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## **Staying Connected: The Role of WeChat for Maintaining Family Relationships within Chinese Separated Families**

Han, Xiaoying

*Awarding institution:*  
King's College London

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**Staying Connected: The Role of WeChat for  
Maintaining Family Relationships within Chinese  
Separated Families**

**by**

**Xiaoying Han**

**A Thesis Submitted for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in  
Culture, Media and Creative Industries**

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## **Abstract**

There is an increasing public concern in China on the legions of children left behind by their parents due to massive rural to urban labour migration in the past decades. It was estimated that there were 61 million left-behind children in China in 2018. The hukou system, a household registration system established in China since 1958, has intensified institutional and social barriers between rural and urban China and created far-reaching economic and social problems, which have prompted a large number of migrants to leave their children behind in their birthplace. As a result, how to keep in touch and maintain family relations has become one of the most crucial issues for Chinese separated families due to internal migration. In such a context, social media like WeChat serve as crucial tools in helping Chinese migrants to fulfil familial duties from a distance, sustain bonds with their left-behind children, and to foster emotional links with family members at home.

This thesis investigates how Chinese separated families engage with social media and for what purposes; illustrates how parents, carers (mainly grandparents) and children use social media, perceive, and interpret their roles in family lives in different ways; and explores how family relationships are shaped by social media like WeChat within Chinese separated families. It employs mixed methods to comprehend the relationship between the use of WeChat and family lives of Chinese separated families, including an online survey, semi-structured interviews, child-focused interviews and creative online workshops. The participants of this research, including parents, carers, children, and schoolteachers, are mainly recruited from a primary school in a city in Liaoning province in Northeast China.

Since the maintenance of long-distance familyhood is a collective work that consists of parents, carers, and children, the research findings are presented from the perspectives of the three parties. This thesis shows that social media like WeChat has primarily been seen as parenting and surveillance tools instead of communication tools among parent-participants, who attempt to exert control over children and maintain authority from a distance. It illuminates how carers play the roles as facilitators, observers, and gatekeepers in mediating parent-child communications and relationships. It also demonstrates how the child participants, exercising their agency, use WeChat to seek parental involvement and resist the practices of parental surveillance. By bringing together the perspectives of the three parties, there are three dimensions that are associated with the quality of mediated relationships in the Chinese cultural context: 1) media policy, media access, and media literacy impact online communication, which in turn shapes mediated relationships; 2) care arrangements have been identified as a

key factor that has implications for long-distance relationships; 3) the value of filial piety continues to play a pivotal role in shaping parent-child and parent-carer relationships in Chinese separated families.

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*This thesis was originally dedicated to Chinese left-behind children and separated families.  
Now I want to dedicate it to all families that experienced family separation around the world  
during the COVID-19 pandemic.*

# 1. Introducing the Study

## 1.1 Introduction

When Yue, a 25-year-old migrant mother, picked up my video call on WeChat, she was sitting in a kitchen making dumplings for dinner. She told me shyly that she was a bit nervous as she was not wearing any makeup. ‘I usually just make video calls with my family members. I don’t know, I guess to me it’s something quite intimate,’ she said. When Yue saw that I was wearing a t-shirt and was sitting next to my bed, she became much more relaxed, and happily took me on a virtual tour of her ‘home’, a flat she shared with five migrant workers in Dalian, the second largest city in Liaoning Province, China. Yue had been working in a hair salon in Dalian for six years. She wanted to buy a small flat in the city, settle down and bring her 6-year-old daughter with her. Since birth, her daughter had been taken care of by her grandfather in her hometown.

Yue talked passionately about her daughter and was eager to share their moments of joy,

‘My daughter loves drawing. I enjoy drawing together with her, but I can’t do it now. Oh, and she always asks me to braid her hair, that’s sweet, isn’t it? But she has to keep her hair short now because her grandpa doesn’t know how to do her hair’.

At one point, Yue became tearful when she recalled the moments she had had with her daughter and the constraints she had faced,

‘You know what, the happiest moment of my day is to video call my daughter. After a long and tiring day, I love lying on the bed and talking to my daughter. She often asks when she can see me next time and tells me how much she misses me. We give each other lots of kisses through the camera. It makes me feel like we are together.’

We had already been talking for three hours, which was much longer than the original schedule, when Yue suddenly realised that it was already late in the evening. She told me that she had to end our interview now and video call her daughter who needed to be in bed by 8 p.m. Yue would need to call her father-in-law as her daughter did not have her own phone. A couple of

hours later, Yue sent me a message on WeChat: ‘Sorry that I had to go. Thank you for listening to my story. I always keep it to myself as nobody seems to care’.

This family story can be seen as an exemplar of the phenomenon of left-behind children in China, which has come about as a result of mass rural-urban migration over the last number of decades. The term ‘left-behind children’ refers to those young people, aged under 18 and living in rural areas, whose father and/or mother have migrated to other places in China for work for an extended period (Yeoh & Lam, 2007). In 2018, it was estimated that there were over 61 million left-behind children in rural China, among whom at least one parent had migrated without them, equivalent to the population of the United Kingdom (Ministry of Civil Affairs of China, 2018). Family separation due to migration is nothing new in human history. However, what distinguishes the left-behind children phenomenon in China is that first, it is mainly driven by large-scale internal migration; second, it is exacerbated by the restrictions of the *hukou* system, a household registration system in place in China since 1958, which perpetuates the rural-urban division of the country; third, it is characterised by the prevalence of intergenerational childcare, where children are cared for by their grandparents. Although these separated families are heterogeneous in terms of household income, care arrangements, gender, and the motivation to migrate, they invariably rely on social media platforms, particularly WeChat in the Chinese context, to maintain family relationships across distances.

This thesis seeks to shed light on the maintenance of long-distance familyhood within Chinese separated families via social media, specifically WeChat, given its dominance in the Chinese market. It aims to investigate how Chinese separated families engage with social media to maintain family relationships and for what purposes, and to explore how their family relationships within Chinese separated families are shaped by social media. It aims to answer three central research questions:

- How are social media like WeChat used by Chinese families with left-behind children and for what purposes?
- What role do social media like WeChat play in the family lives of Chinese separated families?
- In what specific ways are family relationships shaped by social media within Chinese separated families?

Situated within the field of media studies, this interdisciplinary research offers methodological and empirical insights into the use of digital media and its impact on Chinese separated families. This study employs mixed methods, including an online survey with parents, semi-structured interviews, child-focused interviews with parents, teachers, and carers, and creative online workshops with children in a school setting to highlight the agency and perspectives of different family members. The research seeks to comprehend the implications of social media like WeChat for the family lives of Chinese separated families. It treats family as a whole and ensures the fair representation of those involved in long-distance communication, including parents, children, and carers. Participants in this study were recruited from a primary school (hereafter M school) in F city, located in Liaoning province in Northeast China.

Based on the data collected from different groups of participants, the thesis seeks to illustrate how parents, carers and children use WeChat, and how they perceive and interpret its role in shaping family relations in different ways. This study enhances knowledge in three ways: 1) By adopting a child-focused approach, it highlights children's digital practices in maintaining long-distance family relationships; 2) It underscores the pivotal role of grandparents in shaping family dynamics; and 3) It provides insights into the complex ways in which WeChat shapes family relationships in the context of high mobility in China. By shedding light on how separated families in China use WeChat, this research has important implications for our understanding of family relationships and digital media within the Chinese cultural context.

The primary aim of this introductory chapter is to outline the context of the thesis. I first briefly describe the development of internal migration in contemporary China. I then explain the *hukou* system and its implications for Chinese separated families. Thereafter, I highlight the current developments of ICT infrastructure in China, illustrate the importance and prevalence of WeChat, and the impact of regulatory aspects of ICT policies in China. Finally, I outline the structure of the thesis.

## **1.2 Internal migration in China**

In the past two decades, internal migration in China has attracted enormous public and scholarly attention. A report by the National Bureau of Statistics of China stated that the total number of migrant workers reached 292.51 million in 2021 (National Bureau of Statistics of

China, 2021). Internal migration in China is mainly characterised by rural-to-urban migration,<sup>1</sup> as the majority of the migrant population are so-called *nonmingong* (agricultural migrant workers), who used to be agricultural workers and have migrated to cities to take up non-agricultural jobs. The rapid surge of migration only became a highly visible phenomenon in China after the 1980s as a result of economic reforms and rapid urbanisation. Internal migration can be roughly divided into three main periods: before 1958, the 1960s to 1970s, and from 1978 onwards.

The People's Republic of China (PRC) was established by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 1949. When the so-called 'new China' was established in 1949, infrastructure construction and factories in urban cities required rural labour. A large number of farmers migrated to the cities to work in factories and mining and coal plants (Li, 1997). In the early 1950s, there were relatively few restrictions on the flow of migration between cities and rural areas. By the second half of the 1950s, collectivisation and crop failures had adversely affected the livelihood of peasants in many parts of China, which forced them to leave their villages and migrate to cities to seek out better-paying jobs (Yu, 2002). The Chinese government labelled these waves of rural-urban migration as 'blind flows' (Cheng & Selden, 1994). To restrict movement, the government initiated a series of regulations on population movement that culminated in the *hukou* system. In 1958, the government began to implement the *hukou* system, registering all Chinese citizens as residents in a specific region based on their birthplace.

Between 1958 and the end of the 1970s,<sup>2</sup> the *hukou* system was designed to rationalise and plan the use of labour, became a major obstacle to human mobility. Under this system, the population was locked into strictly separated agricultural and urban resident categories (Christiansen, 1990). Only those people who were allocated as labourers in urban industries (and their dependents) were seen as urban residents, while the rest by default were members of rural people's communes, each having a share in collective land ownership in a specific production team. China's internal migration policy reflected the philosophy of the socialist planned economy, which was carried out in line with its urban and regional development plans

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<sup>1</sup> Davin (1999) highlights that there are different types of internal migration in China: rural-urban migration, rural-rural migration and urban-rural migration (p. 1).

<sup>2</sup> Under Mao Zedong, the Cultural Revolution took place from 1966 to his death in 1976. Mao sought to remove any traditional and capitalist elements from society and to preserve China's Communist roots. The Revolution was a major failure and led to The Great Famine (1959-1961). In 1978, Deng Xiaoping became the new leader. He gradually began to dismantle the Maoist policies, leading China to open up to the free market.

(Lin, 1999). Under the planned economy, rural workforces were strictly allocated to their birthplaces and unable to move to the cities (Gordon et al., 2000).

Profound changes have taken place in China since 1978. The Chinese government embarked on economic reforms to transform China's planned economy into a market economy, which can be seen as a watershed moment in contemporary Chinese history. This has become the most important driving force in every aspect of Chinese society, including population movement. Since 1978, migration flows in China have been driven by the new and changing socioeconomic circumstances created by economic reform (Liu et al., 2018). From the 1980s onwards, rural migrants kept arriving in large numbers in cities, in search of better employment, because of the potential for higher earnings and better opportunities for social mobility opened up by economic reform (Li Zhang, 2001). The massive migration flows, in turn, accelerated urbanisation and reshaped the social and economic landscapes of both cities and rural areas in China (Rogers & Williamson, 1982). The surge of rural-urban migration contributed to China's economic growth, but at the same time, it has also created substantial social issues such as the left-behind children phenomenon. The core of the problem can be traced back to the *hukou* system.

### **1.3 The *Hukou* system and Chinese separated families**

The *hukou* system has intensified institutional and social barriers between rural and urban China and created far-reaching economic and social issues, which have prompted a large number of migrants to leave their children behind in their birthplace.

*Hukou* is a form of population registration requiring that every Chinese citizen must be registered in one place and one place only. The household is the most common unit for registration, which is documented in the '*hukou* registration book' which records who belongs to the household and their *hukou* types. There are two aspects of registration in the *hukou* system. The first aspect is the *hukou* classification which consists of two categories: the 'agricultural' and 'non-agricultural' (Chan & Zhang, 1999). The categories closely reflect where people lived and their occupations because residents living in the countryside are allocated to an agricultural *hukou* and those living in urban areas are allocated to a non-agricultural *hukou*. These categories continue to distinguish rural Chinese people from urban Chinese people (Fan, 2007). Those with non-agricultural *hukou* registration have access to state welfare, benefits, and housing subsidies which, during the pre-reform period, were designed to take care of the individual from birth to death, and which nowadays continue to privilege urban

Chinese over their rural counterparts. By contrast, in both the pre-reform and reform periods, those with an agricultural *hukou* received little support from the state other than the right to farm (Friedman & Stuetzle, 1981). The second aspect of registration is the *hukou* location that refers to the place of origin or place of registration. The *Hukou* location only allows the individual to acquire access to benefits and welfare in a specific locality that is normally unavailable for an individual whose *hukou* location is somewhere else. In practice, having an urban area as your *hukou* origin is advantageous because of wealthier local governments and the abundance of state-sponsored benefits in urban areas compared to rural areas. Furthermore, a *hukou* origin in larger cities is superior to that in small cities and villages.

The *hukou* system has become a powerful tool for controlling migration in general and rural-urban migration in particular. In line with other institutional mechanisms, such as identity cards, the ability of rural residents to survive in urban areas is restricted by the *hukou* system. These mechanisms involved in the system have a great impact on migrant workers as well as their children. Through the *hukou* system, not only did the state regulate migration but it also constructed two unequal Chinas – one urban and one rural – and divided citizens into two unequal tiers – the privileged urban population and the less privileged rural population (Cheng & Selden, 1994; Christiansen, 1990; Shen & Tong, 1992). In other words, the *hukou* system imposes a de facto ‘birth stratification’ on the Chinese population (Potter, 1983). As a result, the *hukou* system exacerbates inequalities between urban and rural areas in China. On the other hand, internal migration is driven by the poverty of agricultural workers living in the countryside, which in turn has been exacerbated by the *hukou* system. Migration is often viewed as the best option for poor rural households to escape poverty. People choose to migrate to take advantage of jobs elsewhere, to use their skills, or simply because there are few opportunities to earn a living where they reside (Silver, 1994). Whatever the reason, many migrants and their families are affected by the *hukou* system (Rozelle et al., 1999; Taylor et al., 2003; Zhu & Luo, 2010).

Institutional barriers associated with the *hukou* system and changing family structures resulting from migration have created a dilemma for a substantial number of Chinese migrant families. First, migrants and their children face social exclusion in their migration destinations within China. Social exclusion refers to the process whereby individuals or social groups, including migrants, are systematically blocked from or denied full access to various rights, opportunities and resources, key factors for socioeconomic integration that are cumulative and reproductive, and are normally available to members of society (Gordon et al., 2000; Littlewood & Herkommer, 1999; Silver, 1994). Due to the *hukou* system, migrants in Chinese



cities continue to be denied welfare benefits such as subsidised housing, public education, and healthcare (Zhou & Cheung, 2017). With no access to subsidised housing and generally low incomes, migrants have to resort to the informal housing market for affordable housing (Huang & Tao, 2015; Huang & Yi, 2014). In addition to crowded living conditions, migrants experience frequent residential moves due to job insecurity. Therefore, it is difficult for them to provide secure shelter for their children in cities.

A lack of educational opportunities can be seen as one of the biggest challenges for children and their families (Zhou et al., 2019). This issue arises because the hukou system segregates rural migrant children and local urban children in Chinese cities (Zhang, 2017). This system stipulates that public schools in Chinese cities admit children based on their registered location of residence (Ma et al., 2018; Zhou et al., 2019). Under these admission regulations, migrant children and their families are left with three options. Firstly, children of temporary migrants, who usually do not have urban registration, are often denied access to urban schools or are enrolled with additional charges (Chen & Liang, 2007; Dong, 2010; Wong et al., 2007). Secondly, due to constraints on attending public schools, many migrant families have no choice but to opt for private, profit-driven, and low-quality schools established specifically for migrant children in urban areas (Dong, 2010; Holly, 2013). However, even though migrant children can choose to attend these private schools between the ages of 12 and 16, they must cease their education in large cities after middle school graduation at the age of 16. These students are not permitted to take the college entrance examination outside their hukou registration location. Public high schools in large cities will not admit these students without local hukou, and there are no private high schools catering to the needs of migrant children. The two options mentioned above seem to create a financial burden for migrant families given their low income and job instability (Lu & Zhang, 2004; Zhou & Cheung, 2017).

As a result of these institutional barriers in children's education, a large number of migrant parents have to resort to the third option, which is leaving their children behind. According to the All-China Women's Federation Research Group, 46.74% of rural children experienced both parents migrating, 36.39% had a migrant father, and 16.87% had a migrant mother (ACWF, 2013, p. 3). The question of how to maintain family relations therefore becomes pivotal in the context of family separation. Communication technologies such as social media play an important role in helping families maintain and develop bonds across distance. Given Chinese separated families' dependency on communication technologies, it is necessary to look at the development of technological infrastructure in China and its implications for Chinese families on the move.

## 1.4 The digital landscape in China

Based on data from a report by the China Internet Network Information Centre (CNNIC, 2019), up to June 30, 2020, 940 million people in China were internet users, and 99.1% of them, equivalent to 847 million, had access to the internet via a mobile network. There was a significant disparity in internet penetration rates between urban and rural China (McDonald, 2016). The Chinese government has therefore actively engaged in developing the infrastructure to secure access to information and communication technologies (ICT) in rural China (Oreglia et al., 2011), because ICTs were perceived as an effective tool for rural economic growth (Oreglia, 2014; Qiang et al., 2009). With the aim of reducing poverty and narrowing the urban-rural divide, since the mid-2000s, the Chinese government has put a strong emphasis on informatisation, defined as ‘the transformation of an economy and society through the effective deployment of information and communication technologies in business, social and public functions’ (Qiang et al., 2009, p. 5). Improving mobile telecommunications can be seen as the main priority of top-down state interventions in terms of increasing rural informatisation (McDonald, 2016). For example, since 2015 the local government of Liaoning province, where the case study school of this thesis is located, has invested 2 billion RMB (241 million GBP) in the rural informatisation infrastructure, with internet penetration (4G coverage and fibre internet) reaching 95% in rural areas by the end of 2018 (Liaoning Communications Administration, 2021).

With the growth of online connections, internet-enabled smartphones and the prevalence of communication apps, the boundaries between mobile phones and the internet have become blurred (Lim et al., 2015). The popularity of instant communication applications reflects widespread internet penetration across the country as well as the indispensable role of mobile technology in people’s everyday lives (CNNIC, 2019). In the context of family separation, Chinese migrants have embraced WeChat (the most popular social media app in China), via their smartphones, to fulfil familial duties from a distance, sustain bonds with their left-behind families, and foster emotional links with family members at home (Choi & Peng, 2016; Gan, 2020; Sheng, 2019). There are two factors that can explain the prevalence of smartphones among Chinese migrant workers. First, there is the availability of low-cost smartphones, with a price tag below RMB 2,000 (about £200) or even RMB 1,000 (about £100). According to a 2018 report, the average monthly income of migrant workers was RMB 3,721 (about £372) (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2021). This suggests that internet-enabled smartphones may be more affordable than other more expensive communication tools

such as laptops. Second, as migrant workers often have to move due to job insecurity and unstable income, migrant workers are also less likely to purchase and install electronic devices such as desktop computers in their rental housing.

It is worth noting that the internet in China is dominated by domestic internet companies, which hold a monopoly over the digital landscape in China. The Great Firewall – the Chinese government’s censorship infrastructure – blocks a variety of foreign websites and platforms (Roberts, 2018). As a result, popular social media apps such as WhatsApp, Instagram, and Facebook are not accessible in China. This market dynamic allows the Chinese government to further engage in social media censorship (J. Pan, 2017). According to the latest data released by CNNIC, there were 3.02 million apps on the Chinese internet in 2021 (CNNIC, 2021), a large number of which are popular primarily in China (Harwit, 2017). The success of Chinese social media companies in the domestic market is largely due to their willingness to act in compliance with government censorship directives (e.g. – content removal) (King et al., 2013, 2014; Pan, 2017).

In terms of instant messaging platforms, WeChat is the most used app in China with the largest number of downloads and users since 2013 (Kuang, 2017). According to first quarter results released by China’s largest internet company, Tencent Global (2022), there were over 1.2 billion active users on WeChat up until March 2022. Many studies have pointed out that WeChat has become one of the most important applications in Chinese people’s daily lives (Harwit, 2017; Lin et al., 2017; Wu & Wall, 2019). WeChat is a smartphone app that was launched by Tencent in 2011. Users can download the app for free and send free messages, which enables Chinese users to avoid fees charged by the state-owned mobile phone companies (Harwit, 2017). This appealing feature of WeChat therefore attracts many migrant workers and their families to this platform for family communications. In addition to common affordances available on the messaging app, such as text messaging, voice messaging and video calls, WeChat also offers services such as online payment, news subscriptions and e-commerce. As Wu and Wall (2019) note, from a Western perspective, ‘it is as if WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter, PayPal and Apple Pay were all contained in a single mobile application’ (p. 37). In addition, Tencent constantly adds new affordances to attract more users, which prompts WeChat to constantly innovate. For example, version 4.0 of WeChat, introduced in 2012, added the Facebook-like feature of *Penyouquan* (朋友圈 Friends’ Circle). This social networking function is designed as a private community for sharing photos, texts, and articles, where users’ posts are restricted to their friends on WeChat. Because of these non-stop innovations, WeChat

itself can be seen as a polymedia as it creates an environment for proliferating communicative opportunities that function as an ‘intergraded structure’. Within this context, individuals can switch between affordances to manage interpersonal communication (Madianou & Miller, 2012, p. 13).

Since online communication through social media is essential to family communications, it is important to pay attention to the regulatory aspects that may shape these communications. In February 2012, China started implementing real-name registration in microblogs and other internet services. This year was a landmark in the history of the Chinese internet because since then there has been increasingly less anonymity in cyberspace (Fu et al., 2013; Lee & Liu, 2016; Negro, 2013). In line with the measures issued by the central government, the top four microblogging companies –Tencent, Sina, NetEase, and Sohu – asked users to register themselves using their true identity, including names, ID numbers, and mobile phone numbers (Lee & Liu, 2016). In December 2012, the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress (NPC) issued a new law decreeing that ‘network service providers should require their users to provide real identity information when signing contracts to provide users with website access, landline or mobile phone access, or social networking services’ (NPC Standing Committee, 2012, p. 84). As a result, a wider range of online service providers had to follow the real-name registration policy.

Thereafter, the Chinese government expanded real-name registration to users of instant messaging platforms, including WeChat. For instance, the first Cybersecurity Law promulgated in China in 2015 requires everyone to provide their real identity when they register an account on social media applications and websites, and users’ personal information must be verified by providers, who are required to deny service to users who refuse to comply with the regulation. As Lagerkvist (2012) points out, control practices that target internet businesses in general and the use of social media in China in particular, follow mainly from the party-state’s desire to curb threats to socio-political stability. The real-name registration policy was also introduced to SIM card services after 2013. The Ministry of Industry and Information Technology (MIIT) released Document No. 25 and mandated that only those who use a SIM card registered with a real name can continue to use their mobile phone plan (MIIT, 2013).

The state’s regulation of cyberspace and telecommunication services has had unintended consequences for Chinese separated families who rely heavily on WeChat to contact their children. The real-name registration regulations have created obstacles to children accessing SIM cards and WeChat accounts. According to Document No. 25, for minors who

are under 16, their legal guardians must buy telecom services on their behalf in the local branches of mobile telecommunication companies, whereas the service providers must register the ID information of the legal guardians (People's Daily, 2021). This may reduce parents' incentive to apply for SIM cards for their children. Moreover, WeChat requires users to use their phone numbers to verify if the user is the account holder. Without a real-name registered SIM card, child users can not register a WeChat account by themselves and get it verified. The implication here is that many left-behind children rely on their carers to access the social media app. Given current ICT regulations, carers who provide mobile and WeChat access to children play an increasingly important role in long-distance communication between migrant parents and children via WeChat, which can be seen as one of the features of mediated communication in Chinese separated families.

### **1.5 Family Relationships in Chinese Separated Families**

Family separation is one of the basic features that describes the structural transformation resulting from migration. Childcare is one important issue for families where there has been parental migration. With regards to Chinese internal migration, Murphy (2020) describes several types of care arrangement, namely, 'mother at home, father out' families, 'lone-migrant mother, at-home father' families, and skipped-generation families involving care by grandparents (p. 5). Children living with grandparents or with a stay-behind parent is the most common arrangement (Ye et al., 2005). According to data collected by the All-China Women's Federation, 32.67% of left-behind children were cared for by grandparents in Chinese families where both parents had migrated (ACWF, 2013, p. 31).

Based on the above, a key question needs to be asked: why is kinship care, whereby primarily grandparents look after children, so common among Chinese separated families? The answer is that, in East Asia, similar to elsewhere, the family occupies an essential space in the reality and imagination of societies and individuals (Bhandari & Titzmann, 2017). This is consistent with the mutual aid model, in which each household member's capacity is driven by the success of the household as a whole (Lee & Xiao, 1998). Adult children may be motivated to migrate in order to improve the household's economic status if their parents are willing to look after their left-behind grandchildren. As Chang et al. (2011) describe, those who are left behind in the extended family come to rely on their grandparents as an effective support system. By acting as caregivers for their left-behind grandchildren, grandparents increase their migrant children's economic capacity to reciprocate in the form of remittances (Agree et al., 2002),

which may compensate for the grandparents' efforts as surrogate parents. This form of intergenerational exchange has been referred to as an 'intergenerational contract' (Croll, 2006, p. 473), and has been observed in several Asian countries, including China (Cong & Silverstein, 2011).

Although Asian countries embrace the cultural and religious diversity of all major belief systems, including Confucianism, Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism and Christianity, there is a sociocultural coherence, placing a high value on familial obligation and harmony, the core message of which is filial piety or duty (E. J. Croll, 2006). In Chinese and other Asian societies, parent-child relationships are commonly described in terms of filial piety. 'Filial' means the relationship between children and their parents, while 'piety' embodies respect, honour, fidelity, devotion, dutifulness, and sacrifice (Tsai, 1999). Filial piety as a traditional Chinese value is defined as respect, honour, loyalty, and obligation within the parent-child relationship (Yu, 1984). In Chinese culture, filial piety serves as the guideline for parent-child interactions and family ethics, which is thought to produce harmonious intergenerational relationships (Yeh et al., 2013). Sociologists and anthropologists have pointed out that the Confucian idea of family is very distinct from the equivalent concept in the West (see Baker, 1979; Chu & Yu, 2010; Scharff, 2020). As Baker (1979) observes:

In the West, we see the family as an institution which exists in large part to provide an environment in which the individual can be conveniently raised and trained to go out into the world as a full member of society. An indication of the validity of this notion is the break-up of the family when the children reach adulthood. But the emphasis in the traditional Chinese situation was reversed—it was not the family which existed in order to support the individual, but rather the individual who existed in order to continue the family (p. 26).

In order to understand family relationships within separated Chinese families and how they are shaped by social media, this thesis perceives 'family' to be a collective unit comprising 'parents', 'children' and 'carers' (very often grandparents), which is underpinned by the hierarchical dynamics between family members and serve to continue the family.

## **1.6 Thesis outline**

Following this introduction, Chapter 2 highlights the key literature on migration, media, and family. To date, few studies have theorised the dynamic between family relations and social media in the context of internal migration in China. As Chinese separated families in the context of migration are under-researched, I first delineate the current conceptual developments of studies on long-distance communication in transnational families to enrich the theoretical underpinnings of this research. I then explain the sociocultural context of Chinese families and discuss previous research on internal migration and its implications for Chinese migrants and their families. I conclude the chapter by identifying the research gaps in current studies on digital practices in Chinese separated families.

Chapter 3 mainly discusses the methodological and ethical considerations of the research design. In order to understand how migrant families use WeChat, the role of WeChat in their lives, and its impact on family relationships. The thesis employed mixed methods, including an online survey, semi-structured interviews, child-focused interviews, and creative online workshops—all undertaken online because of the challenges wrought by the COVID pandemic. Following an introduction to the field site and the school that serves as the case study, I first discuss the initial findings of a pilot study conducted from June to July 2019 to explain the rationale for the research design and how it had to change with the onset of COVID-19. Since the main research was undertaken during the COVID-19 outbreak, a contingency plan was needed. I outline the evolution of the research design before and after the pandemic, elaborate on each of the methods employed in the thesis, and explain how they helped to address the research questions. Thereafter, I discuss the details of the data collection and data analysis. Based on my experience of conducting research during a period of social distancing, I also reflect on the benefits and limitations of online research when it comes to studying long-distance communications.

Based on data collected from an online survey with parents and parental interviews, Chapter 4 examines the views of migrant parents on being parents from a distance via social media like WeChat. The chapter is underpinned by the three main research questions, but from the parental perspectives. The survey data first provides a brief overview of how social media like WeChat are used within participant families in terms of media access, media use and care arrangements. Insight into how family relationships are shaped by social media are guided by discussion of the parental interpretation of the role of WeChat as a parenting facilitator and surveillance tool. The focus then turns to discussing the parental understanding of how family relationships traditionally shaped of filial piety are impacted by social media and the intermediary role of carers in mediated family relationships. As the COVID-19 pandemic

amplified difficulties in mediated communication, this chapter is concluded by highlighting the issues that were revealed by the COVID crisis.

Based on interviews with family carers and schoolteachers, Chapter 5 aims to provide greater detail about care arrangements in family homes and how these arrangements sit alongside the boarding environment in the case study school, and the role of social media in family lives from the perspectives of carers and teachers. As participant families rely strongly both on the boarding facilities of the case study school and on home carers (mainly grandparents), this chapter starts by providing background context about the Chinese school system and examining the role of WeChat in maintaining parent-teacher communications. It then explains the reason behind the prevalence of intergenerational childrearing in the Chinese context. Before moving on to discuss their role as observers, facilitators, and gatekeepers, I examine carers' media literacy and digital practices. I then discuss how they understand the role of social media like WeChat in maintaining family relationships. Drawing on carers' accounts, the final part of this chapter discusses the implications of WeChat use for parent-child relationships as well as parent-carer relationships.

Chapter 6 is dedicated to the perspectives of left-behind children and addresses a research gap in the literature on children, digital media and migration. Drawing on data from child-centred interviews and online workshops at school, this chapter first accesses children's media literacy and its consequences on how family communications via WeChat takes place. It then identifies the challenges that child participants encounter while communicating with their parents and highlights their creativity in responding to the difficulties embedded in mediated communication. By comparing the different perspectives of adult family members (parents and carers) and left-behind children, the chapter offers insights into children's understanding of the role of WeChat in their family lives. It sheds light on the children's viewpoints about how social media shape family relationships. More specifically, it highlights children's understandings in terms of enacting relationships with their migrant parents via WeChat and carers' intervention in parent-child relationships.

Chapter 7 draws together the multi-perspective analysis of long-distance family practices through social media like WeChat within Chinese separated families comprising parents, carers, and children in relation to the three main research questions to portray a holistic picture of familyhood. I begin to compare the perspectives of the parents, carers, and children in terms of their digital practices. I then move on to juxtapose the perspectives of the three parties on the role of social media in the negotiation of family relations. In term of the relation between social media and family relationships, three key dimensions account for the success



or failure in mediated family relationships in the Chinese cultural context: media related aspects (media policy, media access and media literacy), care arrangements, and the value of filial piety. At the end of this chapter, I reflect on the limitations and contributions of this thesis and make some recommendations for future research.

## **2. Conceptual, Theoretical and Contextual Approaches to Migration, Media, and Family**

### **2.1 Introduction**

This chapter offers an overview of the key literature on migration, media, and family, with the aim of delineating the theoretical and contextual underpinnings of this thesis. It is organised around two themes: separated families in the context of internal migration in China, and transnational families and communication across distance. To begin with, I review previous studies on internal migration and its impact on those families who are involved in such movements. In the next section, I first introduce the evolution of media technologies used for long-distance communication in transnational families. Through discussion of the major debates surrounding digital media and interpersonal communication, I then highlight the key concepts and approaches that shed light on the impact of digital media on interpersonal communication. Thereafter, I discuss current conceptual developments related to family relationships in the digital era and explain the rationale for choosing the theoretical framework for this thesis. Given that family value is an important variable that impacts family interactions, the third section describes the sociocultural context of Chinese families to explain why a key traditional family value – filial piety – is important and how it is implicated in family relationships in the Chinese cultural context. In the final section, I identify the research gaps in the current literature and establish the scholarly contribution of this thesis.

### **2.2 Parental migration and left-behind children in China**

Studies in both Chinese and English advocate the presence of two parents for children's development, notably to ensure their academic achievement and emotional well-being (Arguillas & Williams, 2010; Booth, 2003; Coleman, 1988; Kandel & Kao, 2001; Lv & Wang, 2017). However, accelerated geographical mobility in contemporary China has prompted the emergence of new forms of family and childcare. With the backdrop of internal migration, Murphy (2020) describes three different types of families that have emerged from this context, namely, 'mother at home, father out' families, 'lone-migrant mother, at-home father' families, and skipped-generation families (p. 181). Such 'unconventional' family forms invite us to come up with new terms to capture the new family structure.

There is an extensive body of scholarship within sociology, economics, demography and family studies that investigates families impacted by internal migration within single nation-states (Fan, 1999; Lu et al., 2019; Zhong et al., 2017). Given this context, Michaela Schier (2016) proposes the concept of multi-local families to explicitly capture how people arrange family practices and their everyday lives in the context of job-related mobility, parental separation and migration. The term ‘multi-local family’ is not restricted to one specific scale: it does not matter if the places of residence are close to each other or located in different places, regions, across international borders or continents (Schier, 2016, p. 45). As Kilkey and Palenga-Möllenneck (2016a) point out, the concept of multi-local families invites us to reconsider the divide between research on international migration and internal migration.

In English-language social science research, the term ‘migrant families’ is widely adopted to refer to Chinese families that are physically separated as a result of internal migration (Gan, 2020; Murphy, 2020; Ye & Pan, 2011). However, this term fails to characterise the diversity of childcare within Chinese families given the fact that some Chinese migrant workers choose to migrate with their children, and some leave their children in their birthplaces. There are also terms such as ‘left-behind family’ that are also commonly used in Chinese-language social science publications (Liu et al., 2021; Tao et al., 2019; Wu & Gan, 2022), which however obfuscate the holistic family picture by only emphasising the left-behind side of the family. To illuminate the geographical separation of family members and consider the family as a unit, I will use the term *Chinese separated families* to refer to those who experience family separation as a result of internal migration.

Currently, an increasing number of studies, conducted by both Chinese and non-Chinese scholars, are focusing on examining the complicated and multifaceted aspects of rural-urban migration in China. One strand of scholarship is primarily concerned with the determinants of internal migration (see Knight, 2008; Sicular et al., 2007; Zhao & Tong, 2000). Harris and Todaro (1970), for instance, demonstrated the huge wage gap resulting from the imbalances between regions in terms of the supply of and demand for labour-spurred migration. Internal migration in China has also been driven by socioeconomic inequalities between different areas, provinces and cities. The prosperous development in the Eastern regions of China, particularly the urban areas, has created substantial inequalities between provinces (see Benjamin et al., 2007; Sicular et al., 2007; Zhao & Tong, 2000). This economic and social disequilibrium between Chinese provinces has triggered massive migration streams since the late 1980s (see Cai & Wang, 2006; Chen & Clouston, 2002; Knight, 2008; Knight & Song, 1999). On the other hand, there are huge income gaps within and between urban and rural areas

(Sicular et al., 2007). In other words, migrant workers are able to earn significantly higher incomes in cities than in their home villages, which enables them to sustain the livelihoods of their families (Ma, 2002).

Another strand of literature focuses on how the *hukou* system affects welfare benefits such as housing, the education of migrant children, and medical benefits among migrant workers (see Dong & Goodburn, 2019; Lu & Zhou, 2013; Yang & Fan, 2012). It is not possible to study internal migration in China without paying attention to the social and economic implications of the *hukou* system. The institutional barriers associated with the *hukou* system have resulted in the social exclusion of migrants' offspring as they have very limited access to educational opportunities (Chen & Liang, 2007). Under the *hukou* system, students who intend to enrol at public schools need to reside and be registered in the same school district where the schools are located since local governments are responsible for paying for their educational expenses. Children of migrant workers, who usually are not registered in urban areas, are often denied access to schools in urban areas or they can only enrol by paying additional fees (see Chen & Liang, 2007; Dong, 2010; Wong et al., 2007). As the population of migrant children continues to grow, the central government announced in 2001 that local governments and local public schools are responsible for the education of migrant children. However, the actual implementation of this policy varies by area. In reality, many migrant children still do not have equal access to schools in urban areas, and are therefore left at home (Dong, 2010).

The Chinese government, in fact, has launched a series of reforms over the past two decades as the *hukou* system has elicited much criticism within and outside China (Chan, 2010). In 2003, for instance, the State Council issued a directive affirming the rights of rural migrants to work in cities (Cai, 2003; Chan, 2010). These reforms, however, did not fundamentally change the system and have had only limited effects on improving migrant workers' situations and their children's well-being. This explains why the well-being of Chinese migrants and their children is gaining increasing attention among scholars and has been extensively studied in terms of access to welfare benefits such as subsidised housing, public education, and healthcare (see Huang & Tao, 2015; Wu et al., 2013; Xiang, 2003). With no access to subsidised housing and having generally low incomes, many migrants have to resort to the informal housing market to find affordable accommodation (see Huang & Tao, 2015; Huang & Yi, 2014; Wang et al., 2010). Housing of poor quality, built by suburban villagers, low-cost housing such as factory dorms, and illegal housing such as storage basements, are common shelters for migrants (Huang et al., 2016). These cramped conditions demotivate migrant parents and prevent them from bringing their children with them to live in the cities.

Migrant workers and their children are also generally excluded from the healthcare system in cities. In cities, the ‘Basic Medical Insurance Scheme for Urban Employment’ was established as early as 1994. However, very few migrants are covered by this scheme due to the fiscal concerns of local governments and difficulties in implementation (Xiang, 2003). And for those who are covered, their children, very often, are excluded from the scheme. In fact, in rural areas, there is a so-called ‘Co-operative Medical System’, which provides basic medical services to rural residents. The scheme, however, has very limited coverage and a low reimbursement rate due to limited government funding (Xiang, 2003). Despite the significant improvement of the ‘Co-operative Medical System’ in recent years, the gap between healthcare systems in urban and rural areas is still large. As a result of the *hukou* system, in general, more efforts and money are required for rural migrant workers to bring up their children in the cities. Many migrant workers are therefore forced to leave their children behind. Higher education costs in cities was cited as the major reason for migrant workers to leave their children behind in their hometown (Duan et al., 2005). Other factors for leaving children behind in the home province include the higher living costs in cities, the lack of spare time for carrying out parental duties, the unstable status of parents and poor adaptation of children to city life because the school curriculum varies in different administrative districts (Duan et al., 2005; Zhou et al., 2014). In addition, as the forms of the National College Entrance Examination, commonly known as *gaokao*, varies among the different provinces, those children who have migrated with their parents have to return to their *hukou* origin (registered place of residency) before attending high school in order to get accustomed to the different curriculum (Ye et al., 2005).<sup>3</sup> All these factors explain why many migrant workers have no choice but to leave their children behind in their hometowns.

