which workers are required to regulate their internal feelings to meet social expectations (Hermann & Paris, 2020; Hochschild, 1983). When there is a gap between real life and public display, nomads may experience a "dual self": outwardly maintaining the image of a "free and successful individual," while inwardly facing loneliness, anxiety, and a lack of belonging. On a deeper level, digital nomads' mobility is in fact exclusive, predicated on privileges such as class, nationality, and education. Their so-called freedom lifestyle is shaped by structural constraints and is not universally accessible, particularly to individuals from the Global South, as well as to racial minorities, women, and gender/sexual minorities. When digital nomadism is constructed as an ideal and normalized lifestyle, it reinforces a singular notion of the "successful choice," causing individuals to interpret structural constraints as personal failure, thus generating anxiety and internalized pressure.

Analytical Framework of Digital Nomad

Based on the preceding literature review, digital nomads can then be analysed within a four-quadrant framework that intersects two key dimensions: work–life and nomadic–settled, categorizing two workstyles and lifestyles of digital nomadism, respectively (see Figure 1). For the sake of clarifying the framework, the terms mobility and rootedness have been replaced with the more accessible contrast of nomadic and settled in the Figure 1.

Digital nomads are often seen as people who actively create a "free-form lifestyle," imagining themselves as escaping traditional office jobs (Urry, 2007). This lifestyle is commonly described as mobile and flexible, but it also raises concerns about disconnection, loneliness, and the lack of long-term relationships. Although commonly perceived as rootless, many digital nomads exhibit what can be termed selective rootedness: they frequently settle in specific cities or regions, where they build temporary routines, form friendships, and maintain a sense of order and belonging.

However, this rootedness is selective—not everyone can choose where to stay. Factors like visa policies, cost of living, digital infrastructure, and cultural familiarity shape these choices. In this sense, "selectively-settled workstyle" reflects a certain kind of privilege. It often leads to digital nomads staying in isolated communities (e.g., co-working spaces, expat cafés) rather

than integrating with the local population. Their presence may bring economic activity, but the social connection with local communities is often limited or surface-level.

Reichenberger (2018) suggests that digital nomads seek holistic freedom—not just freedom of movement, but also the power to choose when to settle or stay mobile. While this idea sounds positive, it should be questioned more carefully. What kind of freedom is this, and who has access to it? In reality, not everyone can live this way. Many digital nomads are able to do so because they have high levels of education, work in tech or creative industries, and hold passports that allow international travel. This shows that freedom is unevenly distributed, often depending on nationality, income, and professional status.

Further, although digital nomads adopt a "mobile workstyle" and have escaped the discipline of traditional workplaces, they have entered another type of "de-institutionalized but highly self-demanding" environment. Digital nomads must manage their own work hours, maintain a professional image, collaborate across time zones, and deal with income instability. They must work self-sufficiently in cafés, guesthouses, and shared spaces. The constant state of being "always online" can also lead to emotional exhaustion and occupational burnout.

Additionally, digital nomads must constantly update their personal brand, maintain online visibility, and perform continuous identity performances. Hermann and Paris (2020) point out that this display of authenticity can also fall into a cycle of re-commodification. The more authentic you are, the more marketable you become. It seems free but emphasizes personal responsibility and self-optimization in a new form of neoliberal self-discipline. Are digital nomads living for themselves, or living for algorithms and followers? In such a context, digital nomads experience a psychological split, like a "dual self," where the "temporarily-settled lifestyle" might be expected to offer a sense of healing and life satisfaction through temporary place attachment.

Overall, the four characteristics of digital nomads influenced by mobility and rootedness in work and life are not isolated. Instead, these characteristics reflect a dynamic range depending on the varying contexts of work, life, mobility, and rootedness. Therefore, this framework can contribute to the understanding of digital nomads and serves as an important foundation and basis for further exploration of the nomadic phenomenon in this study.

