

**Transnational families and digital
technologies: Parenting at a distance among
Chinese families**

Thesis submitted for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

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Declaration of Authorship

I...Hong Chen...hereby declare that this thesis and the work presented in it is entirely my own. Where I have consulted the work of others, this is always clearly stated.

Signed: _____ Date: _____

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Abstract

This thesis aims to address how Chinese transnational family members involved in the ‘caregiving triangle’ – migrant parents, left-behind children and guardians (Suarez-Orozco et al., 2002) – navigate new media environments to negotiate their family roles and maintain kinship ties. Acknowledging the structural ‘asymmetrical reciprocity’ (Baldassar & Merla, 2014) of transnational families – which derives from the intersection of internal factors (including family obligation, expectations and norms) and external transnational socioeconomic contexts – this study examines the power dynamics and care circulation through mediated communication among family members across borders. To this end, this study employs a three-year multi-sited ethnography, including participant observation, in-depth interviews and online ethnography of Chinese labour migrants in Britain (mainly clandestine and low-skilled workers) and their family members, conducted between 2015 and 2018. The findings highlight the varied forms of agency and challenges experienced by migrant and non-migrant family members embedded in different social-technical contexts. Notable among these are: the transnational family structure; migration status and generation; Chinese patriarchal ideology; and the socio-economic discrepancies between Britain and (rural) China, which contribute to the shaping of mediated transnational communication. The adoption of communication technology in transnational family life has minimized the geographical and temporal constraints that divide these dispersed family members and enhanced the ‘reciprocity’ between them (including childrearing collaboration between migrant parents and guardians and strengthened intergenerational solidarity between migrant parents and children). However, it has also exacerbated the ‘asymmetry’ of transnational families, such as increased gendered parenting burdens and parental surveillance over left-behind children. This study argues that this mediated ‘asymmetrical reciprocity’ is subject to constant negotiation, as a consequence of unconfined translocal family settings along with the affordances of communication technologies.

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Chapter 1. Introduction

“Because loving your love; dreaming of your dreams;

I am sad of your sadness; happy of your happiness;

because passing the road that you passed;

experiencing the pain that you experienced;

I am happy of your happiness, following what you followed.”

Su Rui, *Holding Hands*

Many years later, when she became a medical student at the State University of New York, Ding Lin was to remember the birthday night when her father wrote a letter to Shanghai Radio Station to broadcast a song for her. The requested song was called *Holding Hands* and was performed by Su Rui, a renowned Taiwanese singer. Following the soothing sound of music, the DJ started to read the letter from Ding Lin’s father, who was working as a clandestine dishwasher in Tokyo, “It has been eight years since dad left you. How time flies. You were just a little girl at the time, but now you have become a senior student in high school. Ding Lin, my good daughter. I cannot stay by your side and give you guidance and care. But when you feel sleepy in class, when you cannot concentrate yourself, or feel sluggish reviewing your lessons, please listen to this song in your heart, which I requested for you from Tokyo. Hope this song could give you warmth, paternal love and the courage to overcome difficulties. Go for it. My daughter, move forward to achieve your goal.”

In 1989 when she was in primary school, Ding Lin's father, Ding Shangbiao, a former rusticated youth¹, left their family in Shanghai and embarked on a journey to Japan in order to shake off poverty. Putting himself in huge debt, he applied for a language school in Hokkaido, hoping to engage in advanced studies in the future. However, the work opportunities promised by the school were never realized. The prohibitively high cost of living in Japan, along with the heavy immigration debt, forced Ding Shangbiao to leave his course. He travelled to Tokyo, where he began an arduous life as a clandestine worker. During the debt payment period, the father eventually gave up his dream of studying overseas as he gradually aged. He decided to pass on the dream to his daughter. In the following years, Ding Shangbiao hopped between different factories, restaurants, and hotels, immersing himself in his work. For a long period of time, he took three manual jobs every day, in order to send more remittances back home. The money was saved by his wife as future tuition for their daughter's overseas study, while the daughter and mother's daily expenditure was primarily covered by the latter's meagre income working in a small knitting mill in Shanghai. This might be a one-moment thought, but no one would know that it took fifteen years for the whole family to make it happen, when Ding Lin finally attended the commencement as a medical graduate at the State University of New York. Throughout the separation years, Ding Lin could not remember how many times she and her mother had cried when reading letters from her father or during their occasional international calls, just as they did on that birthday night when she was choked with sobs in the emotional melody of *Holding Hands*.

¹ The rusticated youth, or the sent-down youth, also known as *zhiqing*, were the urban young people who were sent to the countryside to participate in manual labour on farms and forests in China from the 1950s until the 1970s. The sent-down youth were the product of the "Up to the Mountains and Down to the Countryside Movement" (also known as the Sent-Down Movement, *shang shan xia xiang*), which aimed to reeducate urban and educated youth by having them experience the harsh life of their rural compatriots (Rene, 2013). Although some of these young people had graduated from middle school and university, many of them ended their education after elementary school before getting involved with the movement (Hille, 2013). After returning to their urban hometowns, these sent-down youth found it hard to adapt to the fast changing and competitive economic development. Their lack of skills and low education levels compelled them to live below the poverty line (Pan, 2003).

This is a film scene in ‘Living in Tears’, an episode of the documentary series *Days in Japan*, directed by Zhang Liling, a former Chinese overseas student in Japan (Li, 2012). The bittersweet transnational family life in the documentary was not uncommon ever since China’s ‘reform and opening’ policy (*gai ge kai fang*) in 1978 when the first-wave of Chinese people went abroad. As the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2014) indicates, more than 9 million Chinese emigrated between 1990 and 2013, an increase of over 120 percent, upgrading China to the fourth-largest migrant sending country globally from the seventh place in 1990. During these decades, China’s economic reform has given rise to immense changes in Chinese society, facilitating the international flow of Chinese people. As a vital part of the economic reform, the ‘open-door policy’ (*da kai guo men*) has integrated China into the world economy, making it more open to global capital and population movement (Pai, 2012). Yet, the inflow of foreign capital has also forced China to transform its economic system to facilitate interaction with world markets (Sung, 2009). This has involved a process of de-collectivization of agriculture and privatization of state-owned institutions across the whole country. Indeed, these market-driven measures have largely boosted China’s national economic growth. However, the deregulation of labour-intensive industries on such a large scale has also rendered local labour forces more vulnerable to competition from international products, leading to an unprecedented level of unemployment in rural and urban China (Harvey, 2005). As Deng Xiao Ping, the Chinese leader who initiated the economic reform, bluntly claimed, the purpose of the reform was to “make some people get rich first” (*rang yi bu fen ren xian fu qi lai*) (The Economist, 2011). As a result, those who are less-skilled and low-educated, such as rural peasant workers and employees laid off by state-owned enterprises, have become the victims who are “pushed off the fast train of the ruthlessly developing market economy in China” (Pai, 2008: xviii). Some leave their hometowns for more developed areas that have benefited from the economic reforms, which results in the proverbial Chinese internal migration, while others opt to go abroad and step towards overseas labour market.

This thesis sets out to explore how Chinese overseas migrants and their left-behind family members navigate communication technologies to maintain their family bonds. This is partly because Chinese overseas migrants and their use of new media have received relatively less attention compared to their counterparts in China's internal migration (Sun, 2009, 2014; Wallis, 2013; Wang, 2016). More importantly, most academic writing in the field of Chinese overseas migration and new media has concentrated on questions of identity negotiation (Ding, 2007; Kang, 2009; Sun, 2005; Yin, 2015) and the political empowerment of diasporic populations (Shi, 2005; Sun, 2002), while the significant problem of relation maintenance, especially the intimate relationships in a transnational context, has remained largely underexplored (although see Kang, 2012). What does it mean to a family when parents go abroad for certain purposes while leaving their children behind? How do they maintain a family as they live in different countries, separated for years? These questions are of particular significance for understanding the complexity and multi-dimension of a transnational process within the context of Chinese migration. Meanwhile, the decreasing cost of international telephone calls and the proliferation of new media technologies, such as internet- and mobile phone-based platforms, including instant messaging, social media and webcam calls, have largely made transnational communication more affordable and convenient. Given that the media landscape of the contemporary era is entirely different from that in 'Living in Tears', which was filmed in the 1990s, another important and intriguing question is how the emergence of new media technologies influence the everyday lives of today's transnational families.

To answer these questions, this study draws on a three-year multi-sited ethnography of UK-based migrant workers and their left-behind family members in China, conducted between 2015 and 2018. Although there is no official consensus, several estimates indicate that the number of UK-based Chinese migrant workers is somewhere in the

range of 150,000 – 200,000; the UK is one of the most popular receiving countries for Chinese labour migrants (Pieke et al., 2004; Kagan et al., 2011). I mainly focus on the problems of low-skilled and clandestine migrant groups, particularly those Chinese people living in Britain who have insecure legal status. This is because the question of transnational family relationships is of particular importance for these vulnerable migrants who often lack social capital and mobility. In 2006, the Immigration, Asylum and Nationality Act in the UK was adopted, including measures to prevent irregular migrants from working. In 2008, a point-based system was instigated, enabling the migration of highly skilled workers but designed to prevent the entry of low-skilled workers (Kagan et al., 2011). The increasing selective immigration policy in Britain welcomes those perceived as highly skilled while excluding others without marketable skills or qualifications or insufficient language skills (Lam et al., 2009). In this vein, privileged migrants (mainly comprised of well-educated or high-skilled young people, Knowles, 2015) are able to take family members as dependents through employment and study not only because of their financial capability but also due to the current immigration policy. In stark contrast, economic migrants with relatively low income cannot afford frequent home visits or to bring their families over, and those without a documented status are not even able to move freely across the national border, thus having to face the dilemma of family separation over a long period. Moreover, the salary threshold regulation issued in 2012, which sets a minimum income requirement for migrants to bring non-EU family members to Britain² has made reunification increasingly difficult for low-skilled workers, even if they have acquired documented status. The amount is higher than most of them will ever achieve.

Before proceeding, I will make some clarifications concerning the use of the terminology ‘clandestine migration’. There are a variety of terms in migration studies

² If applicants want to applying for their partner or spouse to join them in the UK, they need to reach the income threshold of £18,600 every year before tax. If they want to bring their children to live with them, the requirement rises by £3,800 for one child and £2,400 for each additional one (The Migration Observatory, 2016).

that describe clandestine migration, including ‘illegal’, ‘unlawful’, ‘undocumented’, unauthorized and ‘irregular’ migration. In most cases, these terms are used interchangeably. However, as noted by Düvell (2008: 484), this is inappropriate since different terms have specific points of reference, such as law, crime, identity documents or regularity. The aforementioned alternative expressions carry negative connotations of migrants as criminals and are often construed as “discursive and legal inscriptions defined through a state-imposed negation” (Andersson, 2012: 14). By contrast, ‘clandestine’ migration has relatively less negative burden and allows more space for interpreting migrants’ expedient activities, such as “hiding from police, evading border checks and disguising the legal otherness through recourse to false documentation” (ibid: 13). Despite its usefulness as an analytical term, ‘clandestine migration’ has also been questioned for masking the complexities of ‘documented and ‘irregular’ immigration status, which are primarily determined by migrants’ entry, residence and employment. To address the limitations, this study also draws on Düvell’s (2008) elaboration of the term. According to Düvell, the three aspects could be considered as independent variables determining whether a migrant is regular or not, and they could also be combined to define one’s immigration status. For example,

either a person has clandestinely and without authorization crossed the border of a nation state and is or is not working; or a person who has legally stayed in a given country fails to depart in accordance with the time limit set in his or her visa, overstays, and is or is not working; or a person who is staying in a given country legally is taking up employment in breach of visa regulations and is thereby jeopardizing their immigration status or a person is born to illegal immigrants and becomes an illegal immigrant himself or herself by birth without ever having crossed an international border.

(Düvell, 2008: 487)

The clandestine migrants involved in this study mainly fall into the former two categorizations and their immigration status will be elaborated later.

1.1 Transnational communication in new media environments

Given that regular hands-on care and face-to-face interaction are clearly not possible in transnational families, remittances and the social use of communication technologies have largely constituted the cornerstone of care circulation across borders. Remittances as a medium of care (Zelizer, 2005; McKay, 2005; Singh & Cabraal, 2014) is not only about sending money, though this is critical to the well-being of non-migrating family members (Åkesson, 2011; Levitt, 2001) – they also operate as symbolic ways in which familial obligation and commitment are enacted and reproduced (Horst, 2006; Olwig, 1999). Compared to the bulk of studies investigating the social implications of migrant remittances, communication technology – another crucial avenue of transnational information exchange and emotional flow – had long been under-examined in early studies and was regarded as a mere tool of communication (Bryceson & Vuorela, 2002; Dreby, 2010; Parreñas, 2001a).

Given its increasing significance in transnational family life, the systematic analysis of media technology has been put on the agenda of sociology and communication studies in recent years (Baldassar, 2008a; Cabanes & Acedera, 2012; Madianou & Miller, 2012). As Baldassar and Merla (2014: 54) argue, migration has been characterized by the increased use of new communication technologies since they can help to ensure migrants remain very much a living part of family life. Migrants in the digital age are no longer deemed to be “uprooted”, but instead “connected” despite geographical

distance (Diminescu, 2008). Being the “social glue” of transnationalism (Vertovec, 2004a), new media technology has made it possible for family members scattered around the world to maintain the same ties of kinship that proximate families do. Despite the temporal and geographical constraints, the ubiquitous mediated/virtual co-presence (Baldassar, 2008a; Baym, 2010), which makes the absent family member “tangible” (Wilding, 2006) and embodied, has contributed to the maintenance of kinship and created a sense of “doing family” (Morgan, 2011) among dispersed families across borders.

Overall, this body of literature has highlighted the dialectical consequence of media technology in “connected transnational families” (Madianou & Miller, 2012). On the one hand, the use of communication technology is conducive to mitigating the emotional cost of migration, intensifying the circulation of care and support, and facilitating family solidarities at a distance (Baldassar et al., 2016; Madianou & Miller, 2012; Nedelcu & Wyss, 2016; Wilding, 2006). However, on the other, frequent communications could also give rise to unforeseen obligations, burdens, or even conflicts among transnational family members (Horst, 2006; Madianou & Miller, 2012). Following these fruitful discussions, I will not only address the ways in which transnational family members engage with transnational communication and exchange via media technologies, but also shed light on the role these technologies play in shaping family relationships across time and space. The questions of whether and under what circumstances communication technologies can replace physical co-presence, and the ways in which various communication technologies (including access, reliability and affordability) are harnessed by different family members to sustain distant familial bonds, are also subject to scrutiny in this study.

1.2 Caregiving triangle in transnational families

There is no doubt that migration engenders profound changes in a family. The formation of transnational families not only reshapes the form and structure of a uniform family, but also poses challenges to the maintenance of intimate familial connections between migrants and the left-behind children in sending countries. Dealing with children's daily care arrangements while their parents are scattered through different countries relies on what Suarez-Orozco et al. (2002) referred to as the "caregiving triangle" – along with various forms of care co-management that depend on non-migrant caregivers' active collaboration the distant intimacy and contact within transnational households is able to be sustained.

1.2.1 Migrant parents

The investigation of the caregiving triangle has been a popular agenda in transnational family studies. The majority of the academic literature mainly stems from the diversity of transnational parenting patterns, which describes the transition and plurality of transnational family forms in different period of time and in different countries. For instance, migrant mothers are found to perform intensive mothering (Hays, 1996), albeit staying at a distance as a breadwinner (Fresnoza-Flot, 2009; Parreñas, 2001a, 2001b); by contrast, migrant fathers are associated with the role of financial supporter while being barely involved in caregiving (Dreby, 2010; Parreñas, 2008). These studies have been helpful for understanding the ways in which migrants reconstitute their parenting roles given the transformation of family structures forced upon them by migration. Yet the depiction of parenthood is still based on an essentialized gender division, which lacks an interrogation into the heterogeneity of parenting experiences. Some studies have recently been attentive to subtle dynamics of parenting through discussing the ambivalence of transnational motherhood (Madianou & Miller, 2012; Monini, 2018) and diversified transnational mothering (Peng & Wong, 2013), which

are often associated with women's maternal identities and their negotiation of the ambivalence towards family and work life. However, all are heavily focused on the case of mother-away families, while other family configurations and the perspective of male migrants have largely remained unexplored.

Several noteworthy exceptions have been the recent works of scholarship concerning Polish male migrant workers in Europe. For instance, Kilkey (2014) in her study of Polish male migrants in the UK, observed that although sending remittances still constitutes an important part of transnational parenting, it is also a means by which fathers involve themselves in the everyday lives of their children and enable them to fulfil other normatively prescribed fathering responsibilities, such as acting as a disciplinarian or the role model of a responsible breadwinner. In Pustulka et al.'s (2015) study of Polish migrant fathers in Norway, they discovered the emergence of "new fatherhood". Though by no means universal, the institutional support and social expectations of engaged fathering in Norway have contributed to some migrant fathers' involvement in child care provision.

The empirical literature has been very influential in understanding the ways in which migration triggers a profound impact on parenting roles and duties in a uniform family. Yet focus on either migrant fathers or migrant mothers does not always capture the full diversity and complexity of gendered divisions within transnational parenting, since a comparison analysis of the ways in which both migrant parents manipulate long-distance parenthood has been overlooked. How do migrants of different genders experience and respond to long-term separation with their children? In what ways do they deal with distant parenting while confronting varied challenges in their own migration lives? All these questions are significant in understanding the dynamics and diversities of transnational parenting, given that parenting from afar is not merely in

regards to the dyadic relations between parents and children, but rather involves the socio-economic context within and outside transnational families, such as gender ideology, overseas job markets, migration status and migration law.

Overall, in this thesis, specific issues that are important in creating a more gender-sensitive approach to migration and digital technology will be explored in more detailed ways. While new communication technology has created a sophisticated context in which migrant parents establish the maintenance of close familial ties with their left-behind children, I will not only look closely at the various forms of transnational communication, as other scholars have done, but also probe the intersection of gender relations, care arrangements and digital technologies during the process of distant parenting. More specifically, the thesis will conduct a comparative approach to examine the nuanced differences in the consequences that transnational migration engenders in different family configurations in the context of Chinese migration. What is particularly special about the Chinese case is that Chinese labour migration is not as gendered as other migrant-sending countries. Compared to South Asian countries where migration is highly feminized (e.g. Filipino domestic workers and live-in nannies) or some East European countries where the situation is reversed (e.g. Polish construction workers), in the case of Chinese labour migration, men and women are equally likely to migrate (the elaboration of migrant demographics will be addressed later in Chapter 5). In addition to various family configurations available in Chinese migration, another advantage of exploring the Chinese case is that it helps us to understand how Chinese patriarchal ideology contributes to the shaping of Chinese parenting in particular.

1.2.2 Left-behind children

Prior scholarly interest in Chinese left-behind children has mainly addressed their situation and well-being against the backdrop of China's internal rural-to-urban

migration. Here, migration is viewed as a destabilizing and risk factor. It is seen to boost the national economy at the cost of family disruptions. In many cases, left-behind children are depicted as vulnerable and passive victims of migration, suffering from the negative consequences of the lack of parental care and guidance. These include mental depression and psychological dysfunction (Liang et al., 2017; Wen & Lin, 2012), physical health crises (Yeoh & Lam, 2007), high rates of school drop-outs and poor academic performance (Koo, 2012; Lu, 2012), as well as risks of misbehavior and abnormality (Guo et al., 2012; Ye & Pan, 2011). The dark consequences of migration revealed by these multiple studies are undisputedly essential in sketching the contours of China's immense internal migration. However, most of these studies are designed to reflect upon migration policies and seek potential institutional arrangements for these separate households, thus employing a top-down quantitative approach and rarely inquiring into children's own voices and subjectivities.

Similar findings have also been observed in early literature within transnational familial settings. Both positive and negative outcomes have been found in left-behind children's economic well-being (Kandel & Kao, 2001; Nguyen et al., 2007), physical and mental health conditions (Frank, 2005; Graham & Jordan, 2011; Mazzucato et al., 2015), as well as educational achievements (Kandel & Kao, 2001; Kuhn, 2006; Jampaklay, 2006). Aside from the copious literature that probes the "impact of migration" on left-behind children, some noteworthy exceptions have begun integrating the subjective voices of children, elucidating how they experience growing up in such globalized families (Olwig, 1999; Poeze & Mazzucato, 2014) and identifying them as agents who exert influence within transnational households (Dreby, 2010; Olwig, 2014). For example, Asis (2006) highlights that left-behind children are not always caught in powerless situations: though having created emotional displacement, migration opens up possibilities for children to improve their autonomy and independence. It is well documented that left-behind children are able to solve problems on their own (Asis, 2006: 63). In addition to dealing with daily chores with the absence of parents, left-

behind children are also found to play a significant role in shaping their parents' migratory decisions. In her long-term ethnography of Mexican transnational families, Dreby (2007) teases out various self-empowerment patterns adopted by left-behind children in accordance with their age. By displaying emotional withholding, preadolescent children pressure parents into prioritizing reunification; adolescent children may act aggressively to their siblings, forcing parents to redistribute families' resources in terms of education, therapy and the like. As teenagers mature, they may urge migrant parents to finance their migration for better employment (Dreby 2007: 1062).

To be sure, a number of studies have delved into children's embodied agency that is embedded in their daily lives. They have shown how children hold power over and control of their left-behind life, even influencing the whole families' migratory trajectories. More recently, some transnational family studies (Lam & Yeoh, 2019; Madianou and Miller, 2012; Fresnoza-Flot, 2014) have begun to explore how children utilize communication media to respond to their migrant mothers' parenting from afar. Following such a child-centred framework, in this study I will interrogate the ways in which Chinese left-behind children interact with their parents through the use of communication technology, and also attempt to shed light on how these kinds of distant interactions contribute to the shaping of intergenerational relationships in a transnational context. I particularly pay attention to adult children (over 18 years old) whose parents migrated when the children were still young (under 10 years old). This is not merely because grown up children can better reflect upon and narrate their experience of living a life without their parents, but also children of this age are more likely to understand the implications of new media technologies in transnational family life, given that most of them have experienced booming development of internet-based communication technology during their separation from their parents. In addition, children are 18 at the time of the interview, but they were invited to reflect on a longer period of separation that in some cases spans their entire childhood.

1.2.3 Left-behind guardians

Compared to the abundant debates revolving around transnational parenting, the question of how left-behind family members relate to transnational practices has only been addressed sporadically. As Levitt and Nyberg-Sørensen (2004: 6) argue, “those who stay behind but receive support from those who migrate” are also experiencing transnational migration. In this sense, this study will include left-behind guardians as crucial pieces in constituting a complete picture of transnational family life. Normally, in one-parent-away families, the duty of child-rearing is often assigned to left-behind spouses. While a father’s migration is often understood as a natural expansion of their providing role, a mothers’ migration is more frequently described as a consequence of what Castles & Miller (2009) called “feminization of migration”, which is more associated with potentially conflict and challenges in transnational families. Given such a research agenda, the extant discussion has primarily concentrated on the phenomenon of left-behind men (Cabanés & Acedera, 2012; Hoang & Yeoh, 2011), whereas left-behind women have received comparatively less attention (although see Parreñas, 2001a). To enrich the existing literature of left-behind couples, more diversified family configurations will also be under scrutiny in this study.

In addition to biological caregivers, the majority of the proxy guardians in previous literature have been left-behind extended kin, notably grandmothers³. These elderly grandmothers have been largely construed as “middle women” (Dreby, 2010), mediating the relationship between migrants and their left-behind children. Although there has been a tendency to assume that the left-behind elderly are reliable care-providers, we should also bear in mind that they are possibly elderly parents who are in

³ There are also cases where caring duties are allocated to aunts or paid carers (Parreñas, 2001a; Madianou & Miller, 2012).

need of care themselves. This possibility has been eventually addressed by the burgeoning body of literature about “transnational elderly care” (Ahlin, 2017; Deluigi, 2016; Horn, 2019; Wilding & Baldassar, 2018). In general, these studies have provided fruitful evidence in examining the intergenerational relationships of migrants with their older parents living in their homeland. Some studies have revealed migrants’ ambivalence and difficulties of fulfilling filial obligations over great distances, while others tend to discuss how left-behind elderly parents negotiate the dual role of both caregiver and care receiver when interacting with their migrant children. Following the two strands of prior literature, this thesis aims to enrich the discussion of elderly proxy guardians by probing into how such intergenerational relationships (left-behind elderly and their migrant children) intersect with the care arrangements for left-behind children.

1.3 Research questions

In brief, acknowledging that digital technology is neither beneficial nor detrimental to transnational families, and moving beyond optimistic and dystopian views of technology, this study will provide a grounded, ethnographic account of the impact associated with the use of technology. My focus is based on the transnational interactions that occur among family members who keep in touch via communication media across distance and time. By proposing a comparative approach of different family members involved in the caregiving triangle of Chinese transnational households, I will theorize transnational caregiving as the intersection of gender and intergenerational relationships, transnationalism, and the use of communication technology. Thus I specifically explore:

- 1) the different ways migrants of different genders negotiate their parenthood via mediated communication with their left-behind families:

- in what ways do migrants fulfil their parenting duties via mediated communication with their left-behind families?
 - what role does media communication play during the process of distant parenting?
- 2) the different ways in which left-behind children respond to mediated parenting:
- how do left-behind children perceive the intervention of communication technology in their transnational family life?
 - how do they utilize communication technology to deal with the intergenerational relationship with their parents?
- 3) the different ways in which left-behind guardians fulfil their caring duties through mediated collaboration with migrant parents:
- what kind of challenges do different guardians (left-behind men, women, extended kin) face when performing their roles as caregivers?
 - how do these guardians negotiate their relationships with migrant parents?
- 4) the ways in which different communication technologies contribute to the shaping of transnational family relationships.

1.4 Mapping the thesis

This thesis is composed of nine chapters. Following this introduction, **Chapter 2** provides the theoretical framework of understanding transnational families. In line with prior transnationalism literature considering “transnational families” as a form of “transnationalism from below” (Vertovec, 2009), this chapter draws on the combination of “situated transnationalism” (Kilkey & Merla, 2014) and “care circulation” (Baldassar & Merla, 2014a, 2014b) approaches to capture the dynamics and complexities of transnational family practices. While “situated transnationalism”

aims to contextualize the understanding of transnational family practices by interrogating the different social, political and cultural contexts where dispersed family members are embedded, the “care circulation” approach attempts to grasp the multidimensional features of transnational relationships. Overall, by theorizing transnational family as “transnationalism from below”, this study construes transnational family relationships as a kind of “asymmetrical reciprocity” (Baldassar & Merla, 2014a, 2014b), which results from the intersection of power dynamics within families (gender and intergenerational relationships) and socio-economic factors across borders. To better understanding how transnational family practices take place in the context of Chinese families this chapter also provides a review of family dynamics and parenthood in Chinese culture.

Chapter 3 theorizes the role of media technologies in maintaining transnational family relationships. In general, this study draws on the theory of “social shaping of technology” (MacKenzie & Wacjman, 1999), which approaches media technologies through a socio-technical perspective. In so doing, the consequence and usage of media technology should not only be read as shaped by media per se, but also the specific socio-cultural context in which the media is employed. Under such a framework, this study analyses media technologies in multiple layers. First, given that transnational family members are unable to rely on face-to-face interaction, this study draws on the concept of mediation (Couldry, 2008; Livingstone, 2009; Silverstone, 2002, 2005) to explore how mediated communication contributes to the shaping of transnational family relationships. Second, to further unpack the inner workings of mediation, it turns to the concept of affordances (Hutchby, 2001; Baym, 2010), through which we can better understand how media specificities influence the use of media technologies under specific social contexts. Given the recent emergence and proliferation of new media technologies, I also draw on the concept of polymedia (Madianou and Miller, 2012) to investigate the ways in which transnational family members exploit the differences among communication technologies to meet certain interactive purposes.

Chapter 4 explains the methodological approach of this thesis. It starts by highlighting the rationale of adopting a multi-sited ethnography in this study through reviewing prior transnationalism literature. It shows the detailed procedures of recruiting participants in this study, including migrant parents in Britain and left-behind children and their guardians in China. It then outlines the demographics of the participants and introduces the specific research methods adopted in this study, including participant observation, online ethnography, and in-depth interviews. This chapter also discusses how I reflect on my role as a researcher and how I cope with the power relations with my participants.

Chapter 5 provides a sketch of transnational family life of the participants to contextualize the subsequent analysis on their communication practices and mediated family relationships. It locates their experiences within the broader contours of Chinese transnational labour migration. It starts with the general history of the Chinese population in the UK, and then teases out the macro political and economic “pull and push” factors (Bagne, 1969; Lee, 1966) in both China and Britain. This chapter also explains the motivations of these low-skilled and clandestine migrants at a micro level, which I argue are always implicated with the culture of migration. In this chapter, I also explain the factors that may prolong the family separation, notably, migration status, smuggling debts and other personal reasons. To enrich the understanding of how transnational care is delivered, this chapter introduces care arrangements for left-behind children within different family configurations. I also delineate the media landscape in which transnational communication takes place, by conducting a comparative analysis of media access between migrants and left-behind family members.

Chapter 6 tells the stories of how migrants in Britain navigate polymedia environments to parent from afar. Through conducting a gender comparative analysis of mediated

transnational parenting, it delineates the dissimilar challenges and empowerment experienced by migrants of different genders associated with media use while negotiating their role as distant parents. This chapter particularly looks into nuances in practices on different platforms and how migrant parents employ these platforms to manage their relationship with left-behind families. In this chapter, I also consider the specific socio-technical context in which migrants of different genders are embedded, including the transnational family structure, migration status and generation, and patriarchal ideology.

The purpose of **Chapter 7** is to explore how left-behind children perceive the use of communication technology during transnational communication with their migrant parents. It also examines the ways in which these children exploit polymedia environments to shape intergenerational relationships. This chapter highlights the varied forms of agency exerted by children. Given the socio-technical approach, aside from media technology per se, this chapter also discusses the reasons that contribute to the shaping of children's reaction and strategies towards parents' migration. This includes their age and gender, the parents' gender, and their relationship with the guardian.

Chapter 8 turns to left-behind guardians, which are constitutive of three groups of family kin: left-behind men, left-behind women and extended female kin (grandmothers and other female relatives). It specifically focuses on the mediated childrearing collaboration between migrant parents and guardians from the perspective of the latter. Given their different positions within the whole transnational family network, this chapter considers the nuances in challenges and media practices when different left-behind family kin take on the childrearing duties.

Chapter 9 synthesises the main findings and arguments of the preceding chapters. It situates and compares family practices of different actors involved in the caregiving triangle (including migrant parents, left-behind children, guardians). This chapter particularly delves into the role of communication technology and how it contributes to the shaping of transnational family relationships. This chapter also aims to explain how this thesis contributes to Chinese transnationalism and migration literature, and more generally to broader understandings of communication technology in transnational family literature. I conclude by teasing out the next steps for this research and assess what further research is required in this area of study.

Chapter 2. Transnationalism, transnational families, and the Chinese context

This thesis aims to explore how Chinese transnational family members employ new media environments to maintain their family bonds. It specifically examines how different family members involved in the “caregiving triangle” – migrant parents, left-behind children and guardians – (Suarez-Orozco et al., 2002) negotiate their family roles. It also considers the role of communication technology when transnational family members are “doing family” (Morgan, 2011), despite temporal and geographical distances. Theoretically, this study is at the intersection not only of transnational families and transnationalism but also media and communication technologies. Prior to proceeding to elaborate the theoretical implications of media technologies, this chapter first discusses the concept of transnationalism and transnational families.

This study considers “transnational family” as a form of “transnationalism from below” (Gardner, 2002; Vertovec, 2009), which is commonly characterized by structural “asymmetrical reciprocity” (Baldassar & Merla, 2014a, 2014b) among family members in sending and receiving countries. This study adopts a combination of ‘situated transnationalism’ and ‘care circulation’ approaches – while the former locates ‘transnational family practices’ in the nexus of global institutional factors and intra-family power dynamics, the latter highlights the multidimensional nature of transnational care flow. By doing so, I attempt to unveil the ways in which family members living apart negotiate their roles and obligations, and how these ‘situated’ family practices contribute to the shaping of transnational family relationships. In order to better understand the ‘situated’ expectations and obligations faced and practiced by different family members, the second section aims to engage with empirical studies in

regard to the various interacting patterns in these transnational households. Inequalities and asymmetric power relations within transnational families mainly revolve around the gendered relations of power, intergenerational relations and transnational asymmetries across multiple places.

Broadly speaking, the traditional definition of family seems to be challenged by global migration, which opens new possibilities of family dynamics in households. In the final section, I review the existing literature concerning transnational families within the context of Chinese migration. I tease out the limitation of previous scholarship (Huang & Yeoh, 2005; Pe-pua et al., 1996; Waters, 2003) on Chinese transnational families, which is mainly associated with upper-class settings, and further pinpoint the significance of this thesis, in which low-tier and marginalized migrants are the main research objects. After that, I elucidate the intergenerational structures and gender dynamics within Chinese families, attempting to enrich the understanding of how transnational familial bonds are maintained in the context of Chinese migration.

2.1 Transnationalism from below

The concept of transnationalism, broadly defined as a “set of sustained long-distance, border crossing connections” (Vertovec, 2004b: 3), is nothing new in migration studies. In the late 1980s, when transnationalism first emerged in the field, most of the relevant literature has concentrated on the ‘macro’ or ‘great’ level, which mainly corresponds to debates revolving around the public arena of politics, global capital and nation-state economy (Smith & Guarnizo, 1998; Gardner, 2002). These macro perspectives ‘from above’ conceptualize migrant practices as multi-local and multifaceted processes, which are subject to international political landscape, economic interactions and more generally global social institutions (Smith & Guarnizo, 1998). Yet such a top-down approach is unable to capture the nuanced complexity of transnational practices,

especially on the level of migrants' everyday activities. In response, the following research witnesses a turn towards 'transnationalism from below' (Smith & Guarnizo, 1998), with a focus on the 'meso' or 'micro' level of transnationalism – such as the integration and assimilation issue of individual migrants and ethnic communities, and transnational families and households (Vertovec, 2009).

Compared to the past when migrants were expected to settle into the receiving-societies, they are currently more likely to continuously deal with multi-stranded social relations and create connections between multiple places (Watters, 2011). In this vein, family practices within a transnational context become an indispensable part of migrants' everyday lives, which requires specific attention and investigation (Olwig, 2002). As Gardner (2002) suggests, to deepen the understanding of the implications relating to transnationalism for ordinary people it is imperative to call for a greater emphasis on activities within households and families, which she identified as 'little transnationalism'. Similarly, Vertovec (2009: 61) also emphasises the necessity of putting family at the centre of transnational debates: he argues that family practices serve as "the provenance of most everyday migrant transnationalism", allowing us to see the other dimensions of transnational life that are also worthy of attention, such as parenting, gender relations and care arrangements.

Understanding the ways in which family relationships moving beyond national borders are redefined over space has been the major theme of literature focusing on transnational family life. Several influential approaches for theorizing transnational families have been the 'transnational social space' and 'transnational social field' approaches. These two approaches have similar concerns in mapping the plurality of transnational families, albeit with slightly different emphases. The concept of 'transnational social spaces' was initially adopted in anthropological and sociological

studies in the 1990s, drawing attention to the everyday life of the ‘transnational community’ based on shared values and collective identity (e.g. diaspora communities) (Portes, 1996). Given the growth of diversified transnational exchanges and communications, Faist (2000: 190) broadened the definition of ‘transnational social spaces’ by integrating “transnational circuits” and “transnational kinship groups” into the categorization. While the former refers to transnational trading networks (e.g. overseas Chinese and Indian family businesses), the latter is primarily associated with transnational kinship and intimacy (e.g. first-generation labour migrants or refugees and their left-behind families). Faist (2000) argues that ‘transnational spaces’ are characterized by a high density of interstitial ties on informal or formal institutional levels. The word ‘space’ denotes dynamic social processes where individuals, collectives and networks operate and which is however subject to larger structural factors such as economic and political opportunities/constraints (Faist, 1998: 9). In other words, transnational social spaces are constituted by a ‘triadic relationship’ between institutions in the host society, the sending society and the transnational actors (ibid). Transnational families, under such an institutional perspective, are construed as a sociocultural unit, maintained through everyday practices and a feeling of collective identity and social reproduction that take place in pluri-local transnational spaces (Pries, 2005).

The ‘transnational social field’ concept draws upon the notion of ‘social field’ suggested by Bourdieu, through which he clarified his ontological view on society – where all social relationships are structured by power (Jenkins, 1992). Although Bourdieu did not discuss the implications of social field in a transnational context, Levitt and Glick-Schiller believe that the ‘social field’ framework also applies to the practices and relationships that are coterminous with state boundaries. For them, social field is basically “a set of multiple interlocking networks of social relationships through which ideas, practices, and resources are unequally exchanged, organized, and transformed” (Levitt & Glick-Schiller, 2004: 1009). According to Levitt & Glick-Schiller (2004), a

social field perspective helps to distinguish between ways of “being” and ways of “belonging” in transnational social fields, with the former referring to the social relations and practices that individuals engage in across borders as a regular feature of everyday life, while the latter refers to symbolic practices related to identity expression and reproduction (Levitt & Glick-Schiller, 2004: 1010-1011).

Following the ‘transnational social field’ approach, Carling (2008) proposed the notion of ‘transnational asymmetries’, indicating the human dynamics of migrant transnationalism. According to him, there are three transnational asymmetries patterns between migrants and non-migrants, including transnational moralities, information and imagination in transnational relations, and transnational resource inequalities. First, transnational moralities refer to the shared yet contested value systems in transnational social fields, which could be the experiences of leaving, being left, and (thinking about) returning. The asymmetrical perception of such value systems stems from migrants and non-migrants’ positioning in moralities of transnationalism. Second, information and imagination in transnational relations describes migrants and non-migrants’ unequal access to information and different resources for imagination of migration. Finally, transnational resource inequalities mainly delineate the asymmetry in the distribution of resources between migrants and non-migrants, such as material resources, legal entitlements to mobility and residence, and cultural and linguistic resources. In employing the concept of social fields in a transnational context, one is able to conceptualize the potential social relations and connections between those who migrate and those who stay behind (ibid). Given the circumstances, transnational family turns into a social field where information, resources and values flow across borders through various forms of communication, albeit in an unequal way due to the different socio-cultural context of receiving and sending countries (Benitez, 2012).

Overall, the social space approach is more concerned with how external political and economic structures surrounding transnational kinship groups influence the shaping of family ties and solidarity. However, under such an institutional perspective, ‘transnational families’ are often construed as a whole ‘community’, while the nuanced internal dynamics within transnational families have yet to receive much analysis. At the other end of the spectrum, the social field approach has emphasised the relational interdependency and negotiation within transnational families over time and space. Yet, the internal family dynamics within a ‘transnational social field’ are primarily based upon a simplified ‘migrant/non-migrant’ dyad, which fails to fully theorize the complexity of transnational family relationships. Despite the limitations of theorizing transnational family, these general transnationalism approaches have pinpointed its crucial essence as a form of ‘transnationalism from below’ – transnational family practices, as a kind of sociocultural transnational processes, are always subject to internal and external structures surrounding the family. Following this, this study draws on transnational family literature to further unpack the mechanism of how these sociocultural factors contribute to the shaping of family relationships within these dispersed households.

2.2 Transnational families: ‘Doing family’ across borders

Transnational families exemplify the recent theorization of family as a verb (doing family) instead of a noun (Morgan, 1996; Madianou, 2016). Compared to proximate families as place-bound units, transnational families are not defined by geographical proximity, but are instead constituted through “sets of activities which take on a particular meaning, associated with family, at a given point in time” (Finch, 2007: 66). These everyday family practices take place across borders but under “a feeling of collective welfare, shared feelings and mutual obligation”, fuelling the formation and reproduction of transnational family as an “imagined community” (Bryceson & Vuorela, 2002: 14). To advance the understanding of transnational family practices and

connections, Bryceson & Vuorela (2002) proposed the notions of ‘frontiering’ and ‘relativizing’ – while ‘frontiering’ refers to how migrants create family space and network ties in host countries, ‘relativizing’ investigates how they establish, maintain or curtail relational ties with family members back home. The combination of ‘frontiering’ and ‘relativizing’ provides a lens through which we can better understand how individuals navigate family membership against a backdrop of declining contact time and spatial proximity associated with transnational mobility. However, such a bipolar and dichotomous division has been criticized for suggesting a mechanical and rigid understanding of transnational families, and is not flexible enough to grapple with the dynamic sociocultural contexts and relational complexities of transnational families (Goulbourne et al., 2010: 7). As Baldassar and Merla (2014: 9) put it, transnational families should not be understood as “a uniform family form defined by constant characteristics”, but instead as highly diverse social entities, differing in a wide variety of ways, including their temporal-spatial configurations and family value systems, as well as different levels of social, economic, and cultural backgrounds, in both their home and host societies (Baldassar et al., 2007; Goulbourne et al., 2010; Horn, 2019).

2.2.1 Situating transnational family practices

For contextual analysis of transnational family practices, the concept of ‘situated transnationalism’ proposed by Kilkey & Merla (2014) seems to be more useful as a theoretical framework. Under the ‘situated transnational’ perspective, they identified four regimes related to transnational care flow: the migration regime (e.g. immigration policies, including rules for entrance into a country, settlement, employment, political and civil rights, and migration cultures in both sending and receiving countries); the welfare regime (e.g. quality of welfare provision); gendered care regime (e.g. state support for care arrangement, gender expectations, and gendered discourses of care cultures); and working-time regime (e.g. policies around the regulation of working-time practices). The concept of ‘situated transnationalism’ reminds us that institutional

contexts function as both resources and constraints, making it easier or harder for certain actors within a transnational family network to engage with particular form and level of support (ibid: 128).

As Baldassar (2008b) suggested, debates about migration and transnational family practices must be understood not merely as an attribute of individuals or families alone, rather it should be read as the relationships between agents and social institutions within and across borders. Regarding transnational family practices, Baldassar et al. (2007: 204) further identified three influential factors, including: “the capacity of individual members”; “their culturally informed sense of obligation to provide care”; and “negotiated family commitments that people with specific family networks share”. While capacity refers to transnational family members’ opportunity and ability to engage in care exchanging (e.g. resources, money, technologies, time, mobility, health), obligation relates to the cultural norms of duty and perception of family caregiving, which is often linked to individuals’ gender, age and social roles. In addition, negotiated family commitments refer to the history of relationships between family members involved in transnational family networks (Finch & Mason, 1993). In other words, the concept of negotiated family commitments is not fixed as a public social norm, but subject to constant re-negotiations between family members (Merla, 2014: 126).

Against this backdrop, Merla (2014: 120-128) argues that the capacity to circulate care, the cultural construction of family obligation, and the negotiation of family commitment, are largely shaped by the aforementioned ‘situated transnational’ regimes. For example, the lack of physical mobility due to restrictive visa regulations (migration regime) may influence a family’s reunion, and low-income yet time-consuming jobs (working-time regime) could limit a migrants’ involvement in distant family practices; welfare and gendered care regimes, such as an insufficient welfare system and gendered

care culture, could contribute to the increasing caring burden (the elder and the young) of certain family members (particularly left-behind female family members); in terms of family commitment, some migrants may reinforce their sense of obligation by sending more remittances in an attempt to compensate for their absence. However, the strong investment in maintaining a relationship with non-migrants back home could also be interpreted as a way of coping with a sense of loneliness, incurred by the failure of integrating into new social networks in host countries (migration regime).

Following such a 'situated' perspective, a considerable body of literature has contributed to the contextualization of the 'transnational family' by integrating varied institutional variables. For example, some authors investigate the interrelations between care arrangement and family life course (e.g. family circle, migratory stage) (Ariza, 2014; Melander & Green, 2018; Wall & Bolzman, 2014), while others seek to interrogate the ways in which community and voluntary associations influence transnational caring practices (Baldassar, 2008b; Olwig, 2014). Also, there are scholarships discussing the emergence of ubiquitous information communication technology regime (Baldassar et al., 2016; Nedelcu & Wyss, 2016), raising questions such as how access to media technology contributes to sustaining family relations across national borders. In other words, the situated transnational approach not only helps us to grapple with the socio-cultural dimension of transnational families as a whole. It is also conducive to understanding the multifaceted nature of transnational families by underlining the constraints and resources available to family members across gender and generation in shaping their family practices. That said, 'situated transnationalism' does not tackle the relational dynamics and complexities between different family members. To address this gap, the following section aims to review several influential approaches in theorizing transnational family relationships.

2.2.2 Conceptualizing transnational family relationships

The most influential research approach in exploring the transformation of kinship and familial roles has been the ‘care chains’ tradition (Hochschild, 2000; Parreñas, 2001a). This body of literature has been attentive to the care flow associated with the recent rise of ‘feminization of migration’ (Castles & Miller, 2009), which derives from increased participation of mothers in the global labour force. Specifically, women from developing countries (mainly in the Global South) migrate to take care of the child of a middle or upper-class woman who works full-time in a developed society, leaving their own children behind, which is generally implicated with a care deficit for both migrants and their left-behind families (Parreñas, 2001a; Pyle, 2006). The care chain approach has been helpful to understand the inequalities of the global political economy by concentrating on the commodity of caregiving from a feminist perspective. However, its focus on ‘one-way’ care flow between two people linked together as dyad nodes of a chain does not really capture the fluid and multidimensional feature of transnational family relationships (Baldassar & Merla, 2014b).

Meanwhile, the care chain approach has also been critiqued for its rigid and partial conceptualization of transnational parenthood, as migrant mothers are too often portrayed as passive victims of global economy, while fathers are generally excluded or depicted as absent. Also, family members that are also included in the care chain, such as the elderly and extended family, have not received enough attention (Baldassar & Merla, 2014b; Madianou & Miller, 2012). As Baldassar et al. (2007: 14) remind us, the people who never migrate yet put effort into maintaining contact with their migrant kin are also transnationals – identifiable as non-migrant or local transnationals. In spite of staying behind in their home countries, these non-migrant family members are implicated in transnationalism and also think and act in transnational ways.

The following transnational family literature, therefore, has undergone a shift from the linear mother-child(ren) relationship to a more dynamic understanding of care exchanges, which Baldassar & Merla (2014a, 2014b) have termed the ‘care circulation’ approach, through which they argue that transnational family relationships are characterized by “reciprocal, multidirectional and asymmetrical exchange of care that fluctuates over the life course within transnational family networks subject to the political, economic, cultural and social contexts of both sending and receiving societies” (2014a: 22). Compared to the global chain approach, the care circulation approach has expanded the analytical scope beyond the one-way care flow between two certain nodes within the care chain. In so doing, it not only takes into consideration the entire caregiving network of transnational families, but such a circulation lens also allows us to consider all the members involved in the care flow network as active actors, and pays attention to the extent of their engagement in care activities, which depends on their positioning vis-à-vis the migration, welfare, gendered care and working-time regimes in both home and host societies (Baldassar & Merla, 2014b).

As Baldassar et al. (2007: 13) put it, “the resulting idea of the transnational family is intended to capture the growing awareness that members of families retain their sense of collectivity and kinship in spite of being spread across multiple nations”. In this vein, this study sets out to combine the ‘situated transnationalism’ and ‘care circulation’ approaches in an attempt to integrate multiple actors involved in transnational care chains, and to also grasp the complexity and multi-dimensional nature of transnational relationships. Given that global institutional factors and intra-family dynamics are equally significant in understanding the mobility and immobility that different actors are subject to in cross-border family settings, in this thesis I conceptualize transnational family members as embedded in a transnational family network that is constituted through continuously negotiated relationships with other family members. As mentioned earlier, the sense of family-hood is sustained by what Morgan (1996) has called ‘doing family’ – family is something that people ‘do’ and in so doing create and

recreate the idea of family (Morgan, 2011). This is particularly true when it comes to the transnational family due to its de-territorialized nature. However, in the absence of physical co-presence, family practices within a transnational context are as (or even more) diverse as geographically proximate families. This is mainly because transnational family practices are not merely activities at individual level or families alone, more importantly, they are contingent to more complex and dynamic structural constraints of migratory, welfare and employment regimes at both local and transnational levels (Baldassar & Merla, 2014a: 9). Given that family is no longer a place-bound unit, dispersed family members have to reaffirm their sense of belonging through daily mundane practices from afar.

In other words, the maintenance of a family relationship is constitutive of a set of family practices that are intertwined with cultural construction of social roles (within families) based on age and gender, which leads to varied familial obligation and expectations. Family ties within a transnational context, therefore, are not only shaped by the reciprocity and exchanges among migrants and non-migrants based on familial obligation and expectations (e.g. remittances and communications), but also the reproduction of transnational family ties should be read in light of the social-cultural contexts of the local, national and global. As Baldassar & Merla (2014a) suggest, transnational family relationships are characterized by a kind of ‘asymmetrical reciprocity’, since transnational family practices bind members together in distant but connected networks of “reciprocity and obligation, love and trust, that are simultaneously fraught with tension, contest and relations of unequal power” (Baldassar & Merla, 2014a: 7). In this sense, the transnational family relationship is by no means harmonious – it is subject to constant negotiations by different family members who are located in various socio-cultural contexts.

Following the combination of the ‘situated transnationalism’ and ‘care circulation’ lenses, I set out to discover how family life is reconfigured by long-term migration. I will review existing literature regarding how family members carry out their familial roles within specific sociocultural contexts. I will also tease out the ways in which transnational family relationships are sustained through constant “asymmetrical reciprocal exchange” (Baldassar & Merla, 2014a: 7) across and despite the distance.

2.3 Contextualizing ‘asymmetrical reciprocity’ in transnational families

Benitez (2012: 1442) argues that the concept of transnational family has to acknowledge the inequalities among their members, such as socio-economic levels, lifestyles, political views, religious beliefs, migratory status and cultural values across national borders. Hence, to better understand the asymmetries within transnational families, it is imperative to delve into how family members construct their familial identity by interacting with other members. As suggested by Bryceson & Vuorela (2002: 15), understanding transnational family practices requires the redefinition of the conventional nuclear family roles, such as father, mother, son, daughter, as well as more extended roles of aunts, uncles and so forth.

One of the major themes in transnational family literature lies in the discussion of transnational parenthood. Normally, parenthood can be understood as a patriarchal institution that serves as “a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women” (Walby, 1990: 20). Women’s subordination to men not only takes place in ‘private patriarchy’ domains, which are mainly associated with household production, but also in ‘public patriarchy’, principally based upon public sites such as employment and the state (ibid: 20). As such, the gendered division

of labour that sees men as breadwinners and women as caregivers and nurturers has been naturalized as 'normative gender convention' (Butler, 1990). In this sense, women would be considered as unqualified or 'bad' mothers unless they fulfil the maternal duty through what Hays (1996) called 'intensive mothering', which refers to "child-rearing methods that are child-centred, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labour intensive, and financially expensive" (122). Likewise, although in most cases, men are construed as beneficiaries of patriarchal institutions, those who cannot fit into cultural ideals of masculinity (e.g. Caucasian, middle-class, heterosexual men) are also likely to have their gender identity threatened, which may lead to further subordination and marginalization (Connell, 2005). As feminist scholars have argued, the perception of gender has witnessed a turn from essentialism to post-structuralism (Butler, 1990; Jeremiah, 2006) – gender is not determined by biological divisions but rather "an ongoing emergent aspect of social interaction" (Deutsch, 2007: 107). Although individuals are able to carve out their agency through 'doing gender' (West & Zimmerman, 1987), they may confront social sanctions and conflicts when engaging in behaviours that do not conform to their gender category.