Not surprisingly, left-behind children are commonly perceived as a marginalised group living in an unstable environment, lacking parental care and love, and receiving inadequate discipline and guidance. Several studies have been conducted to identify the problems left-behind children experience in relation to education, mental health and social behaviour (Fan, 2002; Wu et al., 2013). Some literature has suggested that left-behind children have more psychological problems, including inadequate family bonding and emotional vulnerability. Moreover, higher rates of depression and anxiety have been reported among left-behind children compared with their age-matched peers (Cheng et al., 2013). Some studies have also

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<sup>3</sup> One can only take the *gaokao* at his/her *hukou* of origin.

argued that left-behind children often feel a lack of affection and attention and even develop resentment toward their parents (Ye & Pan, 2011).

Although rural-to-urban migration in China has been intensively studied from different perspectives (migration, sociology, political science, psychology, and education), little attention has been paid to a fundamental aspect of this social world: family life. Rachel Murphy is one scholar who pays attention to the family life of Chinese migrant families. In her book *The Children of China's Great Migration*, Murphy (2020) proposes the term 'striving team' (p. 182) to describe Chinese multilocal families in which parents, children and grandparents work collectively in search of a better life. Drawing on in-depth interviews with 109 children, and matched interviews with the children's caregivers and teachers in two major migrant-sending provinces in China, Murphy's (2020) analysis not only offers a nuanced sociological study that highlights the dynamic of intergenerational reciprocity in the Chinese cultural context but also prioritises children's viewpoints, experiences and agency in parent-child and grandparent-child dyads. Murphy's (2020) research design inspires me to adopt child-centred approaches to address children's perspectives in terms of maintaining long-distance familyhood. According to Murphy's research findings, parental migration profoundly changed Chinese childhoods when children were incorporated into the 'striving teams.' Not only parents and grandparents but also schools were found to actively promote the value of filial piety since it represents traditional Chinese family values. From the children's perspective, 'study' prevailed as the major means for them to repay the intergenerational debt and reciprocate their parents' sacrifice (Murphy, 2020, p. 216). Murphy's work helps us understand how intergenerational families function and how children navigate their lives in the context of parental migration in China. However, we still know little about how everyday family practices are communicated across geographical distance, a gap which this research attempts to fill.

Nevertheless, although maintaining long-distance communications, especially those between parents and children, is crucial to Chinese separated families, the previous literature on internal migration in China has largely neglected the role of communication technologies. According to a non-governmental organisation's white paper on the mental health status of left-behind children in China, over 50% of left-behind children communicated with their parents at least twice a week. In fact, 23.9% of them contacted their parents via phone or the internet almost every day (On the Road to School, 2015). Since such parent-child relationships are increasingly dependent on communication technologies, a handful of studies have examined the use of mobile phones among migrant parents and left-behind children (Liu & Leung, 2017). However, in recent years, social media such as QQ, WeChat, and mobile phone

applications have replaced texting and calling as the major means of long-distance communication among Chinese migrant families (Sheng, 2019). Gan Yumei's doctoral research made methodological and empirical contributions to the understanding of family lives via ICTs within Chinese migrant families. In her thesis, Gan (2020) adopted the methodology of qualitative video analysis to study the use of video-mediated communication in migrant families with young children (aged under 3). This approach uses 'audio-visual recordings as an analytic resource with which to explore, discover, and explicate the practices and reasoning, the cultures and competencies, the social organisations on which people rely to accomplish their ordinary, daily activities' (Heath et al., 2010, p. 5). Through analysing video recordings of video calls in participant families, Gan (2020) observed that multigenerational families (parents, children, grandparents) are all involved in using linguistic and embodied resources to create meanings for affective relationships across distance. The study highlighted the role of grandparents in enabling young children's engagement with remote parents. Gan (2010) proposed the term 'facilitated three-party calls' (p. 158) to describe the scenario where grandparents facilitate the accomplishment of an interaction sequence between parents and children. However, the video-based approach employed in Gan's research solely focused on examining the communication process per se rather than the participants' account of their feelings and experiences of being families across distance. Additionally, Gan's study only explored the experiences of very young children under 3 years old, rather than older children. The present study focuses on children aged 8-13 who can better express their feelings and thoughts.

As stated in the previous chapter, the purpose of this research is to study the impact of social media, and WeChat in particular, on maintaining family relationships within Chinese separated families. Although the groundwork laid by the existing research on internal migration provides useful insights into the experiences of Chinese migrant workers in cities, the implications of the *hukou* system, and the impact of parental migration on children's well-being in rural China, more theorisation is needed on the dynamic between family relations and social media in the context of internal migration in China. Therefore, this research examines these theoretical frameworks in the broader field of international migration and considers their theoretical implications for understanding the Chinese case.

### **2.3 Transnational families and communication**

Since the 1990s, globalisation and transnationalism have come to dominate the language of the social sciences (Castles et al., 2014). Countries such as the United States, Canada, and Australia are still considered to be classical immigration destinations. Europe is another major destination for migrants. European countries, in general, have a long history of both significant emigration and immigration (Castles et al., 2014). In the literature, these developed countries are commonly referred to as the Global North. Asian countries such as the Philippines and Indonesia where overseas working is particularly common are generally referred to as the Global South. Asia has experienced large-scale, sustained and diversified population movements since the 1970s (Asis & Piper, 2018). Different Asian countries have experienced different migration processes as a result of uneven regional development and international relations (Parreñas, 2005a). Based on the most recent data, about 2 million Filipino children (5% of the total population) have one or two parents working overseas (UNICEF, 2010). Furthermore, over 2.15 million are left behind in Indonesia – i.e. with one or both parents working overseas (UNESCO, 2017). Since there is an increasing demand for female labour in the healthcare and domestic sector in the Global North (Madianou & Miller, 2012a), the recent intensification of global migration and the increasing feminisation of migration has brought about a new type of transnational family where women seek employment in the Global North, leaving their children behind in the Global South (see Asis & Baggio, 2003; Gamburd, 2003; Hugo, 2000; Jolly et al., 2003).

The term ‘transnational families’ refers to families in which parents (predominantly mothers) and children are physically separated because migrant parents have left their children in their country of origin due to constraints in the receiving society’s environment, such as restrictive immigration policies (Kilkey & Palenga-Möllenbeck, 2016). The transnational family now exists in various forms. What is new about the phenomenon nowadays is that the measures which migrants use to maintain connections with families left behind have changed. The availability of different media and communication tools enables the preservation of family relations and values despite distance and separation (Bhandari & Titzmann, 2017). The use of media technologies in the context of migration and their implications for families in Asia has come into focus because family separation results in many stresses and strains (Dreby & Adkins, 2011).

A large body of cross-disciplinary scholarship is emerging, which is providing a more nuanced picture of the family lives of transnational families and highlighting the different roles



of ICTs in the maintenance of family relations across distance (see Baldassar, 2016; Baldassar & Merla, 2015; King-O’Riain, 2015; Madianou & Miller, 2012a, 2012b; Uy-Tioco, 2007). Given the dependency of transnational families on communication technologies, a wealth of empirical studies have also recently emerged, specifically examining mediated communication as an important aspect of transnational family life (see Dreby, 2007; Ito & Okabe, 2005; Lim et al., 2015; Paragas, 2010; Vertovec, 2004). Scholars are particularly interested in exploring how Asian migrant workers keep in touch with their family members, and how they fulfil their familial responsibilities with the help of communication technologies (see Hugo & Ukwatta, 2010; Madianou & Miller, 2012a; Parreñas, 2005a). The following section provides an overview of key studies that explore how media have revolutionised the way in which families conduct distant communications and maintain relationships in the context of international migration.

### ***2.3.1 Evolution of mediated communication***

Many studies have shown how Asian migrants have used different channels over time to keep in touch with their home countries, ranging from earlier methods (letters, written cards, cassette tapes, pictures) to more recent technological devices (landlines, mobile phones, computers, laptops, smartphones), and Internet-based platforms (Email, online chatting/calling, and social media) (see Lim et al., 2015; Madianou & Miller, 2012a; Parreñas, 2005a). Before the prevalence of telephones, communication between Asian migrant workers and their left-behind families required minimal media competency or involved minimal media mediation (Madianou & Miller, 2012a). Until the late 1980s, phone booths and long-distance calls were not available in the Philippines, and even then, they were extremely expensive and therefore rarely used. Paragas (2010) found that, during the 1980s, Filipinos, who constitute one of Asia’s largest and earliest migrant groups, contacted their left-behind families mainly through pictures, cassette tapes, and letters sent by post or via friends who returned home. Such communication options played an important role in nourishing a sense of belonging (Ling, 2010), but the messages took a long time to reach their destinations (Bonini, 2011).

Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, landlines and mobile phones became more available and affordable across Asia. In the Philippines, mobile calling prices dropped dramatically in 1996 (Paragas, 2010). Similarly, over the past two decades, there has been a reduction in mobile call charges and a corresponding rise in the number of mobile phone subscribers in South Asia due to regulatory reforms (Gunawardene, 2015). Phone calls made through landlines and

mobile phones provide Asian migrants with a synchronous communication platform (Lim et al., 2015). In the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, the emergence of cheap international phone calls through pre-paid calling cards represented for migrants one of the most important advances in the maintenance of family and personal relationships with people who reside in their country of origin (Vertovec, 2004). Considering the incredible rise in the number of mobile phone users all over the world, migrants are now able to maintain constant and direct channels of communication despite geographical distance (Ito & Okabe, 2005). The growth of telephone services with the advent of cheap phone cards made it easier for families to be in touch on a regular basis. The real-time contact provided by international telephone calls thus shapes the everyday lives of migrants. Cheap telecommunications affect the involvement of migrant parents in the lives of their children and spouses. ICTs empower these parents to offer support and participate in their children's 'academic and emotional growth' while still taking part in decision-making processes within the household (Ito & Okabe, 2005, p. 149). Vertovec (2004) identified that low-cost calls serve as a kind of social glue, connecting small-scale social formations across the globe.

As in other parts of the world, the internet penetrated Asia in the late 1990s and has spread across the region ever since. With the growth of online connections, Asian migrants enjoy more communication options and have embraced the use of laptops, computers, online chats/calls and blogs (see Bonini, 2011; Chib et al., 2014; Hoang & Yeoh, 2012). In addition, internet-enabled smartphones and the prevalence of communication apps have blurred the boundaries between mobile phones and the Internet, with mobile phone usage among migrants involving a higher level of complexity (Lim et al., 2015). Long-distance communication, such as sending a message or making a video call, has become the key practice through which 'family' comes into being (Madianou, 2016). Communication platforms serve as a crucial tool in helping migrants fulfil familial duties from a distance, sustaining bonds with their left-behind families, and fostering emotional links with family members in the home and host societies (Lim et al., 2015).

Within the Chinese digital landscape, a growing body of research has begun to examine the role of social media in mediating social relations and migration. For example, Qiu (2009) introduces the term 'have-less' to describe the emergence of a working-class population, typically comprised of migrant workers in urban China. The author identifies a common pattern among Chinese migrant workers in terms of their digital practices, with millions of these 'have-less' individuals utilising digital media for experiences that are 'uplifting, risk taking, community building, and suffering from persistent structural inequality' (p. 7).

A parallel strand of studies adopts a gender perspective to examine the migratory experiences of Chinese female migrants. In *Technomobility in China*, Wallis discusses how young migrant women in China use mobile phones to maintain, and establish relationships, as well as to adopt a cosmopolitan appearance (Wallis, 2013). She introduces the concept of ‘immobile mobility’ to explain the ‘false hope’ that mobile phones seem to offer her informants in terms of integrating into the new cities (p. 26). One of her primary arguments is that despite their efforts to expand their social networks in the city via mobile phones, the social status of these young women remains unchanged.

Similarly, scholarly attention has been directed towards WeChat, China’s most popular mobile app, exploring how WeChat has shaped the social practices of its users. Chen and her colleagues (2018) use the term ‘stickiness’ to encapsulate the essence of WeChat and to depict a scenario where users are unwilling to leave this platform due to its extensive range of functions and services. These scholars argue that WeChat is more than just a social media platform; it can be seen as a ‘super-app’ deeply embedded in the everyday lives and routines of its users. Furthermore, WeChat plays an important role in shaping the civic life of Chinese people. For instance, Wu and Wall (2019) explore the implications of WeChat for contentious political engagement among Chinese citizens based in the UK. They found that their respondents’ discussions on WeChat were often limited to interest-oriented or state-approved topics due to potential repercussions for posting critical statements. This observation challenges the overly optimistic assumption that the Internet can foster democratisation potential in China.

The empirical literature discussed above has demonstrated how communication technologies help migrants throughout Asia, in countries such as the Philippines, Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Sri Lanka and Vietnam, to bridge the geographical distance with their loved ones (see Bonini, 2011; Chib et al., 2014; Hoang & Yeoh, 2012; Hugo & Ukwatta, 2010; Thomas & Lim, 2010). The following section focuses on discussing the seminal theoretical works that examine the interconnections between digital media and interpersonal communication.

### ***2.3.2 Digital media and interpersonal communication***

When new media were first introduced into interpersonal communication, there were diverse opinions about the quality of mediated communication. On the one hand, mediated interaction has usually been seen as an inferior form of communication compared to standard face-to-face

interaction because the reduced amount of social cues in mediated interaction (e.g. – lack of visual cues in text-based or voice-based types of communication) might potentially lead to ambiguities and misunderstandings (Kiesler et al., 1984). For others, new media like the internet offer their users the possibility of forming stronger relationships with more people (Baym, 2010). Although there are many unanswered questions about interpersonal communication media in the digital age, several conceptual developments provide a more nuanced picture of personal connections through digital media. This section focuses on highlighting the key concepts and theoretical approaches that can shed light on the transformation of interpersonal communication with the proliferation of communication technologies.

Affordance is one of the key concepts commonly used to analyse mediated personal relationships in studies of media technologies today (Bucher & Anne, 2016). The concept of affordances, according to Hutchby (2001), has been developed to move beyond technological determinism and social constructivism. As Hutchby (2001) argues:

Affordances are functional and relational aspects which frame, while not determining, the possibilities for agentic action in relation to an object. In this way, technologies can be understood as artefacts which may be both shaped by and shaping of the practices humans use in interaction with, around and through them (p. 444).

Nancy Baym's (2010) analysis of the impact of media on interpersonal relationships is enriched by the 'social shaping of technologies' approach (MacKenzie & Wajcman, 1999, p. 21) on which the concept of affordances (Hutchby, 2001) is based. Drawing on these theoretical foundations, Baym (2010) proposes seven concepts to productively compare different media with one another as well as with face-to-face communication, namely 'interactivity, temporal structure, social cues, storage, replicability, reach, and mobility' (p. 2). She proposes these key concepts to concentrate our attention on how media influence personal communication and to examine the role of digital media in shaping the creation and maintenance of relationships.

To understand personal connections through digital media, a parallel trajectory comes from recent developments, notably the theory of mediation (Couldry, 2008; Livingstone, 2009; Madianou, 2005; Silverstone, 2005;) and mediatisation (Hjarvard, 2004; Krotz, 2007), both of which are complementary and have largely converged (Couldry, 2008). According to the work of Silverstone (2005), mediation can be described as the dialectical process by which media institutions (the press, broadcast radio, television, and internet) are involved in transforming

social and cultural processes while being socially shaped by the processes themselves. In other words, any process of mediation is a non-linear process, meaning that media need to work not merely by transmitting content, but through a process of environmental transformation which, in turn, shapes the social experience of the medium itself (Couldry, 2008; Madianou & Miller, 2012b). Since the proliferation of ICTs and new communication technologies has prompted scholars to find a theoretical alternative to examine the impact of media, mediation has been widely advocated as a concept that can be used to capture the increasingly technology-oriented nature of interpersonal communications in the digital era (Lievrouw, 2009). Mediation provides a conceptual toolkit to capture the tension between the technical and the affective. For example, it is common to see that people choose a certain medium to suit different types of relationships, and the latter is often constituted by the medium through which it is conveyed (Madianou & Miller, 2012a).

Drawing on the theory of mediation, which highlights the mutual shaping of media and social process, Mirca Madianou and Daniel Miller (2012a) propose the theory of ‘polymedia’ in their book *Migration and New Media*. This theory draws together the phenomenon of migrant transnationalism and the emergence of new communication environments enabled by new media. Based on a long-term ethnographic study with both mothers in the United Kingdom and their children in the Philippines, the theory of polymedia demonstrates how the new media function as an ‘environment of communicative opportunities’ where Filipino migrant mothers can choose a combination of different media to enact and manage their relationships with their left-behind children (Madianou & Miller, 2012b, p. 170). By examining the affordances of each discrete medium that has been widely used in transnational familyhood (e.g. – letters, cassette tapes, landline, mobile phones, social networking sites, and webcams), the focus of this theory shifts from examining the affordances and limitations of each discrete medium to an emphasis on the social and emotional consequences of choosing between the different media. The authors propose the notions of ‘sociality’, ‘power’, and ‘emotions’ to substantiate how each particular medium is defined relationally with regards to the other media, forming the so-called polymediatic environment:

- Sociality highlights how people navigate polymedia environments to cater for the different relationships that they are in.
- Polymedia may ‘assuage the basic asymmetry in power’ between migrant parents and left-behind children (Madianou & Miller, 2012a, p. 130).

- Polymedia can be exploited as a means to create different emotional repertoires and registers.

Madianou and Miller (2012a) argue that polymedia is not ‘a free-floating process but rather is dependent on cultural genres of sociality and emotional registers and struggles over power’ (p. 139). Although the three frames (sociality, power and emotions) overlap somewhat with each other (Leung, 2014) and Madianou and Miller’s work does not offer insights into the perceptions of carers such as stay-at-home fathers or other relatives (Helsper, 2013), the theory of polymedia casts light on the conjunctures of digital media, family relationships and migration. In this thesis, WeChat, with its multiple affordances, will be analysed as a polymedia platform for Chinese separated families to express emotions and maintain relationships in the context of prolonged separation.

### ***2.3.3 Rethinking the concept of ‘family’ and ‘relationships’***

Based on the preceding discussion, it is evident that digital media have reshaped contemporary family life in the context of migration. The unconventional form of families where family practices take place at a distance necessitates a reconceptualisation of family life. This reconceptualisation deviates from a perspective of family as a static social institution that is physically co-present. In this context, sociologist David Morgan proposes the concept of ‘family practice’ to reflect how individuals construct the meaning of family by creating an experience of particular places, relationships and events, such as buying Christmas presents for family members and making regular phone calls to a relative (D. Morgan, 2011; D. H. J. Morgan, 1996). In his book, *Rethinking Family Practices*, Morgan (2011) argues that a sense of family life should be seen as a set of activities whereby people are ‘doing family’ (p. 3). Family, in this sense, as Morgan (2011) states, is better understood as a verb rather than as a noun. For example, the ones who are mothers and fathers can be seen as ‘doing’ mothering or fathering (p. 5). Inspired by Morgan’s concept of family practices, Janet Finch’s (2007) article *Displaying Families* uses the concept of ‘display’ to characterise the contemporary family. The notion of family display emphasises the process by which people convey to each other that their actions are associated with ‘doing family things’ and thereby validate their family relationships (Finch, 2007, p. 67). The intimate relationships that families represent are of importance to each person’s sense of place within an ever-shifting social world. The core message of the displaying theory is: ‘These are my family relationships, and they work’ (p. 73).

The conceptual development of ‘family’ in sociological studies provides a new angle for the understanding of family practices whose key members are physically separated due to migration. As a result, the significance of face-to-face interpersonal relationships has been questioned because of the proliferation of new communication technologies. This trend has led several scholars in the field of sociology to question and re-visit the concept of co-presence, which refers to the occurrence of two or more aspects in the same time and place. This concept was originally conceived as physical and embodied (Merla & Papanikolaou, 2021). John Urry is one of the leading scholars who believes that the emergence of digital technologies ‘reconstruct notions of proximity and distance, closeness and farness, stasis and movement, the body and the other’ (Urry, 2002, p. 271). Urry (2002) recommends that researchers should not only investigate the physical and immediate presence but also other forms of co-presence such as imagined co-presence and virtual co-presence. He highlights four kinds of ‘travel’ (p. 256):

- Physical movement of objects.
- Corporeal travel of people who have seen intermittent co-presence as an obligation for many forms of social life.
- Virtual travel – a form of co-presence through the internet that transcends physical and social distance.
- Imaginative travel – to be present elsewhere through the images of places, where people create moments of co-presence.

Loretta Baldassar has further developed Urry’s framework and situated it in the context of family separation. In her study of sustaining caregiving – one of the central practices of family life – across geographical distance via internet-based communication, Baldassar (2008) proposes four ways that families can construct a sense of shared ‘presence’:

- Physical co-presence – being physically present.
- Virtual co-presence – the most common way people experience virtual forms of co-presence through various technologies.
- Co-presence by proxy – using objects such as photographs provides a sense of presence that functions as a conduit for emotion and feeling by proxy.
- Imagined co-presence – a form of co-presence that is achieved through daily prayers for the family (p. 263).

These four types of shared co-presence – virtual, proxy, physical and imagined – reinforce the sense of family closeness (Baldassar, 2008). Given that virtual co-presence plays a pivotal role in transnational family relationships, Baldassar (2016a) thus subdivides virtual co-presence into three categories:

- Live or real-time, streaming and immediate virtual co-presence via Skype or Facetime, which provides the feeling of ‘we are all here together’.
- Active, intermediate, selective or discretionary co-presence where individuals are able to choose when to respond to messages via text-based communication platforms.
- Passive, ambient, or continuous co-presence where individuals choose to engage in communication at particular times to create an ambient sense of being together (p. 153).

Evidence from numerous studies in the Philippines, for instance, indicates that social media enhance migrants’ capacities to maintain family and intimate contact across long distances, and create a sense of mediated co-presence – the feeling of ‘being there’ (Baldassar, 2016, p. 86). Baldassar and Merla (2014) developed a new concept, ‘care circulation’ (p. 3), to study caregiving at the intersections of family studies and migration. They challenge the idea of ‘proximity’ that ultimately leads to the stigmatisation of transnational families as deficient, fragmented or broken (Baldassar & Merla, 2015). They argue that by routinely using a mixed set of communication tools such as email, social media, and the telephone/mobile phone to keep in touch, transnational families develop a range of practices of ‘doing family’ to construct the feeling of co-presence (Baldassar, 2016).

Coinciding with the transformation of the notion of co-presence, the strand of literature on intimacy has also called for the reconceptualisation of the concept in the digital context. For a long period of time, intimacy as a sociological category had been seen to be rooted in spatial proximity and physical closeness (see Baldassar, 2008; Eklund & Sadowski, 2021; Merla & Papanikolaou, 2021). From such a perspective, family intimacy develops automatically because family members are physically co-present (Eklund & Sadowski, 2021). In recent years, there has been a growing interest in the conduct of ‘intimacy’ on digital media, through which people negotiate relationships (see Eklund & Sadowski, 2021; Gan, 2021; Miguel, 2018; Zhao,



2019). In order to understand the drastic changes in the ways that family members maintain emotional closeness via the use of new media (Chambers, 2013), some scholars have updated the theoretical underpinnings of intimacy in the digital age (see Eklund & Sadowski, 2021; Erdreich, 2020; Jamieson, 2013). As Miguel (2018) argues, if social media appear to be a new venue where intimacy practices are experienced and negotiated, the concept of intimacy also needs to be discussed in the digital context. Lynn Jamieson (2013), therefore, emphasises that it is necessary to uncouple self-formation and face-to-face personal relationships if the latter are becoming increasingly digitally mediated. Building on Morgan's (2011) concept of 'family practice', mentioned earlier, Jamieson (2011) uses the term 'practices of intimacy' to refer to 'practices which cumulatively and in combination enable, create and sustain a sense of a close and special quality of a relationship between people' (p. 3).

To date, there has been little agreement about the impact of digital media on the way people maintain intimacy in their everyday lives. For the pessimists, exemplified by Ulrich Beck (1992), the explosion of digital technologies is corrosive to personal relationships and in turn will damage intimacy. According to Jamieson (2013), those more pessimistic predictions about the impact of digitally mediated relationships on personal life have never come to fruition. As a result, a growing numbers of studies have provided a much more nuanced understanding of both the positive and negative effects of digitally mediated relationships since digital technologies have played an important role in everyday practices of family life (see Baym, 2010; Livingstone, 2011; Miller & Jolynna, 2014; Quan-Haase et al., 2019). Lee Rainie and Barry Wellman (2012), for example, use the term networked individualism to capture a historical shift in emphasis from traditional communities like families to more detached networks of individuals, which means that 'it is the person who is the focus: not the family, not the work unit, not the neighbourhood, and not the social group' (p. 6). More specifically, ICTs can be seen not only as a means of creating and maintaining family intimacy but also as a means of reinforcing individualising tendencies in communication (Eklund & Sadowski, 2021).

Within the conditions of the so-called polymediated environment, Madianou and Miller (2012b) also develop the theory of 'mediated relationships' to conceptualise the impact of new media on family relationships in Filipino transnational families. This well-developed theoretical framework will be adapted in this thesis to examine family relationships within separated families in China. Given the increasing feminisation of migration in the Filipino context, transnational motherhood is the central topic of their research. The authors believe that communication technologies and relationships are mutually constitutive because, first, new media are now integral to the enactment and experience of relationships; and second,

relationships in turn shape technologies by ‘driving the choices about which medium to use and to what desired effect’ (p. 150). The authors theorise the mother-child relationship as a triangle consisting of the normative projection of a person (mother/child), the actual person, and the discrepancy between these two. In the context of family separation, the revelation of the mother/child and the discrepancy between the actual and the normative are subject to media that are available to both sides. Their theorisation of ‘mediated relationships’ enables us to better understand how communication media have been socialised in the context of family separation.

The seminal works discussed above provide valuable insights that could be useful for understanding Chinese families. The thesis pays attention to the issue of the applicability of the above theories and concepts in different cultural contexts, as most of the analytical frameworks discussed above are drawn from the contexts of contemporary Western societies. The theoretical frameworks will have to be modified in the Chinese context for two reasons. First, the Chinese digital landscape and that of democratic countries is very different. Due to strict regulations and censorship by the Chinese government, globally popular social media platforms, such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Skype, are banned in mainland China, and China has developed its own equivalent apps such as WeChat (WhatsApp), Weibo (Twitter) and Red (Instagram). Because WeChat is a ‘comprehensive’ app, having integrated functions of different social media, this thesis focuses on the use of WeChat and examines its implications for family communications and relationships in Chinese separated families.

Second, and more importantly, any exploration of family-related topics needs to take family values and cultural context into consideration. Most of the current theoretical development on concepts such as intimacy is drawn from the contexts of contemporary Western societies and based on individualistic values (Chambers, 2006, 2013; Jamieson, 2013; Rainie & Wellman, 2012). Theoretical adaptation is especially necessary because Chinese families are guided by a collectivistic ideology (Shek, 2006). What prompted social scientists in Western societies to re-evaluate the model of family relationships in the digital age, according to Chambers (2006) were the ‘new forms of household arrangements, moving populations, rising divorce rates and modes of interaction mediated by new media technologies’ (p. 33). Take the notion of intimacy, for example. The existing conceptualisation of intimacy is heavily reliant on ‘a construction of the individual which is a peculiarly “Western” form of personhood and subjectivity’ (Jamieson, 2011, p. 2). Those theories cannot be directly applied to the Chinese context because there are indigenous social norms in Chinese families that guide

family members' behaviours (such as filial piety, which I will further elaborate on in the next section), and may impact communication practices. This is the reason the thesis will draw on the theory of 'mediated relationships' proposed by Madianou and Miller (2012a) to study family relationships in Chinese families, since it is not restricted to a specific cultural context. In addition, the perceptions of family, children and parenting are culturally and socially specific (Chao & Tseng, 2002). Those culturally-specific family values are likely to be implicated in the interactions between family members, which in turn shape the way people communicate with one another online. Locating participant families within the specific context of Chinese family culture is a prerequisite for understanding the maintenance of relationships via social media. In the next section, I will provide a discussion of the sociocultural context of Chinese families.

## **2.4 The Sociocultural Context of Family Life in China**

Sociologists and anthropologists have pointed out that the Confucian idea of family is very distinct from the concept in the West (see Baker, 1979; Chu & Yu, 2010; Scharff, 2020). Although Asia embraces cultural and religious diversity, and a general tolerance of all major belief systems, including Confucianism, Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism and Christianity, a common thread that runs through all Asian countries is the high value placed on familial obligation and harmony, the core message of which is filial piety or duty (E. J. Croll, 2006). In Chinese and other Asian societies, parent-child relationships are commonly described in terms of filial piety. 'Filial' refers to the relationship between children and their parents, while 'piety' embodies respect, honour, fidelity, devotion, dutifulness, and sacrifice (Tsai, 1999). Filial piety as a traditional Chinese value is defined as respect, honour, loyalty, and obligation within the parent-child relationship (Yu, 1984). In Chinese culture, filial piety serves as the guideline for parent-child interactions, and family ethics are thought to produce harmonious intergenerational relationships (Yeh et al., 2013).

There are four distinctive features of the ethic of filial piety that can help us make sense of family practices within Chinese separated families. First, collective family interests are stressed over individual interests in a traditional Chinese family (Chu & Yu, 2010). As a stable, cohesive and strong unit, the importance of reciprocity has been repeatedly reinforced in Chinese family relationships, and the sense of mutual responsibility between parents and children is crucial to the operation of the family (Baker, 1979). Although the changes to the family structure caused by modernisation, urbanisation, migration, and changes in political

ideologies or systems may have weakened family closeness and loyalty, Chinese families are still extremely cohesive (Hsu, 1985). This is evidenced by common care arrangements within Chinese separated families where grandparents are pleased to be involved with childcare in China's rural and urban areas. Although grandparents play an important role in childcare provision in Chinese families (Cong & Silverstein, 2011), research on this topic remains limited (Murphy, 2020; Santos, 2017).

Second, gender role differentiation remains central in traditional Chinese culture (Baker, 1979; Santos & Harrell, 2017; Shek, 2006;). As Murphy (2020) notes, Chinese families underscore patrilineal over matrilineal obligation, which can be seen as one of the key characteristics of Chinese family culture. Santos (2017) investigates the historical continuity in ritual ideologies of patrilineal descent and ancestor worship. He explains that these ideologies have nurtured the development of a reproductive culture and emphasised the importance of having many male heirs. Chinese families have traditionally favoured sons, counting on their sons to carry on the family name and the family's future (Scharff, 2020). In the patriarchal Chinese system, women play an important role in enacting and reproducing traditional values that are associated with 'religion, patriarchy and patriliney' (Stafford, 2009, p. 148). Many studies have shown that policies implemented in socialist China for the purpose of promoting gender equality and helping free Chinese women from patriarchy have had only a limited effect (Brown, 2017; Croll, 2006; Fincher, 2016; Stafford, 2009). By the time of the Maoist period from 1949, women remained associated with the provision of childcare, despite several campaigns aimed at challenging this normative assumption (Santos, 2017). This 'patriarchal exploitation' was reconfigured after the 1980s when women in Chinese rural families started engaging with a new mode of livelihood based on labour migration to cities to work in factories (Santos, 2017, p. 94). Although gender has been identified as being key to understanding the dynamics of transnational families (Chib et al., 2014; Hugo & Ukwatta, 2010; Longhurst, 2013; Madianou, 2012; Parreñas, 2001, 2005b), research on Chinese migrant mothers and their long-distance motherhood remains limited (To et al., 2018).

Third, filial piety is an instrument of measurement for the distribution of power within Chinese families (King & Bond, 1985). In other words, each member of the family needs to take on heterogeneous obligations and responsibilities depending on where the person is located in the hierarchical power structure (Tsai, 1999). Filial piety justifies absolute parental authority over children and the authority of senior generations over junior generations in generational rank (Croll, 2006; Ho, 1994; Hwang, 1999). Nevertheless, it should be remembered that the

family in Confucian social theory is the prototype of all social organisations (Mei, 2021), which means the family system is the social system of China (Fung, 1948).

There is a heated debate about the role of filial piety in the context of modern Confucian societies like China. Some studies reveal that filial piety has been associated with lower levels of parent-child conflicts (Yeh & Bedford, 2003), and greater financial, physical and emotional support (Ishii-kuntz, 2016). However, other studies have shown the negative effects of filial piety, such as parental overprotection and harshness (K.-H. Yeh, 2003). By examining the role of Confucian filial piety in relation to parental attitudes, Ho (1994) argues that filial piety has been implicated in parental attitudes and child-raising, reinforcing ‘obedience and indebtedness to one’s parents, impulse control, and proper conduct’ (p. 349). Parents who emphasise parental supremacy tend to respond to children’s misbehaviours with criticism rather than understanding and empathy (Hsu, 1985).

Yeh and Bedford (2013) introduce the dual filial piety model and distinguishes two types of filial piety: reciprocal and authoritarian. This model is beneficial when it comes to understanding parenting practices of migrant parents in this research because it captures the diverse implications of filial piety and helps explain seemingly contradictory findings. According to Yeh and Bedford (2013), the attributes of reciprocal filial piety are reciprocity, intimacy, and the quality of the parent-child relationship. The behaviours of children guided by reciprocal filial piety entail gratitude and willingness to repay parental care and sacrifice. Therefore, reciprocal filial piety is compatible with modern values such as democracy and equality, which is demonstrated through voluntary support and expressions of love and care for one’s parents (Yeh et al., 2013). In contrast, authoritarian filial piety emphasises obedience and hierarchy. It is worth mentioning that authoritarian parenting is not necessarily regarded as ‘bad’ in Chinese family cultures as it is viewed as a way of showing parental care and involvement (Chao & Tseng, 2002). Children in traditional families have limited personal space, and often their views and rights to privacy are not respected in their upbringing (Shek, 2006). Authoritarian filial piety expects children to satisfy parental demands and expectations without hesitation (Chen, 2014; Croll, 2006; Hsu, 1985; Hwang, 1999; Shek, 2006; Yeh et al., 2013). In her psychoanalytical research study, Hsu (1985) argues that inadequate communication has become one of the problems common to contemporary Chinese families. According to her research findings, since Chinese parents are often authoritarian, children rarely talk spontaneously or communicate their opinions or feelings to their parents. This can prevent children from feeling emotionally close to their parents and telling them about their

emotional problems because children receive inadequate parental understanding or empathy (Hsu, 1985).

Fourth, in Confucianism, the individual is conceptualised as a relational being who is expected to behave differently based on their position in the Five Cardinal Relationships (Wu Lun), which include ruler-subject, father-son, husband-wife, older brother-younger brother, and senior friend-junior friend (Dreyer, 2021; King & Bond, 1985b). The concept of Wu Lun suggests that children are viewed as a network or continuum connecting ancestors with descendants (Kenney, 1995). This perception and treatment of children in the Chinese cultural context differs from that of the West, where the notion of individuality is developed in terms of liberty and autonomy.

For example, in the conceptual development of sociology and social anthropology, emphasis has been placed on the social construction of childhood (e.g., Allison, 2007, 2009; Qvortrup, 2009; Wyness, 2012). This perspective has led to an interdisciplinary dialogue and the emergence of childhood studies as a growing field of research, emphasising children's agency and its theoretical and empirical implications. The concept of children's agency is seen as relational, acknowledging that children, as agents, actively participate in social interactions and are embedded in relationships where they can exert influence (Esser et al., 2016). Childhood studies particularly focus on children's agency in decision-making processes, advocating for their participation and the recognition of their voices by parents, policymakers, and practitioners (Tisdall & Bell, 2006). However, this conceptual assumption of children's agency may not fully apply in the Chinese family context, where children's wishes are often not fully respected when they conflict with parental doctrine (Deng et al., 2013). As a result, this strand of literature remains limited in explaining the experiences of children in Chinese families.

Another strand of literature in the field of media studies provides a valuable reference point for understanding this study. There has been a shift in research focusing towards examining the role of media in influencing and shaping childhood, as well as investigating the direct and indirect impacts of media on children (Bolshaw & Josephidou, 2023). By studying the effects of media on children's lives, researchers aim to provide insights for parents and concerned professionals to ensure responsible and beneficial media engagement for young audiences. Many studies in this field address significant debates surrounding young children's digital practices, such as the effects of media on children (Calvert & Wilson, 2009), media literacy (Livingstone, 2014; Ofcom, 2005), the influence of advertising on children, and digital media use in early childhood (Bolshaw & Josephidou, 2023; Gardner, 2013). However, despite

the growing body of research, we still face uncertainties when it comes to navigating the use of digital media among children (Smahel et al., 2020). This research seeks to include children's voices and enrich our understanding of the use of social media among left behind children.

It is also important to note that traditional Chinese family values have changed (Murphy, 2020; Shek, 2006; Tseng & Wu, 1985), alongside social transformations, including the influx of Western values introduced by the open-door policy,<sup>4</sup> the implementation of economic reforms and the repercussions of the 'one-child policy' introduced in 1980, which ended in 2016 (E. J. Croll, 2006; Shek, 2006). These trends can be seen in parenting practices within Chinese families, with parents increasingly emphasising more child-centred concerns (Croll, 2006; Kipnis, 2009; Shek, 2006). However, the growing acknowledgement of children's needs, empowerment and rights, which scholars are observing in China's cities, is not necessarily pervasive in the countryside because there is huge inequality between the rural and urban population (Naftaili, 2016). As indicated in the preceding discussion, the concept of filial piety and its derivatives are crucial to the understanding of family relationships in Chinese families.

## **2.5 Addressing gaps in the research**

Having outlined two strands of literature on migration, family and media, this section sets out to identify the research gaps in the current literature. First, while transnational families have been intensively studied from many perspectives (sociology, anthropology, media studies, migration studies, and family studies), very few studies have focused on investigating the use of media technologies, especially social media, within Chinese separated families and addressing the role of media in shaping their family relationships.

Second, the majority of studies have sought to discuss the situation of migrant workers and their left-behind children separately instead of examining the impacts of parental migration on families as a whole. Although kinship care is the most common form of childcare arrangement in the Chinese family context, the role of carers in online parent-child communication is clearly under-researched.