Figure 1

Digital Nomads' Life-Work-Style Framework in Mobility and Rootedness
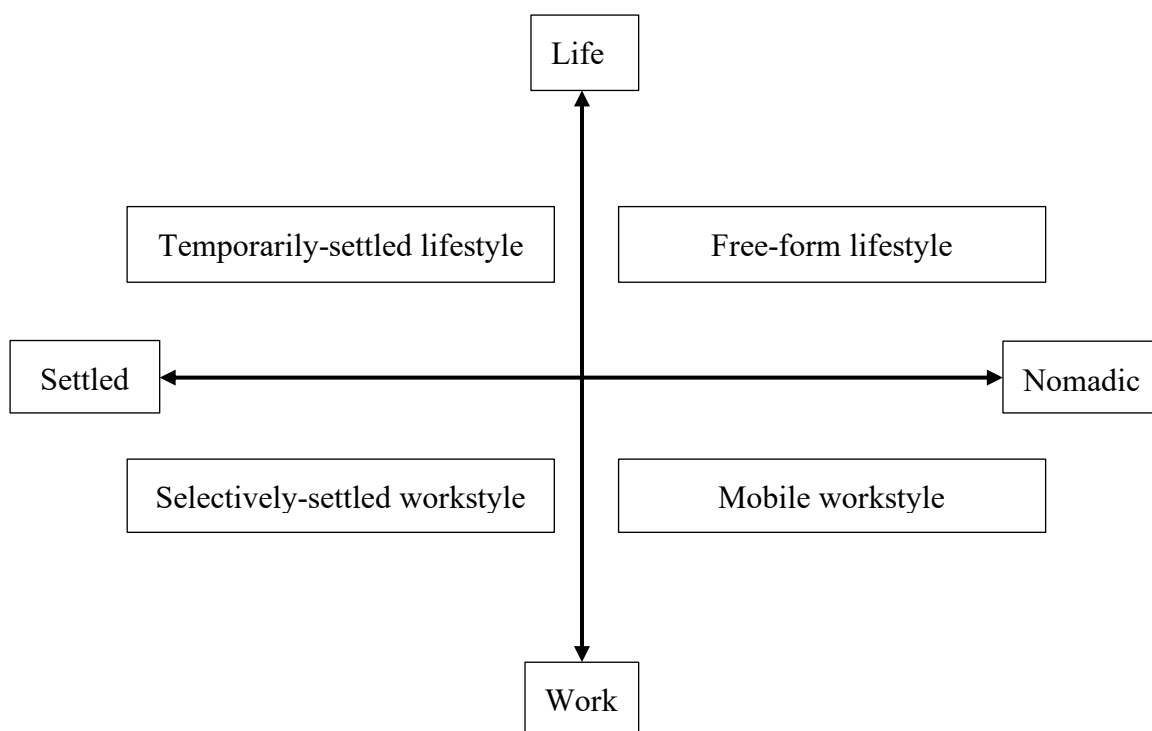
Source: Authors

Methodology

Research Design

The research design of this paper is based on qualitative research. In-depth interviews were being conducted. The main criteria for selecting interview participants were based on purposive sampling and snowball sampling. Participants were selected based on two characteristics as a digital nomad: remote workers using technology, which enables them to travel and work from various locations; also encompasses those with more semi-permanent work arrangements, who may find local employment or reduce their dependence on technology in their destinations. Participants were recruited from Xiaohongshu (RedNote), a popular social media platform in China. According to the data from Stairs (2024), Xiaohongshu has shown strong growth momentum in 2024, the platform boasts over 300 million monthly active users. Xiaohongshu has a large number of tags related to digital nomads. For instance, the tag #Digital Nomad has received more than 200 million views, #How to Become a Digital Nomad has 347.86 million views, and #Digital Nomad Lifestyle has 640.4 million views, and so forth. This is the fastest way to recruit because digital nomadism as a lifestyle is promoted by themselves through active online presence (Hannonen, 2020). As for the specific type of nomads or differentiating factors of nomadic lifestyles, the study will set a tolerable examination of each participant, because self-identification is one factor that delineates different types of digital nomads (Cook, 2023). The ability to self-identify allows digital nomads to embrace their unique circumstances while still belonging to a broader, flexible community that values autonomy and exploration. Some

