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### Mediating intimacies through mobile communication: Chinese migrant mothers' digital 'bridge of magpies'

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# **Mediating intimacies through mobile communication: Chinese migrant mothers' digital 'bridge of magpies'**

Yang Wang & Sun Sun Lim

## **Introduction**

During the past two decades, China has witnessed a steady stream of school-aged children venturing overseas for education, accompanied by their mothers. Singapore is deemed one of the most popular destinations for this purpose, due to its cultural proximity to Chinese society, its bilingual education system and its incentive schemes for foreign students. The mothers involved in this endeavour are commonly referred to as *peidu mama* (literally 'study mothers'), who accompany their young children abroad while leaving their husbands behind in China. As de facto 'single mothers' in the host society, they must overcome acculturation challenges and pave the way for their children to quickly thrive in an alien environment and simultaneously maintain affective bonds with their family and friends back home. In this context, mobile communication is of crucial significance for their daily micro-coordinations and emotional exchanges with children and remote loved ones.

Similar to the romantic Chinese legend of the weaver girl and the cowherd who reunite only once a year on a bridge formed by magpies, transnational families who are separated by insurmountable geographical distance also 'meet' each other on the digital 'bridge of magpies' forged by information and communication technologies (ICTs). From delayed, asynchronous connections via tapes and telegrams to sporadic and costly conversations over landline telephones all the way to synchronous communication with Internet-enabled mobile devices such as smartphones and tablet computers, the range of options for international migrants to maintain long-distance relationships has grown in line with the proliferation and development of ICTs (Thomas and Lim, 2011; Wilding, 2006). In technology-mediated spaces, transnational family members can remain involved in one another's mundane experiences and perform familial responsibilities from afar on a daily basis, thus reconstituting family intimacies across national borders (Madianou and Miller, 2011; Parreñas, 2005).

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Building on prior research on the role of technologically mediated communication in the enactment of long-distance intimacy, this chapter features the narratives of three Chinese study mothers in Singapore, presenting detailed accounts of their transnational communication practices to demonstrate their use of mobile communication to manage their intimate relationships with children and left-behind families and friends. Particular focus is placed on the way in which contextual constraints shape their experiences of mediated intimacy, and how – in the face of these constraints – they maximise possibilities for mediated intimacy via all available resources. An innovative 'content-context diary', participant observation and the visualised technique of culturagram (Congress, 1994, 2005) were employed to map the topographies of the mothers' mediated relationships, both distant and proximate, and to identify the contextual constraints and dynamic strategies that were employed within quotidian routines of transnational communication.

### **Chinese 'study mothers' in Singapore**

In contemporary Asian society, a 'cosmopolitan' educational background is increasingly perceived as an essential pathway to upward social mobility (Huang and Yeoh, 2005; Waters, 2006). The overseas education of adolescent children, therefore, has become a top priority for many middle- and upper-middle-class families in Asia, and these families brave painstaking journeys to unfamiliar foreign lands and are prepared to weather the transnational split of their households for this purpose (Chee, 2003; Huang and Yeoh, 2005; Lee and Koo, 2006). In typical cases, the mothers uproot and resettle with their children abroad, while the fathers are 'left behind' in the home country to continue working and to provide financial support for the long-term transnational family situation. The phenomenon of the transnational household has been witnessed in several Asian societies, such as Hong Kong and Taiwan ('astronaut families') (e.g. Chee, 2003; Waters, 2006), South Korea (*kirogi* families) (e.g. Lee, 2010; Lee and Koo, 2006) and Mainland China (*peidu* families) (e.g. Huang and Yeoh, 2005, 2011).

According to previous studies, mothers in these transnational families usually pay the greatest price for the migratory journey, as they sacrifice opportunities for personal career development and often experience an overwhelming sense of loneliness, helplessness and insecurity due to a loss of financial independence and support networks of family and friends (Ho, 2002; Waters, 2006). Moreover, as de facto 'single mothers' in the host country, they

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tend to privilege 'motherhood' over 'wifeness' and 'selfhood', to the extent of sacrificing conjugal relations and individual aspirations in favour of maternal obligations (Chee, 2003; Huang and Yeoh, 2005).

During the past two decades, a considerable number of Chinese mothers – commonly referred to as *peidu* (literally 'accompany study') *mama* (or 'study mothers') – have ventured overseas to accompany their children as they pursue education abroad. Singapore is one of the most popular destinations for Chinese families due to its incentive schemes for foreign students, its high standard of public safety, its cultural proximity to Chinese society, its bilingual education system and so forth (Huang and Yeoh, 2005, 2011). Chinese *peidu* families in Singapore range from wealthy and upper-middle-class families to lower-middle-class families (Huang and Yeoh, 2005). However, under the influence of the 'one-child policy' in China (Fong, 2004), the pursuit of overseas education is no longer exclusive to wealthy 'elite families'. In contrast, growing numbers of middle- and lower-middle-class parents are sending their children abroad, even at the cost of depleting their household savings (Huang and Yeoh, 2005).