Both motherhood and fatherhood is widely accepted as a social construct, which is situationally influenced by historical, societal and cultural contexts (Arendell, 2000; White, 1994). Gender expectations, norms and practices pertaining to parenthood, therefore, are heterogeneous across different cultures, social classes, and family configurations. As Parreñas (2005b: 6) put it, compared to patriarchal nuclear households, transnational families are more likely to open the door for the reconstitution of gender through disturbing the structural constraints that encourage normative parenthood. Given the transformation of family structure and reconstitution of family roles, the discrepancy between the social norms of parenthood and individuals' parenting experience then becomes a popular topic in transnational family literature.

This body of studies often focuses on the female domestic workers who flow from the Global South to developed nations, marked by a strong emphasis on the dyadic relationships between “migrant mothers and left-behind children” (Fresnoza-Flot, 2009; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2001; Parreñas, 2001b, 2005a, 2010). The gendering of migration opportunities creates new possibilities and tensions with traditional gender relations – although female labour migration grants migrant women opportunities to stretch their motherhood to include breadwinning and increases their social status within their families and countries of origin (Castles & Miller, 2009; Hondagneu-Sotelo & Avila, 1997), it has not necessarily led to significant changes in the gendered labour division among transnational families. Several studies argue that migrant mothers are still expected to perform intensive caring albeit staying at a distance as a breadwinner due to care-giving expectations and obligations (Parreñas, 2001a, 2001b, 2005a). In addition, some studies have also emphasized the role in child caring played by wider family networks, such as the relationship between migrant mothers and substitute caregivers in sending countries (Ariza, 2014; Moran-Taylor, 2008; Peng & Wong, 2013, 2015). Generally, these transnational family arrangements are characterized by a highly gendered division, in which grandmothers and other female kin have dominated the role of proxy guardian who engage with child rearing after mothers’ migration (Dreby, 2006; Dreby & Adkin, 2010; Lutz & Palenga-Mollenbeck, 2012; Pantea, 2012).

Compared to the vehement debates revolving around women’s role in care chains, discussions about male family members have received scant attention. The few exceptions mainly focus on left-behind fathers, some of which reveal men’s masculinity crisis not only due to the loss of role as breadwinners after their wives’ migration, but also because women’s migration forces them to take on the feminized role of caregiver (Cabanés & Acedera, 2012; Fresnoza-Flot, 2014; Hoang & Yeoh, 2011; Pingol, 2001). On the other hand, evidence also shows that left-behind fathers have begun to involve themselves in childrearing not only via financial support but also through providing emotional care as their wives would do (Choi & Peng, 2016; Fresnoza-Flot, 2014;

Harper & Martin, 2013; Nobles, 2011). The improved care contribution also happens in the case of migrant husbands and left-behind wives (Kilkey, 2014). Nevertheless, some of the fathers feel reluctant to wholeheartedly accept domestic chores or caregiving as their duty due to gendered pressures from social expectations (Choi & Peng, 2016; Fresnoza-Flot, 2014; Peng & Wong, 2015); the fresh pattern of care allocation in split households has already modified the rhythm and functioning of the family as a matter of fact. For example, in their study of Chinese male migrants who flowed from rural to urban areas for economic gains, Choi & Peng (2016) found that migrant fathers convince themselves to engage with allegedly feminized work by redefining their masculinities, such as regarding the capacity of mastering a new challenge in domestic chores as an important masculine attribute.

Aside from the gendered division of labour in transnational families, intergenerational relationships also play a significant role in contributing to the shaping of ‘asymmetrical reciprocity’ during transnational child care. Intergenerational relationships, characterized by “solidarity, conflict and ambivalence” (Bengtson et al., 2002), are often influenced by various factors, such as physical proximity, frequency of interaction, emotional bonds and the exchange of assistance as well as the perception of familial expectations (e.g. filial obligations) between family members (Bengtson & Roberts, 1991). This is particularly salient when it comes to transnational families given that long-term separation poses challenges to intimate family relations between migrant parents and the children. For example, in her seminal study of left-behind children in transnational Caribbean families, Olwig (1999) discovered that children may miss their absent migrant parents, yet they can still develop closeness to them and obtain a sense of belonging if the latter remains a strong social and economic presence in their life. However, this is not always the case as the absence of parents could engender profound impacts on children. In Parreñas’s (2001a) early study of Filipino transnational families, she found that while migrant mothers resorted to “the commodification of love” (e.g. sending more remittances and gifts to their children) in an attempt to compensate for

their absence, their children may disagree with them that the commodities are sufficient markers of love. The luxury of receiving monthly remittances and care packages does not really replace the “emotional costs of geographical distance with feelings of loneliness, insecurity and vulnerability” (ibid: 375).

The ambivalent experiences of ‘childhood’ in a transnational family not only derive from the asymmetrical intergenerational relationship whereby parents hold more power over their children (Morgan, 2011), but also because left-behind children are deemed to be mostly passive receivers according to the care chains theory (Asis et al., 2004). Compared to migrant parents who are able to access relatively rich resources to initiate care flow (e.g. travel, remittances and telecommunication), immobilized children are more likely to find themselves trapped in the receiving end of the flow of transnational communication (Massey, 1994; Parreñas, 2005a). Yet the proliferation of communication technologies has enhanced the circulation of care flow and lifted left-behind children out of this dilemma to a certain degree. Parreñas (2005a) found that access to cellular phones has enabled children to initiate communication with migrant parents, though still under the constraints of their minimal resources, such as not having enough credit loads to send international text messages to their migrant parents. Likewise, in her study of left-behind sons in Filipino transnational families, Fresnoza-Flot (2014) documented the various ways in which they emotionally supported their migrant mothers, including sending greetings cards, photos, letters, or things the latter requested such as medicine and foods, maintaining regular communication via phone and through the internet, and expressing their gratitude towards their parents through studying hard, sharing the housework, or spending their allowance reasonably.

The even flow of transnational communication is further strengthened by the decreasing cost of international telephone calls and the proliferation of new media technologies, as

mentioned in the introduction chapter (the role of media technology in transnational family life will be further addressed in the next chapter). Yet, the asymmetrical communication in transnational families is still subject to another significant factor: the class division. Transnational families do not have uniform access to resources to maintain intimate transnational connections. The rural-urban divide of technological infrastructure development in sending countries may serve as a barrier to accessing communication technology (Madianou & Miller, 2012; Parreñas, 2005b). This is especially true in less-developed countries such as those in the Global South (e.g. Philippines). For example, Parreñas (2005b) found that migrants with access in receiving countries may not be able to connect easily to left-behind family members located in rural areas without appropriate technological facilities. Another noteworthy class-related factor that shapes transnational communication is the disparity of financial resources among middle-class families and working-class and poor families (Baldassar, 2008a; Horst, 2006; Madianou, 2014a; Şenyürekli et al., 2009). Generally, compared to middle class families, working-class families have fewer opportunities to maintain a regular and constant flow of transnational communication. For instance, in their study of Filipino transnational mothers, Madianou & Miller (2012) observed the “employment inequality” between domestic workers and nurses and care-workers in terms of transnational communication. While domestic workers often rely on internet cafes to communicate with their left-behind children, most nurses and care-workers had their personal devices so that they could call more frequently and flexibly than domestic workers. Apart from class, gender and age have also served as significant factors contributing to asymmetrical communication among transnational family members. For instance, in her study of London-based Chinese migrants and their ageing parents in China, Kang (2012) observed the emergence of ‘silenced mothers’ in internet-based transnational communication. Given the gendered digital inequality, the supposedly feminine role of care and intimacy is increasingly assigned to male family members. In her research regarding transnational families of Romanian migrants in Canada and Switzerland, Nedelcu (2017) documented the ways in which migrants’ elderly parents overcome their inability to make full use of digital devices and acquire manifold

technological skills to improve the quality of their interaction with children and grandchildren living abroad. By and large, the disproportionate level of network capital as informed by age, gender and social class, which results in what Cabalquinto (2018) called “asymmetrical mobile intimacy”, have largely determined the quality of transnational family relationships.

In addition to transnational communication, class position also serves as a significant factor that determines whether or not migrant parents can achieve well-being and social capital, which directly or indirectly influences the distant family relationship. In her study of central American migrants in the United States, Menjivar (2006) found that parents were unable to reunite with their children due to the lack of migration status, such as being undocumented or living in a state of ‘liminal legality’ – where temporary legal status becomes increasingly common. The indefinite separation associated with irregular status can also be seen in Fresnoza-Flot’s (2009) investigation of Filipino migrants in France. She argued that irregular migration status restricts the choices available to migrant mothers, making them unable to pay frequent visits, thus having to compensate by resorting to more intense transnational communication and financial provision. Social class divisions between family members also contributes to transnational communication. For instance, in his study based on Honduran children whose parents work in the US, Schmalzbauer (2008) found that they have little knowledge about their parents’ migration lives – most assume their parents are doing well, thus increase the expectation for remittances, whereas in reality they are struggling to make ends meet. The remittances that migrant parents send back home, on the one hand, raise their left-behind families to the higher class, but on the other, they exacerbate their already poor economic condition. In most cases, misunderstanding along with resource inequality gives rise to tensions among family members, particularly when it comes to the different perceptions of consumption and life expectations.

Overall, transnational families are commonly characterized by ‘asymmetrical reciprocity’, which primarily stems from unequal power relations associated with the intersection of gender and generation and needs to be read in light of socio-economic dynamics. Specifically, what is at stake is how culturally and locally specific interpersonal relationships among different family members are challenged or reproduced in a transnational context. Previous empirical academic work concerning transnational family practices provides insightful views for understanding how transnational family members perceive and experience transnationalism in a situated way given their different resources, goals, expectations and family obligations. These studies indicate that transnational family relationships and obligations are not dissolved, but instead experience transformation and restructuring engendered by transnational migration. Following this consideration of the theoretical and empirical literature, I next elucidate the intergenerational structures and gender dynamics within Chinese families, attempting to enrich the understanding of how transnational familial bonds are maintained in the context of Chinese migration.

2.4 The power dynamics in Chinese families

Chinese families have been influenced by Confucianism for over 2,000 years. The traditional Chinese gender ideal has thus always been characterized as patriarchal, patrimonial, patrilineal, and patrilocal, placing women at a severe social disadvantage relative to men (Thornton & Lin, 1994). According to Confucius, men are considered to be the ‘master of the family’, which is associated with financial provision and responsible for issues in public realm, whilst women are confined to the domestic sphere and raising of children (Mann, 2011; Slote, & De Vos, 1998). In addition, the gendered division is also manifested in the cultural perception of filial piety in the Confucian philosophy, which refers to the virtue of respect children have for their

parents, elders, and ancestors. Derived from the paramount importance of family lineage in Chinese culture (Chu & Yu, 2010), the principle of filial piety is carried out through practical behaviours in everyday life. In a more general sense, filial piety means to be obedient and devoted to parents or grandparents (Thornton & Lin, 1994; Whyte, 2004), to glorify the family name (Hsu, 1971), and to provide financial support for parents when they get older (Ho, 1996). It should also be noted that within the filial piety philosophy, a rigid system of sex segregation cannot be ignored. In the traditional Chinese family system, daughters are temporary members of the natal families before marriage, and after marriage, the custom of patrilocal residence requires a woman to move closer to and serve her husband's extended family, both symbolically and practically (Stacey, 1983; Whyte & Xu, 2003). This is also the reason that men have to pay the bride price (*cai li*) before marriage, to compensate the bride's family for their loss of labour. In this sense, patrilocal residence serves as the exchange of labour, with women as the currency (Stacey, 1983). By contrast, sons are regarded as permanent members of the family, carrying on the lineage with power, and retaining a financial relationship with their parents over their lifetime (Stacey, 1983; Whyte & Xu, 2003). In other words, they are more likely to shoulder the responsibility of caring for the elder parents and contributing economically to the natal family, even after marriage. Thus, it is due to self-interest that parents invest their majority of familial resources in their sons, whilst extracting resources from their unmarried daughters to improve the family budget and further invest in their sons (Greenhalgh, 1985).

The gendered and hierarchical family structure has undergone tremendous change since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949. Driven by the imperative of the political and economic development of the nation, the communist party of China (CPC) initiated governmental policies and economic development to encourage women to participate in the labour force (Ma, 2009), which Wang (2005) has called "state feminism". Although the CPC policy liberated women to some extent, the 'gender equality' prompted by state feminism can be understood as, in effect, the

masculinization of women, in contrast to some concepts of female gender autonomy or empowerment. The “the erasure of gender and sexuality” (*xing bie muo sha*) (Yang, 1999: 41) in socialist China could be exemplified by the official slogan during the Maoist era, which depicted women as “strong labour” or “iron girls” (Honig, 2000). In addition to women’s increasing participation in the workforce, equality in gender relations was also manifested in specific policies, such as the 1950 Marriage Law, which aimed to abolish polygamy and child marriage and further legalized or validated free-choice marriages (Meijer, 1971).

From 1978, when the Chinese government implemented a policy of radical economic reform, China was transformed from a centrally-planned economy to a freer and competitive market economy. In this vein, the CPC paid more attention to social development and economic efficiency than to gender equality. Although women’s educational levels were significantly improved because of government policies instituted by the Party from the mid-1940s (Wu & Zhang, 2010), the gender gap in earnings has increased over time (Attané, 2012), particularly among rural workers and less educated groups. The paradox could be explained by the CPC’s lessening of control over job markets and the restoration of the traditional division of labour within households, where the load of domestic work has fallen on the wife’s shoulders rather than the husband’s, inhibiting women from fulfilling their greater potential in the labour market (Yu & Xie, 2012). Meanwhile, the one-child policy, implemented from 1979 to 2015, has also contributed to the profound transformation in family structures, especially in the urban areas of China; it has been argued that the family hierarchy has shifted from the father’s authoritarian dominance to a more ‘child-centred’ framework (Deutsch, 2006), improving daughters’ status within households relative to boys (Lake, 2018), as well as keeping the elderly generation from relying on sons for their old-age support (Whyte & Xu, 2003).

The social changes of family values and power dynamics of China families are also related to the transformation of individualization in contemporary China (Yan, 2009), which stems from the process of modernization associated with China's economic reform in 1978 (Cao, 2009). According to Yan (2010), Chinese individualization is characterized by party-state policies and the absence of cultural democracy, a welfare state regime, classic individualism and political liberalism. Cheung & Pan (2006) coined the term "regulated individualism" to describe the new pattern of individual-collective relationships in China that differ from not only traditional collectivism in the Maoist era but also individualism in Western societies. As Beck & Grande (2010) suggested, compared to the 'unintended' and 'stretched' modernization processes in Western societies, the transformation process in developed countries like China is more 'intended' and 'compressed'.

Given the circumstances, the influence on Chinese families engendered by individualization is often characterized by contrasts and paradoxes. Existing academic debates are mainly about whether family values and kinship obligations are declining because of China's individualization trend, such as the rise of nuclear families, the declining parental power of senior generations, or more equal conjugal relationships (Yan, 1997, 2003, 2011). The prioritization of personal values, such as independence, autonomy and self-reliance, have given rise to what Davis & Friedman (2014) called "deinstitutionalizing marriage", which combines with open-minded attitudes about premarital sexuality and cohabitation, as well as the rise of marital infidelity and divorces. It seems that traditional patriarchal norms have been deinstitutionalized and gradually replaced by individual lifestyles. Yet, still visible is the stigmatization of 'left-over women', a term coined to describe the growing group of women who are usually highly educated and have not married in their late twenties or older (Lake, 2018). In addition, although free love prevails in contemporary China, the elder generation exerts great influence over their children's decisions when it comes to marriage choices (To, 2015).

The paradoxical influence of individualization also applies to intergenerational relationships. Yan (2003) lamented that the awareness of personal rights and desire for modern lifestyles, especially among young generations, has contributed to the decline of traditional ethics and morality within Chinese families. The rise of individualism and prevailing consumerism have propelled Chinese youth to pursue their personal desires and enjoyment of life, leaving them less involved with filial obligations. In addition, the one-child policy introduced in 1979 also served as an important factor contributing to the emergence of individualism among younger generations. The child-centred orientation has resulted in a generation of spoiled only children, also known as ‘little suns’ or spoiled ‘little emperors’ who gain excessive amounts of attention and material resources from their parents and grandparents (Connor, 2013; Goh, 2011), which makes them become self-centred and less committed to filial duties (Fong, 2004).

However, there are also arguments suggesting that filial piety has not declined, or at least not much. For example, based on a study of six Chinese cities, Cheung & Kwan (2009) observed that the reduction of filial piety by modernization was minimal and conditional, and could be remedied by educational policy and practices. Yue & Ng’s (2002) study examined the ways in which university students in Beijing view filial piety in Chinese society. Their findings revealed that young people still endorse strongly filial obligations, such as “looking after the aged parents” and “assisting them financially”, and “retaining contact with the elders” (Yue & Ng, 2002). It is also well documented that the traditional virtue of filial piety is even better preserved in rural areas of China. Drawing on a long-term ethnography in Dougou, an average village situated in east Henan province, Cao (2019) found that despite the twentieth century’s political and socioeconomic transformation, certain traditional family values persist, including filial piety, parental obligations and looking after one’s family-of-origin.

In addition to the discussion revolving around whether filial piety is declining or preserved, there are also discussions about how it has been transformed by individualization. The concept of “intergenerational contract” proposed by Croll (2008) best illustrates the argument that the nature of filial piety has morphed into filial support based upon “mutual need, mutual gratitude and mutual support for two-way exchange of support and care” (Croll, 2008: 110). Similarly, Yue & Ng (2002) also discovered that “respecting elders but necessarily obeying them” appears to be a new cultural protocol for fulfilling filial obligations in contemporary Chinese society. The two-way exchange of support is also manifested by the recent shift from the traditional ideal of ‘children as old age insurance’ (*yang er fang lao*) into ‘children as companions for old age’ (*yang er pei lao*) (Goh, 2011).

In general, Chinese family traditions seem to be challenged by the emergence of individualist values associated with the modernization of Chinese society. Although both gender and intergenerational relationships have experienced significant changes in the past decades, the flourishing individualism does not necessarily reset traditional family values and morality, such as family cohesion, patriarchy and filial piety. This section has drawn on previous empirical literature, depicting the general contour of the power dynamics and asymmetries in contemporary Chinese families. In so doing, I aimed to develop an introduction of how Chinese families function as a socio-economic unit within a transnational context. The next section reviews extant literature concerning Chinese transnational families, exploring the intersection of various family configuration and power dynamics in Chinese family values.

2.5 Chinese transnational families

There is limited empirical literature about transnational families within the context of Chinese migration. The very few exceptions have focused on the phenomenon of the ‘astronaut family’, which is a term originally employed to describe the migratory strategy practiced by businessmen and professional families from Hong Kong and Taiwan, with husbands pursuing careers at home and relocating their families in ‘safe havens’ such as the United States, Canada, and New Zealand (Lam, 1994; Ho, 2002; Waters, 2002). The related research that followed expanded the definition of the ‘astronaut family’ to depict a broader range of split-households, addressing the situation that family members are deployed abroad as a collective familial strategy to pursue economic opportunities, political conditions or educational purposes. For example, some work has been done on the phenomena of ‘satellite children’ or ‘parachute-kids’ (Pe-pua et al., 1996; Waters, 2003; 2005; Zhou, 1998), depicting the group of children who go overseas to seek a better education at very young age, not only for the improvement of their own educational prospects, but also to serve as a form of ‘deployable resources’ exploited by the whole family, fulfilling the family project of accumulating social capital and future mobility (Orellana et al., 2001).

This was followed by another strand of the related research, which addresses the phenomenon of ‘study mothers’ (Chee, 2003; Huang & Yeoh, 2005), referring to mothers accompanying their children who study abroad. The gendered division and women’s sacrifices within transnational households have been highlighted in this body of research. For example, in their study of Chinese study mothers in Singapore, Huang & Yeoh (2005) discovered that mothers were found suffering from giving up good careers and comfortable lives, as well as prolonged separation from their husbands. Waters (2002) has also revealed the gendered sufferings confronted by ‘astronaut wives’ in Vancouver, albeit in a different way. The women in his studies reportedly gained independence due to the absence of husbands, however, the return of their husbands

intensified the conflict between spouses, when women's new-found independence contradicted with the prior patriarchal dominance.

Recent migration studies on Chinese transnational families have shifted towards the phenomenon of grandparenting (Da, 2003; Lie, 2010; Xie & Xia, 2011), addressing the situation that grandparents going abroad to take the responsibility of child caring when their migrant parents are absent due to full-time employment. This research strand mainly reveals the multifaceted nature of grandparenting within a transnational context, including intergenerational connectedness, gender roles and ideology, as well as adjustment and adaption of caring practices. For instance, Lie's (2010) paper examining Chinese immigrant families in the UK indicates that although both grandmother and grandfather are involved in grandparenting, most of the burden falls on the grandmother. In her research examining child care arrangements of Chinese migrants in Australia, Da (2003) asserts that involving grandparents in childrearing reflects women's pseudo 'emancipation' to some extent: on the one hand, it enables the mother to return to paid work or study soon after giving birth, therefore improving their low status as daughters-in-law in the extended family; but ironically, on the other hand, the emancipation of one woman is actually based on the unremunerated labour of another, which means the gender norms are not challenged but instead perpetuated in another form.

The literature on Chinese transnational families has demonstrated the ways in which gendered division and intergenerational relations have been manifested in Chinese migratory practices, highlighting the disparate transnationalism experienced by different family members. It should be acknowledged that this body of literature has been very helpful in understanding the multiplicities and the asymmetrical structure of Chinese transnational families. However, scholarly interest in Chinese transnational families has largely focused on the experience and familial practice of emergent

middle- and upper-class populations, especially from the region's relatively well-off economies, which is unable to exemplify the whole picture of Chinese transnationalism. Therefore, I attempt to address the gap in this thesis by focusing on low-income and working-class Chinese transnational families and other family configurations.

2.6 Conclusion

Transnationalism, as noted by Caglar (2001: 607), provides a lens through which we can make sense of the increasing intensity and scope of circular flows of persons, goods, information and symbols triggered by international labour migration. This chapter looks into the phenomenon of transnational families through the perspective of transnationalism, by combining both the 'situated transnationalism' and 'care circulation' approaches. I aim to engage with not only the multi-sited networks surrounding the transnational family (particularly the socio-economic level), but also probe into the intra power relations, notably the gender and intergenerational relations among these family members scattered across the world. The following chapter takes us through the ways in which media communication technology contributes to the processes of family bond maintenance and attempts to develop a deeper understanding of how transnational family members construct and reconstitute their lives as simultaneously embedded in multiple societies.

Chapter 3. Transnational families in digital media environments

If man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun [...] then communication media are spinning wheels in the modern world and, in using these media, human beings are fabricating webs of significance for themselves.

(Thompson, 1995: 11)

Media has always played a significant role in the process of transnationalism; as noted by Appadurai (1996), transnational mediascapes have created the “narrative” and shaped the “imagined worlds” that geographically dispersed people inhabit. As shown in the previous chapter, the development of communication technologies in the 21st century has largely turned “uprooted” migrants into “connected” migrants (Diminescu, 2008), who are absent but are “being there” (Baldassar, 2008a). The ubiquitous regime of being together within multiple social ties despite the temporal and geographical constraints, which Nedelcu (2012) called the “new geographies of everyday life”, could be best exemplified by Vertovec’s (2004a) observation that the rapid growth of cheap phone calls and internet communication has become the “social glue” of transnationalism. It is within this context that the interplay of transnational family life and new media technology has been drawn to our attention.

As Morley (2017: 159) suggests, on a par with other emblematic technologies in previous ages (such as the motor car, fridge and television set), contemporary communication technologies, particularly the mobile phone, best symbolize our “liquid” era (Bauman, 2011). The traditional premise of social interactions based on proximity in time and space is gradually undermined due to the proliferation of new media technologies. Yet still we cannot ignore the “imagined” dimension of transnational families (Bryceson & Vuorela, 2002), as family within a transnational context is no longer a place-bound unit. As Huang et al. (2008: 6) argue, “regardless of whether their pluri-locations are the result of accidents or deliberation, transnational families are primarily defined by the fact that they continue to maintain shared imaginaries and narratives of belonging”. Hence, the circulation of transnational care and intimacy via the ubiquity, simultaneity and immediacy of media-based interaction (Nedelcu, 2012), which constitutes the “fragments of daily life”, makes it possible for family members scattered over the world to maintain a sense of familyhood and “doing family” (Morgan, 1996: 190) across distance. The heavy dependency on mediated communication is also a main reason that transnational families are at the forefront of adopting new communication technologies (Asis, 2006; Gonzalez & Katz, 2016; Madianou, 2012). It is, accordingly, no wonder that as Hamel (2009) pointed out, media technology has increasingly become the global driving force of migration.

This chapter engages with the conceptualization of transnational communication and media technology. I first review the related literature concerning the interplay of media technology and society. This study adopts the “social shaping of technology theory” (MacKenzie & Wacjman, 1999) as a general theoretical framework to interpret the consumption of media technology from a socio-technical perspective. In so doing, I aim to grasp the dynamic process of media in shaping society while media itself is socially shaped in turn. To better understand the co-constitution of media usage and transnational family relationships, I draw on a combination of mediation (Livingstone, 2009; Silverstone, 2005), affordance theories (Hutchby, 2001, 2014; Baym, 2010), and

the concept of polymedia (Madianou & Miller, 2012) in an attempt to establish a working framework. Given that mediation has been largely used to describe the process and social implications of mediated communication (Silverstone, 2002, 2005), I believe that its application in examining how actors within different communication nodes exert their agency provides new possibilities for considering the circulation of family communication among different family members, and further comparing how they respond to each other via the use of media technology, given the different socio-technical contexts in which they are embedded. To explore how media specificities function during such transnational communication, I employ the notion of affordances – considering media technology as both “functional” and “relational”, through which I explore how media materiality allows for possibilities of agency for dispersed family members to have certain communicative practices in accordance with their intentions.

In addition, this thesis draws on the concept of polymedia advanced by Madianou and Miller (2012), who understand media as an “integrated environment of affordances” (Madianou, 2014a: 667). The concept of polymedia emphasizes the affordance of a certain medium as relational to other media. In this sense, I am able to capture the ways in which individuals choose one platform over another for certain communicative purposes, given the various options for communication tools thanks to the proliferation of new media technologies in recent decades. What follows is a review of the extant literature regarding transnational families in the digital age. This significant body of literature has helped us to have a clear sense of how dispersed family members maintain a sense of familyhood via various kinds of media technology. Building on these earlier achievements, this study aims to provide a holistic understanding of the ways in which communication technologies reproduce, shape or even transform family practices from perspectives of separate family members in both sending and receiving countries.

3.1 The interplay of society and technology: A socio-technical perspective

Debates concerning the influence of technology on society have revolved around two opposing arguments. On the one hand, technology is construed as a dominating force in shaping how it is utilized and the subsequent social consequences, such as the well-known technological determinism. McLuhan, the most prominent technological determinist proponent, who coined the phrase “the medium is the message” (McLuhan, 2001), suggested that technological characteristics control the scale and form of human interaction. Drawing on a similar technological determinist stance, Meyrowitz (1985) argued that the rise of electronic media (television) in modern society has dissolved physical and social boundaries between people so that individuals have lost their sense of place. Following the ideas of McLuhan, Postman (1985), in *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, asserted that the presentation of television news largely transformed the traditional political culture of the print age when politicians competed with one another through written speech. As a form of entertainment programming, television news has altered the focus of candidates’ political views and solutions to whether they are telegenic. In 1992, Postman further proposed the term “technopoly”, expressing worry about a future society where technology is deified and largely shapes the direction and purpose of culture, society and individuals.

At the other end the spectrum, another group of theorists holds the view that the meanings and values of technology are mainly determined by users’ own needs and socio-cultural contexts (for example, social construction of technology; Bijker et al., 1987; Pinch & Bijker, 1984; Pinch, 2009). For instance, some feminist authors (Fischer, 1992; Rakow, 1988) have argued that the telephone was “feminine” as it was largely adopted by women to keep in touch with family and friends, exchange the latest community news and reduce their loneliness. Conversely, the computer was

constructed as a masculine technology due to its close connection with science, mathematics and technology, given that these subjects require high-level rationality and intelligence, which are traditionally considered male traits (Perry & Greber, 1990). Although the implication of particular technologies is deeply rooted in socio-cultural contexts under a social constructive lens, it still allows for a certain degree of “interpretative flexibility” among different social groups (Pinch, 2009: 46). In their case study of “penny farthing bicycles” in the 19th century, Pinch and Bijker (1984) discovered that while the bicycle was regarded as an “unsafe bicycle” for women and elderly men who used it for transport, it was considered a “macho bicycle” for young men who mainly used it for sporting purposes and showing off.

Both stances concerning the relation between technology and society only reveal a partial story. While technological determinism attempts to make causal connections between the technology and social changes without exploring other possible factors or shaping forces, social constructivism views technologies and their uses as consequences of social factors but does not really take technology per se into consideration. As MacKenzie & Wajcman (1999: 3-4) put it, technology matters, however “a hard and simple cause-and-effect way” fails to “capture the nuanced consequence brought by technology”, and also “to say that technology’s social effects are complex and contingent is not to say that it has no social effects”. Baym (2010: 44-46) contended that, “the truth [...] lies somewhere in between”, and either “locating cause with the technology or locating cause with people” is problematic, since people, technologies and institutions are “interrelated nodes in constantly changing sociotechnical networks”, all of which “have power to influence the development and subsequent use of technology”. The middle path, which integrates both technology and society as indispensable analytical variables, is what MacKenzie & Wajcman (1999) called “the social shaping of technology”. Wajcman (2004: 106) argued that technology is always a socio-material product – a seamless web or network combining artefacts, people, organizations, cultural meanings and knowledge. The consequence of

technology, therefore is “a process in which there is no single dominant shaping force”, but rather constitutive of the technological modality and capabilities and the specific cultural circumstances where the technology is consumed (MacKenzie & Wajcman, 1999). Under a socio-technical perspective, the problem of the relationship between technology and society cannot be fully understood through an oversimplified utopian or dystopian dichotomy, nor could it be construed as direct consequences either of technology or of the user (Baym, 2010). Instead, the outcome around the interplay of technology and society differs depending on the specific socio-technical context in which the consumption of technology takes place.

Recently, a significant body of literature has concentrated on the everyday uses of technology through a socio-technical lens, recognizing the mutual constitution of society and technology. For example, Qiu’s (2009) work on internal migrant workers in China argues that although new media has provided the “information have-less” with a certain degree of social capital, it should be responsible for entrenching extant social formation and hierarchies. Wallis (2013), in her long-term observation of female migrants working in the low-level service sector in Beijing, discovered that while mobile phones assisted these migrants in increasing income and searching for better employment, in the meantime they perpetuated the patriarchal ideology that exploits them. The use of mobile phones would reinforce the surveillance not only from traditional authoritarian managerial styles at workplaces, but also from patriarchal modes of familial organizations. Similarly, by proposing the term “digital inequality”, Madianou et al. (2015), in their work on humanitarian technology use in the disaster recovery of Typhoon Haiyan, found that the mobile-media-based recovery programmes did not substantially alter but in some ways reinforced existing economic inequalities, as affected communities with limited access to digital technologies were less able to benefit from recovery programmes than those who were well integrated into multiple technology platforms.

Instead of implying that a certain technology contains any inherently liberating or emancipatory properties, past empirical studies have provided a nuanced understanding of how social factors such as class, digital inequality, gender differences and exclusions are interwoven with the employment of communication technologies in a situated and contextual way. In other words, not only have they demonstrated how media technology use among ordinary individuals (in terms of various hierarchies) in everyday life is embedded in specific sociocultural contexts, they have also interrogated the social consequences associated with the emergence of media technologies. Following such a socio-technical perspective, this study attempts to analyse how the adoption of communication technology has contributed to the shaping of transnational family relationships while itself being socially shaped by situated transnationalism (as elaborated in the last chapter). To grasp such a dialectical process, in the following section I introduce the concept of mediation in order to explain the significance of communication technology in shaping interpersonal relationships through conceptualizing mediated communication and how it intersects with wider social contexts and implications. I will further elaborate the definition of mediation and clarify the rationale of adopting it as the conceptual tool for this study.

3.2 Mediation and mediated communication: Locating the power of communication technology

In his writings on the telenovela and local radio in Latin America, Martin-Barbero (1993) initially proposed the appeal to move “from media to mediation” – rather than adopting a functionalist media-centric approach, which mainly focused on “media effects”, Martin-Barbero interrogated how people appropriate media content and technologies to resist, recycle and reconstitute their identities when facing dominant ideologies. In so doing, he argues that media is a process where diverse social forces

and symbolic production collides and interacts. In a similar sense, Silverstone's (1999) work defines 'mediation' as "circulation of meaning", through which we can witness the movement of meaning from one text to another, from one discourse to another, and from one event to another (Silverstone, 1999: 13). In his later article, *Complicity and collusion in the mediation of everyday life*, Silverstone (2002: 762) further elaborated on the concept to describe "the fundamentally but unevenly dialectical process in which institutionalized media of communication (the press, broadcast radio, television, and the Internet), are involved in the general circulation of symbols in social life". In other words, the analysis of mediation not only requires us to understand the ways in which "the process of mediated communication⁴ shapes society and culture", but also, we need to pay attention to "how social and cultural activity in turn mediates the mediations, as institutions and technologies and their delivered meanings are appropriated through reception and consumption" (Silverstone, 2005: 203).

Overall, mediation is a fundamentally dialectical term, which helps to describe both the process and social implications of mediated communication through recognising the mutual shaping of technology and society. A mediational perspective not only has emphasized the socially situated nature of media communication, as the mediated communication differs depending not only on media technologies per se but also on the dynamics among media technologies, users and social-cultural domains. Given the prevalence of internet-based new media technologies, Livingstone (2009: 2-7) argues that contemporary life is marked by the "mediation of everything", and by this she refers to the phenomenon of "media saturation" where "the media mediate, entering into and shaping the mundane but ubiquitous relations among individuals and between individuals and society". For example, a growing body of anthropological and media research has extensively examined the ways in which mediated communication impacts

⁴ Mediation is often used to distinguish between face-to-face and mediated communication (Thompson, 1995). however, as many media scholars remind us, there is no such thing as "unmediated" communication (Hutchins, 1995; Madianou, 2014b; Morley, 2017) since even face-to-face interaction is mediated by language and culture. Therefore, "mediated communication" here specifically refers to techno-mediated communication.

the maintenance and creation of various social relationships, such as strengthening interpersonal intimacies and friendships (Cui, 2016; Rodriguez, 2014; Yu, et al., 2017), arousing spousal surveillance and control (Masika & Bailur, 2015; Rakow & Navarro, 1993), augmenting internal coordination among activists in social movements (Mattoni & Treré, 2014), and expanding social networks (Livingstone, 2009; Wei & Lo, 2006).

The concepts of mediation and mediated communication are arguably of particular significance in exploring social relations in today's high-speed and liquid modern society (Bauman, 2011) where individuals' everyday lives are greatly influenced by their increasing mobility (Urry, 2007). It is not uncommon to see a variety of forms of family relationships across distance in this era, such as "LAT" (living apart together) couples subject to translocal work arrangements (Cohen et al., 2015; Levin, 2004), multi-local families resulting from temporal student migration (Peng, 2016), as well as translocal families associated with certain family members' upward mobility (Lam, 2013). The proliferation of new communication technology has given rise to the "time-space compression" (Harvey, 1993), which allows individuals to simultaneously inhabit a range of places and pluralize their experience of relationships, making possible what Moores (2004) called "the doubling of place". Similarly, Morley (2017: 139) also suggests that the emergence of electronic communication technology enables people to virtually extend their physical selves, allowing for a sense of "place polygamy" and "multilocationality". As such, the physically absent party is able to obtain presence through instantaneous and multimodal mediated connections, where co-present communication and distant exchanges seem woven into a seamless web, therefore contributing to the emergence of "connected presence" (Licoppe, 2004) in social relationships. However, the "time-space distancing" (Giddens, 1984) entailed by mediated communication at a distance is also conducive to the "lifting out" of social relations from local contexts of interaction. This may result in a lack of social cues and risk causing more potential misunderstanding, which is less likely to happen in face-to-face communication that is often confined to physical co-presence scenarios.

In this sense, mediation and mediated communication have made them well suited to study geographically separate people and relationships. This is especially true when it comes to transnational families as dispersed family members endure relatively longer separation, and in most cases could only rely on mediated communication to maintain such a distant bond. Given the understanding of “mediated communication” from a socio-technical perspective, the concept of mediation pays particular attention to the characteristics and circulation of transnational communication among dispersed family members. Mediation is sensitive to capturing the ways in which one’s family practices via communication technologies may evoke different responses from another. As suggested in Chapter 2, the care circulation in transnational families is characterized by “asymmetrical reciprocity” – while everyday family practices take place under shared values and mutual obligations, family relationships are simultaneously replete with tension, contest and unequal power. Although “asymmetrical reciprocity” also occurs in proximate families, it is especially true in transnational families since they are subject to political, economic and social factors in multiple countries. In this sense, by considering media as media process, mediation invites reflection on dynamic mediated communication among transnational family members. More significantly, it also sheds light on how such multi-dimensional mediated communication contributes to the shaping of family relationships while being itself socially shaped by transnational structural factors as well.

The multi-faceted definitions of mediated communication, both empirically and theoretically, have been very helpful for understanding the heuristic contributions and potential constraints created by media-based intimacy. Yet, the concept of mediation has also received critiques for being too vague and abstract (Madianou, 2014b), as it does not pay particular attention to the inner-workings of the process of mediated communication, given that the ways in which interpersonal communication is mediated

varies widely depending on the media and technology employed. This study builds on these earlier achievements and aims to advance the understanding of the concept of mediation since it may appear in varied forms in accordance with the medium and media platform adopted. This leads me to introduce the notion of affordances, a term to describe how users are allowed or constrained in some interactions while preventing others. In the course of the discussion that follows, I shall seek to introduce the literature of affordances and how it relates to the research question of this study.

3.3 How technology specificities matter: Affordances as socio-technical possibilities

This section aims to reveal how the affordances of different media open diverse communicative possibilities, which shape distinctive communicative practices as well as different norms covering use, social expectations, and emotions around the use of media. The concept of affordance is generally adopted to describe what material artefacts such as media technologies allow people to do. First coined by James Gibson in the field of psychology in the late 1960s, the notion of affordance originally aimed to explain how animals perceive their surroundings. Gibson (1986) used affordance to refer to environmental properties that “offers the animal, what it provides or furnishes, either for good or ill” (127). For example, a fire can be both the warmth necessary for life, but also serves a threat of burning that may lead to injury and potential death. For Gibson, the core argument of affordances is that each artefact has a characteristic that offers the possibilities and specific actions as part of its “usability” (Gibson, 1986).

The concept of affordance was later introduced and developed into the design area by Donald Norman, a cognitive scientist who defined affordances as intrinsic properties of artefacts, which suggests or determines certain forms of use based on the ways in

which designers “indicate how the user is to interact with the device” (Norman, 1990: 8). For instance, knobs are for turning, slots are for inserting things into, balls are for throwing or bouncing. When affordances are taken advantage of, the user knows what to do just by looking (Norman, 1990: 9). For Norman, it is designers’ duty to ensure the affordance of a certain item is perceivable by the user. While Gibson’s definition of affordances stresses an organism’s initiative to decide how to make use of the item, Norman’s definition has placed the power in the designers’ hands, who influence the user’s perception and further action associated with the artefact through their design choices. However, there is a determinism inherent in both definitions, since their conceptualization of affordances indicates that an artefact determines certain actions.

More recently, the concept has been embraced by social scientists and media and communication scholars to describe the ways in which the properties of communication technologies intersect with users’ practices and the structure of social relations. In his analysis of social interaction involving technology, Hutchby (2001: 30) defines affordances as “possibilities for action that emerge from given technological affordances”. He stressed that affordances are both “functional and relational”: functional in that they enable and constrain the engagement of certain activities, while relational in being attentive to how the affordances of one object may differ in different contexts and species. In other words, the very definition has distinguished the affordances of an artefact from its materiality, as the former change across different contexts while the latter does not. While Gibson (1982) argued that the walk-on-ability of a surface exists whether or not the animal walks on it (p. 409), Hutchby & Barnett (2005: 152) go further and suggest that “the surface’s affordance of walk-on-ability becomes manifest when the animal walks on it”. Such a twofold consideration of affordances has shifted the focus on the “negotiation in understanding the socio-technical relation” to questions of “the use-in-situated-social-interaction of technological devices” (Hutchby, 2003: 582). The rule also applies to communication technologies, for Hutchby (2001) the functional aspect of affordances of a certain media

technology, namely the possibilities for agency it enables, is inextricably interwoven with users' intentions and various social-cultural norms.

Based on extant literature on mobile media technology, Schrock (2015: 1232) proposed a “communicative affordances” approach to conceptualize how the “interaction between subjective perception of utility and objective qualities of technology alter communicative practices”. These affordances include portability, availability, locatability, and multimediality, all of which are associated with certain communicative practices. For example, the portability of a mobile device affords its use during commuting or waiting, locatability could be used for coordination and surveillance, and multimediality may allow practices like screen sharing or synchronous video streaming (Schrock, 2015: 1235). Instead of equalizing affordances with static media properties, Schrock contends that these communicative affordances function differently depending on the specific contexts in which they are embedded, which may incur unexpected outcomes and contribute to further social consequences. For example, mobile media has often been considered to be a device that enables “perpetual contact” (Katz & Aakhus, 2002; Licoppe, 2004; Mascheroni & Vincent, 2016). Such affordance of availability, on the one hand, has offered increased frequency of communication despite geographical constraints, which may be associated with positive feelings of proximity, intimacy and belonging; whilst on the other hand, it can also contribute to the framing of the obligation and social expectations of being always contactable, which may lead to feelings of anxiety and insecurity (Mascheroni & Vincent, 2016: 422).

Rather than being “an on switch to constant social interaction”, however, individuals are able to strategically draw on the communicative affordance of availability to alter the degree to which they might be reached (Schrock, 2015: 1237). Mannell (2018), for example, proposes a typology of five “disconnective affordances” that users adopt to

manage and limit their connections to friends and family and to mobile devices and platforms, including: disentanglement (a loosening of ties to attention where device and platform retreat in a person's field of awareness, such as turning off the incoming message notification or putting the phone away or turning it face-down); jamming (blocking the communication signals); modulation (adjusting the availability of messages from a specific person, such as the "block" feature that stops messages from a specified contact); delay (being free to read a message but disconnected in the sense of being unwilling or unable to reply until later); and suggestiveness (keeping messages short or infrequent to express disinterest or unavailability to interlocutors).

In addition, social media research is also an area where the concept of affordance plays an important role in shaping communicative practices. For instance, in boyd's (2010: 7) discussion of social network sites, she argues that such networked technologies have introduced new affordances for "amplifying, recording and spreading information and social acts." She contends that while capacities like persistence, replicability, searchability and scalability have made it possible for people to "connect to one another across great distances and engage with asynchronously produced content over extended periods", the "bit-based" nature of the digital environment has also incurred new problems – persistence and replicability may make the access of "authenticity" more difficult online, as acts and information are no longer space- or time-bounded, and it is easier to alter or modify them due to the nature of bits; also the emergence of searchability and scalability would make people susceptible to unanticipated exposure to invisible audiences when they are contributing online.

Given the rapid evolution of social media platforms, a number of new affordances have been added to the research agenda, such as shareability (Papacharissi & Yuan, 2011) and anonymity (Fox & Potocki, 2014), geotagging (the use of people's location

information to enhance their online interactions; Humphreys & Liao, 2011), anonymity, and visibility (e.g. the visibility of activities in the news feed on social media; boyd, 2014; Marwick & Ellison, 2012). As always, these new affordances have opened up new possibilities for facilitating mediated communication, while also arousing new challenges. For instance, in Marwick and Ellison's (2012) study of Facebook memorial pages, they discovered that the visibility of social media enriches mourning displays and allows more participants to get involved, however the openness (the scalability, persistence and searchability features) of SNSs also contribute to context collapse⁵, unwelcome participants, and "trolls". Although these fruitful debates have deepened our understanding of how social media platforms reshape varied forms of personal interaction in daily life, their use of affordance has been questioned for narrowing the term down to stable and inherent properties without paying enough attention to its situated and relational dimension, such as human actors and socio-cultural contexts (see also Costa, 2018; Evans et al., 2017).

In response, recent studies have witnessed a shift towards a relational approach. McVeigh-Schultz & Baym (2015) developed the notion of "vernacular affordance", focusing on how people "make sense" of affordances and negotiate technology in their everyday lives. Nagy and Neff (2015) studied the imaginary dimension of the affordances of digital technologies, in which they contend that imagined affordances "emerge between users' perceptions, attitudes and expectations; between the materiality and functionality of technologies; and between the intentions and perceptions of designers" (5). Drawing on Bourdieu's concept of habitus, Fayard & Weeks (2014) proposed the framework of "affordances-for-practice", which sees affordances as both dispositional and relational, exploring the affordances of social media as embedded in and emergent from social processes. In a similar vein, drawing

⁵ "The wide and varied audiences common to social media give rise to the phenomenon known as 'context collapse', in which individuals representing multiple social contexts (e.g. work, family, high school acquaintances, close friends) are 'collapsed into the flat category of 'friends' or 'contacts' on social media sites" (Marwick & Ellison, 2012: 379).

on Orlikowski's concept of "technologies-in-practice", Costa (2018) proposed the concept of affordances-in-practice, referring to the enactment of platform properties by specific users within social and cultural contexts.

Taking these works together, rather than seeing affordances as stable properties of an object, both functional and relational, I consider affordances as opportunities for action that are produced by the properties of an object, relative to the perceptions of the person engaging with the object and the broader context in which they are acting. The analytical focus of adopting affordance as a conceptual framework is therefore not on media per se but on the socio-material practices entangled with technology. This requires me to be attentive to the specific possibilities and constraints a certain medium provides, the societal circumstances where media consumption takes place, and also the ways in which media practices may affect or possibly be affected by the socio-technical context in everyday life.

The analysis of media as technical affordances and the emphasis on the ways in which individuals exploit affordances help us to better understand the inner workings of the mediation process, namely the consequence of mediated communication for social relationships. That said, as mentioned in the introduction chapter, the past few years have witnessed a proliferation of new media technologies, so that individuals can employ a plethora of tools and platforms when engaging in mediated communication. In this sense, affordances are no longer independent, but instead intersect with personal, social, and cultural influences in ways that lead to media use meaning different things to different people in different relationships at different times. To address the complexity of affordances, the following section sets out to introduce the concept of polymedia, a term to theorize the interrelation between different media affordances in

today's digital environment. Prior to the discussion of polymedia, I first review several notions that describe media as an environment.

3.4 Polymedia: Communication technology as integrated environments of affordances

Given the emerging complex environment of multiple and evolving media technologies, a couple of concepts have been developed to capture the interrelation of various communication technologies. Some terms have focused on the unprecedented plurality of media technologies in the digital era, such as multi-media, multi-channel, multi-platform and transmedia. Though these terms might be useful for understanding the appropriations of multiple media by users, they fail to conceptualize the convergence trend in the contemporary media landscape, since different platforms are constantly merging with each other and creating new hybrid technologies (for example, VOIP (Voice over Internet Protocol) calls on mobile phones, or instant messaging embedded in online games and social networking sites) (Jenkins, 2006). The concept of media multiplexity (Haythornthwaite, 2005) is another noteworthy example illustrating the how users utilize the plurality of digital media to fulfil their communicative purposes. It suggests that tie strength determines how media is used in relationships and the ways in which individuals allocate media among different ties creates a media hierarchy. Such media use hierarchies, however, become less significant given the convergence of media technologies.

Other concepts foreground the ways in which technological environments contribute to the shaping of societies. For example, the concept of media ecology (Slater & Tacchi, 2004; Ito et al., 2010) attempts to capture the use of communication systems (e.g. online activities) in conjunction with wider offline contexts, such as social and cultural

systems (e.g. public transportation, schools and government), structural conditions, and infrastructures of place. The concept of media manifold proposed by Couldry (2011: 220) aims to grasp “the complex web of delivery platforms”. It specifically considers individuals’ relations with the plurality of media, through viewing their positions within the “institutionalized environment of interdependent media” and “the situated complexity of their everyday choices of media” (Couldry & Hepp, 2017: 56). As such, media manifold tries to delineate a “degree of institutionalized interdependence in everyday practices with media that creates a distinctive type of social complexity (ibid: 57). In so doing, Couldry (2016) believes that the concept is able to capture the many-layered complexity of our access and use of media in the digital era.

These concepts provide insightful views regarding the plurality and complexity of the contemporary media landscape from various perspectives, contributing to the theoretical effort of understanding media as environments. However, they are not attentive to the interdependent relations of different technological affordances that characterize today’s digital media environment. To address the gap, this study draws on the concept of polymedia proposed by Madianou and Miller (2012) who consider all media and platforms to be an “environment of communicative opportunities”, which serves as an “integrated structure”, within which people choose one platform over another to manage their relationships (Madianou & Miller, 2013: 170). Drawing on Levi-Strauss’s (1963) anthropological structuralism, which argues that any given thing is experienced in relation to others, the authors suggested that polymedia is “a form of structuralism in which the understanding we have of any one medium becomes less its properties, or affordances, and more its alternative status as against the other media that could equally be employed for the message” (Madianou & Miller, 2012: 125). In this sense, polymedia treats media as a symbolic environment instead of independent platforms of communication. For instance, an email is not just an email, but also its differences from a telephone call, a message or any other media technologies. In other words, media are defined as relational within the structure of the polymedia

environment – the very nature of affordance of each individual medium, therefore, is radically transformed since it “exists in a state of contrast, but also synergy, with all others” (ibid: 125).

Given that different media have different affordances, polymedia is particularly attentive to the ways in which individuals exploit the differences among communication technologies to meet certain interactive purposes. It shifts our attention from different media as discrete technologies to an understanding of a communicative environment where users exploit various media affordances to navigate their social relations, emotions and consequences. Therefore, polymedia is not simply the environment, it is also the social implication of media choice in a particular relation or context (Madianou, 2014a). Overall, compared to other terms that describe media as an environment, the concept of polymedia is sensitive not only to the composite nature of the various technologies, devices, and platforms – namely the complexity of communication technology in the digital age, but also advances the debate on the social uses of communication technologies, capturing the dynamic consequences and contexts in which different affordances are interpreted and relate to each other. For instance, Madianou & Miller (2012) summarize various types of mediated communication in polymedia environments: voice-based or visual communication like phone calls and webcam sessions provide synchronicity and interactive communication, which is helpful to convey feelings and remove ambiguities that may lead to misunderstanding or conflict, however, it is also intrusive and sometimes provokes unwelcome revelations, and its synchronicity also requires extra arrangement to make it happen; text-based communication such as email or texting is good for accurately transmitting information however lacking in synchronicity; multi-media communication such as social networking sites and blogging are good for sharing information in various ways (visually or vocally) but they are relatively hard to control in terms of access.

In sum, the concept of affordance understands the materiality of an artefact in a relational way – they are not things that impose themselves upon humans’ actions with, around, or via that artefact, but are also interwoven with the social dimension of human relationships. In addition, the concept of polymedia construes media technologies as an integrated environment of affordances, which allows for various communicative opportunities. I therefore believe that putting the two concepts in the theoretical framework helps to nuance the understanding of how users employ media for communication at a micro level. Specifically, the combination of affordance and polymedia is adopted in this study to address the questions of media access and uses, for example, the type of communication tools employed, the reason why a certain medium is used over another, how family members scattered around the world exploit polymedia environments to generate various communicative practices to navigate distant family relationships. As argued in Chapter 2, family should be understood as a verb (doing) instead a noun, particularly within a transnational context, since the maintenance of family kinships across borders primarily relies on transnational communication in everyday life. Given that a situated transnational approach is adopted, the ways in which transnational family members in the “caregiving triangle” (migrant parents, left-behind children and guardians) experience transnationalism varies depending on their positions vis-à-vis the networks of various transnational regimes, such as migration, welfare, gendered care and working-time regimes in both sending and receiving countries. The combination of polymedia and affordance, in this way, is conducive for understanding how different family members are “doing family” through the use of communication technologies, given that they are embedded in different socio-technical contexts.