digital nomads may choose to constantly travel from one location to another, while others prefer to stay in a foreign destination for an extended period; some digital nomads might even hold a fixed job within a semi-permanent location but still maintain the flexibility and independence associated with the lifestyle (Orel, 2023).

A total of 15 participants were recruited for this study. All participants were Chinese citizens with overseas nomadic experiences, and they still maintain a digital nomadic lifestyle. Among the 15 participants, there were 4 men and 11 women with an age range from 23 to 34 years old. All of them are well-educated with mostly bachelor's and master's degrees. Detailed demographic information of the participants are shown in Table 2 below.

Table 2

Participants' Profile

Participant #	Gender	Age	Education	Main Job	Duration (continuing)
Participant 1 (P1)	Male	30	Bachelor	Strategic Consultant	10 Months
Participant 2 (P2)	Female	34	Master	Insurance Agent	3 Years
Participant 3 (P3)	Male	25	Bachelor	Entrepreneur	10 Months
Participant 4 (P4)	Male	29	Bachelor	Web3 R&D	1 Year
Participant 5 (P5)	Female	29	Master	Marketing & Sales	5 Years
Participant 6 (P6)	Female	27	Bachelor	Stock Investor	9 Months
Participant 7 (P7)	Female	30	Master	Entrepreneur	2 Years
Participant 8 (P8)	Female	23	Bachelor	Web3 Developer	8 Months
Participant 9 (P9)	Female	24	Bachelor	Content Creator	1 Year
Participant 10 (P10)	Female	24	Bachelor	Model/ Therapist	1 Year
Participant 11 (P11)	Female	28	Master	Web3 Operation & Sales	7 Months
Participant 12 (P12)	Female	30	Bachelor	Content Creator	2 Years
Participant 13 (P13)	Male	28	Bachelor	Entrepreneur	8 Years
Participant 14 (P14)	Female	29	Master	Project Manager	4 Years
Participant 15 (P15)	Female	31	Associate Degree	E-Commerce Entrepreneur	9 Years

Research Procedures

Based on the participant's selection criteria and the targeted social media platform outlined above, purposive and snowball sampling methods were employed. Through Xiaohongshu, we initially identified 11 Chinese digital nomads. Their email addresses were obtained from their

profile pages, and we sent out the research proposal to them via email. The remaining 4 participants were introduced by those we had already contacted. Interviews were conducted after receiving Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval together with participants' signatures on the consent form through eformsign. The in-depth interview was divided into eight sections: Background and Motivation, Work Practices and Professional Identity, Social-Cultural Identity, Work-Life Balance and Personal well-being, Mobility and Travel Preferences, Financial Practices and Stability, Future Plans, and Reflections. A total of 23 questions were asked. Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes to 1 hour. The interviews were conducted in Mandarin and later translated into English. Transcripts were converted from video or audio recordings of the interviews. The first author was the coder using inductive coding. Key phrases, sentences, and paragraphs were underlined in the interview transcript. Underlined contents were used to create the codes. In the process, a stable set of codes and categories was developed mainly based on eight sections identified in the interview questions, as well as some behaviors, commonalities, or other themes relevant to the research topics.

Findings

Contingent Motivation

At least for some participants, the key motivation to become a digital nomad was contingent motivation. The contingent motivation behind some participants' decision to become digital nomads was often a combination of remote work opportunities and passion for travel.