Third, a salient feature of the previous literature is the absence of children's voices. The existing literature on transnational families has placed greater emphasis on adult experience, including practices of transnational caring (Ahlin, 2018; Baldassar, 2016b; Baldassar & Merla,

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<sup>4</sup> In 1978, China's open-door policy (ODP) was implemented by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to lessen the adverse effects of the economic depression caused by the Cultural Revolution (Quach & Anderson, 2008).

2015), transnational mothering ( Madianou & Miller, 2012a; Parreñas, 2005), and transnational intergenerational relations (King-O’Riain, 2015; Marino, 2019). Although children involved in their parents’ migration projects have the agency to construct meaning and make sense of their family lives (Greene & Nixon, 2020; Murphy, 2020), children’s perspectives, in contrast, have not been sufficiently studied (Dobson, 2009; Gardner, 2012; Merla & Papanikolaou, 2021; Murphy, 2020; Zhang, 2015). In other words, virtually no research has asked the following questions: how do children use internet-based communication technologies to negotiate their family relations; and how do children interpret the role of ICTs in their family lives at a distance. As Merla and Papanikolaou (2021) point out, little research on ICT-based forms of co-presence has been undertaken with regards to young people and their digital practices. In addition, there are also methodological weaknesses in current studies of digital practices in migrant families, across both strands of the literature. Most extant literature on children and migration tends to apply the same methods to both adult and child participants (L. Pan et al., 2013; Sheng, 2019), which may be of limited value because children’s communicative and social faculties are still developing (A. Bell, 2007).

By filling these research gaps, this study seeks to contribute to the dialogue between family studies and digital media in the context of migration in three respects. First, in order to enhance our understanding of the role of media technologies in the negotiation of family relations within Chinese separated families, this thesis draws on theoretical and empirical literature pertaining to transnational families to explore how social media contribute to the migratory experience and long-distance familyhood. The historical continuity of cultural traditions (e.g. – filial piety, duty, obedience) in Chinese families will be taken into consideration when it comes to examining family communications and relationships.

Second, this thesis ensures the representation of the perspectives of all those who are involved in long-distance familyhood, including migrant parents, grandparents, and left-behind children (aged 8 to 13) across its three analytical chapters (4 to 6). I also include schoolteachers to understand the nonfamilial perspective. The purpose of bringing together three perspectives is to present a comprehensive picture of ‘doing’ family (maintaining familial bonds and managing family lives). Also, it is clearly a collective effort for separated families to exercise family practices at a distance through social media, especially when children are involved. In the current literature, grandparents in Chinese separated families are merely perceived as caregivers. This inaccurate conception overlooks the intermediary role of grandparents in parent-child communication as they are not only senior family members but also gatekeepers



within parent-child communication. Therefore, it is imperative to address the carers' role in shaping online interaction and communication between parents and children.

Finally, the absence of children's voices in research on migration and digital studies will be addressed in this study. By employing child-centred approaches such as creative workshops and child-focused interviews, this thesis seeks to provide child respondents with a chance to articulate their feelings about online communications by expressing how they enact, experience and display family relationships via social media platforms like WeChat.

## **2.6 Conclusion**

This chapter has offered an overview of the key literature on migration, media, and family, and outlined the key conceptual tools for this study of digital practices within Chinese separated families. In the context of migration, the concepts of recomposed multi-local (Schier, 2016), transnational (L. Baldassar et al., 2014), and separated family forms invite us to rethink the concept of family. These new family forms fundamentally challenge the assumption that family life is characterised by co-residence, geographical proximity and spatial co-presence (Schier, 2016; Urry, 2002). Therefore, Morgan's seminal concept of 'doing' family is very much relevant to understanding contemporary families, including in China. Family in his view should be used as a verb, which means individuals can be seen as 'doing' family (Morgan, 2011, p. 3). In this study, family is defined as 'a set of activities which take on a particular meaning associated with family' (Finch, 2007, p. 66).

Nowadays, it is common to see family members use their own personal digital devices to manage their family relationships (Sadowski & Eklund, 2021). Since WeChat is the dominant social media platform in the Chinese digital landscape, this thesis will examine how WeChat is used by Chinese separated families to maintain their family relationships. Drawing on the theoretical framework of polymedia and mediated relationships proposed by Madianou and Miller (2012a), this thesis seeks to investigate how different groups of family members (parents, children, and grandparents) perceive and maintain their family relationships through the lens of filial piety, as it serves as a strong cultural guide for parent-child interactions and intergenerational relationships within Chinese families (K. H. Yeh et al., 2013).

This study aims to answer three research questions: How do Chinese separated families engage with WeChat and for what purposes in their everyday lives? How do three groups of participants – parents, carers, and children – interpret the role of WeChat in their long-distance family practices? In what specific ways are family relationships shaped by the use of WeChat

from the divergent perspectives of the three parties? In order to address these questions, this thesis adopts mixed methods to comprehend the relation between digital practices and family lives within Chinese separated families. In the next chapter, I will explain the research design and the detailed rationale for each method adopted.

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1 Introduction**

The thesis employs mixed methods to examine how long-distance familyhood is maintained by Chinese separated families via social media like WeChat. It draws on data collected in a primary school in Liaoning province, Northeast China, from April 2020 to January 2021. The methods employed include an online survey, semi-structured interviews with parents and carers, child-focused interviews, and online creative workshops with children in school settings. The participants in this research, including parents, carers, children, and schoolteachers, were mainly recruited from a primary school (hereafter, M school) in F city in Liaoning province. All the names of participants and the fieldwork site mentioned in this thesis have been provided with a pseudonym, except for the names of the host cities of migrant workers. In this chapter, I first explain the trajectory of how the research design evolved before and after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. I then discuss the data collection and data analysis process in this unprecedented context. At the end of the chapter, drawing on the commentary that I published in the JOCAM special issue on the COVID-19 crisis and other scholars' contributions in this issue (see Bent, 2021; Han, 2021; Lemish, 2021; Lim & Wang, 2021; Page Jeffery, 2021), I also reflect on the benefits and limitations of conducting remote research, as well as the methodological contribution of this thesis.

#### **3.2 Lessons learnt from the pilot study**

The research design of the thesis was informed by the pilot study that I undertook in 2019. There are many advantages of conducting a pilot study before any proposed major research study (Lackey & Wingate, 1998). A pilot is necessary and useful for identifying potential problems and defects in methodology and protocol prior to the implementation of the formal study (Hassan et al., 2006; Lancaster et al., 2004; Kraemer et al., 2006). Therefore, I undertook a pilot study in Beijing and Shenyang<sup>5</sup> in July 2019 in order to test the feasibility of the research methods and also to build connections with potential participants. Pilot participants were recruited from M school in F city. The reason why I chose M school was because of good access and familiarity. This school was the primary school that I used to attend from 1999 to

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<sup>5</sup> Shenyang is the provincial capital of Liaoning province.

2005. I remembered that there were no left-behind children when I attended and that the school did not provide boarding facilities for pupils at that time. In 2018, I heard from an old schoolteacher that there were now more and more left-behind children from the rural areas of F city attending this school. This news attracted my attention because many Chinese mainstream media such as *The People's Daily*<sup>6</sup> and Western media such as BBC News,<sup>7</sup> the *Los Angeles Times*<sup>8</sup> and the *Economist*<sup>9</sup> began reporting on this so-called left-behind children phenomenon, thus piquing my research interest. In June 2019, the school contacted parents on my behalf and asked whether they were willing to participate in a doctoral research project about Chinese separated families. This pilot study enabled me to gain initial insights into how Chinese migrant workers used social media to communicate with their children and carers. Semi-structured interviews were undertaken with eight migrant workers whose children were attending M school and left behind in their birthplace F City. The duration of each interview was around 2 hours on average.

The pilot study contributed to the development of the research design of the project in four ways. First, the findings of the pilot helped me identify the common type of care arrangements in separated families. Echoing previous studies of left-behind children in China (see ACWF, 2013; Murphy, 2020; Yeoh & Lam, 2007), intergenerational rearing has been found to be the most prevalent form of childcare in Chinese separated families. In other words, grandparents of left-behind children commonly take on the role of primary home carers. According to parent participants involved in the pilot study, five children out of eight were taken care of by their paternal grandparents, two by maternal grandparents, and one by an at-home mother. The pilot underscored the vital role of home carers in Chinese separated families, which informed the formal fieldwork later and examined the implications of intergenerational childcare for parent-child communications and mediated family relationships.

Second, the pilot helped to identify the major social media platforms and participant groups (parents, carers, children) to be studied in the formal fieldwork. Based on the interviews conducted in the pilot, WeChat was identified as the main social media platform used by parents within Chinese separated families. In fact, most left-behind children, based on the pilot

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<sup>6</sup> See People's Daily. Retrieved November 11, 2022, from <http://opinion.people.com.cn/GB/n1/2019/0710/c1003-31223929.html>

<sup>7</sup> See BBC (2016). Retrieved November 11, 2022, from <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-china-35994481>

<sup>8</sup> See Dixon (2016). Retrieved November 11, 2022, from <https://www.latimes.com/world/la-fg-china-school-20181229-story.html>

<sup>9</sup> See The Economist (2015). Retrieved November 11, 2022, from <https://www.economist.com/leaders/2015/10/15/pity-the-children>

findings, did not have their own digital devices, including smartphones, personal computers, or televisions because their parents were worried about the negative impacts of those digital devices (e.g. – damage to vision, game addiction, radiation from electronic devices). What also caught my attention was the impact of real-name mobile registration and ICT policy in China, which calls for participants to use their real names on registered SIM cards and social media accounts, and which also shapes the way participant families use WeChat.

Third, the pilot also informed the mixed methods approach employed in the project, although at this time the implications of COVID-19 were not known. As the focus of the research was the interaction between left-behind children and migrant parents via WeChat and the role of home carers in parent-child communications, it was crucial to address the research questions from the perspectives of different family members within separated families by applying suitable research methods. The pilot study in this sense informed and helped enhance the research design of the formal field research by adopting suitable methods to study different groups of participants. Lastly, the pilot study influenced my choice of fieldwork site for the formal fieldwork. The pilot study went smoothly with M school helping to recruit participants. I subsequently decided to conduct a case study focusing on this ethnic Mongol primary school in F city. In the next section, I will introduce the school that served as the case study for the research.

### **3.3 The case study: M school**

The case study, M school, is the only ethnic minority school in F city, an autonomous city with a significant minority of ethnic Mongols, located in the west of Liaoning Province. There are 15 towns and 22 villages in F city. According to the seventh Chinese census in 2021, F city encompasses a total area of 6,246.2 square kilometres, an area which had a population of 5.46 million inhabitants within the combined metropolitan area and rural area in 2020 (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2021). A total of 78.2% of the population were Han Chinese, whereas the Mongol ethnic minority group and the Manchu ethnic group made up 20.3% and 1.3% of the population respectively (National Ethnic Affairs Commission, 2004).

M school was established in 1962 for ethnic Mongol children aged from 6 to 13 to learn their native language at primary level. In the late 1980s, China started to implement the 9-year Compulsory Education Plan, which aimed to improve access to primary education for all children under the age of 16 and boost children's educational attainment in poor rural areas. Basic education consists of 6 years of primary education and 3 years of secondary education,

provided by local governments at various levels ( Li & Liu, 2014). Under the 9-year compulsory education scheme, children need to enrol at public schools where they reside and where their *hukou* (residence permit) is registered, as local governments are responsible for paying for their education. The school used to recruit ethnic Han children whose *hukous* were registered in F city. The enrolment of ethnic Han children used to make up around one-third of total pupil numbers. In 2006, the local Education Bureau, which is responsible for formulating and developing policies in respect of education in the city, imposed a restriction on the recruitment of ethnic Han students by ethnic minority schools. In other words, M school has only been allowed to admit ethnically Mongolian children since 2006, and it now has no ethnic Han children. According to the school's official records, it started to recruit ethnic Mongolian students from surrounding rural areas to boost its student intake after 2006 as the number of school-age children who are ethnically Mongolian has been declining in F city.

Within the catchment areas of M school, it takes about 15 minutes by bus from the nearest village to the school, and 90 minutes from the farthest village. The school thus started offering dormitory accommodation to pupils who had boarding needs after 2006. From then on, there have been two types of students in M school: day students and boarders. Day students are those who reside in F city and are able to commute between school and home every day. Boarders are students who live on school premises during the week with family visits at weekends. As can be seen in Table 1, according to the official records of M school, in 2022 there were 1,737 pupils in total and around 576 of those were weekly boarders, while 362 were left-behind children. However, in 2017 there were only 56 left-behind children among 1,584 students, meaning a growth of 546% in 5 years.

*Table 1 – Number of left-behind children in M school*

<b>Year</b>	<b>Total number of students</b>	<b>Number of boarders</b>	<b>Number of left-behind children</b>
<b>2017</b>	1,584	653	56
<b>2018</b>	1,595	610	83
<b>2019</b>	1,571	579	127
<b>2020</b>	1,625	594	236
<b>2021</b>	1,625	594	316
<b>2022</b>	1,737	576	362

The transformation of M school into a school with boarding facilities seems to have reflected the increased population of left-behind children in F city, the implication of which was that there were more and more separated families who had to rely on communication technologies to maintain communication and family relationships. The next section discusses the original research design for the study (due to start from May 2020), which was proposed prior to the outbreak of COVID-19. It also explains the contingency plan I came up with in response to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **3.4 Original research design before the COVID-19 pandemic**

The original research protocol sought to employ multiple methods to answer the research questions, including semi-structured qualitative interviews with parents, participant observations involving carers and children in the family home, and creative workshops with children in the school setting.

Semi-structured interviews (25) with migrant parents were included in the original research design. The interviews were planned to last approximately 2 hours. During the interviews, migrant parents would have been invited to elaborate on their communication experiences with their children via social media. Given that qualitative methods like interviews entail the reconstruction of events (Bryman, 2012), the major aim of the interviews was to explore parent-child communication in participant families from the parents' perspectives.

The original plan was to conduct approximately six workshops with left-behind children on school premises, facilitated by the school. The rationale for conducting creative workshops was to allow children to feel more relaxed and thus able to express their own opinions and agency more openly, as creative methods offer an alternative way to gather qualitative data (Awan & Gauntlett, 2011; Gauntlett, 2007). More importantly, the use of creative visual methods is more engaging and enjoyable for child participants than purely verbal approaches (Buckingham, 2009). In the workshops, children would have been invited to articulate how they engage with social media to contact their parents in their daily lives through playful and creative activities such as drawing and writing. I would have also asked children to present their ideas about how social media such as WeChat work. The artwork, writings and drawings produced during the workshops would have been collected at the end of each session. These creative and visual activities allow participants to go through a reflective process, which enables the researcher to receive more carefully thought-through responses and

achieve rich insights into how an individual interprets the discussed issues (Awan & Gauntlett, 2011).

I had intended to recruit around 30 participants aged 7 to 16 years to participate in 6 workshops. The participants would have been split into two age bands: 7 to 11 (junior, primary 1-3) and 12 to 16 (senior, primary 4-6), to help identify age-related differences. I had aimed to use the workshop approach to explore how left-behind children have used social media on their own terms. Each workshop session would have catered for about 5 children and have lasted 90 minutes. I had planned to conduct the workshops in a classroom or an entertainment room in the school, taking account of the risks and ensuring the safety of the children at all times. A teacher or teaching assistant would have assisted and been present at all times and would have helped with the logistical arrangements. The school settings together with the presence of teachers may have impacted responses as children in the workshops may have been unwilling to discuss personal relationships in front of their peers and teachers. I would have kept reminding the children to skip any questions if they did not feel like answering.

Given that the combination of creative visual methods and other methods is valuable in terms of enabling participants to speak and represent themselves (Buckingham, 2009), 10 participant observations within the family home were also included in the original research design to mitigate the limitations of using creative methods per se. The objective of the participant observations was to find out how carers managed and influenced interactions and communications between left-behind children and their parents. With the separate consent of children, carers and parents, I would have undertaken participant observations during weekends, when left-behind pupils were allowed to visit their families. Each visit would have lasted around 3 hours with the presence of the carers. According to the original plan, I would have sat with the children while they used WeChat to communicate with the parents. I would have also talked both to the children and carers about how they communicate with parents. The observations would have included video calls with parents via social media. Carers would have been encouraged to share their views about how children use social media to connect with their parents.

### **3.5 Revised research design in response to the COVID-19 pandemic**

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 stopped me from conducting any face-to-face research in China, which also seriously disrupted the ethical clearance for the original research design. I had to apply for an additional ethics clearance to conduct online interviews



with adult participants (teachers, carers, parents) to progress the research in May 2020. Once I acquired ethical approval for the original research protocol from the College Research Ethics Committee (CREC) in May 2020, I had no choice but to amend the research plan and move the remaining research activities online as it was highly uncertain if I would be able to resume face-to-face research in China. In order to reduce the impact of COVID-19 on the project, I submitted an ethics modification application and came up with a corresponding revised research plan. The modifications did not change the nature of the research, which still aimed to understand the significance of social media in the context of internal migration and its implications for Chinese separated families, and to examine the role of social media in shaping family relationships. The modifications enabled me to progress the project without changing the research questions and without travelling to China, which would not have been possible.

The rationale for the modification was to maintain the feasibility of conducting research remotely by employing child-focused research approaches because gaining a better understanding of children's perspectives was one of the major goals of this project. The findings derived from interviews with adult participants, including parents and carers, suggested that most child participants who were boarding did not have their own digital devices and social media accounts. Meanwhile, according to school regulations, pupils were not allowed to use digital devices at school without the permission of schoolteachers. In addition, those who were boarders were only allowed to visit their carers' homes at weekends. It was clear that it would have been extremely difficult for me to conduct participant observations from a distance. Therefore, I chose not to utilise this method that would have enabled me to observe how children use social media to communicate with their parents in their daily lives in a home setting. Given the above considerations, my new research design had to address the logistical and ethical issues arising from conducting remote research.

First, I added an online survey with parents who send their children to M school to get a better overview of the general pattern of digital experiences within Chinese separated families and for recruitment purposes. Second, I replaced face-to-face participant observations in the home with child-focused online interviews with individual children in their carers' homes. Third, I moved the face-to-face creative school workshops with children online and adjusted the format accordingly (fewer children, shorter timeframe). The online workshops and child-focused interviews complemented each other and were feasible during the COVID-19 pandemic.

As Platt (2016) argues, research with children needs to emphasise the voluntary collaboration of children – who should be regarded as active participants rather than as passive

subjects – and to consider enhancing research participation. In this study, the remote research design with children took children’s agency into consideration and put them at the centre of the research process. In order to engage children and elicit their voices, some studies encourage children to draw pictures, tell stories, or act out different roles or scenes (Curtin, 2001; Richards, 2012). In this study, I designed the interviews in an inventive and playful way by embedding digital activities, mini-games and small tasks to help the children feel at ease expressing themselves. I made use of the toolkit developed by Global Kids Online when I designed the workshops and interviews. As pointed out in the ‘Qualitative guide’ to the toolkit (Livingstone, 2016), it is best to include both interviews and focus groups when conducting qualitative research with children (p. 6). Workshops help researchers to understand ‘a range of children’s views and experiences’ (p. 6) whereas interviews are useful to examine ‘children’s individual experience, perceptions or feelings’ (p. 7).

### **3.6 Data collection**

#### ***3.6.1 Semi-structured online interviews***

I kept the semi-structured qualitative interviews in the revised research plan as their effectiveness had been tested in the pilot study. However, I switched to remote data collection in response to COVID-19. All the interviews were conducted via WeChat as all adult participants favoured this platform over others. As mentioned earlier, interview participants originally included just migrant parents and home carers (family members such as grandparents). In the revised research plan, I added schoolteachers who have been involved in childcare during the week. The selection criteria for multiple participant groups were as follows:

- Migrant workers who left children behind in F city and sent their children to the case study M school.
- Carers who were taking care of left-behind children while their parents worked in other cities.
- Schoolteachers who had experience of interacting with left-behind children on a regular basis.

#### **Step 1 – Parental Interviews (10)**

The first research activity I conducted was parental interviews. Parent participants were recruited from M school. I first asked participants who took part in the pilot study in July 2019 to refer more potential participants for the project. The school also helped me post the project information and my contact details on the school's official WeChat account to help recruit participants. All the participants contacted me directly without the intervention of the school, having seen the information on the school information outlets. In the end, I conducted 11 interviews with parent participants remotely, one of which was a follow-up interview with a migrant father who participated in the pilot study. Including 8 interviews conducted in the pilot study in June 2019, I interviewed altogether 13 mothers and 5 fathers. With respect to ethnicity, 15 parent participants are ethnic Mongol and 3 are Han Chinese who are in mixed marriages. In terms of care arrangements, it is very common that paternal grandparents are responsible for childcare as traditional Chinese families emphasise patrilineal over matrilineal obligations (Murphy, 2020). There are seven families in the sample in which only one grandparent looks after their grandchildren by themselves for personal reasons (e.g. – losing a spouse).

*Table 2 – Profile of migrant parents*

No	Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Occupation	Host city	Number of child(ren)	Gender of child(ren)	Age of child(ren)	Caregiver(s)
P1	Bai	M	35	Social worker	Beijing	1	M	13	Paternal grandmother, at-home mother
P2	Lili	F	34	Courier	Beijing	2	F	13, 9	Paternal grandparents, aunt
P3	Mei	F	38	Bath attendant	Shenyang	2	F, M	19, 11	Paternal grandparents, maternal grandparents, father
P4	Furong	F	49	Cook	Beijing	2	M, F	23, 13	Paternal grandparents, father
P5	Bao	M	40	Lathe operator	Beijing	1	M	13	Mother
P6	Lai	F	49	Toll collector	Beijing	2	F	13	Maternal grandfather
P7	Mingyang	M	35	Worker in a beverage factory	Shenyang	1	M	11	Paternal grandparents
P8	Haipeng	M	35	Engineer	Beijing	2	M	10, 2	Paternal grandmother
P9	Yue	F	25	Hairdresser	Dalian	1	F	6	Paternal grandfather
P10	Tao	M	45	Bus attendant	Beijing	2	F, M	23, 13	At-home mother
P11	Ying	F	42	Butcher	Dalian	2	M	24, 11	Paternal grandparents, father
P12	Jie	F	31	Assembly line worker	Tianjin	1	F	11	Paternal grandmother
P13	Na	F	35	Supermarket worker	Tianjin	1	F	11	Paternal grandmother
P14	Wu	F	40	Assembly line worker	Japan	2	M	12	Aunt, father
P15	Hong	F	50	Truck driver	/	1	M	13	Maternal grandmother, aunt
P16	Han	F	42	Waitress	Beijing	2	F, M	21, 10	Paternal grandparents
P17	Wang	F	33	Supermarket worker	Fuxin	1	F	9	Paternal grandparents
P18	Wenli	F	35	Beautician	Beijing	1	M	13	Paternal grandparent

Each parental interview took approximately 2 hours and was scheduled at a mutually convenient time. The parental interviews were structured in three main sections: personal

background, the use of social media, and family relations. In order to address the research questions, I placed greater emphasis on the second and third sections, which means the majority of time was spent investigating how parents engaged with WeChat to contact their children, and how they interpreted its implications for their family relations. The parental interviews allowed me to understand the role of WeChat in the negotiation of family relations within Chinese separated families from the parent's perspective, and to examine how these negotiations were directly or indirectly facilitated by WeChat.

## **Step 2 – Interviews with carers (6)**

Interviews with carers were undertaken after I completed the parental interviews. I asked the parent participants if the home carers were also willing to be interviewed. A recruitment document for carers was then distributed to those who agreed to participate. The case study school also helped me to circulate the recruitment document on the same platforms that had been used to recruit parents. Ten carers – mainly grandparents – came forward initially to participate in the research. However, in the end, only six agreed to be interviewed. The reason for this was that the research was conducted in April 2020. Most of the carers were agricultural workers and busy planting crops during the spring season, so five did not have time to participate. Of the five participants (see Table 3), two were maternal grandmothers, two were paternal grandmothers, one was a stay-at-home mother, and one was brother of the child. During the interviews, carers were invited to share their observations about how the children used WeChat to connect with their parents and to elaborate on their understanding of the significance of WeChat in the context of family separation.

*Table 3 – Profile of carers*

No	Pseudonym	Gender	Occupation	Identity	Age	Ethnicity	Gender of the child(ren)	Age of child(ren)
<b>C1</b>	Yan	F	Agricultural worker	Maternal grandmother	58	Mongol	M	13
<b>C2</b>	Mei	F	Agricultural worker	Paternal grandmother	55	Mongol	M	9
<b>C3</b>	Xu	M	College student	Brother	21	Mongol	F	12

<b>C4</b>	Wu	F	Agricultural worker	Maternal grandmother	58	Mongol	F/M	11/8
<b>C5</b>	Ping	F	Agricultural worker	Paternal grandmother	62	Mongol	M	12
<b>C6</b>	Ran	F	Housewife	Mother	36	Mongol	F	9

The rationale for including home carers in the participant groups was that pilot findings indicated that they played a very important role in long-distance communication within Chinese separated families. According to parents who were interviewed, home carers were in a position to control media access as most children did not have access to their own digital devices in participant families. The implication was that home carers were expected to facilitate parent-child communication by sharing their digital devices as well as their WeChat accounts. Thus, I decided to examine the role of carers in long-distance communication within Chinese separated families. Since face-to-face participant observation, including conversations with carers, in the original plan was no longer an option, interviewing carers became an alternative way to investigate the use of WeChat in Chinese separated families, and to understand the perspective of carers regarding long-distance communications and family relationships.

### **Step 3 – Interviews with schoolteachers (5)**

Interviews with schoolteachers were the last research activity I undertook with adult participants. According to the pilot, migrant parents reported greater reliance on the school's boarding facilities because schoolteachers were involved in childcare during the week. In the Chinese education system, students are organised by class units and each class has one assigned class teacher. Class teachers are responsible for supervising the educational as well as the boarding lives of their left-behind students. For these reasons, I incorporated class teachers into the new research design.

The teacher-participants were also recruited from M school. I used my personal connections to circulate the recruitment document as I used to attend this school and knew some schoolteachers. I sought consent from those teachers who had experience of teaching left-behind children. In the end, five class teachers agreed to participate in the research and share their observations about left-behind children in their classes. By interviewing class teachers, I was able to get a different, non-familial perspective on the school lives of left-behind

children to better understand the role of the school and teachers in the care arrangements of separated families.

*Table 4 – Profile of teacher participants*

No	Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Grade
<b>T1</b>	Mrs. Wang	F	42	Second Grade
<b>T2</b>	Mrs. Qin	F	44	Sixth Grade
<b>T3</b>	Mrs. Li	F	50	Sixth Grade
<b>T4</b>	Mrs. Wu	F	50	Second Grade
<b>T5</b>	Mrs. Yu	F	50	Fourth Grade

### **3.6.2 Online survey**

In media and communications research, surveys have been a powerful instrument in terms of studying how the demographic and socio-economic background of individuals shapes the way they use and the attitudes they hold towards media (Ørmen, 2020). I thus disseminated a 15-minute online survey to parents who sent their children to the case study school. M school had already agreed to facilitate the circulation of the survey. The school helped me post the information about the survey together with a link to the survey on their official WeChat account and circulated the information to potential participants. Given that the case study school as gatekeeper held a position of authority, the research plan sought to avoid the influence of the school as the gatekeeper of participants' engagement. Potential respondents were asked to answer a mandatory question, indicating that they had read the information sheet and agreed to participate. Parent participants were not under any pressure to fill out the survey as participation was completely voluntary and anonymous. The school just played a role in circulating the link for the survey. Parents who were interested in taking part in the research could access the link and answer the survey questions.

The online survey had two purposes. First, it enabled me to gain a better overview of a general pattern of media practices within Chinese separated families and to comprehend how migrant parents in general evaluated the family relationships that were facilitated by social media. Since the combination of qualitative and quantitative methods can mitigate the limitation of individual data collection methods (Ørmen, 2020), the online survey in this research was employed to complement the qualitative data generated from parental interviews. Second, the survey worked as a useful tool for me to identify and recruit child participants remotely for the online workshops within the school with the assistance of the schoolteachers.

At the end of the survey, a hyperlink to a screening survey was embedded to ask parents whether they were willing for their children to take part in the online school-based workshops and to allow the school to approach the children to ask if they would like to participate. If the parents were willing to give their consent, they were asked to provide their contact information and some basic information about their child.

In the end, I received 545 parental responses on the survey, 318 of which filled in the questionnaires and facilitated the recruitment of child participants for the creative workshops. Among those valid parental questionnaires, 246 migrant parents gave their consent for their children to take part in the school workshops.

### ***3.6.3 Online workshops***

In the original protocol, I had planned to conduct creative workshops with children in M school. Child participants would have been recruited through the school and parents would have taken part in the interviews. Given that this was not possible anymore because of the pandemic, I moved the workshops online. The aim of the workshops remained unchanged: to explore how left-behind children use social media on their own terms. However, given the online setting, I adjusted the recruitment strategy, target sample size (reduced from five to three), and the arrangement and content of the creative workshops to better suit an online setting. The effectiveness of creative workshops has been tested in other studies to engage children and elicit their voices (see Gauntlett & Steemers, 2008; Sakr & Steemers, 2019). Throughout the research process, children are encouraged to convey their thoughts and understandings through creative methods (Gauntlett, 2007), including writing, drawing, acting and play, as a prompt for reflecting on how they communicate with their families. These methods offer insights into children's interpretations not afforded by questionnaires, interviews or focus groups, which are of limited value in research with children, because of their focus on instant verbal articulation (Awan & Gauntlett, 2011).

In terms of recruitment, after obtaining parental consent through the screening survey embedded in the online survey, potential child participants (246) who were in the right age group and balanced according to gender were approached for their consent. The school helped approach the potential child participants by distributing a child-friendly recruitment document that introduced the study to them. Only those whose parents had given consent were approached. Children who were interested in taking part in the study could tell their schoolteachers. After getting the list of participants, I discussed with the schoolteachers how

to set up a short online meeting with the children, at a mutually convenient time, to explain the project to them verbally and get their consent. Facilitated by the schoolteachers, the children used a laptop in the school to access the meeting. I sought their consent verbally again and recorded it at the beginning of the online workshops. I ran the workshops using a popular video conference platform in China called ‘Tencent Meeting’ (the international version is Voov Meeting). I chose this platform because, based on the findings from the teachers’ interviews, children had been using it to attend online classes since the outbreak of the pandemic and were familiar with its functions. In the end, I selected 31 left-behind children for the online workshops in schools and divided them into two age bands: 7 to 11 years (junior, primary 1-3) and 12 to 16 years (senior, primary 4-6). The rationale for selecting workshop participants was based on the feasibility of conducting research from a distance. Since the workshops took place at school during the week, it was easier for me on a practical level to choose participants from the same class as the children were more likely to have the same schedule. Therefore, I chose those classes that had enough participants (at least three children who were willing to participate) from the name list.

In order to mitigate the influence of the presence of schoolteachers, I sought consent twice, making sure that the children took part in the research without any pressure (once prior to the workshops and once at the beginning of the workshop). In addition, child participants were reminded that they could skip any questions and withdraw from the research at any point without giving a reason. As can be seen in Table 4 below, the majority of children in each workshop were from the same class and only one workshop was a mixed group.

*Table 5 – Profile of workshop participants*

	No.	Age	Gender	Class & Grade
<b>The 1<sup>st</sup> school workshop</b>	W1	12	F	Class 4, Grade 5
	W2	12	F	Class 4, Grade 5
	W3	12	M	Class 4, Grade 5
	W4	12	M	Class 4, Grade 5
<b>The 2<sup>nd</sup> school workshop</b>	W5	11	M	Class 5, Grade 4
	W6	10	F	Class 5, Grade 4
	W7	11	F	Class 5, Grade 4
<b>The 3<sup>rd</sup> school workshop</b>	W8	12	M	Class 3, Grade 4
	W9	10	F	Class 3, Grade 4
	W10	10	F	Class 3, Grade 4



<b>The 4<sup>th</sup> school workshop</b>	W11	11	M	Class 3, Grade 4
	W12	12	M	Class 3, Grade 4
	W13	11	M	Class 3, Grade 4
<b>The 5<sup>th</sup> school workshop</b>	W14	12	F	Class 1, Grade 6
	W15	12	M	Class 1, Grade 6
	W16	12	M	Class 1, Grade 6
<b>The 6<sup>th</sup> school workshop</b>	W17	11	M	Class 3, Grade 4
	W18	11	M	Class 3, Grade 4
	W19	11	M	Class 3, Grade 4
<b>The 7<sup>th</sup> school workshop</b>	W20	10	M	Class 5, Grade 3
	W21	9	F	Class 5, Grade 3
	W22	10	F	Class 5, Grade 3
<b>The 8<sup>th</sup> school workshop</b>	W23	13	M	Class 3, Grade 6
	W24	12	F	Class 3, Grade 6
	W25	13	F	Class 3, Grade 6
<b>The 9<sup>th</sup> school workshop</b>	W26	13	F	Class 3, Grade 6
	W27	11	F	Class 1, Grade 4
	W28	10	F	Class 1, Grade 4
<b>The 10<sup>th</sup> school workshop</b>	W29	9	M	Class 5, Grade 3
	W30	9	F	Class 5, Grade 3
	W31	9	F	Class 5, Grade 3

Facilitated by the schoolteachers, I ran the first online workshop with four children, but the result turned out to be unsatisfactory as there was only one laptop available in the school that allowed children to access the workshop. I was unable to see the child sitting on the end of the bench. Thus, I decided to reduce the size of each workshop from four to three children to ensure that each participant could see and be seen, and was able to receive ample attention and also participate in the online setting. The teachers helped arrange the laptop and provided necessary technical support but were not involved in the discussions and work with the children. I sent the links for the meetings to the teachers beforehand. The online workshops were video-audio-recorded through the recording function of Tencent Meeting. I downloaded them directly to my local drive and encrypt these files to protect the data. The recording of the workshops was used for research purposes only. Based on these arrangements, I undertook 10 online workshops. Each one lasted 60 minutes and catered for 3 children only (except for the first one).

In order to engage children within an online setting, I also amended the format of each workshop session to enhance engagement. The children were invited to participate in small group discussions with me. Taking children's attention span into account, I broke down each workshop into smaller sessions, each lasting no more than 10 minutes. The discussions were structured around three themes: media access, long-distance communication and family relationships, which reflected the research questions. I incorporated a role-playing game into the break (5 minutes) and a pen and paper exercise at the end of the workshop (5 minutes) to help the children relax and feel at ease.

The role-playing game at the beginning invited each child participant to roleplay a scenario when a parent working in another place had returned home. Three child participants were encouraged to take up the role on the basis of three options: the child, the parent, and the carer. This activity allowed children to recall a scene when the family was reunited by interacting with their peers who had the same family-separation experiences, and it also enabled me to observe the family dynamic from a child's perspective. As Curtin (2001) reminds us, creating playful games for child participants can be especially effective when children lose interest in the research process.

I also designed a pen and paper exercise for the end of the workshop. Each child was given a notepad to write down two things they often wanted to tell their parent(s) but never had a chance to do. This activity helped me understand not only things that children valued but also the limitations of long-distance communication in terms of the range of topics that children might not have raised in their online communications with parents. Writing produced during workshops also serves mainly as a prompt for eliciting verbal data, following Gauntlett's (1997, 2007) creative research methods, which avoid instant verbalisation, and instead allow respondents time to reflect on their responses. More details can be found in Table 6.

*Table 6 – Online Creative Workshop Outline*

Online Creative Workshop Outline	
<b>Introduction (10 minutes)</b>	Description of the project
<b>The workshop will start by welcoming the children and thanking them for their help and participation. The researcher will introduce herself and</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>I am Xiaoying, from the Department of Culture, Media &amp; Creative Industries at King's College London. I want to talk to you about my PhD project that I gave you information about before.</li> </ul>

**the project. The researcher will also seek verbal consent from the children.**

- The purpose of the study is to find out how children use social media such as WeChat to communicate with their parents when they are away.
- The reason why you are being invited to take part in this study is that you are aged 7-16 and interested in using social media like WeChat to keep in touch with your family members.
- You will attend a 60-minute workshop along with 2 other children. One of your schoolteachers will also be there. The workshop will be audio and video recorded.
- In the workshop, you will participate in creative activities such as games and writing to show how you use social media in your daily life.
- Taking part in the workshops will not harm you in any way.
- Your data will be treated anonymously and kept in strict confidence. That means your name will not appear anywhere and your personal data will be stored carefully. I will give your parents an overview of how you and other children in general think about social media. But I won't share your name and details with anyone, including your parents and carers.
- Your personal data will be stored with password protection. That means only I can access the files. The data will be

kept for two years after the completion of the project.

- Taking part is completely your choice. You can leave the project at any time without having to give a reason. You can withdraw consent for the interviews by yourself or you can also ask your parents to withdraw it on your behalf.
- You can withdraw your data from the study up until September 30, 2021. If you choose to quit the project, I will not keep the information you have given thus far. Please note that it is not possible to delete workshop data completely because your data is interlinked with other children in the workshops.
- The results of the study will be summarised in my PhD thesis and other publications.