### **Mediated intimacies of transnational families – A review of prior research**

Over the past several decades, the increasing accessibility, affordability and rich functionality of advanced ICTs (especially mobile devices and the Internet) have emancipated people from temporal and spatial constraints and brought unprecedented flexibility to social interaction and communication (Fortunati, 2002; Licoppe, 2004; Turkle, 2011). The enactment and reproduction of intimacies – be these at the level of the individual, community or even society – are increasingly shaped by this emerging media-rich environment (Hjorth, 2011; Hjorth and Lim 2012). Nonetheless, this intensely mediated landscape introduces uncomfortable tensions and contradictions that individuals must negotiate. On the one hand, mediated communication offers new and effective approaches to expressing affection and building intimate relationships (Clark, 2012; Licoppe, 2004; Wajcman et al., 2008). On the other hand, the wealth of technological affordances may also cause emotional burdens and impair rather than nurture intimacies (Lim, 2014; Lim and Soon, 2009; Madianou and Miller, 2012; Turkle, 2011).

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For transnationally separated households, mediated communication through ICTs assumes particular significance, as it is the only viable way for members to keep family bonds alive (Horst, 2006; Pham and Lim, 2016; Uy-Tioco, 2007). Extensive research has delved into mediated intimacies within transnational households, with a major strand of literature focusing on the renegotiation of parenthood – especially motherhood – in transnational families in which children have remained in the home country (e.g. Chib et al., 2014; Madianou and Miller, 2011; Uy-Tioco, 2007). Instead of forsaking parental responsibilities after physical separation, migrant mothers often seek to reconstitute or even strengthen their gender identity as 'ideal mothers' via virtual involvement in diverse facets of their children's daily routines (Madianou, 2012; Peng and Wong, 2013; Uy-Tioco, 2007). These mediated mothering practices often include quotidian elements of everyday life such as waking their children up and saying goodnight, reminding them to have meals, helping with their homework and providing comfort when they are depressed (Chib et al., 2014; Madianou, 2012; Peng and Wong, 2013; Uy-Tioco, 2007).

Another important thread in extant research sheds light on the way in which transnationally separated couples employ ICTs to reproduce conjugal intimacies across vast geographical distances (e.g. Cabanes and Acedera, 2012; King-O'Riain, 2015; Neustaedter and Greenberg, 2012). In particular, distant couples have been observed to 'hang out' in mediated spaces where they share mundane and bittersweet everyday occurrences, cooperate on family affairs and express affection to each other (King-O'Riain, 2015; Neustaedter and Greenberg, 2012). Mediated communication has been found to play a dual role, in that it can both enable new practices of cooperation between husbands and wives (Cabanes and Acedera, 2012; Kang, 2012) and thrust migrants back into their family lives, allowing them to hold on to their previous family roles (Cabanes and Acedera, 2012; Madianou, 2012; Uy-Tioco, 2007).

The majority of studies have noted the indispensable role of mediated communication as the 'social glue of transnationalism' (Vertovec, 2004: 219). ICTs – and especially webcam software such as Skype – allow separated family members to 'stream' each other's daily routines in a mediated space of co-presence that enables information and emotions to be reciprocated in a precise and ongoing manner as if the family were still together (King-O'Riain, 2015; Longhurst, 2013; Wilding, 2006). Some studies have also scrutinised the

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potentially burdensome implications of mediated communication. In particular, mediated interactions mean far less than the immediate company of loved ones. Sometimes it is precisely the simulated togetherness that reminds migrants and their families of the actual physical distance between them and accentuates feelings of guilt, anxiety and loneliness (Parreñas, 2005; Uy-Tioco, 2007; Wilding, 2006).

Although prior research has offered considerable insight into the multifarious roles of mediated communication in remote family intimacies, the range of transnational families that are studied is far from complete. Specifically, previous studies have paid exclusive attention to the use of ICT by 'mother-away' transnational households, in which women have migrated alone for financial benefits and left their children and husbands behind in their home countries (e.g. Chib et al., 2014; Madianou and Miller, 2011; Thomas and Lim, 2011; Uy-Tioco, 2007). However, despite the prevalence of education migration across Asia, 'mother-child resettlement' transnational households and the migrant mothers involved remain understudied in media and communication research.

Moreover, transnational families do not live in isolated environments but are located in and shaped by a series of social and geographical inequalities (Parreñas, 2005). Many sociocultural factors, such as gender, ethnicity, nationality and social class, may be foregrounded and bleed into their experiences of mediated intimacy (Anthias, 2002; Parreñas, 2005; Plüss, 2013). However, to date, research has only examined 'salient' influential factors such as gender (e.g. Hannaford, 2015; Kang, 2012), place of origin and destination (e.g. Cabanes and Acedera, 2012; Peng and Wong, 2013) and working conditions (e.g. Parreñas, 2005; Thomas and Lim, 2011), while many seemingly prosaic yet crucial factors, such as language proficiency, housing conditions and motivations for relocation, have been overlooked. In this context, this chapter proposes a closer investigation of the quotidian routines of mobile communication by Chinese study mothers and their families in their home country, with a particular focus on the contextual constraints that shape their transnational communication practices and, in turn, their proactive strategies of negotiating family intimacies in the face of such constraints.

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## **Research method**

For this study, an innovative 'content-context diary' with participant observation was designed and conducted with ten Chinese study mothers of diverse sociocultural backgrounds. Each participant was shadowed by the same researcher for two days, one weekday and one weekend day; in this way, the research covered as many contexts of her daily life as possible within the limited research period. Each observation lasted for 8 to 12 hours, according to the schedule and convenience of the participant. During the observation, participants were told to behave naturally while the researcher accompanied them and observed their mobile communication practices. After completing the two-day observation process, each participant was given a shopping voucher as a token of appreciation. The detailed research protocol was approved by the National University of Singapore's Institutional Review Board.