> Before becoming a digital nomad, I really liked traveling and had a strong yearning to see the world. I have always longed for such a lifestyle. There is such an opportunity at work that provides remote working conditions. (P1)

For most participants (10), the decision stems from contingent decision-making, triggered by a strong desire to escape the traditional workstyle. Among those participants, the transition into digital nomadic lifestyle is seen as an experimental phase, where they test out nomadic lifestyles to determine if they suit them. Their motivation was shaped by a combination of factors: the urge to break free from traditional work structures, the opportunity to find remote work, and a broader desire for lifestyle change. Interestingly, participants P7 and P5 began this lifestyle before they even became aware of the "digital nomad" concept, highlighting the spontaneous nature of their decision-making.

> I was already traveling while working for a longtime. One day I met someone who told me that you were a digital nomad. I had never heard of this term, and I did not understand what a digital nomad was. (P5)

Work and Life

Two workstyles: Remote Employees & Freelancers

There are at least two types of workers among digital nomads: some work remotely for companies, or, more likely, as freelancers or entrepreneurs (Green, 2020). All participants, whether remote employees or freelancers, reported there are significant differences in workstyles. The biggest difference is that working hours have become more flexible, there is a stronger autonomy of scheduling. Everyone mentioned that the efficiency is much higher than before. They can complete tasks in less time, and the rest of the time they can do what they want to do instead of continuing to be in the office.

> Before, my effective working time every day was only three to four hours. The rest of the time might be slacking off and being inefficient in the office. But as a digital nomad, I can choose the most effective few hours to finish work, and go out to see the scenery or meet friends afterwards. (P4)

For participants who are freelancers, the nature of their work becomes more entrepreneur-oriented. They are independent and self-directed, manage their own clients, projects, and set up goals and schedules without having to listen to company or higher-ups. This brings them a greater sense of achievement and they do not feel forced to work. They are also willing to explore different industries or learn new skills. P12 mentioned that she has changed from a state of merely outputting to having the opportunity to absorb new knowledge. Nevertheless, complete freedom and flexibility cause them to intentionally set working schedules and tasks. P8 mentioned that she needs to have a very strong self-control ability to maintain efficiency. She will force herself to work at least a certain number of hours every day. P6, a stock investor, mentioned that before she did it as a hobby but now she will feel guilty if she does not trade every day which causes stress.

Work-Life Integration

When asked about work-life balance, 13 participants said they have a good work-life balance. They believe that work and life are not in a confrontational relationship which need to be strictly defined and separated. In other words, there is no clear boundary between work and life, and they may switch between the two continuously.

> Many of us in Chiang Mai are like this: after working in a cafe, they immediately move to a place where they can go to a party. When they are tired of partying, they find a place to work at night. Why are work and life constructed into an opposing relationship? (P13)

The state of full integration of work and life is not always positive. P12 is a content creator, her content and her travel are tightly connected. She needs to consider her shooting content when changing destinations. Even if she goes to a place for relaxation, she may end up thinking

about what that place can do with her content creation. Over mixed state caused her to wonder whether she is living for life or work.

> It seems that making money and spending money, traveling and my social media account are all integrated together. Sometimes I do not know why I am doing this, it is a bit too mixed. I wanted to pursue work-life balance, but I had no way to achieve this distinction between work and life. (P12)

Co-working Space for Social Needs

Most participants (11) use a combination of individual working and working in co-working spaces. Fulfilling social needs is the main reason for people to work in co-working spaces. In co-working spaces, they can meet many different remote workers or digital nomads, allowing them to network with like-minded people and share resources. But they prefer to work alone in terms of productivity. For them, the working space is shared with the aim of minimizing possible social isolation while facilitating integration into social networks (Rus & Orel, 2015). Moreover, co-working spaces are not the only public workspaces they like to visit to meet more people. P15 and P11 indicated that they would go to different cafes to work instead of just co-working spaces because they can meet diverse people, while people in co-working spaces are more of a unified group of remote workers. As a result, an established leisure infrastructure of cafes and coffee shops are transformed, in terms of meaning and language, through the specific needs and requirements of a working nomad (Green, 2020).