#### Seek verbal consent

- If you decide to take part, I will record your verbal consent.
- You can contact me if you have any questions. My contact details are [xiaoying.han@kcl.ac.uk](mailto:xiaoying.han@kcl.ac.uk).
- Do you still want to take part?
- If you change your mind at any point, just tell me that you want to quit; it is absolutely fine to do that. If there are any issues you don't want to discuss, just tell me and we can move on.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I would like to video and audio record the workshop so that it will help me write my notes later. I will not share the recording with anyone, and I will change your name in my notes to protect you. Is it okay to record the workshop?</li> <li>• Is there anything you want to ask me before we start?</li> </ul>
<p><b>Warm-up (5 minutes)</b></p> <p><b>The researcher will encourage children to talk to each other and enable them to familiarise themselves with each other.</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In the beginning we will introduce ourselves. You will each say your name and you can also tell us the last time you contacted your parents – which platform did you choose, what did you talk about on the call, and was it fun?</li> </ul>
<p><b>Access (10 minutes)</b></p> <p>Children will be given time to discuss their access to the internet (devices, comparison with peers), time spent online, and activities carried out online.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do you have your own digital devices that you can use to access the Internet?</li> <li>• Whose devices do you use to contact your parent/s?</li> <li>• Prompts for details: If you don't have your own devices, how do you manage to keep in touch with your parent(s)...Do you want to have one in order to contact your parent(s) whenever you want?</li> <li>• Do you sometimes have any difficulty getting online? Why?</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>How often do you go online? Where? For how long? When do you go online the most (time of day/week)? and for what purpose?</li> </ul>
<p><b>Long-distance communication (10 minutes)</b></p> <p>The children will be given time to discuss how they use social media to communicate with their parents. The emphasis here is on examining the role of social media in the context of peer interaction.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What media or platforms do you use to keep in touch with your parents? Do you mainly use WeChat?</li> <li>What do and don't you like about social media?</li> <li>Prompts for details: What exactly do you like or dislike about talking online with your mom/dad?</li> <li>If you could change something about WeChat, what would you change? Or if you could talk to the person who designed this App what would you tell them?</li> </ul>
<p><b>Role-playing game (5 minutes)</b></p> <p>The role-playing game will be built upon to make the children feel at ease. They will roleplay a scenario where the child reunites with his/her away-from-home parent(s). The researcher will observe their interactions.</p>	<p>Imagine the following scenario:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>One day a parent working in another place returns home. The child and the parent have not seen each other (physically) for 6 months. What will the scene look like?</li> <li>Can someone volunteer to take up the role of 1) the child, 2) the parent and 3) the carer?</li> </ul>
<p><b>Family relationships (10 minutes)</b></p> <p>In order to identify the role of social media in shaping family relationships,</p>	<p><u>Care arrangement</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Can you tell us who is taking care of you when your parent(s) work(s) away from home?</li> </ul>

<p><b>children will be encouraged to express their agency freely.</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Are there any differences between living in your own home and your grandparent's/auntie's?</li> <li>• Prompts for details: did it take time for you to get used to the new care arrangement? Do you feel at home when you are at your carer's place?</li> </ul> <p><u>Relationships</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What is the difference between being taken care of by your parents online and offline?</li> <li>• Do you miss your parent/s when they are away from home?</li> <li>• What do you do if you miss them?</li> <li>• Does talking via WeChat help or not help? Why?</li> </ul>
<p><b>Pen and paper exercise (5 minutes)</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Please write down two things you often want to tell your parent(s) but never get around to, what are they?</li> <li>• Please keep the note that can remind you to tell him/her when you have a video call next time.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Close the workshop (5 minutes)</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Thank you so much for taking part in the workshops. You did very well.</li> <li>• Is there anything you'd like to add? Is anything important to you that we haven't talked about?</li> <li>• You can contact me if you have any questions. My contact details are xiaoying.han@kcl.ac.uk</li> </ul>

### **3.6.4 Online child-focused interviews**

As participant observations in home settings would have been impossible online, I interviewed 10 left-behind children remotely in the presence of their carers instead. Children were invited to reflect on their personal experiences of communicating with their parents online. The rationale for undertaking interviews was to provide children with a safe space to articulate their personal feelings about their family communication. Participants may find online interviews less stressful because they can attend the interview in a familiar physical environment such as at home (Gruber et al., 2008). Consequently, participants may be more open to revealing things that are hard to discuss in person (Salmons, 2015). More importantly, online interviews can be a powerful instrument when it comes to exploring an online phenomenon, as it offers a research method that closely mirrors natural settings without the need to conduct a participant observation (Gaiser, 1997). Undertaking online interviews via the same type of technology and setting takes advantage of the full dimensionality possible in mediated communications and online settings (Salmons, 2015). Given that this study examines mediated online communication, interviewing children via WeChat allowed me to better observe children's digital practices.

Potential child participants for interviews were identified and recruited through parents and carers who had already taken part in and been interviewed as part of the research. I re-contacted all the parent/carer participants who had taken part in the pilot study and online interviews and sought their verbal consent online to interview their children. After obtaining the consent of both parents and carers, children were approached and invited to take part in the interviews. Potential child interviewees gave their consent voluntarily to participate in the research. I also sought consent twice in order to make sure that they participated in the research without any pressure, underlining that they could withdraw at any time. Carers were given my WeChat ID before the meeting so that I could set up separate online meetings (lasting 10 minutes) with the potential child participants to explain the project to them and seek their verbal consent. Eventually, I undertook interviews with 10 children whose parents/carers had participated in the research via WeChat (see Table 7).

*Table 7 – Profile of interview participants*

No.	Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Carer(s)	Matched interview
<b>F1</b>	Ran	M	13	Maternal grandmother, aunt	Maternal grandmother



<b>F2</b>	Zhe	M	13	Aunt, maternal grandmother	Mother
<b>F3</b>	Yang	M	13	Paternal grandparents	Mother
<b>F4</b>	Hui	F	11	Paternal grandmother	Mother
<b>F5</b>	Nan	F	13	Paternal grandmother	Mother
<b>F6</b>	Junbo	M	10	Paternal grandmother	Father
<b>F7</b>	Tong	F	8	Paternal grandfather	Mother
<b>F8</b>	Wulan	M	9	Paternal grandmother	Paternal grandmother
<b>F9</b>	Mai	F	12	Care centre, aunt, brother	Brother
<b>F10</b>	Hao	M	11	Maternal grandparents, paternal grandparents	Mother

Taking account of children's attention span, each child participant was invited to take part in two interview sessions, and each interview session lasted no longer than 45 minutes. The first interview focused on their knowledge of the functionalities of WeChat, while the second interview focused on discussing their experiences of using social media to communicate with their parents and their feelings about the role of WeChat in maintaining family relationships. The children had the right to call for an end to the interview at any time. Based on the earlier findings from the adult interviews, WeChat was identified as the prevalent social media application in terms of online communication between parents and children. Before the interviews, I designed five digital activities to explore how the children used WeChat and discovered more about the level of their digital skills. Child participants were invited to complete the following digital activities one day before they attended the first interview.

- Can you send me a voice message via WeChat and introduce yourself? (I would like to know: 1) your name; 2) your age; 3) your hobby)
- Can you send me a text message via WeChat about what you expect to do during our conversation? (Please feel free to use Pinyin if you do not know how to type the words)
- Can you share with me the stickers you'd like to send to your parents via WeChat?
- Can you draw your family portrait, take a picture, and send it to me via WeChat?

- Can you record a short video (30 seconds) about something that you like and send the video to me via WeChat?

In the first interview session, the children and I focused on discussing the digital activities they have completed via WeChat. Discussing the digital activities in the interview enabled me to understand their digital skills. Since 6 out of 10 children who I interviewed were boarding and were only allowed to visit their carers' homes at the weekend, the online interviews were scheduled at a mutually convenient time on weekends. As 9 out of 10 of the child interviewees did not have their own digital devices, carers were asked to help facilitate the online interviews, by giving each child access to their digital phone or another digital device. In order to minimise risk and ensure the safety of the children at all times, carers were asked to be present. The presence of carers may prevent children from sharing their ideas more openly. However, carers' presence was considered to be necessary because children have not reached a sufficient level of 'emotional maturity of legal, social or physical independence' to avoid distress (Platt, 2016, p. 10). The involvement of carers ensured that the research process was ethically responsible and did not create any anxiety for children. See the topic guide for the child-focused interviews below (Table 8 [session 1] and Table 9 [session 2]).

*Table 8 – Topic guide for the first interview session*

### **Session 1 – How do you use WeChat (40 minutes)**

<b>Core themes</b>	<b>Example Questions</b>
<b>Introduction</b>  <b>The interview will start by welcoming the child and the carer(s) and thanking them for their help and participation. The researcher will introduce herself and the project. The researcher will then seek verbal consent from the child.</b>	<b>Description of the project</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I am Xiaoying, from the Department of Culture, Media &amp; Creative Industries at King's College London. I want to talk to you about my PhD project that I gave you information about before. Now I would like to confirm some of the details of the project to make sure you understand what your participation will involve.</li> <li>• The purpose of the study is to find out how children use social media such as WeChat</li> </ul>

	<p>to communicate with their parents when they are away.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The reason why you are being invited to take part in this study is that you are aged 7-16 and use social media like WeChat to keep in touch with your mum and/or dad.</li> <li>• The interview will take about 40 minutes and your carer [your grandma (Mrs X) will be with you all the time]. The interview will be audio and video recorded.</li> <li>• Taking part in the online interview sessions will not harm you in any way.</li> <li>• Your data will be treated anonymously and kept in strict confidence. That means your name will not appear anywhere. I will give your parents an overview of how you and other children, in general, think about social media. The overview will simply discuss the general observations and conclusions.</li> <li>• Your personal data will be stored carefully with password protection. That means only I can access the files. The data will be kept for 2 years after the completion of the project.</li> <li>• Taking part is completely your choice. You can leave the project at any time without having to give a reason. You can withdraw consent for the interviews by yourself or you can also ask your parents/carers to withdraw it on your behalf.</li> </ul>
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- You can withdraw your interview data from the study up until **September 30, 2021**. If you choose to quit the project, I will not keep the information you have given thus far.
- The results of the study will be summarised in my PhD thesis and other publications.

#### **Seek verbal consent**

- If you decide to take part, I will record your verbal consent.
- You can contact me if you have any questions. My contact details are [xiaoying.han@kcl.ac.uk](mailto:xiaoying.han@kcl.ac.uk).
- Do you still want to take part?
- If you change your mind at any point, just tell me that you want to stop the interview; it is absolutely fine to do that. If there are any issues you don't want to discuss, just tell me and we can move on.
- I would like to audio and video record this conversation so that it will help me write my notes later. I am not going to share the files with anyone, and I will change your name in my notes to protect you. Is it okay to record the conversation?
- Is there anything you want to ask me before we start?

<p><b>Warm-up games</b></p> <p><b>In order to engage the children, there will be a pen and paper exercise at the beginning, allowing the researcher to get to know each child and build a trusting atmosphere.</b></p>	<p>Let's draw each other's portrait while you answer the following questions.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Are you living with your grandma or auntie or someone else?</li> <li>• Are you boarding?</li> <li>• Do you like your school life?</li> <li>• Can you describe your best friend at school?</li> <li>• Can you describe your favourite teacher at the school?</li> <li>• How good are you at using WeChat?</li> <li>• Ok, now it's time to reveal our portraits.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Discussion about digital activities</b></p> <p><b>The researcher and the child will discuss the worksheet completed prior to the interview and find out how the child uses WeChat on his/her own terms.</b></p>	<p>Thank you very much for completing the activity. Shall we discuss your digital skills?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How good are you at using WeChat?</li> <li>• Prompts about WeChat functions: text message, voice call, video call, voice message, red package, stickers, games, sharing moments with friends.... Is there any function that you find difficult to use? How did you overcome it?</li> <li>• Prompt for details: can you show me how you use different functions of WeChat, and for what purpose?</li> <li>• Can you tell me a function that you frequently use when you communicate with your parent(s) via WeChat, and show me how you use it?</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Which function of WeChat do you find easy to use and which do you find difficult? (why)?</li> <li>• What do you think about WeChat?</li> </ul>
<b>Close the interview</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Thank you so much for taking part in the interview session. You did really well.</li> <li>• Is there anything you'd like to add? Is anything important to you that we haven't talked about?</li> <li>• Would you like to continue to take part in the second session?</li> </ul>

*Table 9 – Topic guide for the second interview session*

**Session 2 – How do you use WeChat to maintain family relationships? (40 minutes)**

Core themes	Example Questions
<b>Opening</b>  <b>The interview will start by welcoming the child and the carer(s) back and thanking them for continuing to offer their help and participation. The researcher will talk with the child.</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How was your school life over the last week?</li> <li>• Do you have anything exciting that you want to share with me?</li> </ul>
<b>Warm-up games</b>  <b>The researcher will conduct an icebreaker activity to help the child feel at ease. Using an online map, the researcher will plot the route overland from his/her home to the city where his/her parents live and discuss it with the child.</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do you know how many kilometres you and your parent(s) are separated from each other?</li> <li>• Do you know all the different places you would have to pass through along the way?</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Have you been to the city where your parent(s) live(s)? If yes, what did you do there? Did you like it?</li> </ul>
<p><b>Use of WeChat</b></p> <p><b>The children will be given time to elaborate on their experience of using social media to communicate with their parents.</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How often do you contact your parents online?</li> <li>• What's your favourite topic to talk about with your parents on WeChat? Why?</li> <li>• What don't you like to talk about with your parents via WeChat? Why?</li> <li>• What do you like better, talking online or face-to-face communication? Why?</li> </ul>
<p><b>Family relationships</b></p> <p><b>The child will be encouraged to talk about their feelings in maintaining familial bonds with their parents via social media, and how their carers facilitate their communication process.</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What do you think a family is? Can you draw it?</li> <li>• What do you think about the role of each family member? What are the responsibilities of a father, mother, carer/grandparent, and child?</li> <li>• Do you think that social media/WeChat help bring your family together? Why or why not?</li> <li>• How do you feel about the fact that your parent(s) are looking after you from a distance?</li> <li>• Do you understand why they chose to leave home and work in another city?</li> <li>• What do you feel when your parents are home?</li> <li>• Prompts for details: When you have problems with your schoolwork, who would you ask for help? When something</li> </ul>

	<p>great happens to you, and you want to share happiness with someone, who do you approach first, your carer or parent? When you feel a bit sad and want to have a little chat, who would you approach? Explain your choice.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do your parents treat you the same way online/offline? Explain a bit more.</li> <li>• Prompts for details: Would you react differently when you have online conversations with your parents? And why?</li> <li>• What is the main difference between being taken care of by your parents online and offline?</li> <li>• What do you do if you really miss your parents?</li> </ul>
<b>Close the interview</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Thank you so much for taking part in the interview session. You did a great job.</li> <li>• Is there anything you'd like to add? Is there anything important to you that we haven't talked about?</li> <li>• You can contact me if you have any questions. My contact details are xiaoying.han@kcl.ac.uk.</li> </ul>

The interview sessions were audio and video recorded with the consent of both the child and the carer. The children were allowed to stop the interviews at any point and withdraw their consent without giving a reason. By observing how children communicated with me via WeChat, I was in a better position to understand how children use WeChat in reality. Child-focused interviews enabled me to explore children's perspectives on the use of WeChat and its implications for their family relationships. By collecting data about children's media practices and their opinions on how it impacted their family relationships, I was able to juxtapose the



perspectives of different family members, including children, parents, and carers, on the same themes.

### **3.7 Data analysis**

In this research, thematic analysis was applied to identify the recurring themes that emerged from the dataset. Because there is little empirical research that investigates the perspectives of left-behind children and carers in Chinese separated families, or offers conceptual development that fosters a dialogue between family and media studies. Qualitative methods such as thematic analysis are useful as a means of giving voice to respondents who are traditionally unrepressed or underrepresented in literature to speak about their experiences in their own words without being hindered by predetermined analysis categories (Pistrang & Barker, 2012; Riger & Sigurvinsdottir, 2015). Thematic analysis also allows researchers to code and categorise data into themes (Alhojailan, 2012). Furthermore, the process should provide the different levels of themes and demonstrate the relationship between the variables to create a logical chain of evidence (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Such an approach has been commonly applied in qualitative research on children's digital experiences (see Livingstone, 2014; Livingstone & Blum-Ross, 2020; Smahel & Wright, 2014).

I transcribed the data once I completed each interview and workshop. All data and my fieldnotes were anonymised when I started writing up the thesis. In the beginning, I planned to use NVivo to analyse the qualitative data. However, the platform was not user-friendly when it came to analysing another foreign language apart from English. In order to maintain the authenticity of the data, I decided to manually analyse the data by using the original transcripts in Chinese and came up with a thematic coding framework in English. As mentioned previously, the thesis sought to answer three research questions:

- How are social media like WeChat used by left-behind children and for what purposes?
- What role do social media like WeChat play in the family lives of left-behind children?
- In what specific ways are family relationships shaped by social media from the children's perspective?

To address the research questions, in this study, I used three overarching codes: the use of social media, the role of social media, and mediated family relationships, to organise the themes emerging from the empirical data. I started by thematically coding the transcripts of the interviews with parents and identified recurrent themes. Through the coding of parental accounts, ‘parenting’ was identified as a key theme that could incorporate the themes of ‘incomplete parenting’, ‘children’s agency’, alongside ‘carer’s facilitation’ and ‘carer’s gatekeeping’. With respect to the role of WeChat, ‘parenting facilitator’ and ‘parenting surveillance tool’ emerged from the interview data as recurrent themes. Thereafter, other themes about family relationships emerged, including ‘COVID-19 impact’, ‘filial piety’, and ‘intermediary role of carer’. I then examined the data of carers and children and compared different accounts to highlight the recurring themes. Finally, I reorganised these themes into overarching codes through which I framed the perspectives of parents, carers and children (see Table 10).

*Table 10 – The coding framework*

Perspective	Overarching themes	Themes
Parents	Use of WeChat	children’s agency; incomplete parenting (lack of control/practices/emotional connection); carer’s facilitation; carer’s gatekeeping;
	Role of WeChat	parenting facilitator; parenting surveillance tool
	Mediated Family Relationships	COVID-19 impact; filial piety; intermediary role of carer
Carers	Use of WeChat	carers’ observations; carer’s facilitation; carer’s gatekeeping
	Role of WeChat	parenting facilitator; parenting surveillance tool
	Mediated Family Relationships	ineffectiveness of WeChat (building emotional closeness); parent-carer conflicts; care’s gatekeeping
Children	Use of WeChat	media literacy; children’s difficulties; creative strategies

	Role of WeChat	facilitator of parental involvement; enabler of parental surveillance; emotion management tool
	Mediated Family Relationships	obstacles in enacting relationships; COVID-19 impact; filial piety; carer's intervention

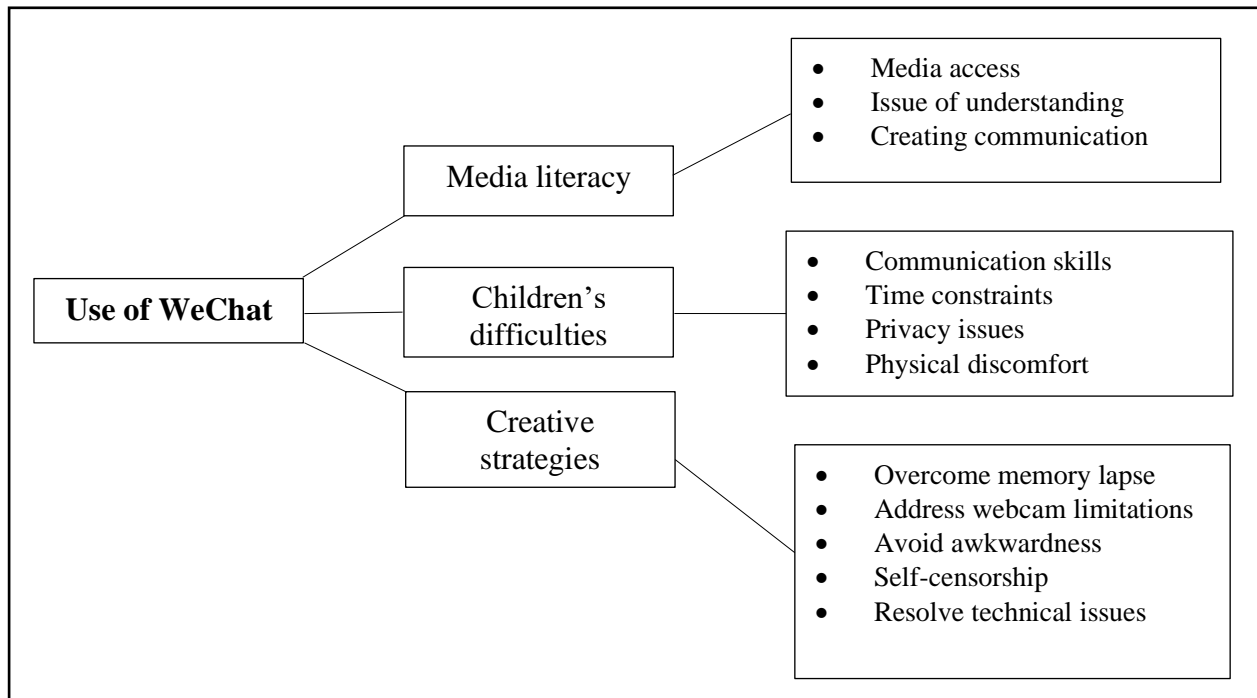
In order to enhance the coding framework based on the themes that emerged from the data, I incorporated references to other research in the fields of migration, communication technologies, transnational families and children's media (see Ofcom, 2005; de Block and Buckingham, 2007; Madianou and Miller, 2012; Livingstone, 2014). The data analysis was improved through multiple rounds of revisions based on feedback from my supervisors. As the field research was conducted with Chinese separated families in Mandarin Chinese – the official language of the People's Republic of China – all Chinese terms and expressions quoted in this thesis are transcribed with the standard Chinese pinyin system of Romanisation.

### 3.8 Example of coding procedure

From Table 10, it is evident that key themes overlap across the three perspectives. However, parents, carers, and children interpret the same topics differently, shaping the emphasis of their digital practices and leading to diverse recurrent sub-themes from each perspective. In this section, I use children's data as an example to illustrate and explain my coding process. The reason for this is that I collected two sets of qualitative data using different approaches: workshops and interviews. As a result, the analysis structure becomes more intricate, and the themes are more diverse. Nevertheless, the underlying rationale behind the coding strategies remains consistent when analysing qualitative data with parents and carers.

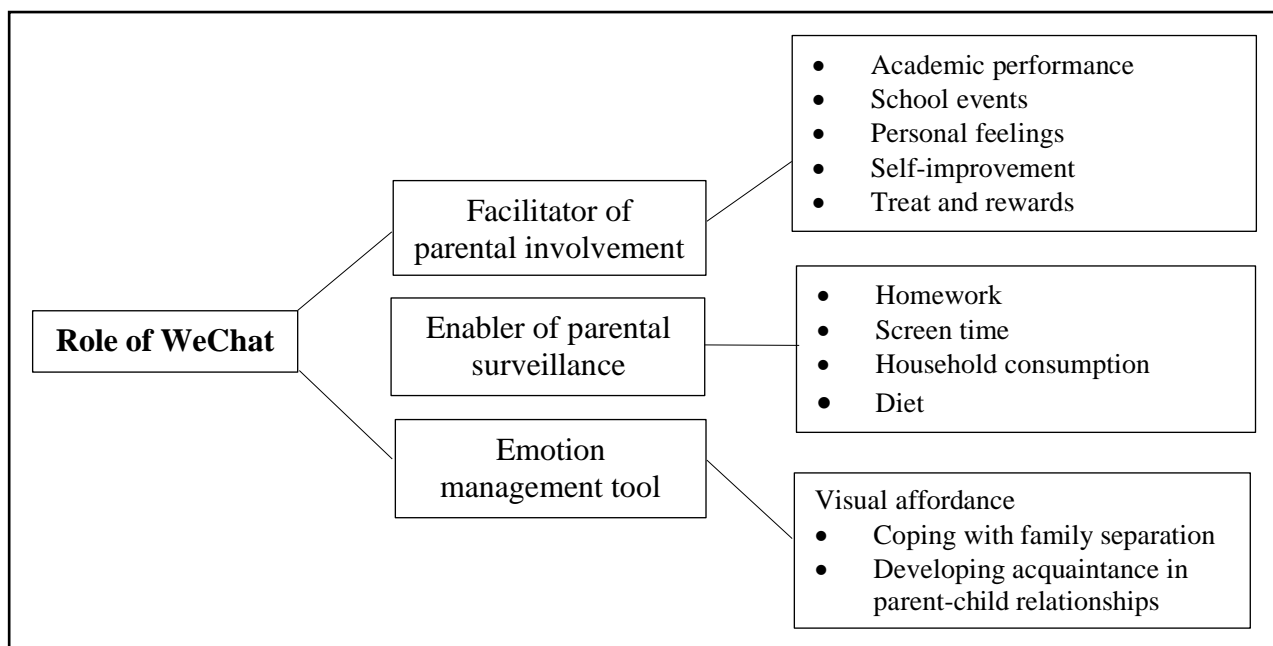
Under the three overarching themes, I organise the key themes and sub-themes extracted from the analysis of workshops and interview transcripts. The logical structure of the thematic analysis can be found in Figures 2, 3, and 4, respectively. According to findings from the digital activities embedded in the child-centred interviews and the online workshops, media literacy emerged as a recurrent theme under the overarching theme 'use of WeChat'. Drawing on the definition of media literacy proposed by Ofcom (2005), children's digital skills were examined through three aspects: media access, issue of understanding, and creating communication. Unlike adult participants, most of the child participants encountered

difficulties in online communications, which embodied communication skills, time constraints, privacy issues and physical discomfort. However, child participants in both the workshops and interviews were found to devise creative strategies to overcome these obstacles. The common approaches used by children to maintain better parent-child communications included overcoming memory lapse, addressing webcam limitations, avoiding awkwardness, self-censoring topics, and resolving technical issues (see Figure 2).



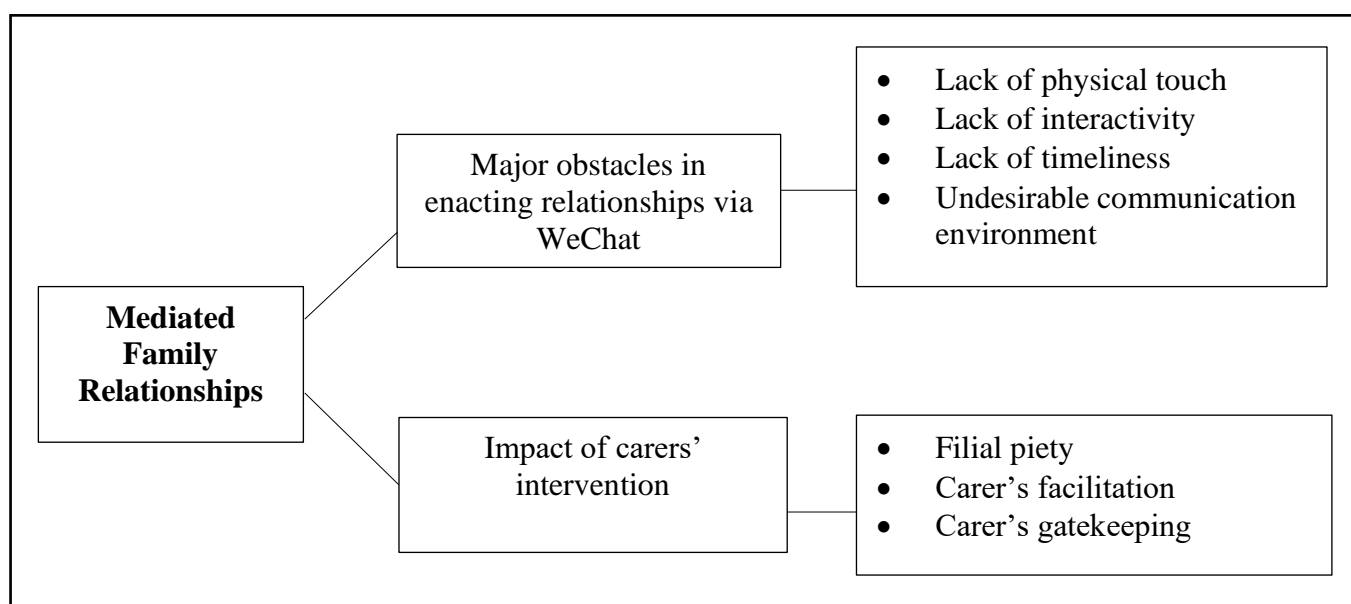
*Figure 2. Themes and Sub-themes from Children's Workshops and Interviews on 'Use of WeChat'*

Based on the children's accounts regarding the second overarching theme, WeChat has been identified as a facilitator of parental involvement, an enabler of parental surveillance and an emotion management tool. Child participants in both workshops and interviews commonly discussed their academic performance, school events, personal feelings, and self-improvement with their parents and asked for rewards via WeChat. Regarding parental surveillance, homework, screen time, household consumption, and diet emerged as recurrent themes in the transcripts of workshops and interviews. Additionally, the emotional aspect of long-distance communications was highlighted in children's narratives; they commonly used WeChat to cope with family separation and maintain acquaintance with their parents (see Figure 3).



*Figure 3. Themes and Sub-themes from Children's Workshops and Interviews on 'Role of WeChat'*

A prominent finding from workshops and interviews relating to the theme of 'mediated relationship' is that four limitations (lack of physical touch, lack of interactivity, lack of timeliness, and undesirable communication environment) in online communications prevent children from enacting relationships with their parents. Filial piety, carer's facilitation and gatekeeping emerged from the analysis of children's accounts of the impact of carers' intervention in parent-child communications as recurrent themes (see Figure 4).



*Figure 4. Themes and Sub-themes from Children's Workshops and Interviews on 'Mediated Family Relationships'*

### **3.8 Methodological contribution to remote research**

Owing to the experiences I acquired from the pilot study, the research activities with adults (parents, carers and schoolteachers) were not adversely affected by the implementation of remote research. Given the shift to an online setting as a result of the pandemic, most adult participants took part in the interviews from the comfort of their homes and may have felt more relaxed about sharing their stories. It also offered more flexibility in terms of scheduling interviews, especially with migrant parents, because some of them had irregular work shifts. As a result, my participants, parents in particular, were more open to discussing their personal feelings about family separation, the drawbacks of WeChat and parent-carer tensions. It is worth noting at this point that the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted family reunions of all participant families because of domestic travel restrictions in China. In this specific context, most migrant parents endured even longer periods of family separation. Owing to the nature of the research, my participants and I unavoidably touched upon topics in relation to their children and families. There were some emotional episodes in the parental interviews, particularly when parents spoke about missing their children.

It became a challenge for me, as a researcher, to tackle some of the emotional moments that occurred in the interviews from a distance which I had not anticipated, and which may have been exacerbated by the pandemic. In these instances, I asked my interviewees whether they would like to take a break, waited until they felt able to continue and then asked them if they still wanted to continue the interviews because they always had the right to withdraw without giving a reason. No one withdrew and they were still willing to openly discuss feelings about having to leave children behind and the emotional challenges of family separation.

Similar emotional moments happened in the child-focused interviews, but it was more challenging for me as a researcher to deal with children's emotions from afar. For example, 2 out of 10 children began to cry when they talked about their absent mothers. Given that I was not physically present, I had to pause the interviews when the children were emotional and ask them whether they wanted to continue. It is worth noting that the presence of carers in these circumstances was beneficial because they helped to comfort the child participants. One 8-year-old girl started to cry at the start of the interview because she was sad that a scheduled video call with her mother had been cancelled because of her mother's work. At this point asking her whether she wanted to take a break did not help and she continued to cry. I tried to say something comforting and talked about her favourite hobby, painting, but this little girl could not stop crying until I asked the carer to help me comfort the child. In order to prevent

any more stress and pressure for both the child and the carer, I decided to end the interview after 15 minutes as I could see the child was still upset. After the interview, I sent her a small art gift (all children received a token gift for their participation). In return, she drew a picture for me which she wanted to give me in person. The physical distance stopped me from receiving her kind gesture and expressing my gratitude. In this case, remote research is less interactive compared to the face-to-face format, which may prevent participants from building trust with researchers.

Another challenge of conducting remote research with children was when children behaved in an unexpected way. For example, I interviewed an 8-year-old boy whose parents were both migrant workers. During the first interview, he found it difficult to sit still and kept on changing his position in order to be comfortable, which affected the sound quality of the recording. I needed to repeat myself several times to ensure that he understood my interview questions. He also asked his grandmother to help him hold the phone when his arms were tired. After a 30-minute conversation during the second session, he fell asleep in front of the webcam at 3 p.m. (CST) on Sunday. I did not notice that the child was sleepy as he was engaging with the interview questions just before he fell asleep. Although I could see my participant via webcam, I did not pay enough attention to the fact that the child was lying in bed while he was talking to me. If I had noticed when my participants felt tired, I would have ended the interview earlier. However, remote communication hindered me from noticing when things were not going well. The quality of mediated interactions has always been challenged as many scholars believe that technological mediation eliminates the social cues (e.g., voice/facial expression and physical surroundings) that provide rich information (see Kiesler et al., 1984). As Baym (2010) argues, due to the paucity of social cues, mediated communication can be seen as a diminished form of face-to-face conversation. My personal experience of undertaking remote research allowed me to reconsider the concept of mediation and its analytical significance when it comes to understanding mediated familyhood in participant families. More specifically, this research experience has given me an insight into how parents might feel when they communicate with their children.

An unintended benefit of studying children remotely was that it simulated the same environment as that of parent-child communications, which offered me rich insights into the issues that parents and children face when communicating via WeChat. My own experiences of remote research made me more aware of themes such as physical discomfort, carers' facilitation, the unpredictability of parent-child communications, children's attention span, and ICT infrastructure in rural areas when I came to analyse the data collected from the child-

focused interviews and school workshops. I would have overlooked these recurrent issues, observed in children's media practices, if I had interviewed them in person. The reasons were, first, none of the child participants took the initiative to reflect on their digital practices unless there were some issues occurring in online interviews, which often happened in parent-child communication. For instance, during one of the workshops, our conversation was interrupted by the unstable internet connection. When I tried to pick up on the topic we had been discussing again after the connection returned, I forgot where I had left off. The three child participants laughed and told me that they often experienced similar interruptions during video calls with their parents. They added that they just kept forgetting what they had wanted to say.

Second, using online interviews in addition to the workshops, I was in a better position to observe and understand how children might actually use WeChat when communicating with their parents, for example, their technical proficiency in using certain functions, attention span, and physical discomforts that accompanied online communication. For instance, in relation to the latter point, I interviewed a boy (aged 13) who was distracted by his vibrating phone and could not concentrate because of the many messages being sent to his carer's device. Since all child interviewees (10) used their carers' smartphones to communicate with their parents, I assume that parents also need to address issues around children's attention span during online communications. I also encountered problems such as unstable internet connections both in interviews and workshops. Moreover, the ICT infrastructure in rural areas caught my attention because one of the child interviews had to be rescheduled because of a power cut caused by heavy snow in F city. After this incident, I realised that online communications could be challenging as most child participants were living in rural areas where ICT infrastructure was often undermined by extreme weather.

Third, the downsides of online communication for children were rarely mentioned in parents' and carers' accounts. For example, none of the adult participants mentioned that the children, especially younger children, had difficulties sitting still or holding smartphones steady. Adult participants tended to interpret the children's 'uncontrollable' behaviours as the threat of losing control in remote parenting or children's transgression. Children's voices and feelings have been neglected in the adult world. As noted in Chapter 2, the viewpoints and experiences of Chinese left-behind children in the context of internal migration have received very little attention in the literature (Lu & Zhou, 2013). By using field research material, this thesis aims to give children a voice and address a research gap in the literature on children and migration. Children's perspectives are seen as equal to other key family members, including migrant parents and carers. I will align the perspectives of different family members and



contrast the inconsistencies and similarities in parents', carers', and children's accounts in order to elucidate the role of media technologies in shaping family relationships.

Finally, researching children remotely provided me with an opportunity to observe how children exercised their agency. In other words, I witnessed children's agency and resilience in the face of so-called 'obstacles', not only in their interactions with me but also in the ways in which they engaged with WeChat to maintain family relationships. The child-focused interviews and workshops were undertaken in the presence of carers and schoolteachers respectively. I assumed that the presence of carers and teachers might affect children's responses when I modified the research plan. For example, I assumed that the involvement of carers might deter children from expressing their personal feelings when it came to topics related to family relationships. However, this issue seemed unavoidable even in the originally approved research design, as carers were expected to be present during participant observations. In order to ensure that the children felt relaxed, I reminded my participants that they could opt out of specific questions or elements of the research during interviews at home and that they could stop the interviews at any time. In fact, the presence of carers did not prevent children from expressing their opinions, as I had expected. One of the reasons that could be speculated for this result was that most carers chose to take a backseat during the interviews, except for two younger children (aged 8) who needed their carers to facilitate the interview sessions. More importantly, if children wanted to tell me something that they did not want their carers to hear, they came up with other ways of expressing themselves. For instance, a 10-year-old boy lowered his voice when he complained about his father's strictness. In another example, a teen boy waited until his grandmother walked away and then told me that he felt misunderstood by his parents due to the drawbacks of communicating online. Echoing previous literature on children's viewpoints and agency (see Greene & Nixon, 2020; Kuczynski, 2003; Murphy, 2020; Tisdall & Punch, 2012), the idiosyncrasies and creativity of left-behind children in response to family separation are highlighted in this thesis.

## **4. The Parents' Perspectives**

### **4.1 Introduction**

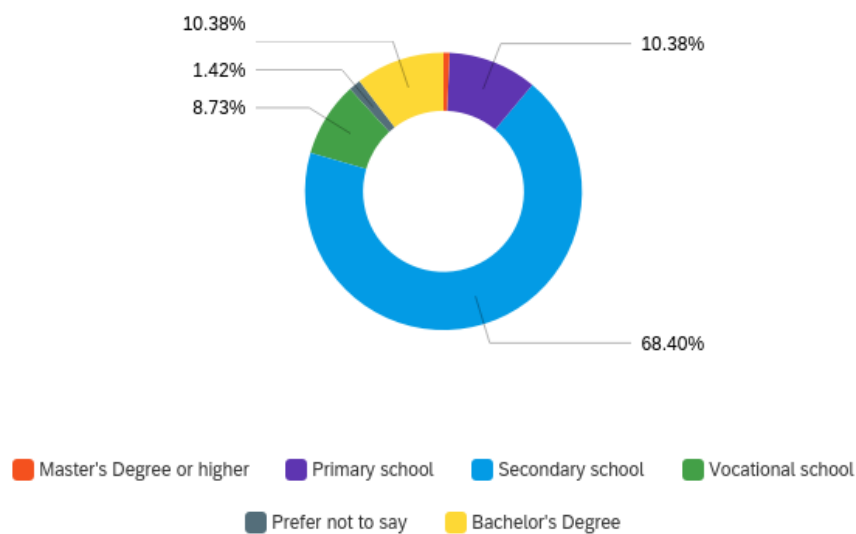
This chapter draws on findings from the online survey and 20 parental interviews to examine: 1) how parents use WeChat and for what purposes, 2) how parents interpret the role of WeChat in their family lives, and 3) in what specific ways they think family relationships are shaped by social media like WeChat within Chinese separated families. The chapter first examines findings from the parental survey data and provides an overview of separated families in terms of their profiles, media access, media habits, frequency of online communication, as well as care arrangements. Drawing on parental interviews from the case study school, I then move on to discuss long-distance parenthood through WeChat and how it exacerbates parental powerlessness in general and maternal ambivalence in particular. After that, I examine the role of WeChat in maintaining parent-child relations from the parental perspective and focus on how parents address aspects of powerlessness by using WeChat as a parenting facilitator and surveillance tool. The final section highlights two important dimensions that play a pivotal role in shaping mediated relationships in Chinese separated families: filial piety and the intermediary role of grandparents. This section also illustrates how the unprecedented context of the COVID-19 crisis exacerbated existing issues related to mediated relationships in separated families.