Participants were recruited through a combination of convenience sampling and snowball sampling from multiple sources, including the researcher's personal networks, instant messaging groups that specifically catered to Chinese study mothers in Singapore and local churches with Chinese fellowship groups. Participants were selected in order to achieve diversity in demographic traits (e.g. age of child, years of relocation, type of employment, etc.). Thus, the final sample was representative of the social group.

A researcher-administered 'content-context diary' was employed during the observation to record both content- and context-related aspects of mobile communication. Specifically, the content-related aspects included the correspondent and platform of communication, details of the content exchanged, the mode of expression and so on; context-related aspects encompassed the temporal and spatial settings of communication, the attitudes and emotions involved, special behaviours and their meanings during mediated communication and so on. Since the participants primarily spoke Mandarin, diary entries were maintained in English, Chinese or a mixture of both during the fieldwork, and later transcribed into English. Informal interviews were also incorporated into the observation to gather background information and elicit the subjective opinions of participants when interesting issues emerged from the research process.

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Qualitative data collected from participant observation was analysed through the visual technique of the culturagram (Congress, 1994, 2005). The culturagram is a multi-dimensional family assessment tool that is employed by social workers to understand and intervene in culturally diverse families, and it has proven to be particularly effective in identifying the impact of cultural values and practices on family functioning (Brownell, 1997; Congress, 2005). The prototype culturagram model embraces ten sociocultural dimensions of family life, including legal status, time in the community, family values and contact with cultural/religious institutions (as shown in Figure 1).

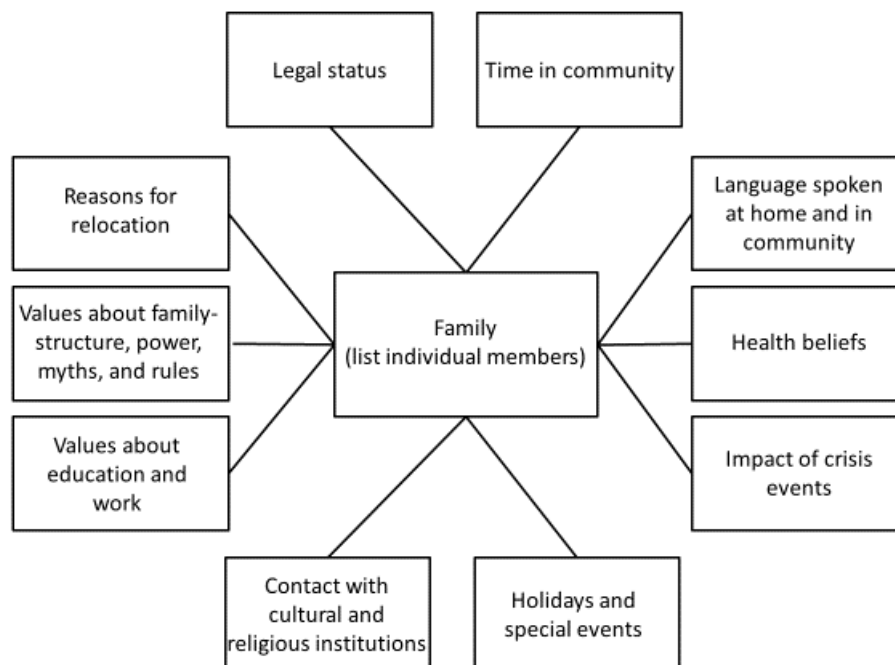


Figure 1. Culturagram. (Congress, 2005)

For this study, the culturagram model was adapted for the particular life situation of the Chinese study mothers in order to identify crucial factors in their transnational life that could affect their daily routines and strategies of mediated communication. The adapted model, the 'transnational culturagram', encompassed 18 dimensions of transnational life, including: demographic factors, such as residential status; subjective factors, such as motives for relocation; relational factors, such as social activities; and life transition factors, such as significant life events that preceded and/or accompanied the relocation (see Figure 2).