> I will not only go to co-working spaces specifically provided for digital nomads or remote workers. I like to work independently, because every time I go to a coffee shop it is very easy for me to meet new friends and everyone is so different. (P15)

4 participants (P2, P6, P9, P12) who prefer to work alone or have never tried co-working spaces. P9 and P6 addressed that the basic facilities or functions such as internet speed are not well developed. P2 felt that there were many young workers or artists socializing in the co-working spaces which was overwhelming to her. P12 mentioned that co-working spaces recreate the feeling of office, which she does not prefer.

> I do not like to go to co-working spaces that are set up for digital nomads. I already wanted to escape from the traditional working environment, but then a feeling of office set up again in those spaces. (P12)

Mental Health

A Healthier Mental State

14 out of 15 participants stated that they had entered a healthier mental state after becoming digital nomads; freedom to control work and life, and varied travel experiences made them emotionally stable and less stressed. P2's time in nature makes her mental state more positive;

P14 said that her attitude towards life has changed, and she is more willing to try more things, whether it is hobbies or work, which has improved her mental state. Only one participant (P5) stated that she is having a hard time keeping a healthy mental state because of higher work pressure and the difficulty in meeting colleagues offline. Besides, P9 mentioned that even though her overall mental health is better, her emotions are becoming more sensitive and unstable.

> This lifestyle makes my whole heart very clear to the touch of the outside world. I thus became very sensitive, as if all five senses are fully opened, which makes my mood very easy to fluctuate. (P9)

Loneliness

All participants are living digital nomads on their own without companionship. Most people are single. Only two participants explicitly mentioned that their partners are settled in China. When talking about loneliness, the majority of participants (11) said that they would feel lonely sometimes, but they also felt that loneliness was a very normal emotion as an independent digital nomad. They do not see loneliness in a negative way but as a common mental state in their life. They will call family and friends, do their hobbies such as reading and exercising, or go out to participate in different activities etc. to eliminate loneliness.

> At this stage of my life, I do not think such an encounter with loneliness is a negative state, it just be interspersed in my life. (14)

> Loneliness is the essence of life, a very normal state. (P8)

Challenges

Instability & Uncertainty & Home

The most mentioned challenge as a digital nomad is instability and uncertainty (11). In a state of constant movement and relocation, they mentioned the need to constantly establish new social circles and routines (P3, P5, P14). Also, they lose a stable social framework (P7, P11), risk more physical fatigue (P1, P9), and lose a sense of belonging (P10).

> I will be more tired physically. Not only does my body need to adapt to such an intensity of moving, but also encounter uncontrollable factors on the road. (P1)

> The biggest challenge is my life drifting, homeless, and displaced. The feeling that you belong to a place is very thin. (P10)

Because of this instability and uncertainty, participants will develop a sense of home and stability (9). They return to their home in China regularly after a few months on the road, to

rest and visit family and friends, or they have a fixed location as their base and will travel back and forth when they feel the need to take a rest.

> You will find that every time I go to a place, I always return to Shenzhen to stay for a while. Because Shenzhen is where my relatives and friends are, it is like a place to take a break. (P7)

Instability not only refers to lack of settlement, but also financial instability. The latter is mentioned by 7 participants as a big challenge when being digital nomads. Among them, 6 participants who are freelancers stated that the income is unstable depending on different opportunities or projects they have. Whereas P5 currently lives in Australia where the cost of living is higher than the income she earned from her company.

