Toward Traditional or Atypical Parenting:
Mediated Communication in Chinese Transnational Families

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Drawing on a two-year ethnography of Chinese migrants (mainly undocumented and low-skilled workers) in Britain, this article uses the technofeminist approach to probe how migrants of different genders negotiate their parenthood via mediated communication with their left-behind families. Three patterns of distant parenting have been adopted by these migrants: extending traditional parenting, ambivalence toward mediated parenting, and escaping from gender expectations. This article highlights the gendered (dis)empowerment associated with media use when migrants parent from afar. It also pinpoints the underlying cause of such (dis)empowerment by delving into the specific socio-technical context where migrants of different genders are embedded. Notably, the transnational family structure, migration status and generation, and patriarchal ideology contribute to the shaping of mediated transnational parenting.

Keywords: transnational family, transnational parenting, Chinese migration, gender, ICT

It was midnight on Lunar New Year's Eve, a Chinese traditional festival in which family is supposed to reunite. In a detached Victorian house located in southeast London, A Biao huddled up in his 5-square-meter attic waiting for his 17-year-old daughter in China to answer his webcam call via smartphone. The 42-year-old migrant has not returned home for almost 15 years because of his illegal status in the UK, which makes him rely heavily on communication technologies to maintain such a distant bond. China's Spring Festival Gala (*chunwan*), the highest rated television entertainment event annually held by China Central Television (CCTV) on Lunar New Year's Eve, was playing on the flashing screen of A Biao's laptop. With two devices on at the same time, he could enjoy the Spring Festival atmosphere not only with a can of beer in his hand while miles away from home, but also with his daughter, who made fun of the cross-talk actors appearing on the show. A Biao's experience reflects the transformation in the ways of interacting within transnational families in today's polymedia environment (Madianou & Miller,

2012). Migrants in the digital age are no longer deemed as "uprooted," but instead "connected" (Diminescu, 2008), because they can take advantage of a wide range of options (inexpensive calls, instant messaging, video sessions, and social network sites [SNSs]) to engage extensively in transnational communications and exchanges. Despite the temporal and geographical constraints, the ubiquitous mediated/virtual co-presence (Baldassar, 2008; 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, 2013) among dispersed families across borders.

Given the context, this article draws on the case of Chinese migrants in Britain to examine how migrants of different genders carry out parenting duties from afar via the use of ICT. Specifically, it explores the mediated mothering and fathering strategies adopted by migrants to negotiate their absence from home. As transnational migration has engendered profound impacts on the structure of family, forcing migrants to reconstitute their parental practices, there has been a growing body of literature offering insights into the gender dynamics within transnational families. For instance, migrant mothers are found to perform intensive mothering, albeit staying at a distance as a breadwinner (Fresnoza-Flot, 2009; Parreñas; 2001); by contrast, migrant fathers are associated with the role of financial supporter while barely involved in caregiving (Dreby, 2010; Parreñas, 2008). These studies represent the intersection of gender and transnational parenting; however, the depiction of parenthood is still based on an essentialized gender division, which lacks an interrogation into the heterogeneity of parenting experience.[2] Meanwhile, although media technology has been playing an increasingly important role in migration life, it has not as yet received much analysis in this context. Some studies have recently examined the integration of new media communication into distant parenting within transnational households (Baldassar, 2008; Cabanes & Acedera, 2012; Uy-Tioco, 2007), and very few of them have been attentive to the subtle dynamics of parenting practices by discussing the ambivalence of transnational motherhood (Madianou & Miller, 2012; Monini, 2018) and diversified transnational mothering (Peng & Wong, 2013). 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. In a bid to conduct a gender comparative analysis of ICT-mediated transnational parenting, this article draws on the technofeminist approach as a way to illustrate the intersection of gender dynamics and technology usage that explains the dissimilar struggles and empowerment experienced by migrants of different genders while negotiating their role as distant parents.

Gender Confronts Digital Technology

The early scholarship on gender and technology is characterized by two contrasting views. As Wajcman (2004) recalls, technology as a synonym of masculinity, on the one hand, is closely related to industrial machinery and military weapons, which contributes to the cultural stereotype of women as physically and technically incompetent, thereby reinforcing the patriarchal division of labor. On the other

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[2] A noteworthy exception is Pustulka, Struzik, and Ślusarczyk (2015)'s study of Polish male migrants in Norway, in which 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.

hand, technology has also created an avenue for women's emancipation, especially during the 1990s, with the unprecedented revolution taking place in the use of the Internet. Postfeminist scholars (e.g., Donna Haraway, Sherry Turkle, and Sadie Plant) enthusiastically appreciated the potential of the Internet to deconstruct the conventional gender inequalities and give women new freedom, since it neglects the corporeal and allows for hybrid and degendered identities.