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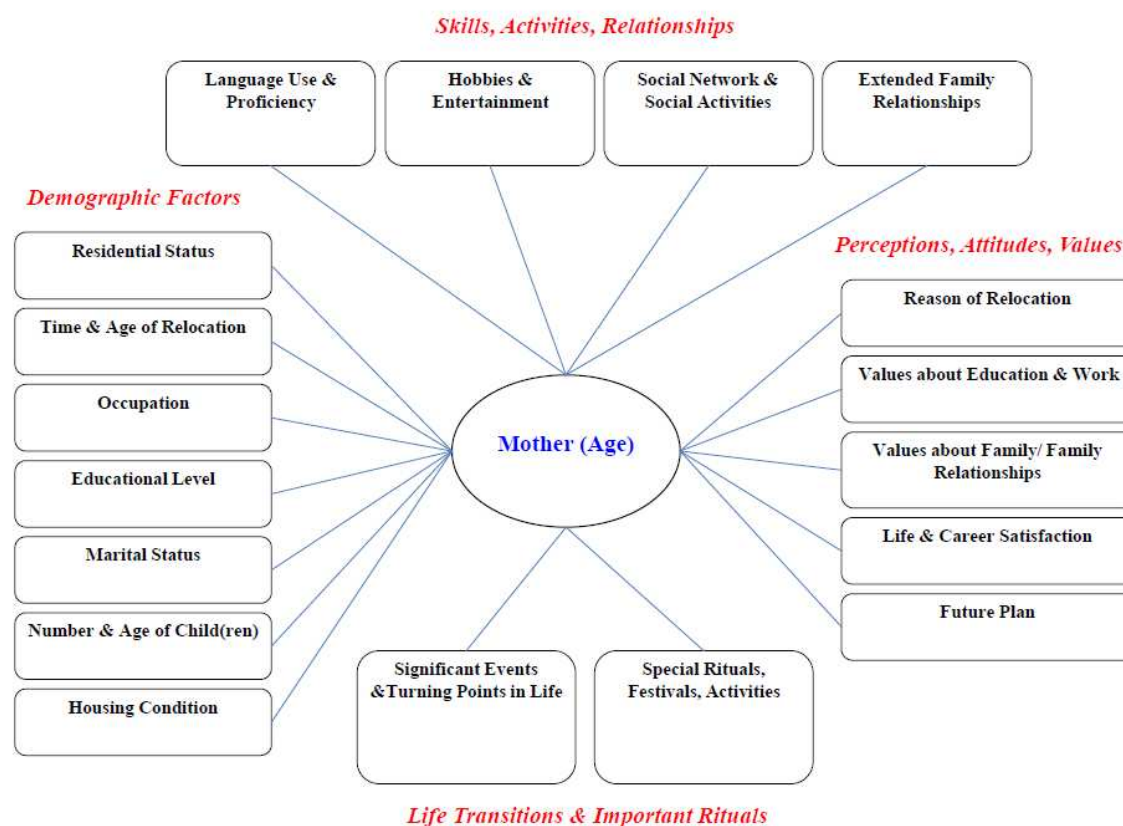


Figure 2. Transnational culturagram.

## Findings

In this chapter, we present the experiences of three of the ten mothers in our study, representing different socioeconomic profiles. We seek to demonstrate how transnational life situations posed significant constraints on the migrants' expression of intimacies, while also showing that the migrants could be highly creative in circumventing these contextual limitations.

### *Ms Zhang: Multi-sited householding by a 'digital immigrant'*

Having relocated with her son in 2002, 49-year-old Ms Zhang was among the 'first-wave' Chinese study mothers in Singapore. As a lower-middle-class family, the Zhangs had to drain their household savings and even borrow money from relatives to support the move. After relocating to Singapore, Ms Zhang managed to find employment in the service sector, which guaranteed her sufficient income to cover all of her expenses in the host country. Several years later, her husband quit his job in China and joined his wife and son in Singapore.

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However, the joy of the family reunion did not last long, as Ms Zhang soon discovered that her husband had become addicted to gambling and had squandered almost all of their hard-earned savings. Bitterly disappointed in her husband's impenitence, she moved out of their home and planned to get divorced after her son's graduation from college. A full snapshot of Ms Zhang's transnational life is shown in Figure 3.