3.5 “Doing family” through mediated communication in polymedia environments

Drawing on a socio-technical perspective, this study attempts to build a working theoretical framework by integrating the concepts of mediation, affordance and polymedia as a combination into the study of transnational families as a form of “transnationalism from below”. Such a socio-technical perspective is helpful for us to understand how media technology intersects with transnational family life in the digital era, since it not only avoids the arbitrariness of the radical constructivist position, with its single-minded view that social and cultural factors are the only driving forces in shaping the use of technology, but it also evades the equally unilateral epistemology associated with technological determinism. The general idea of the “social shaping of technology” theory is the fundamental background of this study, which emphasizes the mutual shaping process of society and technology. Its dialectic feature potentially provides a useful bottom-up analytical lens through which we can better understand how mediated transnational family life is subject to broader structural factors, including ideological discourses as gender and class, modernity as well as the socio-economic discrepancies between receiving and host societies that are embedded in transnationalism.

On the whole, the research aim of this study is to investigate the ways in which migrant parents, their children who remain in China as well as their carers take advantage of various affordances of media technologies in polymedia environment to communicate with each other. It also delves into how these mediated family practices constitute the care circulation in transnational families, which is characterized by both reciprocal collaborations and constant tensions. The mediation process should be read in light of the premise that transnational family is construed as a form of “transnationalism from below” – a socio-economic unity with intra power dynamics (gender, intergenerational

and class divisions) in a transnational context. It is noteworthy that these three conceptual approaches are not exclusively distinct from one another, given that the whole study is based upon the general co-constitutive implication of media technology and society. Such a combination of mediation, affordance and polymedia, as an analytical framework, is useful on various levels, ranging from micro media management for interactive communication to macro social consequence associated with media use. In addition, the holistic approach fits well with the ethnographical bottom-up approach this thesis employs. Given that transnational family functions as a typical manifestation of “transnationalism from below”, family members (including migrant parents, left-behind children, and guardians) scattered over the world are at different positions within a certain transnational family network, thus subject to disparate structural rules and resources. The bottom-up approach, both theoretically and methodologically, is arguably helpful for delving into the heterogeneity and subtlety of transnational family life in a “situated” way (Kilkey & Merla, 2014).

To advance the understand of how migrants and non-migrants “do family” at a distance through mediated interactions, the following section reviews prior literature regarding the use of communication technology in transnational families. This study builds on this already substantial body of work in an attempt to theorize how communication technologies and polymedia environments influence the ways in which transnational family members fulfil their family roles and stay connected with each other despite the geographical distance that divides them.

3.6 Mediated communication and co-presence in transnational families

Given that transnational family life has been enhanced and transformed by the growing innovations of media technology, current related scholarships have revolved around debates concerning the different forms of mediated communication associated with the use of various media technologies within transnational households. For example, as Wilding (2006) observed, compared to letters and postcards, the introduction of email in the 1970s further reduced the impact of distance and migration on the exchange of support and care among transnational families, enabling family members to take part in the lives of their kin overseas. Although the emergence of a new media technology plays an important role in contributing to the perception of intimate connectedness within transnational households, it does not really substitute the existing communication patterns, but instead complements them (Wilding, 2006). A similar finding is Baldassar's (2008a) categorization of distant co-presence experienced by family members across national borders. According to Baldassar, the mediated form of co-presence, which mainly refers to verbal exchanges on the telephone or webcam, or indirect interactions via written words on email or messages, generates family routines and facilitates regular exchanges, however, it complements other forms of co-presence in families dispersed across borders: these include co-presence by proxy, which is achieved indirectly through "objects and people whose physical presence embodies the spirit of the longed for absent person or place" (e.g. photos and gifts); physical co-presence, which mainly refers to "bodily present with the longed for person or in the longed for place so as to experience them fully" (e.g. reunion); as well as imagined co-presence, which corresponds to the ways in which individuals feel a sense of togetherness even without actively engaging in communication with each other (e.g. prayers) (Baldassar, 2008a: 252).

With the rise of internet and mobile-based new media technologies in the 21st century, the mediated forms of transnational communication have also experienced massive transformation, which has given rise to extensive academic discussions. In her long-term ethnography of UK-based Filipino migrants and their communication with left-behind families, Madianou (2016) discovered a new type of mediated co-presence, which she termed “ambient co-presence”. As she noted, the increasing prevalence of an “always on” culture of ubiquitous connectivity has made it possible for individuals at a distance to have a “peripheral awareness of distant others”. Therefore, people are able to know the “actions and daily rhythms” of their peers from afar via the affordance of media technology, such as the “news feed” from social networking sites, the portability of internet-based devices and location services. Baldassar (2016), in her investigation in regards to communication technology consumption among middle-class Australian migrants, identified diverse types of mediated co-presence preferred by different actors in various scenarios. For example, the “immediate” or “stream” co-presence afforded by Skype is preferred by the elderly and very young. By contrast, adult family members, particularly male adults, prefer textual media, such as SMS messages, through which they can have a sense of “active” co-presence during the communication exchange. Similarly, in their study of Romanian migrants in Switzerland, Nedelcu & Wyss (2016) teased out three forms of “co-presence” in their mediated communication with left-behind families. “Ritual” co-presence is primarily used by migrants to sustain the minimum intergenerational solidarity obligation; “omnipresent” co-presence occurs when family members living apart attempt to maintain a sense of continuously ‘being together’ despite the geographical separation; and “reinforced” co-presence takes place in the case when migrants need to care for their vulnerable parents.

The recent growing body of empirical evidence, to some extent, has dissolved the assumption that distance is implicitly a barrier for communication and intimacy exchange, particularly within a transnational context. Some studies have demonstrated

that the ubiquitous and frequent connectivity enabled by the technological evolution makes the “imagined” transnational mundane life more “tangible”, contributing to a sense of closeness and “virtual intimacy” irrespective of face-to-face interaction (Wilding, 2006), enhancing the mutual support and solidarity among these split families (Baldassar et al., 2007; Cabanes & Acedera, 2012; Madianou, 2012; Nedelcu & Wyss, 2016), mitigating the emotional loss of family separation (Bacigalupe & Camara, 2012; Uy-Tioco, 2007), and even providing possibilities to create the “ideal distance” that leads towards a “pure relationship” between migrants and non-migrants (Madianou & Miller, 2012). Yet, mediated communication is not solely deterritorialized given that geographical and temporal gaps between family members have not vanished. We should therefore not romanticize the intervening of new media technology in transnational family life. The consequence of mediated communication, however, can also inflict new practical conflicts and negative effects, for example, the ubiquitous connectivity that strengthens feelings of control and surveillance (Acedera & Yeoh, 2018; Johnson & Lindquist, 2019; Kang, 2018), the communicative opportunities enabled by communication technologies that arouse burdens and new expectations of mediated co-presence (Horst, 2006; Peng, 2016), and the poignant moments during mediated communication when a family crisis or ceremony takes place, which reminds family members of the frustration of physical separation (Baldassar, 2015; Chib et al., 2014; Madianou & Miller, 2012; Wilding, 2006).

The emerging scholarship has addressed the very important problems of how communication technologies are shaping the ways of “being together” and what modalities of mediated communication and co-presence within transnational families have emerged. This study builds on these earlier achievements and aims to provide a nuanced understanding of how Chinese migrants and their left-behind families utilize the affordances of communication technologies to fit their needs during the process of “doing family”, while at the same time how the adoption of communication

technologies contribute to the shaping of care circulation and family relationships within these transnational households.

3.7 Conclusion

This chapter aimed to develop a working approach by bringing transnationalism and the concepts of mediation, affordances and polymedia in dialogue with each other in specific relation to the mediated transnational family communication debates. Given that a socio-technical perspective has been adopted, this thesis attempts to put a balanced emphasis on both the material dimensions as well as the social implications of media technology by taking a middle way to reflect the interrelations of media-technological and socio-cultural factors. As such, I draw on the concepts of polymedia and affordance to understand how transnational family members navigate digital environments to negotiate their family roles and obligations. Given that they are positioned in different socio-technical contexts, the care circulation within transnational families is often characterized by “asymmetrical reciprocity”. In this sense, the concept of mediation, which understands media as the process and social implications of mediated communication, is particularly utilized here to describe the ways in which care circulation is reproduced and shaped by mediated communication, which may contribute to the shaping of transnational family relationships.

My broad argument here is that migration studies concerning the interplay of transnational family and media use should be widened and rethought in a broader relation to the current trends of transnationalism and media saturation, which, from the level of micro to macro, contributes to an understanding of the diverse contexts in which transnational family relationships are shaping and being shaped by processes of media access and consumption. The aim of this thesis is to compare how family members are “doing family” given their different positions within the nexus of

transnational family networks and the polymedia environment during the mediation process. In so doing, we can better locate the role and power of communication technologies to advance the understanding of “transnationalism from below”, namely everyday transnational practices in the digital age. Prior to addressing these issues, I will elaborate the research design and how the whole research was carried out in the next chapter.

Chapter 4. Doing multi-sited ethnography to study transnational family

In Chapters 2 and 3 I discussed the theoretical frameworks adopted in this thesis. As argued in Chapter 2, this study understands transnational family as a form of ‘transnationalism from below’ (Gardner, 2002; Vertovec, 2009) – a sociocultural unit largely influenced by the intersection of transnational structural factors and intra family power dynamics. I draw on the combination of ‘situated transnationalism’ (Kilkey & Merla, 2014) and ‘care circulation’ (Baldassar & Merla, 2014a, 2014b) not only to contextualize individuals’ family practices, but also to capture how these transnational care practices are interrelated and relational. Following a socio-technical perspective, in Chapter 3 I discussed the rationale of adopting a hybrid framework of mediation, affordances and polymedia to explore the ways in which Chinese transnational family members “do family” (Morgan, 1996) via mediated communication – I specifically explored how family members exploit polymedia environments to negotiate their family roles by interacting with other family members, given their situated positions within transnational family networks (i.e. situated transnationalism); in addition, I considered how mediated communication among different parties constitutes “care circulation” within a transnational context and contributes to the shaping of family relationships.

The theoretical framework of this thesis allows me to study “doing family” across borders from a bottom-up and situated perspective. This not only requires a long-term observation of how Chinese transnational family members experience international migration and engage family relationships in their everyday life, but also requires in-depth interviews to delve into their life stories, thoughts and feelings about family

separation, as well as communication practices via media technologies. To fully capture the multi-dimensional nature of care flow in transnational households, this study employs a multi-sited ethnography as its research method, which is designed to “follow people, connections, associations and relationships across space” in this increasingly mobile and deterritorialized world (Falzon, 2009: 1–2; Marcus, 1995). In this chapter I start by discussing the ethnographic tradition of migration literature and transnational family studies. What follows is the detailed procedures of recruiting participants of this study. This includes migrant parents in Britain and non-migrants, including left-behind children and their guardians, in China. In addition, this chapter also outlines the composition of the participants and further introduces the methodological framework: in-depth interviews, and online and offline participant observation. I conclude with a discussion about ethnics, focusing on my role as a researcher and how I cope with the power relation with my participants.

4.1 Multi-sited ethnography to study transnationalism

Traditionally, ethnography has been defined as a strategy of inquiry in which the researcher studies a cultural group in a natural setting over a prolonged period of time by primarily collecting observational and interview data (Creswell, 1998). The inquiry process often consists of prolonged fieldwork, typically through participant observation in which the researcher is immersed in the day-to-day lives of the people studied, as well as one-on-one interviews with members of the group (ibid). More specifically, ethnography is a “particular method or set of methods that involve the ethnographer participating overtly or covertly in people’s daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, and/or asking questions through informal and formal interviews, collecting documents and artefacts – in fact, gathering whatever data are available to throw light on the issues that are the emerging focus of inquiry” (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007: 3). The process of immersion enables ethnographers to gather empirical insights into social practices that are often ‘hidden’

from public awareness, which helps them to “identify, explore and link social phenomena which on the surface, have little connection with each other” (Reeves et al., 2013: 1365).

The task of ethnography also relates to the production of its own distinctive form of knowledge, which Geertz (1973) calls “thick description”, referring to a way of providing cultural context and meaning that people place on actions, words and things so that a person outside the culture can make meaning of the behaviours. The production of ethnographic knowledge involves interpretation of the meanings and consequences associated with various social actions and phenomena, and also includes the ways in which they are implicated in wider contexts (Reeves et al., 2008; Ritchie & Lewis, 2013). Through the dialectical engagement of existing theoretical formulations with empirical data, an ethnographer is able to develop systematic and generic understandings about the complexities and shared cultural nuances of the social world (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007; Snow et al., 2003). An ethnographic perspective is therefore well suited to examine the life forms of a particular group of people as well as the latent cultural and social context that underpins the behaviours. As O’ Reilly (2005) concluded,

Ethnography is [...] iterative-inductive research (that evolves in design through the study), drawing on a family of methods, involving direct and sustained contact with human agents, within the context of their daily lives (and cultures), watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions, and producing a richly written account that respects the irreducibility of human experience, that acknowledges the role of theory as the researcher’s own role and that views human as part object/part subject.

(O’Reilly, 2005: 3)

Ethnography is close to the way we make sense of the social world we inhabit in everyday life and also serves as a scientifically rigorous and systematic research method (O'Reilly, 2005). Given its sensitivity to everyday life, ethnography has been widely adopted within migration studies, which sheds light on different aspects of migrants' life experiences, such as identity and assimilation issues, migration community and networks, political involvement, and citizenship and human rights (Cao, 2005; Carol, 2010; Menjívar, 2000; Smith, 2006). Although these previous ethnography-based studies have produced a wealth of knowledge to advance our understanding of migration 'from the bottom', they have yet to fully grasp the multi-stranded essence of transnational living. As argued in Chapter 2, transnationalism is the emergence of a social process in which individuals establish social fields across geographic, cultural and political borders (Guarnizo, 2003; Glick-Schiller et al., 1992). This means that transnational living and social relations are no longer bound to a single site or space, but instead involve both sending and receiving areas. The concept of 'field' in traditional ethnography is therefore challenged by the trend of globalization (Gille, 2001). As a response, advocates of multi-sitedness as a new methodological framework have emerged in an attempt to explore the full scope of the migration experience and its impacts. The essence of multi-sited ethnography, according to Marcus (1998: 90),

[...] is designed around chains, paths, threads, conjunctions, or juxtapositions of locations in which the ethnographer establishes some form of literal, physical presence, with an explicit, posited logic of associations or connection among sites that in fact defines the argument of ethnography.

In this sense, the field of ethnographic inquiry is not simply a confined geographic place waiting to be entered, but instead a conceptual space within which boundaries are

constantly negotiated and constructed by the ethnographer and subjects (Fitzgerald, 2006). As such, a multi-sited researcher is able to trace and describe the connections and relationships “that are substantially continuous but spatially non-contiguous” (Falzon, 2009: 2) through “ethnography’s way of making arguments and providing its own contexts of significance” (Marcus, 1998: 14). As mentioned earlier, a crucial aim of the transnational approach is to investigate the “simultaneity of transnational practices” that take place across multiple locations (Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004). The “multi-sited ethnography”, which involves comparative studies in different localities therefore serves as a suitable methodological framework to grasp the varied and multidirectional nature of transnational living. In addition, the bottom-up and multiple analysis lens granted by multi-sited research also moves away from what Wimmer & Glick-Schiller (2003) called “methodological nationalism”, which assumes the ‘nation’ and the ‘state’ are the central units for the study of migrants’ lives. In other words, by integrating various global actors embedded in different sociocultural contexts, multi-sited ethnography is able to debunk the taken-for-granted equation of society with the nation state and further conceive society as extending beyond national boundaries.

Given that my study is concerned with “doing family” within transnational families through the use of digital technologies, a multi-sited ethnographic approach allows for a wider remit of analysis than traditional methods of interviewing. This is not only because multi-sited ethnography can incorporate the accounts and agency of different family members across borders, but also due to its sensitivity to those complex and detailed daily behaviours, which constitute transnational living and communication processes (Francisco-Menchavez, 2018). A growing body of research has recently employed such a methodological framework to study transnational communication and distant kinship among dispersed family members (Dreby, 2006; 2010; Francisco-Menchavez, 2018; Madianou & Miller, 2012; Parreñas, 2005a, 2005b, 2010). Following this, my research uses multi-sited ethnography to focus on three main themes, as mentioned in Chapter 1. First, I considered how migrants of different genders

negotiate their parenthood via mediated communication with their left-behind families; second, I investigated the ways in which left-behind children employ communication technologies to negotiate intergenerational relationships with their migrant parents; and finally, I looked into how left-behind guardians perform their familial roles through mediated communication with migrants.

4.2 Online ethnography for studying the Internet

To advance the understanding of participants' communication practices and mediated interaction between different family members, this thesis also adopts online ethnography to facilitate a deeper understanding of the empirical data collected from traditional ethnography. Online/virtual ethnography transfers the ethnography tradition as an embodied research instrument to the social space of the Internet (Hine, 2008). Online ethnographers do not necessarily have to travel physically, but instead focus on "experiential rather than physical displacement" (Hine, 2000: 45). The key traditional ethnographic principle of developing understanding through long-term immersion and participant observation still applies to ethnography of the Internet, albeit in virtual or digital settings (Hart, 2017). Historically, online ethnography was originally employed to examine virtual community practices and their social implications when cyberculture became popular in the 1990s (Baym, 1995; Rheingold, 1994; Silver, 2000). While realizing ethnography in online settings may fail to capture the full spectrum of Internet social interactions, recent virtual ethnographical literature has witnessed a shift from 'ethnography of the Internet' to the 'study of a digitally enabled world' (Perterra, 2018), paying particular attention to the complex connections between the online and offline worlds. For example, in her study of an online soap community, Baym (2000) found that the domestic and working lives of participants worked with the influence of the soap opera, contributing to the ways in which they interacted online. Similarly, drawing on ethnographic fieldwork in Trinidad, Miller & Slater (2000) argued that individuals' positions in a culture or a particular location greatly shapes the ways they appropriate

the Internet – as they put it, the Internet is not a “placeless” space (4) but instead has been ‘Trinidadianised’. As argued in Chapter 3, technology is always a socio-material product, combining artefacts, individuals, organisations and cultural meanings (Wajcman, 2004). In other words, under a socio-technical perspective, the space in which online interactions take place is socially produced through a technology that is itself simultaneously socially shaped (Hine, 2000).

The complex links between online and offline social space is best illustrated by Hine’s (2000) two theoretical views of the Internet: the Internet as culture, and the Internet as a cultural artefact. While the former explores the Internet as a space in which individuals produce and reproduce culture just like virtual communities, the latter treats the Internet as an object interwoven with sociocultural factors and individuals’ practical uses in everyday lives. Therefore, the main field for observing the Internet as a cultural artefact is the offline world, which is often used to map the sociocultural context in which participants are situated (Hine, 2015). Following this, this study employs both online and offline ethnography to facilitate a deeper understanding of how Chinese migrants and their left-behind family members navigate communication technologies to maintain family relationships. As for the aspect of technology use, through an ethnographical approach this thesis attempts to compare people’s experiences of interaction across distance and time. Also, a comparison is made involving the different technologies and media available to individuals. Overall, drawing on thick descriptions in regards to perspectives of migrants and left-behind children, as well as other family members who engage with child rearing, I discerned the dynamic nature of transnationalism as a web of multi-dimensional relationships. I elaborate on how online and offline ethnography was carried out and the related ethical issues below.

4.3 Recruiting participants in Britain

In selecting the sample of individual participants, I aimed to focus particularly on those facing a long-term family separation and who rely on digital technology for distant communication. As argued in Chapters 1 and 2, I focused on clandestine migrants in Britain and their families in China, not only because this group of migrants have largely remained unexplored in prior Chinese transnational family literature, which primarily concentrated on middle-class migration contexts, but also because communication technologies are of particular significance among low-income, working-class and clandestine migrant groups since they have to endure prolonged separation due to their constrained mobility and insecure migration status.

This study took place between November 2015 and October 2018 and consisted of two phases. The first phase of the research focused on UK-based migrant parents, between November 2015 and June 2017. After due consideration, London was chosen as my main field site since clandestine migrants in Britain are very dispersed with substantial concentration only in several main cities, among which London is the destination that most (approximately two thirds) opt for (Gordon et al., 2009). Moreover, the Soho's Chinatown in London, as a metaphorical manifestation of ethnic Chinese society (Benton & Gomez, 2008: 179; Sales et al., 2008, 2009), has the highest intensity of Chinese residence (26.2%) in the country at a postcode level, according to the 2011 census. Chinatown retains its importance not only due to its iconic meaning, but also because of the support it provides to Chinese communities. Especially for the vulnerable and clandestine, many Chinese associations in London's Chinatown provide essential support networks, consultancy services, language teaching and many other social events (Benton & Gomez, 2008). Given that I am researching an often-hidden population of clandestine migrants and catering workers, London's Chinatown was considered to have the potential to be a key site for my research as it enabled me to encounter respondents with a relatively insecure status.

Initial contacts with migrants were primarily made through such Chinese migration networks and communities, although with some twists and turns. I searched for information online concerning organisations for the Chinese diaspora in London, and then visited several of them, such as the London Chinese Community Centre⁶, London Chinatown Chinese Association, Islington Chinese Association⁷, and Camden Chinese Community Centre⁸. However, I eventually found that the ethnic Chinese in these early-established (around 1980s) associations did not fit my sample requirement, since most were populated by migrants of older generations (Hong Kong Chinese) and already had their children in the UK as second or even third-generation migrants. Subsequently, I was directed by one of the association volunteers to other newly emerging Chinese associations – UK Fujian Business Association, UK Chinese Business Association,⁹ and Chinese Information and Advice Centre.¹⁰ The first two business associations are major migration organisations constituted by Chinese entrepreneurs in Britain. I contacted the staff members and subsequently got access to several association members, some of whom were restaurant owners in Chinatown. The process went smoothly after I explained my research purpose and its potential social implications. The discontent of the existing migration policies in the UK in my research proposal resonated among these restaurant owners, since many of them suffered from frequent raids from the immigration office. As a result, they introduced me to some of their employees as my participants.

⁶ For more information see: <http://www.ccc.org.uk>

⁷ For more information see: <https://islingtonchinese.com>

⁸ For more information see: <http://www.camdenccc.co.uk/>

⁹ For more information see: <http://www.ukcba.uk>

¹⁰ For more information see: <https://ciac.co.uk/>

Chinese Information and Advice Centre is known for its dedication to the empowerment of UK-based Chinese workers. These welfare associations were frequently visited by unskilled or clandestine migrants because of their multiple services, such as volunteer consultancy, welfare and benefit support, as well as information exchange for jobs and accommodation. I was turned down when I first requested the roster of their migrant visitors due to privacy protection, since most of their visitors lacked visas. Despite access difficulties and frustration, I continued to visit these associations, hoping to encounter potential participants at random. To gain their trust, I established my identity as a student researcher and expressed my passion to unveil the unheard voices of these invisible and vulnerable migrant workers. After multiple visits and negotiations, the association staff eventually agreed to introduce me to some of their visitors. However, only documented migrants (former clandestine migrants) were referred as they did not have concerns about their uncertain status. The Chinese Church in London's Soho¹¹ was also a migrant-based institution I frequented. I attempted to establish contacts with potential participants by attending the free weekly English language classes. The church also has regular cultural and recreational activities, especially during Chinese traditional festivals (e.g. mid-autumn festival, lunar new year eve and dragon boat festival), where I also met some of the eventual participants.

In addition to soliciting participants through these large organisations, I also rented a flat shared with three Chinese migrant families (a family of three and two couples). It should be noted that my research had not really started by then. The rent advert was posted on the Internet and was referred to me by distant relatives in Britain before I departed for London. Given that this was the first time I had studied in the UK, I was

¹¹ For more information see: <https://ccil.org.uk/en/congregations/new-soho/>

not familiar with the rental market, so I followed their suggestion and took up residence in the shared flat, which was also a primary inspiration for this study (I will elaborate on this in the later section). All of my flatmates had similar experience of migration – as Fujianese, they travelled to Britain with clandestine status at first and some¹² later transferred their status to documented. Some were employed in the catering sector (including chef, pastry cook, and waiting staff) in Chinatown, while others worked in construction and nail salons. Only one family had their child with them (the family of three), but all had experienced long-term family separation (leaving their children behind in China). Given that they had a social network with Chinese migrant workers who probably had an insecure status (such as colleagues, friends and relatives who are also Chinese migrants in Britain), my flatmates were not only qualified to be key participants, but were also appropriate gatekeepers (i.e. key research participants who ease access to a group or setting; O'Reilly, 2005) to introduce me to possible respondents. Considering that I was studying a 'hidden population' of clandestine immigrants, snowball sampling was widely used to recruit additional participants. Also, purposive sampling was conducted to ensure a more heterogeneous sample in terms of age, gender, occupation and family configuration.

Of all the migrant participants, 22 identified as male and 23 as female, and ages ranged from 25 to 58. Most of the participants in this study migrated to Britain within the last 30 years, the majority from rural villages in Fujian, Shandong, Hubei, Jiangxi, Liaoning, Jilin, and Heilongjiang Provinces (36), though some were from urban areas like Shanghai and Tianjin (9). Some were smuggled to Britain without documentation, whereas others overstayed their student, business, or travel visas. More than half of these clandestine migrants (29/45) had applied for asylum in the name of humanitarian protection to prolong their stay in Britain; nearly half of these (13) became documented

¹² The two families who came earlier (early 2000s) were documented, while the young couple who came recently (within three years at the time) was still in clandestine status. The migration status of migrant participants will be addressed later in this section.

(with indefinite leave to remain or discretionary leave for several years) primarily due to the Legacy Scheme¹³ launched by the Home Office in 2007, whereas others were rejected or still awaiting a decision. The occupations of more than half of the participants were within the catering sector, including chefs, kitchen workers, waiters and delivery drivers. Other occupations of participant migrants included construction worker, cleaner, live-in nanny and nail technician. Of the 22 male participants, 12 migrated alone, and 10 migrated with or were subsequently joined by their wives. By contrast, seven of the 23 female participants migrated alone, and 16 migrated with, or later were joined by, their husbands. Given that the one-child policy is not strictly implemented in rural China, most of the participants had at least two children. Apart from some of the documented parents (7/13) who had their children joining them or returned home periodically (once every 1.5 years on average), the majority of the participants had to endure long-term separation from their children, and the average period of separation was approximately 13 years.

4.4 Recruiting participants in China

In the second phase, I turned to how left-behind families respond to transnational separation and their digital media use. The sample collection of left-behind family members, including both children and left-behind spouses and elderly guardians, was conducted in China. The left-behind participants I worked with were based in Fuqing, which has been historically recognized as a major clandestine migrant-sending area in China (Fong et al. 2014). Located in the southern tip of Fuzhou prefecture in central Fujian, Fuqing has a long history of migration to southeast Asia and more recent large-scale emigration to Europe (Pieke et al., 2004). The pervasive overseas emigration in Fuqing relies on a multiplicity of ‘push’ factors, such as poverty status due to its

¹³ To deal with a backlog of approximately 450,000 undecided asylum cases, the UK Government issued a new asylum model in March 2007, regulating that all unresolved legacy cases be cleared by July 2011. As a result, more than 160,000 (40%) asylum seekers were granted settlement to stay, while 38,000 (9%) had their claims rejected. The Legacy Scheme was once mired in controversy regarding whether it was an “amnesty policy” because of the high proportion of applicants granted residency (Travis, 2011).

geography (insufficient arable lands for the local people), lack of governmental and business investments, as well as developed networks of migration brokers (a mature smuggling industry). Also, 'pull factors', like lucrative overseas working opportunities and thriving Fujianese communities located in various Global North countries, have also been crucial causes, facilitating the transnational emigration wave in Fuqing (Liu-Farrer, 2010; Thunø and Pieke, 2005) (migration motivations will be explored in the following chapter). Although there are no official estimates of the emigration population across the whole Fuqing some of the village committees had conducted demographic censuses locally. Of the two villages I visited, there were over 1,800 villagers living abroad, constituting approximately 40% of the whole population.

The fieldwork in Fuqing was conducted intermittently between 2016 and 2018. Overall, I visited the two villages twice – the first visit was dedicated to soliciting left-behind children participants and lasted for ten weeks (mid-July 2016 to early October 2016); the second period was mainly for left-behind guardians, which lasted for eleven weeks (August 2018 to October 2018). Though setting out with different purposes, I was open to any potential participants during the recruitment process. For example, I met several guardian participants when I was attempting to engage left-behind children, while some of the children participants were also involved during my second visit for their guardians. Overall, initial contacts in Fuqing were made via referrals from UK-based participants (migrant parents). Given the lack of job opportunities, many of the participants (people at their labour age such as some teenage left-behind children and spouses) left the villages and went to the central area of Fuqing or Fuzhou (the capital and one of the largest cities in Fujian province) for better career prospects. In addition to strolling around the villages, I also visited their residential and working places and participated in various family events (weddings, birthday parties and family worship) to encounter more potential participants. Given the pervasive culture of migration in Fuqing (Fong et al., 2014), snowballing was surprisingly effective as a method to reach out to participants. Many of the participants introduced their relatives, friends and

classmates as potential interviewees. Compared to migrant participants who might have feared their clandestine status being exposed, participants in China did not have that concern, therefore they were quite willing to share their life stories and help me find other participants.

Table 1. The demographic characteristics of participants.

Migrant parents (45)	Male	22	Urban	9	Documented	13
	Female	23	Rural	36	Undocumented	32
Left-behind children (38)	Male	21	Father-away	10		
	Female	17	Mother-away	5		
			Both-parents-away	23		
Left-behind guardians (33)			Left-behind mothers	11		
			Left-behind fathers	10		
			Grandparents	6		
			Proxy guardians	6		

Of the 38 left-behind children involved in this study, 17 were female and 21 were male, with their ages ranging from 18-31. More than half (23/38) had both of their parents working abroad. 10 reported that their fathers were working overseas whilst 5 had their mothers as migrant parents. As discussed in Chapter 1, I limited my interviews with left-behind children to adult participants (over 18 years old). In so doing, I was able to obtain the perspectives of those who grew up in a transnational family and could better formulate their thoughts of living a life as left-behind children. Given that most of the children at this age had experienced the rapid development of communication

technologies during their growth, the ways in which they used these communication tools to maintain contact with their migrant parents served as useful evidence to reflect the implication of mediated communication in transnational family life. Additionally, I accessed 33 left-behind guardians as participants, which included 11 left-behind mothers, 10 left-behind fathers, six elderly parents (four paternal grandmothers and two maternal grandmothers) and six proxy guardians (three paternal and three maternal aunts). In total, I paired nine parents and nine children, and seven migrants and guardians in an attempt to obtain a comparative analysis based on multi-sited ethnographical approach.

4.5 Entering the field(s)

This is a multi-method study that aimed to develop a holistic understanding of transnational parenting within the context of Chinese international labour migration. From an early reliance on participant observation of London-based Chinese migrants, I established an overview of Chinese migrant life in Britain, especially among those with insecure status and dealing with long periods of family separation. Following that, semi-structured interviews that focused on transnational parenthood provided a more concrete account of the mutual shaping between digital technologies and distant parenting practices. In addition, participant observation and in-depth interviews were used to explore the ways in which left-behind children, left-behind fathers, mothers and proxy guardians cope with long-term separation, given that a ‘situational transnational’ approach (Kilkey & Merla, 2014) was adopted in this study. Online ethnography was also employed to advance the understanding of participants’ media usage and their communication practices. Thus, all the methods were not conducted in a mutually exclusive manner, but rather a plan of action was constructed to allow the researcher to efficiently maximize the validity of field efforts through what Denzin (2009: 300) refers to as “triangulation” of the data. The study thus considers a comprehensive view of transnational parenting with the use of digital media. The challenge for me was not only

to gather data from many relatively intimate and private sources, but also to systematically analyse my observations, and to make comparisons with data from different methods of inquiry to identify general patterns during the whole fieldwork process.

4.5.1 (Online and offline) participant observation

According to DeWalt & DeWalt (2002), participant observation is a process that enables researchers to learn about the activities of the people under study in their natural setting through observing and participating in those activities. It provides the context for development of sampling guidelines and interview guides. In essence, it is only through participating, watching, listening, asking questions, formulating hypotheses, or even making mistakes that the ethnographer can acquire a good sense of the social structure of the setting and begin to understand the culture of participants (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). As Mack et al. (2005: 13) explain, rather than having the participants come to the researcher, participant observation requires the researcher to approach participants in their own environment. In other words, this required the researcher to engage with what anthropologist Renato Rosaldo called “deep hanging out” (see Clifford, 1996: 5), attempting to be part of the participants’ everyday life and make sense of the patterns of that culture.

I thus tried to involve myself in participants’ daily lives in the first place to develop a close understanding of their inner culture. During the period of UK-based ethnography, as aforementioned, I regularly visited London-based Chinese associations, such as the Chinese Community Centre, UK Fujian Association, and the Chinese Church in London, attending their free English classes and other entertainment activities (such as festival gatherings) that they held for migrants. After developing natural friendships with participants, I then had the opportunity to visit their homes and workplaces, spent

time with them during their days off, participated in their family meetings, sharing meals and drinks with them, and even attending weddings and gatherings with friends. As mentioned earlier, I also rented a flat in a house shared with three other Chinese migrant families. Normally, we had dinner every day, went shopping and hung out together, and also constantly shared what happened in either work or life. All of these interactions were conducive to enriching my understanding of various aspects of their migration life in the UK (including struggles, challenges, and joys).

Similarly, during the ethnography in China, I also visited (non-migrant) participants' working places, homes and even schools (children participants), in an attempt to delve into how those left behind experience transnational family lives. Once I gained the trust of my participants, I then hung out with them as well as their friends in their leisure time, such as attending birthday parties, playing mah-jong and poker, and going to karaoke and church together. These immersive attempts were not only for the sake of experiencing their everyday lives, but they also helped me to develop other possible respondents during the course of fieldwork. In brief, in these "natural" settings, I was able to develop a detailed and multifaceted understanding of how participants within different sociocultural contexts endure long-term separation from certain family members. During the course of participant observation, I not only recorded the physical landscapes (living and working conditions) to which participants were exposed, but also posed questions relevant to the present scenarios and took note of conversations anonymously for confidentiality.

When we spent time together, participants were asked to show me some of their interactions on media platforms (e.g. chatting records with other family members, family chat groups, or online voice messages). In addition, I 'friended' some of the participants on social media, such as Weibo, WeChat, QQ, or any other popular social

media among Chinese Internet users. Through the online connections, I could keep in touch with my respondents instantly, but I was also able to record the ways in which they used different media platforms for various communicative purposes. In some cases, I also attempted to obtain information concerning the participants' communication with their dispersed family members through participant observation. Given the private nature of family interactions, this could only take place among those key participants whom I had fostered a very close rapport with. I normally stayed by their side when they used media technology to communicate with their dispersed family members. This could happen in any day-to-day situation, such as making routine phone calls before or after work, having webcam sessions during dinner time, and sending or receiving voice messages in leisure time. In addition to these regular telecommunication situations, my observation also took place in some more 'ritualised' scenarios where 'mediated co-presence' was often prolonged (e.g. webcam calls during festivals or the birthday of a family member). Data gathered from participant observation allowed me not only to gain a more grounded picture of transnational family life in the context of Chinese global labour migration, but also to build a contextual foundation for the further in-depth interview arrangement.

4.5.2 In-depth Interviews

Consistent with the research design mentioned in Chapter 2, I was primarily concerned with gender as a category contributing to the transformation of a family split by national borders. The aim of the semi-structured interview was thus to seek how distant fatherhood and motherhood are performed through the use of digital technologies, and whether this challenges conventional notions of Chinese family life as defined by geographical proximity. The influence on a transnational family affected by migration differs according to the specific contexts in which the person migrates, thus interview questions not only involved basic inquires such as their trajectories of migration, their motivations for migrating, and their plans for their future, but also encompassed the

multifaceted and asymmetric character of relationships between family members and how these relationships were transformed by being subjected to spatial separation as well as the use of communication technologies. Drawing on a gender comparative approach, I ensured that I gained the perspectives of both male and female migrants. Overall, semi-structured interviews allowed me to gather accounts about how migrants perceived their life cycle and experience of distant parenting, which would assist in the social and cultural illustration of their behaviours observed in the previous phase.

To supplement previous interview data collected from migrants in the receiving country, a further interview concerning the perspectives of the left-behind children in China was also conducted. My interviews with left-behind children concentrated on the following aspects: their family life, relationships with their parents and other relatives, memories and feelings about parental migration, their experience of long-distance communication and the range of different media used to sustain it. Meanwhile, I also conducted interviews with their guardians, not only to check the validity of the information I gathered from the original sample, but also to obtain an understanding of the roles and contributions of other family members within transnational households. The main themes of in-depth interviews with left-behind guardians revolved around the forms of care they provided to left-behind children, the challenges they faced when taking up the responsibility of childrearing, and the ways in which caregiving duties affected their own lives and their relationships with migrants.

Active listening was crucial during the whole process of interviewing to understand what was being said and access its relation to the research topic. Semi-structured interviews with both migrant parents and non-migrant family members (children and guardians) followed a scheduled interview guide, yet unexpected data was also allowed and welcomed, due to its potential to refine the original research design as a sort of

empirical feedback. In summary, data collected from participant observations of Chinese migrants in host society served to establish a contextual foundation for the following in-depth interviews with them. In addition, the multi-sited interviews did not simply seek to generate narrative collections of childhood experiences for the sake of validation of accounts provided by their migrant parents. Instead, my queries about transnational family relations focused on the relationships that transnational parents maintained with left-behind children, as well as the roles new technologies played in the whole process. By applying a gender-sensitive comparative approach, the study aims to shed light on both mother-away cases and father-away cases to consider how gender, digital technology and transnationalism interweave in the specific context of transnational parenting within Chinese families.

4.6 Data analysis

Data processing took place during the fieldwork process. Generally, in-depth interviews were conducted in Mandarin and lasted from 1.5 to 2 hours. I did not record and transcribe all of the interviews, given that in some cases, interviewees felt upset with a recorder (particularly migrant participants who had unsecure status), so detailed notes were written up immediately after the meeting as an alternative. In general, except for some of the interviews with clandestine migrant participants (17/32), other interviews with documented migrant participants, left-behind children and guardians were fully recorded and transcribed. I normally took notes during or after formal or informal conversations with participants. This included the content of the conversation, the scenarios in which the conversation took place, as well as participants' expressions and behaviours. Sometimes, I also took pictures in different scenarios (weddings, parties, workplaces, and everyday life), with their permission, to enrich the field notes. The collection of data ended when it came to "saturation", which means no new insights are observed during the process of gathering and analysing data (Guest et al., 2006; Whittemore et al., 2001). All names used in this thesis are pseudonyms due to matters

of confidentiality. All the notes were written in Chinese and I subsequently translated all of the quotations involved into English.

Interview data was analysed thematically. Initially, I repeatedly read the notes to become familiar with the data, shortly after in-depth interviews or participant observation. I wrote down my thoughts and tried to summarize the field notes. During this process, I teased out relevant themes that were relevant to the research questions and theoretical assumptions. As the fieldwork progressed, I began to identify recurring themes that I could further categorize into patterns and concepts. This was followed by sorting out themes of similarities and differences (Ryan & Bernard, 2003) that emerged during the fieldwork. Thus, I was able to develop a nuanced understanding of the hidden reasons which account for participants' varied behaviours (e.g. gender, intergeneration, class), and how they relate to wider social contexts (Berg, 2009). In the late stage of the analysis process, I related my findings to prior literature by making comparisons between the themes I identified and existing ones.

4.7 Researcher's positionality and reflexivity

The concept of reflexivity stemmed from what was called the 'writing culture' movement in anthropology during the 1980s and 1990s, which pointed out the biases implicit in the presentation and production of ethnographic text (Clifford & Marcus, 1986). The proponents (Clifford, 1996; Clifford & Marcus, 1986; Marcus & Fischer, 1986) of the movement proposed to critically scrutinize the inevitable partiality and limitation of ethnographic writings. By highlighting the "constructed and artificial nature of cultural accounts" (Clifford & Marcus, 1986: 2), the critical reflexive practice goes beyond the idea of bias and turns to address the subjectivity of researchers, such as their interaction with other people and things, their narrative style of research findings, as well as the institutional and disciplinary constraints (and paradigms) in

which they are embedded (Robben & Sluka, 2015; O'Reilly, 2005; Pink et al., 2016). In this sense, social knowledge should be construed as situated depending upon the position of the researcher. Researchers should constantly examine their positionality through constant “self-reflexivity”: self-critical sympathetic introspection and self-conscious analytical scrutiny of the self as researcher (England, 1994: 82). As Morin (2002) pointed out, the researcher must constantly elucidate what they feel and reflect on their experience, as they cannot escape their internal duality – being the one who observes and part of the ‘phenomenon’ as well. The following section sets out how my positionality influences the process of knowledge production and what I have done to negotiate this.

My research interest regarding Chinese international labour migration not only derives from the television documentary *Living in Tears*, mentioned in Chapter 1, but also from the people (my flatmates) I encountered in Britain. I watched the documentary at least five times, yet the watching experiences were quite different. The first time I watched it was approximately eight years ago (2011). I was, on the one hand, greatly touched by the father’s selfless dedication to fulfilling his daughter’s dream despite the hardship he had to go through, whilst on the other hand, I was also deeply moved by the long-term separation between the father and the daughter. Given that I grew up in a ‘complete’ family (as did my friends and classmates during my childhood), it was hard for me to imagine having intimate family members absent for such a long period of time. However, this changed after I moved to the house where I spent almost all of my PhD years. Due to the thin walls in the house, it was not unusual to hear someone living next door crying after a webcam call at midnight. Eventually we got to know each other and started to share all the joys and sorrows of life. I then realized that my flatmates were having the same experiences as the protagonist in *Living in Tears*. The midnight weeping was actually from a clandestine migrant mother whose seven-year-old son could not recognize her on the tablet screen. I have watched the documentary several times since I came to London. I felt more related to the film’s content, as the poignancy

of the separation between significant others was no longer film scenes in a documentary, instead it was so real, vivid and intense as it happened to someone I knew in my everyday life. This was where everything started.

As a Chinese who was born and raised in a middle-class family in Shanghai, I entered the field with existing knowledge not only about general beliefs, customs, and values, but also about my self-recognition as a Chinese international student in Britain. When I went into the UK-based field to understand the sociocultural contexts of Chinese labour migrants in Britain, it involved having to handle aspects of local culture for these Chinese migrants with a lower social status, which was more strange than familiar to me. Similarly, when I went back to China to visit their left-behind families, most of whom are from underdeveloped rural regions, I had to step out of my previous Chinese urban life, which required me to prepare to encounter discoveries and surprises about places, people and lifestyles that I was not quite familiar with. As a result, to prepare myself prior to entering the field, I spent lots of time watching related documentaries, chatting with my flatmates, reading books (both academic and non-academic), as well as collecting archival data related to transnationalism and migration in the Chinese context.

At the access stage, the most important challenge was to figure out the best way to introduce myself and purpose to others. As mentioned earlier, my recruitment of migrant volunteers was mainly enabled in two ways. When I attempted to get access to participants by recruiting my flatmates in London – mainland migrants working in Chinatown's catering trade – as gatekeepers, I presented myself directly as a friend of theirs working on homework, since we had developed a rapport and they were willing to help me draft participants. Apart from this, while recruiting participants through Chinese associations in London, I asked for permission of participant observation by

introducing myself as a PhD student working on a thesis. This also applied to my fieldwork in China. Given that non-migrants normally did not have worries about exposure of clandestine migration status, it was not difficult for me to obtain their trust when I presented myself as a PhD student doing his homework at the very beginning. As a result, I found that playing up my role as a researcher who empathised with the precarious status of Chinese clandestine migrants, as well as my ethnic identity as a Chinese migrant in Britain, developed a sense of trust and belonging that enabled me to gain access to my participants. In-depth interviews came after the participant observation, as it was easier to approach people for an interview after we had known each other informally.

During the course of fieldwork, I was aware of my prior perception and imagination of low-skilled and clandestine migrants so that I did not merely reproduce the superficial taken-for-granted understanding. As Myerhoff & Ruby (1982) suggested, reflexivity requires subject and object, breaking the thrall of self-concern by its very drive toward self-knowledge that inevitably takes into account a surrounding world of events, people and places. For example, I assumed that these economic migrants had a lower status of earning and tended to have poor digital media literacy at the beginning of my research plan, while my findings showed that some people are not as poor as expected (some migrants purchased houses once they became documented and then rented out flat rooms for extra income; many of my participants used smartphones as their communication tools; and some migrants bought luxuries to show off their migration success, which will be further discussed in the next chapter).

Indeed, I might be taken to be a member of the Chinese community. However, in some cases, my identity as a middle-class Chinese international student probably also excluded me from my participants and created distrust of me, particularly when some

of the participants had migration status concerns. For example, I was initially considered to be an “undercover investigator from the immigration office” by A Biao, one of my participants, when I tried to ask questions about the details of his smuggling experiences to Britain. However, the distrust was gradually eliminated as our relationship became closer during the process of fieldwork. I established a rapport with my participants in the UK by constantly helping them with daily chores, such as carrying stuff to their left-behind family members since most were unable to cross borders freely, or errands that required English since they had the language barrier, such as accompanying them to NHS (National Health Service) centres to see a doctor or having a physical examination, translating letters and bills for them, as well as haggling with vendors when going shopping with them.

Gender was also a significant factor that cannot be ignored when considering the relationship between the researcher and participants. Gender-related ethnographic discussions primarily revolve around female ethnographers’ sexual status and how it influences the process of fieldwork, especially female researchers’ risky situations in fieldwork associated with their sexuality and femininity (e.g. sexual harassment) when engaging with male participants (Arendell, 1997; Moreno, 1995; Middleton, 1986). However, it is a different story in this study. The way in which my gender identity influenced the fieldwork was mainly manifested by the masculinity contest between my male participants and me (which sometimes intersected with class). As a well-educated and middle-class male researcher, I found it quite difficult to develop close field relations with my male participants with relatively low educational levels, particularly in the early stage of fieldwork. For example, some participants often bragged about their migration success during our conversations and were reluctant to share with me about their feelings of separation from their children and wives. This was particularly salient when it came to those participants with poor financial conditions. They mostly chose not to talk in detail to me about their life in Britain and their relationships with their families. One of the migrant participants who was clandestine

and in huge debt kept saying to me that his ‘humble life’ (*jian min yi tiao*) did not need my attention. This also happened when I was doing fieldwork among left-behind children in China. Some of the male participants of my age regarded me as ‘city people’ (*cheng li ren*) or ‘people who went to school’ (*du shu ren*), while depreciating themselves as ‘vulgar’ (*cu ren*) and ‘boor’ (*xiang ba lao*), insisting that I did not really care about and understand their feelings. Yet as mentioned earlier, there was no shortcut for the mitigation of such distrust, and the only way was to spend time getting to know the participants and offering them practical help. For example, Xue Qiang, one of my child participants, treated me coldly at the beginning of my fieldwork, even though I had already developed a close relationship with his migrant mother in London. As a warehouse porter employed by a digital panel factory in Fuqing, the teenage boy told me that we belonged to different worlds and he did not really care about my ‘homework’. After I went back to Shanghai, I received a message on WeChat from his migrant mother asking me if I could buy some medicine for the boy’s grandmother. The elderly woman was suffering from a chronic cardiovascular disease and the medicines were temporarily out of stock at the nearby hospital. I bought the medicines and put notes on the boxes with hand-written and enlarged-font dose guidelines, since his grandmother had severe presbyopia. I mailed the medicines to Xue Qiang and since then his attitude towards me entirely changed. As a left-behind child who was raised by his grandmother, the boy had a close relationship with her. To repay my help, he opened his heart the second time I went to Fuqing for the fieldwork.

4.8 Research ethics

Ethnography of illegal industry raises ethical concerns. However, as argued earlier, it is problematic to treat clandestine migrants as ‘illegal’ since they have “only committed an administrative infraction” (Andersson, 2012: 13). Meanwhile, the precarious situation of clandestine migrants associated with their irregular status has largely rendered them “potentially vulnerable”, as they were in a “dependent or unequal

relationship” (ESRC, 2015: 8). Given the context, this study aims to contribute to a nuanced understanding of how these vulnerable individuals work, live and experience long-term separation from their significant others. Drawing on a bottom-up and close-up perspective, I hope this study helps to debunk the stereotype of clandestine migrants as criminals as depicted in most mainstream media in the UK (Pai, 2008). The main ethical concern, therefore, was to minimize any potential risks for all the participants involved in this study, especially those with clandestine migration status.

This study adhered to ESRC and ASA (American Sociological Association) ethics guidelines. All the research participants (including migrant parents, left-behind children and guardians) were adults over eighteen years old. I presented my participants with an information sheet prior to interview, informing them of the objectives of the research, how it would be carried out, how I would guarantee their anonymity, how I would use and manage their data, and their rights as a research participant¹⁴ during the whole process of the fieldwork. Oral consent was sought and obtained from all concerned groups. As mentioned earlier, the recording of interviews and photos taking during the fieldwork were all undertaken with participants’ permission. All data obtained was anonymized and the names of participants were replaced with pseudonyms in the analysis stage. Other recognizable information such as addresses, telephone numbers or details that could reveal participants’ identities was removed during the course of analysis. Likewise, the photos used in the thesis were pixilated if they had recognizable faces or locations. In addition, any personal data obtained was stored securely in a password-protected laptop.

¹⁴ Participants’ rights include withdrawing from the research at anytime, requesting a transcript of interview data or photos I took during the course of fieldwork, or a copy of this thesis.

4.9 Conclusion

This study employs multi-sited ethnographic methods, including in-depth interviews and (online and offline) participant observations, both in Britain (London) and China (Fuqing). In so doing, I was able to investigate the perspectives of migrants and non-migrants in Chinese transnational families. Through a review of previous literature, I argued that multi-sited ethnography serves as a match with transnationalism studies (particularly transnational family literature) due to their common interest in different localities. I broke down the ethnographic process into several sections: recruiting participants, entering the field, and processing the data. It is notable that the researcher's positionality and reflexivity played a significant role in shaping the whole research process, given the constructive nature of ethnographical knowledge. I discussed what inspired my research interest and how my identity as a Chinese middle-class international male researcher excluded me from getting close to my participants. The distrust was eventually dissolved as the fieldwork progressed as I established rapport with them. The discussion of ethical issues was also addressed, and the protection of clandestine migrants was highlighted.

Chapter 5. Overseas labour migration, transnational family, and the media landscape in the Chinese context

Xiao Ou: “There is no hope for people like us”

I met Xiao Ou, a 47-year old takeaway-restaurant chef from Fuqing, in early 2016. When I first arrived at his place, a shared room located in Elephant and Castle,¹⁵ he had just got up and was waiting outside the bathroom. His roommate was doing the washing inside. It was Xiao Ou’s day off but a workday for his roommate, a male migrant from northeast China, who was employed in the same Chinese takeaway restaurant. “As someone working in the catering business, our time schedule is exactly the opposite of ordinary people”, Xiao Ou said as he hinted at me to let his roommate get out of the bathroom as I had blocked his way out. He entered and continued, “People’s leisure is the busy time for us. It’s impossible for us to have days off at weekends. We can only pick a day for rest from Monday to Friday”.