The essentialist utopian view of digital technology is challenged by a considerable body of empirical work that conceptualizes the gender-technology relation in a more dialectical way. In their study of cellular telephone use among women from northern and western Chicago, Rakow and Navarro (1993) found that the use of new technology was expected to have a positive impact on women's lives because of the potential to disrupt old social and political conventions. However, the findings indicated that it ironically intensified husbands' control over their wives and led to mothers' increasing burden of remote parenting. In her long-term observation of female migrants working in the low-level service sector in Beijing, Wallis (2011) discovered that mobile phone use was regarded as both liberatory and constraining; it assisted these migrants in increasing income and in searching for better employment, while at the same time reinforcing the surveillance from traditional authoritarian managerial styles and patriarchal modes of familial organizations. Likewise, in their study concerning mobile phone use by the "Third World Woman," Masika and Bailur (2015) observed that the interventions of ICTs in women's lives were not necessarily bringing about changes in existing gender dynamics. While mobile phones help urban female street traders in Uganda to expand social networks and develop their business, conducting frequent business calls at home may destabilize their spousal relationships by arousing husbands' suspicions of infidelity.

Compared with the debates concerning women's engagement with ICTs, relatively scant academic attention has been given to the field of men's ICT employment. The very few exceptions primarily investigate the way in which men construct and negotiate masculinities via digital technology in the mundane daily life of being a father, a husband, and a professional (Abril & Romero, 2010; Lie, 1995; Lohan, 2001), or explore the hacker and Internet culture that is often perceived as a highly masculine sphere (Gansmo, Lagesen, & Sørensen, 2003; Laegran, 2003). This body of research has provided insight into understanding the gender implications of males' ICT usage; however, it has largely concentrated on the elite class or the Anglo-Saxon world, thus studying the gender-technology relation based on an essentialist assumption that men are always dominant and the main beneficiary in the digital domain.

Technofeminism in Relation to Transnational Parenting

This study applies a theory of "technofeminism" raised by Judy Wajcman (2004), which conceives of technology as both a source and consequence of gender relations. From a technofeminist view, the issue is no longer seeing masculine or feminine as the inherent and static character of one particular technology, but rather, that gender relations can be thought of as materialized in technology. Wajcman (2004) contends that technology is a sociomaterial product—a seamless web or network combining artifacts, people, cultural meanings, and knowledge. Hence, digital technology is considered an artifact depending on users' place within the sociotechnical network. As such, a more balanced interrogation on users of both genders is possible by taking into account the network position in which the individual is placed, which may compensate for the dearth of ICT studies of male users from subordinate groups. In

putting together all the relations entangled with the consumption of technology, technofeminism not only scrutinizes the emancipatory metaphors, but also helps to balance the analysis with an equal emphasis on the material realities; in practice, the usage of ICTs is always intricately interwoven with class, age, gender, and other social factors (Wajcman, 2004).

If we apply the insights of technofeminist theory to transnational parenting in the context of digital technology use, we will have a better understanding of the social consequences entailed by mediated communication that recognizes both the technological and the social influences on migrants' parenting practices. Wajcman (2004) suggests that an emancipatory politics of technology requires more than hardware and software; it needs wetware: bodies, fluids, human agency. In other words, for the constitution of subjectivity of migrants of both genders, not only is the positive empowerment enabled by digital technologies considered, but the gender power within the socio-technical context is the subject of scrutiny as well. Gender should not be thought of as existing independently of technology, but rather as constituted in its practices. Given that ICT has made the alleged "mediated co-presence" possible, this study seeks to shed light on the question of how digital technologies facilitate or constrain male and female migrants' efforts to negotiate gender dynamics when "doing family" by taking into consideration the gender ideology of parenting roles. In brief, I specifically explore these questions: First, in what ways do migrants of different genders maintain a distant relationship with their left-behind children through the use of ICTs? Second, what is the role that digital technologies play in shaping the gender dynamics and constituting migrants' gender identity during the process of transnational parenting?