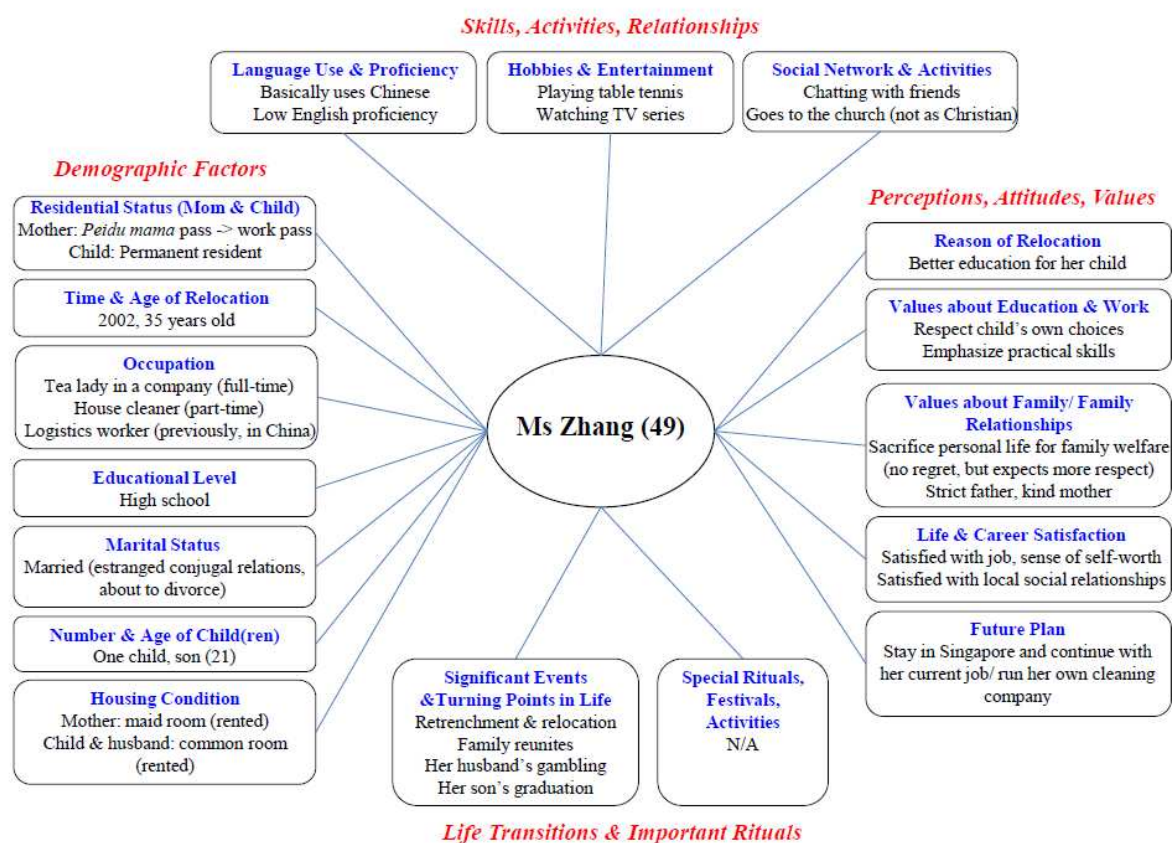


Figure 3. Transnational culturagram of Ms Zhang.

Ms Zhang had two mobile phones: an old-fashioned cell phone that had been given to her by her employer for work purposes and a smartphone of her own. As a 'digital immigrant' with low proficiency in ICTs, she utilised only very limited functions of both devices, and showed a strong preference for more 'traditional' functions on the old-fashioned cell phone over 'new' platforms that were available on her smartphone for daily communication.

Due to her strained relationship with her husband, Ms Zhang seldom spoke to him, either in person or through technological mediation, even though they lived in the same city. At the

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time of the research, she was living separately from her son, yet remained updated on his daily routines and provided real-time help when necessary via mediated communication. For example, when she was preparing dinner for herself one evening, she remembered the shrimp and sausages she had bought for him several days prior and paused what she was doing to remind him, over WeChat, to cook the food without delay (see the excerpt from the content-context diary in Figure 4).

ITEM	CONTENT	CONTEXT
6:17pm-6:19pm	Sent voice message to her son Smartphone, WeChat Reminded him and his father to cook the shrimps and sausage she bought for them last weekend	About to cook dinner, standing in front of the refrigerator No one else in the living room or kitchen (public spaces of the apartment) Explained that she usually did not speak much with her son and husband during week days unless there was something urgent

Figure 4. Diary excerpt: Ms Zhang's communication with her son.

Such short and sporadic conversations characterised the mediated communication between Ms Zhang and her son. Her working conditions as a tea lady and in-home cleaner rendered it impossible for her to maintain continuous contact with him. Moreover, since she lived in a small maid's room and shared the apartment with several other tenants, she tended to avoid prolonged mediated conversations at home. In view of these obstacles, she relied more on regular face-to-face communication with her son to maintain their intimate relationship. Mobile communication played a supplementary role and was only utilised occasionally for coordinating schedules and spontaneously chatting.

Although Ms Zhang managed to maintain a close relationship with her son, she found it difficult to get emotional support from him after he became an independent adult. As the years went on, extended family members increasingly constituted her main source of emotional comfort. Mobile communication enabled her and her left-behind family to share personal experiences at length, and hence secured for her constant companionship and support during her 'tough days'. For example, after she discovered her husband's gambling addiction, she made many phone calls to her aunt in Shanghai to pour out her feelings and seek suggestions in dealing with this thorny issue:

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She [my aunt] is the only person who can fully understand me [...] I called her immediately [after I found out about my husband's gambling]. I cried and scolded him [my husband]. She talked to me for more than two hours, comforting me throughout. She also suggested that I talk to my husband calmly before making any hasty decisions [...] I really appreciated her. Without her, I might have done something irrational.

Besides strengthening long-distance intimacy with her family back home, mobile communication also nurtured Ms Zhang's intimate relationships in the host society. In particular, her regular sharing of useful information and mundane experiences with local friends and colleagues in the mediated space not only helped her to resolve everyday challenges but, more importantly, granted her a sense of 'being accompanied'.

#### *Ms Yu: Negotiating a hectic schedule of work-life blending at home*

Ms Yu was a 40-year-old mother of two boys, aged 13 and 2 at the time of research. In 2010, her entire family resettled in Singapore in pursuit of a better education for her elder son. One year later, her husband returned to China while she and her son remained in Singapore. Compared with Ms Zhang, who had to work to make ends meet, Ms Yu was from an affluent middle-class family and received sufficient financial support from her husband. However, she decided to take on some part-time work, including a job as a direct seller of health products, in order to relieve the burden on her husband. As a Christian, she participated in many activities and made many good friends in church. A full snapshot of Ms Yu's transnational life is shown in Figure 5.