#### ***4.1.1 Survey overview***

This overview based on data from an online survey seeks to offer broader insights into parental interpretations of the role of social media. This survey was administered from November 29, 2020 to December 7, 2021. In terms of household income, gender and care arrangements, Chinese separated families are collectively a heterogeneous group. However, some general trends could be identified among the parent participants. Parents involved in the research were predominantly young and middle-aged adults from the case study school. According to the survey responses, the age group with the largest number of respondents was 31 to 35 years (40.3%), followed by those aged under 25 (2.4%), 25 to 30 (8.3%), 36 to 40 (30.6%), 41 to 45 (12.3%), 46-50 (3.8%), and over the age of 50 (2.3%).

It is worth mentioning that female respondents (67.7%) outnumbered male respondents (32.3%) in the sample. As the data show, the highest educational qualification attained by two thirds of the participants (68.4%) was lower secondary school education; 19.1% of respondents

had a tertiary education, followed by 8.73% who had attended a vocational school. Chart 1 below shows the full range of responses. This aligns with the national pattern of education levels of Chinese migrant workers released by the National Bureau of Statistics of China (2021), showing that 55.4% and 16.7% of migrant workers had attained lower secondary school education and upper secondary school education respectively.



*Chart 1 – Survey – Distribution of migrant workers by level of education*

Parents were asked how many times they were able to visit their children in a year (Chart 2). In total, 70.7% of parents reported they visited their children once every 2 months, 6.4% visited their families 3 to 4 times a year, while 18.9% visited their families fewer than 3 times a year. However, it should be pointed out that the outbreak of COVID-19 and lockdowns in major Chinese cities prevented migrant workers from visiting their families as scheduled. The figures shown in the survey therefore may be lower than usual.



*Chart 2 – Survey – Frequency of family visits*

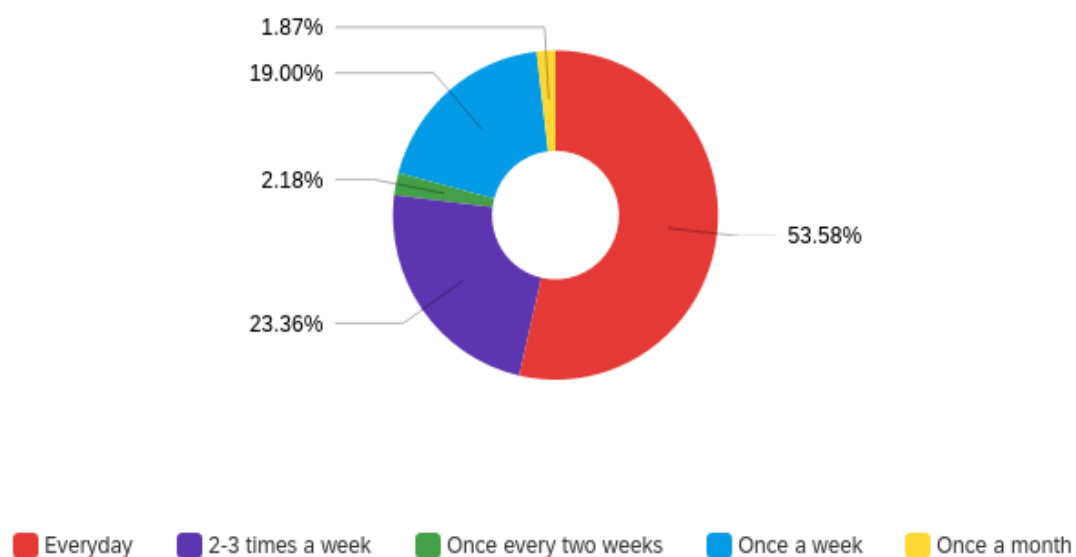
Although the majority of respondents (78%) were ethnic Mongols and eligible to have more than one child,<sup>10</sup> over two-thirds the participant families (67.6%) only had one child, 30.1% of families had two children, and a small number of families (2.3%) had three or more than three children. Given that the case study school (M school) was a Mongolian minority primary school that implements Mongolian language education, it was interesting to find that most of the parents (83.2%) spoke Mandarin when they communicated with their children online while 15.3% of the respondents mixed Mandarin and Mongolian. Only a small number of respondents (1.6%) spoke Mongolian exclusively to their children.

With respect to childcare, in addition to common care arrangements, as described by Murphy (2020), which include ‘mother at home, father out’ families, ‘lone-migrant mother, at-home father’ families, and ‘skipped-generation families’, an alternative type of care arrangement was also evident among participant families, which I refer to as proxy-parent families. Proxy-parent families in this context refer to those families who resort to professional childcare services such as foster care homes. Based on the school survey findings, left-behind children were most commonly cared for by their grandparents (33.6%), followed by stay-at-home mothers or fathers (30.6%). It is worth noting that 35.7% of families chose different care arrangements and selected ‘other’ from the options on the survey. Parents who chose ‘other’

<sup>10</sup> The Chinese government started loosening the one-child policy and allowing ethnic minority households to have two or three children in 1984, with the aim of preventing population decline within ethnic minority groups (Liping Zhang, 2017, p. 14).

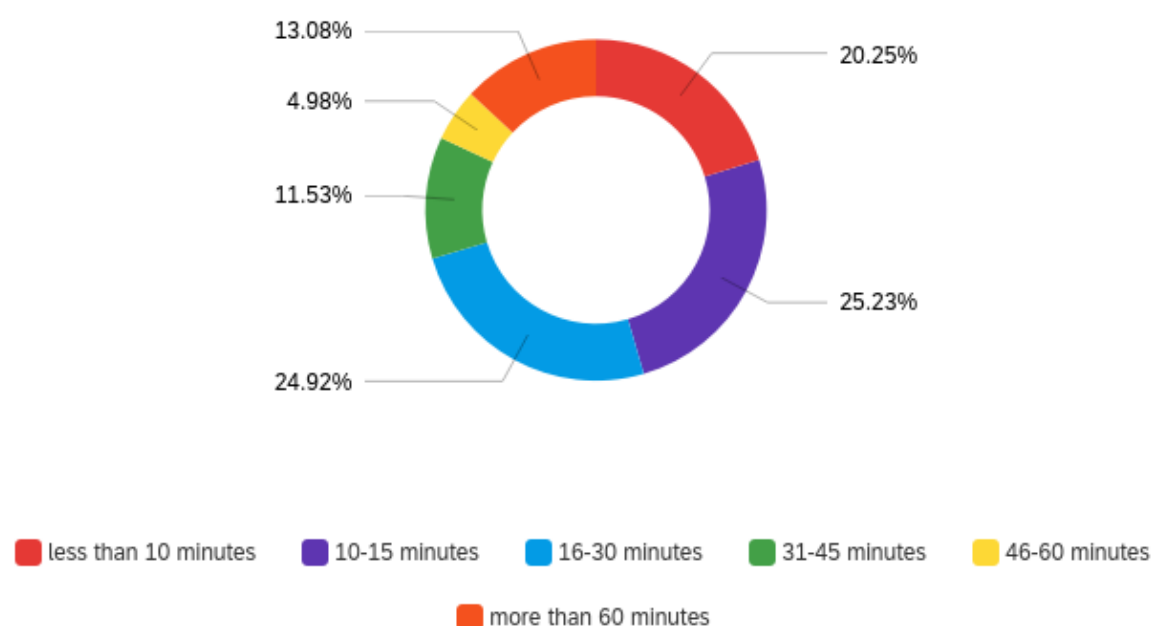
may have sent their children to another family member's home or foster care homes at weekends. According to the regulations of M school, boarding students could only be looked after by family members at weekends. Therefore, it was also quite common for children to be looked after by extended family members. For example, two parents participating in the interviews confirmed that their children were looked after by the children's aunts. Some children were sent to privately-run foster care homes at weekends because there were no family members available at home who could look after them. This practice of sending children to privately-run foster care homes, as revealed in the parental interviews, was in fact not allowed by the school. These foster care homes were based near the school and offered boarding and pickup services. Childcare professionals there ensured the children completed their homework and returned to M school on time.

The survey established that 91% of respondents used social media to keep in touch with their children when their families were separated. A total of 83% of respondents chose WeChat as the primary communication tool. Smartphones were used as the primary communication device (68.1%), followed by smartwatches (4.5%), tablet computers (3.8%), and landline telephones (1.4%). In terms of the frequency of online communication, more than half of the families (53.8%) kept in touch via social media on a daily basis; 23.4% contacted their children two to three times a week; 19.0% contacted their children once a week; 2.2% contacted their children once every two weeks; and 1.9% contacted their children once a month (see Chart 3).



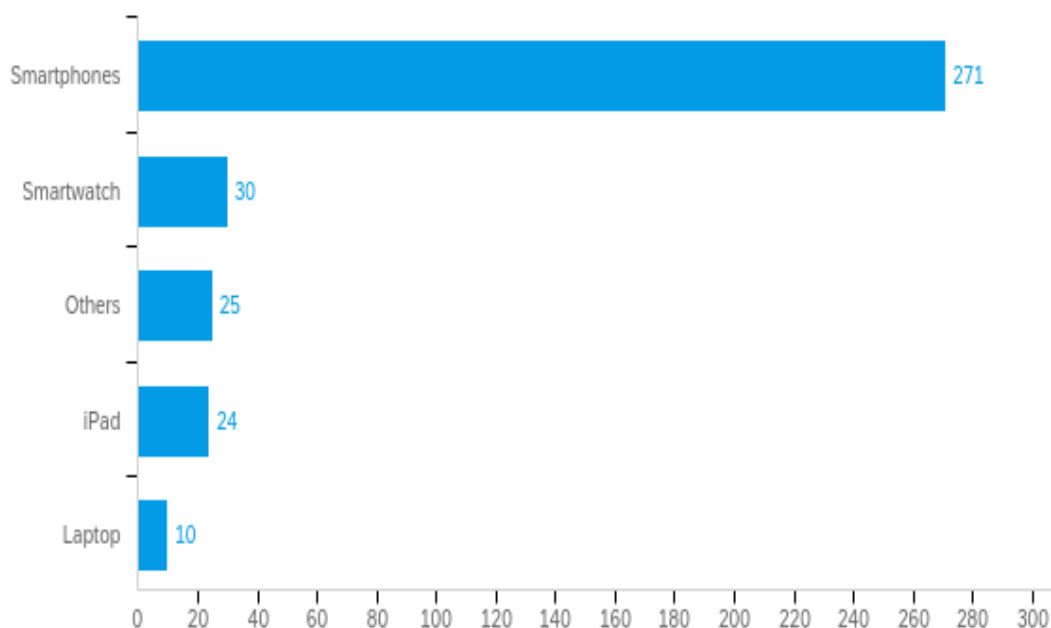
*Chart 3 – Frequency of online communications*

Over half of respondents (65.4%) reported that the duration of online conversations with their children was mostly under 30 minutes, while 13% reported that they were able to talk to their children online for over 60 minutes. Chart 4 below shows the full range of responses relating to the duration of calls.



*Chart 4 – Average duration of online calls*

Media access is an important factor associated with the frequency of communication between children and parents. According to M school's regulations, pupils are not allowed to use digital devices at school. In survey responses, 38.3% parents stated that their children were weekly boarders, which means they were only allowed to visit their carers' homes and access digital devices and the internet at weekends. The survey data suggest that most of the families (96.9%) had internet access at their carers' homes. However, one in two parents stated that their left-behind children did not have their own digital devices. Therefore, carers' smartphones were used as primary devices (75.3%) to get in touch with parents while others used smartwatches (8.3%), tablet computers (6.7%), laptops (2.8%) and other (25%) (see Chart 5).



*Chart 5 – Survey Parental responses on Children’s media access at carers’ homes*

The results also suggest that 35% of parents respondents stated their children needed help from their carers when online communication took place. In terms of topics discussed during online conversations, the survey suggests that the majority of parents (67%) mainly discussed education-related topics such as homework and school life with their children. This was especially the case for skipped-generation families where most parents (71.5%) were concerned that grandparents were unable to help the children with their homework and that their children’s academic performance would be affected by the lack of supervision.

In order to investigate how migrant parents evaluated their family relationships maintained via social media, some direct statements were selected from the interviews conducted in the pilot study and embedded in the matrix scale questions which then asked parents to rate their attitudes towards long-distance familyhood (see Table 1).

*Table 1 – Parental attitudes towards long-distance familyhood*

What do you think about the following statements that other parents have made about the role of WeChat within parent-child relationships?				
1.Strongly Disagree	2. Disagree	3. Neither Agree nor Disagree	4. Agree	5. Strongly Agree

Compared to face-to-face communication, it feels the same when I have video calls with my child/ren.
If I miss my child and call him/her, I will be more upset after seeing his/her face.
I don't know what to say when my child and I communicate via video calls, and I feel embarrassed to tell my child I love and miss him/her during video calls.
The separation makes it really difficult to discipline my child from a distance.
In terms of my child's behaviour, there is a contrast between online and offline. I don't know much about my child.
WeChat helps me maintain a healthy relationship with my child when I am away.
Sometimes I question my decision when I see my child misses me so much during WeChat video calls.

There was a spectrum of opinions about online communication carried out via WeChat video calls. Over half of the parents (72.7%) agreed that long-distance parenting was really difficult. Many parents (67%) also reported that they did not know much about what their children actually did in real life. However, 62.6% of parents agreed that WeChat was helpful in terms of maintaining a relationship with their children. Due to family separation, 51% of parents sympathised with their children because they could not be with them; 58% of parents questioned their own decisions to migrate when they felt their children missed them.

The survey found that the respondents in general agreed that social media like WeChat helped them to communicate more conveniently with family members at a distance. However, these communication technologies cannot address all the issues stemming from physical distance. The survey also revealed some key themes such as parental powerlessness in long-distance parenting, which I will examine further in my discussion of the interviews in this chapter. The next section is based on interviews with from 5 migrant fathers and 13 migrant mothers, and seeks to illustrate how parents experience parenthood via WeChat.



## 4.2 Long-distance parenthood via WeChat

### 4.2.1 *Lack of parental control and involvement*

In an age of migration and mobility, families' practices are often deeply embedded in a state of intensified movement (Kilkey & Palenga-Möllenbeck, 2016, p. 2). Family in this sense, as Morgan (1996) argues, is better understood as a verb rather than a noun, meaning that, against the backdrop of migration, family members can only 'do family' through the daily contacts facilitated by mediated communication technologies (Eklund & Sadowski, 2021). In this respect, data from the parental interviews indicate that the hope of being connected motivates many migrant parents to 'do' parenting from a distance despite constraints that lead to parental stress. WeChat facilitates parental involvement in their children's lives. However, as noted in many parent participants' interview responses, the availability of WeChat does not necessarily solve the problems that occur in long-distance parenthood. Some of these issues stem from attitudes towards parenting in China, with particular regards to issues of control and surveillance over children's study.

Livingstone and Blum-Ross (2020) argue that 'parenting' as a verb and an active intervention refers not just to the task of bringing up children, but to a personal, cultural, and even ideological 'project' in its own right (p. 23). In Chinese family culture, the concept of *guan* (管) is an indigenous description of child-rearing (see Chao, 1994; Wang & Chang, 2010). Even if the word *guan* literally means 'to regulate', it has a positive connotation in Chinese family culture. *Guan* is a Chinese term that combines the English-language meanings of the following verbs: 'to educate, care for, support, control, and love' (Tobin et al., 2009, p. 40). Therefore, parental care, concern, and involvement are associated with rigorous control and governance of the child (R Chao, 1994). As mentioned in Chapter 2, filial piety serves as a guide for parent-child interactions (Yeh et al., 2013). Psychological studies usually describe Chinese parenting as 'controlling', 'authoritarian', or 'restrictive' (Hsu, 1985). In fact, these concepts are not necessarily depicted as negative in Chinese culture. According to Chao (1994), in China, obedience to parents and some degree of strictness may be seen as equivalent to 'parental concern, caring or involvement' (p. 1112).

Table 2 – Profile of parent participants

No	Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Occupation	Host city	Number of child(ren)	Gender of child(ren)	Age of child(ren)	Caregiver(s)
P1	Bai	M	35	Social worker	Beijing	1	M	13	Paternal grandmother, at-home mother
P2	Lili	F	34	Courier	Beijing	2	F	13, 9	Paternal grandparents, aunt
P3	Mei	F	38	Bath attendant	Shenyang	2	F, M	19, 11	Paternal grandparents, maternal grandparents, father
P4	Eurong	F	49	Cook	Beijing	2	M, F	23, 13	Paternal grandparents, father
P5	Bao	M	40	Lathe operator	Beijing	1	M	13	Mother
P6	Lai	F	49	Toll collector	Beijing	2	F	13	Maternal grandfather
P7	Mingyang	M	35	Worker in a beverage factory	Shenyang	1	M	11	Paternal grandparents
P8	Haiheng	M	35	Engineer	Beijing	2	M	10, 2	Paternal grandmother
P9	Yue	F	25	Hairdresser	Dalian	1	F	6	Paternal grandfather
P10	Tao	M	45	Bus attendant	Beijing	2	F, M	23, 13	At-home mother
P11	Ying	F	42	Butcher	Dalian	2	M	24, 11	Paternal grandparents, father
P12	Jie	F	31	Assembly line worker	Tianjin	1	F	11	Paternal grandmother
P13	Na	F	35	Supermarket worker	Tianjin	1	F	11	Paternal grandmother
P14	Wu	F	40	Assembly line worker	Japan	2	M	12	Aunt, father
P15	Hong	F	50	Truck driver	/	1	M	13	Maternal grandmother, aunt
P16	Han	F	42	Waitress	Beijing	2	F, M	21, 10	Paternal grandparents
P17	Wang	F	33	Supermarket worker	Fuxin	1	F	9	Paternal grandparents
P18	Wenli	F	35	Beautician	Beijing	1	M	13	Paternal grandparent

One prominent finding from the interviews I conducted with Chinese migrant parents, who value parental control and governance in their child-rearing practices, is that the whole process of remote parenting is characterised by a feeling of a lack of control. Fifteen out of nineteen participants I spoke to felt that parenting via WeChat was inadequate for providing sufficient and consistent parental guidance. The case of Wenli (P18), a 35-year-old beautician working in Beijing, is illustrative of this point. Although Wenli acknowledged the convenience of WeChat for keeping in touch with her son, she expressed concerns about remote parenting during the interview. She told me that she was concerned about her son's tendency to tell lies:

‘He deceived his grandparents by telling them his homework had been done. His class teacher was fooled into thinking that he lost the homework on the way home’.

Wenli did not know this until the schoolteacher informed her about her son's failure to submit his homework. Wenli attributed her son's behaviour to a lack of self-control. She felt irritated once she knew what her son had done because she had asked him if he had finished his homework during the video calls. His answer was always “yes”. Given that the carers were illiterate, Wenli felt she had to supervise her son remotely, but she was not satisfied with the outcome of homework supervision via WeChat. As she said:

‘It [referring to homework supervision] is really excruciating every time. I’ve found that the kid has a tendency to cut corners when he does his homework. I’ve warned him not to do that and he always says “ok”. But then he continues to do so...’

Parental interviews also suggested that it is difficult for parents to address their children’s ‘undesirable’ behaviours online via WeChat. For example, Yue (P9), a 25-year-old hairdresser working in Dalian,<sup>11</sup> had no idea how to help her daughter (aged 6) to stop bed-wetting via WeChat. She brought this issue up repeatedly on video calls, but her daughter, according to Yue, kept forgetting to go to the toilet before going to bed when she was boarding. Yue received reports from the dormitory coordinators<sup>12</sup> several times about this. According to Yue, when she tried to ‘teach’ her daughter how to avoid bedwetting via video calls, her daughter would hide behind her grandfather or cover her face with a blanket. Yue believed her daughter did not want to face the camera because she was feeling uncomfortable. Yue felt she could do nothing about this issue, so she had to ask her father-in-law, who was the primary carer, to take care of it, and this exacerbated her feelings of parental powerlessness.

Other examples given by parents suggest that children might in fact enjoy a higher degree of autonomy when it comes to parent-child communications online, the implication of which is that parents need to compromise with regards to their parenting strategies when control proves to be less effective in long-distance communications. For instance, according to the interview data, the duration of online communication is often dependent on children’s level of focus and interest. Three parents (P5, P7, P12) reflected that their children seemed to be more interested in watching animations on TV than they were in video calls via WeChat. With wry humour, they laughed at their ‘misfortunes’ during our interviews and recalled the moments when their children would rather watch TV than continue conversations with them. This finding echoes many scholars’ observations that children are at the heart of their parents’ migration trajectories across the world (see Boccagni, 2012; Pan et al., 2013; Parreñas, 2005a), and their viewpoints, experiences, and sense of agency play an important role in shaping the family dynamic. Dreby (2007) states that in migration studies so-called ‘left-behind children’ are no longer seen as vulnerable victims, but rather as agentic family members who have power

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<sup>11</sup> Dalian is the second largest city in Liaoning Province.

<sup>12</sup> The duties of dormitory coordinators in M school include cleaning and maintaining order in their assigned dormitories.

in decision-making processes. As a consequence, parents' repertoire of actions needs to respond to the inputs they receive from their children (R. Q. Bell, 1968).

Physical distance seems to undermine parental authority, and media, both old and new, are not sufficient to overcome problems of separation (Madianou & Miller, 2012a). It was not uncommon for parents and carers among families involved in this research to use physical punishment to discipline their children, which has long been considered as a normal form of discipline in Chinese families (Chao, 1994; Simons et al., 2000; Wang et al., 2018). Forty percent of parents I interviewed used corporal punishment to discipline their children when families were physically co-present, but this type of authoritarian parenting style was not possible during periods of family separation. Parents revealed that their children tended to resist parental control by, for instance, talking back, running away from the camera, and hanging up on video calls when they sensed they were about to be chastised. Given the limited field of view of the webcam, parents recalled that it was also difficult to follow their children's every move and that children could easily escape parental discipline and punishment unless carers were asked to help with remote parenting. In this sense, carers play an important role in facilitating the long-distance parenting process, which I will discuss in further detail in Chapter 5. Jie (P12), for instance, said that her daughter would run away to watch TV if she kept reminding her to study harder. Jie believed that she could not compromise on this pivotal issue. She thus asked her mother-in-law to catch her daughter and bring her back in front of the camera, so that she could continue her parenting. Based on Jie's experience and observations, her daughter, has also taken advantage of the separation. As Jie put it:

'My daughter is more wayward during our video calls on WeChat because she realises that there are no punishments and consequences. She said to me, "You can't spank me now because you are not here. You won't remember my fault when you come back"'.

WeChat, as the parental interviews suggest, does not always effectively alleviate issues related to long-distance parenting. Parental powerlessness was a recurrent theme noted in many participants' descriptions, as parents felt frustrated and helpless when they had failed to 'educate' their children and to 'correct' their behaviours remotely, owing to the spatial and temporal constraints of WeChat. In particular, long-distance parenting via WeChat affected migrant mothers' feelings of competence, which I will further discuss in the next section.

#### ***4.2.2 Practising motherhood and maternal ambivalence***

What emerges from the data is a differentiation of gender roles in long-distance parenting. Compared to their male counterparts, the migrant mothers whom I interviewed were more worried about their long-distance mothering and its impact on their children. This observation is supported by previous research, which has identified gender as a key concept for understanding child-rearing in transnational families (Parreñas, 2001, 2005b). The performance of both emotional sharing and care practices in relation to intimacy in distance relationships is highly gendered, with many of the responsibilities for maintaining togetherness falling on women (Holmes, 2004, p. 197). In the Chinese context, cultural norms expect mothers to be highly involved with and devoted to their children (P. Wu et al., 2002). Model Chinese mothers should be physically close to their children, should be the main caregiver, and should help their children succeed in school (R Chao, 1994).

Owing to the expectation that mothers should deliver care to their children and be responsible for their development outcomes, mothers show a stronger emotional need than fathers to maintain bonds with their children (Boccagni, 2012; To et al., 2018). This result resonates with what Hays (1997) refers to as the ‘cultural contradiction of motherhood’ (p. 1) – the desire to be nurturing mothers at the same time as being competent and ambitious workers, which is viewed as a normal state for many mothers. Building on this concept, Madianou (2012) points out that the experience of migration may exacerbate this so-called cultural contradiction of motherhood because the juggling of multiple identities is often a source of tension that may lead to the ambivalence of identity. Maternal ambivalence can be defined as the challenging nature of reconciling contradictory roles as workers and mothers (Madianou, 2012). For migrant mothers who experience transnational migration, the negotiation between work and motherhood is more difficult because they are dispersed across different continents and find it difficult to negotiate work commitments and the maternal role (Madianou, 2012; Madianou & Miller, 2012a). In other words, migration can give rise to ambivalence, especially for mothers with left-behind children, because of the deterritorialisation of mothering (Madianou, 2012). This may explain why many female respondents participating in this research felt guilty about their decision to migrate since they saw family separation as an unpleasant experience for their children. The feeling of ambivalence among fathers, on the other hand, was not evident in the interview data collected from male participants (n:5). Most of migrant fathers held the belief that they had no choice but to be breadwinners for their families rather than caregivers for their children.

WeChat, in the context of family separation, has consequences for the ways in which migrant mothers negotiate their maternal identity. Besides official holidays, the weekend was the only time for children who were boarders to talk to their parents online. Migrant mothers talked about children's high expectations for the established routine of the video call each week. Three migrant mothers (P12, P11, P3) whom I interviewed told me that their children would feel disappointed and abandoned when scheduled video calls were cancelled or disturbed because of their irregular work schedules, and in turn they felt 'powerless' as they could not live up to what they considered to be their children's expectations.

The irregular work schedules of migrant mothers often disrupted mother-child communications. For instance, Jie (P12), an assembly line worker, and Ying (P11), a fishmonger working in a seafood market, found it difficult to balance work and motherhood. Their occupations meant that their days and nights were completely reversed. Jie's responses to video calls or messages from her daughter were always delayed due to her work shifts. Jie and her daughter have been experiencing scheduling conflicts since she started working in a factory that manufactures medical-grade masks in March 2020. The demand for face masks escalated during the COVID-19 pandemic. She worked the night shift for a month without a day off. When I contacted Jie to schedule our online interview in April 2020, she told me that she was currently living with other workers in a dormitory provided by the factory and that our video call might disturb her roommates. Our interview eventually took place on May 6, 2020, which was her first day off since April. According to Jie, her daughter would leave a message, send an emoji, or record videos of herself through WeChat until Jie found time to reply to them after her night shift. Jie told me that she only responded to her daughter selectively because she felt exhausted after night shifts. These types of asynchronous communications went on for a month as both of them were unavailable to schedule an instantaneous video call. Jie had to repeatedly explain the reason for her slow responses because her daughter kept asking why she was taking so long.

Ying experienced similar issues as her irregular work hours affected the established video call routine. As a butcher, Ying had to get up at 3 a.m. every morning and was even busier during weekends and holidays. Her son (aged 11), who was boarding only, had access to WeChat at weekends. Although Ying looked forward to talking to her son at weekends, she was not able to answer his video calls when she had customers to serve. Her son was disappointed by her late responses. According to Ying:

‘My son was really upset if I replied to him late.... He questioned me: “don’t you love me anymore?” when I finally found the time to answer his call’.

Mei (P2) worked as an attendant in a 24-hour public bath and had a heavy workload and inflexible shift patterns during the week. Mei said she liked helping her son to finish his homework through video calls when she was available. However, the frequency of mother-child communication was subject to her work shifts. I also interviewed her 11-year-old son who clearly remembered his mother’s shift patterns and could recount them without any help. He normally video called Mei at weekends when she was supposed to have breaks. However, sometimes Mei’s colleagues would answer the phone and tell him, ‘Your mom is still working. Call her later’. The boy said he felt upset because he was calling to seek help with his homework and his mother was not there. In order to compensate for her absence, Mei even asked her neighbours to help her son to study whenever necessary.

As many mothers noted, the visual affordances of WeChat helped to ease the negative feelings associated with being separated. They also confirmed that seeing their children via WeChat real-time video calls reduced feelings of distance. For example, Wenli (P18) discussed the shift from landline to smartphone usage for communication purposes. In the past, she could not bear to see toddlers on the street because they reminded her of her own son; however, with the advent of WeChat, parents like her were enabled to have real-time video calls with their children on smartphones. She felt that visual calls via WeChat alleviated her homesickness. This resonates with the observations of previous studies on transnational mothering, suggesting that mothers use digital media to become involved in everyday parenting, including issues such as homework, and their children’s upbringing (Francisco, 2013; Madianou & Miller, 2011; Parreñas, 2005b). Communication technologies (ICTs) enhance migrants’ capacities to maintain family and intimate contact across long distances and create a sense of mediated co-presence – the feeling of ‘being there’ (Baldassar, 2016a, p161). In the context of family separation, maternal relationships are being reconfigured via the visual component constituted by real-time video (Longhurst, 2013). For example, Wu (P14, aged 40), had built up a routine of video calling her sons based on their schedules and needs. On Friday, when her sons visited their carer’s home, she usually asked about their school life during the past week. On Saturday, she checked with her sons if they had finished their homework. On Sunday, she would remind her sons to pack the necessary items to prepare for boarding school in the coming week.

However, according to the interviews, there were also many cases when the visual affordances of WeChat failed to fully address the problems and challenges those mothers

associated with distanced motherhood. For all the migrant mothers interviewed, the camera's field of view was too narrow to capture children's developmental changes. Some participants found it difficult to accurately assess the physical growth of their children via WeChat, resulting in the clothes they bought being either too big or too small. More importantly, they experienced a shortage of nonverbal cues (e.g. – facial expressions, direction of gaze, posture, and bodily orientation) in mediated communications (Baym, 2010), which, as the mothers recounted, are important cues for understanding their children's feelings. For instance, Hong (P15) felt that she was unable to observe the subtleties of the atmosphere back at home using video calls given that she could merely see her sons' faces. This mother felt even more worried after she hung up the phone and was concerned that her sons were hiding their emotional needs from her. As she explained:

‘If I were at home, I could see it all at once, for example, if they like the food I made without them saying anything... They sat up straight during the video calls. I couldn't observe many details. I couldn't touch them or feel them’.

Six mothers (P2, P4, P9, P12, P11, P14) interviewed told me that they believed that they were not ‘good’ mothers because they felt that they had insufficient involvement in their children's lives. Lili, for instance, cried when recounting that her daughter once had surgery, and she could not accompany her. She felt sorry for her daughter but did not know how she could make it up to her child. This finding resonates with a key argument about transnational mothering: that not participating in relevant events in children's lives – such as birthdays – far away from home is considered to be one of the most painful aspects of distant motherhood (Boccagni, 2012). In terms of daily interactions, some mothers were disappointed that they were unable to hug and kiss their children in the same way as in ‘real life’. One mother also found it challenging to react to certain emotional moments in online communications. For example, Yue (P9), whom I mentioned earlier in the chapter, had no idea how to comfort her daughter during video calls. As she explained:

‘Every time my daughter cries, I feel heartbroken. She cannot be a normal kid in the company of her parents. She is too young. (I left home) for a living; there is really no other way... What I can do is to buy her a toy or something she fancies’.



Given that geographical distance cannot be addressed through WeChat video calls, two female (P13, P15) participants decided to resign from their jobs to look after their children at home. They said that they could no longer stand the separation from their children and what they perceived to be their lack of maternal control. Na (P13), a 35-year-old supermarket worker, had found a job as a factory worker in Tianjin<sup>13</sup> and had left her daughter behind in F city. After a month, Na quit the job since she could not stop worrying about her daughter. When I asked Na why she returned home when she could have made more money as a migrant worker, she said:

‘I think no one except me can take good care of my daughter. I was so anxious when I supervised her homework via WeChat. She needed to take pictures first and send them to me. Most pictures she took were blurred. The process was so time-consuming, and I didn’t know how to help her just through a camera’.

Based on the maternal accounts I have collected, I argue that Chinese migrant mothers, like their transnational counterparts in other countries, face difficulties in juggling multiple identities as breadwinners and mothers. This is a source of tension that is associated maternal ambivalence (Madianou, 2012), which has implications not only for providing opportunities to perform mothering but also, as Parreñas (2005b) argues, for reassuring maternal identities. Although the disruption of mother-child communications is a disappointment for children, WeChat at least offers an opportunity for female participants to experience motherhood and negotiate the contradictory roles of mother and worker from a distance.

#### **4.3 WeChat as a parenting facilitator and surveillance tool**

While many parents, especially mothers, experienced a reduction in their level of parental control and involvement in their children's lives, the interviews also showed how they used WeChat to enhance parental involvement from a distance, including as a surveillance tool. Although migrant parents do not have free rein to exert the same level of control over their left-behind children as non-separated families (Boccagni, 2012), many participants, as demonstrated in the interviews, actively engaged with WeChat to tackle what they perceived as a lack of parental control and involvement. While the constraints of long-distance

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<sup>13</sup> Tianjin is the largest coastal city in Northern China.

communication made some parents anxious and frustrated about their parenting, some families involved in the research came up with creative strategies to enhance family communication and maintain what they saw as a healthy parent-child relationship. In this context, WeChat in Chinese separated families can be seen as a parenting facilitator.

The interview data show that WeChat itself as a form of polymedia has been widely employed by migrant parents to innovate their parenting practices. For instance, Wu (P14), a 40-year-old migrant mother, encouraged her husband, who was also a migrant, to organise quizzes with their sons during WeChat video calls. Otherwise, her ‘introvert husband’, in Wu’s own words, would often run out of topics to talk about after 10 minutes. When her husband took her advice, the online interactions between father and sons became more playful and lasted longer than before. As Wu explained:

‘Their (Wu’s sons’) dad struggled to find new topics to talk about... So, I thought of a way to let three of them play games on WeChat. They’ve played idiom solitaire, brain teasers and then puzzles. I just want them to interact more because their dad is really not good at talking. I hope that they can communicate effectively during video calls every time, or my sons can learn something from their dad’.

Haipeng (P8), a 35-year-old engineer based in Beijing, also came up with an effective strategy to help his son with his homework by using the record function on WeChat. For instance, if his son had difficulties with maths homework, Haipeng would illustrate how to solve the problem step by step on a blank piece of paper, and would record the process. His family took advantage of different communicative opportunities such as the smart camera, smartphone and online shopping apps to manage family relationships. Embracing the so-called polymedia environment in which new media operate as environments of affordances that users navigate to manage their relationships (Madianou & Miller, 2012a), Haipeng was able to achieve the parenting results that he wanted. For instance, Haipeng used online food delivery apps to order food his son liked to reward his good academic performance.

However, it is worth noting that the depth of parental engagement or involvement was affected by the nature of online communication. Over half of interview respondents reflected that parent-child activities via WeChat were less interactive and engaging compared to those carried out offline. For example, Hong (P15), a 50-year-old migrant mother, enjoyed sharing her thoughts with her son about his paintings and artwork when she was at home. However,

when they were apart, her son could only use the camera to show his artwork to his mother. It seemed difficult for Hong to engage with the painting process and provide feedback. Two migrant mothers (P9, P12) recalled that their daughters seemed to be interested in ‘feminine stuff’, in their own words, referring to lipsticks and skincare products. During her visit back home, Yue’s daughter, a 6-year-old girl, curiously stared at her when she applied her make-up. Yue, therefore, put some lipstick on her daughter’s lips. As Yue said, her daughter was really happy about wearing it. As Yue stated, interactions like this could only take place offline.

Apart from being used as a parenting facilitator for parental involvement in children’s lives, findings from the interview data show that parent participants also used WeChat to monitor their children from afar as a form of parental surveillance. In many countries, digital surveillance methods and software are increasingly being used to monitor and track children across time and place, and this is now seen as a core characteristic of modern childhood (Rasmussen, 2004, p. 159). Rooney (2010) argues that surveillance is no longer just about discipline and control but is increasingly perceived as a form of ‘care’. Leaver (2015) proposes the idea of ‘intimate surveillance’ to explain the reason that parental surveillance is prevalent. This concept entails invasive monitoring and mediation by parents, which contributes to the normalisation of intimate surveillance in a so-called ‘culture of care’ (Leaver, 2017, p. 1). Owing to physical distance, some parent participants use digital media to reassure themselves that they know where their children are. As Marx and Steeves (2010) point out, parents show great enthusiasm in purchasing surveillance devices to keep children safe. In this sense, surveillance can be seen as a necessary tool for parents to become responsible and caring (Barron, 2014).

To exercise parental supervision, Bao (P5), a migrant father working in Beijing, told me that he bought a smartwatch for his son. According to Bao, this digital device with a GPS tracking function not only acted as a communication tool, but also as a location tracker, to ensure his child’s safety. In order to address the narrow visual field of smartphones, another respondent, Haipeng (P8), installed a smart camera at home so that he and his wife could check on their son anytime from Beijing via their mobile phones. According to Haipeng, he placed the camera in the living room, which helped him monitor his son from a distance.

It is worth mentioning that parental digital surveillance is made possible only with the assistance of schoolteachers and home carers who are involved in day-to-day childcare. Teacher participants revealed that WeChat played an important role in keeping parents and carers informed about children’s performance at school. Carers were also found to employ WeChat to update parents on children’s school performance, including their health and diet.

The involvement of teachers and carers in digital surveillance empowered parents in terms of exerting parental control. Wu (P14), for example, wanted to obtain more information about her children and attempted to have conversations separately with each of her twin sons. She failed to dig out more details because the twins refused to ‘tell on’ each other. She therefore relied on her sister, who was taking care of the children at weekends, to double check if her sons were doing well. In terms of school performance, Wu also consulted her nephew, a classmate of the twins, who had been a staunch ally while she was away from home. Despite all these efforts, to her surprise, she still could not ‘find faults’ with her twins. To Wu, online communication with her sons was ‘unreal’, as she stated, so she had a strong desire to obtain as much extra information as possible.

The role of WeChat as a parental surveillance tool was confirmed by child participants, with particular regards to matters such as academic performance, diet, screen time, and how carers managed the sending of remittances. Most of the children who participated in workshops and interviews felt that their academic performance was subject to parental scrutiny through parent-teacher group chats on WeChat. Parents – usually mothers – did exploit video calls to scrutinise their children’s daily lives from afar. More details of children’s perspectives will be discussed in Chapter 6.

Based on the parental interviews, it can be argued that WeChat plays a dual role as a parenting facilitator and surveillance enabler in Chinese separated families. Given that Chinese family culture emphasises children’s obedience to parental authority and control (R Chao, 1994), WeChat, with its different functionalities and affordances, helps parents to experience parenthood and exert control from a distance. Having outlined the use of WeChat and its role, I will now move on to discuss mediated relationships in the Chinese cultural context.