Gender Dynamics in Chinese Families

Chinese families have been deeply influenced by the traditions of Confucian patriarchy, which places the father as master of the family, responsible for financial and disciplinary provision, and by contrast ties mothers to the domestic sphere and child-rearing (Mann, 2011). However, 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 government policies to encourage women to participate in the labor force, which Wang (2005) has called "state feminism." Although the CPC policy liberated women to some extent, the "gender equality" prompted by state feminism can been understood as, in effect, the masculinization of women, in contrast to some concept of female gender autonomy or empowerment. "The erasure of gender and sexuality" (Yang, 1999, p. 41) in socialist China could be exemplified by the official propaganda during the Maoist era, which depicted women as "strong labor" or "iron girls" (Honig, 2000). In addition to women's increasing participation in the workforce, the equality of gender relations was also manifested by 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, the CPC paid more attention to social development and economic efficiency than to gender equality. Although women's educational level has been 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 the job markets and the restoration of the traditional division of labor 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 labor 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-centered" framework (Deutsch, 2006).

Undocumented Chinese Migrants in the UK

The number of UK-based Chinese undocumented immigrants is somewhere in the range of 150,000–200,000 (Kagan et al., 2011). The majority of them have relatively low socioeconomic status in Britain and are from less developed areas—including southern China's Fuzhou and Fuqing coastal areas that have attracted less capital investment because of the unevenness of the Chinese economic transformation (Pieke, Nyiri, Thuno, & Ceddagno, 2004)—and latterly joined by people from other regions, notably northeast China, such as Liaoning, Jilin, and Heilongjiang Provinces (Gao, 2004). Most are illegal workers and often make huge sacrifices to come to Britain. 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 (Anderson & Rogaly, 2005).

Most of these mainland migrants engage in unskilled work, even if they had been in more skilled or even professional work in their country of origin. The lack of qualifications, official visa status, and language skills limits them to working largely within a Chinese-speaking environment, particularly in catering, food processing, and agriculture (Lam, Sales, D' Angelo, Montagna, & Lin, 2009; Pai, 2012). Driven by poverty, these migrants are willing to work long hours under poor working conditions for pay well below the minimum wage, ranging from £110 to £200 per week (Kagan et al., 2011). For many, the prime motivation is to support their children through college, to pay for their parents' medical expenses, to save money to set up their own business when they return to China, or the hope of eventually making a better life (Benton & Gomez, 2011; Pai, 2008).

These vulnerable low-skilled migrants cannot afford frequent visits home, especially given that those without documented status are not able to move freely across national borders and thus have to face the dilemma of family separation for years. It is within this context that communication technologies have become the only channel between migrants and left-behind families, bridging the physical gap and enabling the possibility of some kind of distant parenting (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Migrants contacting their left-behind families in China.
Photo by the author (2017).

Method

This analysis draws from two years of ethnographic fieldwork conducted in London[3] during 2015–2017 among 45 documented and undocumented migrants employed in low-skilled work sectors such as Chinese takeaway (takeout) restaurants, dim sum bars, grocery stores, and nail salons. To enrich my understanding of their migration life (struggles, challenges, and joys), I visited their homes and workplaces, spent time with them during their days off, and participated in their weddings, gatherings with friends, and festival parties. Also, in-depth interviews were conducted in an effort to delve into the complexity and dynamics of mediated communication within transnational families.

Of all the 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

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[3] London has two thirds of the irregular migrant population in Britain (Gordon, Scanlon, Travers, & Whitehead, 2009), which is the main reason it was chosen as the fieldwork site. Initial contacts with migrants were made by London-based Chinese migration networks and communities, such as UK Fujian Business Association and Chinese Church in London. Given that I was studying a "hidden" population of illegal 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.

villages in Fujian, Shandong, Hubei, Jiangxi, Liaoning, Jilin, and Heilongjiang Provinces, though some are from urban areas like Shanghai and Tianjin. Some were smuggled to Britain without documentation, whereas others have overstayed their student, business, or travel visas. More than half of these illegal migrants (29/45) have applied for asylum in the name of humanitarian protection to prolong their stay in Britain; nearly half of these (13) have become documented (indefinite leave to remain or discretionary leave for certain years) primarily due to the Legacy Scheme[4] launched by Home Office in 2007, whereas others were rejected or still awaiting a decision.

In line with previous literature, the occupations of more than half of the participants lie within catering business, including chef, kitchen worker, waitstaff, and delivery driver. Other occupations of migrants include 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 of them migrated with, or later were joined by, their husbands. Given that the one-child policy was not strictly implemented in rural China, most of the participants have at least two children. Apart from some of the documented parents (7/13) who had their children joining them, the majority of the participants have to endure long-term separation from their children. Normally, father-away families resemble the conventional family structure to a certain degree— fathers go out for work, leaving children in the custody of their mothers. In both-parents-away families, the role of caregiver is mainly assigned to other female relatives, such as (mainly paternal) grandmother or female cousins. In a mother-away family, left-behind fathers take on the responsibility of childrearing, although in most cases with the assistance of other female kin. In some cases in which the migrant mother is divorced or widowed, it is primarily (maternal) female relatives who shoulder caregiving duties.