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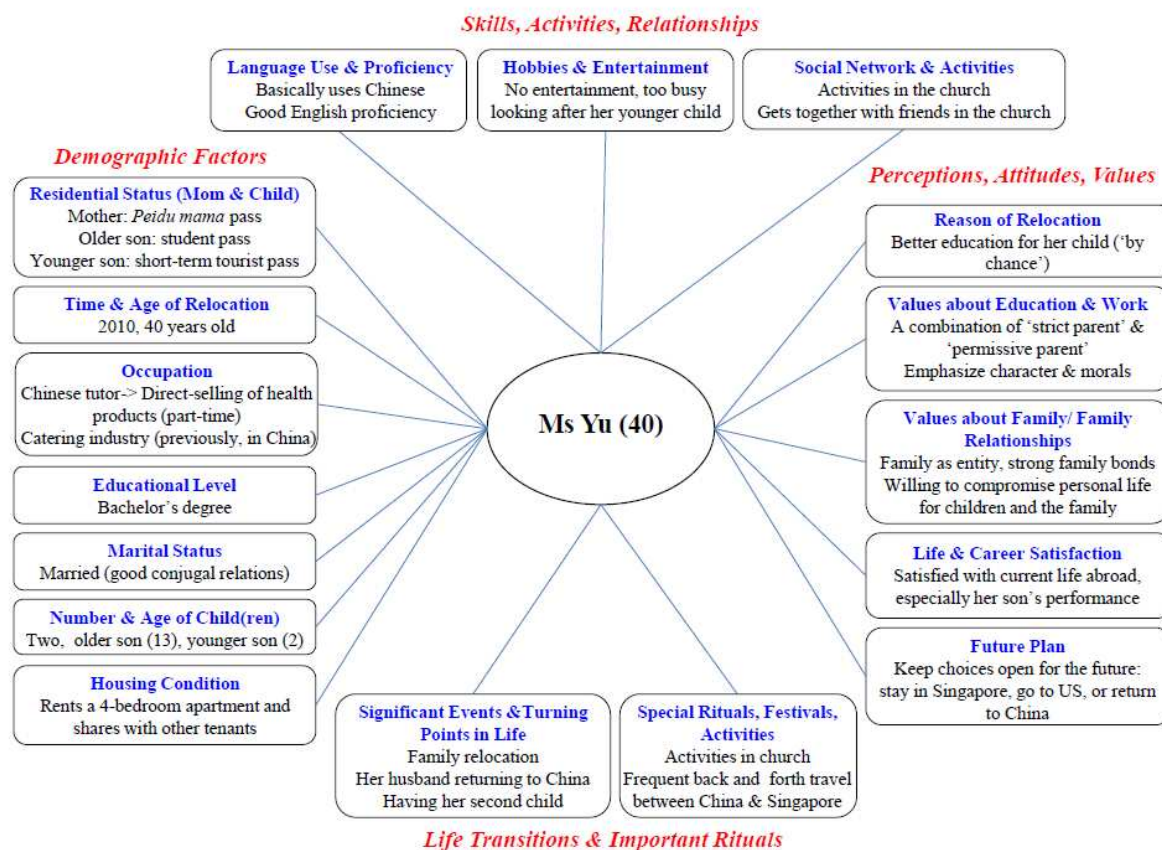


Figure 5: Transnational culturagram of Ms Yu.

As a full-time 'single mother' and a part-time homemaker, Ms Yu was located in a situation of 'work-life blending' (Clark, 2000), wherein her already hectic family life was constantly punctuated by work-related demands. In this context, mobile communication assumed crucial significance in her daily juggling of work and family obligations. Through strategic deployment of her smartphone, she was able to maintain intimate relationships with family members back home, stay in contact with networks of local friends and colleagues and reach out to increasing numbers of customers without stepping out of her house.

Rather than comprising merely routine greetings or discussions of major domestic affairs, mediated communication between Ms Yu and her husband usually went deep into mundane daily activities and feelings, relating to dinner plans, anecdotes about their children, the weather and other topics. Considering her tight schedule, Ms Yu tended to use all available 'fragmented time' – such as during her younger son's afternoon nap and while cooking or waiting for the bus – to exchange messages with her husband. For example, when she

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browsed group chats on WeChat during cooking, she found a new reading group for Christians and recommended it to him immediately (see the diary excerpt in Figure 6).

ITEM	CONTENT	CONTEXT
5:49pm-5:50pm	Sent text messages to her husband Smartphone, WeChat Recommended that her husband join a reading group on WeChat (initiated by church friends)	Cooking dinner in the kitchen Her son was reading a picture book about vehicles in the living room (sometimes ran around the dining room and the kitchen) Explained that her husband was also a Christian, so she often recommended materials in her church groups to him

Figure 6. Diary excerpt: Ms Yu's communication with her husband.

Since Ms Yu's husband was also very busy with his job in China, the fragmentary yet continuous trickle of mediated communication was optimal for the spouses to reproduce long-distance family intimacy on a daily basis, while minimising interruptions to their regular schedules.

Beyond using mobile communication in the domestic sphere, Ms Yu also used mobile communication to seek various forms of social support from larger social networks in the host society. In particular, as a busy mother who spent most of her time at home, she relied heavily on a series of WeChat group chats with church friends for companionship and emotional comfort. Rather than discussing or solving practical problems, most conversations in these groups comprised daily greetings or affective expressions (see examples in Figure 7).

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Figure 7. Ms Yu's group chats on WeChat.

According to Ms Yu, the simple posts of 'Amen' and 'Christ be with you' built strong and intimate bonds between the group members and afforded her a strong sense of belonging and togetherness despite her relatively isolated life. In her own words, these virtual communities served as 'a second home' for her and her friends, where they could 'express their feelings freely, without reservations'.