A heap of shampoo bottles, with different marker-pen-inscribed names sat on the edge of the bathtub, and several squeezed toothpaste tubes lay beside the blotted sink, some of which were cut open. “The life in Britain was not that glamorous”, Xiao Ou said with a wry smile, “Many people are attracted to come here because of the bright side of migration – having luxurious leather belts, snazzy watches, posh cars and big houses – living a decent life in a nutshell; however, this is not the whole story”. Having seen villagers building beautiful houses and making their children a better life through

¹⁵ A central London neighbourhood just south of the River Thames known for its working class heritage, low-income households and rapid gentrification. Given most Chinese takeaway restaurants provide their employers with free accommodation, Xiao Ou normally works on the ground floor of the restaurant at daytime and sleeps at night in the shared room on the first floor.

overseas remittances, Xiao Ou professed that he was determined to leave his sparsely furnished home at the age of 29, “Lack of education, no networking and skills, people like us would never have a chance to live a life like that if we stayed still”. After one year’s consideration and preparation, Xiao Ou finally made up his mind. He gave up his profitless eel growing business¹⁶ and embarked on an oversea journey by borrowing money (RMB 250,000; £18,000) from several relatives and a private moneylender.



Figure 1. A shared bathroom with many shampoo bottles around the washbasin.

The journey was not as easy and safe as the travel facilitator promised. Given that Fuqing was blacklisted by most wealthy European countries because of its clandestine-migrant-sending record, the travel visa granted to Xiao Ou was not directly for the UK, but for Ukraine. He travelled across five different countries by lorry and was required to climb mountains when crossing borders. The journey ended up taking over four months – Xiao Ou eventually entered the UK on a fake visa given by a snakehead (i.e.

¹⁶ The baby eel cultivation business was very popular in Fujian at that time; according to Xiao Ou, the primary destinations of the eels were Japan, America, and some European countries. However, the competition became increasingly fierce as more local people poured into the business, which led to nasty incidents, such as pouring toxic chemicals into other’s tanks and sabotaging competitors’ fishing tools. The water supplies were also contaminated by industrial waste, and agriculture pesticides contributed to the decline of the eel business.

professional travel facilitator) during the journey (a Taiwanese tourist visa was swapped with Xiao Ou's portrait). The first job Xiao Ou found was as a dish washer in a Chinese restaurant in East London. It was introduced to him by one of his distant relatives and he was paid £100 every week. In the early days, Xiao Ou struggled to pay his debts, as the interest rate was quite high. If it took him one more year to pay off the debt, it would increase by approximately 20 percent. The value of the loan constantly haunted Xiao Ou's mind, especially during the bus journey from his workplace to the place he rented. Reminiscing about his early days in Britain, Xiao Ou confessed that he used to collapse and burst out crying at midnight as he thought he was unable to endure the pressure any longer. But when the dawn of another day arrived, everything returned back on track, since the debts were still there, and work had to be done.

To increase his income, Xiao Ou tried to leave the catering business by selling counterfeit shoes and cigarettes. He even tried growing weed, a business introduced to him by one of his Fujianese friends, however he ended up losing almost £2,000 due to his immature planting skills. In the fourth year, Xiao Ou finally paid off his debts, which made him feel a sense of relief. It is now Xiao Ou's eighteenth year in Britain, and the job as a food fryer in a Chinese takeaway restaurant gives him £480 every week. However, he still finds life quite hard as he misses his wife and children. He considered returning home but immediately gave up the idea when he learned the remittances he sent back were far from enough.

Frankly, I was thinking to go back to China. Even if there are no job opportunities in Fujian, I cannot go to other places in China, at least I do not have to be that far from my home. And also, there won't be the [migration] status issue. I can go back to see my children as long as I want to. But I just gave up the thought after deliberate consideration. People like us are

unskilled and not young any more. If I go to big cities like Beijing, Shanghai or Guangzhou, what we can do is basically the same as we are doing in Britain. Even in these big cities, doing the kitchen stuff can give you about RMB 3,000-4,000 (£345-460) every month, which is only a week's salary in Britain. So for us, returning to China is nothing other than returning to poverty. I heard a lot of people said, "I prefer to live on a mattress in Britain instead of living in a big house in Fuqing". It is not because they are willing to do so. It's just because there is more prosperity there.

Xiao Ou sends remittances about once every two months. The number goes up and down depending on his wage and the exchange rate (£9,000 every year on average). Given the language barrier for migrants like Xiao Ou, they must resort to intermediaries (usually Chinese) to send money home. More than half of the remittances sent by Xiao Ou have been used to renovate his house, as he put it: "We don't want to be looked down by our friends and relatives. Nobody still lives in stone-made hovels when they have family members abroad."

Back in Fujian, Xiao Ou's two children (boys) are taken care of by his wife, Xiu Lan, a 43-year-old woman who runs a small stall near *Shui Nan* bus station (in Fuqing) selling handmade *guangbing*¹⁷. In addition to heavy childrearing and an exhausting business, as a daughter-in-law, Xiu Lan also has to take care of Xiao Ou's elderly parents, who have chronic health problems. Every morning Xiu Lan would receive phone calls from Xiao Ou, talking about nothing other than daily trivia, such as if the boys were doing well in school, how the *guangbing* business was going, the elderly parents' health, as well as the progress of their house construction. It had become a tacit

¹⁷ *Guangbing* is a bread product that is shaped like a sesame-seeded burger bun top. It was named to commemorate the general Qi Jiguang who drove the Japanese invaders out of Fujian in 1562. Shaped as a ring with a string hanging around soldiers' neck, *Guangbing* was invented to not to let meal time slow down the army's marching speed.

agreement that the couple only shared positive news whilst concealing the suffering and pains they had in their daily lives. “What’s the use of revealing everything?”, Xiu Lan said with the same wry smile as Xiao Ou, “[international telephone calls] could only increase the sadness [of conjugal separation].”

When asked their future plans, Xiu Lan told me that she was planning to migrate to Britain to join her husband for work after her children grew more independent. She had already asked Xiao Ou to apply for asylum and residency and they were waiting for the decision. If Xiao Ou was approved, Xiu Lan would join him as a dependent family member; if not, she would migrate (via smuggling) on her own. “Our plan is to have a takeaway restaurant of our own, but that’s for the best. If we don’t have the opportunity [only legal migrants are allowed to run a business], it’s also fine to work for others [*zuo ge da gong zai*]”, Xiu Lan said with a determined look, “Family is everything, especially when we have two sons; we cannot stop striving until we get their dowry ready for marriage.”¹⁸

Xiao Wen: “I am bewildered if I have made the right choice”

Xiao Wen was born in a small town on the outskirts of Fushun, a small city in Liaoning province. Like many of his peers, after completing high school, she went to a state-owned engineering factory to be an assembly worker. In 1998, the old industry sacked a lot of employees, including Xiao Wen, because of the reform of state-owned corporations. The compensation provided by the factory was supposed to be around RMB 4,000 *yuan* (£500). However, the money was embezzled by the factory leader and Xiao Wen only got RMB 2,000 *yuan* (£250) as a result. With the compensation and her husband’s wage as a technician in a machinery factory, the family lived from hand-

¹⁸ According to Yan (2003: 149), “brideprice” refers to the “property transferred from the groom’s family to the bride’s family”. In Fujianese communities, it is a custom for a young man to prepare approximately 300,000 to 400,000 *yuan* (£35,000-£45,000) as bride price if he wants to marry a girl.

to-mouth. But conditions altered radically in 2001 when her husband had a severe infarction during work. The one-off compensation of occupational injury barely covered his medication expenditure. Despite doctors' efforts to save him, Xiao Wen's husband ended up in a long-term coma and was confined to bed for the rest of his life.

“The sky turned to dark at that moment”, Xiao Wen could not restrain her grief when recalling the past, even though it had been almost fifteen years since her husband's heart attack. Xiao Wen had been staying at home as a housewife, taking care of her two children (a son and a daughter) since being laid off. But she had no choice after such a family meltdown but to stand up and support the family. She tried many jobs, such as hospital cleaner, nanny, and laundry worker, yet none lasted long due to the meagre income they generated. One day, Xiao Wen's son came back from school and asked her if the family was able to afford a trainer for a school spring meet. Xiao Wen could not help feeling sad as she did not know how to turn down such a small request. It was then she made up her mind to embark on an arduous overseas journey for economic gain. Rumours of overseas migration for better income were quite popular among laid-off workers, such as the woman in the nearby town who died of a fierce rape in Paris, or someone's friend ending up as a sex worker in Rome's red-light district. Although these horrible 'tales' used to hold her back from leaving her hometown, the tough life forced Xiao Wen to give it a try. She borrowed RMB 84,000 *yuan* (£6,500)¹⁹ in and around the town as the brokerage fee and went to a migration agent introduced to her by a relative.

At 36, Xiao Wen left her children and paralysed husband in the care of her mother-in-law and journeyed to the UK. She overstayed her business visa and became a member

¹⁹ Compared to their counterparts from Fujian – known for its clandestine-migrant-sending history – it is comparatively easy for individuals from northeastern China to apply for legal entry into the UK, therefore the brokerage fees incurred are much lower.

of the hidden army of labour in Britain's catering business. Her husband passed away three years after she left. When she got the news from her mother on the phone, Xiao Wen was burying her nose in the assembly line in a food processing factory. She confessed that she felt guilty since the sense of relief overweighed her sorrow. Positions in low-skilled Chinese catering industries are known for their heavy load and high intensity. Xiao Wen always pokes fun at herself, "We north-easterners never have a chance to compete with those Fujianese women. They are the toughest women I have ever seen in my entire life". To get access to more job opportunities, Xiao Wen tried to learn English on her own by attending free English classes at the Church of London. The basic language skills helped her to swap jobs several times, such as working as a server at McDonald's and later a receptionist in a fish and chip shop. Although these jobs were less stressful, they did not increase her overall income. To send more remittances back home and pay the medical debts left by her deceased husband, Xiao Wen tried to save as much money as possible. For a long period of time, her dinner was cooked using vegetable skins and rotting fruit she picked up in the market.

Her residence application was approved in 2012, and in the same year she met her current husband, a barber from Liaoning. Xiao Wen finally got the chance to leave the catering business. She and her husband started to run a small barber shop in suburban London. Now Xiao Wen has been in Britain for twelve years. When asked if she regretted the decision of oversea migration, Xiao Wen revealed her ambivalence. On the one hand, she was proud of herself not only being able to support her own family, but also being capable of taking care of her dead husband's parents. Her daughter has been admitted to the Chinese Renmin University, one of the most prestigious universities in Beijing, while her son got a decent white-collar job in Beijing. It seems that her initial migration goal has been fulfilled. However, on the other hand, Xiao Wen found that an invisible distance emerged between her and her children. "The deep and emotional family bond and unity is not there anymore", Xiao Wen complained with a bitter smile on her wrinkled face. After long-term separation, the children were on more

intimate terms with their grandmother, who had been their primary caregiver since Xiao Wen left. On the contrary, phone calls between Xiao Wen and her children mainly concerned asking for remittances and superficial greetings. Xiao Wen used to suggest to her two children that they could join her for reunion in Britain, but the proposal was refused, since they did not want to give up everything in China and start over somewhere they did not know.



Figure 2. A Chinese barber shop located in southeast London.

Fortunately, the second year I met Xiao Wen, she became closer to her daughter through frequent WeChat messaging and voice calls on the smartphone she bought for herself. They developed lots of common topics since Xiao Wen often asked her daughter about the use of her smartphone when encountering problems. She was proud to show me her daughter's WeChat profile page, which was a photo of the mother and daughter they took on the latter's high school graduation ceremony. Yet Xiao Wen's efforts did not seem to work on her son. The 24-year-old was still acting indifferent to her distant care and did not respond to her friend request on WeChat, not to mention actively initiating calls. He was planning to buy a house in Beijing and asked Xiao Wen to send more

money back home. This was the only call from him in over half a year. “I think I’ve lost the considerate son who would give up buying trainers to ease a mum’s burden”, said Xiao Wen with a bleak air. For her, family is the primary motivation that drives her to go through all the difficult times, but now what she values most is alienating her.

Zhou Yang and Yan Na: “Seeing the world and earning the bread”

I met the Zhou couple in the winter of 2016, during their first Christmas in London. The glittering Christmas lights shimmering above Oxford Street were stunning, but what really struck them was the coldness of London’s winter, which was quite different from that of their hometown, Fuzhou, a southern coastal city in China. Like other newcomers, Zhou Yang and his wife, Yan Na, were ambitious and looking forward to their brand-new oversea life. While sauntering along Oxford Street, the couple looked at the boutique windows, sharing their migration stories and dreams. The wares on show behind the plate-glass were reflected in Yan Na’s eyes. She shrunk her neck and turned up the collar on her coat, and a twinkle emerged in her eyes when she began to talk about where everything got started.

As a second-generation transnational migrant, Yan Na was subconsciously influenced by the culture of migration during her growth. Her father used to be an electric welder in an underground factory in Japan. Yan Na had not seen him in person during her entire childhood, until he returned home when Yan Na was 16 years old. The letters (sometimes containing photos) and occasional international calls, constituted fragments of her father figure. When she grew a little older, Yan Na’s mother always taught her, “You should cherish what you have.”, “Without your father’s remittances, we cannot live in such a spacious house”; “Without your father, you cannot have that many toys”; and “Without your father, we cannot...”. These various ‘without’ discourses filled Yan Na’s childhood, colouring her perception of her father. The invisible yet strong

presence of the father figure became deeply rooted in her mind. Very naturally, almost as a kind of inheritance, Yan Na became a migrant almost at the same age as when her father went abroad.

Zhou Yang's migration story is even more circuitous, and Britain is not the first destination on Zhou Yang's migratory journey. As a child with a migrant father, Zhou Yang was also greatly influenced by his parents, like his wife. At the age of eighteen, Zhou Yang did not finish high school and could not wait to leave. He went to Argentina and worked in his cousin's Chinese supermarket. However, their business eventually went into a decline due to increasing competition from peers. "With the inrush of Chinese immigrants like us, now [in] Buenos Aires, the capital city of Argentina, every two blocks have at least one Chinese supermarket", explained Zhou Yang. After struggling for four years, he eventually came back home to China. Since Zhou Yang had reached marriageable age, his parents arranged for him to have a blind date, which was where he met Yan Na. Similar experience growing up and the common migration dream meant that the two youths hit it off the first day they met. Soon thereafter, they married and gave birth to their son. When everything was settled down, the plan of migration was placed on the agenda once more.

Unlike migrants of earlier generations, most of whom are in desperate poverty, younger migrants are usually not in an extreme strained economic condition. Migration is no longer a forced option merely for the purpose of 'filling stomachs', but instead turns into a routine – going abroad, earning big money, and achieving self-development and personal ambitions has become a neat formula for success ingrained in these youngsters' minds. Thus, Zhou Yang borrowed some money from a private moneylender, and along with his previous saving from his Argentina days, the couple found a travel agency and smuggled themselves to Britain successfully. With the already established and mature

migration network in the UK, Zhou Yang and Yan Na knew where they would work in London before departure. Now Zhou Yang started his new career in a construction site where another cousin also worked, while Yan Na worked as a junior nail technician in a salon in north London. Their future plan was to earn enough money to have a Chinese grocery store of their own.



Figure 3. Chinese migrant women working in a nail salon in London.

Zhou Yang’s parents were taking care of their baby. Through regular telephone and webcam calls, they reported the well-being and growth of the child to the couple almost on a daily basis. “We encourage them to go out and see the world. That’s what young people should do”, said Zhou Yang’s mother, Jun Mei. “Since we are not that old, we can still support them by solving their worries back home”. It was not something new for her to take care of a left-behind kid, since she brought Zhou Yang up in the same way. Back in their spacious home in Fuzhou, it is not difficult to see signs that the couple have migrated: imported toys scattered around the sitting room, loads of British milk powder piled in the corner, as well as the empty bedroom. The bright-coloured Chinese paper cut-outs of ‘happiness’ and ‘the phoenix and the dragon’ on the window

and door reveal traces of their recent wedding. “That’s the price we have to pay” – the empty bedroom reminded me of what Yan Na said on Oxford Street that day when she showed me her son’s photo as the wallpaper on her cracked smartphone screen – “I believe my child would understand me when he grows up, just as how we used to understand our parents”. It was as if it was yesterday once more.

To advance the understanding of the emergence of Chinese transnational families, and how communication technology matters when family members maintain kinship at a distance, I began this chapter with three case studies in different family configurations. The aim of this chapter is to contextualize the intersection of transnational families and communication technology in the context of Chinese labour migration, which is crucial for understanding how transnational family members maintain distant kinship on a daily basis. This chapter combines original empirical data with analysis of secondary data and the relevant literature in an attempt to unearth the general history of the Chinese population in the UK, the motivation of low-skilled and clandestine migrants, as well as providing a glimpse into their life in the UK. This will be followed by the introduction of the emergence of the Chinese transnational family, which intersects with migration status, smuggling debts and other factors that may prolong family separation, as well as care arrangements for left-behind children within different family configurations. Given that mediated communication is the only channel for dispersed family members to maintain kinship and create a sense of ‘doing family’, I also set out to delineate the media landscape in which transnational communication takes place. Specifically, a comparative analysis of media access between migrants and left-behind family members will be addressed.

5. 1 Leaving China and migrating to Britain

The following section attempts to delineate the phenomenon of Chinese migration in Britain. I will first introduce a brief history of the UK-based Chinese population and pinpoint the recent trend of Chinese low-skilled labour migration. What follows situates the flow of population by not only discussing the broad socioeconomic factors in China and Britain, but also taking into consideration micro personal motivations and the culture of migration.

5.1.1 The history of UK-based Chinese migration

Britain has a long history of Chinese migration dating back to the 19th century. The Chinese population in Britain is one of the most rapidly growing communities and it has now become one of the most mature and diverse Chinese groups in Europe. The official 2011 Census indicated that there are approximately 393,141 Chinese living in Britain, constituting 4.9 percent of the ethnic minority population in the UK, an increase of 69 percent compared to the figure recorded in the 2001 Census. Of these 393,141 approximately 254,000 were born in China (152,000) or Hong Kong (102,000) (ONS, 2015). In terms of geographic distribution, the Chinese population in Britain is highly dispersed. Figures released by the ONS (2015) show that most of the Chinese migrants (124,250, 35% of the total) choose London as their destination. This is followed by the South East (53,061), the North West (48,049) – especially Manchester – and the West Midlands (31,274) – especially Birmingham. It is worth noting that estimates of the migration population are difficult to determine, since the large number of clandestine migrants and the mobility of the population are likely to be underrepresented.²⁰

²⁰ Although there is no official estimate, some studies suggest that the number of UK-based Chinese clandestine migrants is somewhere in the range of 150,000 to 200,000 (Kagan et al., 2011).

Historically, the first wave of Chinese migration was a group of sailors working for the East India Shipping Company in a colonial framework in the 17th century (British Museum, 2008). British imperial expansion during the 19th century (including imposing the opium trade on China) facilitated racist hostility against Asians, particularly the Chinese people. The rise of the ‘yellow peril’ not only labelled the Chinese as immoral and corrupt people, but also promoted anti-Chinese immigration laws (Benton & Gomez, 2011). The outside stimulus of World War I and associated post-war settlements signalled the end of the British yellow peril (Stone, 2017). In the following years, the late 1950s and the early 1960s witnessed large-scale immigration from Hong Kong and the New Territories²¹, as a supplement of workforce to the domestic labour shortage in Britain after World War II. These entrants were predominantly male, generally spoke little English, had limited employment opportunities, and later developed as an ethnic enclave concentrated on specific economic niches such as catering (Chan & Chan, 1997).

5.1.2 “Pull” and “Push”: Political and economic discrepancies between Britain and China

Over the past two decades, the dominance of Hong Kong Chinese in the composition of Britain’s Chinese population has been challenged, as the figure from mainland China has experienced a rapid upward trend since the early 1990s, replacing Hong Kong as the largest Chinese sending area in 1997 (Home office, 2004). As Lam et al. (2009) suggest, this new migration wave should be read in a broad context of the political and economic changes in both China and Britain. A series of top-down reforms initiated by the Chinese government, especially the economic policies from 1978, prompted

²¹ The Chinese community in Britain has been long established and most immigrants have come mainly from Hong Kong driven by the strong connection established between Britain and Hong Kong in the nineteenth century following the defeat of the Chinese by the British in the Opium War of 1840. As a result of the war, the island of Hong Kong was ceded to Britain by the Nanking Treaty of 1842. Subsequently, under the Convention of Peking 1898, Hong Kong including Kowloon, the New Territories and more than 200 islands, in all about 1000 sq. km., was leased to Britain until 1997 (Chan & Chan, 1997).

China's increasing engagement in the global economy, which also led to changes in the existing communities of overseas Chinese (Pieke et al., 2004; Kagan et al., 2011). As Xiang & Pieke (2009) noted, similar to neoliberalism in the West, China's reform policies are undergirded by the assumption of market deregulation, giving rise not only to unprecedented economic growth, but also to a new proletariat who lost their employment rights or even employment altogether. As a result, the unevenness of Chinese economic reform and expansion has brought a substantial increase and diversification of international migration from mainland China.

These migrants include the most privileged, such as students, and those who are highly skilled with established jobs abroad. However, for those who live in less-developed areas that cannot attract capital investment, China's transformation to a market economy has meant dispossession and loss of livelihood, driving them to move to cities and richer rural areas in China, or to enter international labour markets (Lam et al., 2009, Pieke et al., 2004; Xiang, 2012). The negative social consequences brought by massive market deregulation is particularly salient in rural China. This is not only because of the rising labour surplus associated with rural agricultural reforms since the 1970s and 1980s, which decollectivized the land and boosted the efficiency of food production among rural households (Lin, 1992), but also, the uneven distribution inherent in the market reforms has exacerbated the urban-rural divide, especially in terms of welfare provision – compared to their urban counterparts who share the majority of the governmental resources, rural areas suffer from unstable social welfare and a broken pension system (Shi, 2006). Meanwhile, the *hukou* (house registration) system in China also contributes to segregation of China's rural population from urban citizens in accessing social resources and benefits (Cai, 2011; Chan, 2010). Given the context, the Chinese government holds an ambiguous attitude towards transnational labour migration – although it does not encourage migration at an official level as other migrant-sending countries do (such as the Philippines), the state largely transformed its prior perception of overseas migrants as traitors and defectors, and began to encourage

the naturalization of this group of people by calling them ‘our family and kin’, in order to ‘reap the maximum benefit’ from them (the flow of China-bound overseas Chinese investment) (Pieke et al., 2004: 21-22).

In addition to these economic and political push factors in China, the lucrative labour force market and immigration policies in Britain also serve as significant pull factors, attracting Chinese transnational migrants. Britain has experienced a continuous labour shortage since the 1980s in several sectors such as hospitality, construction and catering, where elementary occupations usually comprise the majority of all occupations.²² This is partly due to the fact that these sectors are primarily characterized by relatively low wages, intensive work and poor conditions, which makes them unattractive to UK-born workers. Also, the introduction of a points-based immigration system²³ by the British government has further exacerbated the labour shortage in catering industries (Lucas & Mansfield, 2008) – this means low-skilled migrants from outside the EU are unable to obtain permission to work in the UK; in addition, the language requirement for Tier 2 skilled workers has excluded those who have specialized skills but lack English language skills, such as managerial staff and chefs (Kagan et al., 2011; Lucas & Mansfield, 2008).

These vacancies in the labour market have created an atmosphere in which clandestine Chinese immigration has the opportunity to thrive. Due to the lack of effective legal regulation, the flock of clandestine Chinese migration has caused severe social

²² <https://www.ft.com/content/36baacce-ddd0-11e8-9f04-38d397e6661c>

²³ A points-based and five-tier framework for entry to the UK was introduced in 2008. To qualify for a visa, applicants must score sufficient points. In general, points vary for each tier and if it is a work visa application, points are awarded based on the applicant’s work experience and ability. The five tiers include: Tier 1, for high value migrants who have full access to the labour market and the welfare system (entrepreneurs, investors, and migrants with exceptional talents in science, engineering, medicine, humanities); Tier 2, for skilled workers with a long-term job offer to fill specific gaps in the labour market as identified by the Migration Advisory Committee (general skilled workers, intra-company transfers); Tier 3, for low-skilled workers and not available for those outside the EU; Tier 4, for students, including children aged 4-17 and adult students aged 16 and over; Tier 5, for youth mobility (limited to certain nationalities) and temporary workers (generally staying for less than two years).

consequences and myriad tragedies with multiple fatalities, notably the 2000 Dover incidents²⁴ and the 2004 Morecombe Bay cockling disaster²⁵. As a result, the UK government issued measures to curb this growing invisible population, such as the Gangmasters Act 2004 and the Coroners and Justice Act 2009²⁶. However, given that labour immigration benefits the receiving country with cheaper and better services and an increased supply of labour, politicians often adopt what Stephen Castles called “hidden agendas” when dealing with migration issues – “giving lip service to anti-immigration rhetoric while actually pursuing policies that lead to more immigration” (Castles, 2004: 867; Xiang & Pieke, 2009). The most typical example is the Legacy Scheme mentioned in Chapter 4, which was issued by the UK Government in 2007 to deal with superfluous clandestine labour migrants and ended up granting residency to 40% of applicants.

5.1.3 Improving financial status

Apart from the aforementioned political and economic discrepancies between Britain and China, serving as the ‘pull and push’ catalysts (Bagne, 1969; Lee, 1966) for migration at macro levels, migrants in this study also have numerous personal motivations to leave their homeland. Given that labour migration is often considered to be economic migration, the most common reasons given by previous literature is to improve their families’ financial status (Madianou & Miller, 2012; Dreby, 2006, 2010). Findings in my fieldwork concurs with this argument to an extent. Some of the participants reported that they owed heavy debts incurred by medical expenses, failed investment, or gambling losses. Normally this could not be paid off by the low income

²⁴ 58 Chinese men and women, who were smuggled to the UK, were found suffocated to death in the back of a lorry that arrived in Dover from a cross-Channel ferry.

²⁵ 23 Chinese clandestine cockle pickers were found drowned in Morecombe Bay, caught by incoming tides.

²⁶ The Gangmasters Act covers the regulation of agencies providing workers to a restricted range of sectors, including agriculture, shellfish farming and food processing, with the purpose of detecting and punishing exploitation in these sectors. The Coroners and Justice Act legislates against forced labour in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, making it an offence to knowingly hold another person in slavery or servitude or to knowingly require a person to perform forced or compulsory labour (Kagan et al., 2011).

and poor medical welfare that individuals could access locally. This is particularly true for migrants from rural China, since the *hukou* system has excluded them from access to public services and social resources, which means that even internal migration within China cannot help them escape financial dilemmas, leaving international emigration as the only way out.

Similar to Xiao Wen, the migrant woman in the first vignette above, Yin Chun, a 36-year-old man from Henan, was also forced to leave his hometown for the overseas job market to save his wife who had been suffering from severe uraemia. Prior to his migration, Yin Chun was working as a security guard in a toy factory in Dong Guang, a city in Guangdong Province, while his wife was an assembly worker in the same factory. Although the couple was not wealthy, they were living a promising life until Yin Chun was informed that his wife had been diagnosed with uraemia. The frail wife was compelled by cruel reality to quit her job and return back to her hometown. The family financial status was on the brink of collapse, not only because of the drastic decrease of family income, but also due to the increased economic burden incurred by her medical bills. After spending the last of their savings, Yin Chun started borrowing money from underground money lenders to pay for his wife's regular renal dialysis. Yin Chun divulged that his income as a security guard (RMB 2,000; £230 every month) could hardly afford the medical bills for dialysis, not to mention the kidney implant surgery, which would cost at least RMB 100,000 *yuan* (almost £11,500):

The reality is harsh... sometimes money is the equivalent of life. The amount of money determines how long she can live. No money, no life... I thought it was the end of the world... However, heaven always leaves a door open [*tian wu jue ren zhi lu*]. One of my colleagues in the [toy] factory told me that her sister went to Glasgow and made a lot of money. It's just like a life-saving

straw [*jiu ming dao cao*]. I contacted her sister and eventually learned how to do all the stuff [being smuggled to Britain]. After very short consideration, we decided to take the risk and fortunately we made it [becoming a London-based construction worker].

Though strained economic conditions has greatly facilitated the growth of clandestine emigration among Chinese migrants, it is notable that economic reasons vary among migrants of different generations. Aside from the aforementioned causes, such as heavy debts and medical expenses, which might be considered as accidental and sudden poverty, it is not uncommon for migrants of earlier generations to come from the situation of long-term extreme poverty. For them, the prime motivation is usually related to filling their stomachs and improving their wretched housing conditions. Xiao Yang is a 52-year-old Fujianese who has been in London for over 15 years. Given the lack of job opportunities in the local labour market, he could barely find a steady job for a long period. The longest job he ever had before migration was being a fruit farm labourer, through which Xiao Yang was able to earn RMB 300 *yuan* (£35) every month. Staying in Fuqing and earning this amount of income, according to him, was nothing other than awaiting his doom [*zuo yi dai bi*].

We were extremely poor at that time, even unable to keep the pot boiling [*jie bu kai guo*]. Children are at the age of growth and need nutrition. With this amount of money, it is impossible to even have meat very often... not to mention renovating our decayed house... In short, poverty gives rise to the desire for change [*qiong ze si bian*].

As time progresses, most of these transnational families have improved their lives. In Fuqing, a major clandestine-migrant-sending area in China, where I visited two ‘international villages’²⁸, it is usual to see many lavishly decorated new houses built on ancestral land. Even for migrants who have decided to settle abroad permanently, house-building still continues as a family project, which echoes the findings of other studies (see Aguilar et al., 2009; Madianou & Miller, 2012). Yet, compared to house-building in prior literature, which mainly represents symbolic ties between overseas kin and community in the country of origin, having a house in the homeland actually has more to do with saving face [*mian zi*] among Chinese labour migration communities. In Chinese culture, *mian zi* is defined as individuals’ dignity and prestige associated with their social standing and position (Hu, 1944), which is either achieved through “getting on in life” or “ascribed by other members of one’s own community” (Mao, 1994: 457). In this sense, with years of remittances invested in house construction, house-building has gone beyond a necessity and become more of a competition of migration success. As Pai (2012: 261) pointed out, the untenanted houses operate as “emblems of how hard-working migrants were enriching their families and homeland”. Similar arguments could also be verified by some of my Fujianese participants:

It is all about face [*mian zi*]. The house you build on your ancestral land reflects your success abroad, which determines your social status in the village. It is a glory not only for yourself, but also it is about your family and ancestor [*guang zong yao zu*] (Qiu Min, 53-year-old migrant man).

House is where our root is, regardless how far we are away [from it]. The more spacious and beautiful a person’s house is, the greater he has

²⁸ Although there are official estimates of the emigration population across Fuqing city, some of the village committees had conducted demographic censuses locally. Of the two villages I visited, there were 1882 villagers working abroad, constituting almost 40% of the entire population.

contributed to the family and the more people will look up to him (Xiu Mei, 46-year-old migrant woman).

As a stark contrast, many of the younger migrants hold opposing opinions of the immense investment in house construction and renovation. They argued that it is not practical to squander the majority of their hard-earned savings on a house they barely live in. For migrants who chose to migrate within the past decade, although economic reasons still function as a key variable of migration, other personal aspirations such as improving personal financial status, broadening horizons or setting up their own business when they return to China, have become increasingly significant when making the decision to leave their homeland. This is partly because China's post-1980s generation tends to be seen as more individualistic compared to earlier generations (Cao, 2009), which also serves as a primary reason for young internal migrants in China to achieve self-realization and autonomy during migration (Choi & Peng, 2016; Wallis, 2013; Wang, 2016). Also, most of the young migrants in this study were born in transnational families and therefore had a better understanding of how to avoid the unnecessary steps their migrant parents might had taken. Zhu Lin, a 32-year-old Fujianese female migrant, explained:

My generation is not like my parents' generation – sacrificing everything only for the family. Although I have my baby at home, I chose to migrate more for myself. I would send the essential money he needs, but it's impossible for me to live in shared room with four or five people, save as much money as possible and send back all of them. That's what my parents' concept [Zhu Lin's parents used to be clandestine migrant workers in America], definitely not mine. My dream is to open a garment store in Fuzhou after I return back to China and live a life I am willing to live.

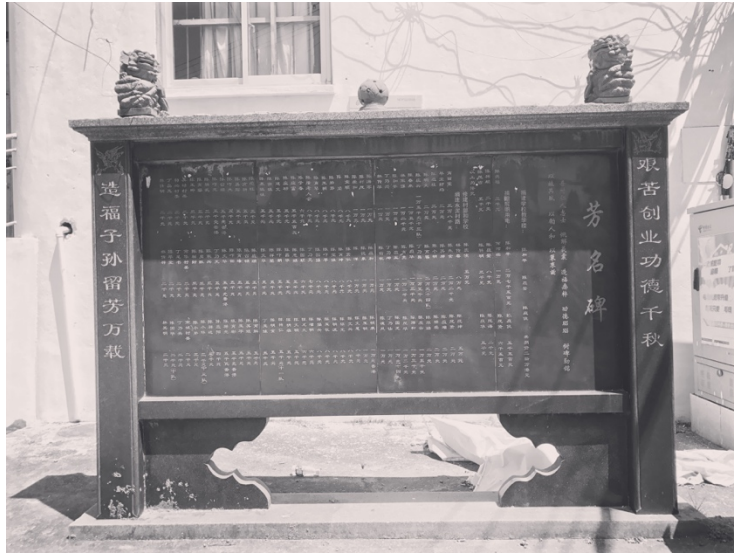


Figure 4. Monument recording the names of migrants who donated remittances towards the construction of infrastructure in Fuqing.

5.1.4 Children's education

In addition to improving financial status, paying for children's better education is also a frequently mentioned reason that migrants strive for a living abroad (Dreby, 2006, 2010; Parreñas, 2001a, 2001b; Fresnoza-Flot, 2009; Madianou & Miller, 2012), regardless of their generation. The majority of the labour migrants have comparatively low educational levels. For earlier generation migrants, having only an elementary school education is not uncommon, but while younger migrants have higher education level, more than half have junior high school education. Many migrants attribute their harsh life to their lack of knowledge and expertise, therefore they invest in their children's education as a compensation. For example, as Tian Feng, a Shanghainese deliver driver put it,

I don't want my children to have the same life as I do. People like us have no opportunities to study because of the historical background [the cultural

revolution]. Without diploma and expertise, you can only do the manual labour, which is sleazy and sweaty. This is what I always told my son, as long as you can study, regardless what degree you can take on, I would definitely be responsible for the tuition.

There are also exceptions in which children's education is never construed as a significant factor that drives migration, which contradicts existing literature (Madianou & Miller, 2012; Sime et al., 2017). This usually happens in areas, such as 'international villages' in Fuqing, Fuzhou or Changle, where clandestine migration has been a prevailing tradition for a long time. During the process of my fieldwork and interviews with participants, I found the view that 'study is useless' [*du shu wu yong lun*] (often underpinned by the idea of 'earning big money abroad') was unexpectedly popular in these villages. Xue Li, a left-behind mother whose son dropped out of school and went to Britain for work on a fake student visa, shared a story that she witnessed when attending a parent-teacher meeting at her son's school:

The concept [study is useless] is very popular in our village. I remember once I went to attend my son's parent-teacher conference, one of my son's classmates failed the model exam and was criticized for playing with a mobile phone on class. His mother was also scolded by the teacher for not supervising him well. I was stunned at that time when the mother yelled at the teacher, "What's the use of study? College graduates can only earn 2,000 *yuan* [£230] [every month]. We are planning to go abroad [smuggled for economic gains] to earn big money! do you understand?" The teacher was standing still and couldn't say a word.

The remark by this left-behind mother reflects the complexities of migration motivations, since they are often intertwined with what many migration scholars have called “culture of migration” (Cohen, 2004; Kandel & Massey, 2002). While migration increasingly becomes a normative behaviour, it is generally accepted by most people as a rite of passage towards socioeconomic mobility. Not only is it pervasive horizontally (throughout the region), the culture of migration is also passed on vertically from one generation to another (Cohen, 2004). The next section elaborates the culture of migration that operates in the context of Chinese labour migration.

5.1.5 Culture of migration

The majority of the participants professed that they have at least one relative who had migrated to Britain. In some extreme cases, participants had seen almost all their parents, relatives, and friends migrating overseas for economic benefit. As Lao Zhou, a 45-year-old migrant man from Fuqing, put it, “We have moved the entire village to Britain”. In this vein, the migration culture actually functions in two ways. First, as more and more people of the same original communities migrate to other countries, increasing overseas Chinese communities emerge, which constitute the strong migration network in the host society. The overseas migration network benefits migrants in various ways, making it a lot easier to find jobs, accommodation, and access to private medical services, which is particularly important for clandestine migrants who are unable to access local public services. The migration network in the host country grows even more mature, as some of the migrants of later generations reported that they knew where to live and work before their departure from China. This would certainly downplay concern when individuals consider migration as a future plan. Mei Lan, a 57-year-old migrant woman who came to Britain as a clandestine dish washer in 1998, noted:

I still remember the first year I came to London, it was not that common to meet Chinese people on the street. We have no friends and all we could do was to rely on ourselves. But for today's generation, everything has become much easier. I have a nephew who is also considering [going abroad for work]. I told him not to worry too much. There are no longer stories... like spending the first night [on arrival] in a telephone booth or underground station or getting scammed when trying to find a new job or a new place to live.

At the same time, the culture of migration, as the cumulative causation of migration, could also exert pressure on those who have not migrated, which in turn further facilitates the emigration of community members. It is not uncommon to hear about information circulating among 'international' villages to the effect that remittances will pay back many times the original investment of smuggling. Similar to showing off success by building large houses, during fieldwork I also witnessed the lavish spending and consumption patterns of migrants who return from abroad, such as wearing high-end leather jackets and gold necklaces.²⁹ There were also elementary schools, local temples and village lanes that were supported by remittances from oversea migrants, many of which bear the names of the migrant donators. The positive information that migration is likely to entail considerable financial feedback has contributed to widespread migration culture (see Liang & Son, 2018; Song & Liang, 2016). Although this information is positively biased³⁰, it has led to what Liang and Ye (2001) have called "relative deprivation", which provides further impetus for going abroad. As for those who have not migrated but are in their prime, the pressure from migration culture could possibly be manifested by either societal expectation or encouragement from their family members:

²⁹ According to Pieke (2004: 57), "the purchase of houses, consume goods, and clothing such as leather jackets and gold necklaces are about more than just social status or the good life. Conspicuous consumption should also be read as a practice that reflects desire for modernity that previously had been beyond reach, indeed may never been contemplated as a possibility".

³⁰ Normally, the hardship and potential risks that migration entails would not be circulated among these communities.

There is a very popular saying in my home town village: “those who have great farmlands in front of their houses are not successful.” (Jing Jing, 28-year-old female migrant worker)

If you do not go out, you are not filial [*bu xiao zi sun*]. This is what my parents told me. My wife also asks me to go out, “if you don’t go out of the door of the country, then don’t come back into the door of the home.” (Lao Zhou, 45-year-old male migrant, unemployed)

The pervasive culture of migration has largely influenced relationship expectations and norms in transnational families, as it destabilizes the modern family ideal based upon physical proximity and normalizes the absence of certain family members. This can help individuals perceive their life in transnational families from a positive perspective, however it does not mean distant family relationships are always smooth and unproblematic, as will be elaborated on in the following chapters. Overall, personal motivations and the culture of migration are not mutually exclusive, but instead are deeply intertwined. Personal motivations are often inspired by the culture of migration, whilst personal success and migration stories generated by personal motivations would in turn consolidate the culture of migration.



Figure 5. A travel agency in rural Fuqing, a major clandestine migration area in China.

5.1.6 Entry and life in Britain

As mentioned in Chapter 1, the documented and irregular immigration status of clandestine migrants are primarily determined by their entry, residence and employment. The complexity of migration status was also reflected in migrants in this study. Their entry into the UK mainly relies on the services of professional travel facilitators (agents or ‘snakeheads’, as they are known in China) who charge large sums of money either to apply for a false visa (a student or business visa), or to smuggle clients with no documentation (see Anderson & Rogaly, 2004). The fees charged by travel facilitators vary considerably, ranging from £9,500 to £28,700 (100,000 RMB to 300,000 RMB). As shown in the opening vignette, the travel fees were much higher for migrants from areas that are known for its culture of migration, such as Fuqing, Fuzhou and Changle, since the clandestine-migrant-sending records make it more difficult for migrants to obtain a legal entry directly to the UK, and therefore their journey normally involves multiple destinations. Some migrants were able to move from being

clandestine to a more secure status, including citizenship, while for recent migrants, the increasingly strict rules have made the transition harder than before.³¹

The travel fees were usually raised from families, relatives, friends and private moneylenders.³² Generally, a third or half of the fee had to be paid to the agent or facilitator before the migrant's departure. Once the migrant arrived in the UK, family members had to pay off the rest. Normally, most debts were paid off within two to five years. Some of the participants experienced downward mobility (Bauer et al., 1999; Gans, 2009) and were in unskilled work, even if they had been in more skilled or even professional work in their country of origin. This was particularly true among migrants from north-eastern China, most of whom were laid-off workers due to the economic reform of state-owned industries. Their clandestine status and lack of qualifications and language skills limited them to working largely within a Chinese-speaking environment, which kept them isolated from wider society, especially in catering, food processing, agriculture and construction sites. While this confirms the findings of previous literature (Bloch, 2013; Lam et al., 2009), we can also see how migrants in this study enacted their agency in stepping out of the Chinese ethnic job markets, such as Xiao Wen, the protagonist of first story above, who learned basic English skills to swap her jobs, and Yan Na, the wife of the Zhou couple who worked in a nail salon open to local British customers, as well as those migrants who obtained their documented status and developed their own business in Britain (running a takeaway restaurant or a Chinese grocery store).

³¹ Becoming documented is difficult, and requires the clandestine migrant to make an application for citizenship, asylum or other form of protection, residence based on long-term residence or to demonstrate a particular status (such as parenthood or partner). These applications often require the individual to demonstrate that they are embedded in the UK through assessment of, for example, their local participation, employment or education (Spencer, 2014).

³² Some participants from areas with culture of migration reported that it was not difficult to borrow money from others for clandestine migration due to the high payback rates.



Figure 6. A chef stirring curry in a Chinese takeaway restaurant.

While it is often assumed that Chinese migrants are predominantly male, Chinese women are as willing as their male counterparts to search for better earnings and a more promising future (Lam et al., 2009; Song, 2004). For those women who come to Britain for economic gain, the pressure to support their family is intense. In her study of Chinese takeaway businesses in Britain, Song (1995) discovered the phenomenon of ‘kitchen hierarchy’ whereby women were always allocated the low-intensity jobs such as serving at the counter or waitresses compared to the role of their male counterpart who were employed as chefs. Yet, the increasing labour intensity in UK-based low-skilled businesses had blurred the gender boundary to some degree. It is now not uncommon for migrant women to compete with men for the same labour-intensive jobs (Song, 2004). The high labour intensity could be exemplified by a problematic quote circulating among Chinese migration communities: while women are often considered as men, men are generally treated as animals. In general, the occupation of the participants mainly lies in the catering business, while some work in construction or other service sectors like hotels and nail salons. Roles include: *ya-ba-lou-mian* (dumb

waiter or waitress unable to speak English), *chao-fan-mian* (a position in charge of rice and noodle frying), *da-za* (handyman in back kitchens), *you-bao* (a position in charge of deep frying), dishwasher, live-in nanny, bricklayer, cleaner, driver, and nail technician.

In their early study of UK-based Chinese clandestine migrant workers, Kagan et al. (2011) found that they were driven by poverty and willing to work under poor conditions for long hours and pay well below the minimum wage, ranging from £110-£200 per week. The average wage of the participants experienced an increase due to the devaluation of sterling over the last fifteen years. Besides the few who have their own business (earning £800-£1,500 per week), the majority of the participants in the catering business and other service industries were able to earn £250-£550 per week. Migrants' working conditions on construction sites were quite different from those in other industries. Generally, the jobs were subcontracted from local construction companies and workers were paid approximately £100 every day. Despite the relatively high income, work on construction sites was not fixed and largely dependent on the contracts available. Overall, the wage of migrant workers varied depending on skill requirements, work experience as well as migration status. For the same position, inexperienced (*sheng shou*) migrants could only expect to earn approximately 50%-80% of the income of experienced (*shu shou*) workers. Meanwhile, clandestine workers faced more exploitation given that most employers were more willing to hire workers with secure papers. As a result, the wage differences between documented and clandestine migrants can reach 20%.

Given the expensive rents in Britain (particularly in London), the majority of the migrants live in cramped shared rooms and attics, which usually cost them £70-£100 per week. For extremely poor migrants (mainly clandestine ones), their living

conditions were even worse. Some just rent a mattress and share a room with five to six roommates. This usually costs about £50 or less per week³³. It is noteworthy that some of the documented participants have bought houses in Britain, as they often have comparatively high wages and are able to access bank loans that are not available for clandestine migrants.

5.2 Living apart together: The emergence of Chinese transnational families

From most migrants' perspectives, family plays a significant role in shaping their migration lives. It is worth mentioning that migration is not just an issue for migrants – it also engenders profound impact on those who are left behind (Baldassar et al., 2007). As noted in Chapter 2, transnational family should be read as a socioeconomic unit embedded in various structural factors straddling both the sending and receiving countries. This section focuses on how family separation intersects with migration status and rural China's welfare status. Care arrangements of different family configuration are also addressed in this part.

5.2.1 Migration status and family separation

Leaving family in China for a better living often involves long periods of separation. As for clandestine migrants, legal status is fundamental not only in affecting every aspect of their migrant lives, but also in determining the time they have to endure before enjoying a family reunion. As a consequence, these vulnerable low-skilled migrants cannot afford frequent home visits, especially as those without documented status are not able to move freely across borders, and thus have to face the dilemma of family

³³ Migrant workers in Chinese takeaway restaurants usually do not have to rent places to live. Instead, the accommodation is provided by the business owner.

separation for a period of years. Even for those who have acquired documented status, it is becoming increasingly difficult to reunite with their left-behind families. As mentioned in Chapter 1, the salary threshold regulation implemented in 2012 – which sets a minimum income requirement for documented migrants to bring a family member to the country from outside the EU – makes it more difficult for low-skilled migrants to reunite with their family members, even if they have obtained documented status. For applicants who are applying to bring a partner or spouse to live with them in the UK, they have to meet a minimum income requirement of £18,600 every year before tax; if applicants want to apply for their child to join them, the threshold rises by £3,800 for one child and £2,400 for each additional one (The Migration Observatory, 2016). In addition, immigration rules in the UK state that only children who are under 18, unmarried and unable to lead an independent family life could be considered as a dependent child (Home Office, 2019). As a result, many participants failed to apply to bring their children to live with them, as they have passed the upper age limit when their migrant parents obtained documented status.

5.2.2 Revised decision to stay and prolonged separation

Although migration status serves as a very important variable in determining family reunification and separation, other reasons were mentioned by my participants. More than half of the migrants, at the start of their journey, intended to earn enough money to return to China. However, many gradually changed their initial plans and decided to prolong their migration (Castles & Miller, 2009). These decisions were closely intertwined with family responsibilities, personal ambitions, and sometimes changes associated with their migratory journey.

Some participants reported that the abuse of remittances by families could lead to new economic crises, which usually forced them to prolong their migration (see Madianou

& Miller, 2012). In some cases, remittances that should have been used for house construction or children's tuition were appropriated for high-risk investments, gambling, or womanizing by left-behind families. Jiu Lin, a 52-year old migrant woman from Liaoning, was once riled when she learned that the remittances she prepaid for her son's future marriage was used by her husband to secretly invest in a precarious P2P loan project³⁴. This ended in failure, which meant that Jiu Lin had to continue to work as a dishwasher for at least another five years:

I was striving to earn money and that idiot has contributed nothing to this family but increased my burden. I have already missed my son's graduation ceremony. However, this bastard wants me to miss my son's wedding as well. He has no idea how hard and tough my work is. All I have done is for my son. In my hometown, if a boy does not have a house, he would not have the chance to marry a girl.

The lack of sound social welfare provision in a migrant's rural hometown was also a frequently mentioned incentive for their prolonged stay in the host society. This is especially the case given that they barely fulfilled the obligation to pay taxes after migration, which made the public medical insurance and pension provision limited or even inaccessible to them if they were to return to their homeland. Some elderly (particularly clandestine) migrants claimed that they had accomplished their initial goals of migration, such as putting children through college, finishing the house building project, or paying off previous debts. They were actually considering returning to China during my fieldwork, as they were tired of the monotonous life in the UK. There was a very popular quote among Fujianese migrants, indicating the boring life in

³⁴ P2P, or peer-to-peer, lending companies provide lending services by "matching up someone looking to invest with someone looking for funding, often with promises of double-digit returns on short-term investments" (Feng, 2018).

Britain: “stay with the gas stove in the day, whilst stay with the pillow in the night” (*bai tian zao tou, wan shang zhen tou*). That said, these migrants chose to remain in Britain for work, simply to obtain more financial security for their future. In some cases, migrants’ decisions for prolonged stay were supported by families in China, especially when left-behind family members were in need of long-term social care, such as the elderly and those with chronic diseases. Zhi Qiang, a 56-year-old man from Fujian, continued to stay in the UK even though he had finished his initial migration plan, just because he wanted to earn more pension for his ailing wife and himself:

Many of my fellow-villagers have gone home within the last ten years. They don’t have the legal status and are not that young and tired of the rootless life abroad. However, I heard a lot of them regretting the decision of going back [home]. You know people like us, work extremely hard when we were young, but our health condition is a mess now we are old. Normally, if you work on construction sites, you cannot avoid getting periarthritis of shoulder and varicose veins on legs, because you have to stand still and keep doing the same thing for the whole day. Just imagine the intensity that lasts for over ten years. If you don’t have the public medical insurance, it is prohibitively expensive to go to hospital in China. The money you saved during the first half of your life would be squandered instantly once you have a serious illness. I’ve learned their lesson and started to save my pensions by prolonging my stay here. My wife is a medicine pot [*yao guan zi*, referring to those who suffer from chronic diseases]. She has got stomach ulcers and neurasthenia, so basically [she is] unable to go out for work and has to take pills all the time. She asks me to stay and work for more years so that we don’t have to worry about money in the future. As you can see, I don’t need to earn money as hard as previous days, since I have paid off the smuggling debts, children are independent now. But it’s time for me to consider our own later life.

Given the long-term labour shortage in Britain, for the majority of the participants who work in low-skilled service industries, the income earned for doing the same jobs in Britain was much higher than it would be in China. As noted by Xiao Ou, the migrant worker at the beginning of this chapter, wages for positions in China's catering businesses reach up to RMB 3,000-4,000 (£345-460) per month, which amounts to a week's salary in Britain. In Xiao Ou's words, "returning to home was nothing other than returning to poverty". Thus, for these Chinese labour migrants, remaining in the UK serves as a simple economic prospect, which echoes Parreñas's (2001a) finding in her study of Filipino female migrant workers who opted to not return because of their long-term pessimism about the economic prospects in the Philippines.



Figure 7. A group of Chinese migrant workers strolling around the streets of London after work.

In addition to these rational economic behaviours, Parreñas (2001a) argued that there were also 'hidden causes' of female migration, primarily related to escaping gender

inequalities, such as labour market segmentation, domestic violence, and single motherhood (including the financial burden of childrearing as a result of marriage breakdown). Following Parreñas's (2001a) observation, Madianou (2012: 284) identified more 'hidden motivations' of individuals' (prolonged) migration in the Filipino context, which included self-improvement and personal development. The evidence collected during my fieldwork accords with these 'hidden' causes of migration but also adds others, especially with regards to the transformation of migrants' clandestine status, which further contributes to shaping their dynamic relationships with left-behind families. As mentioned in Chapter 4, given the Legacy Scheme in 2007, some clandestine migrants who used to apply for asylum became documented and were granted residency by the UK government. By getting access to more social resources and stable living conditions, some eventually shifted their life focus to the receiving country, such as developing their own businesses, establishing new families, or simply getting accustomed to the overseas lifestyle and enjoying the social welfare system in the UK. These 'hidden causes' have made those migrants with secure status feel reluctant to return, which gives rise to the extension of family separation. As a result, they may justify their desire to remain through sending more remittances (Mozere, 2005) and increasing the frequency of telecommunication with left-behind families (Madianou & Miller, 2012). Yet, migrants' revised decisions to remain and postpone reunification could contradict with other family members' relationship expectations, which may lead to conflict, negotiation and collaboration among transnational families, as argued in Chapter 2.