All the participants stated that they have used ICT in the past 20 years, and the majority of them regularly use at least one mode of ICT, including prepaid phone cards, smartphones, and tablet computers, along with various types of Internet-based communication software, such as QQ, WeChat, and Weibo (see Table 1). Participants who migrated to Britain in the early 2000s relied heavily 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 mode of transnational communication,[5] some participants have not completely replaced former communication methods. Some participants still use prepaid phone cards to communicate with elderly proxy guardians back home who have limited digital literacy. Also, migrants of the earlier generation do so because of their own lack of digital literacy. Even though they access new media, they frequently use certain functions

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[4] 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 these 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 "amnesty policy" because of the high proportion of applicants granted residency (Travis, 2011).

[5] Normally, undocumented migrants are not allowed to hold local bank accounts. However, it is not uncommon for them to use a legal migrant friend's account to have a registered mobile number that allows for inexpensive data roaming.

that require relatively less digital knowledge (visual- or voice-based communication), such as webcam calls and VoIP (voice over Internet phone).

Table 1. ICTs Adopted to Contact Left-Behind Families.

Digital communication tools	Number of adopting respondents
Social networking sites (Weibo, Qzone, the WeChat Moments)	32
Webcam session (WeChat webcam, QQ webcam)	42
Instant message (WeChat message, QQ message)	39
Telephone (Prepaid phone card)	23
Total	45

Extending Traditional Parenting: Caring Mothers and Authoritarian Fathers

Among the 45 respondents who were interviewed concerning their experience in transnational communication with left-behind families, nine males and 12 females reported behavior and attitudes that conformed to the parenting mode in accordance with traditional Chinese gender culture. Most of these "traditional" parents are migrants of an older generation who were smuggled to Britain around the 1990s and are about 50 years old or come from rural areas in Fujian, Shandong, or northeastern China, where traditional gender ideology is especially embraced and entrenched. They are proud of the idea that they can fulfill their parenting duties by conforming to the gendered role assigned to them. In this vein, the mediated parent-child relation, which is reshaped by communication technology, mirrors the extension of traditional gendered parenthood practices.

Xiao Wen is a migrant mother from Fushun, an eastern prefecture-level city in Liaoning. Her 18-year-old daughter left her hometown and moved to Beijing to attend university. This means that she is 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 keep Xiao Wen worrying. As a result, her routinized mothering strategy consists 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. Whereas Xiao Wen's experience, characterized by care and love, may be taken as a typical example of transnational mothering, much of the communication between migrant fathers and left-behind children revolves around discipline and control.

An old Chinese saying was frequently 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 misbehavior such as skipping school, cheating on an exam, 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 with the child by phone or webcam call. A Fu,

a 40-year-old chef from rural Hubei, became angry after receiving his wife's WeChat message that she found a box of cigarettes in their middle school son's backpack. He recalled scolding this 15-year-old boy via a webcam call:

> 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.

Notably, in the case of distant fathering, it is wives at home who play the primary role in providing intensive supervision, although fathers tend to perform their paternal role by regulating children from a distance. Indeed, media technology fulfills male migrants' needs in being a dutiful authoritarian father; 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 their fathers whom 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 undocumented and separation is extended. 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 prevailing, these older migrants have 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 ICT-mediated "ordinary co-presence" (Nedelcu & Wyss, 2016) via new media: They increase the frequency of regular phone calls, leave the webcam on at any odd moment, and send digital gifts such as WeChat red envelopes (money inside a red envelope given to children as a gift) to their children during anniversaries and festivals. By contrast, male migrants are found to reestablish their fatherhood by intensifying their authoritarian role and imposing discipline more strictly over children via ICTs 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 labor division within transnational families, which is consistent with the technofeminist view that conceptualizes technology as both a source and consequence of gender relations.

Ambivalence Toward Mediated Parenting: Exhausted Mothers and Struggling Fathers

The second category, ambivalence toward mediated parenting, demonstrates a more complicated and dynamic parenting form of behavior when compared with the first pattern. Unlike migrants who are proud of performing gendered parenting duties through various digital tools, parents in this pattern (seven fathers and six mothers) 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 have to 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. 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 labor-intensive jobs. 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 constantly and continuously connected with 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 contribute to the parenting burden for these female migrants. Because of the one-child policy, family resources have been allocated to the singleton 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 requires parents' involvement for cotutorials. As reported, the head teacher of each class sets up a WeChat group that includes course teachers, all the students, and parents. Information such as course schedules, exam results, and teaching plans are published and shared via 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 school. Interestingly, most of the parents involved in the cotutorial group are not left-behind fathers, but rather female migrants. The tasks that teachers assign, such as reviewing and checking children's homework, are often performed by these migrant mothers, while husbands at home, on the whole, are not called on to take on this responsibility.