#### *Ms Gu: Transnational companionship on the webcam*

Ms Gu, a 42-year-old mother of a 13-year-old son, had been in Singapore for three years at the time of the research. As she came from an upper-middle-class family, abundant financial support from her husband and other family members spared her the toil of taking on unsatisfactory jobs and allowed her to fully concentrate on child-minding while enjoying a rich social life in the host society. As a former high school English teacher in China, she had good English proficiency, and this facilitated her quick adaptation and creation of local networks in Singapore. A full snapshot of Ms Yu's transnational life is shown in Figure 8.

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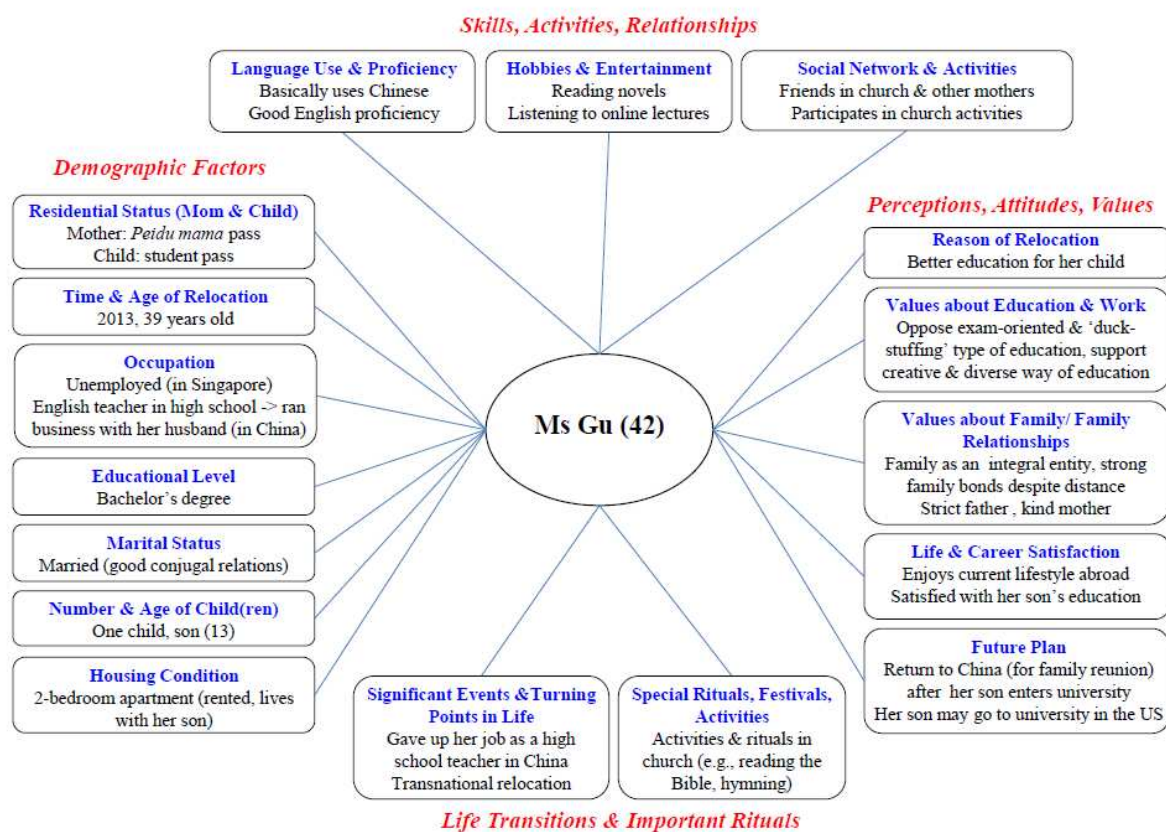


Figure 8. Transnational culturagram of Ms Gu.

For Ms Gu and her husband, mutual virtual presence in each other's customary routines was their 'default state' of daily life after the relocation. Continuous mediated communication via the smartphone and iPad, especially on WeChat, bridged the physical gulf between them and allowed them to enjoy family life as if they were still living under the same roof. Most of the time, their conversations – whether in the form of video, voice or text – were prosaic 'small talk' without any practical purpose. For example, every evening Ms Gu 'showed off' pictures of dinners she had cooked to her husband via WeChat (see examples in Figure 9). Over time, 'sharing dinner' became a habituated 'family ritual' between them, and often served as preludes to long mediated conversations over the webcam.



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Figure 9. Ms Gu's WeChat conversations with her husband.

Compared to Ms Zhang and Ms Yu, whose daily routines largely hinged upon work-related demands, Ms Gu had generous space-time flexibility in her family life. Moreover, living in an apartment that was exclusive to her and her son, she also enjoyed a high degree of privacy and freedom in her mobile communication. In this context, she often left the webcam on for an extended period of time while engaging in domestic chores and personal activities, such as cooking, having dinner and reading. For both sides, mediated communication was more of a companionship that replicated an environment of 'togetherness' than a pragmatic tool for information exchange. This virtual companionship could take place almost anytime and anywhere. For example, when her husband was travelling late at night, Ms Gu stayed up until he arrived at his destination and talked to him via webcam as he settled down (see the diary excerpt in Figure 10).

ITEM	CONTENT	CONTEXT
0:40am	Video chat with her husband Smartphone, WeChat Asked whether he had arrived at the destination Her husband dialed video chat and talked with her for about 20 minutes	Lying in bed She had a headache, and got up to eat a painkiller Her husband was travelling that night, so she chatted with him after waking up

Figure 10. Diary excerpt: Ms Gu's communication with her husband.