5.2.3 Family configurations and care arrangements

The formation of transnational families is not confined to migrant parents and left-behind children but often includes the involvement of other family members. The rearrangement of child care varies primarily depending on who migrates and who is left behind. In earlier times, male family members constituted the majority of Chinese

labour migrants due to traditional gendered labour divisions (Pieke et al., 2004). However, the last three decades have witnessed a transformation of transnational configuration from a father-away-dominated model to a both-parent-away model. This is partly because today's migrants are less likely to be in extreme poverty, and the initial smuggling cost is a less significant factor impeding them (particularly female migrants) going overseas to further improve their financial status. Also, considering the devaluation of GBP and the inflation of RMB during the last two decades (from 1:15 in 2000 to 1:8.5 in 2015), remittances from only one migrant family member are not as much as they used to be. Therefore, it has become more common to see both parents work abroad. Another noteworthy reason for the emergence of both-parent-away families is the circulating stories in the community that geographical distance between spouses would possibly lead to broken marriages, as mentioned earlier. To maintain the stability of marriage, many participants prefer to migrate with their spouses.

Normally, father-away families resemble the conventional family structure to a certain degree – husbands go out to work, leaving children in the custody of their wives. In mother-away families, it is primarily left-behind fathers who take on the responsibility of childrearing, albeit in some cases, with the assistance of other female kin such as a grandmother (paternal or maternal) or female cousins. If it is a both-parents-away family, the role of caregiver is mainly assigned to other female relatives. Migrant mothers from afar can keep an eye on their left-behind children through communication with these proxy guardians (see Olwig, 1999; Parreñas, 2001a, 2001b; Madianou & Miller, 2012). Migrant mothers' and fathers' experiences as transnational parents are not the same, and the influence incurred by parents' leaving on the family also varies depending on the migrants' gender. Particularly important for children adjusting to changes in their family is a sense of stability in the household. All of these questions will be systematically elaborated on in the following chapters.

5.3 Transnational communication and the Chinese media landscape

As shown in previous chapters, low-skilled labour migrants cannot afford frequent visits home, especially those who are without documented status for whom it is impossible to move freely across national borders – they face the dilemma of family separation for years. Given the context, the care circulation within Chinese transnational families primarily relies on mediated communication that helps to bridge the physical gap and enable the possibility of some kind of ‘doing family’. To contextualize the ways in which transnational family bonds are reshaped by the use of communication technology, it is essential to map the development of telecommunications in contemporary China. This includes the transformation in the diffusion and access of communication technologies, user digital literacy, and rural-urban divisions within the Chinese context.

5.3.1 Telecommunication development in the Chinese context

Since 1978, when China embarked on a massive economic and policy reform, the government has put remarkable effort in boosting the telecommunication industry to enhance its competitiveness in the world economy. The Chinese ‘informatization’ (*xinxihua*) since the early 1990s – including the development of information technology infrastructure, services and applications – is greatly related to modernization and industrialization in China. It prioritized information and access to information as a national economy strategy, since such routes provided the infrastructure to boost the development of other industrial sectors in the information age (Oreglia, 2015). As a result, according to the Ministry of Information Industry, with 263 million fixed-line and 269 million mobile phones subscribers, by 2003 China had become the world’s largest telephone market (Information Gatekeepers, 2004). In 2008, based on the 22nd

China Internet Development Report issued by the China Internet Network Information Centre (CNNIC), China's registered Internet users had reached 253 million, becoming the largest web population in the world. In addition, China smartphone shipments had reached over 150 million in 2011, surpassing the United States to become world's largest smartphone market by volume (Strategy Analytics, 2011).

Similar to the uneven development of China's economic marketization process, the telecommunications revolution in China is also characterized by significant stratification and division among different social demographics. For instance, in contrast to the elite and rising middle-class who primarily use global brand-name smartphones and 3G services, Qiu (2007) found that those he termed "information have-less", such as migrant workers, laid-off employees and retirees, tend to adopt inexpensive mobile phones, prepaid phone cards, and Internet cafes. Kang (2011) pointed out that the rising digital modernity in China is largely dominated by elite groups, such as wealthy, white collar, younger users living in urban areas. Wallis (2013), in her study of Chinese rural-to-urban women migrants' media access, made a comparison between what she called "selective convergence" and "necessary convergence". In contrast to middle- and upper-class users who have multiple ways of accessing the Internet (including digital cameras and desktop computers), young migrant women have to converge all different functions onto one single mobile phone (including gaming, listening to music, social networking). Wallis emphasizes that such necessary convergence mainly results from the users' constrained economic resources and limited access to new media technologies.



Figure 8. Telecommunication adverts on a wall in rural China.

Some of these arguments remain true, particularly the rural-to-urban division. According to the CNNIC's 37th report in 2015, when this study started, estimates of rural Internet users reached 195 million, accounting for 28.4% of the total Internet users in China. However, the annual expansion rate (16.94 million, 9.5%) of the Internet in rural areas is twice that of urban areas (22.57 million, 4.8%). The disparities of communication technology access among other social categories has decreased as well. Although the young generation (20-39) are still the main users of the Internet, representing 53.7% of all users, middle-aged and elderly users (50+) have gradually grown from 5.8% in 2010 to 9.2% in 2015. The male-to-female ratio is also becoming moderate from 55.8:44.2 in 2010 to 53.6:46.4 in 2015. In addition, the divides between the high-educated (college and masters degrees) and the middle or low-educated (junior and senior high school degrees), as well as between different income groups are also narrowing (see details in the CNNIC's annual report).

Overall, the structure of Chinese Internet users is gradually transforming. The transformation of communication technology access is particularly salient within the

presumed non-elite groups, such as those who are comparatively less-educated, relatively low-paid and work in agriculture, forestry, and fishery, or are rural-to-urban migrants.³⁵ Given the context, the following part of this section aims to describe the contours of the media landscape in China. I then discuss media access among transnational families – transnational migrants and non-migrants – who primarily lie within the aforementioned non-elite group in China.



Figure 9. An abandoned payphone and a broadband box newly set on the wall.

³⁵ The rapid development of ICTs in rural areas of China in the 21st century is primarily due to the province-based implementation plans in rural areas launched by the central government. Notably, this includes the “Overall Framework of National Agriculture and Rural Informatization, 2007-2015” issued by the Ministry of Agriculture, which aims to support modern agriculture, rural public service and social management, and the “Suggestion of Promoting the Construction of the New Socialist Countryside” launched by the Ministry of Information Industry in 2006, in an attempt to narrow the rural-urban gap in terms of information access (Qiang et al., 2009). This was later followed by a collaboration between the government and Internet giant Alibaba’s investment in ICT infrastructure and services to develop local e-commerce for the sake of economy boosting, such as the Information Enters Villages and Families Project (*xin xi jin cun ru hu*) and the Thousands of Villages and Counties Project (*qian cun wan xian*) (Tim et al., 2017).

5.3.2 The media landscape in China

With the world's largest Internet-using population, China's social media market is very different from its counterparts in Western countries (Chiu et al., 2012). Internet censorship and bans on foreign social media sites (such as Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp and Instagram) in China have allowed the Chinese equivalents, such as QQ, WeChat, and Weibo, to thrive. As the most popular platform among participants, QQ is a multi-functional piece of software developed by the Chinese tech giant Tencent in 1999, and had reached over 860 million active users by the end of 2016 (Tencent Holdings Limited, 2016). QQ provides a plethora of services, including instant messaging, online social gaming, social networking, email, cloud storage, music, live streaming, group and voice chat, webcam conferencing, video sharing, movies, and news. Among these, QQ instant message and Qzone (QQ *kong jian*, literally 'QQ space') are central to most participants' experiences of the platform. Qzone is a popular web-based social networking site similar to Facebook, where users write blogs, update statuses, and upload and share articles, photos music and videos, which are viewable by their online contacts (McDonald, 2016; Wang, 2016).

WeChat (*wei xin*, literally 'micro letter'), another frequently-mentioned social media application during the course of fieldwork, was launched in 2011 by the same company that developed QQ. Hitting over 700 million monthly active users in 2016, WeChat tops China's most popular apps (Custer, 2016). Compared to QQ, which is often used on a fixed digital device, WeChat requires users to have a smartphone to login to the network. Similar to QQ, as a multifunctional application, WeChat integrates multimedia instant messaging (text, voice messaging, group chat, and webcam calls) and a social networking platform called WeChat Moments (*peng you quan*, literally 'friend circle'), which allows users to update statuses and share links, photographs and videos (Cui, 2016). Users are also able to customize the visibility of their posts by grouping certain WeChat friends (*fen zu*) before posting. Given the increasing

popularity of smartphones among participants, WeChat has gradually replaced QQ to become the most popular social media among them.

Another noteworthy media platform is Weibo – known as microblogging in Chinese – which is often seen as a Chinese equivalent to Twitter. Although there are several microblog platforms in China (including Tencent Weibo and Sina Weibo), Weibo is often used as the synonym of Sina Weibo due to its popularity, with more than 500 million registered users (Koetse, 2015). Most of the features on Twitter can be found on Weibo – users can share short messages, multimedia information (pictures, videos, music and geolocation information), and mention other users of the network (MacDonald, 2016). In contrast to WeChat and QQ, which require the acceptance of friend requests to see the posts of others, Weibo users can follow any other users without seeking permission. Additionally, Weibo also differentiates itself from WeChat and QQ in terms of visibility control – while content on WeChat and QQ is largely shared with one’s online contacts, the information on Weibo is often open to the public by default and searchable by anyone on the Internet. Given such features, Weibo were not as popular as QQ and WeChat among the participants in this study, since most preferred to use a platform where they could establish close and personal connections. This is in line with other social media studies (McDonald, 2016; Wang, 2016), which suggest that Weibo is less appealing to users with non-elite class positions (less-educated or from rural areas) and its main attraction lies in the ability to follow celebrities. The majority of the Weibo users in this study are left-behind children and young migrant parents, who employ Weibo primarily to follow their family members, read news and follow celebrities.

Table 2. Communication technologies adopted by transnational family members

Digital communication tools	Number of adopting respondents
Social networking sites (Weibo, Qzone, the WeChat Moments)	91 (including 32 migrant parents, 36 left-behind children, and 23 left-behind guardians)
Webcam session (WeChat webcam, QQ webcam)	109 (including 42 migrant parents, 38 left-behind children, and 29 left-behind guardians)
Instant message (WeChat message, QQ message)	96 (including 39 migrant parents, 38 left-behind children, and 19 left-behind guardians)
Telephone (Pre-paid phone card or landline)	50 (including 23 migrant parents, 15 left-behind children, 12 left-behind guardians)
Total	116

Note: The numbers of adopting respondents in different categories together add up to more than 116 as transnational family members use more than one tool to maintain contact with each other.

5.3.3 Migrants' media access and usage

All of the migrant participants stated that they had accessed communication technology in the last 20 years, and the majority regularly use at least one mode of communication technology, including prepaid phone cards, smart phones, and tablet computers, along with various Internet-based communication software such as QQ, WeChat and Weibo (see Table 2). Participants who migrated to Britain in the early 2000s heavily relied on prepaid phone calls to maintain contact with left-behind families. Prepaid phone cards are mainly purchased from Chinese grocery stores and supermarkets in Britain, providing international phone service at a local rate. Although the proliferation of low-cost digital media has gradually replaced prepaid phone calls and become the dominant method of transnational communication³⁶, some participants have not completely

³⁶ Normally, clandestine migrants are not allowed to hold local bank accounts. However, it is not uncommon for them to use their legal migrant friends' accounts to obtain a registered mobile number, which allows for cheap data roaming.

renewed former communication methods. Some still adhere to prepaid phone cards because they have to communicate with elderly proxy guardians back home who have limited digital literacy. Migrants of the earlier generation also use phone cards due to their own lack of digital literacy. Even though they access new media, they frequently use certain functions that require relatively less digital knowledge (visual- or voice-based communication), such as webcam calls and VOIP (voice over Internet phone).



Figure 10. Prepaid phone cards in a Chinese grocery store in London.

5.3.4 Non migrants' media access and usage

Compared to the relatively low national penetration rates of household broadband Internet (31.7%), the two villages I visited in Fuqing have remarkably higher rates, which echoes earlier studies indicating the high adoption rates of communication technology among transnational families (Asis, 2006; Gonzalez & Katz, 2016). Based on the statistics provided by the local telecommunication office, of the two villages I

visited, the penetration rates of household broadband have undergone a drastic boost from 13% in 2007 to almost 70% (646/925) in 2017.



Figure 11. Internet service commercials in Fuqing.

As elsewhere, China has been experiencing a convergence of mobile devices and the Internet. Estimates released by the CNNIC report in 2015 indicate that 31.5% of the country's Internet user base accesses the Internet via tablet computers, 38.7% via laptops, and 90.1% via mobile phones. In line with these substantial convergence trends, of all the transnational families I visited in 2016, every single one had at least one type of digital portable device. Tablet computers and mobile phones were two commonly mentioned communication vehicles during the fieldwork. Although laptops and desktop computers are not rare in these families, they are not frequently used for transnational communications.

In contrast to previous literature that considers non-elite and rural media users as “information have-less” (Qiu, 2009), whose media options are largely constrained by economic resources, more than half of the participants (including migrants and non-migrants) in this study have owned middle- or high-end smartphones and portable devices with Internet access. It is not uncommon to see left-behind children holding iPhones and their grandmothers using expensive iPads to communicate with their migrant family members. Although the rural-to-urban stratification has not vanished, it is narrowing. This is particularly salient within the overseas migration context, not only because these dispersed families heavily rely on media technology to stay connected, but also, the high-end consumption of digital gadgets, as aforementioned, is a symbol of migration success, which is associated with face (*mian zi*) in Chinese culture. However, this is not to say that the the phenomenon of “information have-less” has vanished: it still exists but has less to do with users’ constrained economic resources and hardware access. Instead, it is more related to their limited digital knowledge and literacy. For migrants of the earlier generation and elderly caregivers, even though they access new media, they frequently use certain functions on a single media device (though it could be a high-end smartphone), which require relatively less digital knowledge (visual- or voice-based communication), such as webcam calls and VOIP (voice over Internet phone):

I use my tablet computer quite often because the operation is not that difficult. The only thing you need to do is press the button and you can see them [migrant children] on the screen. And also, another good thing is that the character is much bigger [in tablet computers] compared to smartphones (Jun Mei, a 58-year-old grandmother).

WeChat or QQ message is just for short information such as “are you available now”, “give me a call when you receive the message”, because I am not very good at Pinyin. It is not that quick [efficient] to have a conversation unless you use the Webcam calls or WeChat calls (Xiang Lan, a 62-year-old left-behind grandmother).

5.4 Conclusion

Beginning with three vignettes of Chinese transnational families in different configurations, this chapter provided background information concerning how dispersed family members navigate communication technologies to ‘do family’ in the context of Chinese overseas labour migration. Combining original empirical data with analysis of secondary data, it first pinpointed the ‘pull’ and ‘push’ factors accounting for UK-based Chinese overseas labour migration, which includes macro political and economic discrepancies between Britain and China, and at a micro level, the intersection of migrants’ personal motivations and culture of migration in sending areas. The chapter further discussed the sociocultural contexts of Chinese transnational families – while the harsh immigration policies in Britain make reunification increasingly difficult, the incomplete welfare systems and lack of job opportunities in rural China continues to push labour migrants global. In addition, the ‘hidden causes’ of prolonged migration were also discussed, which are mainly associated with the transformation of migrants’ clandestine status (including shifting the life focus to the receiving country). As mentioned earlier, transnational family is form of transnationalism from below, which is embedded in structural socioeconomic factors of both the sending and receiving countries. Therefore, mapping out the reasons for migration and prolonged migration is important for understanding transnational communication and the dynamics of family relationships. To further understand the socio-technical context of mediated interactions among dispersed family members, I

discussed China's media landscape to enrich the understanding of migrants' and non-migrants' media access and consumption in transnational communication.

In the next three chapters, I will explore the ways in which different family roles and duties are negotiated through communication technologies adopted by dispersed transnational family members in the caregiving triangle, which is characterized by 'asymmetrical reciprocity' based on both transnational socioeconomic factors and gender and intergenerational dynamics within families.

Chapter 6. Towards traditional or atypical parenting: Gendered “blessings and burdens”

It was midnight on Lunar New Year’s Eve, a Chinese traditional festival in which family is supposed to be reunited. The day was extraordinarily gruelling for A Biao compared to usual because of the massive increases in table orders during the New Year. A Biao, a 42-year-old man from north-east China, is employed in the back kitchen of a Chinese restaurant located in London’s Chinatown. In 2000, he was laid off by a state-owned enterprise and entered Britain clandestinely to start his arduous journey. Prior to coming to London, A Biao had been strolling around the country, hopping between different jobs – assembly line worker, cockle picker, and even pirate DVD seller – all of which did not last long due to the unstable income he received.

“Thanks God, finally it’s over” (*xie tian xie di, zhong yu jie shu le*), he said in Chinese to his colleague, who always teased him about his homesickness: “Look at A Biao. He’s rushing home to call his family again. Unlike us, a real man should feel at home wherever he goes” (*hao nan er si hai wei jia*). Ignoring these mocking words, as usual, A Biao took off his greasy uniform in haste and rushed out of the restaurant in the dark to catch the last train. The place he rented was located in south-east London, one-hour from the centre of London where he worked – he never called it a ‘home’, but rather a place to sleep. It was a detached Victorian house on a quiet and unspectacular street. The cold and silent darkness was illuminated by the flickering house lights inside. From the ordinary exterior you would not believe that over twenty migrant workers lived in there, celebrating the festival of their own.

The only item of furniture in A Biao's five-metre-square room was a mattress, over which hung a family portrait. In the framed photograph, stained with cigarette tar, A Biao looked radiant in a black suit, with his daughter as an infant nestling in his wife Shu Feng's arms. A Biao had not returned to China for almost 15 years, Shu Feng for over six years, due to their illegal status, which made them heavily reliant on communication technologies to engage such a distant family bond. That was also why they had never been stingy when investing money in digital devices for communication. Shu Feng had already got off work and been waiting for A Biao at home, as she was doing a morning shift as a cleaner in a dim sum bar. Turning on the iPad's webcam and starting to call their daughter, the couple brought a grateful smile to their weary faces. For them, this small family underpinned their persistent, diligent work at the cost of enduring separation.

It was 1 am GMT in the UK and 9 am in China. Eventually Xue Juan, A Biao's 17-year-old daughter, sleepily answered the call. It had become a tradition for them to celebrate the lunar new year 'together' since their Chinese family gained access to broadband Internet. China's Spring Festival Gala (*chunwan*), the highest rated television entertainment event held annually by China Central Television (CCTV) on Lunar New Year's Eve, was playing on the flashing screen of A Biao's laptop. On the other side of the world, A Biao's daughter was watching the same show online as a rerun as it had premiered the previous night in China. With two devices active at the same time, the couple could enjoy the Spring Festival atmosphere not only with a canned beer in hand while miles away from home, but also with their daughter, who made fun of the cross-talk actors appearing on the show.

After the show ended, A Biao sent a digital red envelope (money inside a red envelope given to children as a Lunar New Year gift in Chinese culture) to his daughter via

WeChat, which had not been possible even five years ago. When it comes to the rapid evolution of communication technologies, A Biao still remembered the first time he received his weekly salary and rushed into a phone store to buy a Nokia with pre-paid card. On that night, he made a call to his wife until dawn. A Biao always kept up with trends in technology. In 2005, when laptops were not prevalent, he invested £700 (9,500-10,000 RMB) – almost as much as his monthly pay – in a notebook computer of the latest style (see also Asis, 2006; Gonzalez & Katz, 2016; Madianou, 2012). Until then, A Biao had not seen his daughter for nearly five years. It was a complicated mixed emotion for him to launch the first webcam call with his daughter – infused with joy and surprise at the same time. The grown-up face that appeared on the screen was a little unfamiliar, in contrast to the familiar voice, as the childish kid in the family portrait remained in his memory.

A Biao's experience reflects the transformation in ways of interacting within transnational families in today's polymedia environment (Madianou & Miller, 2012). Drawing on the concept of "mediated/virtual co-presence" (Baldassar, 2008a; Baym, 2010), it is clear that the shared 'presence' served as a strategy to cope with the feeling of loss and separation when A Biao and his wife were "doing family" (Morgan, 1996). Given that they were clandestine, 'physical co-presence', mainly referring to regular trips back home, had been impossible for a long period of time, which necessitated other forms of 'co-presence', including: 'connected co-presence', such as synchronous communication through regular phone calls, voice messages, and webcam sessions (see also Licoppe, 2004; Madianou, 2012; Madianou & Miller, 2012); 'co-presence by proxy' including the family portrait on the wall, digital gifts sent by their daughter, or selfies downloaded from her SNSs like Qzone on smartphones (see also Baldassar, 2008a; Pananakhonsab, 2016); and 'ambient co-presence', based on the peripheral awareness of actions by distant others made possible via the affordances of a ubiquitous media environment (Madianou, 2016). For instance, both A Biao and his wife would constantly keep an eye on their daughter, even without frequent interactions, by

checking her news feed on SNSs like Weibo, and catching up with her daily updates for reassurance.

As argued in Chapter 5, the combination of Internet and mobile-phone-based platforms enables migrant parents to perform some parenting practices despite geographical and temporal displacements. Given the context, in this chapter I draw on the perspectives of Chinese migrants in Britain to examine how migrants of different genders carry out parenting duties from afar through the use of communication technology. In so doing, I have the opportunity to probe into the constitution of gender dynamics in transnational communication through which male and female migrants “do gender”, as West & Zimmerman (1990) defined it. Thus, gender is no longer an essentialist and fixed entity based on biological division, but rather a heterogeneous and contingent process in which migrants construct their identity of fatherhood and motherhood through continuous social practices. I specifically explore the mediated mothering and fathering strategies adopted by migrants to negotiate their absence from home. I also investigate the role that communication technology plays in shaping gender dynamics and constituting migrants’ gender identity during the process of transnational parenting. As a result, migrant parents have been empowered to perform their parental identity in a variety of ways through different communication technologies. Also, male and female migrants confront dissimilar struggles while negotiating their role as distant parents, which can be attributed to various factors embedded in transnational communications, including gendered pressure from social expectations, migration status, and family structure.



Figure 12 (left). The pathway to a house with over 15 Chinese migrants living inside.

Figure 13 (right). The attic with only a mattress where A Biao lives in Britain.

6.1 Extending traditional parenting

The ‘mediated co-presence’, as exemplified by A Biao’s experience, has undergone several stages not only because of the proliferation of new media technology, but also due to the diversified communication demands embedded in various socio-technical contexts. By probing parenting patterns and themes that frequently emerged within migrants’ transnational communications with their left-behind families, this section aims to demonstrate how ‘mediated co-presence’ is characterized by gendered differences. Among the 45 respondents who were interviewed concerning their experience in transnational communication with left-behind families, nine males and 12 females reported performance and experience that conformed to the conventional parenting mode in accordance with traditional Chinese gender culture.

This pattern usually occurs in father-away families or both-parents-away families, which resemble the conventional family structure to a certain degree. Husbands go out for work, leaving children in the custody of their wives if it is a both-parents-away family. Although, in the latter case, wives do some trivial or part-time jobs, the earnings they obtain are often regarded as subsidiary, both by their husbands and even by themselves. Still, it is the father's responsibility to take up the role of breadwinner, and the mother's duty to maintain emotional bonds and the stability of their children. In addition, both-parent-away families are more complicated than father-away counterparts in terms of family structure, as the role of caregiver is mainly assigned to other female relatives such as grandmothers (both on the mother's side and father's side) or female cousins. Migrant mothers can keep an eye on their left-behind children from afar through communication with these proxy guardians.

Most of these 'traditional' parents are migrants of an older generation who were smuggled to Britain around the 1990s and are around 50 years old or come from rural areas in Fujian, Shandong, or north-east China, where traditional gender ideology is especially embraced and entrenched. They are proud of the idea that they can fulfil their parenting duties by conforming to the gendered role assigned to them. In this vein, the mediated parent-child relationship, which is reshaped by communication technology, mirrors the extension of traditional gendered parenthood practices.

6.1.1 Emotional care from afar: Caring mothers' extended love

As indicated in existing literature, 'intensive mothering' in a transnational context is constitutive of emotional labour, caregiving, and nurturing (Madianou & Miller, 2012; Monini, 2018; Peng & Wong, 2013). Although staying at a distance, these 'intensive'

transnational mothers believe that the love and care delivered by a mother is indispensable and irreplaceable for their children, even if the latter are well cared for by proxy guardians. Jing Jing, a 28-year-old Fujianese woman who arrived in the UK in 2014, is a manicurist in a nail salon in north-east London. When free from work, Jing Jing launches WeChat calls to her mother-in-law to inquire about the wellbeing of her 3-year-old baby boy. The content of such calls could be considered trivial, concerned with whether the infant slept well, if he appeared healthy, or whether the milk powder she sent back home was brewed on schedule. “It doesn’t matter what you said”, as she noted. For Jing Jing, the meaning of such regular communication is to have a sense of ‘what is going on with the baby’, which was the greatest consolation after a full day’s work. Although her son was in the custody of his grandmother, Jing Jing believed that distant care from a biological mother was more meticulous and considerate:

I am not saying she [Jing Jing’s mother-in-law] is not good... But I am the one who spent nine months to give birth to him. I know all his needs. I could tell if he is thirsty, hungry, happy or sad even though I am now miles away from him, because mother and son are emotionally connected by heart [*mu zi lian xin*]. This is a mother’s instinct and nobody could replace that role.

Migrant mothers confessed that they were afraid of missing any moments of their children’s growth and development, especially when they had young children who usually grew up at an unexpected pace. Xiao Na is a 26-year-old migrant woman from rural Jiangxi, who came to London with her husband two years ago, soon after giving birth to their son. She regretted having not paid enough attention to the boy during the first half year after their arrival in Britain. The couple was swamped with their jobs and accommodation at the time. Xiao Na was not satisfied with the low (average) income in Birmingham and decided to move to London, in an attempt to pay off her smuggling

debts more efficiently. Yet the prohibitively expensive rent in London was far beyond their expectations. As a result, it took them another two months to find an affordable place to live. When everything was finally back on track, Xiao Na resumed regular contact with her family in China. However, she felt a pang of remorse when discovering that her infant son was able to walk during a webcam call: “It is irreversible. Once you miss it, you miss it forever.” While talking about the past, Xiao Na could not conceal her sadness. Despite her heavy workload as a dishwasher at a dim sum bar (ten hours every day and six work days a week), Xiao Na intentionally increased the frequency of making webcam calls to her left-behind family. In order to further seize the moment of her child’s growth, Xiao Na also constantly reminded her mother-in-law, the proxy guardian, to take pictures of her boy as often as possible:

I would like to record all the dribs and drabs about his growth. I don’t want to make the same mistake again. Children would not wait for you. They are growing all the time. As a mother, I have to make sure that I have never missed any crucial moment. Now I call my son almost every day, both before [11 am GMT, 6 pm in China] and after my work [12 am GMT, 7 am in China], no matter how exhausted I am.

When children grow older and have their own mobile phones, migrant mothers would usually contact their children directly for updates. For example, migrant mothers were commonly found to make phone calls every day to wake up their children in the morning (usually at night in the UK when they got off from work), to remind their children to take medicine timely when they are sick, and to provide emotional support when they confront difficulties in their daily lives. In spite of the distance dividing these mothers and their children, these communication practices help to create the virtual presence of a caring mother from afar. This is particularly true when some children

have left their surrogate caregiver for various reasons, such as going to a boarding school or migrating to other cities for work.

Xiao Wen – the migrant mother from Fushun mentioned in Chapter 5 – told me that her 18-year-old daughter had left her hometown and moved to Beijing to attend university. This meant that she was no longer in the custody of her grandmother, who had been her primary caregiver since Xiao Wen’s departure. The uncertainty and challenges her daughter would possibly face in her new life kept Xiao Wen worrying. As a result, her routinized mothering strategy consisted of frequent calls asking about her daughter’s diet, sharing information and articles concerning health care via QQ (including tips to avoid breathing the notorious polluted air in Beijing, the negative effects of eating too much greasy takeaway food, or physical issues caused by staying up late) and providing a sympathetic ear when she confronts adversities either in study or in life. For Xiao Wen, the most enjoyable thing at weekends is to teach her daughter ‘how to cook’ via the webcam calls. Usually, the mother and daughter would decide which dish to make and each prepare the ingredients in advance. This was then followed by simultaneous step-by-step teaching sessions via webcam conferences. The possibility of interacting at any moment, albeit miles away from each other, created a feeling of continuous ‘being together’. These interactions between migrant mothers and their left-behind children are similar to what Nedelcu & Wyss (2016) identified as “omnipresent co-presence”, through which family members living apart are able to reproduce the ‘ordinary’ ways in which a family interacts.

6.1.2 Compensation for the absence: Authoritarian fathers’ virtual rod

Given that breadwinning is central to the traditional definition of ‘good father’ and ‘good husband’ among Chinese migrants, much communication between fathers and left-behind families revolves around money and practical issues, such as remittances

management and the exchange of relevant information. For instance, by means of webcam conferences with his wife at regular intervals (e.g. the first day of every month or every half month), Qiu Ming, a 53-year-old North-London-based construction worker, was able to impose remote control over the family budget, making sure that his 26-year-old son was saving money for his marriage plan, and gauging the profit his wife made from the grocery store in their hometown which was set up by his remittances:

The life stability and prosperity in the future is why we [the whole family] are striving and suffering at present [from long-term separation]. So I really have to ensure that we are stepping towards the future as planned. There are so many stories circulating [in the Chinese migration community] that the remittances migrants send back home are squandered [by their families] and they don't even know. [The emergence of] communication technology really helps [me] to know what's happening and assert my presence [back at home].

It is worth mentioning that an old Chinese saying was cited by several migrant fathers during my research: “Dutiful sons are the product of the rod” (*gun bang di xia chu xiao zi*). Communication technologies primarily play a similar role, as a virtual ‘rod’ to discipline children under the conditions of extended separation. Some migrant fathers use their mobile phone to urge their children to complete homework on time, to give suggestions when children are older and encounter problems in life or work, or to scold them for misbehaviour such as skipping school, stealing money from home for gaming consoles or lying to their guardians. More often, fathers receive updates about their children from left-behind wives via instant message and decide whether to launch a direct conversation by phone or webcam call. A Fu was a 40-year-old from rural

Guangdong working as a chef when I met him in London last year. He was mad when hearing his wife say that she found a cigarette box in her 15-year old boy's rucksack:

I am working like a dog for nothing but him. But he is ruining his own future! Smoking isn't the worst yet stealing money for it is nothing other than committing a crime. I held in my anger and waited until after work [10 p.m. GMT]. I was so mad that I put aside the time differences and made a webcam call to my wife [6 a.m. in China], asking her to pull him out of bed, and then scolded him for over one hour before he went to school.

Similarly, Tian Feng, a 48-year-old Shanghainese lorry driver shared an example of disciplining his only son with the assistance of his wife at home. Tian Feng's son was a senior school student, who was sparing no pains in preparing for the National College Entrance Examination (*gao kao*). During the crucial year for every examinee, model exams are held monthly in school to capture the students' progress. Tian Feng always asked his wife to take photos of the transcripts at the end of every month and send them to him via WeChat. He then decided whether it was necessary to make a direct call depending on his son's academic performance. In previous literature, migrant mothers usually take the initiative regarding discipline and control over their left-behind children (Madianou & Miller, 2012; Monini, 2018; Peng & Wong, 2013). However, in the case of distant fathering, it is wives at home who play the main role in providing intensive supervision, although fathers tend to perform their paternal role by regulating children from a distance. Indeed, various communication tools fulfil male migrants' needs to be dutiful and authoritarian fathers – the effect of the virtual 'rod' is comparatively limited or even useless without the involvement of left-behind mothers, given that children normally refuse to listen to fathers they have not seen for years.

The experience of long-term separation caused by transnational migration also contributes to the polarization of gendered parenting division. Migrant parents largely feel guilty for being unable to provide their children with a ‘complete family’, especially when they are clandestine and separation is extended. As mentioned in Chapter 5, even though some have obtained documented status, the salary threshold regulation released in 2012 has made it more difficult for these low-skilled migrants to reunite with their family members. As discussed earlier, some migrants of earlier generations rely heavily on prepaid phone cards to maintain distant kinships. Compared with those who migrated later, when digital media technology was already prevalent, these older migrants have a stronger sense of their ‘absence’ because of the relatively scarce social cues afforded by transnational telephone calls. To keep up a ‘normal’ family relationship and regain the feeling of being a responsible parent, female migrants have tried to rebuild the emotional ties by reinforcing mediated “ordinary co-presence” (Nedelcu & Wyss, 2016) through new media: they increase the frequency of regular phone calls, leave the webcam on at odd moments, and send digital gifts such as WeChat red envelopes to their children during anniversaries and festivals. By contrast, male migrants re-establish their fatherhood by intensifying their authoritarian role and imposing discipline more strictly over children through technology in an attempt to compensate for their physical absence. Despite the empowerment that is perceived and appreciated by these migrant parents, the consequence of new media perpetuates and even aggravates the existing gendered labour divisions within transnational families.

6.2 Ambivalence towards mediated parenting

Unlike migrants who are proud of performing gendered parenting duties through various digital tools, parents in this pattern (seven fathers and six mothers) are more often than not struggle with the assigned obligation and feel reluctant to meet parenting expectations. This happens more often in mother-away and father-away families, where migrants without their partners face more pressure and are more

likely to struggle with their parenting duties because of the lack of mutual support available in both-parent-away families.



Figure 14 (left). Back kitchen filled with stacks of dishes to be washed.

Figure 15 (right). A migrant cook playing with his smartphone during a lunch break.

6.2.1 Being both a mother and a father: The double burden of exhausted mothers

In rural China, women's waged jobs are often undervalued as 'help' instead of 'work' compared to their male peers. The undervaluation of women's economic contribution is not only relevant to gender-based wage inequality, but also serves as a discourse to rationalize patriarchy (Brown, 2017). However, women's economic contribution is no longer deemed as 'help' in a transnational context, especially in mother-away families, where women's income is the primary (sometimes only) economic resource. The

valuation of female migrants' income, on the one hand, has increased their status and decision-making power in the family (as will be elaborated on later), whilst on the other hand, it has also placed more breadwinning expectations on these female migrants. The pressure to support family is even more intense for single female migrants; in searching for better earnings, it is not uncommon for them to compete with males for the same labour-intensive jobs. Many migrant mothers complained that their family members had no idea how hard their life was and asked them to send more remittances back home.

Wen Qian, a 29-year-old petite Fujianese women, used to be a fashionista who loved dressing up. However, she had to give up the habit of purchasing trendy cosmetics and outfits after migration, not only because of heavy unpaid smuggling fees, which have the highest spending priority, but also because, as a dumb waiting staff (one who cannot speak English) shuttling between the kitchen and clients, Wen Qian had no time and need to dress up. She cut off her shoulder-length hair, which she maintained for years, since short and neat hair better fit in with the hygiene requirements of the catering business. During our conversation at her workplace, Wen Qian did not look like a little girl as she used to be, but instead a professional member of catering staff. Rolling up her sleeves, Wen Qian piled up a bunch of dirty dishes on her slim forearm, preparing to deliver them to the back kitchen. Her petite figure was almost covered by the gigantic dish piles. The only clue that would help to recognize the old 'her' was probably her red and swollen fingers with half-peeling polished nails. Wen Qian revealed that she had been wearing the same hooded nylon jacket for over three years, for nothing else but to save money for her two children left behind at home. Wei Qian's cousin, the proxy guardian of her children, kept up her demand for more money when they engaged in phone calls:

Every time she calls me, there would not be anything else but asking for money. She [Wei Qian's cousin] thought even the roads of London are made of gold... and I am making easy and big money. This is absolutely ridiculous. She does not have any idea how expensive London is. It is true that I am earning more, but also, I have to spend more. £1.50 just for the bus! You can take a taxi back in Fuqing with approximately the same money. I have already lowered my living quality to a large extent. I haven't bought new clothes for a long time. I even hesitated to spend £1 for bananas the first year I came here... But she never understands what kind of life I am living here.

Remittances have largely improved the life quality of left-behind families. Yet they have also exacerbated the already difficult condition of these low-skilled migrants. This often becomes the trigger for conflicts among dispersed family members (see Schmalzbauer, 2004). As shown in the case of Wen Qian, the burdens associated with expectations for remittances could be intensified because of the more convenient and frequent transnational communications. However, some female migrants were observed to use media technology creatively, reconciling their dual role as mother and father, such as relieving the childrearing burden by motivating their left-behind spouses or extended kin to become involved with 'collaborative parenting' through use of media (see Peng & Wong, 2013). Indeed, left-behind fathers or surrogate guardians engaged with part of childrearing (including nappy washing, taking children to hospital, and attending parent-teacher conferences) (see Parreñas, 2001a, 2001b). Yet it is mothers who, from a distance, take up the dominant role in providing care and nurturing, especially when proxy guardians are elderly grandparents, as their caring capability is often limited because of their health and low education levels. In other words, given the lack of support from left-behind families, the breadwinning capacity granted by economic migration does not lead to the transformation of women's role as caregivers. A Wen, a divorced woman with an 11-year-old son left behind in China, could not

contain her emotion when talking about the experience of juggling the dual role of both father and mother:

My ex-husband is an alcoholic. I was fed up with his abuse every time he gets drunk. He looked down on me and said I would regret leaving him and end up homeless on the street. Since then, I was determined to make a living on my own. That's why I came here [as an illegal migrant to London] against all odds to make money [to raise my son]. My mother is now taking care of my son, but unable to do that much because of her limited strength, so I have to keep an eye on him... I had no idea how I got through all these years, as I felt overwhelmed by the [physical and mental] stress. At times, after a whole day's work [frying rice and noodles in a takeaway restaurant], I could not even lift my arm and dial the phone.

As noted by boyd (2012), the popularization of Internet and mobile-phone-based communications has given rise to an 'always on' lifestyle in which people are continuously connected with their significant others. In addition to the lack of support from their spouses, the ubiquity and immediacy of such 'always on' culture, facilitated by new media, also contributes to the parenting burden for these female migrants. Because of China's one-child policy, family resources have been allocated to a single child rather than being shared among many children. Some female respondents from urban areas where the one-child policy was more strictly implemented revealed that they had sent their children to private schools for high-quality education, which in turn required parents' involvement for co-tutorials. As reported, the head teacher of each class sets up a WeChat group that included course teachers, all the students, and parents. Information such as course schedules, exam results, and teaching plans were published and shared in the group. Xiao Wei, a 34-

year-old migrant mother whose daughter is in a private primary school, told me that it was impossible to contact teachers instantaneously in the past. However, with the advent of digital platforms, parents working abroad are able to gauge children's emotional and social progress through constant interaction with their school. Interestingly, most of the parents involved in the co-tutorial group were not left-behind fathers, but rather female migrants. The tasks that teachers assigned, such as reviewing and checking children's homework, were often performed by these migrant mothers, while husbands at home, on the whole, were not called upon for this responsibility.



Figure 16. A migrant mother making a phone call with her left-behind son in Fuqing.

6.2.2 Negotiating the masculinity crisis: The double-edged sword for struggling fathers

For migrant fathers, the struggle with and ambivalence about distant parenting were also frequently mentioned, albeit in a disparate form. In Chinese culture, fathers are expected to give beneficial guidance or be an authoritative role model for their children, signifying the dignity of being a competent father. But the kinds of practices associated with dignity seem to have a delicate relationship with the financial support that fathers are able to provide (see also Choi & Peng, 2016; Dreby, 2010). Xiao Yang, a 52-year-old Fujianese man who has been in London for more than 15 years, had lost his position as a kitchen porter just before we first met. The reason the manager gave for firing him was his lack of strength due to his age. Indeed, over the course of a year, he had been dismissed from at least five positions that required physical labour usually performed by a younger person. Consequently, he had not sent remittances back home for a long time because he was unable to make ends meet, which had a negative influence on his relationship with his left-behind family:

Xiao Yang: I just feel I can't hold my head up in front of my children. I haven't called them for a long time.

Researcher: Have you told them your trouble? Maybe they would understand you.

Xiao Yang: I don't know what to say to them. It's my fault I haven't done well.

This feeling of loss of dignity leading to a suspension of communication particularly occurs among clandestine migrants. Socio-economic downward mobility prevails in

migrant groups (Bauer et al., 1999; Gans, 2009; Platt, 2005) and it is particularly salient among low-skilled and clandestine migrants. Compared with many other documented migrant peers, who may be able to start a small business, purchase a house, and host family members in Britain for reunions, these illegal migrants have little space for stability; with uncertain status, they are unable to stick to one place for work because of the need to avoid raids from immigration officials.³⁷ They are also exposed to more employment uncertainty given that most legitimate employers prefer legal migrants, even in traditional cash-based employment such as catering. It is not uncommon to witness extreme cases of male migrants becoming addicted to gambling or drugs just to relieve the pressures of their harsh migration life. In the overwhelming majority of cases, these frustrated migrants eventually lose contact with family and become caught in a vicious circle: being unemployed and trapped in poverty and gambling, which in turn exacerbates their frustration and doubt about not being a qualified father, finally leading to a loss of connection with left-behind families. A Qiu, a 38-year-old bricklayer from Shandong had been in serious debt because of his long-term unemployment and addiction to the lottery. As explained earlier, the work on construction sites was not that stable compared to other industries. The uncertain job market in the construction industry was even more harsh for a clandestine migrant worker like A Qiu. As a result, he could not get a single job contract for over seven months in 2014 when he unfortunately developed a gambling problem. A Qiu confessed that he had not contact his family for a long time:

They are now well cared for by their mother. I don't have the courage to call them. Thanks to these small gadgets [pointing at his second-hand Samsung smartphone], when I really miss them a lot, I listen to their [WeChat] voice messages that I haven't deleted, or enter their net names

³⁷ Detailed discussion of migration status will be addressed in the next section.

in Weibo and search for their updates, and this reminds me that I am still a father of two daughters.

In their study of refugee transnational families, Robertson et al. (2016) suggest that the use of digital photography among refugees has created ‘imaginary co-presence’, where they can share a sense of ‘being with’ their absent family members when direct interaction becomes impossible. Though grounded in a different context, struggling fathers who have gradually lost contact with their families have also benefited from such ‘imaginary’ intimacy and togetherness – while the searchability affordance of social media allows for tracking children’s updates without direct interruption and emotional voice messages serve as triggers recalling the past (LeFebvre & Haggadone, 2018). The combination of various media affordances therefore allows for some kind of simulation of a warm ‘virtual family’ for these struggling fathers.



Figure 17. A migrant father browsing his son’s WeChat Moments updates via smartphone after work.

Yet, it could be argued that media technology also operates as a double-edged sword for these fathers. Lao Zhou, a 45-year-old Fujianese man who had been unemployed and relying on loans for half a year simply to survive, had been working as a chef in a Cantonese restaurant in London's Chinatown for over ten years before unemployment. However, the excessive fumes from the back kitchen where he worked for a long time have seriously affected his health. Unfortunately, Lao Zhou was unceremoniously laid off from his workplace when he was diagnosed with chronic lung disease, which was regarded as contagious. The compensation he received soon ran out due to high prices in London. Similar to other struggling fathers, Lao Zhou eventually reduced contact with his family since he had to lower the frequency of sending remittances back home. The second time I visited him at his home, all the family portraits sent by his daughter were taken down from the wall. Instead, they were replaced by horse racing and football gambling posts. Although Lao Zhou had tried to evade such 'proxy co-presence', other forms of 'co-presence' such as finding his daughter's name on WeChat, was still like a knife in his heart. It reminded him of the neglect of his fathering duties, though he had not tapped on the name to start a conversation for quite a while. Lao Zhou felt reluctant to delete his daughter's account, since it was the last bond they had. In this sense, the presence of left-behind family associated with ubiquitous connection enabled by digital tools has, therefore, turned into a nightmare, even as these migrants indulge themselves in casino gaming day and night for self-anaesthesia.

6.3 Escaping gender expectations

While some migrants were passively struggling with gendered parenting duties, other participants (six males and five females) were observed to adopt a more active approach in coping with their parenting crisis. In so doing, they were not only further challenging gendered relations, but also showing agency in resisting the gendered norms imposed on them. Respondents of a younger generation and those who come from urban areas

have been commonly found in this pattern, which concurs with the empirical findings in previous literature on Chinese families (Hu & Scott, 2016). But I argue that, in addition to generational and urban-rural divisions, migration status also plays a significant role in contributing to migrants' parenting strategies.

In contrast to Fresnoza-Flot's (2009: 267) observation in her case study of France-based Filipino migrants that clandestine migrants would "bear the pain of missing important family events and the childhood years of their children, and the pain persisted even after regularization of their status", migrants in my case study appeared to experience long-term separation in a more ironic way – they never considered their accommodation in their host country as 'home', but rather 'a place for sleeping in', thereby attempting to establish intimacy with left-behind families when unable to return due to the lack of status. After pulling through all the hardships and turning into documented citizens, they shift life focus and become unwilling to frequently pay visits to China for reunions. In this respect, rather than providing the possibilities for more intensive transnational parenting, media technology allows for the strategic 'relativizing' (Bryceson & Vuorela, 2002), through which migrant parents are empowered to flexibly negotiate their obligations and navigate familial ties with specific family members. However, it should be noted that 'migration status' functions differently among male and female migrants.

6.3.1 Dilemma of having two families: Justification of 'self-interested' mothers

As noted in the literature review, the feminization of migration (Castles & Miller, 2009) engenders a profound impact on existing gender divisions, enabling migrant women opportunities to transgress gender boundaries – not only increasing their economic status vis-à-vis men, but also placing them outside of the domestic sphere (Parreñas,

2001a, 2005a). According to my long-term observations, incentives to migrate for female migrants not only include structural factors such as unemployment, domestic violence, and relationship breakdown, which have previously been recognized (Parreñas, 2001a; Madianou, 2012), but also vary depending on their residential status in Britain. The story of Xiu Mei, a 46-year-old female migrant, presents a typical example to illustrate the argument. When she first came to Britain in 2000, she never considered that she would settle down here (she and her husband travelled together, but he was deported). Her initial dream was to earn sufficient money and return home to retire. She started from scratch, but her life ambitions kept her on track. In her seventh year of working hard in her cousin's restaurant, Xiu Mei was informed that her application for citizenship had been approved; this became a turning point in her life as a migrant. With legal status, she was entitled to borrow money from banks. A loan and her hard-earned savings afforded her an opportunity to quit the hard labour in the restaurant and run a small Chinese grocery store in London.



Figure 18. A London-based Chinese grocery store.

Now Xiu Mei regularly returns to China twice a year, but it seems that she has given up her initial dream and plans to settle down in Britain, even if it means leaving her husband and children back home. This decision is not merely due to self-empowerment (enjoying the feeling of autonomy and funding family members) or increased status (winning the respect of children; Castles & Miller, 2009; Parreñas, 2001a; Madianou & Miller, 2012); for her, London is a place where she can enjoy a totally different life compared with the ‘boring life’ in her hometown:

Staying in London means a new lifestyle. You can go to Regent Street for shopping, while back at home, you can go nowhere except Cheng Long pedestrian street [a commercial pedestrian street in Fuzhou]. The social welfare, food security, and the law here... are much better than those in Fuqing. I also have my own business here... I just can't give up.

These personal ambitions reveal an authentic deviation from the normative gender convention that mothers are required to devote themselves entirely to their family's interests. Xiu Mei's narrative not only sums up the ambivalence of female migrants, but also indicates that ‘hidden motivations’ (Madianou, 2012) are not merely inflexibly pre-planned before migration but could also be a dynamic transformation during migration life. However, migrant mothers risk being subject to the ‘deviancy’ discourse of mothering, if they fail to comply with the requirement of the ‘intensive mothering’ ideology (Chib et al., 2014). In this sense, mediated transnational communication, particularly digital media-based interactions between female migrants and their left-behind families, then appears to be the justification of their prolonged absence, which helps to alleviate feelings of ambivalence. Li Juan, a 42-year-old woman from Hubei who used to be a clandestine migrant worker, had just obtained her British citizenship

when we first met. Like Xiu Mei, Li Juan changed her initial plan and decided to prolong her migration, since she began to enjoy the feeling of being an independent woman – both economically and spiritually:

Ever since I became ‘the pillar of the family’, I have a say in the family. I can make the decision of the house decoration, the business investment, as well as children’s education... If I go back to China, everything would just go back to the past. And also, there is no need to go back... You see, it’s not the like the past when we could only have letters and international calls. Now that we have webcam sessions, WeChat and the Moments, I don’t think [my presence/absence] makes a huge difference. By these [communication] tools I know what’s going on back in China and they [Li Juan’s husband and son] are also able to have my latest updates.

Similarly, in Monini’s (2018) study of Ukrainian domestic workers in Italy, migrant mothers were observed to utilize media technology to sustain their ‘double living’ – maintaining some kind of distance from left-behind families, while at the same time keeping presence from afar. As such, the culpability of being an absent mother is counterbalanced by an ongoing caring commitment to their left-behind children as well as the feeling of retaining personal autonomy. However, the new identity of being an independent woman has been increasingly destabilized and challenged by the aforementioned ‘double burden’ associated with the ‘always on’ Internet culture. Unlike those who are struggling to switch between the dual role of breadwinner and caregiver, mothers in this category go further, exploiting the media’s affordance to actively negotiate excessive burdens and maintain their new identity.

Xiu Mei, for example, used to delay responses to her husband's frequent WeChat calls concerning routine childrearing matters, such as how to lecture their 16-year-old daughter about overspending on cosmetics, where to find a home tutor when their 15-year-old son's academic performance was not satisfactory, or how to make traditional Fujianese seafood noodles, their children's favourite dish. For Xiu Mei, the delayed use of media tools served as a strategy to avoid the constant burden during work time and was also, as she put it, conducive to her husband's involvement with childrearing:

I can't answer the call when I am busy, so usually I ask him to text me what has happened. If there is anything urgent, I call back immediately. If not, I would intentionally delay my reply. If you get back to him every time you are requested, he would never learn to take on the caring responsibility. It works since he has eventually realized that I'm not always available and begun to actively engage with childrearing.

Besides the conjugal tension associated with family labour divisions, migrant mothers' new lives could also contradict children's perceptions of motherhood. Xue Ping, a 39-year-old waitress who does not speak English and works in a dim sum bar in London, best exemplifies this view. Like many female migrants who were smuggled to Britain alone, Xue Ping divorced her husband because of domestic violence and went overseas in search of a better life. The arduous life and immense pressure of living as a clandestine and single migrant woman lasted for years until she met her current husband, a Cantonese migrant chef working in the same dim sum bar. After Xue Ping acquired legal status, they married, purchased a house, and planned to settle down. Despite the joy of starting a new chapter in her life, Xue Ping divulged that the only thing that bothered her was her left-behind son in China; the 19-year-old held a grudge against her because of her departure and new marriage. The boy's 'retaliatory' demands for care and attention, such as constantly asking for money and expensive gifts, turned out

to be a headache. Instead of easily rebuking him on the phone, which may have exacerbated the guilt of being an absent mother, Xue Ping tried to court her son's empathy and consideration. She sought to justify her refusal to meet her son's inexhaustible demands by strategically presenting her harsh migration life via SNSs, which she thought would help to develop his emotional maturity in the long run:

Every time we talk on the phone, I remind him that "I am not earning easy money", "I am up to my neck in work and unable to attend to you that much", "You need to grow up and be independent". He thought I left him and was living a fantasy life in Britain like he sees on television. It's just not the case here. You have to work extremely hard otherwise you don't have the chance to survive. So sometimes, I make posts about my poor working conditions in my WeChat Moments especially during my night shift. No Big Ben, no London Eye, no gorgeous views, no afternoon tea and high street brands, only rows of sinks with loads of dirty dishes waiting to be washed.