#### **4.4 Mediated relationships in Chinese separated families**

Previous sections have highlighted issues around reduced parental control and involvement in separated families, the tensions between providing for a family materially through work and emotionally through care, and the ways in which parents use WeChat to enhance supervision and involvement. In line with the ‘mediated relationships’ theory proposed by Madianou and Miller (2012a), this section builds on these findings and seeks to understand the reported tensions that occur within mediated family relationships. Although the theoretical framework of ‘mediated relationships’ provides valuable insights for understanding Chinese separated families, we need to pay attention to the fact that family relationships embody culturally

specific social relations, as cultural context mediates people's interpretation of family systems (Baker, 1979). Based on the interview data that I collected from migrant parents, the value of filial piety and carers' involvement in parent-child communications were identified as two key factors that shape mediated family relationships in the Chinese context. Thus, this section discusses how filial piety and the involvement of carers such as grandparents impacts on parent-child relationships. Since the research was conducted during the outbreak of COVID-19, this section also discusses how the issues embodied in long-distance familyhood have been exacerbated by the COVID crisis.

#### ***4.4.1 Filial piety in the Chinese parent-child relationship***

Filial piety is the most fundamental value that guides parent-child interactions in the Chinese context (Tsai, 1999). Filial piety and its close association with various aspects of daily life is still at the core of contemporary Chinese societies (Croll, 2006; Yeh et al., 2013). Therefore, the mediated family relationships in Chinese separated families can be understood through the lens of filial piety. There is an ongoing debate about the role of filial piety in the context of modern Confucian societies. For instance, filial piety has been associated with harmonious intergenerational relationships (E. J. Croll, 2006; K. H. Yeh et al., 2013); filial attitudes are also seen as related to children's submission to parental control (W.-W. Chen, 2014), and the inhibition of children's self-expression (D. Y. Ho, 1994). In order to understand the diverse implications of filial piety for family relationships in Chinese separated families, this section uses the dual filial piety model proposed by Yeh and Bedford (2003) to make sense of the conflicting and contradictory findings from the parental interviews. The dual filial piety model highlights two fundamental aspects of filial piety: reciprocity and authoritarianism. Reciprocal filial piety emphasises the intimacy and quality of the parent-child relationship whereas authoritarian filial piety is characterised by obedience to normative parental authority (K. H. Yeh et al., 2013).

The practices of reciprocal filial piety may contribute to an affectionate parent-child relationship and fewer parent-child conflicts (Yeh & Bedford, 2003). According to Chen (2014), reciprocal filial piety provides young people with affection and autonomy, which may enhance their life satisfaction. The practices of reciprocal filial piety were evident in the parenting practices of some participant families. Facing the constraints of remote parenting (e.g. – lack of parental control and involvement), as discussed previously, migrant parents were compelled to adopt more lenient parenting styles, which unintentionally fostered harmony in

parent-child relationships. This observation is confirmed by previous empirical studies in which parents who promoted reciprocal filial piety were more likely to reduce parent-child conflicts (Chen, 2014).

Two respondents told me that long-distance communication shaped their way of parenting. For example, Hong (P15), a 50-year-old hair stylist, recalled giving her son compliments and encouraging him to strive for his best at school during their video calls. In return, her son promised to study hard, which Hong perceived as showing his appreciation for her sacrifice for the family. With respect to parental discipline, she recounted that her son had had a fight with one of his classmates and had thrown the other's uniform into the toilet. The schoolteacher and the child's carer had all rebuked him for his inappropriate behaviour. Hong simply warned her son not to do that again when she was informed of this incident via WeChat. She did not scold her son harshly because she felt that nothing could be achieved through scolding, owing to the physical distance. This child (aged 13), whom I also interviewed, confirmed that his mother was very supportive during their online mother-child communications. However, he felt the strictness of his mother when she quit her former job and returned home because his aunt, the primary carer, was unable to take care of him anymore. As he recalled, his mother would stop him from drawing – a hobby that he enjoyed – and expected him to spend more time on his homework. He did not experience such a degree of control from his mother while she was working away from home. A shift from reciprocal filial piety to authoritarian filial piety could be observed in the participants' parenting practices, which seemed to have been influenced by the physical distance between parents and children. In other words, some parents were forced to adopt reciprocal filial piety because of physical distance.

In addition to physical distance, parental empathy also prompted parents to advocate reciprocal filial piety to foster closeness with their children and the continuation of family bonds. Compared to those who passively adopted the approach of reciprocal filial piety, some parents whom I interviewed refrained from disciplining their children when they reunited in person, meaning that they actively promoted reciprocal filial piety in order to maintain a 'better' family relationship. In a study that employed data from transnational multi-local families in Germany, Schier (2020) observed that both migrant parents and children consciously spent quality time together during brief reunions. What emerged from the parental interviews was a tendency for participant families to 'be a family' intensively and to create some quality time together during face-to-face reunions, which had a positive influence on parent-child relationships. For example, Bai (P1), a male participant, aged 35, has been working in Beijing

for almost 20 years. Based on what he told me during the interview, he did whatever he could to meet all the expectations of his son when he returned home. Bai took his son to restaurants and made whatever food his son wanted to eat. He was accused of ‘winning the heart of his son’ by his wife, since she was the one who needed to play the role of the ‘bad cop’ in the family. The day Bai went back to work, his son described to his mother how much he lamented Bai’s absence. As the son said: ‘I can’t eat what I like after my dad leaves’. Another example that allows us to understand parents’ tendency to protect their emotional bond with their children comes from Jie (P12). During the family reunion, Jie would take her daughter to amusement parks and buy her new clothes, toys and books. Jie told me that her daughter ‘abandoned’ her grandmother and followed her once she came home. Her mother-in-law got jealous and half-jokingly complained about her granddaughter’s behaviour: ‘Now you are abandoning me. But your mom will leave soon; you are stuck with me anyway’. ‘My mom is still here. She hasn’t left yet’, the child retorted. Jie also avoided berating her daughter because she deemed the family reunion to be precious to her. As she added:

‘It’s not easy for us to meet. If I scolded her hysterically, our relationship would deteriorate. So, I didn’t *guan*<sup>14</sup> too much. I talked to her nicely and hope she can understand her mistakes’.

On the contrary, there were also examples of parents who favoured authoritarian filial piety in order to maintain parental authority. An emphasis on hierarchies and submissiveness was therefore also evident in the parenting practices of some participant families. Authoritarian parents tend to show less tolerance for children’s mistakes or inappropriate behaviours (W.-W. Chen, 2014), which according to Hsu (1985) can result in a lack of parental understanding and empathy and prevent children from forging an emotional connection with their parents. Most parents whom I interviewed expected their children to be obedient in their grandparents’ home and show gratitude for their parental sacrifice for the family. However, the authoritarian parenting style was found to give rise to children’s resistance to long-distance parenting. This accords with some scholars’ observations that mediated communication may even amplify tension within parent-child relationships (Madianou & Miller, 2012a). Madianou’s (2016) research pertaining to transnational mothering points out that three factors can impact long-distance relationships, namely, the age of the child when the mother left, the available media,

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<sup>14</sup> *Guan* means to discipline, educate and preach in Chinese.

and the quality of the pre-existing relationship. When the latter is weak, close parental surveillance can lead to parent-child tensions during family separation because it is difficult to maintain mutual understanding in mediated communication (Baym, 2010).

Among the interview sample, the duration of family separation in participant families ranged from 2 to 11 years. For those who had experienced longer family separations, a combination of authoritarian parenting and mediated communications created tensions and misunderstandings between parents and children. Take Wenli's (P18) family as an example. Due to her prolonged absence from home for 12 years, Wenli felt that there was no trust in her mother-son relationship and her son did not really respect her. For instance, Wenli could feel the hostility from her son when she was at home and checked his homework. Thus, she had to seek help from her son's class teacher to resolve some parent-child conflicts since she and her husband did not know how to deal with her son's perceived transgressions. As she explained:

'My husband once rebuked my son during a WeChat call, "If you lie to us one more time, don't go to school then". My son was pissed off by his father and retorted, "Fine, then I will throw my backpack into the river" ... his grandparents had to stop the kid from rushing out with his backpack'.

Since mediated interactions are more likely to amplify ambiguities and misunderstandings (Baym, 2010), I argue that authoritarian parenting in this context may give rise to conflicts in mediated parent-child relationships, which in turn can adversely impact emotional closeness between parents and children. This observation was confirmed by child participants, whose viewpoints and experiences will be further discussed in Chapter 6. While the concept of filial piety, and the ways in which it is applied (reciprocal or authoritarian) have implications for parent-child relationships, the role of grandparents is also important for understanding mediated family relationships in Chinese separated families and how filial piety shapes family dynamics. First, grandparents are not only primary caregivers but also senior family members who have authority and expect to receive filial piety from their adult children; second, they act as gatekeepers in parent-child communications because children lack media access in participant families. Drawing on parental interview responses, the next section focuses on the impact of carers' involvement in parent-child relationships within the context of filial piety and from a parental perspective.



#### ***4.4.2 Parental perspectives of the intermediate role of grandparents***

Overall, migrant parents develop a strong reliance on carers because of the high degree of unpredictability involved in long-distance parenting. In particular, for those parents whose children are boarders, good collaboration between members of the caregiving team, which involves primary carers such as grandparents and schoolteachers, may help parents to supervise their children's behaviour and deal with parenting issues if necessary. Due to the parents' absence, grandparents in participant families perform many parental functions in the children's lives. Sociologist Ester Goh (2011) draws on research in China's coastal cities to suggest that grandparents and parents form intergenerational parenting coalitions. In line with this concept, Murphy (2020) introduces a new concept – the 'striving team' – to understand child-raising practices in multilocal families in China. She argues that family members from three generations (grandparents, parents, and children) are motivated by a 'striving ethos', namely, an aspiration to bring about a better life (p. 215).

Findings from the parental interviews suggest that family communications can be maintained more smoothly when parents, carers, and children are able to commit to participating in the so-called 'striving team'. In this context, the intervention of carers in parent-child communications may play a pivotal role in shaping family dynamics. According to the parental survey, most children (75%) used carers' devices to contact their parents and one-third of them needed help from carers when real-time video calls were carried out. Based on the findings from parental interviews, it can be seen that left-behind children mainly contacted their parents via their carers' WeChat accounts. In that sense, carers play a gatekeeping role in facilitating WeChat-based communication by sharing their devices and accounts with children.

In some participant families, parent-child communications were negatively affected when the caregiving team of grandparents and parents fell apart. Compared to family traditions in other cultural contexts, it was observed that there are more shared familial responsibilities and interactions between family members in Chinese families, which can lead to more family conflicts, especially with in-laws and between siblings (Hsu, 1985). As evidenced in the parental interviews, the relationship between migrant mothers and their mothers-in-law in some cases was found to disrupt parent-child communications and damage parent-child relationships. For example, Jie's (P12) family faced financial strains following successive droughts for 5 years in F city. Her husband and father-in-law therefore left home to seek better job opportunities to support the family. She also decided to become a migrant worker and asked her mother-in-law to look after her daughter. Apart from the economic factors, she said she felt

awkward spending time with her mother-in-law alone at home. When Jie was away from home, her daughter needed to borrow the smartphone from her mother-in-law to contact her. Jie remembered one time when her mother-in-law had urged her daughter to end the conversation quickly because she had wanted to take the phone back and go out and play *mah-jong* (a popular Chinese tile-based game). Given that Jie's daughter did not have her own digital devices, we discussed the role of her mother-in-law in her parent-child communications. Jie thought that although her mother-in-law was not extremely helpful, at least she did not seek to intrude in her parent-child relations. As Jie put it, 'my mother-in-law at least didn't make mischief between me and my child'. After we finished the interview, I sent a message to Jie on WeChat and asked whether it was possible to invite her mother-in-law to participate in the research. To my surprise, Jie told me that their relationship had broken down, and they did not talk anymore, which was also affecting the frequency of her mother-child video calls.

In another example of relationships with in-laws, a migrant mother, Furong (P4), a 47-year-old cook in Beijing, whom I interviewed during the pilot study, recalled a tense relationship with her mother-in-law, which caused family conflicts because, from Furong's perspective, her husband often sided with his mother. Furong's 13-year-old daughter has been taken care of by her 'toxic' mother-in-law (aged 71), in her own words, for almost 10 years. Furong also told me how she felt the carer had attempted to sabotage her mother-daughter relationship: 'My daughter will only call me when she is short of money'. She claimed that her mother-in-law often prompted her daughter to ask for money if she sent remittances late.

Based on the findings from the parental interviews, grandparents as carers play an intermediate role in shaping parent-child communications in separated families, which in turn can complicate parent-child family relationships. From the parental perspective, carers' involvement in parent-child communications seems to be perceived as a hinderance that may damage parent-child relationships. This is particularly the case in families where mothers are away from home, and paternal grandmothers adopt the role as carers. However, by contrasting the parental perspective against the evidence revealed by the carers whom I interviewed, we can see some discrepancies between their understandings of the same topics, such as the use and role of WeChat, and mediated family relationships. Thus, the next chapter draws on the perspectives of carers to further explain what role carers play in mediated communication as well as parent-child relationships.

#### ***4.4.3 Family lives during the COVID-19 pandemic***

As this research took place during the exceptional circumstances of COVID-19, it is also worthwhile highlighting how parents attempted to maintain family communications, including subsequent face-to-face reunions, during this unprecedented context. Within Chinese separated families, the COVID pandemic amplified the difficulties embodied in mediated relationships. In December 2019, there was a COVID-19 outbreak in Hebei province. After Chinese officials confirmed there was a risk of a possible wider outbreak, major Chinese cities such as Wuhan and Beijing, where there were confirmed cases of coronavirus, went into strict lockdown. In a normal year, China would see millions of people travel across the country to go home and celebrate the Lunar New Year. It was also the only time for some participants to see their left-behind families. Due to the COVID outbreak, during interviews, many participants reported that they had either stayed at home for a shorter period of time or decided not to return home. In 2021, stricter travel restrictions were introduced by the government because the Spring Festival travel season was believed to have played a pivotal role in the spread of COVID-19 in 2020. As a result, some participants reported that the COVID-19 outbreak stopped them from visiting their families.

COVID-19 affected not only family reunions but also care arrangements in Chinese separated families. The interview data also show that COVID-19 heightened job insecurity and that some participants could not return to work as scheduled. Recent research has suggested that parents were burdened by additional responsibilities without additional support during the pandemic as there were disruptions in childcare arrangements and other services catering to children (Garcia et al., 2021; S. J. Lee et al., 2021). This problem was magnified within Chinese separated families as they were much more reliant on stable care arrangements. The interview data suggest that some participant families experienced care disruption. For example, Yan is a 58-year-old maternal grandmother and primary caregiver of a 12-year-old boy. Her elder daughter working in South Korea was supposed to return home because of the termination of her employment. The caregiving ‘handover’ had been scheduled for April 2020. However, the plan was postponed due to border controls and international travel disruption. In addition, the child’s aunt, who used to be involved in childcare, had no time for her nephew during COVID-19, because her 6-year-old daughter needed more supervision at home for online schooling. It was too difficult, as Yan explained, to juggle the needs of both children, especially in the context of online teaching. The 12-year-old boy therefore had been staying at his grandmother’s home since January 2021.

The COVID-19 pandemic revealed weaknesses in the care arrangements of participant families, which relied too much on schools to educate their children. Recent studies pertaining to parenting experiences during the pandemic have found that parents and caregivers faced greater challenges, with increased caregiving responsibilities (Garcia et al., 2021; Sari et al., 2021). According to interview data, those parents who experienced an unexpectedly prolonged family reunion lacked experience in caregiving because they had previously relied on the school to share many of the childcare responsibilities. With school closures across F city during the pandemic, children needed to take online classes at home, and this required migrant parents to supervise their children on their own, even if they were not fully prepared for that. For Jie (P12), being at home during the lockdown required her to intensively mother. She had worked as a waitress for 5 years prior to COVID. The restaurant she worked for was required to shut down indoor dining, thus increasing her job insecurity. As she said, it was the longest time she had spent with her daughter since she was 2 years old. Jie felt overwhelmed:

‘My daughter has cried all the time ever since she has begun taking online classes. She never acted like that at school when teachers were around. Online courses are too stressful for the kid... It [crying] made me feel so annoyed sometimes. So, I think it is better to go back to work’.

Given that some participants had left their children with grandparents for years and relied on the school’s boarding facilities, stress occurred when the parenting role required more responsibility than usual during the unexpected family reunions of COVID-19. Parental incompetence in day-to-day childcare further suggests that the long-distance parenthood achieved through WeChat seems to be an incomplete parenting practice. This may be implicated in parent-child relationships because family relationships in the context of family separation are ‘intrinsically a mediated entity’ (Madianou & Miller, 2012a, p. 141). As noted in Chapter 2, Madianou and Miller (2012a) believe that any relationship consists of a triangle: the normative ideal of a child or a parent, the actual person, and the discrepancy between those two. The length of the discrepancy side of this triangle is the degree to which a mother/child ‘deviate from the normative ideal’ (p. 141). Incomplete parenthood indicates that long-distance parenthood mediated by WeChat is unable to restore the experiences of day-to-day child-rearing from a distance, which may further extend the length of the discrepancy side of the relationship triangle.

However, the interview data suggest that parent-child misunderstandings caused by mediated communications can be resolved by physical co-presence. This is the reason why the COVID-19 pandemic, in some families, provided migrant workers with a prolonged family reunion and an opportunity to repair parent-child relationships. For example, Wenli (P18) was pleased that she could spend more time with her son during the COVID-19 pandemic. She believed the reunion helped her repair their relationship and get to know her son more comprehensively. The physical co-presence was beneficial for resolving the misunderstandings caused by previous mediated communications. She assumed her son had got used to family separation and had never had separation anxiety in the past. After an unusual 2-month family reunion, when she and her husband had decided to go back to work, her son was upset about it and unwilling to see them leave home, which had rarely happened to this couple.

In light of the above discussion, it can be seen that the COVID-19 crisis drastically impacted the family lives of Chinese separated families. It exacerbated the problems arising from mediated relationships, such as parental incompetence in response to real-life childrearing and the weaknesses of care arrangements, including overreliance on schools for childcare. It also brought some unexpected benefits for some participant families, such as repairing parent-child relationships. This invites us to rethink the notion of co-presence and mediation in the context of long-distance familyhood.

## **4.5 Conclusion**

The availability of WeChat has enabled migrant parents to experience parenthood from a distance. However, parents clearly have mixed feelings about long-distance parenting. On the one hand, social media like WeChat have created a platform to facilitate parental involvement in their children's lives. On the other hand, findings from the survey and interviews with parents suggest that the whole process of remote parenting via social media is characterised by a lack of parental control. In the face of the constraints of long-distance parenting, some participants demonstrated their creativity in enhancing family relationships by adopting child-centred approaches to engage children and improve parental involvement. However, for Chinese parents who value parental control, as characterised by filial piety, remote parenthood via WeChat undermines their feelings of competence. Long-distance parenting exacerbates the difficulties of parenting, which results in parental powerlessness and feelings of frustration. Migrant mothers were particularly impacted by what they felt was their lack of involvement in remote mothering.

Through negotiating the mediated parenting activities, parent participants articulated their ideas not only about media technology but also, importantly, about the role of social media in their family lives. From the parents' perspective, WeChat can be seen as a parenting and surveillance tool that enables parents to exert control over their children and maintain authority from a distance.

Building on the theoretical framework of mediated relationships established by Madianou and Miller (2012a, 2012b), two factors, namely the value of filial piety and the intermediary role of grandparents, are particularly relevant to understanding family relationships in the Chinese context. First, filial piety plays an important role in shaping family relationships within Chinese separated families. Owing to physical distance and parental empathy, some parents adopt the approach of reciprocal filial piety to foster familial bonds with their children, which in turn reduces tensions and enhances mediated relationships between parents and children. In contrast, for those parents who emphasise rigorous control, the combination of authoritarian filial piety and online communications can give rise to children's resistance and lead to parent-child conflicts. Second, grandparents as carers play an intermediary role in Chinese separated families. From the parental perspective, carers' involvement in parent-child communications may complicate parent-child mediated relationships. Moreover, according to parental accounts of their family lives during social distancing, we can see that the COVID crisis reveals some potential problems hidden in mediated relationships and provides us with an opportunity to reconceptualise the implications of digital media for interpersonal relationships.

## 5. The Carers' Perspectives

### 5.1 Introduction

Drawing on interviews with five caregivers and five schoolteachers, official documents from M school, and policy documents on education and ICTs in China, this chapter aims to answer three questions: 1) how do carers use WeChat and for what purposes? 2) how do carers perceive the role of WeChat in their family lives? and 3) in what specific ways are how family relationships shaped by social media like WeChat within Chinese separated families, from the carers' perspectives? Carers in this context refer to those who are taking care of children whose parent(s) are working away from home. Home carers in this study were recruited through parent participants who took part in the research. Ten carers – mainly grandparents – gave their initial consent to participate in the research, but in the end, only five agreed to be interviewed<sup>15</sup>. Of the five participants, two were maternal grandmothers, two were paternal grandmothers and one was a brother of the child. Class teachers who had left-behind children in their classes were recruited from M school. The two sets of data complement each other and allow us to understand non-familial and familial perspectives on the care arrangements in separated families. This chapter does not simply take each perspective at face value but critically analyses consistencies and inconsistencies.

In this chapter, I first provide background context on the Chinese school system to explain the division of childcare between home and school, as well as the role of teachers. I then examine the impact of the Chinese government's educational policies related to separated families (section 5.2). Since intergenerational child-rearing has been identified as a common care arrangement in China (ACWF, 2013; Gan, 2020; Murphy, 2020), I move on to explain the rationale for and historical continuity of intergenerational child-rearing in Chinese family culture (section 5.3). Section 5.4 sheds light on family communications relating to different levels of media literacy between children and carers, and the carer's role in parent-child communications as observer, facilitator and gatekeeper. Section 5.5 investigates how carers interpret the role of social media like WeChat in the maintenance of long-distance familyhood. Focusing on carers' evaluations of the ability of WeChat to build closeness in family bonds, it discusses issues around time constraints in online communications, inflexibility in remote parenting, children's attention spans and communication skills, and children's resistance to

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<sup>15</sup> As the field research was conducted in April 2020, carers who were agricultural workers were busy with the spring season harvest.

parental discipline. Section 5.6 moves on to consider the involvement of carers in parent-child communications and its implications for mediated relationships between children and parents. It also looks at how parents and carers communicate with each other and how they negotiate parenting practices and family relationships.

## **5.2 Communicating school policies and the role of teachers in separated families**

This section provides details about care arrangements in the boarding environment of M school. It is important to take a closer look at the school's policies as the boarding facilities and schoolteachers share part of the childcare responsibility, and parents and carers need to obtain up-to-date information about their children. Echoing the opinions of the majority of parents discussed in the previous chapter, most home carers tended to accept the feedback of the educators/teachers, whose evaluations were valued by participant families. This was the case because: 1) teachers in China are afforded authority and respect (Gu & Lai, 2016); and 2) children, especially those who are boarders, spend more time in school than at home. This may in some ways shape parental strategies towards children and parental attitudes towards home carers, which in turn affects the priorities of long-distance communications and family dynamics. This section also addresses the implications of educational and COVID-related policies for separated families with particular regards to childcare, family reunions and the frequency of online communications.

In the late 1980s, China started to implement the 9-year Compulsory Education plan, which aimed to improve access to primary education for all children under the age of 16 and boost children's educational attainment in poor rural areas. Basic education consists of 6 years of primary education and 3 years of secondary education, provided by local governments (Li & Liu, 2014). Under the 9-year compulsory education scheme, children need to enrol at public schools in the cities/towns where they reside and where their *hukou* (residence permit) is registered, as local governments are responsible for paying for their education. M school is an ethnic Mongol primary school founded in 1962, which caters for children aged 6 to 14. M school is the only ethnic minority school in F city and was established for Mongolian children to learn their native language. The school also recruited ethnic Han children until 2006, who made up around one-third of total pupil numbers. Indeed, Han Chinese are the largest ethnic group in this city, comprising 78.2% of the population in the early 2000s (National Ethnic Affairs Commission, 2004).



In 2006, the local Education Bureau, which is responsible for formulating and developing educational policies in the city, imposed a restriction on the recruitment of Han ethnic students in ethnic minority schools. Since 2006, M school has only been allowed to admit ethnic Mongolian children. However, according to interviews with teachers in the school, the number of school-age children who are ethnically Mongolian has been declining in F city. As a consequence, from 2006, M school started to recruit ethnic Mongolian students from surrounding rural areas to boost its student intake. At the same time, it started offering dormitory accommodation to pupils who needed to board. According to the official records of M school (2021), in 2019/2020, the school had 1,579 pupils, and around 316 of these were left-behind children, whose parents were working elsewhere.

There are two types of students in M school: day students and boarders. Day students are those who reside in F city and are able to commute between school and home every day. Boarders are students whose homes are far away from the school and are allowed to visit homes at weekends. It is worth noting that personal digital devices are forbidden on campus and boarders only have media access on weekends when they visit homes. Among the children who were left behind (n:41) and took part in the interviews and workshops, the number of boarders and day students was 19 and 22 respectively. In this context, class teachers played an important role in childcare as they had to look after boarders during weekdays, and WeChat was the main tool they used to keep parents and carers updated.

WeChat plays an important role when it comes to circulating school policies and test results. In the interviews, all class teachers stated that they used WeChat to contact the guardians/parents individually if there were issues regarding their children. As home carers in separated families were involved in childcare, teachers noted that some carers also joined the WeChat groups. For those carers who were not in these WeChat groups, parents were expected to not only update home carers about the school's policies and regulations but also to keep the school informed about the care arrangements for their children at home. According to class teachers, this mediated communication, whereby parents relayed information to carers, also through WeChat, was not always effective. Two schoolteachers observed that migration could be a trigger for divorce and that this also complicated childcare. As reported by some schoolteachers, children could be affected by the combination of parental migration and marital breakdown, but teachers knew little of their home lives and whom they needed to contact in the event of marital breakdown. Three teachers believed that it was sometimes difficult for children to get consistent parental support if migrant parents were divorced and living in different cities. As one teacher recalled:

‘We (teachers) had records of their (the left-behind children’s) carers because the school asked every student to report this information as an emergency contact... Only when I had something to tell the carers did I find out that the child’s carers had been changed because his parents got divorced. Well, they (the parents) did not have the responsibility to tell me about their personal life, but it became difficult for me to keep them informed of their children’s situation at school... Sometimes their (the children’s) carers were paternal grandparents, sometimes an aunt, sometimes maternal grandparents, and sometimes their mother... Nobody approached me and updated these care arrangements’.

In some cases, the shifting of the role of caregiver from one family member to another also disrupted communications between parents and teachers. Teacher interviewees reported that parent-teacher communications were ineffective, if not unsatisfactory, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. During the pandemic, a lack of media access at home in some separated families affected children’s online attendance when classes moved online. All teachers interviewed had tried to reach out to parents to highlight absenteeism during online classes, but they eventually gave up because informing migrant parents did not change the fact that children continued to miss online classes.

What emerges from the interviews with teachers is that care arrangements in separated families are also susceptible to external changes such as those related to school and governmental policies, including COVID-related regulations. Teacher participants recounted that boarders used to go home fortnightly. However, after 2018, the school changed the policy on home visits from once every 2 weeks to once a week because hygiene in the dormitories was deemed unsatisfactory, and this was seen to affect children’s well-being. One teacher explained that boarding students were prone to catching the flu in winter, for example, and this was exacerbated by the living conditions in the dormitories. When the school decided to change the home visit policy to once a week, the teacher participants told me that parents complained in the parent-teacher WeChat groups because they did not always have someone available to collect their children from the school at weekends. In addition, the regulations imposed by local and central governments related to COVID-19 and education did have an impact on the family lives of separated families. For example, local government regulations about COVID-19 deterred many migrant parents from visiting home. According to the vice principal of M school, if parents returned home from a high-risk area, they were required to undergo quarantine for 7 days in hotels designated by the local government. Additionally, if students had had contact

with parent(s) who had returned from a low-risk area, students were asked by the local government to self-quarantine for 15 days, and only then were they allowed to attend school. According to the parent participants, this policy discouraged them from visiting home as they did not want to disrupt their children's studies.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the limitations of grandparental childcare shaped how parents used WeChat and what parents prioritised in family communications. More specifically, as noted in the previous chapter, parent-child communications were centred on education because grandparents were unable to provide study-related support. Interviews with teachers provide us with a nuanced understanding of the intergenerational child-rearing undertaken by grandparents. For instance, some parent participants believed that the priority of grandparents was to feed and clothe children rather than to become involved in children's education. The teacher participants also commented that left-behind children, especially those cared for by grandparents at home, tended to show a lack of self-discipline in class. Three schoolteachers assumed that grandparents did the household chores and that this had an adverse impact on pupils' ability to do the relevant chores in the dormitories. Furthermore, they assumed that pupils whose parents were physically co-present would have a tendency to be more organised. According to the teachers, parent carers consciously cultivated children's self-organising abilities. As they observed:

'I guess some grandparents often did most of the household chores, which made children incapable of completing the domestic chores in the dormitories. Their class desks were likely to be untidy'.

—Mrs Wang, class teacher, second grade

'There is a left-behind child in my class. Unlike other students, he had no idea how to organise his personal belongings, leaving his uniform on the floor and having ink-stained hands'.

—Mrs Bai, class teacher, sixth grade

Teachers' concerns about grandparents' educational supervision mirror previous studies that have examined the effect of intergenerational rearing on Chinese families. Chinese academics and policymakers have expressed concern about the development of left-behind children if they are in the care of poorly educated rural grandparents (Ye & Pan, 2011). Murphy (2020)

observed that the local officials and teachers she interviewed in China complained about grandparents' lack of education and preoccupation with "life" matters such as food, clothing and warmth to the exclusion of discipline and homework supervision (p. 184). These observations about rural elderly caregivers are consistent with parental and teacher accounts in this research.

The educational policies issued by the authorities might have a positive impact and compensate for the drawbacks associated with intergenerational child-rearing. As Murphy (2020) points out, grandparents as carers in Chinese migrant families are often inadequately equipped to deal with children's education. This observation was reinforced by two teacher participants who pointed out that some left-behind children were unable to completely finish their assigned homework during the holidays due to a lack of supervision and support from their grandparents. In July 2021, the Chinese central government issued a policy which banned out-of-school private academic tutoring businesses. This had unintended benefits for separated families with left-behind children because they were given access to extracurricular activities in school. The document titled "Opinions on Further Reducing the Burden of Homework and Off-Campus Training for Compulsory Education Students" issued by the CCP Central Committee and the State Council, made an explicit statement about the "double reduction" principle. This refers to a reduction in the amount of pressure put on children with regards to both school homework and after-school training programmes (The State Council, 2021). According to the Opinion document, one of the major goals of this policy is to improve the quality of school education and relieve the burdens and anxieties experienced by parents around additional tutoring. The policy also prohibits tutoring businesses from delivering courses during school holidays.

When the 'double reduction' was implemented in September 2021, M school was required by state regulations to organise additional subject-based activities during the summer and winter breaks by the local Education Bureau to cater for all students. During a follow-up interview, the Vice Principal speculated that left-behind children might actually benefit from this new policy even though teachers would be expected to take on additional workloads. She assumed that many left-behind children attending the school were from low-income households. On-campus/school tutoring by M School during the holidays would only cost 200 yuan (£23.4) per month per student, which according to the principal was much more affordable than off-campus private tutoring. Parental interviews suggest that only two families sent their children to private tutoring off campus. Although it is too early to predict the result

of the ‘double reduction’ policy since 2021, the vice principal thought it might compensate for the drawbacks associated with intergenerational rearing<sup>16</sup>.

### **5.3 Skipped-generation childcare in Chinese family culture**

Before I examine the role of carers in online communications, I shall briefly explain why childcare provided by grandparents – so-called skipped generation families – is so prevalent in Chinese separated families. This type of childcare is described as ‘intergenerational childrearing’, which refers to families in which senior family members participate in their grandchildren’s childcare (C.-Y. Yang et al., 2021). Intergenerational childrearing is also common within participant families with Mongolian ethnicity, as kinship childcare is prevalent in Mongolian family culture (Na, 2010). Additionally, ethnic Mongols living in F city have lived alongside Han Chinese for generations and have gradually been integrated into the mainstream Han Chinese culture, which also mirrors the general trend toward the assimilation of minority nationalities in China (X. Wu, 2014).

Several research studies have explored kinship care arrangements and their implications for childcare (Murphy 2020; Santos 2017), especially those childcare arrangements where grandparents play a key role (Burnette et al., 2013). The prevalence of childcare provided by grandparents is in line with the mutual aid model, in which each household member is driven by the success of the household as a whole (Lee & Xiao, 1998). Adult children may be motivated to migrate in order to improve the household’s economic status if their parents are willing to look after their left-behind grandchildren. Those who are left behind in the extended family seem to become what Murphy (2020) describes as ‘adult-child striving teams’ (p.176). By being caregivers for their left-behind grandchildren, grandparents help their migrant children’s economic capacity to reciprocate in the form of remittances (Agree et al., 2002), which may compensate for the grandparents’ efforts as surrogate parents. This form of intergenerational exchange has been referred to as an ‘intergenerational contract’ (Croll, 2006, p. 473), and has been observed in several Asian countries such as China, the Philippines and Thailand (Cong & Silverstein, 2011). According to a 2013 report by the All-China Women’s Federation Research Group, in Chinese families where both parents had migrated, 70% of children were cared for by grandparents (ACWF, 2013).

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<sup>16</sup> The practices of families whose senior family members participate in their grandchildren’s childcare can be referred to as intergenerational rearing (C.-Y. Yang et al., 2021).

One of the characteristics of Chinese family culture is that Chinese families underscore patrilineal over matrilineal obligations (Murphy, 2020). A similar familial ideology can also be seen in Mongolian families, as its kinship system is heavily patriarchal, based on the rules of marriage and descent. According to *The Secret History of the Mongols*, a classic study that records various aspects of Mongol culture, traditional Mongols believe male heirs to be the descendants of clans and lineage systems, tracing descent through the patrilineal line (Na, 2010). One should note that parents in urban Chinese families are abandoning the traditional Chinese tendency to favour childcare undertaken by the father's parents, instead making practical decisions about childcare based on 'availability, caregiving qualifications, and the nature of grandmothers' relationship with adult children and their spouses' (C. Zhang et al., 2019, p. 1174). This shift towards care arrangements more centred around maternal grandparents than paternal grandparents was also evident in this study. What emerged from the interviews with parents and carers was the rise of maternal grandmother childcare over childcare provided by the paternal grandmother. Maternal grandparents were involved in childcare when the marital status of their daughter had changed through the divorce or loss of a spouse. Two out of five carers in the sample were maternal grandmothers. Four migrant workers out of thirteen females participating in the interviews left their children with their maternal grandparents, two of whom were forced to become migrant workers due to losing a spouse.

In China, the normative burden of child-rearing has been placed on women (Brown, 2017). More specifically, Chinese families have formed a female-centred intergenerational parenting body consisting of the child's mother under the authoritative guidance of the child's paternal grandmother—a type of childrearing that Santos (2017, p 94) terms as multiple mothering. This so-called multiple mothering has enabled women in ordinary rural families to leave children with their mothers-in-law and be involved in rural-urban migration (Santos, 2017). As discussed in Chapter 3, the quality of the pre-existing relationship between female migrant workers and their in-laws impacted parent-child relations. The intervention of carers, especially those of paternal grandmothers, was likely to complicate family dynamics in the participant families.

The findings of this study suggest that grandparents play a key but often neglected role in mediating parent-child communications and relations, which has so far received little attention in the literature. This research aims to address the identified research gap by seeing grandparents not only as carers but also as senior family members. In comparing data collected from parents and carers, there are discrepancies between parental and grandparental opinions

about long-distance familyhood. Therefore, it is worth demonstrating the viewpoints of carers in an effort to comprehend the role of social media and mediated family relationships in Chinese separated families. The next section is thus based on the carers' accounts, and seeks to address the first research question: how do carers use WeChat and for what purposes? The section highlights the carers' role as facilitators, observers, and gatekeepers in parent-child communications.

#### 5.4 Carers' digital practices and role in family communications

Given that recruiting carer participants was not smooth under the circumstance of online research during the pandemic, the sample of cares in this research was limited and the findings may not be representative of all digital practices in different types of childcare. Although the sample of carers was small, we can still see that care arrangements in participant families were diverse. Among those carers who I interviewed, two were maternal grandmothers, two were paternal grandmothers, one was a stay-at-home mother, and one was a brother who became the temporary carer of his sister during the pandemic (see Table 1).

*Table 1-Profile of carers*

No.	Pseudonym	Gender	Occupation	Identity	Age	Ethnicity	Gender of the child(ren)	Age of child(ren)
C1	Yan	F	Agricultural worker	Maternal grandmother	58	Mongol	M	13
C2	Mei	F	Agricultural worker	Paternal grandmother	55	Mongol	M	9
C3	Xu	M	College student	Brother	21	Mongol	F	12
C4	Wu	F	Agricultural worker	Maternal grandmother	58	Mongol	F/M	11/8
C5	Ping	F	Agricultural worker	Paternal grandmother	62	Mongol	M	12
C6	Ran	F	Housewife	Mother	36	Mongol	F	9

##### 5.4.1 Lack of media literacy among grandparents

Before I move on to discuss the carers' digital practices, and how they engage with WeChat for the purposes of parent-child and parent-carer communications, we need to first understand

carers' digital skills because media literacy can be seen as a key criterion in the conditions of long-distance communication (Madianou & Miller, 2012a). Data from interviews with carers suggest that the media literacy of grandparents has become an important factor in shaping the quality of parent-child communications in Chinese separated families. Media literacy in this context refers to the ability to access, use, understand, and create content in a variety of contexts (Aufderheide, 1993). Although media literacy is perceived to be a core competence for citizens of all ages living in digitalised societies (Livingstone et al., 2012; Rasi et al., 2020), all the senior carers found it difficult to use information and communication technologies (ICTs) in the beginning, when they were first introduced to smartphones and WeChat. The average age of the four grandmothers I interviewed was 58 and they were all agricultural workers living in a rural area in the vicinity of F city. During our interviews, they seemed to be amazed by the efficiency of WeChat for family communications, but at the same time, they were also concerned about their limited capacity to use WeChat. The findings corroborated the views of parent participants, who suggested that media literacy among older people influenced parent-child communications. For example, a migrant mother wanted to buy a smartphone for her in-laws, hoping to have frequent video calls with her son. However, her in-laws (in their 70s) rejected the proposal because they found it challenging to learn new ways of communicating via smartphones. Her son thus needed to borrow the neighbour's smartphone once a month to make video calls with her. Interestingly, one grandmother interviewee helped her 8-year-old grandson set up video calls with his parents, but she did not always apply her newly acquired ICT skills when it came to her own communications with family members. She preferred calling her son, for instance, directly on a mobile phone instead of using the video or audio call function on WeChat.