Conflict with Cultural Values

Chinese digital nomads' pursuit of freedom by constantly moving without a fixed abode and job are contradicted by the traditional collectivist values that prioritize social harmony and community over individual pursuits (Linyan & Boqing, 2023). All participants admitted that they felt their lifestyle was contradictory to traditional social norms in China. 12 out of 15 participants indicated that their family was not supportive. Only 3 participants' families (P5, P13, and P14) were open-minded about their decision from the beginning. Although the majority of families did not flatly disapprove of the participants' choice, they did express hesitation, doubt and concern. After seeing that they could survive independently, the family gradually accepted and respected this lifestyle. Some participants had to persuade their families for a long time to be understood, while others said they felt it was unnecessary to explain their lifestyle choice to their families because they were living their own life and have certain achievements to show for their choice.

> They were worried at first. It is more about being able to get results. If you want to get support from your family, show them the results and say that I can completely support myself, and I am living a good life, and they will respect your decision. (P8)

Two participants commented that digital nomads are still a niche group of people and not welcome in Chinese society. When society's acceptance of digital nomads is not high, it is difficult to return to the original workplace or find a stable job again in China because they lose the competitiveness without enough experience.

> The cost of trial and error is very high. If you want to go back to find a job, the company will wonder what you did during the past years. (P12)

> Our country may not be friendly to this thing (digital nomadism), basically you cannot turn back once you shoot the arrow. Your resume will be blank, it is impossible to return to the workplace with no experience. (P6)

Structural and Social Barriers

Furthermore, the difficulty of getting a visa in certain counties as a Chinese citizen was cited by 4 participants as a disadvantage. As an overseas Chinese digital nomad, getting visas is the most essential need (P13) but it is relatively hard for Chinese nomads to get as many visas as they want, and visa-free countries are far and few in between. Their work status as independent freelancing individuals makes it even harder to get visas.

> I am a single, unemployed female, my visa application might be easily rejected. (P6)

Besides, there is a lack of community for either socializing or resource exchange mentioned by most participants (11). They implied that there is a lack of platform or community currently while many western digital nomad communities already existed. When they tried to find activities for digital nomads in the destination, they were all held by western digital nomad groups. P14 addressed that digital nomads are still western-dominated when she was abroad, and she felt discomfort that the atmosphere is not Asian-friendly when participating in social events for digital nomads.

> Digital nomad groups in Bali are white-dominated, it actually causes discomfort. For example, when you go to a bar on weekends to relax, but the atmosphere is not very enjoyable. You will not always meet like-minded Chinese nomads or Asian nomads, and the majority are white males. (P14)

The lack of platform or community for Chinese digital nomads also refers to resource hunting in terms of job opportunity. Participants mentioned that the source of income as a freelancer is very unstable, which echoes the challenges mentioned earlier. The information they gather on their own is not comprehensive without guidance from an expert in the industry. They wish to have more job opportunities or viable side jobs through a platform targeted at Chinese digital nomads.

Discussion & Conclusion

The Dilemma Between Belonging and Escape

The Chinese collectivist culture has been significantly shaped by Confucian values, with family bonds and stable life cycles remaining high on the list of ideals (Chan et al., 2022). As repeatedly mentioned by our participants, their decision to be a digital nomad was not supported by family. They were trying to break away from such a culture and adopt an individualistic and flexible lifestyle and workstyle. Whereas individualistic values are said to be largely unique to Western countries, where there is greater economic, political and social freedom allowing for higher levels of autonomy (Bauman, 2000; Hofstede et al., 2010, as cited in Humphrey & Bliuc, 2022). Under more individualistic cultural values, western digital nomads are eager to escape from traditional norms by radically expressing flexibility, fluidity, and novelty (Green, 2020). However, the findings reveal a paradox. Although the Chinese

digital nomads seek to break from traditional lifestyles, they simultaneously attempt to retain a sense of home, either temporarily or through longer-term settlement, to regain stability. This ambivalence reflects the enduring pull of Chinese cultural norms, particularly the importance of family and rootedness. This finding contrasts with De Loryn's study on western digital nomads' perceptions of home. According to De Loryn (2021), while western digital nomads also emphasized the importance of home in times of crisis, they believed that home could be anywhere, as long as there is internet access and meaningful connections, such as with friends or loved ones. This comparison highlights the cultural differences in how digital nomads from Eastern and Western cultural contexts perceive the concept of home differently.