For migrant fathers, the struggle with and ambivalence about distant parenting are 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. 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 labor 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:

> 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.] 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 occurs among undocumented migrants especially. 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. 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 exacerbate 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 and father of two daughters narrated,

> 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 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, Wilding, and Gifford (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, which allows for some kind of simulation of a warm "virtual family." Yet, congruent with the technofeminist approach that dialectically treats the consequence of technology, it could be argued that media technology also operates as a double-edged sword for these fathers. For Lao Zhou, a 45-year-old unemployed Fujianese man who had been relying on loans for half a year simply to survive, finding his daughter's name on the WeChat listing was like a knife in his heart. It reminded him of his neglect of fathering duties, though he had not tapped on the name to start a conversation for quite a while. The presence of left-behind family associated with ubiquitous connection enabled by digital tools has turned into a haunting nightmare, even as these migrants indulge themselves in casino gaming day and night for self-anesthesia.

Escaping From Gender Expectations: "Self-Interested" Mothers and Sentimental Fathers

In addition to passively struggling with gendered parenting duties, other respondents (including six males and five females) are observed to adopt a more active approach in coping with their parenting crisis. In so doing, they are 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.

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 there (she and her husband traveled 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 was 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 labor in the restaurant and run a small Chinese grocery store in London.

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, 2003; Parreñas, 2001; 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. 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 step 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 favorite dish. The delayed

use of media tools, for Xiu Mei, served as a strategy to avoid the constant burden during work time and also, as she put it, was 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 emergent 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 labor 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 an undocumented 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 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 gender structure cannot be interpreted overoptimistically. As technofeminism reminds us, we cannot dismiss the structural realities behind emancipatory metaphors. 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 of leaving their children, has yet to be altered (Dreby, 2010).

As opposed to mothers who strategically exploit media technology to detach from left-behind families, fathers in this category stress that the need and willingness to interact with their left-behind children become 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 bring improvement of caring skills spontaneously. Because of the long-term cultural expectations and their previous interaction habits with their children, the majority of migrant fathers have the barrier of expressing feelings. Meanwhile, being apart for such a long period, these fathers acknowledged that they are often unfamiliar with their children. 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 vignette, who is currently employed in the back kitchen of a Chinese restaurant. He told me that the migrant labor market in Britain had been immensely influenced by the frequent raids from the immigration office. Given his illegal status, he had no option but to lower his salary expectation 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. 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 has resorted to following his daughter's life by relying on the news feeds through her SNSs (Qzone and WeChat Moments). 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 something frustrating. 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.

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" (e.g., real-time calls) fails to do (Baldassar, 2016, p. 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 this circumstance, 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 via media use, 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," through which subordinated men construct their alternative manhood when unable to deal with the discrepancy between the social ideal and their practical situation.

Conclusion

This study has sought to explore the way in which Chinese migrants in Britain manage their relationship with left-behind children, and, given that a technofeminist perspective has been adopted, a crucial question is whether and how media technology reproduces or undermines existing gender dynamics within transnational families. I argue that the intervention of ICTs in transnational family life does not necessarily lead to egalitarian gender relations. Rather, the consequence associated with media use is situated and differs depending on the specific socio-technical context where transnational parenting takes place.

In general, the use of ICTs 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, this study attempts to give further nuance to the understanding of ICT-based (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, ICTs 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 ICTs has also resulted in the reproduction of conventional gendered dynamics. As for single or divorced migrant mothers, who are usually the main breadwinner, the increasing availability of these ICTs allows them to perform their parenting role, but at the cost of incurring excessive caring burdens. By contrast, for undocumented 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 an independent woman, the delayed use of media technology (e.g., VoIP calls or instant messages) can be a liberating way through which they 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 fulfill 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 ICTs to escape the stereotyped roles of parenting. However, the "atypical parenting" is not a genuine revolution regarding new parenting practice, but serves as a tactic of compromise when migrants face patriarchal parenting expectations. As Wajcman (2004) proposes, technology is always embedded in a macro-socioeconomic environment where women are subjected to patriarchal ideology. The finding concurs with the technofeminist argument, 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.

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