The post shared by Xue Ping is actually only visible to her son, which demonstrates a creative way of dealing with 'impression management' (Goffman, 1959) online afforded by new media. By adjusting the privacy setting of specific posts, she was able to engage with a selective 'self-presentation'. On the one hand, she constructs the misery of her migrant life on social media, thus justifying her refusal of intensive mothering. In the meantime, she has also circumvented the risk of losing face by concealing the poignant moments of migration life from her migrant peers, since reputation plays an important role in collectivist cultures in East-Asian countries (Ting-Toomey & Kurogi, 1998), and also the discourse of showing off migratory success, such as new houses, clothes, or big weddings, prevails among migrant groups (Riccio, 2005).

The increasing availability of new media has allowed mothers like Xiu Mei and Xue Ping to reconcile the contradiction between their new identity (new life) and mothering expectations. Yet, the empowerment facilitated by the use of media that engenders change in the gender structure cannot be interpreted too optimistically. In this case, media technology does allow female migrants to be the mother who escapes the role of a devoted caregiver; however, patriarchal ideology, which assumes that mothers must bear more moral burdens for leaving their children, has yet to be altered (Dreby, 2010).



Figure 19. The house bought by Xue Ping and her new husband in Britain.

6.3.2 Struggling with emotional care: The alternative affective expression for sentimental fathers

Much early research views transnational fathering mainly through the perspective of breadwinning (Parreñas, 2008; Pribilsky, 2004; McKay, 2007), however the rigid association between fathering and earning ability has limited other dimensions and

possibilities of distant fathering. Thus, recent studies have attempted to widen the lens by developing a nuanced look into the dynamic father-and-children relationship. For example, in her empirical analysis of London-based Polish men, Kilkey (2014: 198) discovered that fathers expressed a commitment to a model of fathering that combined breadwinning with being involved with their children, both practically and emotionally. The trend of viewing fathering beyond breadwinning is also acknowledged in research from a Chinese culture context. In their summary of research literature on fathers in Chinese culture, Li & Lamb (2013) speculated that the ways in which Chinese fathers deal with their parent-child interaction differ from those in other cultures. It turns out that Chinese fathers are shifting from stern disciplinarians to involved parents as a result of current circumstances. The speculation is verified by Choi and Peng's (2016) investigation of migrant fathers within the context of Chinese internal migration. Choi and Peng's findings reveal that long-term separation incurred guilty emotions among migrant fathers, which made them transform their traditional disciplinary styles. Through regular remittances, short-term visits and telecommunications, these migrant fathers were struggling to sustain vulnerable bonds with their left-behind children.

During my fieldwork, some of the findings resonated with prior empirical data. As opposed to mothers who strategically exploit media technology to detach themselves from left-behind families, fathers in this category stress that the need and willingness to interact with their left-behind children becomes more intense after migration. This is partly due to the emotional loss aroused by long-term separation, but also, in most cases, because they cannot meet the financial needs of left-behind families, thereby adjusting paternal practices by taking more emotional care as compensation. Yet the transformation of mindset is not guaranteed to spontaneously bring improvement of caring skills. Because of the long-term cultural expectations and their previous interactions with their children, the majority of migrant fathers experience a barrier in expressing feelings. Meanwhile, being apart for such a long period, these fathers acknowledged that they were often unfamiliar with their children. The phone

communication between father and child does not last quite as long, usually less than five minutes, after the mother has finished talking and passed the phone to them. What most fathers say to their children through regular phone calls can be summed up as exhorting them to listen to their guardians.



Figure 20. A migrant up-fitter worker from Heilongjiang Province who is listening to WeChat voice messages from his left-behind daughter.

The transformation of interaction between father and child prompted by the proliferation of digital tools is best described by the experience of A Biao, the protagonist of the opening vignette. He told me that the migrant labour market in Britain had been greatly influenced by frequent raids by the immigration office. Given his illegal status, he had no option but to lower his salary expectations to remain employed, which exacerbated his already strained economic status. He cut his expenses by swapping his cramped shared room for an even smaller attic space. Even so, A Biao

still had to reduce the frequency of sending remittances home, which was the last thing he wanted to do because his daughter needed tuition to enter college the following year.

I am not a good father as I cannot give her the best [financial provision]. But at least I can show her my care and support, making her realize that I am still a useful father. It was a bit uneasy to do so at first when digital media were not that popular. I had nothing to say while making phone calls to her except repeatedly inquiring [about] her academic performance. It was quite frustrating that I did not really know about her and was unable to provide much support because of my low education level.

A Biao resorted to following his daughter's life by relying on the newsfeeds through her SNSs (Qzone and WeChat Moments). By browsing the photos and captions she posts, A Biao tries to be involved with her life while being physically absent. For instance, when his daughter reposts a sad song at midnight, A Biao realizes immediately that she must be experiencing frustration. Leaving an encouraging comment below the post, forwarding inspiring articles he comes across on the Internet, or sharing a joyful song with her constitute A Biao's strategies to express his care and love through distant communication. Even without frequently launching direct conversations and expressions of love, A Biao believes that he is able to play a role as a beacon in his daughter's life journey.

I think that is a 'tacit agreement' [*mo qi*] we [A Biao and his daughter] have reached without saying so in public. It's kind of a proper distance; you can avoid awkwardness but still feel quite soothing.

Male migrants rely heavily on text-based communication as a strategy to get closer to their children not only because such ‘intermediate co-presence’ delivers an “ambient, continuous and ever-present” sense of “being there for you” that “immediate co-presence” (such as real-time calls) fails to do (Baldassar, 2016: 153), but also because it is conducive to alleviating the burden of being a sentimental father. Given the traditional gender image of the father as emotionally detached and rational, affective expressions such as ‘I miss you’ or ‘I care about you’ via voice-based communication such as phone or webcam calls may be construed as excessively undisguised and may lead to an uneasy feeling of embarrassment. Under such circumstances, text-based communication such as texting, instant messaging, or SNS browsing grants these fathers an alternative way of conveying their emotional care that may actually be less possible in face-to-face interaction with their children. Similar to those ‘atypical mothers’ in this pattern, although fathers have been granted an alternative way of escaping the role of an authoritarian breadwinner through use of media, they are unable to subvert patriarchal ideology. Their intensive emotional care and participation in children’s growth is primarily related to what Connell (2005) termed “marginalized masculinity,”³⁸ through which subordinated men construct their alternative manhood when unable to deal with the discrepancy between the social ideal and their practical situation.

6.4 Conclusion

This chapter sought to explore the ways in which Chinese migrants in Britain negotiate their parenthood via mediated communication with their left-behind families. It also

38 Drawing on Gramsci’s concept of “ideological hegemony”, Connell (2005) proposes the term “hegemonic masculinity” to refer to the privileged social normative manhood that legitimizes the dominance of men over women and non-hegemonic men, such as those who at a social disadvantage due to class, ethnicity, or sexual orientation. “Marginalized masculinity”, therefore, serves as an alternative strategy for non-hegemonic men to reconstruct their masculine identity.

provided evidence regarding how communication technologies might matter during the process of transnational parenting. As a result, three patterns of distant parenting have been adopted by these migrants: extending traditional parenting; ambivalence towards mediated parenting; and escaping gender expectations. This chapter highlighted the gendered (dis)empowerment associated with media use when migrants parent from afar. Given that the situated transnationalism perspective has been adopted, in this chapter I also pinpointed the underlying cause of such (dis)empowerment by delving into the specific socio-technical context in which migrants of different genders are embedded. Notably, the transnational family structure, migration status and generation, media affordances and patriarchal ideology all contribute to the shaping of mediated transnational parenting.

In general, the use of communication technologies in transnational communication is construed as both “blessings and burdens” (Horst, 2006) – it serves as a kind of ‘social glue’ connecting dispersed family members (Vertovec, 2004), while also bringing about unforeseen obligations and burdens. Following this, I attempted to give further nuance to the understanding of mediated (dis)empowerment in transnational parenting by taking gender into consideration. For migrants of the older generation or from rural China, who are more likely to hold on to traditional gender norms, communication technologies such as prepaid phone calls, webcam sessions, and instant messages have offered them a space for agency to carry out their parenting duties. However, use of communication technologies has also resulted in the reproduction of conventional gendered dynamics (see also Rakow & Navaro, 1993; Parreñas, 2005). As for single or divorced migrant mothers, who are usually the main breadwinners, the increasing availability of these communication technologies allows them to perform their parenting role, but at the cost of incurring excessive caring burdens. By contrast, for clandestine migrant fathers who fail to meet the financial needs of left-behind families, archived voice messages and SNS updates of family members back home turn into a temporary yet warm substitution of ‘family’ when direct communication has stalled; however, these messages and updates are

also sometimes a painful reminder of their neglect of fathering duties. When some of the female migrants obtain legal status and embark on their new life of being independent women, the delayed use of media technology (such as VOIP calls or instant messages) can be a liberating way to exert agency to avoid extra caring burdens associated with the ‘always on’ Internet culture. Also, the selective representation of a harsh migration life on SNSs has allowed for justification of some mothers’ refusal to fulfil intensive mothering expectations; however, the moral burden of being an absent mother still exists. As for fathers who try to compensate for their lack of breadwinning ability by engaging with more emotional care for their children, text-based and asynchronous communication tools have helped them to reduce the barrier to being a sentimental father.

Indeed, these migrants have carved out their own space for agency by various media affordances to escape the stereotyped roles of parenting. However, ‘atypical parenting’ is not a genuine revolution regarding new parenting practice, but serves as a tactic (de Certeau, 1984: 35-36) of compromise when migrants face patriarchal parenting expectations. This is more evident when it comes to the case of clandestine migrants as incomplete status exacerbates an already difficult circumstance for them, making it harder to live up to parenting expectations. As Scott (1985: 301-302) argues, the subordinate group has to show “grudging compliance” in order to “work the system to their minimum disadvantage”, thus in this vein, communication technologies play the role as the “weapon of the weak”, allowing them to construct their alternative fatherhood and motherhood when conducting distant parenting.

Chapter 7. Left-behind children as actors: Beyond receiving care and countering surveillance

Melodious music circled around the hall, mingled with snatches of laughter and the faint sound of firecrackers outside. The air was pervaded with the aroma of wine and food. Finally, Chao Hong had some time to take a break, after toasting almost every guest in the room, most of whom had travelled a great distance to attend her wedding ceremony. She found a quiet corner and turned on the webcam on her smartphone. She tried to dial her parents, who were absent on this special day, one of the most important days in her life. Like most parents in Fuqing who devoted themselves to chasing their migration dream, Chao Hong's mother gave up farming and smuggled herself to Britain for economic gain in 2002; her upfitter father followed in 2005. Because of their clandestine status, both of Chao Hong's parents have not returned to Fuqing. Chao Hong asked her fiancé to hold the phone for her, as she spun in front of the camera and showed her mother how beautiful she was in her wedding dress. Giggles burst from the little screen. Chao Hong's father teased that she had gained some weight and that the dress looked a bit tight on her. Chao Hong rolled her eyes and, ignoring the joke, started to complain to her mother about how her fiancé was being lax in preparing the wedding. The conversation was natural, as if her parents had never left – until the moment her father said, “Sorry that I can't hold your hand and give it to your fiancé”. A silence followed, then everyone started whimpering in front of the camera. Tears trickled down Chao Hong's face, staining the wedding gown. “Thanks for raising me. I am married today”, she said while wiping off the tears, “You can come back now. It's time for me to take care of you”.



Figure 21. Chao Hong’s grandmother holding the smartphone, live-streaming her wedding to her parents in Britain.

I followed Chao Hong back to her home in rural Fuqing the next day, as according to Fujianese custom, brides are required to return to the parental home after the wedding ceremony. The dusty alleyway ended abruptly in a large tract of obtrusive Western ‘castles’, embedded in a vast tract of abandoned farmland, providing a jarring view. “That’s where they have invested all their savings”, Chao Hong pointed at an unfinished five-storey building, lavishly decorated with marble pillars and carved windows. It is not difficult to distinguish families with migrant parents from those without in the village. Chao Hong felt embarrassed to tell me that overseas migrants usually show off their success by building houses in their hometown. The number of storeys on a building has become an indicator for measuring competitive ability, which has created a paradoxical phenomenon – on the one hand, the main labour force has left home to seek jobs in other cities or countries (like Chao Hong and her parents), with ageing

family members or children left behind, which could be termed “rural hollowing” (Liu et al., 2008); on the other hand, the back flow of remittance has resulted in “rural flourishing” in terms of infrastructure. Chao Hong told me that the most exaggerated example in her village was an eighteen-floor-building with only three people living inside.



Figure 22. It is not difficult to distinguish the migrant families and non-migrant families.

Chao Hong conceded that she had never understood her parents’ migration dreams, thus she had an ambivalent attitude towards prolonged separation from her parents: “Indeed, I benefit from their migration – never worried about my tuition and living expenses. But home is not just about a big house, instead it’s about family members getting together, even in a small house”. Long-term absence during her adolescence resulted in the feeling of abandonment and caused her parents to misunderstand her, as she said, “They know nothing about you. All they want to do is impose their opinionated thoughts and their so-called love on you”. In 2012 Chao Hong obtained her first smartphone, which was sent by her mother from abroad, and thereafter the gadget

became a ‘cage’ for her – a conduit for endless scolding about her academic performance, a constant urge to meet the guy they introduced her to for a blind date. Given the pressure of authoritarian parenting, which triggered her adolescent rebellion and outward resentment, Chao Hong took her own course and dropped out of school, starting to live on her own, as she did not want to rely on her parents’ remittances. The reckless decision exacerbated her difficult relationship with her parents. After saving her salary for three months, she bought herself another smartphone as the celebration of financial independence, as well as a signal of getting rid of the ‘cage’.



Figure 23. A house under construction in Fuqing.

Change occurred in the second year when she was struggling to make ends meet without the shield of parents. Every obstacle Chao Hong confronted reminded her how hard life was as a stranger leaving her hometown for a living. She could not imagine the hardship that her parents went through, especially in a foreign land where they could not speak the local language, starting everything from scratch, and even taking care of her from afar by sending regular remittances. The intense relationship was softened by Chao Hong’s gift on Father’s Day – she spent one and a half months of her salary and

purchased an iPhone for her father for reconciliation. Chao Hong confessed that she owed so much to her parents and stressed that it was also the reason she made every effort to assist me in seeking potential respondents as that was her father's request. She could still not reconcile some of her father's thoughts, but now she attempted to understand them and dealt with conflicts in a smoother way. She cancelled the block on her father's account on WeChat and recovered their regular communication, acting indifferent rather than revolting when conflicts became intense. As well as encouraging mediated communication as a buffer for easing conflicts, Chao Hong also learnt to reassure her parents by sharing her life via digital platforms, but in a filtered way, for example, by concealing some of her posts on social media when suffering at low moments, or avoiding webcam session when she was sick.

Chao Hong's case is typical as an example of life experiences from the perspective of left-behind children, not only in terms of the dynamic and ambivalent attitudes towards mediated parenting, but also of the role that communication technology plays during the process of mediated transnational communication. The meaning of digital tools has been changed in accordance with relationships at different stages (from the 'cage' to the mark of maturity), and the use of media technology was also interwoven with the fluctuation of relationships. As we can see, similar strategies of media usage can indicate dissimilar meanings – concealing updates on social media for completely opposite purposes. From blacklisting parents and expressing resentment to partially hiding bad news out of consideration for others, not only are we able to witness a young girl's growth, but we can also see how digital media reshapes the parent-child relationship, and vice versa. The complexity of children's responses to their migrant parents explains attention should also be paid to the children's perspective, as we should not assume parents' accounts on the consequences of separation represent the whole story, nor should we draw any superficial or homogeneous conclusion without taking into account the specific contexts that these children face.

The challenge in this chapter, therefore, is to rethink the influence of migration on left-behind children by taking into account the role of media. In so doing my aim is not only to discuss how these children enact agency given their positions in the ‘care chain’, but also to investigate whether their media practices lead to further transformation of distant intergenerational relationships. My argument is that a socio-technical approach, as aforementioned, serves as a helpful starting point to delve into the dynamics of mediated family life in a transnational context, as transnational family is not a given, but a dynamic that is articulated through media use in an ongoing process. This leads to questions concerning how left-behind children perceive mediated parenting and reconstitute their own role as children, as well as the ways in which they respond to it and the subsequent consequences.



Figure 24. Left-behind children in Fuqing playing with a smartphone together.

7.1 The perception of mediated parenting

Although left-behind children are not at the frontier of migration, they live with it (Asis, 2006). The following section investigates how transnational family life is experienced by such children through their use of communication technologies in their transnational communications with their parents. It turns out that mediated communication does not always lead to a harmonious relationship between parents and children. Instead, it has sparked binary opposite opinions based on the statements of these left-behind children.

7.1.1 Embracing the technology: “They are back”

Long-term separation between parents and children has destroyed the routine availability of face-to-face communication and care exchange within a bounded space, which in turn has destabilized the cornerstone of intergenerational bonds. Given the context, the elimination of constraints caused by time and space is vital for understanding the role that technology plays during transnational communication. The proliferation of new media has given rise to an emerging ‘tangible’ mediated intimacy (Wilding, 2006), contributing to the sense of closeness and mitigating the emotional loss incurred by long-term separation (Baldassar et al., 2007; Bacigalupe & Camara, 2012; Madianou & Miller, 2012). Thus, the care circulation among dispersed families has been revitalized to a certain degree even within a transnational context, which has been embraced and appreciated by many left-behind children. Xiao Lin, a 21-year-old boy whose parents migrated to Liverpool for work in 2005, had eventually developed a closeness to them through the prevalence of digital tools, as new media-based interactions, such as webcam calls, have included more visual and sound cues:

The first time I had a webcam session with them, I remember the feeling was neither happy nor sad but complicated. We hadn’t seen each other for

approximately five years. Although I am familiar with their voices on the phone and handwriting in letters, I have no idea that they are that old [sobbing]. [Technology] really helps. It seems that the distance between us has vanished and I can feel them now.

An extreme example that could exemplify the ‘tangible’ intimacy afforded by new media is the story of Wen Hui. Since his mother’s departure to Birmingham (joined by his father the following year), the 18-year-old boy had been ridiculed by his classmates, saying that he did not have a mother because they never saw her at their school meetings. When his village first gained access to the Internet, Wen Hui launched a webcam conversation with his mother for the first time. He took his classmates home and introduced his mother to them in front of his new laptop – vivid and convincing proof that the woman he frequently mentioned was real. In contrast to infrequent telephone calls and letters in the past, the sense of reality enabled by various apps available on smartphones allows children to sustain a close and intimate relationship with their parents from afar. As Wen Hui explained,

Indeed, letters convey emotion. My aunt [Wen Hui’s proxy guardian] usually reads letters for me as I just entered primary school at that time. You can feel their [Wen Hui’s parents] love between the lines. But I have to say that digital platforms are more instant and real. Through webcam conversations, you know she had a haircut recently, and by photos she shared on her WeChat Moments, you see what she had eaten for dinner. They are not as emotional as calls or letters, but I mean they are real, and I like the feeling.

In other words, the abundant cues afforded by some new media allow both migrant parents and left-behind children to expose their everyday lives to each other in a more detailed and intuitive way, which to some degree provides reassurance for these family members who are unable to reunite frequently. Hai Ping has not met his father for seven years since the latter smuggled himself to Canada for better income in 2010. The 25-year-old man suggested that the abundant cues afforded by new media have reassured his remote father when talking about his wellbeing:

Parents always worry about their children if they can't see them regularly, and so do us children. They might have a bee in their head even if you say that you are living a good life. Just saying is far from enough. Sometimes showing them you are living well is a more effective way to reassure them.

Despite the visual and sound cues afforded by new media that increases the extent of humanization in distant relationships, what is more intriguing is that the mediated 'parents' were reported to have become even more 'real' from some children's perspectives. Chao Hong, the protagonist of the story at the beginning of this chapter, said,

Sometimes they [digital tools] are more real because you can see multiple dimensions of your parent. People always act differently when they are online, maybe more sensitive or emotional as they hide behind the Internet. Before she [Chao Hong's mother] left, I had no idea what kind of person she was except for the 'mother' figure that I saw at home. But now I started to know my mother's taste in music by the songs she shared on WeChat Moments. I learned her feelings about her life through the captions she wrote on Weibo.

I think they [digital media] provide you with an opportunity to find something about your parents that has been ignored before.

‘Tangible intimacy’ is also manifested by the location and position where left-behind children situate their communication technologies. It is not uncommon to see children place digital devices in very important positions at their working or living places – while some put their laptops at the centre of sitting rooms, others may place their tablet computers right beside their parents’ photos on an end table. The placement of communication devices is not only for reasons of practical convenience. For children, it has also functioned as ‘proxy’ parents accompanying them in their lives. Wen Hui, the aforementioned 18-year-old man, always put his smartphone beside his pillow. In so doing, he was able to answer his migrant mother’s morning call every day more conveniently. At the same time, this also helped him to regain the feeling that his mother was sleeping beside him.

In some cases, children felt that their relationship with their mothers or fathers actually improved during long-term separation. The positive transformation of the parent-child relationship was not only due to separation strengthening the sentiments of longing from both sides, which in turn intensified family bonds. It was also about communication technologies enabling dispersed family members to more easily express intimate affection relative to face-to-face communication. The increasing availability of asynchronous communication tools – particularly the advent of instant message and SNSs – enriched the ways in which family members expressed their emotions for each other. Zhang Hua, a man in his early twenties, whose father had left Fuqing for Scotland 12 years ago, professed:

It's awkward to express your feelings or have a deep conversation on the telephone or webcam because it's like you are standing in front of each other. Although in the age of the letter this was not an issue, in this digital era you just have more alternative choices. You can send your father 'Happy Father's Day' with a picture of a flower on WeChat, but when he was at home I didn't do that.

Meanwhile, the interactive feature of polymedia media environment diversified the ways in which children and parents communicated, which also reinforced the intergenerational solidarity between parents and children. Several participants reported that they developed emotional closeness with their migrant parents through sharing their life online, such as playing online games, sharing online diaries, or watching the same Internet dramas. Amongst all these cases of relationship improvement enabled by media technology, the most dramatic example I encountered is the story of Xue Di, who works as a part-time singer on an Internet live broadcast platform. Spending most of her spare time in her virtual broadcast room, Xue Di told me that she had not contact her estranged parents for a long time. Xue Di's parents smuggled themselves to Britain 11 years ago; her mother worked as a barber at first, while her father was a *ya ba lou mian*³⁹ in a Chinese restaurant. In the fifth year since their migration, the couple decided to run a barber shop of their own, however, they did not have the legal status to start a business in Britain.

To improve the possibility of their permanent resident application being approved, Xue Di's parents had another baby. Since then Xue Di's parents did not pay as much of attention to her as they struggled with raising a new child and preparing for their forthcoming business. The estranged parents started to realize the neglect of their caring

³⁹ Literally a 'dumb waiter' in Chinese, referring to those who have a language barrier in English and are thus unable to take orders when serving at the table.

duty when their life in Britain got back on track. Despite monthly phone calls regarding remittance management, they rarely had deep conversations with Xue Di, who felt awkward at first when her mother tried to chat with, her until one day she saw an ID similar to her mother's WeChat name in her virtual broadcast room and sent her a large number of virtual gifts. Xue Di was deeply touched by the first step her mother took to restore their relationship, as she registered an audience account especially for her. Thereafter, the bond between mother and daughter gradually grew as they started to invite each other to join their online lives. To varying degrees, the multimodal interactions afforded by polymedia environments allowed dispersed family members to develop common topics despite their long-term separation. This was arguably conducive to strengthening the mutual involvement of life between migrants and non-migrants.

7.1.2 Detesting the technology: “I don't need the unnecessary care” / “It deprives me of them”

As indicated in the last chapter, discipline and control are two recurrent themes in mediated parenting. Although long-term absence impeded parents' surveillance of their children, the advent of new media technology, to some degree, has made possible what Perterra (2006) called “absent presence”, enabling them to be ‘here’ and ‘there’ simultaneously and thus turn their absence into presence in their child's life. Many of the left-behind children resented that their parents attempted to recover their parenthood by imposing their discipline in the name of love, thereby sharing the negative attitude towards media's role in frequent communications. For them, digital technology could shift from a vehicle that conveyed affection and care to a cage that facilitated surveillance (see Chao Hong's story). This was particularly salient when some of the left-behind children had already been accustomed to their parents' absence instead of their presence (see Hoang & Yeoh, 2012; Parreñas, 2001a), and had even been enjoying

the freedom brought by this situation (see Dreby, 2010). For example, Jian Xiong, a 19-year-old man, was once caught playing truant and staying at home by his parents in London because his WeRun⁴⁰ steps registered less than 100 for several days. Although in a different form, parents' distant surveillance on children's digital footprint echoes Madianou's (2016) research into Filipino transnational families in which she wrote about a migrant mother who suspected that her son dropped out of school because his status on social media was 'on' when he was supposed to be in class.

The intensity between children's aspirations for autonomy and parents' desire for control becomes more severe when practical care conflicts take place. Some children believed that their parents could not provide genuine support, but instead cast blame from afar (*zhi shou hua jiao*) to fulfil their desire for control. They also failed to solve practical problems in children's everyday lives. Sometimes it became more of a reminder of the family's traumatic separation. Chao Hong's sorrowful wedding is a typical example of this phenomenon, indicating that mediated communication is sometimes unable to substitute the proximity of embodied company – other examples include school conferences, graduation ceremonies, or times of illness (see Uy-Tioco, 2007; Wilding, 2006). In these instances, a webcam session or an instant message would not be sufficient to deliver the care that the children needed, instead creating a strong psychological gap. As some of the participants said, the so-called mediated 'co-presence' was revealed to be nothing more than 'illusory' (*xu huan*):

They were not able to attend the sports meeting and share my joy of winning a medal for sprint. What they would usually do is leave some encouraging comments below a photo I posted on social media. I do understand them to some degree, but I am still a child. Can you understand that feeling especially

⁴⁰ An affiliate application of WeChat that calculates steps walked everyday and publishes the result as a ranking list in a public forum.

when you see your classmates having their parents around? (Chun Ling, 18-year-old woman, both parents abroad)

All she could do was to ask me to drink more water when I had a high fever, and then kept asking me if I was feeling any better... sometimes I feel like... [deep sigh] I prefer not to have this 'telephone mother'. (Di Er, 19-year-old woman, parents divorced and mother abroad)

In contrast to previous literature suggesting that children who have negative views on mediated parenting are prone to detaching from their parents (Lam & Yeoh, 2019; Madianou & Miller, 2012), I observed another possibility, which was the exact opposite. In this case, children do not reject closeness, but digital tools prevent them from getting closer to their parents. As previously noted, the majority of migrant parents recognized the positive impact brought by new media for allowing them to reconstitute their roles as parents. Especially for those who changed their initial migration motivation, shifted their life focus, or decided to settle down in the receiving country, the frequent communication afforded by communication technology contributed to some parents' holding on to an illusion that they were fulfilling their parental duty. Ironically, with some children, this triggered resentment towards media technologies. Xue Qiang – the son of Xue Ping (introduced in Chapter 6), the mother who married a new husband and decided to settle down in London – blamed the existence of the new media technology for the infrequency of his mother's visits to China:

She thinks she has fulfilled her maternal duty, like a phone call every two weeks and several comments on my WeChat Moments... and she believes that's enough for what she has done as a mother. The times she came back to

China decreased from once per year to once every two years. When I see the photos she posted on WeChat Moments – red wine, beef steak, luxury bags, and short videos showing the construction of enlarging her house, I know she had given up her reunion dream. She won't go back. I know [choke with sobs].

As shown in the last chapter, Xue Qiang's migrant mother thought that the boy's misunderstanding about her fantastic migrant life in Britain derived from the image produced by mass media (e.g. television). However, the 'stereotypical' gorgeous migration life ironically came from her own posts and those of other migrant relatives, since the 'showing off' culture of migration success prevails in migrant groups. Similarly, in Margold's (2004) study of Filipina workers in Hong Kong, she documented that these migrant mothers often sent home pictures from fancy shopping centres with smiling and happy poses in fashionable new clothes. Although these kinds of behaviour may be due to migrants' conscious efforts to conceal their harsh lives, which may worry their families, they could unexpectedly give rise to children's feelings of abandonment and resentment towards their parents (Dreby, 2010; Parreñas, 2005a). Left-behind Children were sensitive to this kind of 'betrayal', and they transferred their blame to the digital tools that became part of their parents' excuses for justifying their prolonged absence. However, we cannot draw a superficial conclusion that negative attitudes towards new media inevitably led to a refusal to use them. The next section deals with how left-behind children would take advantage of various digital tools to strengthen their agency in negotiating intergenerational relationships with their parents.

7.2 Children as actors: Mediated co-presence as strategies

Given the various positions in which different family members are placed (Benitez, 2012), they may have confronted disparate oppression and access to various resources. In the following section, I attempt to explore how left-behind children negotiate their

family roles and respond to the ‘absent presence’ of migrant parents (Pertierra, 2006) during mediated communication. I then further explore how the accumulation of such mediation leads to further transformation of intergenerational relationships. Following the ‘child-centred’ approach in existing transnational family literature (Hoang & Yeoh, 2015; Lam & Yeoh, 2019) – which conceives of left-behind children as active actors who engage with the meaning making and day-to-day negotiations with family relationships – this study attempts to capture various forms of agency enacted by these children through the use of communication technology, which is closely intertwined with wider socio-technical circumstances.

7.2.1 Left-behind but not left forgotten: Craving for parents’ attention

Generally, Chinese clandestine migrants find themselves involved in unskilled work, particularly in catering, food processing and agriculture, as their lack of qualifications and language skills limits them to working largely in low-paid and poor working conditions (Lam et al., 2009; Pieke et al., 2004). As mentioned earlier, some of the clandestine migrants struggled to make ends meet, thus paying little attention to their left-behind families. Meanwhile, those who became documented shifted their life focus to their host society, as they were able to access richer social resources. Under such circumstances, the majority of the left-behind children reported experiencing a long period of emotional loss after their parents’ departure.

Some left-behind children took measures to regain their parents’ attention in a de-territorialized context, such as disclosing the embodied cues of their practical life and conveying their associated inner states through communication technology. Xue Qing, a 20-year-old woman, complained that her father had not been answering her calls for some time. Even though she knew he was striving to earn money to build their big house, Xue Qing still wanted him to pay more attention to her: “family is not just about

living in a big house, it's more about family members living inside". To regain his attention and affection, Xue Qing sent her exam papers with full marks and paintings of family portrait by overseas mail when digital technology was not yet popular. By the time she bought her first smartphone in 2012, the way she expressed her desire for her father's attention had undergone some changes. For instance, she began to frequently post something like certificates of merit (scholarship and awards of extracurricular competitions), details of her disciplined and organized daily life (jogging selfies, photos of her self-made dishes), and in-depth feelings and thoughts (diaries recording how she helped her mother take care of her grandmother who had Alzheimer's disease) on WeChat Moments:

I want him to know that I am very mature and distinguished now. I am the girl he should be proud of. Hope he can return to China in the near future. By then, he would not have to suffer anymore, as I believe I am outstanding and strong enough to take care of him for the rest of his life.

Consequently, Xue Qing's father began to increase the frequency of his WeChat calls inquiring about the details of life she shared on social media. Xue Qing's strategic self-representation on SNSs echoes what Yu et al. (2017: 133) called 'performative interactions', referring to the ways in which individuals manipulate interactive modalities and content for various purposes. However, in addition to such positive 'performative interactions' (constructing an embodied distinguished self), another group of children in this study sit at the other end of the spectrum. A small proportion of the juvenile participants admitted that they had messed up their lives (dropped out of school, become involved with gangs, indulged in Internet cafes) and that their parents had already given up on them by barely sending remittances or stopping regular telecommunication. To attract their parents' attention these children frequently shared

their ‘chaotic life’ on social media. They would do things like post a video clip of revelry in a pub, a shot of a new tattoo, or a selfie while smoking a cigarette. They professed that through these actions they could change the status of being long-overlooked. However, what often happened was that they would end up in furious quarrels with their parents. Take Wei Xin, a 21-year-old left-behind woman, whose mother divorced her disabled father and then established a new family in London once she obtained British citizenship. While flashing back to these traumatic moments, Wei Xin could not hide her grudge against her mother’s departure. She said that she and her mother had a huge fight on the phone after she showed off her freshly tattooed middle finger (with a striking ‘F**K U’ on it) on WeChat Moments:

She is definitely not a responsible mother. Look at me. I am the evidence of her neglect of duty. She has already started a new life, while I am dwelling in the past. I want her to feel guilty. I cannot do anything else but constantly remind her that it’s her fault she made me like this.

As discussed earlier, left-behind children’s misbehaviour has long been ascribed to the lack of parental care and supervision due to their long-term absence (Guo et al., 2012; Ye & Pan, 2011). I argue, however, that this is a partial story that requires a nuanced exploration. For Wei Xin, the display of a ‘delinquent self’ on social media cannot be merely interpreted as the result of parents’ absence. It also serves as an active way of expressing resentment and trying to attract their parents’ attention. Despite the poignancy, we have to acknowledge the fact that these children are more than the passive victims of adult migration, but also have the initiative to transform their care deficit situation. As a result, Wei Xin’s mother later increased the amount of the remittance she was sending, though material compensation may not necessarily ameliorate the mental hardship of the familial separation.

7.2.2 Achieving autonomy or showing consideration? Negotiating mediated parenting

Parental control and care have always served as two sides of the same coin. In contrast to the aforementioned children who used various strategies to draw their parents' attention, another group strategically exploited media technologies to cast off their parents' remote control and acquire individual autonomy. Xiao Yu, a 19-year-old girl, recalled that when she hit adolescence, her relationship with her migrant parents in Vancouver intensified. When she was 15, her desk-mate in school became her boyfriend. Xiao Yu's mother discovered this on Qzone, on the blogging website where her daughter recorded the minutiae of her daily life. Her parents were strongly against their young relationship, believing that premature love affairs should be prohibited, as it was a distraction that would affect their daughter's academic performance. Xiao Yu's migrant parents were saving money to open a small take-away restaurant at the time, thus curtailing the amount of remittances for a long period of time. The remittances, according to Xiao Yu, were "sufficient to avoid starving to death, however far from being well fed". Yet it was her young boyfriend who helped her get through the financial hardship. As noted by existing literature (Dreby, 2010; Olwig, 1999), parents' physical and financial absence may largely destabilize their authority over their left-behind children. From Xiao Yu's perspective, her long-absent parents had already been disqualified to discipline her. Here we see that the 'ambient co-presence' facilitated by a ubiquitous media environment increases people's awareness of activities by significant others (Madianou, 2016: 183). This, in turn, intensified conflicts between children's desire for autonomy and parents' surveillance and control. Yet, media technology is not only a means of control, but also a way of achieving independence and privacy (Baym, 2015). Consequently, Xiao Yu was angry that her mother did not respect her privacy, locked her out of her Qzone.

The age of a child has always functioned as a crucial variable in determining the parent-child relationship in transnational families (Dreby, 2010; Woodward et al., 2000). This is not only due to the fact that younger children are more likely to be affected when parents migrate, but also because they are often not mature enough to understand their parents' decision to migrate. The trigger for the change in the intergenerational relationship could occur when these children start to work, develop a romantic relationship (see Dreby, 2010), or begin a family (see Madianou & Miller, 2012). When children mature, they may understand their parents' surveillance in another way. Some began to realize that their parents' control actually derived from care. However, the concern based on virtual co-presence did not necessarily contribute to solving practical problems, but often led to parents' worry and self-blame. Hence, these children chose to filter information by sharing good news while holding back the bad (*bao xi bu bao you*). As they stated:

I have to admit I had resentment about their leave when I was a kid. But now I am a [internal] migrant worker [in Fuzhou] myself and have my boy left behind [in Fuqing, with my wife's parents]. I could feel the powerlessness of being unable to provide practical help [when kids are in need]. All of a sudden I started to understand why they were so keen to ask me if I was good on the phone, because that's the only way [to relieve the feeling of powerlessness]. So now every time they call to ask me the same question, my standard answer is 'yeah, everything is good'. (Yu Bing, 26-year-old son, both-parent-abroad).

I would not answer phone calls when I don't feel good. You cannot conceal your status on the phone. I mean, when you are sick or in a bad mood, your voice would tell. She was living on her own in a foreign land. I could not

imagine how hard it is to have a life in an unfamiliar place without any support. But I have never heard her complaining about anything for a single word. So how could I increase her burden and worry her unnecessarily? (Xiao Xia, 22-year old daughter, mother abroad)

In addition, filtering information on social media is also commonly employed by children as a strategy to pretend to obey parents' ruling and accept discipline while disregarding them behind their back. Xiao Xia's story best describes how 'selective co-presence' functions as a form of ostensible obedience when coping with the intergenerational relationship. When she was 12, Xiao Xia's parents divorced due to her father's addiction to drinking and gambling. Her mother left their poor village and was smuggled to Britain to earn more income to raise her. As time passed, the mother and daughter managed to escape poverty, however, Xiao Xia's mother still had a grudge against her ex-husband and never allowed her daughter to contact the "scumbag" (*ren zha*). On the other hand, after leaving his daughter and ex-wife, Xiao Xia's father tried to set up a small business but failed, ending up becoming a motorbike taxi driver (*mo di si ji*) in Fuqing. When the father and daughter met again after a long separation, Xiao Xia could not equate the old man with the wrinkled face in front of her with the crabby and irresponsible drunkard she remembered from her childhood. Her hardened heart began to soften. On her father's 50th birthday, Xiao Xia went to celebrate with him unbeknownst to her migrant mother. She made him a table of his favourite dishes, after which she posted for a selfie with him on the friend circle to capture the moment, and also show her sincerity to remedy the ruptured relationship. To reconcile the contradiction between her parents, Xiao Xia adjusted her privacy settings so that the post was visible to her father but invisible to her mother. Xiao Xia's experience illustrates how media technology functions as a means of 'relativizing' (Bryceson & Vuorela, 2002) when transnational family is materialized as an 'imagined' community. Through maintaining "networked privacy" (Marwick & boyd, 2004: 1063), Xiao Xia successfully negotiated different family relations and expectations in the online

‘networked ecosystem’, which allows her to fulfil the family role not only as the left-behind child of her migrant mother but also the filial daughter of her long-lost father.

7.2.3 “It’s my turn to take care of you”: Reversing the ‘parenting’ role

As mentioned earlier, children’s continued development may help them better understand the pressure and needs of their parents. But I argue that media technology also plays a significant role in contributing to children’s maturity. The rich visual and sound cues afforded by polymedia environments (including webcam calls and social media) have given rise to alleged ‘tangible’ intimacy, yet also provide children with a more intuitive presentation of their parents’ aging and vulnerability, particularly after a long-term separation. Like the aforementioned case of Xiao Lin, who felt both grief and shock about his mother’s aged appearance after their first webcam session, it is not uncommon for children to realize their parents’ incapacities (inadvertently) through regular transnational communication.

Wen Fang, a 29-year-old left-behind daughter, was aware that her mother was no longer in her prime as she remembered from her childhood during one of their webcam calls. Her mother was a clandestine *chao-fan-mian* (a position in charge of frying rice and noodles) in a Chinese takeaway restaurant in London. The small room she rented in zone three⁴¹ did not have a radiator, which made the cold and damp winter intolerable for a patient with omarthritis (a very common occupational disease in the catering business). Wen Fang’s mother concealed the state of her illness until Wen Fang noticed the plaster boxes lying on the mattress. Wen Fang could not repress her emotions when

⁴¹ London is divided into nine zones. Central London is in zone 1, and the following zones (2-9) form concentric rings around it. Residence in zone 3 is comparatively affordable for many migrant workers whilst still reasonably near to London’s China Town (zone 1) where they work.

she saw her mother's shoulder and back on the screen, which were fully covered with crooked plasters.

I have no idea she is in such poor health until I saw it by my own eyes... She cannot even lift her arm over her head... I understood her attempt to save outgoings and send as much remittance as possible. But she is not taking her health seriously. "Losing health to make money, and then losing money to restore health." This is the tenet of a lot of Fujianese. But I don't buy it. I scolded her on the phone, asking her to swap for another room with a radiator, or at least buy an electric heater.

In this way, the mature children did not see 'doing family' via media technology as solely for the sake of receiving care and discipline. Rather, they reversed the 'parenting' role and turned themselves into the main caregiver and even discipliner of their parents. Given that these children were unable to provide material and emotional support in regular face-to-face forms, communication technology became indispensable to monitor their parents' health and physical appearance.

The first means used by some of the left-behind children is what Malinowski (1923) terms 'phatic communication'. This refers to trivial conversations where the fact of communication per se is much more important than the actual content of communication (see Madianou & Miller, 2012). Indeed, it was in such minimal interactions that the children became more aware of the connectedness they shared with parents, despite their geographical separation. Wang Yi, who had been a left-behind daughter for over ten years, delivered her care for her father by doing nothing more

than asking him on their weekly phone call if he slept well, what he ate for lunch, and how his construction work was:

The elderly parents are just like children. They need your concerns and care, even if it is a short call. What really matters, I think, is to make them aware that I am getting their back. That's the reason that I make phone calls every week no matter how busy I am.

The 'brevity' and 'regularity' of such mediated communication between parents and children, echoes what Nedelcu and Wyss (2016) describe as 'ritual co-presence', corresponding to "sustaining intergenerational ties via media as a ritual communication to accomplish the filial obligation" (209). In their work, however, they depict filial piety as a passive responsibility, which constitutes the 'basis of a subjective feeling of co-presence'. The left-behind children in this study, however, seemed more active in taking on the obligation to sustain intergenerational solidarity. This is reflected in the nuances of care by these left-behind children. Wen Zhen, a 25-year-old daughter, revealed her strategy in taking care of her parents' 'self-esteem' in their 'ritualized' communication:

Although I have already grown up, I know I am always a kid from their perspective. So sometimes being too independent will make them feel sad, as they may realize they are not needed anymore. I learned this by myself when I became a mother of two children. That's why I always ask for their advice in childrearing during our weekly webcam session, even if I don't need these outdated suggestions any more.

As noted in Chapter 3, we should not romanticize the effect of mediated communication in maintaining transnational family relationships, since it also incurs negative impacts such as misunderstanding and unexpected conflicts. To minimize the limits of mediated co-presence, it is quite usual for transnational family members to use a mixture of various types of co-presence as caring strategies (Baldassar, 2008a). For example, apart from maintaining regular communication via phone and through the Internet, left-behind children in Fresnoza-Flot's (2014) study of Filipino transnational families emotionally supported their migrant mothers through sending greetings cards, photos, letters, or things requested by the latter, such as medicine and foods. Besides its usefulness in care circulation on a regular basis, such mixed forms of 'co-presence' were often adopted by children in this study as a way of enhancing the quality of care and support for their migrant parents, particularly the poignant moments during mediated co-presence reminding family members of the frustration of physical separation. For example, Zhou Qi, a 25-year-old girl who mails gifts to her parents in London on their birthday every year, as she said, for her parents, "wearing the scarf given by the daughter" while in the meantime "chatting with her when having the birthday meal" is the "happiest moment in their tormented migration life". A similar case is the story of Jiang Shan, a 30-year-old son whose migrant delivery man father broke her leg when rushing downstairs at work. He sent him a folding cane through international mail. Combined with the continuous accompaniment of everyday webcam calls, Jiang Shan finally assisted his father in getting through the tough period. In brief, by resorting to mixed forms of co-presence, left-behind children have been empowered to deliver both mental and physical support to their parents despite the distance separating them.

Aside from these mixed forms of co-presence, there was also a group of participants who adopted a more intrusive and intensified 'co-presence'. Children at home did an active search for the details of their parents' daily routines, which sometimes resulted in remote supervision and even disciplining them. This was especially the case when

their parents were in need of constant care, such as those who had chronic diseases. For Chao Hong, communication technology allowed her to obtain information about her fathers' health condition and deliver her regular care to him instantly:

He [Chao Hong's father] has been suffering from diabetes for a long time. His physical health and strength is much worse than before. But he is still doing manual jobs for the money to build our house. Sometimes he is too busy to pay attention to his health. Then I would remind him to take pills and inject insulin every night [it is actually morning in the UK due to the time zone difference] and call him again in the morning to double check if he has taken the medicine. If he forgets [to do so], I will raise my voice in phone calls to let him know the seriousness [of not taking regular medication].

The intergenerational care exchange practices among parents and children are often asymmetrical, as demonstrated in existing literature (Hoang & Yeoh, 2015; Madianou & Miller, 2012) – it is more likely for children to be cared for and monitored by their parents than the other way around. This is not only because parents often hold more power over their children in the family (Morgan, 2011), but also, as argued in Chapter 2, the asymmetrical access to telecommunication resources between sending and receiving countries in the early days also immobilizes left-behind children and puts them at the receiving end of care chains (Massey, 1994; Parreñas, 2005a). However, with the advent of affordable new media technology, children in this study were able to be more aware of parents' capabilities and care demands, which contributes to their maturity and the eventual reversal of the intergenerational power asymmetry. At the same time, the abundant affordances of polymedia environments also enable them to initiate telecommunication and take on the responsibility of a main caregiver (such as providing emotional support or sometimes disciplining from afar).

7.3 Factors shaping intergenerational relationships

As Ansell (2009: 199) reminds us, ‘child-centred’ approaches have often emphasized agency over structure, which may lead to an overoptimistic view of children’s vulnerability given that they are not fully aware autonomous agents. While acknowledging children’s agency in engaging with transnational communication with their parents, it is also important to recognize the socio-technical circumstances non-migrant children face that have significant bearings on distant intergenerational relationships.

Despite children’s ages, as shown earlier, which greatly shapes their attitude towards their parents’ situation, another crucial factor that explains the differences in distant intergenerational relationship is the children’s gender. Normally, left-behind children should not just be regarded as a drain on a home’s resources, instead they are also an important source of help (Olwig, 2014). In most cases, both boys and girls are supposed to take on some domestic chores to ease the burden of their caregivers, such as running errands, doing laundry, or cleaning. This happens in almost all kinds of family configurations, regardless of whether children are living with their own parents (left-behind men or women) or extended family members (grandparents, aunts and uncles). However, it is not uncommon to hear stories of left-behind daughters being unfairly treated in terms of the division of domestic labour, which in turn deteriorates their relationship with their migrant parents. As observed, girls have to bear more burden of caring for their younger siblings and family chores, and in some extreme cases, these heavy burdens have occupied most of their leisure and study time. Compared to left-behind boys, who usually have more leniency for slacking on assigned tasks, these girls are more likely to be scolded by their migrant parents if they do not fulfil their duties.

For Xiao Yu, a 19-year-old left-behind daughter, the first thing she had to do after school was to rush home and prepare dinner. Her grandmother was too old to do all the cleaning and cooking. What really annoyed Xiao Yu was that her 15-year-old brother never provided any support in domestic chores. Instead, the boy was obsessed with playing computer games in Internet bars and sometimes even forgot to eat and sleep. As a result, Xiao Yu had to search the town's bars and ask him to go home when dinner was ready. However, their grandmother never blamed the boy for his misbehaviour and his consequent poor academic performance, since she believed that "being mischievous is a boy's natural instinct". Compared to the tolerance her younger brother inspired, Xiao Yu faced strict reprimands for not being a considerate daughter whenever she wanted to take a break from the heavy burdens on her shoulders. Xiao Yu recalled she once had a cold war with her migrant parents, as they blamed her for forgetting to urge her brother to have dinner in a timely fashion. Xiao Yu was triggered by her parents' gendered double standard and decided to refuse their phone calls.

I was busy with preparing my final exam at that time. I had stressed the importance of the exam, but they just downplayed it. I spent the majority of the time cleaning the house, doing the laundry and cooking the dinner. And at weekends I also had to help my brother to do his homework before finishing my own, if he is willing to... but now he has gone too far. He does not do homework anymore... and even needs me to pull him out of net bars to have dinner. He [Xiao Yu's father] always says, "he's your younger brother and you need to take care of him". But he is not an infant, but already a 15-year-old teenager. I was fed up with the accusation of being an irresponsible sister, so I hung up the phone when they call. I know [there's nothing but] nagging and scolding again.

The uneven treatment received by left-behind girls is consistent with Parreñas' (2005b) observation of 'dutiful daughters' in Filipino transnational families, in which she argues that left-behind girls become the primary homemakers of the left-behind families when their mothers migrate to developed countries for economic gains. Parreñas argues that the daughters' extra burdens are primarily related to their left-behind father's rejection of household tasks (by leaving home and going to a neighbour's house for drinking and gambling after work, for example). Though a father's neglect of duty contributes to the workload of left-behind daughters, the unfair treatment that girls face in this study were found to be more related to traditional Chinese gender ideology in which a son is valued more highly than a daughter. Such gendered discrimination is best exemplified when some migrant parents plan to bring their children to host societies for a reunion. As discussed earlier, the salary threshold issued by the British government has made it harder for documented migrants to recruit their family members. To increase the possibility of application success rates, in some extreme cases, migrant parents would only choose one child as the applicant for reunion. Under such circumstances, sons are usually prioritized over daughters as the candidates, which could possibly lead to problems between parents and the daughters who have been left behind (again). Jiao Qian, a 22-year-old daughter, permanently removed her parents' name from her WeChat list when the latter asked her to sacrifice herself and let her brother apply for the dependent visa:

I am always the one who's been left at the corner. They don't care about me at all. Sometimes I blame them for giving birth to me. I remember when I was a kid I was once scalded by boiling water by accident. She [Jiao Qian's mother] did not take me to the hospital and just threw me some bandages. Here's the scar on my belly. I can remove their name [on WeChat], but I cannot remove the memory and this [scar from my body]...

Another factor that explains the status of distant intergenerational relationship is the children's relationship with their proxy guardians. Normally, children's presence in an extended family is primarily legitimized by their parents' financial presence. As a result, left-behind children's life quality is greatly influenced by their parents' remittances. When remittances are sufficient, children may find themselves with power over extended kin who depend on their parents' earnings (expressing their demands more freely, such as having their favourite snacks and stationery; more likely to retort when being disciplined by extended kin). However, when parents' money is not enough to cover children's living expenses, children may have to endure cold attitudes from their aunties or uncles. This usually makes them feel like they are nothing more than an encumbrance. It is not uncommon to hear left-behind children being abused as physical labour by proxy guardians as compensation. Consequently, children who had an intense relationship with their extended family would transfer the blame and anger to their migrant parents.

The peer pressure of having migrant parents also contributes to the shaping of intergenerational relationships. During my fieldwork, I frequently heard stories of children with migrant parents getting bullied in school, being teased that they did not have a parent, which in turn aggravated children's resentment about parents' leave. Notably, the pressure differs depending on where children spend their time during growth. Generally, such 'no-parent humiliation' happens in the case of children from rural areas who go to urban areas for education or work. The macro urban-rural division could be used to explain the difference. Since the alleged 'culture of migration' is often deeply rooted in poor areas, most rural children have been accustomed to a family without parents, therefore would not impose so-called peer pressure on each other. Immersed in such an environment, some of the left-behind children attempted to follow the path of their migrant parents. Jian Hua, a 26-year-old son from Fuqing whose father is a clandestine construction worker in London, told me that his dream was to work abroad and "earn big money":

My father is in the UK. My aunt is in Korea. My cousin is in Brazil... almost every family has at least one member working abroad. I totally understand their decision because this is how we Fujianese strive for a living.