Identity Ambiguity of Chinese Digital Nomads

In addition, the findings reveal that participants began adopting the digital nomad lifestyle without fully understanding this concept. As they mentioned, although their lifestyle already exhibited characteristics of digital nomadism, they were unaware of the term "digital nomads" and did not identify themselves as such. In contrast, digital nomads in western countries have a clearer sense of identity and awareness, as this lifestyle was first popularized in western culture. Since 2018, digital nomads have been categorized as a distinct group in the State of Independence in America Report (Hannonen, 2020). Additionally, MBO Partners conducts annual surveys on digital nomads. Many structured communities, such as co-living and co-working spaces, create a bubble-like existence that transports a more western lifestyle to locations around the world (Thompson, 2018). Like Beats, these early backpackers pursued freedom, exploration, and cultural exchange but existed on the fringes of mainstream society, lacking structured communities or labels that contemporary western digital nomads enjoy. The emerging digital nomads in China are similarly pioneering a lifestyle that Western culture had already named and structured. Thus, the delayed recognition and formalization of digital nomads in China mirrors the earlier stages of the Beat Generation's impact on travel culture. This lag in identification and the absence of established community structures among Chinese digital nomads reflect broader cultural dynamics, highlighting that digital nomadism is not a universally uniform experience but is deeply shaped by cultural context, identity formation, and access to community.

Western Cultural Dominance: Integration Challenges for Chinese Digital Nomads

Based on the findings, Chinese digital nomads find it difficult to integrate into the lifestyle of digital nomads at their destinations because it is dominated by Western culture. Back in 1997, Makimoto and Manner (1997) predicted that portable computers would allow some people from wealthy countries (mainly the global North) to live and work in cheaper countries (global South) by using strong passports and money to enjoy a better lifestyle with lower living costs (Makimoto & Manners, 1997). This vision has continued to reinforce existing global inequalities. Digital nomadism and remote work continue to highlight long-standing divisions, separating elite professionals who can work remotely and leverage stronger home currencies to live comfortably in low-cost countries from others who do not have these privileges (Hong 2021; Megan, 2016; Ozimek, 2021). It relies on outdated colonial systems to create a world

where racial and economic inequalities are treated as commodities, hidden behind the promises of technology and freedom (Atanasoski & Vora, 2019). In this context, Chinese digital nomads often find themself marginalized, with many participants describing a lack of community structures for resource exchange and socializing catering to non-western digital nomads. The Western-centric atmosphere made participants feel excluded. Additionally, the absence of platforms dedicated to Chinese digital nomads exacerbates professional instability. Participants' difficulty accessing stable income sources emphasized the need for better support systems and networks that can offer curated job opportunities and industry guidance. These challenges further illustrate how digital nomadism, though marketed as a borderless and liberating lifestyle, remains shaped by entrenched structural inequalities that limit who can fully participate and benefit—especially those from non-Western contexts.

In conclusion, this study selected 15 participants and provided rich qualitative data. Of course, the limited sample size may not fully represent the broader population of Chinese digital nomads. For future research, the study offers several potential directions. It could benefit from a larger, more diverse sample with a balanced gender ratio to improve generalizability. Moreover, the research topic could be explored in greater depth by focusing on specific aspects discussed in this paper, such as co-working space usage, productivity and efficiency, work-leisure balance, and cultural identity. Expanding the focus to include digital nomads from other Asian countries would also provide valuable insights for comparative studies with Western contexts. This study also contributes to a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of digital nomadism as a transnational and multicultural phenomenon. It highlights the need for further interdisciplinary research to better capture the evolving realities of digital nomadism in a globally interconnected world and to make it a more sustainable alternative to traditional ways of living and working.

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