All carer interviewees believed that their grandchildren were fluent in the digital language of social media, video games and the internet. Therefore, they sometimes sought help from their grandchildren to solve problems in using WeChat. Their perceptions of children's digital skills match those observed in earlier studies. Children are portrayed as expert computer users (Selwyn, 2009), and are seen to be "literate in media and ICTs in ways that exceed what adults know" (Alvermann, 2004, p. 78). For instance, a 58-year-old grandmother (C2) recalled her experiences of receiving digital support from her grandson (aged 13).

'I didn't know how to verify my WeChat account and he (her grandson) helped me settle that problem. He also knew how to link my bank account with the WeChat payment...He



knows everything about WeChat. For WeChat's new functions, he selected a few things and it (WeChat) started to work'.

Because of the grandparents' confidence in their grandchildren's competence, they chose to take a backseat while they were using WeChat, whether communicating with their parents or attending online courses. According to the interviews with carers, left-behind children were to a certain extent seen by their grandparents as technology "gurus", as they were much more fluent in using media technology than their grandparents. In addition to being skilful social media users, two grandparents (C5 C6) recalled that their grandchildren did not need further assistance to attend online school courses during the COVID-19 pandemic. For instance, a 58-year-old grandmother said she became anxious because she could barely master the skills required to use WeChat. She said she did not know how to help her grandson with online classes using online teaching software. This was exacerbated by social distancing requirements in her village, meaning that no one was able to come over and help her grandson. Fortunately, the child managed to join the classes on his own, and his grandmother consequently felt relieved and proud. She said:

'I am amazed by this boy. After attending a tutorial session taught by schoolteachers, he has already learnt how to use the [online teaching] platform all by himself [...] He never missed any class'.

By comparing the grandparents' and parents' accounts, it can be seen that there is a discrepancy between their respective observations of children's digital practices. As noted in the previous chapter, due to carers' incompetence in providing study-related support, homework was a consistent and contentious topic in parent-child communications, and most parent participants tried to supervise their children's homework from a distance. Two parents (P13, P16) interviewed were not confident about their children's digital skills because their children were observed to be unable to complete certain digital tasks to facilitate parental homework supervision via WeChat. These two parents recounted that their children were expected to share pictures or record videos of their homework through WeChat. However, their children told them that these tasks were too challenging for them. One respondent cited an example of her daughter not being able to take clear pictures of her homework, which made supervision time-consuming and ineffective for her. The unsatisfactory results of long-distance tutoring often caused conflicts between parents and children. This further illustrates that grandparents may overestimate children's media literacy. The lack of media literacy and overestimation of

children's digital proficiency among carers often hindered them from offering their grandchildren help they need, which in turn may pose challenges for remote homework supervision as well as parent-child communication.

#### ***5.4.2 Carers' role as observers, facilitators and gatekeepers***

Interviews with carers showed that they took on the role of observers, facilitators, and gatekeepers in parent-child communications. Their involvement in parent-child communications took three different forms – observing, facilitating, and gatekeeping – and shaped family communications in different ways. First, carers played a role as facilitators in parent-child communications by sharing their digital devices and WeChat accounts with the children. According to the interview data, all carers needed to share their smartphones with the children. The frequency of parent-child communications was subject to grandparents' facilitation because they controlled media access in participant families. As mentioned in the previous chapter, most children in the sample did not have their own digital devices, including smartphones, personal computers, and televisions, mainly because adult family members, primarily parents, were concerned about the negative impacts of those devices (e.g. – damage to vision, game addiction, radiation from electronic devices) on their children. During the COVID-19 pandemic, owing to online teaching, parents needed to find spare phones or buy new devices for their children to attend online classes. The unintended consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic for separated families was that it increased media access for left-behind children who used to have limited access to devices. According to one grandmother, parent-child communications became more frequent as her grandson would set up his video calls with his parent using his own device, whenever he had spare time.

In addition to sharing digital devices, carers were expected to share their WeChat accounts with the children. According to data from interviews with parents and carers, none of the children in participant families applied for their own SIM cards, which also stopped them from registering a social media account and accessing social media platforms. As explained in the introduction chapter, the Chinese government implemented a real-name policy for SIM cards in 2016, whereby people have to link their ID cards to their SIM cards. In 2021, the state regulator issued further regulations, requiring microblogging providers, including Tencent, the parent company of WeChat, to implement a real-name registration system for users (Lagerkvist, 2012). In accordance with this policy, WeChat users need to verify accounts with cell phone numbers and provide real identities, otherwise, they are prevented from accessing services.

Moreover, according to WeChat's terms of service, children under 13 cannot use WeChat, and those who are between the ages of 13 and 18 can only use WeChat if their parent or guardian agrees to the service terms (WeChat, 2018). Since the children in the participant families were all under 13, in principle, they were not allowed to register an account by themselves. All the interviewed carers said that they shared their WeChat accounts with the children in their care. Grandparents hence play a crucial role in facilitating conversations between parents and children by assisting the children to access social media apps such as WeChat.

Second, carers play a role as observers in parent-child communications, and they do not merely passively observe. Carers' presence in parent-child communications may affect the breadth and depth of their conversations and constitute an invasion of children's privacy. Carers were able to observe parent-child communications because of the restricted living conditions of participant families. All carers interviewed were living in a rural area of F city. The living conditions in rural areas meant that most children in participant families did not have their own bedrooms and needed to co-sleep with their grandparents on the kang, a communal bed, at night. The Kang (see Figure 1) functions as a bed and is widely used in nearly 85% of rural homes in northern China (Zhuang et al., 2009). It is an integrated home system for cooking, sleeping, domestic heating and ventilation, which is similar to the hypocaust system in Ancient Rome.



Figure 1– The Kang taken by a grandmother (C5)

The living conditions in rural homes attracted my attention because two children who had their own bedrooms stated that they went to their own rooms when they had video calls with their parents. For example, a brother who was his sister's temporary carer told me: 'my sister went

to her bedroom when she had secrets to share with my mom'. As de Block and Buckingham (2007) remind us, children have the right to preserve their own privacy and that of their families. The living conditions and the intervention of grandparents in limited living spaces may constrain children from having private conversations with their parents. Most of the children in this study did not have privacy during online communications with their parents, which may have affected their ability to express their feelings freely. These findings corroborate those observed in the children's experiences, which are discussed in the following chapter. However, none of the grandparents whom I interviewed were aware of the need to maintain children's privacy.

Owing to their presence in parent-child communications, some carers observed the efforts that parents put into improving remote communication via WeChat, particularly the efforts made by mothers facing the constraints of long-distance parenting. Based on the interviews with carers, gender role differentiation seems to be reflected in the digital practices of long-distance parenthood. More specifically, the responsibility for maintaining long-distance emotional proximity usually falls on migrant mothers (Parreñas, 2005b). According to the grandmothers interviewed, the children in general showed more attachment to maternal engagement than paternal engagement in long-distance communications. Echoing what has been discussed in the previous chapter and in the literature (see Parreñas, 2005a), in the present study, gender was also identified as a key factor in understanding family dynamics in migrant families, and as deeply embedded in acts of long-distance communications. As discussed in Chapter 3, many migrant mothers whom I interviewed employed WeChat to exercise motherhood and reconstitute their maternal identities from a distance. This practice of distant mothering was also recognised by the children's carers. For instance, one grandmother (C2) mentioned how her daughter-in-law, compared to her son, contacted the children more frequently. Her daughter-in-law not only took the initiative to find topics to discuss but also attempted to parent her son from afar. For instance, she introduced a routine of buying snacks and displaying them online for the child. She then got these delivered to the grandmother's home on a regular basis. This paternal grandmother acknowledged the efforts of her daughter-in-law:

'I give my daughter-in-law a score of 10 [10/10] because she actively has video calls with my grandson. I would only give my son a score of 5 because he doesn't know what to say to his son'.

Third, carers can be seen as gatekeepers in parent-child communications. Although gatekeeping behaviours are commonly seen in carers' digital practices, very little research has touched upon carers' gatekeeping role in Chinese separated families. Family studies has focused on parental gatekeeping to conceptualise the relationship between carers' gatekeeping and parental involvement with children. Previous literature has also presented several interesting findings that are relevant to understanding gatekeeping behaviours. For example, Doherty et al. (1998) have argued that some fathers are prevented from becoming fully involved with their children because of maternal gatekeeping. Many researchers have observed that mothers believe they are responsible for the home and childcare (Baber & Monaghan, 1988). Drawing on marriage literature, maternal gatekeeping may be particularly relevant to families in which fathers do not reside with the children as a result of divorce (Thinger-Tallman et al., 1993). Fagan and Barnett (2003), whose work focuses on maternal gatekeeping in divorced families, define gatekeeping as mothers' preferences and attempts to exclude fathers from taking part in childcare.

This concept of maternal gatekeeping cannot be applied to Chinese separated families because none of the carer participants I interviewed intended to prevent parents from being part of their children's lives. The carers in this study justified their gatekeeping as a way of shielding children from experiencing intense emotions and alleviating parental anxieties. As reflected in the grandparents' responses, looking after young children can be challenging because they have many emotional and developmental needs. If the children experienced what grandparents perceived as strong mood swings and were not able to control their emotions, they sometimes controlled the children's media access to stop them from keeping in touch with their parents. This was where grandparents took on a gatekeeping role. For example, some (C1, C2, C5) grandparents stopped the children from contacting their parents if they evaluated the communication as potentially negative or uncontrollable. As Mei (C2), a grandmother aged 55 recalled, her grandson would usually cry for his parents when he was unwell and keep asking, 'why don't they (the child's parents) come back'. On one occasion, the child broke his nose at school. The child's mother was concerned when she heard this news and decided to return home. Mei stopped her because she knew her daughter-in-law would leave soon, and the child would be more upset to see her leave. This grandmother thus sought to distract the child and to prevent him from having a video call because of her concern that he would be even sadder if he saw his mother's face.

Carers' gatekeeping also occurs in parent-carer communications – the other key dimension of family communications in Chinese separated families. Carers' interviews showed

that carers and parents used WeChat to discuss child-rearing issues since carers were undertaking parenting roles on behalf of parents. Carers said they used WeChat to seek parental confirmation concerning issues related to the rearing of the children. For example, carers used WeChat to provide parents with updates on their children's academic performance, health, and development. In this context, grandparents (C1, C2, C4, C5) avoided mentioning certain topics (for example, children's illnesses and injuries) to ensure that parents did not become anxious. A Chinese proverb frequently mentioned by my participants in the interviews was: "distant water cannot put out a nearby fire". Grandparents (C1, C2, C4, C5) assumed that physical distance prevented parents from understanding their children's problems properly, let alone solving the problems from a distance. This was particularly the case when children were ill or injured. Grandparents (C1, C2, C4, C5) had a tendency to tone down their description of these issues in order to ease parents' concerns.

Based on the preceding discussion, it can be seen that carers observe parent-child communications as a third party and actively participate in parent-child communications as facilitators and gatekeepers. Hence, their understanding of the role of WeChat may be different from those of parents and children (see Chapters 4 and 6). The next section, therefore, moves on to examine the carers' perceptions of the role of WeChat in long-distance familyhood.

### **5.5 Carers' understanding of the role of WeChat in Chinese separated families**

Interviews showed that carers share the same perception as parents with regards to the role of WeChat as a parenting facilitator and surveillance tool. However, all carer participants seemed to challenge the effectiveness of digital parenting and surveillance via WeChat. As discussed in the previous chapter on parents, the whole process of remote parenting is shaped by a feeling of a lack of control and disempowerment, which negatively affects parental feelings of competence. Most parents who were interviewed felt that geographical distance has become an obstacle to maintaining parental authority when families are apart. Such observations confirm earlier findings about transnational family lives, which also suggest that long-distance, as compared to face-to-face parenting, requires negotiation about parenting strategies, and can be rejected by children (Madianou & Miller 2012a). However, carers' observations may offer additional insights as to why migrant parents feel powerless in relation to distant parenting. The carers had doubts about the effectiveness of distant parenting for four major reasons.

First, all grandparents in the sample found that the irregular working hours of migrant parents affected the quality of parent-child communications. Many family studies focused on

American and European societies indicate that spending time with children, including parent-child shared activities, is necessary for children's growth and development (Büchel & Duncan, 1998; Furstenberg et al., 1987; Milkie et al., 2004). However, this was difficult for some participant families in this study. In response to the question: 'what do you think of the use of WeChat in terms of connecting with family members?', all the grandparents (C1, C2, C4 and C5) interviewed were not optimistic about the impact of social media on improving parent-child communications and fostering emotional closeness in relationships. Compared to the carers who were involved in day-to-day childcare, migrant parents devoted less time to their children. Two grandmothers (C2, C4) noticed that their grandchildren emotionally detached themselves from their parents. One (C4) cited an example of her grandson choosing to co-sleep with her rather than his parents when the family was reunited during holidays. Another maternal grandmother felt her daughter needed to use gifts to induce her children to spend more time with her when she returned home. In this grandmother's view, her grandchildren behaved well under her care and never cried for their mother when she was working away from home. From the carers' perspective, spending time with children in person matters for family relationships and talking via WeChat cannot equate to quality in-person family time. This echoes Baldassar's (2008) observation that virtual co-presence cannot replace physical co-presence when it comes to resolving feelings of longing and nostalgia. It is worth mentioning that parental perspectives on the quality of parent-child communications differed somewhat from grandparental views (see Chapter 4).

Second, carers observed that parents did not show flexibility in their long-distance parenting practices via WeChat. A common view held amongst grandparents was that parents did not understand their children's personalities and development because of prolonged family separation, despite the frequent communication facilitated by WeChat. All grandmothers indicated that online communication did not enhance parents enhance their understanding of their children. As a result, all grandparents noticed that children tended to avoid sharing their feelings with their parents during the video calls. For example, some grandparents (C1, C5) had to adapt their parenting techniques as their grandchildren entered puberty and experienced mood swings. However, according to these grandparents, parents made no adjustments during online communication to cater for developmental changes in their children and continued to respond to children's behaviours with criticism. One 58-year-old maternal grandmother (C1) interpreted these parental reactions via WeChat as the inability to understand children's development. As she explained:

‘They may not notice from the video calls. Even though it (puberty) was recognised when they returned home, they only stayed a couple of days at home each year.’

Third, according to grandparents’ responses, parent-child communications via WeChat were subject to children’s communication skills and attention spans. Grandparents’ facilitating role in parent-child communications was also reflected in their efforts to help children to have a ‘better’ conversation with their parents. This was important because some children experienced mid-conversation silence during parent-child video calls. According to the grandparents I interviewed, this was especially the case for families who had younger children (aged under 10). For example, two grandparents (C2, C4) found that their young grandchildren did not know what to talk about with their parents and were unable to keep the online conversations going. They observed that their grandchildren would run away after their parents raised a few questions. One of the grandmothers (C2) remembered that her grandson sometimes picked up the video calls when his parents were calling, turned the screen upside down on the bed, and waited for her to come back to start the conversation. She therefore decided to teach her 8-year-old grandson how to interact with his parents as she wanted to make sure the online conversation between her son/daughter-in-law and her grandson lasted longer. She would prompt the child to ask his parents about their jobs and to express gratitude for their hard work during the video calls. The child, as this grandmother described, would imitate her word for word. Although an effort was made to improve parent-child communications, her grandson still did not know what to discuss with his parents and the parent-child communication did not last very long even though she had stepped in and set a topic agenda for her grandson.

Finally, children’s resistance was another factor that carers considered to be a hindrance to distant parenting and surveillance via WeChat. A recurrent theme that emerged from the interviews with grandparents is that they thought filial piety, a traditional Chinese virtue of respect for parents and seniors, was embedded in the online conversations between parents and children. Previous studies have argued that filial piety not only emphasises authoritarian moralism with regards to respecting elders but also reinforces intimacy between parents and children (D. Y. Ho, 1994; Hwang, 1999). Filial piety also serves as the traditional doctrine for harmonious intergenerational relationships within Chinese families (K. H. Yeh et al., 2013). Based on the observations of grandparents, most parents tended to talk about this moral tenet with children on a regular basis via WeChat and expected their children to study harder, behave well in their grandparents’ home, and show gratitude for their parental sacrifice. According to the interviews, children indeed showed appreciation for their care and efforts whereas parents



were sometimes faced with resistance from children. All grandmothers participating in the interviews had confidence that they had maintained control within the household and that the children were obedient to them. They believed that special emotional bonds were built up through daily interactions with their grandchildren, which facilitated parenting in real life. In contrast to the observations of teachers, some participants claimed that their grandchildren were willing to help them undertake tasks such as domestic chores without waiting to be asked. According to a grandmother (C1), she believed that her grandson would listen to her advice as long as she was willing to show patience, and that being co-present with the child was a strength of her parenting. By contrast, according to the grandparents, parents faced resistance from children when they tried to reinforce the value of filial piety from a distance. More specifically, as grandparents observed, some parents expected their children to show gratitude for the sacrifice they as parents had made for the family, but children did not always express sufficient appreciation of their parents' contributions, despite parental reinforcement. For example, according to one maternal grandmother, her daughter often reminded the child that she worked hard for him to have a better life. She also kept asking the child to be more grateful and to study harder. The child sometimes got annoyed by this and hung up.

With respect to the role of WeChat as a surveillance tool, interviews with carers suggested that they were all involved in parental surveillance and used WeChat to update parents on children's performance with particular regards to their studies, health, and diet. As children could not provide this information, parents relied on carers to obtain it. As one of the grandmothers put it: 'There is no way for my son and daughter-in-law to know their son's personality unless I tell them'.

Based on the interviews with carers, the role of WeChat as a parenting facilitator and surveillance tool was confirmed by carers who, however, questioned its effectiveness on the basis of four factors: 1) migrant parents spend little time on parent-child communications; 2) parents are unable to adjust their parenting strategies in response to children's development because WeChat cannot provide a full picture of real life; 3) children's communication skills and attention spans are perceived as obstacles that directly contribute to difficulties in long-distance parenting; and 4) children's resistance to long-distance parenting gives rise to parental powerlessness. Due to these perceived obstacles from the carers' perspectives, parenting practices and parental surveillance via WeChat cannot be achieved without the assistance of carers.

## 5.6 Carers' perspectives on mediated family relationships

Having outlined the carers' digital practices and how they interpret the role of WeChat in the family lives of participant families, this section analyses the impact of social media like WeChat on relationship maintenance in participant families. The section focuses on examining two aspects of mediated relationships: parent-child relationships and parent-carer relationships.

### 5.6.1 The implications of carers' involvement for parent-child relationships

Since carers are involved in parent-child communications as observers, facilitators and gatekeepers, their views may provide us with a useful third-party perspective for understanding mediated parent-child relationships. It is worth noting that care arrangements can be seen as a key factor that shapes mediated relationships between parents and children. The interview data suggest that stay-at-home parents as carers play a pivotal role in facilitating their partners to maintain relationships with their children. Among all families whose parents and carers participated in this research (n:24), three were three mother-at-home families, thirteen skipped generation families (three maternal grandparents/ten paternal grandparents), seven mixed kinship care families, and one sibling-at-home family.

*Table 2- Care arrangements*

Care arrangements	Participants
Mother-at-home	P5, P10, C6
Maternal grandparent(s)	P6, P12, C1
Paternal grandparent(s)	P7, P8, P9, P13, P16, P17, P18, C2, C4, C5
Mixed kinship care (paternal grandparent(s), at home mother/paternal grandparent(s), fathers/maternal grandmother(s), aunt)	P1, P2, P3, P4, P11, P14, P15
Other (e.g., brother)	C3

As mentioned in the previous chapter, in response to the limitations of long-distance parenting, some stay-at-home mothers came up with creative ideas to facilitate father-child communications. For example, one mother (C6) encouraged his husband to arrange quizzes with his sons to avoid awkward silences. These findings are consistent with those of other

family studies, arguing that there is ample evidence to show that mothers who remain at home actively promote relationships between children and fathers (Walker & McGraw, 2000). The present study also finds that the presence of at least one parent makes decision-making on issues such as homework supervision and child-rearing easier because there are fewer conflicts of opinion between parents and carers. However, this finding is not conclusive due to the size of the sample. It will be interesting to see more research examining the differences between care by grandparents and other care arrangements.

By comparing data collected from grandparents with those from carers who are stay-at-home parents or other family members (e.g. – siblings), it is interesting to note that there were more conflicts and misunderstandings between parents and children within skipped generation families. In other words, mediated relationships in skipped generation families seem to be more complicated, and the consequences of grandparents' involvement in parent-child relationships are twofold. First, spatial and temporal constraints mean that parent-child relationships cannot be sustained without the facilitation of grandparents, especially in separated families with younger children (under 10 years) who lack media literacy and communication skills. Grandparents' facilitation of online parent-child communications can help to maintain parental control and authority to some degree, which in the meantime prevents children from having too much freedom to resist parental control.

Restoring parental authority is difficult because, according to the observations of carers, children enjoyed a greater degree of autonomy in mediated parent-child relationships. For example, one grandmother (C2) once intervened in a parent-child conversation when she felt that her grandson was trying to hide his misbehaviours from his parents to avoid punishment. Another grandmother witnessed her grandson putting down the smartphone and running away from the webcam when her daughter-in-law started scolding him. Two grandparents noticed that their grandchildren did not mention their misbehaviours at home or at school during parent-child communications to avoid admonitions. In these cases, grandparents perceived children's agency and resistance as a challenge to long-distance parenting. According to Greene and Nixon (2020), nurturing autonomy in children is deemed to be a highly valued objective among parents in Western societies, but it is by no means a universal goal. Chinese parents who value children's obedience unsurprisingly do not value children's autonomy in mediated relationships because it can lead to a reduction in parental control – a scenario that most parent participants tried to avoid. As mentioned in the previous chapter, one of the reasons why parents felt powerless in exercising long-distance parenthood was because they believed that physical distance empowered children to resist parental discipline. In this context,

grandparental involvement in long-distance parenting helped parents regain control of their parenting practices. For instance, two grandmothers (C2, C4) were asked by parents to bring the children back on screen when they had run away from the camera.

Second, grandparental involvement in parent-child communications has potential downsides for parent-child relationships. Echoing the findings discussed in the previous chapter, the gatekeeping behaviours of grandparents can be seen as the embodiment of their intermediary role in parent-child relationships. According to the interview data, some grandmothers (C1, C2, C4, C5) admitted that they chose information selectively to update parents on WeChat. Owing to time constraints in online communications, grandparents were found to prioritise the issues that they evaluated as important to discuss with parents. Only when I conducted research with child participants did I pay attention to the consequences of grandparental gatekeeping for parent-child relationships. By contrasting grandparental accounts with those of children, it is clear that the evaluation system differs greatly between adults and children, meaning that what children considered as important issues seemed to be minor to grandparents. For instance, instead of mentioning children's good behaviours, most carers tended to report what they perceived as children's transgressions to raise parental awareness and correct their children remotely. As one grandmother (C2) put it:

‘We (parents and carers) mainly discussed how to discipline my grandson during our WeChat calls. My grandson isn't my own child after all. I needed to seek his parents' consent to *guanjiao* (to educate and discipline) him when he was being naughty or out of control’.

By contrast, child participants in fact preferred to share something positive such as their personal improvement and feelings to seek parental praise and support (see Chapter 6).

As the senior generation has traditionally received filial obedience and respect from the younger generation (Wolf, 1972), grandparental feedback for children may have an impact on the parental evaluation of their children because migrant parents are expected to be filial to their parents/in-laws. This may impede parents' level of understanding of their children because first, children lack media access to express their ideas in a timely way; second, carers provide parents with selected information. In line with the theory of mediated relationships developed by Madianou and Miller (2012a, p 140), relationships in separated families are conceptualised as a triangle consisting of the normative ideal of a person (parent/child), the actual person, and the discrepancy between the other two. Carers' gatekeeping may enlarge the

discrepancy line of the relationship triangle, reducing the opportunities for parents and children to understand each other. Because the sense of closeness in a relationship is rooted in interactions (Goldsmith & Baxter, 1996; Mandelbaum, 2002), the gatekeeping behaviours of carers also hinder the development of emotional proximity in parent-child relationships. Although grandparents perceived their gatekeeping behaviours as well-intentioned, with the aim of helping both children and parents to maintain a better relationship, children whom I interviewed held different opinions on carers' gatekeeping role because it created parent-child tensions and prevented their parents from better understanding their needs. I will discuss children's feelings and their viewpoints on the impact of carers' gatekeeping in the following chapter.

The preceding discussion revealed more nuanced views about the intermediary role of carers in shaping family relationships. Based on the analysis of interviews with carers, I argue that care arrangement is a key criterion in Chinese separated families when it comes to comprehending mediated relationships. Compared to families with one stay-at-home parent (mother/father), grandparental intervention in family communications may alter family dynamics through facilitation and gatekeeping. Grandparents as facilitators in parent-child communications may help parents somewhat restore authority and limit children's autonomy in resisting parental control. However, grandparental gatekeeping may hinder the achievement of mutual understanding between parents and children, which in turn impedes the development of emotional closeness in parent-child relationships.

### ***5.6.2 Carers' perspectives on mediated family relationships between parents and carers***

As previously noted, family communications consist of parent-child and parent-carer communications in Chinese separated families. In addition to observing, facilitating and gatekeeping parent-child communications, grandparents were found to actively engage with WeChat to maintain relationships with their adult children, that is the migrant parents. In this section, I will discuss mediated relationships between grandparent carers and parents and demonstrate how grandparent carers' proxy parenting has been mediated by social media like WeChat.

All grandparents I interviewed acknowledged the importance of education and were concerned that they were unable to help their grandchildren with schoolwork. It also worried them that the children's academic performance might have been negatively affected by their caregiving. Previous studies shed light on why carers worry about their parenting practices. In

China, there is a widely held belief that social resources, including power, status and opportunity, are allocated to individuals based on their hard work and educational accomplishments (Murphy, 2020). This belief in meritocracy fosters rural families' hopes that their children will enjoy a better standard of living through education (Kipnis, 2011). Against this backdrop, WeChat was employed to express their anxieties about parenting. According to one grandmother interviewee, she would share her anxieties with her daughter-in-law during WeChat calls, when she felt overstretched. Her daughter-in-law then comforted her during WeChat calls and suggested that she herself should take over the responsibility for homework supervision from a distance via WeChat.

The interviews with grandparent carers showed that negotiating how to educate children was one of the priority issues in parent-carer communications, and parents and grandparents used WeChat to negotiate parenting values. Parental concerns about their reduced parental control were relevant to parent-carer interactions. Some parents attributed their lack of control to grandparents being too 'permissive' (P1, P2, P3), 'lenient' (P12, P13, P18) and 'over-tolerant' (P7, P15). This finding resonates with wider public concern in China that grandparents are too preoccupied with life matters such as food, clothing and warmth, to the exclusion of discipline and homework supervision (Murphy, 2020). Recent studies on Chinese families have revealed a pattern of strict parents and lenient grandparents (Goh & Kuczynski, 2010; Murphy, 2020). Grandparent carers confirmed their child-raising practices were subjected to parental scrutiny via WeChat because most parents did not give up on exerting control from a distance. When migrant parents deemed grandparental proxy parenting to be too lenient, grandparents confirmed that they were usually asked to be stricter with their grandchildren. This finding was consistent with the experiences of parents. As one father (P7) explained:

'My parents often have a tendency to spoil their grandson because they can't bear to see the kid cry or feel upset. I asked them to discipline my son in the same way they had disciplined me. But I'm pretty sure they will never do so'.

Grandparent carers had their justifications for why they did not follow parental guidance about child-rearing from a distance. They pointed to the ineffectiveness of WeChat in providing a holistic picture of family lives. According to the grandparent carers, parents made judgments based on what they observed through WeChat, which only gave an incomplete view and sometimes resulted in misunderstandings between parents and carers. This confirms the

findings of other studies, which show that mediated interaction is often perceived as inferior to face-to-face communication (Madianou & Miller, 2012a). Some scholars have speculated that a narrowing of the range of social cues in digital communications gives rise to ambiguities and potential misunderstandings (Baym, 2010; Thompson, 2020).

When misunderstandings occur in parent-carer communications, it takes carers extra effort to explain their rationale to the parents. One maternal grandmother (C1) gave me an illustrative example to demonstrate how situations can be distorted by online communications. Her grandson had gained some weight during the pandemic when he could not undertake outdoor activities. On one occasion, when her grandson asked her if it was alright to eat some instant noodles, she agreed. Her daughter happened to video call and see the child was eating what she described as ‘junk food’. She then started to blame the carer for feeding the child unhealthy food and making him gain so much weight in such a short period of time. This grandmother felt that she had to clarify every detail of the story to her daughter to resolve any misunderstandings. As she put it:

‘My daughter assumed that I have been giving her son unhealthy food... She is not here with us and doesn’t know her son has nowhere to go and play during COVID... If she were here, I wouldn’t need to explain’.

All carers interviewed believe that there is a gap between what parents see on WeChat and what children need in their everyday lives. According to the six carers interviewed, WeChat did not allow parents to observe their children’s needs in full, so parental instructions sometimes did not fit carers’ parenting practices. Some grandparents, therefore, exhibited resistance to parental instructions which they felt were unrealistic. The interviews suggest that grandparent carers felt they were being scapegoated by parents who were experiencing powerlessness and a reduction in parental control. For instance, two grandmothers’ parenting (C1, C2) was described by their children as “spoiling the kids” and too “tolerant”. Meanwhile, parents also blamed grandparents for their child-rearing failures if children showed resistance to parental discipline and authority. One of the grandmothers (C2) felt misunderstood when her son criticised her parenting. This grandmother believed the efforts she invested in child-rearing were not respected and appreciated by her son.

From the above discussion, we can see that mediated communications may increase misunderstandings between grandparent carers and parents. Within these circumstances, it takes carers more time and effort to clarify their child-rearing rationale and ensure parents are

in agreement with their proxy parenting practices. In some cases, mediated communication via WeChat may amplify the misunderstandings and lead to parent-carer conflicts, which in turn damage harmony in family relationships between carers and parents.

## **5.7 Conclusion**

This chapter has discussed how the childcare of left-behind children involves two different sets of carers: teachers in boarding school settings as well as home carers (mainly grandparents). Schools seem to play an important role in sharing some childcare responsibilities with participant families. School and government policies also influence care arrangements in these families. WeChat is used by separated families (parents and carers) to keep informed of children's academic performance and school lives because children, especially boarders, spend a considerable amount of time at school.

By investigating the digital practices of carers, the media literacy of both grandparents and children was identified as a key factor that impacts the quality of parent-child communications. Two major findings from this analysis of grandparental digital practices were that: 1) grandparents are not confident about their media literacy and some of them lack basic digital skills; and 2) grandparents perceive children to have greater technical proficiency. By comparing accounts of parents and grandparent carers, in the context of remote homework tutoring, the lack of digital skills and overestimation of children's technical competence leads grandparents to overlook children's difficulties in using WeChat and to prevent children from seeking parental help.

In terms of the question of how carers use WeChat and for what purposes, we need to bear in mind that family communications via WeChat consist of parent-child communications and parent-carer communications. On the one hand, carers are involved in parent-child communications, playing the role of facilitators, observers, and gatekeepers. First, owing to the restricted living conditions of participant families, carers are nearly always present when parent-child communications take place. As a result, children's privacy seems to be invaded by the presence of carers in online communications. Second, given the Chinese ICT policy, which prevents children's independent access to social media, carers are expected to facilitate parent-child communications by sharing their digital devices and social media accounts. Third, carers' gatekeeping occurs in both parent-child communications and parent-carers communications. By controlling media access and filtering out certain information (e.g. – children's injuries and illnesses), carers' gatekeeping is justified to prevent children from



experiencing mood swings and parents from experiencing anxieties. On the other hand, the findings of the carers' interviews highlight the dimension of parent-carer communications. Carers use WeChat to negotiate child-rearing strategies with parents and seek parental approval for their proxy parenting.

Owing to the presence of carers in parent-child communications, their observations provide a useful third-party perspective to examine the role of WeChat in family communications. Although the interviews with carers confirm the role of WeChat as a parenting facilitator as well as a surveillance tool, it should be stressed that these purposes cannot be achieved without carer facilitation. Carers' observations, however, challenge the effectiveness of long-distance parenting and surveillance, suggesting that social media like WeChat can only play a limited role in maintaining closeness between family members. Due to the irregular working hours of parents, as well as inflexibility in remote parenting, children's communication skills and attention spans, and children's resistance to parental control, grandparents are also pessimistic about the role of WeChat in maintaining emotional closeness in parent-child relationships. The physical distance that cannot be bridged by digital media (Madianou & Miller, 2012a), which fundamentally impacts traditional Chinese family values related to filial piety. In other words, parents cannot achieve what they want from long-distance parenting via WeChat, that is, maintaining control and receiving filial obedience from their offspring.

Interviews with carers reveal two aspects of mediated family relationships in Chinese separated families: parent-child relationships and parent-carer relationships. In parent-child relationships, it can be argued that carers play a pivotal role in their maintenance, and that mediated relationships cannot be sustained without the help of carers. The facilitation of grandparent carers empowers parents to restore parental authority to some degree by limiting the resistance of children to parental control. However, carers' gatekeeping behaviours may prevent children from building emotional closeness with their parents, and vice versa. In terms of parent-carer relationships, since carers as proxy parents are responsible for childcare, mediated communications via WeChat may arguably give rise to parent-carer misunderstandings concerning parenting practices, which in turn can lead to family conflicts.

## **6. The Children's Perspectives**

### **6.1 Introduction**

This chapter focuses on the perspectives of left-behind children to explore how they interpret the role of social media in their family lives and how they use social media to maintain family relations. Drawing on data collected from child participants in the online workshops and interviews, the chapter seeks to address several gaps in the literature on children and digital media in the context of migration. Studies on multi-local families have traditionally concentrated on migrant parents; far less research has examined the perspectives of children (Murphy, 2020). In particular, very little research has focused on understanding what children think about “being” a family across large distances via communication technologies. As Greene and Nixon (2020) point out, children are often seen as incomplete adults and incomplete agents who do not have ‘the ability to reason and form judgments and the ability to act with autonomy’ (p. 2). This chapter aims to give children a voice concerning long-distance familyhood when families rely on social media like WeChat to maintain familial ties from a distance. The children who participated in this research showed their agency in using social media to maintain family relationships and this chapter demonstrates how this occurred.

The chapter aims to answer three research questions: 1) how do children use WeChat and for what purposes? 2) what role do children think WeChat plays in their family lives? 3) how do children evaluate the implications of using WeChat to maintain their family relationships? To address these questions, I undertook online interviews with 10 children whose parents had participated as interviewees in the research and 10 online workshops at M school. Child interviewees were asked to complete five digital activities, including sending me a voice message, a text message, a sticker, a picture, and a short video via WeChat to ascertain whether they could use these functions. Apart from interviewing these children, I also conducted 10 online workshops with 31 child participants on school premises in the presence of schoolteachers. In this chapter, the workshop data are used to demonstrate recurrent themes that emerged from the child respondents, while interview data are used to illustrate the complexity of mediated family relationships from a child's point of view.

This chapter first discusses findings from the digital activities embedded in the child-centred interviews and the online workshops to explore children's competence in using WeChat. In particular, it focuses on the issue of media access, children's understanding of the functionality of WeChat, and how they create communication pathways with their parents.

Drawing on the findings that emerged from the interviews and workshops with children, section two seeks to shed light on the challenges that children encounter in long-distance communications and then discusses children's creativity and the strategies they employ in response to the constraints of online communications via WeChat. Section three outlines how children perceive the role of social media in their family lives as a facilitator of parental involvement, as a tool of parental surveillance, and as an emotional management tool in the face of family separation. The final section illustrates and explores how social media like WeChat might account for the shaping of family relationships in Chinese separated families by focusing on the main obstacles to enacting mediated family relationships and the impact of carer interventions.

## **6.2 Children's competence using WeChat**

This section looks briefly at children's media literacy among the interview and workshop participants. Although the notion of media literacy has been in use since the 1950s, no consensus seems to have been reached on its conceptual framing (Rasi et al., 2020). This is the case largely because media literacy research is highly multidisciplinary, bringing together different disciplinary perspectives from the fields of technology, information science, media and communications research and audience studies (Livingstone et al., 2012). Ofcom (2005) defines children's media literacy as 'the ability to access, understand and create communications in a variety of contexts' (p.3). This section adopts this tripartite definition to make sense of children's digital skills and draws on these three aspects to elaborate on the media literacy of child participants.

### ***6.2.1 Issues of access***

Within the household in most cultures, children's ICT access cannot always be guaranteed because traditionally children lack the power to make decisions in the home (Livingstone, 2002). This observation was also reflected in participant families, despite their dependency on communication technologies as a result of family separation. Among the child participants in both the workshops and interviews (n:41), 26 child participants had no personal communication devices and needed to borrow their carers' smartphones for parent-child communication. There was only one girl among ten interviewees who had access to her own smartphone. The remaining nine interviewees had to attend the online interviews using their

carers' smartphones and WeChat accounts. In comparison, workshop participants seemed to have better access to communication devices. Among those workshop participants (15 out of 31) who stated that they had their own digital devices, fourteen children claimed to have access to smartphones and one child claimed to have access to a smartwatch.

For those interviewees without their own phones, almost every one of them described how they dreamed of having their own smartphone to have more freedom to talk to their parent(s) when they felt like it, which resonated with what children said during the school workshops. More than half of the workshop participants (16 out of 31) who had no access to their own media devices described their unsatisfactory experiences while using their carers' devices to communicate. One common scenario was that if carers had to change their schedule, children and parents would need to rearrange video/audio calls at short notice. Two children (W18, W15) in the workshops, who were in families where the father was absent, recalled that their fathers spent less time communicating with them because their mothers also needed to talk during video calls. Three workshop participants (W8, W9, W20) also recounted how their mothers tried to restrict their screen time, which in turn curtailed father-child communications.

It is worth mentioning that having access to media devices such as smartphones does not equate to children having their own WeChat accounts. Among 15 workshop participants who claimed to have their own smartphone/smartwatch, 9 children claimed to have their own WeChat account through which they could keep in touch with their migrant parent(s) independently. However, this has to be viewed with some care because the WeChat service is not open to children under 16 unless they are in the company of guardians. According to WeChat's terms of service, children under 13 years are not allowed to register their own WeChat accounts. Due to the real-name registration regulation when using the internet in China, children (those aged under 13) cannot register an account by themselves, as their age will be verified by WeChat. Those workshop participants who claimed to have access to their own WeChat account said they were using additional SIM cards purchased by their parents/carers which could override the WeChat policy, and which they could not obtain themselves. The remainder of participants (4 out of 15) who said they had their own devices did not have their own WeChat accounts and had to use the accounts of their carers.