Another key factor that should not be ignored is children's gendered expectation of migrant parents. This is not a new phenomenon in the context of transnational families. As Parreñas (2005b: 127) argues, children with migrant mothers are more likely to have feelings of abandonment than those with migrant fathers, not only because they spend less time together, but also due to the double standard of care expectations. In line with previous literature, most children of migrant mothers in this study expressed resentment towards their mothers' migration or prolonged migration, while this barely happens in the case of father-away families. Even in both-parent-away families, children were often found to maintain more frequent contact with migrant mothers than with their fathers. While children may expect more from their migrant mothers in terms of caregiving, they would have more expectation of financial provision from their migrant fathers, as demonstrated by existing literature. For example, in their study of left-behind Ghanaian children, Poeze & Mazzucato (2014) observed that the prospect of remittances can increase children's feelings of being loved by their fathers despite the geographical distance. However, I found that children's financial expectations are not that gendered compared to care expectations. It was not uncommon to find children who complained and expressed disappointment about their migrant mothers, or even imposed pressure on them when the latter did not send remittances regularly. This was especially the case when it came to mother-away families, where in most cases migrant mothers were the primary or only financial resources for the whole family.

Communication technology is also a notable factor that should not be ignored when discussing mediated intergenerational relationships. Given increasingly restrictive migration policies in receiving countries worldwide – which makes family reunification more difficult – mediated communication has become the most significant tool for maintaining kinship and bonding for separated family members. However, as argued in Chapter 2, transnational communication is always characterized by information asymmetry between migrants and non-migrants (Carling, 2008), which is primarily associated with the non-uniform or limited access to communication technology across sending and receiving countries (Hoang & Yeoh, 2012). In their study of Vietnamese transnational families, Hoang & Yeoh (2015) found that the left-behind children knew very little about their parents' lives or the places in which they were living, since the transnational telephone calls were full of mundane details about everyday life back home. This was mainly because of migrants' limited time and money for phone calls, which forced them to focus on the key features of life among left-behind families instead of allowing the latter to know more about their oversea lives. Yet, as demonstrated above, the emergence of a polymedia environment in both sending and receiving countries has balanced the information asymmetry between left-behind children and their migrant parents, which arguably contributes to mutual understanding and emotional support from both sides. As argued in Chapter 2, the nature of filial piety in contemporary China is characterized by mutual need and support for two-way exchange of support and care (Croll, 2008: 110). In this sense, mediated communication between parents and children serves to smooth the migrants' hardship of living and working abroad. It also helps children who live with migration to fulfil their filial duties.

7.4 Conclusion

Starting with the question of how left-behind children in Chinese transnational families engage with mediated communication with their migrant parents, this chapter has found that the intervention of communication technologies in transnational family life has

incurred both positive and negative feedback from the perspective of these children. On the one hand, some children embrace the prevalence of mediated interaction, as it has minimized the geographical and temporal constraints that divide these children from their parents. On the other hand, communication technologies have also created new conflicts since some of the children believe that the prevalence of new media has justified their parents' absence. The left-behind children in this study were not merely passive objects of migration that early migration literature implies. Following the recent 'child-centred' perspective, this chapter has recognized left-behind children's ability to enact agency in shaping intergenerational relationships via mediated communication.

For example, we can see that long-overlooked left-behind children strategically present themselves via either a positive (constructing the distinguished self) or negative way (revealing the delinquent self) to attract their parents' attention and change their care deficit situation. Also, there are cases of children cutting off 'co-presence' or filtering information to negotiate their parents' surveillance, regardless of whether it is for self-autonomy or altruistic considerations. Given the proliferation of affordable polymedia, children are able to monitor parents' daily lives and behaviour from afar, which may deepen their understanding of parents' harsh lives as migrants. This in turn contributes to their maturity and the reversal of their parenting duties. Through 'phatic communications' on a ritualized basis, mixed forms of co-presence, as well as through intensified co-presence by actively imposing supervision and even discipline over parents, left-behind children have been found to dynamically recognize parents' demand for care and provide support at a distance.

Overall, mediated transnational communications, which constitute a crucial part of the family life among these split families, allow children in the original country to maintain a normal relationship with their migrant parents, while in the meantime reconstituting

their role as the ‘son’ or ‘daughter’ of others. As participant Wen Fang put it, media technology has allowed for a “more complete experience of being a daughter of someone”. Here we can see a clear parallel to Madianou & Miller’s (2012: 75) statement in their study on Filipino female migrants that communication technology has afforded “a more complete experience of mothering”, as new media has allowed these mothers to achieve different purposes while performing maternity. By contrast, the ‘more complete’ experience of being left-behind children not only indicates the various strategies they exploit to respond to adults’ distant parenting, it also reflects children’s ambiguous status within families.

As Morgan (2011: 94) pointed out, children could be “unrecognized observers” or “even temporarily non-persons”, whilst “sometimes fully constituted actors”. The advent of mobile media, on the one hand, has revitalized the family gaze from their parents, bringing about surveillance and control, and at the same time, has also allowed children to make their parents’ behaviours become the object of their gazes. Children’s agency is thus manifested by the ability to ‘see’ their parents’ lives and behaviour via mobile media from afar, which has transferred children’s status from ‘unrecognized observers’ to ‘fully constituted actors’, enabling them to actively take actions accordingly (such as expressing feeling of missing or resentment, selectively allowing parents to know about their lives, searching for parents’ needs and providing support). While talking about the absence of family members in transnational families, it has been taken for granted that it refers to the ones who leave – namely migrants’ absence. But what should be stressed is that those who are left behind, particularly left-behind children, are also absent to their migrant parents, since emotional flow, care exchange, and monitoring and surveillance are always mutual and relational.

Chapter 8. Left-behind guardians and collaborative childrearing

In Chapters 6 and 7 I mainly considered the mediated care circulation processes among migrant parents and their left-behind children. It was argued that doing family is mainly achieved through the affordances of communication technologies for different family members to negotiate their family roles. While communication technologies have enormous potential to convey the message of care and strengthen intergenerational solidarity at a distance, they are also complicit in the way conflicts, misunderstandings and negotiations take place in transnational family relationships. The mediated parent-child interaction is important for understanding the implications of ‘asymmetrical reciprocity’ in transnational families, yet it has only revealed a partial story. Mediated transnational care circulation extends beyond the parent-child dyad and involves the engagement of left-behind guardians, the third facet in the caregiving triangle. Given that a situated transnational perspective has been adopted, being inclusive of all family members is crucial for understanding the social reproduction of transnational families, as it helps to consider the process of care circulation within these dispersed households from different perspectives.

Given the context, this chapter aims to examine how care arrangements for left-behind children have been reorganized in various forms of transnational families. From the perspective of these caregivers, I intend to describe how they perform their family roles, which requires them to collaborate with migrants through mediated transnational communication. Specifically, what forms of care do these guardians provide to left-behind children? What factors influence their level of involvement in caregiving? In what ways do their caregiving practices affect their own lives and their relationships

relative to migrants? In addressing these questions, I seek to shed light on how left-behind family members in different positions of the transnational family network experience and respond to transnationalism, albeit staying behind in the sending country. Given the significant role of communication media in transnational communication, I also investigate the ways in which these guardians exploit communication technology to interact with migrants, and further examine how the affordances of communication technology might matter during the process of being a left-behind guardian. In what follows I specifically explore three networks of care that migrants rely on when they are absent: left-behind men; left-behind women; and extended female kin.

8.1 Left-behind men

The clatter of pots and pans came from the kitchen where Xiao Yong was preparing the dinner for his son. At the door of the cramped kitchen stood a strikingly large fridge, on which there were posted multiple layers of hand-written notes. The ink was faded, yet still recognizable – these notes included recipes, tips on hanging silk clothes, a reminder urging the kid to take asthma pills on time, and more. These notes were sent one after another by Xiao Yong’s migrant wife through letters years ago. They had provided practical guidance for Xiao Yong, ever since he became the main caregiver of the family. In the meantime, these yellowish notes recorded the duration of the family separation, as you could easily tell their sequence from the darkness of the oil stains on them. Seven years ago, following the path of his wife’s cousin, who was running a Chinese grocery store in Manchester, Xiao Yong and his wife decided to leave their ‘poor’ village and went to Britain to chase their own migration dream – earning sufficient money and returning home for retirement. Yet things went contrary to their wishes. They had planned to approach London by Eurostar from Paris, but Xiao Yong was rejected by French customs in the airport and deported back to China, leaving his wife working overseas. They had no choice because of their prepaid half smuggling

fees. Xiao Yong later found himself a position as a mason in a local renovation company. Though the job granted him 2,000 *yuan* (about £150) every month – around the average income level in Fuqing – it was still less than half of his wife’s weekly salary (who was working as a live-in nanny). It turned out that his wife had become the ‘pillar at home’ (*ding liang zhu*) who takes on the primary responsibility of breadwinning, whereas the duty of childrearing and domestic chores had fallen on Xiao Yong’s shoulders.

“Keep the pot hot and the oil cold”, “Add more flour or starch when frying the fish”, “Be mindful of the heat control”, the voice of Xiao Yong’s migrant wife came out of his Hua Wei smartphone as he tapped the screen. It was the voice messages left by Xiao Yong’s wife as remote cooking guidance. While playing the voice messages, Xiao Yong turned around in haste and knocked over the seasoning bottle on the cutting board. During the period of his wife’s absence, it was mainly Xiao Yong’s mother who came to their place and made the everyday meals for the father and son. But when it was his day off, Xiao Yong would cook the dinner on his own. Although he had been accustomed to the role as the main homemaker, cooking was still a bit challenging for him. Unlike those paper notes on the fridge door, for Xiao Yong, the guidance of domestic chores now turned into re-playable voice messages on his smartphone. Thanks to the emergence of new communication technology, Xiao Yong was able to maintain an instantaneous contact with his migrant wife from afar, especially when he needed guidance cooking a certain dish. But he was also, through such ‘connected co-presence’, able to consolidate the distant conjugal bond.

The reconfiguration of gender divisions within transnational families is not a new phenomenon. This is particularly salient when it comes to mother-away transnational families, as ‘transnational mothering’ not only redefines the traditional meaning of

motherhood by expanding mothering to encompass breadwinning (Hondagneu-Sotelo & Avila, 1997), but the absence of mother also profoundly impacts non-migrant fathers' duties. Earlier studies have underscored the interrelation between the reversed parenting role and left-behind men's threatened masculinity, harshly pointing out that, compared to migrant mothers' 'absent presence', left-behind fathers' physical presence might be equivalent to absence. Some extreme evidence revealed left-behind men's escape of parental duty and their addiction to womanizing, drug abuse and drinking habits, which are mainly due to their emasculated situation associated with the loss of the breadwinning role (Gamburd, 2000; Parreñas, 2005b). Other feminist scholarship has suggested that left-behind men's engagement in childrearing is limited and sporadic, since the feminized nurturing job has further exacerbated their masculinity crisis (Cabanés & Acedera, 2012; Parreñas, 2008). Contrary to this view, more recent literature has discovered that fathers have been playing an increasing crucial role as left-behind carers (Fresnoza-Flot, 2014; Hoang & Yeoh, 2011; Lam & Yeoh, 2014), although some do so with the assistance of older children or other female kin's involvement (Chantavich, 2001; Parreñas, 2005b; Pantea, 2012).

In contrast to the feminization of migration in prior literature concentrating on Global South migration (e.g. Indonesia, Sri Lanka, and the Philippines), indicating that women's abroad for work mainly derives from the structural transformations of global labour market (e.g. gendered global demand for domestic workers and care-workers), the emergence of left-behind men in this study is primarily related to the uncertainties of clandestine migration. As previously discussed, in earlier times, male family members constituted the majority of labour migrants in Fuqing due to the traditional gendered labour division. Considering the devaluation of major foreign currency (GBP, EUR, USD) against RMB during the last two decades, remittance from only one migrant family member is no longer sufficient, therefore it is more common in recent years to see both parents work abroad. Left-behind men like Xiao Yong, as one of very few exceptions, usually have their (often false) visa application rejected, are deported

by receiving countries, or are forced to return due to major changes arising in Chinese families and are unable to afford a second smuggled migratory journey. As A Jie, a 41-year-old Fujianese man who came back to China five years ago, said:

I was informed by my younger sister at that time that our father was severely ill and would pass away at any moment. It was a really tough time. I have to make the hardest choice in my entire life. My debt [smuggling service fees] had not been paid off. If I returned, it was very possible that I would be in debt for years. But eventually I chose to come back, because of kinship and filial piety.

Given the different migratory context, the following section aims to capture the challenges and agency left-behind men have to deal with when negotiating their roles as left-behind fathers when their spouses migrate. I also examine how the use of communication technology might matter when these fathers respond to changing family arrangements. In so doing, I argue that the discussion of the intersection of gender norms and communication technology use contributes to enhancing our understanding of how family power dynamics are being reconstituted by women's migration.

8.1.1 Remittances requests: "I'm also making contributions to the family"

In most patriarchal societies, providing economic support to the family constitutes the cornerstone of masculine ideals. The contradiction between left-behind men's gender identity and their inferior breadwinning capacity (compared to their migrant spouses) thus becomes the primary concern when discussing their fatherhood within transnational households. Early studies observed that left-behind men have always

lived with the stigma of being “henpecked” husbands (Pingol, 2001). However, recent studies have also found that the proliferation of left-behind families with men as main carers have made societies more open to changes in the gender order (Gamburd, 2000; Fresnoza-Flot, 2014; Lam & Yeoh, 2014; Peng & Wong, 2015). Compared to those left-behind men in previous literature, where a feminized migration culture prevails, the participants in this study have had to suffer more pressure for not being the primary breadwinners in their families. The stigmatization of ‘staying at home’ as failure due to the culture of migration is even more intense for left-behind men. The fact of “having a wife working overseas” is often considered to be an insult for most of them. Some revealed that they had received negative comments ever since their wives went overseas for economic gains, such as *chi ruan fan* (literally meaning ‘eating soft rice’, referring to men without steady income and relying on women for a living) and *wo nang fei* (wimp or good-for-nothing). The immense pressure derives from societal expectations in the forms of villagers’ gossip, relatives’ unconscious joking as well as migrant wives’ scolding.

Some fathers divulged their frustration about their spouses’ frequent calls complaining that they could not share the responsibility of supporting the family. Li Gang is a 43-year-old left-behind man, whose wife is employed as a manicurist in a nail salon in London. In 2013 the couple applied for travel visas to Britain, however Li Gang was rejected during the application process. After several weeks of consideration, the wife decided to migrate first while Li Gang stayed behind and kept applying for a visa. Unfortunately, their reunion plan in Britain has never been realized as Li Gang’s visa application has been repeatedly denied. Although the initial decision was made by both of them, Li Gang constantly received complaints from his migrant wife that supporting a family from afar was extremely toilsome:

I understand her hardship of making a living abroad on her own. But sometimes she's just too harsh and doesn't step in my shoes. I still remember once she was yelling in the phone that it's my fault to make her suffer like that. [The visa application] is not my fault... I have also had a job to ease her pressure. I am not educated and what I can do is [to be] a porter in a warehouse. I've done my best. Have you seen the layered plasters on my waist? [They are] extremely severe slipped discs, all because of the work.

Almost all male left-behind participants in this study hold either regular or part-time positions, though the majority are in low-waged jobs such as petty trades, motorcycle taxi service, farming, construction and factory work. These regular paid jobs are of particular importance for men's involvement in transnational child care, not only because they help these fathers to support their family and give their children an allowance, but also, as Hoang & Yeoh (2011: 733) noted, being in paid work "ward(s) off potential ridicule arising from men's engagement in 'women's work', counteracting the de-masculinization effects that this new arrangement may bring". That said, a wife's socioeconomic superiority is still regarded as a threat to a man's self-esteem as a qualified father and jeopardize their collaboration in transnational child care (Pingol, 2001; Peng & Wong, 2015). Migrant mothers' newly-established power is best exemplified by remittance issues in transnational families, which has been amplified by the advent of polymedia environments. Many left-behind fathers reported that they had been deeply hurt by their spouses' distrust of their remittance management via sporadic telephone and webcam calls. Consequently, some made reprisals by being slow about child care and wasting money on drinking, gambling and womanizing (see also Gamburd, 2000), which became a vicious circle and made migrant wives become stricter about remittance consumption. Zhou Qiang, a 52-year old man who was deported from Britain back to China four years ago, now serves as a worker in a small local automobile repair shop. His wife, Juan Hui, a shampoo assistant in a hair salon in Birmingham, is currently responsible for the primary household uptake. During their

sporadic telephone and webcam calls, Zhou Qiang is required to report every detail of where the remittances have been spent, otherwise he would receive a reprimanding call about wanton spending. He complained to me that sometimes he even wants to throw the phone away:

It seems that she's attained a bossy personality [*qiang shi*] ever since she goes abroad, as if she is the head of this family... how can I be that careful and bear in mind every detail of where the money has gone? I am a man, and I have my own job to take care of... If I haven't answered the call in time, there would be endless scolding.

Aside from strengthening the dominant power held by migrant women, communication technology has actually also empowered left-behind men by providing them with opportunities to strategically respond to their spouses' digital surveillance. For example, some left-behind men are found to employ asynchronous communication tools such as instant messaging to express demands for remittances to their wives, since it is conducive to lessening the shame of asking for money. This is consistent with Cabanes & Acedera's (2012) study on left-behind husbands in the Philippines, where they argue that text messaging has been used by left-behind men to minimize the sense of inferiority while begging for remittances, however it also takes away vocal cues so their concern for the benefit of their children could be misunderstood as only a demand for money. The emergence of polymedia environments has further diversified left-behind men's ways of negotiating their migrant wives' newly-established power within families when requesting remittances. For instance, Zhou Qiang later made his smartphone an account book, uploading the weekly expenditure to their family cloud account, so that his wife was able to download it whenever she wanted. Although they still fight on the phone occasionally when outgoing remittances are unclear, such

'annoying' calls have been significantly reduced, which alleviates Zhou Qiang's anxiety of being unable to provide for his family. In addition to these passive strategies, some left-behind fathers have actively provided emotional support to their migrant spouses. Through being a 'supportive' husband back home, these left-behind men believe that they have also played their part in the family migration project, which would justify their request for remittances. Such transnational emotional support includes telling their wives not to save too much money, to avoid overworking, and to take care of their wellbeing during regular telephone and webcam calls, as well as warm greetings during important family events such as wedding anniversaries and Chinese New Year. As such, the virtual participation in their wives' migration life (sharing the burden of their migrant wives) has made it easier for left-behind men to propose their remittances requests. In the meantime, a close intimate relationship with mutual trust and understanding makes migrant wives more considerate and more likely to have positive attitudes towards their husbands' financial needs.

8.1.2 The 'newly assigned' caregiving duties: The dialectic of guidance and surveillance

Caregiving is another big challenge for left-behind fathers, since cooking, feeding, and doing the laundry have traditionally been recognized as a mother's job in Chinese gender culture. However, after women's migration, most fathers have to learn how to tackle these 'feminine' tasks. This usually happens in families where extended female kin are not an option for proxy caregivers (e.g. they live too far away or are too old), and outsourcing caring work is not realistic either, owing to their comparatively low wages. In general, for most left-behind men, the new role of the primary caregiver at home often triggers a radical change in their daily life, which consequently brings about worries and burdens. Xiao Bing, a 31-year-old men, revealed to me that he even scrambled to prevent food from being overcooked in the first year when he became

primary caregiver of the family. Similar to Xiao Yong, the aforementioned father who used his wife's voice messages for cooking guidance, Xiao Bing recalled the experience of making a birthday meal for his son through 'help' from his wife at a distance:

I remember it was his [Xiao Bing's son] tenth birthday. He said he would like to taste the 'mother's' flavour. I was a bit sad as I did not know he missed his mother that much. I knew the seafood noodle with hand-made fish balls is his favourite dish. Then I asked my wife on the phone how to do it. It was quite frustrating... as you know, this is my first time making that dish. And also, details cannot be conveyed clearly on the phone. Thanks to the invention of WeChat. Now she could send me the recipe first and make phone calls to doublecheck if I am doing it right. If it is still unclear, I would turn on the webcam, letting her teach me step-by-step until I get it done.

What's interesting is that compared to those who have never left their home town, deported (or retired) clandestine migrants are more reluctant to accept the rearrangement of the family labour divisions. The finding is beyond my expectation since most of these fathers used to work in catering business and are supposed to have better cooking skills than other left-behind men. However, the prior experience of being the primary breadwinner of the family ironically impeded them from accepting the newly assigned caring duties after they returned back home. Xiang Quan, a 39-year-old left-behind man, used to be a chef for a Chinese takeaway restaurant in London. His wife worked in a Chinese grocery store as a cashier. During the period of their absence, Xiang Quan's mother, their left-behind son's proxy guardian, passed away from a severe heart attack. After some consideration, Xiang Quan decided to return home to attend the funeral. Though the massive smuggling debts had already been paid off, their migration dream had not yet been fully realized – the rebuilding of their ancestral house

was still ongoing. While his wife continued working abroad, Xiang Quan took over the childrearing responsibility for their son. The new division of labour worked well during the first half year until Xiang Quan was finally fed up with the fact that he was no longer the pillar of the family. He became sluggish preparing for their son's meal and begun to buy street snacks, cook frozen food and instant noodles as replacements. This irritated his wife as she thought Xiang Quan's return and the rearrangement of child caring was agreed by both of them – not only because of the death of Xiang Quan's mother, but also, as a former chef, he was better at cooking than his wife. To ensure that her husband stop buying junk food and make meals on his own, Xiang Quan's wife asked him to send meal pictures through WeChat on a daily basis. She even threatened not to send remittances if she did not see the pictures.

The newly assigned childrearing task is particularly challenging for fathers when the left-behind child is a daughter. It is not uncommon to see fathers consult their migrant wives via WeChat calls or messages concerning daughter-raising matters, such as how to braid a girl's hair, how to deal with a girl's premature love, as well as how to cope with sex education when their daughters hit puberty. Given that the one-child policy has not been strictly implemented in Fuqing, most families involved in this study have at least two children. In some cases, left-behind children, especially elder daughters, would also help with the household chores. Some fathers reported that their migrant spouses would sometimes ask the children to do the job that they assign to them through WeChat or QQ messages, such as mopping the floor, washing the clothes or cleaning the toilet.

In addition to this practical support, fathers also felt encouraged when their migrant spouses expressed appreciation, compliments and positive feedback through WeChat messaging or during their regular webcam sessions when they fulfilled the caregiving

duties assigned by the latter. Arguably, such positive mediated communication helps to strengthen their conjugal relationship and their collaboration in transnational child care. The findings partially confirm Peng & Wong's (2015) study of care collaboration between migrant mothers and caregivers in Filipino transnational families, through which they discovered that migrant mothers adopt multiple strategies to persuade their husbands to adapt to the new child care arrangements. These include soft tactics, such as mutual understanding, compromise, and providing positive feedback, as well as hard tactics, such as digital surveillance, to monitor their husbands' performance in childrearing. In spite of the rich description of migrant mothers' various strategies in cooperating with caregivers back home, Peng & Wong's (2015) study did not incorporate left-behind men's voices, and therefore falls short of demonstrating their reactions and agency. During my fieldwork, I found that left-behind men are not always at the receiving end of their wives' childrearing collaboration requests, but they have also enacted their agency in negotiating such demands by using communication technologies.

Li Gang, the aforementioned left-behind man, revealed he had never "entered the kitchen" prior to his wife's migration. However, the lack of assistance from extended-families (their elderly parents are all in bad health), had compelled him to become the primary homemaker of the family. To maintain a constant contact with his migrant wife, Li Gang bought himself a laptop and placed it on the table in the middle of the sitting room. The area in front of the laptop (the background of the screen during a webcam session) was clean and well-organized whilst other parts of the room were in a horrible mess. Clothes were thrown everywhere, dirty dishes piled up in the sink, and smelly garbage had been stored for days. When asked how often he deals with these domestic chores, Li Gang explained to me with an embarrassed grin:

I am a traditional Fujianese big man [*da nan ren*] and not really good at these. Normally I clean the whole room once every month. But my wife would make phone calls and check if I have done the job. It's quite difficult to hide... [tittering] because of the new technology [webcam calls]. But you can still play some tricks [cleaning the background of webcam sessions]. She would think you have finished everything and wouldn't ask me to [hold the laptop to] show her around the whole room.

According to previous literature, less media-rich technologies (e.g. text-based media) have always been considered to be a tool that allows for deceptive interaction due to their inherent ambiguities (Birnholtz et al., 2010; Carlson & George, 2004; Kang, 2018). However, it should be noted that the use of more media-rich technologies (e.g. webcam calls) could also be strategically appropriated to arrange deceptive interactions. Instead of delivering a 'genuine' picture, the abundant visual and vocal cues afforded by new media, in this case, are conducive for the sender to construct a convincing yet partial story according to their needs. Overall, the emergence of digital communication technology has given rise to a dialectical effect on left-behind men's transnational family life. On the one hand, it enables these fathers to ask for guidance, receive assistance and receive positive credit from their migrant wives while managing the family, which has significantly eased their caring burden. However, at the same time, it could also be exploited as a surveillance tool, allowing migrant mothers to keep an eye on how the house is run, although left-behind husband have developed creative strategies to evade the surveillance.

8.1.3 Challenges of child discipline: Losing status and regaining authority

During the process of childrearing, a father's role as disciplinarian would also be threatened when they are no longer the primary breadwinner. Some fathers reported that their children sometimes ignore their discipline and even go against them when they are mature enough to know who is financially providing for the family. As Wei Yong, a 43-year-old man who is now a motorcycle taxi driver in Fuqing, noted:

As a typical Fujianese man, I was brought up to believe that a real man [*nan zi han da zhang fu*] should work hard to fulfil the needs of his family. Obviously, I also taught my son to believe so ever since he was a little boy. This is quite ironic, as now he would use the same creed to argue against me whenever I want to impose discipline on him.

Consequently, some of these fathers choose to give up the discipline of children because they can sense their masculinity hurt when their children show indifferent attitude or covert resistance towards them. Wei Yong complained helplessly, "They treat me as if I am invisible when I talk to them, not to mention discipline when they have done anything wrong". The avoidance of such frustration then serves as a kind of self-protection mechanism for left-behind men to escape the masculinity crisis of childrearing. Instead of giving up child discipline, fathers would also turn to seek assistance from their wives through the use of communication technology. Whenever their children make any transgression, the first thing these fathers do is to inform their migrant spouses via WeChat or QQ messages, rather than scolding their children directly. Wei Yong recalled once asking his wife to make a phone call to their son, as the latter was still living an extravagant life that has already made him suffer from

kidney stones at a very young age. Apart from the moments when migrant mothers stand out to be the disciplinarian, there are also cases where left-behind fathers collaborate with their wives through communication technology to re-establish their authoritarian figure in the long run. A Jie, the left-behind father in his early forties whose daughter is in her rebellious adolescence, explained:

It is sometimes useful to ask her mother to be the one who reprimands her, but it's not practical when children go into puberty when conflicts between us [A Jie and his daughter] become frequent and intense. My wife has her own job to take care of, so I have to take the responsibility. When they are having regular phone calls, I would ask my wife to [inadvertently] mention the contribution I have made to this family and how important I am. I am not trying to boast but just want her to understand I could be the role model that she should follow.

A more intriguing case is the story of Xiao Bing and his wife, who have been separated by the latter's migration for over 5 years. The creative use of webcam sessions in this transnational family, has assisted the 'losing-status' father remains the 'head' of the family and re-establishes their authoritarian figure in front of their teenager son, although with the help of his wife:

We have reached an agreement. If he [their son] has made any mistakes, we arrange a webcam call, during which my wife would intentionally allow me to step forward to be the white face [*bai lian*, referring to the one who is aggressive, strict and harsh], while she steps behind to be the red face [*hong lian*, corresponding to the one who is gentle, comforting and inclusive]. The

way that your children respond to you depends on how you behave in front of them. Frankly it works. He is now a bit scared of me, but it is fine.

These two cases represent the ways in which left-behind fathers benefit from the intervention of new media in transnational family life. Communication technology contributes to the shaping of gender relations within transnational households – as the mediated co-presence afforded by new media has created a virtual family where a ‘loving mother and disciplining father’ are being ‘performed’ despite the reconfiguration of gender dynamics forced by women’s migration. In this section I discuss fathers’ challenges and strategies as a left-behind guardian. The next section considers the case of left-behind women’s collaboration in childrearing with their migrant husbands.

8.2 Left-behind women

After sending their younger son to join his elder sister’s takeaway restaurant in America last year, Chun Hua’s family has become among the most ‘successful’ transnational families in the village. The lavishly decorated five-storey house, which cost the majority of her husband’s remittances, seems a little isolated for this 53-year-old woman. Given the prevalence of emigration culture in Fuqing, the number of house storeys and migrated family members have increasingly been recognized as indicators of migratory success. In 1998, as the vanguard of their family, Chun Hua’s husband joined the great emigration wave in their village, leaving for Britain to seek a prosperous future. After reaching adulthood, their elder daughter and younger son followed the path of their father in tandem, though towards different destinations. The foreign currency exchange rate and the possibility of successfully applying for a (fake) visa, for those who are trying to work their way out of poverty, is sometimes prioritized over family reunion. For this dispersed family, scattered over three continents,

communication technology is thus extensively used as a tool to maintain the bonds of kinship.

Chun Hua loves to make fun of herself as the hostess of their ‘WeChat family’. In contrast to the five-storey house where she only cleans twice every month, it seems that Chun Hua has devoted more time to take care of her ‘virtual family’ on her smartphone. Everyday Chun Hua sets two alarm clocks, reminding herself to wake up the three other family members via WeChat phone calls. Every Monday (the rest day for her daughter’s takeaway restaurant), she turns on the webcam for the whole day, sharing her own experience of childbirth while her daughter is having her second pregnancy, or even telling stories to her grandson, who she has never met in person, when his parents are busy in the restaurant. Sometimes, she would also teach her clumsy son to make Fujianese sweet potato balls (*fan shu wan*) via webcam sessions when he wants to have a taste of nostalgia. Whenever there are quarrels amongst family members she would be the final peacemaker, strengthening the familial solidarity through the use of new communication technology, such as putting together photos of different family members using her newly-learned picture modification skills, and sharing it as a family portrait in the WeChat family group. Chun Hua believes that although she is the only one who is left behind, she is able to play a significant role as the ‘logistic supply’ in this family, backing up other members who are at the frontier of migration.

Unlike mother-away families, a father’s migration does not engender profound influence on a family’s arrangements. When fathers leave the family in search of better income, fulfilling their breadwinning duty, the gender division within the family is found to preserve the traditional nuclear family structure where mothers continue to take on the role as caregivers (Battistella & Conaco, 1998; Parreñas, 2005b). Despite the relatively scant discussion about left-behind women in south-eastern countries

where women constitute the primary labour emigration force, their counterparts in China have always been a research focus and important subject. Previous scholarly interest mainly sheds light on how China's massive internal labour migration has influenced left-behind women's lives, including their well-being, livelihood strategies, and marital relationships (Jacka, 2012; Luo et al., 2017). On the one hand, left-behind women are found to take on a wider range of responsibilities due to their husbands' absence, such as childrearing and agricultural production (Chang et al., 2011; Mu & van de Walle, 2011), which may lead to their heavier physical burden and emotional hardships (Wu & Ye, 2016), while in the meantime, the extensive engagement with both in and out family chores have also made these women more autonomous and confident. And also, the absence of their husbands has made their invisible contribution more valuable, which in turn improves their position within the family (Ye et al., 2016).

These debates have been significant for understanding left-behind women's challenges and strategies when negotiating their husbands' absence, which is highly associated with the broader social norms and structures in which labour migration and these separate families are situated. This study sides with these insightful views and adds the use of communication technology as another crucial factor that contributes to the varied modalities of the left-behind women's situation within transnational households. The following section sets out to investigate how Chinese women in the sending country use communication technology to interact with their migrant husbands and the hardships they encounter in daily life when working with the latter in childrearing.

8.2.1 Fluctuating remittances: “Like drinking water, only I know whether it is cold or warm” (ru ren yin shui, leng nuan zi zhi)

Compared to left-behind women involved in China’s internal migration, participants in this study have less financial burden due to the relatively high remittances sent by their spouses from abroad. As a result, some left-behind women have never stepped out of home for a paid job, thus entirely relying on husbands’ remittances for a living. This is particularly the case among transnational families of earlier generations, since the amount of remittances was much higher in the past than at present due to the exchange rate decline of RMB against GBP, as previously mentioned. Also, in traditional Chinese culture, daughters-in-law are regarded as ‘out-married’ and thus are required to take care of their spouses’ elderly parents (Stacey, 1983; Whyte & Xu, 2003). This was especially true in the early days in rural areas like Fuqing⁴², where traditional gender ideology is prevailing and entrenched. In this sense, left-behind women’s breadwinning capacities are often construed as the insufficient economic support their family in-law could provide, which may bring shame on the latter and further impede their attempt to be economically productive.

Another group of left-behind women are pre-migrants who are deported or have returned home for retirement. Their hard-earned savings are normally insufficient for sustaining the rest of their lives. As suggested in Chapter 5, this is primarily due to the relatively low level of local welfare that former migrants can access, particularly when many transnational families are saddled with heavy debts for medical expenses, unsuccessful business investments and house construction. Generally, these pre-migrants have reached middle age, and in most cases, have had their health severely damaged by years of high-intensity work as overseas labour migrants. Given the

⁴² Women are also required to be economically productive in Fuqing at present because of the shrinking of remittances associated with the decline of foreign currency exchange rates, which is the primary reason for the emergence of both-parent-way families.

financial insecurity, these former migrants have no option but to rely on their migrant spouses. Even though some may want to seek a job in their hometown, they could possibly end up getting jobs with meagre income since the local labour market has been largely shrinking due to the culture of migration.

Left-behind women may be envied by other non-migrant villagers because of their better financial condition (see also Ye et al., 2016). Yet most confided the ongoing insecurity of their powerless situation, which ironically stems from their financial dependence on their spouses. Zhang Qi is a 37-year-old woman whose husband went to Britain 11 years ago. The remittances from her husband have significantly dropped off in recent years. Although she was told that the decrease of remittances was mainly because of her husband's clandestine migration status, it was not convincing enough for her to ease her insecure feelings:

Many of my friends and relatives are envious that I have married a good husband, as I don't have to go out and suffer the hardship of labour work. However, every family has a skeleton in the cupboard [*jia jia you ben nan nian de jing*]. They would never understand how torturing it is to wait for his money and phone calls. I heard from a lot of villagers that some migrants abandon their families and hook up with women outside. I could not imagine if this happens to me... children are not independent yet and I'm unable to raise them on my own.

Left-behind women's anxiety and insecurity concerning the remittances shortage not only derives from the fact that the money sent by their husbands serve as the primary economic source for the whole family and any fluctuation could greatly influence their

daily life. More importantly, as feminist scholars (Hannaford, 2016; McKay, 2010) remind us, we should not ignore the affection and caring implications associated with remittances. Under such circumstances, husbands' failure to remit on a regular basis may give rise to left-behind women's suspicion that they have invested their attention or earnings elsewhere.

Remittances and transnational communication are the only two ways of sustaining the sense of family-hood for separated families, particularly for transnational families with clandestine migrants. When male migrants' remittances are delayed, or begin to taper off, left-behind women would often resort to the other way – more frequent telecommunication to alleviate their insecurity. Some participants reported using frequent phone calls and 'ambush' webcam sessions to check out if there were any suspicious women in their spouses' lives. Others have even employed recent locative and pedometer applications to track their spouses' whereabouts at times, ensuring that they have stuck with the route they report on the phone. As Zhang Qi explained:

I encouraged him to install WeRun [WeChat affiliate programme calculating the steps one walks everyday], of course, in the name of protecting his health. I know the way between the place he rents and his working place is about 7,000 steps. Whenever it has gone beyond that number too much, I will call him to check out what has happened.

Despite the limited reassurance brought by the use of media technology, it does not really change women's disadvantage status in an unbalanced conjugal relationship. In some case where husbands' infidelity has already been discovered (usually circulated by word of mouth), most left-behind wives choose not to divorce but to tacitly accept

the fact. Mei Jie is a 44-year-old left-behind woman, who used to be employed as a migrant worker in the back kitchen of a Japanese restaurant in Kent. The six-year laborious migratory life gave her 30, 000 pounds of hard-earned savings, but also left her with an irreversible lumbar disc herniation. When she was diagnosed by the doctor that she could no longer take part in intensive manual labour, Mei Jie chose to return to China, leaving her husband in Britain continuing chasing their migration dream. Just in the second year of her return, she was told by her migrant cousin that her husband started to live with another woman. What added to the misery was that her savings had been almost spent out for her physical surgery and the purchase of the apartment in Fuzhou. Now, Mei Jie is able to take care of herself in daily life, but still needs regular rehabilitation, which means she is unable to make a living on her own and financially dependent on her migrant husband. Their son is currently studying in a boarding high school and does not know their marital crisis. During our conversation, Mei Jie glanced at the bedside table inadvertently several times. That is where she puts their faded wedding picture, in which the couple holds their hands firmly however the bridegroom's face is now blackened with ink. While asked the question of how they deal with family chores via transnational communications, Mei Jie analogized their ICT-based relationship as “a dying patient with intubation”:

It (the essence of marriage) has already gone, however still has to be sustained by our regular phone calls. We have to talk about the medication expenses of his elderly parents, our son's tuition fees and his future wedding budget... He knew I have already discovered, but we all pretend nothing has happened. I can't leave him, and my son either. You know you can stop the contact just like extubation at anytime, but you just can't.

In addition to struggling with their broken spousal relationships, several left-behind women have taken advantage of frequent mediated communications to prevent their families from other women's interference. Through conveying their emotional care and support to their migrant husbands, these women believe that they have created a virtual 'warm family' to win their husbands' heart. Yan Ping was a 31-year-old woman whose husband had left the family for five years. She began to worry about her migrant husband once she learned rumours of migrants' extramarital affairs in Fujianese communities, which was spread by one of her returnee friends: "Many men and women who have spouses in China hook up with each other because of loneliness and also living together can save the rent". Having no idea whether her husband had met new women, Yan Ping started to intentionally increase the frequency of telephone calls and WeChat messaging with him, inquiring about his hardships of working as a construction worker, telling him to eat well and take care of his health, and reporting the wellbeing of their son. As Yan Ping put it, "Now that the boy is the most important bond between us, I would constantly remind him that he is a father and husband via frequent webcam calls."

These women were significantly dislocated from society and found themselves trapped in the domestic arena. The appropriation of polymedia technologies allows them to impose distant surveillance and provide strategic emotional support to their spouses in an attempt to relieve their insecurity of remittance shortage. However, the indulgence and devotion in the 'virtual family' afforded by new media does not free left-behind women from their powerless situation, instead it has perpetuated their subordination to men in the existing asymmetrical patriarchal gender order.

8.2.2 Extra child discipline burdens: Another half of the ‘digital rod’

As argued in Chapter 6, in Chinese culture, discipline is often assigned to fathers. Based on the old Chinese saying that ‘dutiful sons are the product of the rod’, I argue that communication technologies primarily function as a virtual ‘rod’ for migrant fathers to discipline children under the conditions of extended separation. In previous literature, migrant mothers usually take the initiative regarding discipline and control over their left-behind children (Madianou & Miller, 2012; Monini, 2018; Peng & Wong, 2013). However, in the case of distant fathering, it is wives at home who play the main role in providing intensive supervision, although fathers tend to perform their paternal role by regulating children from a distance. On the one hand, mothers could discipline children on their own and selectively report their misbehaviour to their spouses in order not to worry them, which grants them a certain degree of autonomy for childrearing. On the other hand, obtaining more freedom also means that mothers have to take the full responsibility of childrearing, especially when their children make mistakes or get into trouble. Mei Lin, a 39-year-old woman with an 18-year-old son, always disagrees with her husband about his harsh discipline style. It is not unusual for them to quarrel on the phone when it comes to child-rearing matters. Mei Lin believes that tolerance and encouragement is more efficient than scold to correct children’s misbehaviours. However, Mei Lin was severely reprimanded by her migrant husband for her ‘indulgent’ childrearing style after the 18-year-old was caught red-handed when stealing money from his grandmother’s coat.

As mentioned earlier, to compensate for their long-term physical absence in their children’s lives, some migrant fathers are found to re-establish their fatherhood by intensifying their authoritarian role and imposing discipline more strictly over children through communication technology. Despite their attempts to assert their presence in the family, migrant fathers’ harsh discipline over their children could further aggravate their already estranged relationship. Normally, left-behind mothers would grab the

device and defend their children if their husbands went over the top as a disciplinarian. In some extreme cases, some children may refuse to answer their father's call and even blacklist them on social media after furious quarrels. To address the aftermaths of their husbands' discipline and remedy the relationship rupture between children and their migrant spouses, left-behind mothers often play a role as intervener. While some mothers may constantly highlight the contributions and sacrifices their husbands have made for the family in front of their children, others would rationalize children's misbehaviour and their disrespect for the father to comfort their husbands (e.g. pressured by life or study, rebellious period, or personality). The physical distance does not serve as a constraint for care exchange, but rather allows for more flexibilities for left-behind mothers to negotiate the conflicts between migrant fathers and their children after discipline, which contributes to restoring the stagnant care circulation in transnational families.

In addition to easing children's emotions and comforting their husbands respectively, some participants have also employed communication technology to bridge the emotional gap between the two sides. The most common communicative method adopted by participants is family chat groups, notably WeChat family groups. WeChat allows users to establish ad hoc chat groups and enables them to engage in many-to-many conversations (Cui, 2016). Given the social-technical perspective, media affordances are not technologically determined but also shaped by specific interactional contexts (Hutchby, 2001). In this sense, the asynchronous feature of WeChat messaging helps to overcome the different time zones that divide dispersed family members. Meanwhile, family chat groups also provide an ideal distance so that estranged family members can avoid private communication (direct contact) that may elicit embarrassment, but also share a bounded public space ("It function as a virtual sitting room", as some respondents put it) that allows for information exchange. For example, Wu Dong, a left-behind mother of two children (19-year-old son and 21-year-old daughter) used to use the WeChat family group as a strategy to fix the alienating father-

daughter relationship after the father severely scolded the girl for having new tattoos and dyeing her hair blonde without telling her mother:

I was quite mad [when the daughter made the arbitrary decision of having the tattoos and hair dyeing] and scolded her at first. But he [Wu Dong's migrant husband] was even more angry after knowing this. He was like "it's a shame to have a gangster daughter" and she replied, "It's none of the business for a person who left for years". [...] They had a cold war for almost two months. [Setting up] a family group is actually a compromise method. I used to ask my daughter to contact her father first. She always says yes but never does so. I then established a family group on WeChat (including four of us). If there is anything I'd like to let him know, I post it in the group, instead of informing her directly. My husband would post the photos that he took when visiting landmarks in London or share discount information of garments in the UK as well. Gradually, she has accepted the way we communicate. Yesterday she posted a video clip of herself learning how to play the guitar, asking us if she was making any progress. She still has not added her father as a friend on WeChat, but they have become closer to each other a lot.

In general, left-behind women have shouldered the responsibility as 'the second half' of the 'digital rod' when collaborating with their migrant husbands in child discipline. Not only do mothers have to impose intensive supervision over their children in everyday life, but they also need to report their misbehaviour when their migrant husbands want to fulfil their disciplinary roles. In addition, mothers are also observed to fix the aftermaths of fathers' harsh discipline, as this may exacerbate their already estranged relationship with left-behind children.

8.2.3 Caregiving as invisible contributions: “He thought he works hard; but I am working hard as well”

Similar to the aforementioned findings in the case of some left-behind children who prefer to live without parents, there is a small proportion of left-behind women who have also been accustomed to the absence of their husbands and enjoy the freedom brought by the distance that divides them. As aforementioned, without husbands’ interference, left-behind women would have more space to make decisions in the family, such as the method of childrearing, domestic chores and use of remittances. However, the prevalence of new communication technology has brought back marital conflicts to some extent. As discussed earlier, in transnational families, financial contributions have largely been prioritized over childrearing and domestic chores. The conjugal power asymmetry is amplified by male migrants’ enhanced breadwinning ability because of the relatively high wages in receiving countries. As reported, when couples have conflicts, some migrant husbands would impose sanctions over their spouses, such as delaying sending remittances or skipping their routine calls to exert their power (see Pribilsky, 2004). This has given rise to many women’s dissatisfaction, as Zhang Qi, the 37-year-old left-behind woman put it:

They are always complaining how exhausted they are and how much they have sacrificed for the family. But we are living a hard life as well. And who can we go to to complain? Yes, they are the ones who are making the money. But we are the one who manage everything at home... we’re the one who take care of the elderly parents...we’re the one who cook ten workers’ meals when building our house... we’re the one in the house with the kids. We don’t have anyone to help us. We are the only one.

As a result, some left-behind women choose to affirm their role as the woman of the house through employing polymedia environments, including revealing their own suffering and sacrifice for their children's growth and development during regular phone calls, sharing photo and video clips of what has happened in the family periodically, either in social media or directly to their spouses. By constructing an 'ambient' figure of a virtuous homemaker (*xian nei zhu*, literally means virtuous domestic assistant), they believe that they are able to remind their spouses of their invisible contribution to the family. On the contrary, there are also participants who resorted to what Acedera & Yeoh (2019) have called "mediated absence" to carve out their advantage in conjugal relationships. For instance, some choose not to reply to WeChat or QQ messages about how the remittances have been spent. Given that managing remittances constitutes a significant part of the whole migration plan, when their wives are 'mediated absent', migrant fathers would be extremely concerned about whether their hard-earned remittances were spent in a productive way. In addition, some left-behind women opt not to answer phone (or webcam) calls requesting to talk to children. Although migrant fathers are able to bypass their spouses and get in touch with their children directly, especially in today's polymedia environments, left-behind women could confiscate children's devices or simply ask them not to reply. This makes them the only channel that migrant fathers could rely on to maintain a relationship with their children. This is especially the case when children are at a young age as they may not have their own communication gadgets. Thus, their role as the major mediator of the father-children relationship contributes to the enhancement of left-behind women's status to a large extent. As a result, many women revealed that their husbands started to acknowledge their domestic contributions to the family and sometimes even ceded some of their decision-making power to the wives.

I have so far discussed the mediated childrearing collaborations in two family configurations, including mother-away and father-away families. The next section

explores both-parent-away families, which require extended family kin to take up the primary childrearing responsibility.

8.3 Non-parental guardians: Extended kin and grandparents

“Let’s say goodbye to mummy”, Jun Mei held her grandson Tong Tong’s hand, waving goodbye to the iPad on the dinner table. The three-year-old boy was crying, spitting out the food fed to him by Jun Mei. “No, no, I don’t wanna mummy go!” Tong Tong kept whimpering. Turning off the webcam, the 58-year-old grandmother held the spoon and tried to feed him again, “Be a good boy and mummy will be back soon.” Tong Tong threw his plush toys over his grandmother. “Where is mummy? Where is mummy?” he started to scream, and ran around the dining room. Jun Mei’s husband attempted to chase him and finally caught the boy. Trying to get rid of his grandfather, Tong Tong grabbed his glasses and threw them away. “Stop being mischievous!” Jun Mei lost her patience. She spanked the boy’s bottom and the latter finally stopped screaming. Everything was back to silence. Jun Mei took out the spoon and started to feed the boy again. Her husband wiped the sweat from his forehead with his hand. He knelt down slowly and began to clean the mess on the ground. The exhausting, mundane chores continued after the webcam was turned off. They have already become the daily routine for this elderly couple, who were taking care of their grandson after his parents went to Britain in a search of a better living.

Childcare arrangements with non-parental guardians is not a rare phenomenon in many migration villages in Fuqing. Given the traditional Chinese gender norms (especially in rural areas), characterized as patriarchal, patrimonial, patrilineal and patrilocal, wives and grandchildren have always been regarded as the property of the paternal family (Thornton & Lin, 1994; Whyte & Xu, 2003). Generally, in both-parent-away families, the role of caregiver is mainly assigned to other female relatives, such as a (mainly

paternal) grandmother or female cousins. Some mother-away families may also need to involve non-parental relatives for child caring, especially when the left-behind husband is not a reliable option. This includes cases where migrant mothers are widowed, divorced, or the husband is irresponsible (e.g. having extramarital affairs, addicted to gambling or excessive drinking; see also Peng & Wong, 2015). Under such circumstances, maternal extended kin would usually take on the caregiving duties. Due to the lack of support from their families-in-law, migrant mothers have to seek assistance from their natal families to take care of their children. In general, the majority of the female proxy guardians are older left-behind women between the ages of 45 and 70 (with very few exceptions). As mentioned earlier, younger village women are increasingly likely to migrate to other countries for better income instead of staying at home, not only because of women's self-empowerment, but also due to the shrinking of remittances associated with the decline of foreign currency exchange rates. Most of them are housewives without income, while some may have petty businesses, such as vendor stalls, grocery stores, and hand-made snack stands, since the available jobs for (older) women are especially scarce in an already shrinking job market.

8.3.1 Extra caregiving duties: “It’s not just adding another bowl and pair of chopsticks”

One of the biggest challenges for extended kin engaging with childrearing is that they have to accommodate the extra duties by adjusting their own lives. For the majority of the participants in this study, having extra children as family members required a serious amount of devotion and time, which often disturbed their original life rhythms. The caring task is especially tough for grandparents when they are the proxy caregivers. Meanwhile, the massive overseas emigration of young parents due to the prevailing culture of migration means that most grandparents have to care for more than one grandchild. As Lin Fang, a 65-year-old woman with three grandchildren put it, “It’s

quite common in our village. All of my children are currently working abroad [two daughters and a son] and I have three grandchildren to raise. But I am not an individual case. My sister even has four [grandchildren] to look after”. Many grandparents may rationalize the extra caring burden as their own duty. Nevertheless, they are often overwhelmed by the caregiving duties as their declining health and strength limits their capacity to care for the children. Jun Mei, the aforementioned grandmother, suffers from severe hypertension and always feels dizzy and disorientated when engaging with her mischievous grandson. She explained:

I did not consider childrearing as an exhausting task at first, since we have already raised our children. I thought it’s just doing the same thing again... washing their clothes, caring for and educating them. But I did not realize that I am not that young. These grinding domestic chores are no longer the same, as I am getting old.

The possibility of collaborative parenting afforded by the proliferation of new communication technology on the one hand may mitigate some of the childrearing problems caused by migrants’ absence (see Chapter 6). On the other hand, frequent communication sometimes increases the burden for these proxy guardians who are already overburdened by practical caring duties. For grandparents, the extra communication burden is often associated with their lack of digital knowledge. Given the lack of digital literacy and skills, elderly caregivers normally use phone calls to contact migrant parents. In some cases, they access digital devices such as smartphones or tablet computers (usually for the sake of lower charges) – they frequently use certain functions that require less digital knowledge, such as webcam calls and VOIP (voice over Internet phone). Even so, these grandparents still need to rely on their tech-savvy grandchildren or other younger relatives for help when they have problems with new

media use (see Kang, 2012), leading to what Breck et al. (2018) called “the reverse mentoring process”. However, the latter are not always available for assistance, which in turn creates unexpected digital burdens for elderly caregivers.