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Continuous mediated communication also allowed Ms Gu and her husband to coordinate domestic affairs such as decisions, online purchases and schedule confirmations in real time and in vivid detail, regardless of their physical separation. For example, Ms Gu described how they would 'sit together' to purchase airline tickets on a Chinese website:

My Singapore phone number could not receive the verification code, so I changed the reception number to my husband's [and booked tickets again]. After he received the code, he forwarded it to me immediately, and I completed the purchase [...] It was very quick, less than two minutes in all. It was just like we were sitting together [to buy tickets].

Owing to her strong English proficiency and relatively ample free time, Ms Gu was among the most 'sociable' study mothers. She participated actively in various local activities – both online and offline – and sought to expand her social circles in the host society. Mobile communication, which afforded Ms Gu a diversity of mediated interaction, boosted her ability to foster local networks of both co-national and foreign friends. Hence, she could effectively maintain intensive communication with several groups of Chinese friends on WeChat and exchange information with them on many aspects of daily life, such as cooking, children's education, shopping and so on. At the same time, she also participated in a variety of WhatsApp groups and email lists to remain updated on the latest news about local activities, such as hiking trips, lectures and religious activities.

## **Discussion and conclusion**

The three cases presented above show that mobile ICTs – particularly smartphones, which are assemblages of early ICTs (Madianou, 2014) – were woven deeply into the fabric of the Chinese study mothers' quotidian routines and constituted indispensable parts of their family and social lives. Specifically, mobile communication served as a digital 'bridge of magpies' for these mothers, linking them to both left-behind family and local communities, and thus facilitating the reconstitution of transnational family intimacies and the nurturance of new social networks in the host society. In the face of various contextual constraints, these mothers developed idiosyncratic strategies for mediated communication according to their unique life situations, in order to perform multiple gender roles (such as mother, wife,

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daughter and friend) and to properly negotiate the complexity of social relationships in line with each of these roles.

In accordance with previous research, mobile communication was found to assume crucial significance for the transnational families in recreating the warmth of domesticity and maintaining affective bonds despite vast geographical distances (e.g. Parreñas, 2005; Wilding, 2006). The trickle of 'emotional streaming' (King-O'Riain, 2015), although piecemeal and prosaic, allowed information and emotions to flow smoothly across national borders, and thus reproduced family intimacies on a daily basis. While there seemed to be a universal desire for maintaining long-distance intimacy, routines and outcomes of transnational communication varied according to economic and sociocultural backgrounds (see also Parreñas, 2005). In the transnational context, in particular, each individual or household has a unique social position from which a certain amount of human resources can be accessed, while structural constraints are imposed (Anthias, 2002; Plüss, 2013). These constraints, which derive from diverse axes such as gender, nationality and social class, both delimit the possibilities for transnational families to practise mediated communication and, at the same time, encourage them to develop novel strategies for articulating intimacy (Clark, 2012; Parreñas, 2005).

For the Chinese study mothers, in particular, the principal constraints of mobile communication did not lie in economic concerns – such as those relating to the availability and affordability of ICTs (see also Madianou, 2014; Madianou and Miller, 2012) – but rather in a series of contextual factors tied to their daily routines. In this research, we identified three main dimensions of constraints that created significant obstacles to mediated intimacy: spatial, temporal and social constraints. Spatial constraints emerged when access to and the convenience of using mobile ICTs were restricted by immediate spatial settings in which a person was embedded. As in Ms Zhang's case, her isolated work conditions and her shared apartment rendered it impossible for her to maintain constant and unconstrained contact with her loved ones. Temporal constraints became evident when the routines of mediated communication were in tension with or interrupted by other obligations. For example, in Ms Yu's case, her hectic schedule as a mother of two children and part-time seller left her very little time for daily communication. Social constraints were shaped by social norms, policies and household power relations. For most of the mothers in this study, their primary role as

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full-time mothers in Singapore and their difficulty in finding local employment confined them to the domestic sphere, and this narrowed their range of mediated relationships.

Nevertheless, although these study mothers were initially circumscribed by various contextual constraints, they did not remain so. Over time, they manifested strong agency and creativity that enabled them to circumvent the constraints that were imposed on them and developed strategies to maximise mediated intimacies with any available resource. For example, in the face of spatial constraints, Ms Zhang established regular communication routines with her son and sought to replace mediated interaction with face-to-face interaction. Similarly, Ms Yu made good use of fragmented time to maintain a thin yet steady trickle of conversations with her husband in light of temporal constraints. As for the social constraints derived from their isolated life experiences, most of the mothers chose to actively approach local networks of co-national friends online for instrumental and emotional support. Indeed, the seemingly marginalised and powerless positions of these mothers actually compelled and impelled them to explore more possibilities for nurturing diverse forms of mediated intimacies and, as a result, led them to perform their roles as mothers, wives, daughters and friends in the transnational context more successfully.

Through an in-depth qualitative research method and a comprehensive evaluation of the panoply of factors that influence the transnational migrant existence, this chapter has sought to shed light on an understudied transnational migrant population with very specific sociocultural and contextual constraints. Our study has further identified the complex of social-temporal-spatial constraints that significantly impinge on mediated communication practices and personalised strategies for circumventing these limitations in order to build and sustain intimacies.

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