The story of Xiang Lan, a 62-year old woman who takes care of her migrant daughter’s son, presents an illustrative example. When her family first accessed the Internet three years ago, Xiang Lan received an iPad from her daughter as a Mother’s Day gift. Since then, VOIP calls gradually replaced telephone calls and became the major way of interacting between mother and daughter. Under her grandson’s repeated teaching, Xiang Lan finally learned how to answer a VOIP call, yet still did not know how to initiate one, as the latter is more difficult than the former.⁴³ Therefore, normally it is her migrant daughter who initiates calls; if Xiang Lan would like to initiate one, she asks her grandson to text his mother via WeChat or QQ messages, and the latter then calls back as soon as possible. Xiang Lan’s initiation of contact with her migrant daughter is heavily dependent on her grandson. The reversed power relation between the grandparent and the grandchild sometimes turns out to be a headache and increases the childrearing burden. Xiang Lan was once mad at her grandson as the boy had been involved in a school fight as his classmates teased him about not having a complete family. He complained that his grandmother did not stand up for him. As a result, he refused to contact his mother when Xiang Lan threatened to call her to scold the boy.

Raising a left-behind child could also engender influence over younger proxy guardians. Compared with elderly caregivers, who are normally retired workers or peasants and thus have more leisure time, younger proxy guardians (mainly middle-aged cousins and siblings) often lack adequate time for transnational communication, since most have

⁴³ Answering a VOIP call is relatively easy as it only requires the user to press the virtual button on the pop-up interface when a call begins. However, to initiate a VOIP call, a specific app needs to be selected and the calling button located among various buttons on the interface. This is particularly difficult for elderly people, as most of them do not have good eyesight to figure out where the button is.

their own jobs and lives to deal with. The arrival of the new child and the corresponding communication expectations from their migrant parents therefore often leads to unforeseen burdens. Yue Qi, a 37-year-old left-behind caregiver, is one of the very few young women among the participant group of surrogate guardians. Born and raised in a relatively poor family, Yue Qi gave up the opportunity of working abroad because her parents could only afford her brother's smuggling fee. Soon after her brother left the village for Britain, Yue Qi married her husband, who was a carpenter from the neighbouring village. To supplement the family income, she also conducted a petty business of dried sweet potatoes. Three years ago, Yue Qi's brother married a Fujianese girl⁴⁴ in Britain and gave birth to a boy. However, the undocumented couple was unable to take care of their son since both of them had to work to pay off their smuggling debts. They asked a relative who had a documented status to bring their one-year-old son back to China. Yue Qi then became the surrogate caregiver for her nephew because no one else could take up the responsibility. She complained how her brother's wife (the boy's migrant mother) had severely interfered in her life from afar:

Our mother is not in good health condition. When she [Yue Qi's migrant sister-in-law] asked for help, I said I could take on the responsibility. But things are not as easy as I thought. Every morning she needs to launch a webcam call to chat with her son, however I have to prepare for breakfast and clothes for five people [Yue Qi's family plus the boy]. The time is tight, otherwise the children would be late for school. But she never steps in my shoes and assumes that I am always available as I am a housewife. Whenever she is at odd moments, I have to be ready. Her phone call should be prioritized over everything. How could it be possible for me to answer her phone calls at any time?

⁴⁴ Clandestine migrants' marriages in receiving countries usually do not involve legal procedures and marriage certificates. But newly married couples would hold weddings not only to inform their relatives but also as a symbol of their marriage. Normally, they would register marriage either in the receiving countries or in China when they become documented.

In her study of Ecuadorian transnational families, Pribilsky (2004) found that the communication between migrants and their non-migrant families was always uneven, primarily caused by the asymmetry of transnationalism. While migrants are mainly focused on the local activities in the receiving countries, such as getting to work on time, getting paid, and finding time to rest before another shift, the daily activities of their left-behind families often revolved around issues related to the absence of the migrant member, such as waiting for their telephone calls or remittances. In line with Pribilsky's findings, it is not uncommon for proxy guardians to accommodate migrant parents' schedules. Normally, arranged webcam calls are scheduled either during days off or the end of migrants' work shifts (some migrants prefer to call back before their work shifts). Due to the dual time zones, this means proxy guardians in China have to stay in front of digital devices waiting for a call, either early in the morning or late at night.

To address such communication burdens, proxy guardians resort to different technologies to maintain their "connected presence" (Licoppe, 2004) with migrant parents. For example, asynchronous communication such as instant messaging or voice messages via WeChat or QQ may be used at ordinary times. If the concerns are urgent or any deep conversations are required, synchronous communication like telephone or webcam calls would be arranged. In this way, the use of various communication tools has allowed migrants and non-migrant caregivers to make their presence felt without severely disrupting the life rhythms of both sides.

8.3.2 The ambivalence of child discipline: “I have no idea how to treat him/her”

The physical absence of parents in children’s lives has created a vacuum of parental power in child discipline. However, an inevitable challenge for these female guardians is the lack of legitimacy to impose discipline on left-behind children (see Moran-Taylor, 2008). Some grandparents claimed to impose the minimum extent of discipline over left-behind children because they were often criticised by their migrant children (primarily daughters-in-law) that their childrearing methods were backward due to their low-education levels. In order not to irritate their migrant parents, these elderly caregivers apt not to interfere too much with their grandchildren’s lives. Yu Mei is a 70-year-old proxy caregiver of two grandsons, whose parents went to Britain as clandestine migrants in 2013. Yu Mei divulged that her daughter-in-law often told her through their daily webcam conferences not to engage with the children’s discipline and education and that she would keep an eye on them herself:

My responsibility is to feed them [Yu Mei’s grandsons] and keep them safe and healthy. Education and discipline are their parents’ duty. I am illiterate and my daughter-in-law would blame me if I get involved too much [with childrearing]. So sometimes doing less is better than doing more [*duo yi shi bu ru shao yi shi*].

However, grandparents also revealed that their passive childrearing strategies would sometimes also trigger their migrant children. Wu Ying, a 61-year-old proxy guardian of two grandchildren (10-year-old granddaughter and 8-year-old grandson), always felt she losing her grip when taking care of them. As a left-behind elder with all of her children abroad, Wu Ying not only had to pay attention to the left-behind children, but

also needed to look after her old husband who had a mild form of Alzheimer's disease. She recounted that every time she went to cook meals, she would ask her husband to look after the grandchildren, or sometimes she would just leave the iPad with them so that they would stay calm for a while. However, the two kids eventually became obsessed with online games and even forgot to have meals and finish their homework. As a result, Wu Ying was blamed for spoiling the children on a telephone call since her migrant son received complaints from the school. She poured out her grievances:

My [migrant] son and daughter often complain that the elderly always indulges the grandchildren. Of course, part of the reason is the atavistic affection [*ge dai qin*]. But what they don't understand is that I don't have the energy to discipline them [grandchildren] as I am already overwhelmed [by the pressure]. Although I am not that old now, my health condition is declining gradually. I have no idea what would happen if I collapsed one day.

The struggle with the scale of discipline over these non-biological children is even more salient when maternal aunts are the primary caregivers. Given that extended families are often negatively associated with the exploitation of left-behind children (e.g. placing heavy domestic chores on them; Olwig, 2014), it is relatively easy for them to bear the stigma of 'mistreating the non-biological children' when they attempt to be strict proxy guardians. The prevalence of new media has facilitated the exposure and circulation of such 'stigma'. Proxy carers' corporeal punishments of left-behind children could be easily amplified, distorted and eventually reach their parents' ears via mediated communication. This is particularly true in cases where left-behind children grow older and have their own mobile devices. It is quite common to see these children inform their migrant parents when they have been reprimanded by their uncles or aunts. For example, Zhou Jie is a 52-year-old the surrogate caregiver who used to take care of

her 18-year-old nephew and 21-year-old niece. The niece once brought her younger brother to an urban disco and spent the night out without even informing Zhou Jie. Both of the kids were underage at the time. While Zhou Jie was furious and beat their palms as punishment, the sister took a photo of their bruises and texted their migrant mother via QQ and exaggerated their injuries.

Under such circumstances, migrant parents' concerns for their children could possibly be strengthened by the one-sided statements provided by children, which often leads to conflicts between migrants and proxy guardians. In other words, the popularity of children's access to communication technology, on the one hand, has empowered them to negotiate their powerless situations (see Chapter 7). On the other hand, the advent of communication technology has also compressed proxy guardians' ability to apply discipline, which may give rise to their sluggish approach towards childrearing, such as indulging children in doing anything they would like to do.

Many extended family members feel bewildered about how to treat their sister or brother's children, as they cannot grasp the scale of childrearing. Sometimes, migrant parents feel their positions as parents are threatened when proxy guardians develop strong emotional attachments to their children. In some extreme cases, proxy caregivers (both grandparents and extended kin) have even been called 'mother' by left-behind children (see Parreñas, 2008; Peng & Wong, 2013; Madianou & Miller, 2012), which could deeply hurt their migrant parents and also trigger guilty feelings in the caregiver. This is exemplified in the narrative of Shi Yin, a 41-year old proxy guardian who was troubled by her deep rapport with her six-year-old niece Yun Yun:

The first time we had a webcam session [with her mother in Britain], Yun Yun was very shy and asked me who the aunt was on the screen. My [migrant] sister burst out crying. I was a bit scared and didn't know what to say to comfort her. I am a mother myself and understand the pain. Later I began to intentionally introduce my sister to Yun Yun, keeping reminding her that the woman on the screen is her mother, and the toys you have in your hand are all bought by her.

8.3.3 Remittances as support and hidden trouble: The risks of unilateral financial reliance

Transnational families have always been characterized by asymmetrical reciprocity among migrants and non-migrants. Olwig (1999) proposed that: “the legitimate presence of children in a ‘new household’ is accepted as the flow of remittances, which is sustained by migrant parents abroad”. Consistent with previous literature, the reciprocal relationship between migrant parents and left-behind guardians was found to be not uncommon in this study. Although several studies have indicated that the welfare and pension system in rural China has experienced significant transformation and has been largely improved in an egalitarian direction (Lu & Feng, 2008; Zhu & Walker, 2018), it is still largely stratified in accordance to the *hukou* system and biased towards urban areas (Zhu & Walker, 2018). Given the context, the majority of the left-behind families receive financial support from their migrant relatives (or children) to build houses, invest in businesses, or pay for medical expenses. On the other hand, overseas migrant parents rely on these relatives to take care of their children. This sometimes leads to harmonious cooperation, but in some cases could also give rise to new conflicts.

In general, when extended family members become children's caregivers, the remittances would often create migrants' distrust over the equity of the exchange of care for money (Dreby, 2010). Migrants are concerned about whether their cousins or siblings have put their own interests over their children's interests, and whether the money has been properly spent on childrearing. It is not uncommon to hear complaints from relatives that the remittances are not sufficient to cover the daily expenditure of care arrangements. In response, rather than asking for money themselves, which might exacerbate the suspicion of self-interest, extended kin usually ask children or grandparents to hint to migrants that remittances are not enough on the phone. Apart from the distrust from migrant parents, these left-behind aunts sometimes have to face competition for the position of guardian. As mentioned earlier, the role of proxy caregiver is often associated with remittances from migrants, therefore it is not uncommon to see several extended kin members compete to be guardian.

During my fieldwork, Shi Yin, a 41-year-old caregiver, showed me the chat history of her family WeChat group, which comprised her sisters and other extended family kin. Her 6-year-old niece had walked out of the house recently without Shi Yin's supervision. While the girl was playing around in the backyard where there was a well without a covering, Shi Yin's elder sister walked past, took a photo, and then sent it to their family WeChat group. This caused great pressure for Shi Yin since all the family members in the group accused her of carelessness. Shi Yin told me that her sister had been striving for the position for a while, because her husband had a severe industrial injury several years ago and they were in dire need of remittances. Though admitting her neglect of caring duty, Shi Yin suggested that snitching was insidious, and that it was bitterly disappointing to see the in-fighting among family members.

Facing distrust from migrant parents and competition from other relatives, some extended family members are found to employ frequent media communication (usually with rich visual cues), in an attempt to convince their brothers or sisters that they are qualified caregivers and treating the non-biological child as well as their own. Qiao Lin is a 49-year old woman who was asked by her migrant brother to take care of his son. She was once questioned by her sister-in-law (the boy's mother) about whether she was a 'qualified proxy guardian' because she imposed corporeal punishments on the naughty boy. Qiao Lin was worried that her brother would reduce his remittances and suspend supporting her son's petty business. To clarify the child-abusing misinformation, Qiao Lin chose to creatively display her care to the child via the use of new media:

I am always strict and fair in meting out rewards and punishments. My sister-in-law never believes that I am treating her son well. I am not a selfish person and would not have any partiality to my own child. I have frequently explained it on the phone. Sometimes, in order to be more convincing, I would turn on the webcam and just show her what we eat for dinner. Everything would be clear.

On the contrary, if remittances are sent to grandparents, they are often regarded as a form of fulfilling filial responsibilities. Normally, migrants would implicitly assume that grandparents would not misuse the money and prioritize grandchildren's interests over their own interests (Dreby, 2010). However, it cannot be naively assumed that grandparents are self-sacrificing care providers who do not have their own priorities. Under a situated transnational perspective, as Kilkey & Merla (2014) argue, the socio-economic structural factors (e.g. the welfare regime) in both the sending and receiving country largely influence the ways in which certain actors engage with caregiving

within a transnational family network. As such, grandparents have an ambiguous status within the care chain, as they are not just caregivers, but also in need of care, not only because of their declining health, but also due to the insufficient pension and welfare system in rural China (Shi, 2006).

As argued in Chapter 5, the definition of filial piety has largely morphed into economic provision in areas with a culture of migration, since long-term separation caused by migration has been normalized to a certain degree. However, most grandparents still hope that their migrant children could come back to accompany them. Yet, the constrained economic conditions bring them immediately back to reality. As Jun Mei, the protagonist of the vignette above, said, “I really want them back, but we don’t have any alternative ways. The child needs feeding, the house has to be built, and everything needs money”. Thus, mediated communication has turned into a tool that contributes to the reconciliation of the ambivalence to a certain degree. While the use of communication technology (usually telephone and video calls) allows grandparents to convey the demand for remittances by revealing what is going on at home, it has also made the harsh fact of their prolonged separation more acceptable, as grandparents are able to receive their children’s care from afar.

Similarly, in her study of left-behind families in South India, Ahlin (2017) found that labour migration has become a new form of elder care. The remittances sent by migrant children and the emotional support afforded by media technologies made elderly parents feel ‘better cared’ for instead of being ‘abandoned’, which resulted in a ‘worthwhile trade-off’ (Ahlin, 2017: 86). Despite the optimistic view, what Ahlin has not pointed out is the precarity of the left-behind elderly and the asymmetrical power relationship between them and their migrant children. Yu Mei, the aforementioned 70-year-old grandmother, is in extremely poor health – suffering from chronic gastropathy,

cardiopathy, rheumatic arthritis, and daily back pain. However, the poor local welfare system was insufficient to cover her daily expenditures, not to mention the regular medical fees⁴⁵, which meant that Yu Mei could only rely on her migrant children to make a living. The heavy financial reliance has created a power asymmetry between Yu Mei and her grandchildren's migrant parents. She recalled the insult from her daughter-in-law that she once choked down:

My daughter-in-law used to yell at me on the phone, "It is your duty to raise our children [Yu Mei's grandchildren]. If you don't take care of my sons, I would not take care of you when you are in the bed [getting aged]." I just... had no choice.

On the one hand, the status of female migrants in families has been largely improved due to their increasing breadwinning capacity (see Chapter 6), yet on the other hand, as daughters and daughters-in-law, these female migrants have also threatened the status of elderly female caregivers. Meanwhile, the nature of filial piety in China has been largely influenced by the recent decline in parental authority and the rise of power among young generations (Davis & Harrell, 1993; Yan, 2016). As mentioned earlier, unconditional obedience and submission by junior generations is not regarded as the dominant cultural protocol of fulfilling filial obligation. Instead, the intergenerational dynamics in contemporary China take form in what Croll (2008) calls the "intergenerational contract", which is based on the mutual need and support among senior and junior generations. However, recently Yan (2016) has taken this further and proposed the emergence of "descending familism", arguing that "family resources of

⁴⁵ After her husband's death from lung cancer five years ago, Yu Mei finally (after trying and failing three times previously) had an application for the local minimum wage scheme accepted, which gave her RMB 450 *yuan* (£52) every month. Although there are no official statistics about the coverage rate of the minimum wage scheme, of all the elderly guardians I interviewed in the two villages, only three had successfully applied for the allowance.

all sorts flow downward, and most important, the focus of the existential meanings of life has shifted from the ancestors to the grandchildren” (Yan, 2016: 245).

In a transnational family, grandchildren are of particular significance since the intergenerational relationship between the left-behind elderly guardian and their migrant children is fundamentally based on a conditional social contract, through which grandparents take on childrearing duties in exchange for emotional care and material support from their migrant children. Therefore, the anxiety of being unable to have a secure life during the golden years becomes intense if their migrant children obtain citizenship and decide to settle abroad. The transformation of migration status often implies a shift of life focus to the receiving countries, giving rise to the decline of remittances. In some cases, documented migrants come back and pick up their children to join them. The loss of grandchildren and the decline of remittances usually increase the pressure these grandparents feel of ‘being abandoned’. Given that many of the elderly do not have regular income and could not provide bank statements, it is also impossible for them to make visa applications to join their children abroad for reunions. Consequently, most maintain frequent contact with their grandchildren, even if they have joined their parents. This is partly due to the deep attachments they built up before the children’s eventual migration. More importantly, these frequent transnational communications should be read in the light of these left-behind grandparents’ powerless situation, which is primarily associated with intergenerational dynamics and the unevenness of transnationalism.

In a study of left-behind older rural women in China, Jacka (2014: 188) attempted to debunk the stereotype of this group of people as “abandoned, dependent, passive and weak”. She advocated that we should acknowledge the contributions made by these women, especially the care work that “otherwise unavailable or too costly for rural

families, and this enables younger adults in the family to seek employment away from the village, which can bring in more cash income” (ibid: 192). This study sides with Jacka’s argument that older left-behind women’s contributions are particularly crucial for the reproduction of transnational families. Yet, I still want to point out the structural dilemma of this group of people, since this largely shaped the ways in which they use media technologies and communicate with migrant parents. These left-behind female guardians should not merely be treated as ‘guardians’ or ‘caregivers’, but also as individuals whose well-being is massively influenced by a lack of national welfare and affordable medical care, gender inequalities in both job markets and within families, as well as the lack of kin networks for support given that many villagers have moved abroad due to the culture of migration.

8.4 Conclusion

This chapter sought to explore the different ways in which left-behind guardians fulfil their childrearing duties through mediated collaboration with migrant parents. While it is true that communication technology can mitigate some of the effects of migration by providing more frequent and instantaneous communication, it cannot shield the left-behind guardians from the tremendous difficulties of having to deal with their family members’ absence. While all the guardians involved in the caregiving triangle collaborate with the migrant parents through the use of communication technologies, there are some differences between them in terms of the challenges they face to negotiate their family roles. Given a social shaping perspective has been adopted, I have tried to tease out the situated socio-technical contexts that different family members are embedded within.

Specifically, for left-behind men, their wives’ migration means the reverse of parenting division in the family, which sees them struggle with remittance requests, scramble

with newly assigned caregiving duties, and confront the dilemma of child discipline. The emergence of new communication technology has largely turned their absent wives into being present, bringing about dialectical effects – while mediated communication serves as guidance for caregiving and assistance in child discipline, it could also lead to digital surveillance and a reminder of left-behind men’s crippled breadwinning capacities. The primary concerns for left-behind women during childrearing collaboration with their migrant husbands encompasses the insecure feelings associated with remittance shortages, the extra burdens of child discipline, as well as the invisibility of their caregiving contributions. To address these concerns, left-behind women have creatively developed multiple mediated communication strategies, such as imposing digital surveillance, enhancing emotional support, and asserting their caregiving contributions in the family through ‘mediated’ absence. As argued in Chapter 2, gender is not a fixed biological division but an ongoing process of social interaction (Deutsch, 2007: 107). While these strategies have enabled them to ‘do gender’ (West & Zimmerman, 1987) in a flexible way, and temper the imbalance of conjugal relations associated with men’s breadwinning role, they have not really transformed the asymmetrical gender dynamics – the contribution of men’s breadwinning is still prioritized over women’s devotions in domestic areas.

When extended kin become the proxy guardians of left-behind children, the recurrent concern mentioned by participants during fieldwork revolved around the extra caregiving burdens. Raising an extra child disturbs proxy guardians’ life rhythms, increasing both physical labour and extra communication burdens, which requires proxy guardians to accommodate migrant parents’ schedules to report on the wellbeing of the child. The ambivalence of child discipline is also a big challenge for extended kin, as they lack legitimacy. As a response, they are found to make every effort to balance the proper distance with left-behind children during the process of childrearing, since being too close or too harsh are both problematic. Remittance management is another frequently mentioned theme among extended kin, since the unilateral

financially reliant relationship between them has complicated the process of childrearing collaboration. While some aunts use communication technology to convince migrant parents that they are proper caregivers, some grandparents consider technology to be a tool to alleviate the ambivalence of their economic demand and the emotional loss brought about by long-term separation.

As Bryceson & Vuorela (2002) have stressed, transnational family serves as an imagined community where everyday family practices take place across borders under collective welfare, shared feelings and mutual obligation. Given the context, from the stories shared by different left-behind guardians, this chapter contributes to the understanding of how the ‘asymmetrical reciprocity’ of transnational families intersects with the consumption of communication technology. Communication technology enables these guardians to reconfigure their family roles through mediated communication with migrant parents. The mediated childrearing collaboration of left-behind guardians with migrants demonstrates their efforts and agency in negotiating the internal dynamics of child care in transnational families. This chapter has also highlighted the obstacles and challenges associated with the socio-technical context in which these guardians are situated within the transnational family network. In so doing, this chapter advances the understanding of how the care circulation process takes place via mediated communication across borders.

Chapter 9: Conclusion

This thesis has investigated how transnational family bonding and relationships are maintained through the use of communication technologies in the context of Chinese overseas labour migration. Drawing on a multi-sited ethnography of UK-based Chinese migrants (mainly clandestine labour workers) and their left-behind families back in rural China, this study focused specifically on the ways in which dispersed family members negotiate their family roles via mediated communication with each other. I have also considered the role of media in sustaining and shaping multi-dimensional relationships among these Chinese transnational families. In this concluding chapter, I discuss the main arguments made by previous chapters and how they contribute to the existing literature from various perspectives.

9.1 Chinese transnationalism and transnational families

Earlier research on Chinese migration and transnationalism has been particularly confined to several specific areas, such as identity formation, integration and assimilation, and political participation, and particularly the social and economic relations between diasporic communities and their host countries. These research agendas are mainly attributed to the predominant focus on middle- or high-class Chinese transnationals and overseas Chinese, such as wealthy elites, students and entrepreneurs, or long-established ethnic Chinese populations. For these overseas Chinese with high mobility and social capital, those traditional migration issues in host societies may play an important role in their migration life. These multiple research angles have drawn a rich picture of the Chinese transnational imagination, particularly against the backdrop of China's rise as a new world power in the twenty-first century (Wong & Tan, 2018). However, another crucial aspect of transnationalism – the

problem of transnational relations and intimacies – has largely remained unexplored in the existing Chinese transnationalism literature. In addition, despite the sporadic discussions in early migration studies, low-skilled and economic Chinese overseas migrants, especially clandestine migrant workers, are overlooked due to the rise of contemporary China, therefore have yet to receive much attention from researchers.

As mentioned in Chapter 2, this study has considered “transnational family” to be a form of “transnationalism from below” (Vertovec, 2009) – a microcosm of interaction between transnational practices and the socio-economic contexts of both receiving and host countries. The shrinking job market and broken welfare system in (rural) China, along with low-skilled labour shortage and selective immigration policies in Britain, have given rise to the emergence of clandestine Chinese migration and transnational families. It should be noted that these macro class-specific migration contexts are intricately interwoven with transnational family relationships at a micro level. The maintenance of transnational relationships is of particular importance for economic and clandestine migrants, since the lack of mobility and their uncertain migration status have largely limited their choice of life in host societies, which makes maintaining a connection with family members in the sending regions a significant part of their everyday life. In addition, compared to their middle- or high-class counterparts, low-skilled and clandestine migrants often lack social capital and mobility, thus they face the dilemma of family separation for several years. Given the context, by demonstrating the complexity and diversity of transnational family members’ interactions with each other in the process of fulfilling their different family roles and obligations, I have contributed to the understanding of Chinese transnationalism not only in a different class setting, but also from a totally different perspective: understanding transnationalism as multi-dimensional relationships across borders. Such a bottom-up perspective associated with the concept of ‘transnationalism from below’ does not exclude the analysis of political economy of global labour. Instead, it elucidates how these macro structural factors provoke impacts on genuine individuals through their

bittersweet narratives. This demonstrates the hidden cost of globalisation and better informs our understanding of the political economic aspect of transnational processes.

9.2 Migrants, Children and Guardians: A systematic analysis of actors in the ‘caregiving triangle’

To obtain a complete picture of transnational caregiving and better understand the social reproduction of transnational families, this study included the perspectives of all the actors involved in the ‘caregiving triangle’ (Suarez-Orozco et al., 2002): migrant parents, left-behind children, and children’s guardians (i.e. left-behind men, women and extended family kin). While previous transnational parenting literature has largely explored the case of transnational motherhood and mother-away families (Madianou & Miller, 2012; Monini, 2018; Peng & Wong, 2013), the perspectives of male migrants and other family configurations have received little analysis (exceptions include Kilkey, 2014; Fresnoza-Flot, 2014; Parreñas, 2008). This study has enriched the understanding of transnational parenting by incorporating various family configurations and making a gender comparative analysis of mediated mothering and fathering strategies adopted by Chinese migrants to negotiate their absence from home. As a result, migrant parents have been empowered to perform their parental identity in a variety of ways through different communication technologies. Male and female migrants also confront dissimilar struggles while negotiating their role as distant parents, which can be attributed to various factors embedded in transnational communications, including gendered pressure from social expectations, migration status, and family structure.

Chinese left-behind children in existing literature (mainly based on China’s internal rural-to-urban migration) have often been depicted as vulnerable and passive victims of migration, suffering from negative consequences due to the lack of parental care and

guidance. Similar findings can also be observed in the literature within transnational familial settings, yet some recent noteworthy studies have begun integrating the subjective voices of children, identifying them as agents who exert influence within transnational households (Lam & Yeoh, 2019; Olwig, 1999; Poeze & Mazzucato, 2014). Following such a children-centred perspective, I have demonstrated the varied forms of agency enacted by left-behind children during mediated communications with their parents, not only in terms of changing their care deficit situation but also of fulfilling their filial duty.

In contrast to migrant parents and their children, left-behind guardians have only received sporadic analysis in transnational family literature to date. To fill the gap, this study has drawn on three networks of care that migrants rely on when they are absent: left-behind men, left-behind women, and extended family female kin (including grandmothers and other female relatives). While all the caregivers involved in childrearing collaborate with migrant parents through the use of communication technologies, there are also differences among them in terms of the challenges they face to negotiate their family roles, which might lead to unforeseen tensions and conflicts. These challenges should be read in light of the guardians' own concerns and stakes, which are often associated with their specific situated positions in transnationalism. Migration engenders a profound influence on all family members, as Levitt & Nyberg-Sørensen (2004: 6) argue, "those who stay behind but receive support from those who migrate" also experience transnational migration. By conducting a systematic analysis of left-behind guardians, this study has provided a significant piece of the jigsaw puzzle that constitutes the whole picture of transnational family. In this regard, this study sides with the 'care circulation' approach, not only in terms of including all the actors of the care network – some of whom are traditionally absent in transnational care literature (e.g. migrant fathers and left-behind women) – but also, such a circular perspective highlights the multi-directional feature of transnational care flows, through which

family members cooperate with each other to fulfil their family roles and maintain family connectedness.

The expansive framework of family provides a nuanced understanding of transnational family as a kind of transnational arena where power negotiation takes place between various transnational family members, which is closely related to their caring capacity, obligation and negotiated commitments (Baldassar et al., 2007). This largely helps to debunk the transnational family as a monolithic and institutional unit (Faist, 1998) since it shifts the focus towards the nuanced power dynamics inside the 'unit'. This study therefore understands transnational practices and transnationalism beyond the simplified 'migrant/non-migrant' dyad. However, the adoption of an expansive family framework also means that we must take into consideration other non-human actors across borders, which might influence the ways in which 'doing family' takes place. Although there has been some discussion of the subject in previous chapters, a systematic analysis of the role of the nation-state, wider social networks in the sending villages, and the migrant networks in receiving countries, might be a good start to further discussion on transnational family practices. Such an institutional reflection might be helpful for policymakers both in sending and receiving countries to take further actions and mitigate the precarity of transnational lives among labour migrants and their families.

9.3 'Doing family' and affordances in polymedia environments

Compared to the vignette at the beginning of this thesis, where the migrant father in the documentary *Living in Tears* had to rely on letters and sporadic international calls to maintain distant family bonds, the contemporary media landscape has completely

changed. Given that the past few years have witnessed a proliferation of new media technologies – notably instant messaging (IM), video-calls through VoIP and social networking sites – individuals have a plethora of choices when engaging in mediated communication. Thus, this study contributes to the literature of media communication and transnational family by asking a question about what role new communication technology plays in shaping transnational family practices and relationships.

Following a socio-technical perspective, this study adopted a hybrid framework of mediation/affordances/polymedia to investigate how Chinese transnational family members maintain a sense of ‘doing family’ via mediated communication. Specifically, media technologies were investigated in multiple layers: first, I considered transnational family members’ media practices during transnational communication, which are embedded in different socio-technical contexts; more specifically, I explored the ways in which family members exploit polymedia environments (i.e. integrated environments of affordances) to suit their interactive purposes by taking into consideration their position within ‘situated transnationalism’. Second, I considered media as mediation (i.e. mediated communication and its social implications). Following this, I explored how communication practices among different parties serve as a kind of ‘care circulation’ and contribute to the shaping of transnational family relationships, with a focus on the ‘asymmetrical reciprocity’ deriving from gender, intergenerational dynamics and other socio-political structures across national borders

In the following section, I first discuss media practices among transnational family members and how they contribute to the understanding of affordances. I found that strategies that different family members employ when ‘doing family’ and ‘displaying’ at a distance vary depending on the specific socio-technical contexts. Many examples that illustrate this argument have been presented, for example, A Biao in Chapter 6 was

a migrant father who failed to meet the financial needs of his left-behind family due to his clandestine status – when he tried to compensate for his lack of breadwinning ability by engaging with more emotional care for his children, text-based and asynchronous communication tools helped him to reduce the barrier to being a sentimental father. Chapter 7 featured left-behind children who have attempted to change their care deficit situation by manipulating ‘performative interactions’ (Yu et al., 2017), in either positive (constructing a distinguished self) or negative ways (constructing a delinquent self) on social media, to attract parents’ attention. Similarly, in Chapter 8, a very typical example was the story of Yan Ping, the 31-year-old left-behind woman who was worried that her husband would cheat on her, given that his remittances were the only financial resource she could rely on. As a result, Yan Ping had no option but to “frequently launch webcam calls and send photos regarding what happens at home in order to let him know he is a father and husband”.

The diverse strategies these transnational family members have developed to negotiate their family roles represent an adaptive response to the challenges and radical changes of family structures brought about by transnational migration. Such media practices during transnational communication are not solely determined by media affordances, but also shaped by individuals’ positions in situated transnational networks (influenced by immigration policies, migration cultures and welfare provision in both sending and receiving countries) and family obligations and social expectations. Although the concept of affordances is often construed to be ‘functional’ and ‘relational’ (Baym, 2010; Hutchby, 2003), most media and communication studies have narrowed the term to stable and intrinsic properties of certain artefacts (Costa, 2018; Evans et al., 2014). To avoid the pitfalls of both technological and social determinism, this study sides with the recent frameworks of ‘affordances-for-practice’ (Fayard & Weeks, 2014) and ‘affordances-in-practices’ (Costa, 2018) and shifts the analytical focus from media per se to the specific assemblage of socio-material practices with technology. While media materiality allows for possibilities of agency for individuals to have certain

communication practices, these practices vary depending on the broader sociocultural context in which they take place. In the next section, I reflect upon the adoption of mediation in this study, which helps to advance the understanding of how various media practices influence transnational communication, care circulation and family relationships.

9.4 Transnational communication in the digital age: Mediating the asymmetrical reciprocity of transnational family relationships

The care circulation operating among transnational family members reveals the moral discourses and social expectations that inform their behaviour towards their kin (Reynolds & Zontini, 2014). However, in practice individuals must negotiate their caring relationships and moral obligations according to particular contexts. As discussed earlier, family members have their own concerns and stakes because of their specific situated positions in transnationalism. Some of these concerns may be mutual and reciprocal, while others may be in conflict with each another, which may lead to tension and contestation. As Baldassar and Merla (2014a, 2014b) have suggested, the ‘care circulation’ within transnational families is characterized by ‘asymmetrical reciprocity’ – though based on shared feelings and mutual obligations (Bryceson & Vuorela, 2002), they are also marked by asymmetries related to gendered relations of power, intergenerational relations, and socio-economic differences. A key question here then is how do media practices contribute to the shaping of such ‘asymmetrical reciprocity’ in transnational families? To better understand the mediation of transnational family relationships, in the following I discuss ‘mediation of reciprocity’ and ‘mediation of asymmetries’ respectively.

Among the Chinese transnational families interviewed, I found that the constant use of communication technology plays an important role in enabling the maintenance of caring roles and responsibilities across geographical borders. In line with previous literature (Madianou & Miller, 2012; Baldassar et al., 2016; Wilding, 2006), this study has found that mediated communication has dissolved the assumption that distance is implicitly a barrier for care and support exchange. The ‘tangible’ mediated intimacy, in most cases, is conducive to the solidarity of family relationships by enhancing mutual reciprocity. For example, in Chapter 6 a migrant mother, Xiao Wen, used frequent telephone calls and instant messages and finally regained her estranged daughter’s heart. Chao Hong, the left-behind daughter in Chapter 7, sent messages via WeChat every day to remind her migrant father to take pills and inject insulin, and called him again to doublecheck whether he had taken the medicine. Also in Chapter 8, a left-behind father was struggling with his newly assigned caregiving role, but benefited from the ‘simultaneous’ cooking guidance given by his migrant wife on a webcam call. In some migrant-sending areas, the culture of migration has normalized transnational migration to a certain degree since long-term separation becomes part of life. However, during the process of my fieldwork, I could still feel the pain and resentment many participants incurred by the absence of a certain family member. The paradoxical ambivalence towards ‘the necessity to leave’ and ‘the pain of separation’, however, has been reconciled by the use of communication technology, or more specifically, the mediation of reciprocity, as the reciprocal and multidirectional exchange of care, to a certain extent, has been revitalized or even enhanced by today’s polymedia environments, as demonstrated by previous studies (Baldassar et al., 2007; Cabanes & Acedera, 2012; Nedelcu & Wyss, 2016).

However, despite functioning as the social glue of transnationalism (Vertovec, 2004), the plethora of new media technologies is definitely not a panacea to heal transnational family separations. As indicated by existing literature, mediated communication is not solely de-territorialized and should not be romanticized in transnational family life. It

can also inflict new practical conflicts and constraints – for example, the ubiquitous connectivity that strengthens the feeling of control and surveillance (Madianou & Miller, 2012; Wilding, 2006), the communicative opportunities enabled by communication technology that arouses burdens and new expectations of co-presence (Horst, 2006; Madianou, 2012), and the poignant moments during virtual co-presence when a family crisis or ceremony takes place, which reminds family members of the frustration of traumatic separation (Baldassar, 2010; Madianou & Miller, 2012; Wilding, 2006). In line with these studies, I have also seen the negative consequences associated with the use of media in transnational families. For example, in Chapter 7, some left-behind children were seen to detest the intervention of communication technology, since the ‘ambient co-presence’ (Madianou, 2016) associated with ubiquitous connection enabled by digital tools turned their absent parents into present, limiting their ‘freedom’ of being a left-behind child (for example, Jian Xiong was caught skipping school and staying at home by his migrant parents because his WeRun steps registered fewer than 100 for several days). In other cases, some children shifted their resentment of parents’ leave to the emergence of new technology because it justified some parents’ continued physical absence. In Chapter 6, some migrant women were troubled with their left-behind children’s frequent calls and messages asking for money and expensive gifts, since the latter considered they were living a ‘fantasy’ migration life. Likewise, in Chapter 8, a proxy guardian aunt was once threatened by her sister-in-law that she would stop sending remittances to her, because her child had reported receiving corporal punishment on the phone.

At first glance, these conflicts and problems may be construed as the direct consequences associated with the intervention of media technology in transnational family life. This only reveals a partial story because these conflicts are the ‘exclusive’ product of the digital age and apparently unable to take place in the past (as described in the documentary *Living in Tears*). However, the in-depth reasons behind such conflicts are the ‘asymmetrical’ relationships among transnational family members,

while technologies only serve as a catalyst to bring them to the table. These relationship ‘asymmetries’ are not only attributable to transnational factors – such as transnational moralities, information and imagination in transnational relations, as well as transnational resource inequalities (Carling, 2008) – but are also closely related to internal family dynamics (gendered and intergenerational asymmetries).

However, I argue that the ‘mediation of asymmetry’ in transnational families should not merely be interpreted as an extension or intensification of the existing family power dynamics. It also provides family members in the caregiving triangle with an avenue through which they can manipulate interactive content and respond to each other in a more strategic way. For example, there are examples of left-behind children in Chapter 7 who choose to filter the content of communication to negotiate their parents’ surveillance; we also see ‘atypical mothers’ in Chapter 6 who attempt to delay the response to left-behind families so that they can avoid the excessive caring burdens; Given that there are no sound welfare provision systems in rural China, some left-behind guardians of older generations often rely on migrants’ remittances as the only financial resource of the family.⁴⁶ It is not uncommon for left-behind cousins and grandparents to compete for the position of the guardian as this grants them the remittances from migrants. Given the context, in Chapter 8 the case of Qiao Lin, the 49-year old aunt taking care of her migrant brother’s son, best exemplified how proxy guardians use communication technology to convince their migrant parents they are qualified caregivers (i.e. launching webcam calls to migrant parents during meals to show how they treat the left-behind child). The mediation of ‘asymmetry’, therefore, does not totally transform the asymmetrical transnational family relationships and exchanges, which are embedded in gender ideology, intergenerational power dynamics and the socioeconomic discrepancies between receiving and sending countries.

⁴⁶ The lack of security is even more severe for people from areas where the culture of migration prevails, since some elder guardians themselves are repatriated or former migrant workers who are unable to access local social welfare at all.

However, the ‘mediated asymmetry’ has allowed for some space for negotiation through mediated communication by different family members. It is noteworthy that the ‘mediation of reciprocity’ and ‘mediation of asymmetry’ are not two distinct processes, but instead are interconnected. While the ‘mediated reciprocity’ is largely constrained by the ‘mediated asymmetry’, the latter is not a static status but a negotiable process which might contribute to the maintenance of the former. It is through constantly negotiating conflicts, obligations and expectations that distant family members develop and maintain the sense of ‘doing family’. The dynamic balance and circular interconnection between the ‘mediated reciprocity’ and the ‘mediated asymmetry’ (i.e. ‘mediated asymmetrical reciprocity’) helps to advance our understanding of the opportunities and challenges brought by communication technology in contemporary transnational family life.

The original concept of ‘asymmetrical reciprocity’ proposed by Baldassar and Merla (2014) pointed out the structural feature of transnational care circulation, yet it does not systematically conceptualize and theorize the role of communication technologies. The emergence of new media technologies should not be merely treated as a neutral tool that bridges the temporal and geographical distance dividing transnational family members. Although the digital ‘time-space compression’ creates an opportunity to alleviate the pain of family separation, it is not always harmonious and often fraught with challenges and conflicts. For this reason, communication technology does not just add another independent layer for analysing transnational family relationships. Instead, it mediates, shapes and reconfigures the care circulation process. This in turn engenders new social implications over transnational family relationships, which requires specific scrutiny. By developing the argument of ‘mediated asymmetrical reciprocity’, I provided a more nuanced interpretation of the emotional flows and power dynamics as constitutive of transnational care circulation in this digital age. This research thus extends existing frameworks of ‘asymmetrical reciprocity’ by explicating how transnational communications and family relationships are shaped by the interaction, conflict and

collision of various media practices from actors within different socio-technical contexts.

9.5 Doing gender in transnational family life: Gender politics and media technology

Gender plays a significant part in transnational parenting since overseas migration poses great challenges to family structures. The gender politics in transnational family is particularly complicated when it intersects with the use of media technology. Although gender asymmetries have been sporadically mentioned in the earlier section, it requires more systematic debate since it constitutes the cornerstone of transnational parenting in this study. The following part specifically discusses how this thesis contributed to the literature regarding the interplay of gender and digital technology.

The majority of the relevant scholarship has been attentive to the ways in which women use digital technology to carve out their agency for self-empowerment (e.g. expanding their social network, increasing income, searching for better employment) despite their disadvantaged position in the patriarchal system (e.g. Rakow & Navarro, 1993; Wallis, 2013; Masika & Bailur, 2015). In line with previous literature, this study has also demonstrated how women take advantage of communication technology to enact their agency when ‘doing family’ at a distance. For example, we can see ‘atypical mothers’ in Chapter 6 who tried to debunk the ‘stereotype’ of ‘fantasy migration life’ by strategically presenting their harsh life on social media, which helped them to justify the refusal to fulfil intensive mothering expectations. Also, in Chapter 8, some left-behind women felt insecure about their husbands’ fluctuating remittances. They were suspicious that the latter might have invested their attention or earnings elsewhere. To address such insecurity, these women have navigated polymedia environments to

deliver emotional support, impose digital surveillance, as well as to assert their caregiving contributions in an attempt to remind their spouses that they have families. However, such empowerment should not be overoptimistically interpreted, since it does not really disrupt the patriarchal structure. For example, the moral burden of being an absent mother still exists and men's financial contribution outweighs women's devotions in domestic areas. Although in some cases migrant women feel their family status had improved since they became the primary breadwinner of the family (e.g. regaining the respect of their children, husbands and mothers-in-law), the emancipation of these migrant women actually comes at the cost of transferring the childrearing duty to the female grandparents or other female kin. As a result, the gender norms are not transformed but instead manifested in another form.

Compared with the debates concerning women's engagement with digital technology, relatively scant academic attention has been given to the field of men's technology use from a gender perspective. The very few exceptions mainly explore the hacker and Internet culture that is often perceived as a highly masculine sphere (e.g. Gansmo et al., 2003; Laegran, 2003). Given the focus on the elite class or the Anglo-Saxon world, these studies understand the gender-technology relation based on an essentialist assumption that men are always dominant as the main beneficiary in the digital domain. In this sense, the empirical findings in this study have largely compensated for the dearth of digital technology studies of male users from subordinate groups. For instance, in Chapter 6, when A Biao – a migrant father who failed to meet the financial needs of his left-behind family due to his clandestine status – tried to compensate for his lack of breadwinning ability by engaging with more emotional care for his children, text-based and asynchronous communication tools helped him to reduce the barrier to being a sentimental father. In Chapter 8, some left-behind fathers were struggling with the challenges of child discipline, which is associated with their crippled breadwinning capacities compared to their migrant wives. The emergence of new communication technology has helped these fathers to re-establish their authoritarian disciplinary status

in front of their children via mediated cooperation with their wives (see the creative strategy adopted by Xiao Bing and his wife). Like their female counterparts, although the use of digital technology in their everyday lives has enabled these men to ‘do gender’ (West & Zimmerman, 1987) in a flexible way, they are unable to subvert patriarchal ideology. Given that a socio-technical perspective has been adopted, we should not merely understand technology as an artefact with static characteristics, but instead a socio-material product. As Wajcman (2004) reminds us, technology is always embedded in a macro-socioeconomic environment where women are subjected to patriarchal ideology. The finding concurs with these prior arguments, but pushes it one step further; it is noteworthy that men, particularly those with relatively low social status and inadequate social capital, are also under the oppression of patriarchal ideology, since in most cases, the expectation of being a successful migrant is much heavier for men than women.

However, among all the distant parenting patterns, mediated childrearing collaboration among migrant mothers and left-behind husbands might be regarded as progress towards egalitarian gender relations in transnational families. Migrant mothers’ increasing breadwinning capacity and some left-behind fathers’ involvement in caregiving activities may be considered a kind of transformation of the traditional gender division. It is worth mentioning that such reversion has less to do with the recent Chinese urban manhood discourses that emphasize the ‘involving’ and ‘caring’ of fatherhood as the product of China’s modernizing and globalizing process (Li et al., 2016). Instead, childrearing collaboration is more like an expedient undertaken in helpless practical situations (e.g. without the support of elderly parents, lack of economic capability to outsource caring work, or left-behind men frequently getting their visa applications rejected) rather than a genuine transformation towards egalitarian gender culture and values. Therefore, this kind of experimental childrearing collaboration may be ephemeral and return to conservative patriarchal gender norms once the conditions that force such collaboration come to an end. Could women retain

their breadwinner role and autonomous status once they end their migration journey and return home? Does men's physical and emotional involvement in fathering reflect the changing patriarchal arrangements? Or does it merely serve as a kind of temporary compromise tactic when unable to fulfil hegemonic masculine ideals? Is there any possibility for mediated childrearing collaboration to become a routine in those traditional 'international' villages like the culture of migration? To explore these questions, future studies are suggested to conduct a longitudinal investigation taking into account the life histories of different transnational family members.

9.6 Conclusion

This study has explored a group of people who have been widely invisible against the backdrop of China's rise as a new world power. It has revealed the bittersweet transnational family life of the precarious overseas labour migrants and their families. The existing Chinese transnationalism literature is often confined to upper-middle class settings and specific migration issues, such as migrants' identity negotiation and political empowerment of diasporic population in host societies. The attention paid to working-class Chinese transnational families, therefore, contributes to the understanding of Chinese transnationalism: not only does it add another class setting, but it also enriches the research agenda by understanding transnationalism as transnational connections and relationships. While China is increasingly recognised as a new economic power, the evenness of economic development inside (rural-urban division) and outside China (global economy) persists and requires special attention. The bottom-up perspective in this study is conducive to teasing out how these macro and uneven structural factors across borders influence individuals' lives and demonstrate the hidden costs of globalisation.

Transnational family relationships and exchanges are characterized by structural ‘asymmetrical reciprocity’, which derives from the intersection of intra-family power dynamics (e.g. family obligation, expectations and norms) and external transnational socioeconomic contexts, such as migration policies and welfare systems in both sending and receiving countries. Given that the working-class Chinese transnational family is largely associated with clandestine migration, technologies and transnational communication practices have become the spaces where family practices take place. It is crucial to consider the social implications of communication technologies, since they mediate, reshape and reconfigure the process of care circulation in transnational families. The whole scope of this research is based upon the general framework of social shaping theory, which recognizes the mutual shaping of technology and society. In this vein, this research proposes the idea of ‘mediated asymmetrical reciprocity’, in an attempt to capture how transnational family relationships and emotional flows are shaped by the interaction, conflict and collision of media practices from family members within different socio-technical contexts. As Pertierra (2018) reminds us in her book *Media anthropology for the digital age*, “The best way to study media and digital culture is not to focus on it” (p. 156). Through distancing ourselves from technologies per se and delving into how they are enmeshed in wider social, economic and cultural contexts, we can develop a clearer picture of how they play their part in our everyday lives.

Appendix 1. Information Sheet

I would like to invite you to participate in my research project that explores the role of communications technologies in transnational parenting among Chinese migrants in Britain. This information sheet explains what the project is about and what it means for you. Please read this information sheet carefully before you decide to take part in our research.

Who am I?

I am Hong Chen, a PhD student in Media and Communications at Goldsmiths, University of London. This research project is for the purpose of completing my PhD thesis.

Why am I doing this research?

Chinese migrants have become one of the largest migration populations in the UK, and the separation of families is an important concern among the Chinese diaspora. My research aims to find out how migrants maintain distant relationships with their left-behind children and partners. I am particularly interested in the role of new communication technologies such as mobile-phones and social media in the maintenance of the long-distance relationship.

How am I going to conduct this research?

I will conduct interviews and ethnography. During the interviews I will ask you questions about your life history, everyday life and media use. The interview will last about one hour and with your permission, our conversation will be tape-recorded so that we have a record of what you shared. If possible, I would also like to invite your children and partner who is back in China to join my interview. Meanwhile, ethnography means I would occasionally spend some time with you, only when your time permits, and I will record your activities in social media. Your participation is entirely voluntary and you can withdraw at any stage. All information you provide will be anonymized. This means that your name and other identifiers will be changed so that no one can recognise you or your family.

What happens after the interview?

All notes, recorded interviews and transcripts will be stored securely and will be available only to me. I will analyse all the interviews I have conducted and aim to share my findings to other researchers, or to publish the research findings. I hope to contribute to improving the way we understand how Chinese migrants live their life and deal with the separation of families in the UK.

If you would like to know more about my research please feel free to contact me on h.chen@gold.ac.uk , mobile number 07761673885.

Appendix 2. In-depth Interview Questions

Migrant parents

1. Biographical questions

- 1) Introduce yourself (name, age, education level, coming from where) and your family (siblings, parents, children).
- 2) When/Why/How did you come to Britain as a Chinese migrant?
- 3) What was/is your job before/after you came to Britain (position and pay)?
- 4) How do you feel about your migration life? (social network, daily routines, or arrangements on leisure time?)

2. Care arrangements

- 1) How often do you go back home? Do you miss your family? How is your relationship with your children or spouse?
- 2) Who takes the responsibilities of childrearing (emotional care, discipline, financial support) before and after your migration?
- 3) How do you feel about and deal with the labour division? Give some examples.

3. Communication technology usage

- 1) Do you contact left-behind families (children or other family members)? If so, how often does it happen? What is the topic mainly about when you communicate with each other?
- 2) What kind of communication tool (landline, mobile, smartphone, laptop, or any social media) have you used since you separated with your family? Please list details about the cost, circumstance, and reason of your technology usage.
- 3) How do technologies impact your relationship with children or other family members? Give some examples.

Left-behind children

1. Biographical questions

- 1) Introduce yourself (name, age, job, education level) and your family (siblings, parents).
- 2) Briefly describe your everyday life (social network, daily routines, or arrangements on leisure time?)
- 3) When and Why did your parents go abroad as migrant workers?

2. The perception of distant parenting

- 1) How often do your parents come back home? Do you miss your parents? How is your relationship with them?
- 2) How do you perceive your parents' leave? Why do you have such perceptions? Are there any changes taking place during your separation? Give some examples.
- 3) Who takes care of you during your childhood (emotional care, discipline, financial support) after your parents' migration? How is your relationship with the guardian (e.g. father, mother, grandparents, or other extended family kin)?

3. Technologies of communications

- 1) Do you contact your parents (father, mother, or both)? If so, how often does it happen? What is the topic mainly about when you communicate with each other?
- 2) What kind of communication tool (landline, mobile, smartphone, laptop, or any social media) have you used since you separated with your family? Please list details about the cost, circumstance, and reason of your technology usage.
- 3) How do technologies impact your relationship with parents? Give some examples.

Left-behind guardians

1. Biographical questions

- 1) Introduce yourself (name, age, job, education level). When/How/Why do you become a left-behind guardian?
- 2) Briefly describe your everyday life (social network, daily routines, or arrangements on leisure time?)

2. Collaborative childrearing arrangements

- 1) What do you primarily do as a guardian? How do you work with migrant parents to manage transnational childrearing (emotional care, discipline, financial support)?
- 2) What kind of challenges have you encountered in your everyday life when taking up the childrearing duties? How do you feel about and deal with these challenges? Give some examples.
- 3) How is your relationship with migrant parents and the child(ren) going? Are there any changes taking place as time progressed?

3. Technologies of communications

- 1) How often do you contact migrant parents? What is the topic mainly about when you communicate with each other?
- 2) What kind of communication tool (landline, mobile, smartphone, laptop, or any social media) have you used since you separated with your family? Please list details about the cost, circumstance, and reason of your technology usage.
- 3) How do technologies impact your relationship with migrant parents? Give some examples.

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