*Table 1 – Workshop participants who claimed to have personal digital devices and/or a WeChat account*

	No.	Age	Gender	Carer	Digital device	WeChat account
The 1 <sup>st</sup> school workshop	W1	12	F	Paternal grandparents	Smartphone	Yes
	W2	12	F	Paternal grandparents	Smartphone	Yes
	W3	12	M	Paternal grandparents	Smartphone	Yes
	W4	12	M	Paternal grandparents	No	No
The 2 <sup>nd</sup> school workshop	W5	11	M	Father	No	No
	W6	10	F	Father	No	No
	W7	11	F	Mother & paternal grandmother	No	No
The 3 <sup>rd</sup> school workshop	W8	12	M	Aunt	Smartphone	Yes
	W9	10	F	Mother	Smartphone	No
	W10	10	F	Maternal grandparents	No	No
The 4 <sup>th</sup> school workshop	W11	11	M	Mother	Smartphone	No
	W12	12	M	Paternal grandparents	No	No
	W13	11	M	Maternal grandparents	No	No
The 5 <sup>th</sup> school workshop	W14	12	F	Mother	Smartphone	Yes
	W15	12	M	Mother	Smartphone	Yes
	W16	12	M	Mother	Smartphone	Yes
The 6 <sup>th</sup> school workshop	W17	11	M	Mother	No	No
	W18	11	M	Mother	No	No
	W19	11	M	Mother	No	No
The 7 <sup>th</sup> school workshop	W20	10	M	Mother	No	No
	W21	9	F	Mother	No	No
	W22	10	F	Mother	No	No
The 8 <sup>th</sup> school workshop	W23	13	M	Mother	Smartphone	Yes
	W24	12	F	Mother	Smartphone	No
	W25	13	F	Mother	Smartphone	No
	W26	13	F	Maternal grandparents	Smartphone	Yes

The 9 <sup>th</sup> school workshop	W27	11	F	Paternal grandparents	No	No
	W28	10	F	Paternal grandparents	Smartphone	No
The 10 <sup>th</sup> school workshop	W29	9	M	Mother	No	No
	W30	9	F	Mother	Smartwatch	No
	W31	9	F	Mother	No	No

Only 4 out of 10 interviewees (F1, F2, F5, F9) had their own WeChat accounts. Their parents had helped them to register these accounts to facilitate parent-child online communication. However, 2 of these 4 interviewees (F1, F2, F5) said they in fact preferred using their carers' accounts because switching accounts from their carer's phone to their own phone was too time-consuming. Media access of child interviewees was proportionately lower than the workshop sample. One possible reason for this situation is that child participants attended the workshops through the school's facility and their responses regarding access to SIM cards and WeChat accounts could not be further proven by the researcher. By contrast, interviews took place at the carers' homes and the child interviewee attended the interviews via the often-used devices for parent-child communications. Their responses about media access to digital devices and WeChat accounts seem to have been accurate and were verified by my observations.

*Table 2 – Profile of interviewees who had personal digital devices and/or WeChat accounts*

No.	Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Carer(s)	Digital device	WeChat account
<b>F1</b>	Ran	M	13	Maternal grandmother, aunt	No	Yes
<b>F2</b>	Zhe	M	13	Aunt, maternal grandmother	No	Yes
<b>F3</b>	Yang	M	13	Paternal grandparents	No	No
<b>F4</b>	Hui	F	11	Paternal grandmother	No	No
<b>F5</b>	Nan	F	13	Paternal grandmother	No	Yes
<b>F6</b>	Junbo	M	10	Paternal grandmother	No	No
<b>F7</b>	Tong	F	8	Paternal grandfather	No	No
<b>F8</b>	Wulan	M	9	Paternal grandmother	No	No

<b>F9</b>	Mai	F	12	Care centre, aunt, brother	Smartphone	Yes
<b>F10</b>	Hao	M	11	Maternal grandparents, paternal grandparents	No	No

A total of 3 out of 41 participant families upgraded their children's media access by giving them spare phones to assist their learning rather than to facilitate parent-child communication. Two workshop participants (W2, W11) said they were given a new smartphone so that they could attend online classes during the COVID-19 pandemic, but they also said they unexpectedly enjoyed increased frequency in parent-child communications, which their parents had not intended in the first instance. In addition, 1 out of 10 carers purchased better digital devices, including smartphones, to be better informed about the school's policies and children's academic performance. In one interview, a child (F5) explained how she started using WeChat to contact her mother in fifth grade when her class teacher created a parent-teacher group on WeChat to circulate information about the school's policies and events. Before her grandmother purchased a new smartphone to join the parent-teacher WeChat group, the child had used an old mobile phone to ring up her mother.

### ***6.2.2 Issues of Understanding***

Although there is increasing public concern regarding children's and young people's use of digital and online media (Buckingham, 2005; Livingstone, 2002, 2014; Ofcom, 2005) and subsequently more research has begun to focus on children's use of media and technologies (Bakia et al., 2011; Cannon et al., 2022; Hobbs, 2017), very little academic research has examined left-behind children's use and understanding of communication technologies.

In order to explore child participants' understanding of social media, both workshop and interview participants were encouraged to discuss their knowledge of WeChat. Since the workshops took place on school premises and pupils, according to the school regulations, were not allowed to use any digital devices on campus, workshop participants had to verbally describe their competency and understanding of WeChat and online communications in general. As noted in Chapter 3, I divided children into two age bands: those aged 6 to 10 (junior, primary 1-3) and aged 11 to 13 (senior, primary 4-6). According to the demographics of the workshop participants, there were 25 children in the senior age band (aged 11 to 13) and 6 in the junior age band (aged 6 to 10). Children in both age bands felt confident about their proficiency in using the different functions of WeChat without help from their carers. Three younger children

(W29, W30, W31) aged 9 found it difficult to use the text-message function in WeChat as they did not know how to type words in *Pinyin*.<sup>17</sup> However, they still believed that their knowledge of social media was better than their classmates as they used WeChat regularly to communicate with their migrant parents.

The findings from the workshops were confirmed by my observations during the online interviews. The online interviews enabled the children to demonstrate their technical proficiency and ability to use different WeChat functions because they were conducted via WeChat – the same platform used for parent-child online communication – and children were given their carers' devices to attend the interviews. In general, child participants were fluent in using the different functions of WeChat except in the case of two younger children (F7, F8), aged under 9, who struggled with typing because they were not proficient in *Pinyin*. The digital activities and subsequent interviews showed that parents and carers did not have to teach child participants how to use WeChat. 8 out of 10 child interviewees were self-taught WeChat users and had learnt by observing how their parents/carers used WeChat in their everyday lives.

### **6.2.3 Creating Communication**

In addition to the more deliberate experience of media production (e.g. – making home videos or designing web pages), the creative dimension of media literacy also includes the everyday practice of communication (e.g. – sending texts or e-mails), and interaction, such as participation in online games (Ofcom, 2005; 2022). Given that WeChat used in the context of family separation is the focus of this research, I will mainly discuss findings related to children's media production experiences as a means of sustaining parent-child online communication.

Before examining the media creation of child participants during online communications, we need to bear in mind that lack of media access in participant families can impact children's involvement in media production. Two factors prevented left-behind children in the sample from engaging with WeChat. First, the school's regulations concerning phones in school played a role in limiting children's participation in media production. As boarding students were forbidden from using personal digital devices on campus, compared to day students who enjoyed access to media resources at home via laptops, tablet computers and smartphones, weekly boarders only had access to digital devices at weekends, and with the

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<sup>17</sup> Pinyin is the Romanisation system of Mandarin Chinese, which is based on pronunciation.



permission of their carers. According to the workshop responses, 18 of 31 participants were day students, and they had more flexibility and time during the week to communicate with their migrant parent(s). For example, a day-student participant in the workshops was able to contact her father five to six times a week after she finished her homework around 7 p.m. This observation was confirmed in interviews. Two interviewees (F1, F2) who used to be weekly boarders enjoyed increased parent-child communications when they stopped boarding. Second, as mentioned in Chapter 4, parental concerns over potential media harm to children also limited children's access to WeChat even though participant families were dependent on communication technologies to maintain contact. A combination of regulations concerning phone usage for boarders on campus and parental concern about possible harmful effects of digital media at home meant that children (primarily boarders) might not have had sufficient access to devices, which in turn inhibited them from practising the skills required to use WeChat effectively.

Based on the findings from both the workshops and interviews, age differences seemed to impact the form of media production adopted by children. According to the responses from both the workshops and interviews, younger children (aged 6 to 10) commonly engaged with the basic functions of WeChat such as video/audio calls. They also preferred audio to text messaging if they had difficulties in typing because it helped them to better express their ideas to distant parents. In addition to using basic WeChat functions, older children (aged 11 to 13) in the sample were able to engage in a wider range of activities on WeChat. For example, two children, one in a workshop, aged 11 (W7), and one in an interview, aged 13 (F5), mentioned that they knew how to use the red packet<sup>18</sup> WeChat function to receive pocket money from their parents. In this sense, some of the multi-functions of WeChat enable children of different ages to participate in media production on their own terms to interact with their parent(s). Video calling was the preferred WeChat function among all 41 child participants in the interviews and workshops because of its visual affordances, and audio-calling seemed to be less popular. However, two children in the workshops mentioned that they would sometimes switch from video to audio calls if the internet connection became unstable.

Access to WeChat also affected the diversity and range of online activities undertaken by child participants. A WeChat function named 'Moments' – also known as the 'Friend Circle'

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<sup>18</sup> The concept of the red packet is based on the Chinese tradition of *hongbao*. It refers to important occasions where money is given to family members and friends as a gift. The Red packet function offers users the option to give monetary gifts to other users of the app by giving virtual credits because WeChat allows users to add their bank card details and to transfer money online.

– enables users to post daily updates that can be seen by their WeChat friends. It also includes a ‘like’ button to allow users to show/receive support from others. Two children, both aged 12, who had their own smartphones and WeChat accounts – one in a workshop (W2), and another in an interview (F9)– interacted with their parents by using the Moments function. These two children said they would leave comments if they saw their mothers post something new and often got responses back from their parents. During an interview, a child (F5) who had her own WeChat account posted a picture of her birthday cake on her own WeChat account and received a comment from her migrant mother saying, ‘Happy birthday my dearest’.

As the above discussion demonstrates, children in general have enough practical knowledge about WeChat to enable online parent-child communications. However, differences in children’s ages and different levels of media/device access need to be taken into consideration when evaluating their participation in online communication. It is also clear that the children could participate in a wider range of parent-child interactions online through their own smartphone and WeChat accounts. Having outlined the media-related literacy practices of child participants, in the next section, I move on to discuss what long-distance communication looks like from children’s perspectives and how they navigate communication and maintain ‘being’ a family from a distance.

### **6.3 Children’s perspectives on family communications via WeChat**

Maintaining interpersonal relationships through digital media is impeded by the lack of social cues such as physical context, bodily movements, and facial expressions that ordinarily provide context about the meaning of messages (Baym, 2010). In contrast, face-to-face interactions provide further information with respect to context and allow people to better interpret messages (Baron, 1984; Baym, 2010; Kiesler et al., 1984). Mediated parent-child contact in separated families takes place in a context within which parents are not always able to understand their children due to the lack of social cues. Bruner (1966) suggests that children in general find it easier to express their knowledge and ideas through action rather than through words. Therefore, any medium that allows children to ‘leverage action, bodily movement, or imagery’ seems to be more child-friendly (Ballagas et al., 2009, p. 322). Although social media like WeChat are video-based platforms that enable visual contact between parents and children, according to the child participants who participated in both interviews and workshops, a gap still exists between children’s communication needs and the technological affordances of WeChat.

### ***6.3.1 Children's difficulties in family communication via WeChat***

Four interviewees (F2, F3, F6, F8) claimed that they struggled to articulate their feelings during online parent-child conversations. By contrast, none of the workshop participants mentioned this difficulty when they were asked about their online communication. The discrepancy might be the result of the workshop setting. As workshops took place at the school premises and workshop participants needed to express their ideas in the presence of schoolteachers and classmates, the participants might not have wanted to share their struggles openly with the researcher for fear of losing face. The literature suggests that language-based media such as telephones or video calling platforms such as Skype are not child-friendly because more developed conversational skills are required to maintain communication (Ballagas et al., 2009; Bruner, 1966; Raffle et al., 2010). In a study focusing on phone communication within families in the Bay area of the United States, Ballagas et al. (2009) argue that the reason why children fail to maintain phone conversations is that they lack conversation skills like turn-taking, asking questions, and listening skills. This observation echoed what two younger child participants (F7, W31) experienced during video calls on WeChat. One of the interviewees (aged 9) said he had relatively short conversations (about 10-15 minutes) with his parents because he ran out of topics to discuss. He added that his co-present grandmother would often step in to help when he was unable to answer his parents' questions. However, he believed that his communication skills had improved as he learned more vocabulary in school, which helped him maintain longer online conversations of up to 30 minutes. Another child interviewee (aged 9) said, 'I don't know what to say to my dad during a video call. What I can do is smile'.

Unlike younger children, lacking confidence in keeping conversations going rarely seemed to be part of the experience of older children (aged 11 to 13). However, there was another problem that prevented older children from speaking with ease: not every child in the sample was comfortable with appearing on the WeChat webcam. One interviewee (aged 13) told me that he felt nervous and stammered when filmed. As he put it, 'I don't have a stammer offline. I have no idea why it happened to me during video calls.' Another child interviewee (aged 13) said that he was unwilling to discuss his feelings with his parents because he felt uncomfortable talking in front of the webcam, as he thought that he was under surveillance.

The child participants also felt they were not given sufficient time during online communications to fully express themselves and share their thoughts with their parents. This finding aligned with what carers related in Chapter 4 about migrant parents being unable to

spend enough quality time online with their children because of their work commitments. Half of the workshop participants reported that time constraints put communications under pressure during online WeChat calls. With limited time, children found it difficult to comprehensively report to their parents what they had achieved that week. As reflected in a pen and paper exercise which was part of the online workshops, most children wanted to share their achievements at school with their parents to receive parental praise, but they failed to do so because there was too much to tell in the limited time available. It was therefore common in online conversations that children forgot what they wanted to say and felt regret about this. As one 12-year-old female workshop participant (W2) explained:

‘Last Saturday, I was going to tell my mom that we were performing at school on Wednesday, and I wanted to tell her that I was very excited. It was really late when I got home. After that, I was in a hurry to eat at my grandma’s. I was very tired after a long day of commuting, and then I went straight to sleep. In the middle of the night when I remembered, I prepared (to tell her) at noon the next day. The next morning, I did my homework until noon, and I forgot about it’.

In addition to time constraints, the presence of carers was also identified as a challenge for children as they attempted to express their feelings freely. Themes around children’s privacy recurred throughout the data collected from interviews and workshops, as the child participants were unwilling to share their thoughts in their WeChat calls with parents in the presence of their carers. The lack of privacy is related to the living conditions in rural areas, which I elaborated on in Chapter 5. Seven out of ten interviewees (F3, F4, F5, F6, F7, F8, F10) did not have their own bedrooms and had to share living and sleeping spaces with their carers. Moore (2019) has indicated that the home is the first place where children are able to practise their interactions with others. Children need a space in the home that belongs to them to start experiencing the kind of independence that helps their development of a sense of self, and furthermore, this should be respected by other family members (David & Weinstein, 1987). McKinney (1998) argues that even young children need privacy to choose when they want to disclose information. Three children, one in the workshops (W1) and two in the interviews (F1, F3), experienced moments when they were unwilling to discuss their feelings with their parents in the presence of their carers. For example, one 12-year-old girl (W1) in a workshop who did not have her own bedroom was embarrassed to tell her mother when she got her first period in

the presence of her grandfather. An interviewee (W1), aged 13, felt more comfortable talking to his parents if his aunt was not present during the video call:

‘I felt happy when my aunt and her family went out for a walk. It meant that I could have a conversation with my parents without further concerns... I liked using group video calls on WeChat to see them when nobody was at home’.

On the other hand, children’s privacy needs seemed to have been overlooked by carers and parents in this research. Literature suggests that parents do not perceive privacy as important for young children, either with respect to physical space or personal matters (McKinney, 1998; Parke & Sawin, 1979; Shmueli & Blecher-Prigat, 2011). None of the parent participants that were interviewed mentioned their children’s privacy concerns during online communications, nor did carers choose to create a private space for the children to communicate with their parents without any disturbances. In fact, the lack of space for private communication demotivated some interviewees and prevented them from sharing their feelings with their parents. From the children’s perspective, the interview data also revealed that online communications can cause physical discomfort (eyestrain, arm, and backache), which in turn can affect how they engage with social media like WeChat. However, these difficulties rarely caught the attention of adult family members (see Chapters 4 and 5). Parents and carers seemed to value control and supervision more than privacy, which may have led to the mismatch of expectations in parent-child communication and in turn may have created tensions in family relationships.

Another drawback of online communication reported by interviewees was the physical discomfort caused by long-distance communication. Four out of ten interviewees (F1, F2, F8, F10) experienced arm or backache when parent-child conversations were too long. This finding was consistent with what I observed during an interview. A 9-year-old child (F8) asked his grandmother to help him hold the phone when his arms became tired 15 minutes after the interview had started. His grandmother stepped into our interview and helped her grandson hold the phone for a while to give his arms a break. In addition to arm ache, two child interviewees (F2, F10) stated that when they were younger their eyes would become tired after a long video call (about 1 hour). An 11-year-old boy (F10) recounted, ‘I could not stare at the screen too long when I was 7 or 8 years old’. Another interviewee (F2) who had the same problem chose to use the audio call function when he was talking to his parent to avoid eyestrain, despite preferring video calls to see his mother’s face. Although online communication involved some physical discomfort for some children, none of the interviewees

was provided with any equipment such as phone holders to make online communication less physically demanding.

Based on the online communication experiences of child participants, I argue that mediated communications via social media such as WeChat are not always child-friendly because they cannot cater to children's communication skills, which in turn may have implications for the success or failure of communication in separated families. Although social media like WeChat provide children with opportunities to have visual contact with their parents from afar, the nature of the communications is still language-based and imposes constraints on children as they may lack the skills to maintain conversations. In addition, the research results suggest that children may be subject to stress in mediated communication as it is challenging for child participants to express their ideas in the limited time available for WeChat calls. Although constraints, including the lack of conversational skills, time limits and physical discomfort, were identified in children's experience of mediated communication, they also tried to overcome the difficulties discussed above. The next section thus looks at the strategies adopted by child participants to achieve a better experience of parent-child communication.

### ***6.3.2 Children's creative strategies for enabling family communication via WeChat***

Findings from the interviews and workshops suggest that children have shown creativity in addressing the limitations of both mediated communication as well as family separation. Previous studies on parent-child relationships acknowledge the agency of children in their relationships with their families. Within this framework, this thesis advocates a definition of children's agency that views 'individuals as actors with the ability to make sense of their environment, initiate change and make choices' (Kuczynski, 2003, p. 9). Child participants were found to use their agency to address the limitations of WeChat for sustaining family relations remotely.

According to responses from both workshops and interviews, child participants were often expected to check in with their parents on a weekly basis. This was especially the case for those children who were boarders and returned to their carers' homes on Friday for the weekend. Memory lapses emerged as a recurring theme among some child participants and prevented them from sharing their daily lives with their parents in the way they had hoped. Five child participants – two in the interviews and three in the workshops – came up with strategies to address this issue of lapses of memory. For example, an interviewee aged 11 (F10) came up with a topic list before she had WeChat video calls with her parents. Three workshop

participants (W20, W24, W13) recalled similar experiences: they had prepared what to discuss with their parent(s) at the weekend. A 10-year-old interviewee (F6) wrote down some points to remind himself what to tell his mother before each video call. If the conversation was interrupted by the poor internet connection, the note also enabled him to catch up with what he had been talking about once his mother reconnected and managed to call him again.

Some children also came up with creative strategies to address the visual constraints of the webcam. Since bodily movements cannot be seen in full via the webcam, some children would stand further away from the camera so that their parents would have a good view of their full height. One 13-year-old interviewee (F1) also asked his grandmother to hold the camera for him in order to ensure that his mother could see his entire body. Another 13-year-old interviewee (F2) who was taken care of by his aunt came up with an idea to make sure his mother understood his growth. As he told me:

‘I used my aunt’s height as a reference to tell my mom how tall I am. For example, I told my mom that I had reached my aunt’s ear level. She knows the height of my aunt so she gets to know mine too’.

On the other hand, to avoid the awkwardness of long-distance conversations, two boys (W15, W16) who participated in the school workshops played a popular mobile multiplayer online battle arena game (MOBA) called *King of Glory* with their fathers on WeChat. This game has different modes to choose from and allows fathers and sons to face off against each other. These two children reported that they liked turning on microphones and talking with their fathers while the game was on. They believed that this kind of conversation was more engaging and seemed more natural to them.

Faced with technical problems including unstable or poor internet connectivity that affected the quality of parent-child communication, even younger children (aged 10 and under) in workshops and interviews knew how to fix the problems themselves. For example, three young workshop participants (W9, W21, W28) knew how to turn off the Wi-Fi connection on their phones and switch to mobile data if the internet was too slow. If this approach did not work, many children would wait to get back online later because they preferred WeChat video calls, which required a stronger internet connection. During internet disruptions, most children turned to other activities, such as watching animations on television, doing homework, or talking to their siblings/carers, to make the waiting process more bearable. In order to avoid

physical discomfort, two interviewees (F1, F10) used mugs or books as temporary phone holders to free their arms, if conversations lasted longer than usual.

Based on the interview and workshop data, it is worth pointing out that physical distance and the use of WeChat have given children more options to avoid and/or resist parental intervention. Indeed, parents and carers perceived this to be a major challenge in long-distance parenting because parental authority and control were undermined by children's resistance. As noted by Laursen and Bukowski (1997), parent-child relationships are initially organised around dependency and caretaking – a vertical power structure that typifies how parent-child relationships are conceptualised – which changes as children become less dependent and more autonomous. Rather than being a static, vertical power dynamic in which parents hold the power, children's agency and their ability to exert power in the service of agency reflect more horizontal features of the parent-child relationship (Kuczynski, 2003). During the parent-child conversations, children tended to self-censor topics in order to stop their parents from questioning or intervening. Half of the interviewees tended to avoid the WeChat webcam when they sensed the 'danger' of being scolded. For example, a 13-year-old interviewee (F1) would use the noisy environment of his mother's workplace as a 'cover' to mention those things his mother might be cross about, such as a drop in school grades. As he put it:

'If she missed what I said, it is her problem, not mine because I told her already'.

It was also common to see child participants make use of online settings to avoid topics that might be likely to worry their parents. Children chose not to tell their parents about something for various reasons. Three interviewees (F1, F2, F9) avoided mentioning minor injuries as they did not want their parents to worry about them. This finding resonates with previous research, which argues that individuals use self-protective display rules to 'gain advantages, avoid negative consequences, or preserve self-esteem' (Gosselin et al., 2002, p. 481). Two children – one in the workshop and one in the interview – decided not to tell their parents about some unhappy experiences they had had during online communication. One 10-year-old workshop participant (W9) chose not to tell her migrant father that she was being bullied at school as she worried that her father would come to the school and intervene on her behalf. Another interviewee (F9) never revealed to her parents that she did not like being sent to privately-run



care homes<sup>19</sup> because she knew that there was nobody available at home who could look after her. As a result, she never mentioned the inconveniences of living with other children whom she did not know well during parent-child communications. The reason why she hid her feelings was that she wanted to avoid creating difficulties for her parents. The girl assumed that her parents would have found a different care home for her if she had expressed her dislike for her current care arrangement.

## **6.4 Children's Perceptions and Interpretations of the Role of WeChat in Family Communication**

Having outlined the communication practices of child participants, in this section, I focus on discussing children's attitudes towards social media like WeChat and the role they think it plays in their family lives. Based on the analysis of both interviews and workshops, WeChat seems to play three major roles in the family lives of child participants. First, children use WeChat to facilitate parental involvement in their lives (albeit with limitations). Second, children view WeChat as a surveillance tool that enables their parents to exercise parental control from a distance. Third, WeChat, as a polymedia<sup>20</sup>, can be seen as a tool for "emotional management" (Madianou & Miller, 2012b, p. 178), which helps left-behind children deal with the emotional aspects of family separation and the prolonged absence of their parent(s).

### ***6.4.1 Children's perspectives on facilitating parental involvement via WeChat***

Cost-effective telecommunications make it possible for multi-local families to see and speak to each other every day (King-O'Riain, 2015). Vertovec (2004) established that low-cost calls serve as a kind of social glue, connecting small-scale social formations across the globe. Previous literature focusing on parental perspectives has argued that ICTs can empower migrant parents to offer support, reassurance and to participate in their children's 'academic and emotional growth while also taking part in the decision-making process within the household from afar' (Ito & Okabe, 2005, p. 149).

But what do children think about the involvement of their parents from afar? According to the workshop and interview data, WeChat provides a possibility for children to engage their

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<sup>19</sup> As mentioned in Chapter 4, those privately-run care homes are near the school and provide boarding and pickup services.

<sup>20</sup> Polymedia works as an integrated communicative environment within which each particular medium is defined relationally to other media (Madianou & Miller, 2012b).

migrant parents in their daily lives in spite of geographical distance. A total of 27 out of 31 children who participated in the workshops enjoyed updating their parents about their daily lives, including their academic achievements, school events, feelings, and personal improvement. During the pen and paper exercises in the workshops, child participants were asked to write down two things they often wanted to tell their parent(s) in their WeChat calls. As the workshop data show, 10 children (37%) wished to share their academic performance with their parents; 8 children (30%) wanted to update their parents about their school events; 6 children (22%) were willing to share their feelings; 2 children (7%) opted for parental reward; and 1 child wanted to show his self-improvement. Since the participants in each workshop came from the same class and shared similar experiences in terms of school life and school events, some of them came up with similar answers. I only chose one response on each theme from each workshop to avoid repetition:

*Table 3 –Topics children enjoy discussing with parents during online communications*

Topics	Number	Gender	Age	Comments
School events	The 1 <sup>st</sup> workshop	F	11	<i>Mom, we had a performance at school last Wednesday, and I felt really excited.</i>
	The 3 <sup>rd</sup> workshop	M	12	<i>Mom, Dad, we had a skipping rope competition last week. I did 272 skips in 1 minute and came first in our class.</i>
	The 8 <sup>th</sup> workshop	M	13	<i>Dad, I won the third place in the high jump on sports day. I have never tried this sport before.</i>
Personal feelings	The 1 <sup>st</sup> workshop	F	13	<i>Mom, I think you don't want me anymore... please use some skincare products and eat healthy food. You look older than my grandma.</i>
	The 2 <sup>nd</sup> workshop	F	10	<i>Mom, I want you to stay with me for a bit longer next time.</i>
	The 1 <sup>st</sup> workshop	M	12	<i>Last week, I told my dad that my grades improved when I got my mid-term exam results.</i>

<b>Academic performance</b>	The 5 <sup>th</sup> workshop	F	12	<i>Dad, I'm sorry that I didn't do well in my mid-term English exam.</i>
	The 6 <sup>th</sup> workshop	M	11	<i>Dad, I got another 100 in Math this time; 99 in Mongolian; 96 in English; 98 in Chinese.</i>
	The 7 <sup>th</sup> workshop	M	10	<i>I forgot to tell my dad via WeChat once I got full marks on the test. It was a pity.</i>
	The 10 <sup>th</sup> workshop	F	10	<i>Dad, my class teacher praised me when I got full marks today.</i>
	The 10 <sup>th</sup> workshop	F	10	<i>Dad, I did well in the test today and I won a prize for reciting Chinese poems. I got second place, not first.</i>
<b>Treat/Reward</b>	The 2 <sup>nd</sup> workshop	M	12	<i>Mom, can you buy me something delicious next time?</i>
	The 6 <sup>th</sup> workshop	M	11	<i>Dad, I got a good grade in the last midterm exam. Can you take me out to play when you come back next time?</i>
<b>Self-improvement</b>	The 6 <sup>th</sup> workshop	M	11	<i>I've learned some new techniques to play basketball and chess. I'm sure I'll beat you when you come back next time.</i>

The workshop findings above were echoed in the interviews, which provided deeper insights into the patterns and limitations of online parenting. Resonating with findings discussed in the parents' chapter about online parenting, children in the interviews confirmed that WeChat functions as a facilitator of parenting from a distance. Other scholars investigating children's perspectives on what underpins feelings of closeness to non-resident parents have found that children interpreted their parents' actions, such as regularity of phone calls and payment of maintenance, as indicators of commitment to a parental role and their desire to maintain family

bonds (Nixon et al., 2012). The data from this research also demonstrate that children construct the concept of family and make sense of their separated family lives through parental involvement in spite of large geographical distances.

Interview data added more nuance into parental involvement from afar and pinpointed its limitation. Four of the child interviewees (F1, F6, F8, F9) suggested that their mothers from afar built up a WeChat video call routine to check with them about what they needed, and then used Taobao, a Chinese online shopping platform, to buy items such as shoes and clothes for them. Three interviewees (F3, F6, F10) reported that their parents used the webcam to supervise their homework. WeChat was also found to enable children to experience feelings of being cared for by a parent from a distance. An interviewee (W9) remembered that her mother bought medicine online and got it delivered to her care home when she was unwell, which made her feel closer to her mother. When a younger child (W8) broke his nose at school, he received a red envelope (monetary gift) from his mother via WeChat. In his account, his mother comforted him by giving him pocket money to buy something he liked as she was unable to return home. In addition to providing material objects from a distance, three interviewees (F1, F2, F10) believed that their parents also provided moral support. For instance, one child stated in an interview (W4) that ‘My dad encourages me to do better when he knows my exam results’. Another child (F1) stated, ‘My mom comforted me after I had an argument with my classmate and gave me some good advice on how to deal with friendship problems’.

In terms of limitations to parental involvement when families are separated by distance over time, the interview findings demonstrated that online communication on WeChat limited the ability of migrant parents to observe the overall development of their children, which in turn hindered the depth of their parental engagement. For example, an 10-year-old interviewee (F6) who had been learning Morin khuur, a traditional Mongolian stringed instrument, for 3 years, was not given a chance to demonstrate his progress to his parents via the WeChat webcam. According to the child, most of his parent-child time was spent on homework supervision, and as a result his parents did not have enough time to watch his musical performances. Another child (F10), an 11-year-old interviewee, cited an example of his mother who often picked the ‘wrong’ gifts for him during family reunions. He interpreted this as evidence that his mother did not know him very well, because ‘she buys things that are not suitable for my age. I’m too old to play with a remote-control helicopter’.

Based on the children’s accounts of online parenting, I argue that children use social media like WeChat to engage their migrant parents and thus seek parental engagement. In the meantime, owing to the nature of long-distance communication, social media like WeChat

shape how parents become involved in the daily lives of their children. WeChat video calls, in particular, play a role in enabling a degree of regularity around parental involvement. On the other hand, although a webcam can provide some visual cues, interactivity and simultaneity (see Baym, 2010; Madianou & Miller, 2012a; Miller & Jolynna, 2014), social media like WeChat cannot guarantee a sufficient depth or degree of parental engagement, which may prevent parents from understanding their children's development and needs more fully.

#### ***6.4.2 Children's perspectives on parental surveillance via WeChat***

Previous studies have found that parents use social media as a surveillance tool to exert control from a distance. Francisco (2013), for example, showed how Filipino migrant mothers based in the United States scrutinised their homes through webcam video chats to make sure their financial remittances back home were not squandered on unnecessary items, while also maintaining their parental authority and the mother-child hierarchy. Like their Filipino counterparts, many mothers in this research reported that they used WeChat to control their household remotely. The analysis of interview and workshop responses shows that children perceive WeChat as a mechanism for parental surveillance over matters such as academic performance, diet, screen time, and household consumption, just to name a few aspects. According to the children, parents tended to take what they read or saw through WeChat as evidence to justify their parental intervention, which created potential risks for misunderstandings and family tensions.

Responses from interviews and workshops suggest that children's academic performance comes under particular parental scrutiny. As mentioned in Chapter 5, all the class teachers set up a parent-teacher group chat on WeChat to relay children's performance at school to parents. Based on the interviews and workshops, all child participants confirmed that their parents were in the parent-teacher groups on WeChat and that some carers were also group members. The interview data showed that the involvement of schoolteachers had implications for parent-child relationships. Weekly reports from class teachers via WeChat sometimes became a trigger for tensions between parents and children. Half of the child interviewees (5) recalled being rebuked by their parents about their performance at school. However, some children felt they were not given enough opportunities to explain themselves. One 13-year-old interviewee (F3) was worried when he heard his class teacher had informed his parents about his poor exam grade and unsatisfactory school performance via WeChat. He recounted how his parents criticised him in their WeChat call as a result. Other child interviewees had similar

experiences. A 10-year-old boy (F6) remembered being spoken to by a classmate in class, whereupon his class teacher subsequently informed his father via WeChat that he was not concentrating in class. This episode led to the child being taken to task about this by his father during a WeChat video call. His father, according to the interviewee, did not listen to his explanation because he trusted the teacher's feedback.

The data analysis shows that the issues related to parental surveillance vary from one family to another. Three child interviewees (F1, F2, F6) were subject to restricted screen time at weekends, set by their mothers remotely, and had to comply as their grandmothers/fathers enforced this rule on the mothers' behalf. Parents, usually mothers, also cared about their children's diet in carers' homes and tried to control this from a distance, which caused some parent-carer tensions. For example, two children (F1, F8) mentioned that their mothers monitored their weight from a distance. According to one child interviewee, he had gained some weight during the COVID-19 lockdown due to a lack of outdoor activities. As he recalled:

'My mom was upset because I put on weight. When she noticed my weight gain via the webcam, she started blaming my diet. But she didn't know I had nowhere to play sports during the lockdown. My grandmom and I had explained it to her, but my mom did not change her mind'.

The interviews suggest that it requires extra effort from children to cope with tensions stemming from parental surveillance. Mediated communication makes it more difficult to maintain mutual understanding, which means that those involved in communication have to work harder to be understood (Baym, 2010). Four interviewees (F1, F3, F6, F10) recalled making efforts to clarify their views if they felt their parents did not know the full context of an issue. For instance, one 13-year-old interviewee (F1) reflected that his mother was cross with his father because he had spent £42 on a pair of children's trainers. The boy recounted a conversation where his mother had described his father as 'knowing nothing about how to bargain for a better price'. To clear the air, the family set up a family WeChat meeting to discuss this issue. According to the interviewee, his mother sometimes overreacted to issues because she had been away from home for years and did not always fully understand the situation at home. The situation was resolved when the child, accompanied by his father, showed his mother the receipt for the new trainers and explained to her the reason for the purchase.

The interview data also show that too much parental surveillance can lead to resistance from children. For example, one interviewee (F6) found the smart camera installed by his father irksome because he felt uneasy about it being on when he wanted to relax after finishing his homework. In order to halt the surveillance, he tried to use a plastic bag to cover the camera, but his father stopped him from doing this. He commented:

‘There was one time when I was secretly playing with my mobile phone while doing my homework. My dad switched on the camera, and it flew over my head for a while... I didn’t notice it because there was no noise... I was in shock when I found out’.

Based on the above, we can see that social media like WeChat play a role in parental surveillance, which allows migrant parents to exert control from a distance. However, children are wary about digital surveillance, particularly if it leads to parental criticism or misunderstandings.

#### ***6.4.3 WeChat used as an emotional management tool***

Several landmark studies have started to ask not only how transnational parenting is achieved technologically (Madianou & Miller, 2012a), but also how people who have experienced transnational migration and maintained their relationships (Miller & Jolynna, 2014). One strand of literature on transnational families is more optimistic about the merits of distant co-presence facilitated by communication technologies. For example, as Baldassar et al. (2016) argue, the proliferation of communication technologies has started to challenge the idea that core relationships require face-to-face interactions. They also dispute the tendency to privilege physical co-presence, viewing it as more authentic than other forms of remote co-presence (see also Baldassar, 2007, 2016b). The concept of ICT-based co-presence is used to study the diverse ways in which people maintain a sense of “being there” for each other (L. Baldassar et al., 2016, p. 134). Where in the past email (L. Baldassar, 2008b) and texting (Uy-Tioco, 2007) kept transnational families together, now there is a ‘new emerging environment proliferating communicative opportunists’ (Madianou & Miller, 2012a, p. 8). Further nuances have been identified in examining the impact of ICTs on the experience and practice of relationships. For example, the idea of ‘mobile lives’ proposed by Elliott and Urry (2010) highlights the way in which people manage their daily mobility without necessarily giving up their connection to their loved ones.

All these studies are especially pertinent for studying Chinese separated families because they provide rich insights for understanding the view of migrant workers concerning the use of ICTs in their family lives. The data collected from migrant parents in my research confirm those of earlier transnational family studies, notably that the usage of communication technologies does create a feeling of “co-presence” across spatial distances.

However, do children feel the same way as their parents about the role of social media in their family lives? According to the interviews and school workshops I conducted with children, the answer is less certain. The literature suggests that transnational families exploit the affordances of each available medium (polymedia) to meet their relational and emotional needs (Madianou & Miller, 2012a). A webcam can help transnational families to ‘de-intensify emotional interaction’ by keeping the webcam turned on all day and enabling long-distance emotional interaction (King-O’Riain, 2015, p. 257). These findings were partially confirmed in my research with child participants in both workshops and interviews. ‘Visibility’ of parents emerged from workshop respondents as a recurrent theme. A small number (2) of workshop participants believed that WeChat video calls enabled them to enhance emotional connections with their parents. In total, 23 out of 31 workshop participants said that WeChat video calls helped them cope with missing their parents. Since it was common to see repetitive responses from child participants in the same workshop, I have thus selected some representative answers to avoid duplication:

Table 4 – Children’s responses regarding visibility

Theme	Number	Gender	Age	Comments
	The 1 <sup>st</sup> workshop	F	12	<i>I think the video call function can enhance the relationship, no different from offline communication.</i>
	The 2 <sup>nd</sup> workshop	M	11	<i>I can see Mom and Dad during video calls and see what they are doing sometimes... video calls help when I miss my mom.</i>
	The 3 <sup>rd</sup> workshop	M	12	<i>It’s important to be able to see them. My mom and dad have been away for a long time. I miss them very much. I feel better after the video calls.</i>



Visibility	The 3 <sup>rd</sup> workshop	F	10	<i>I like video calls. I haven't seen my mom and dad for so long, I kind of forgot what they looked like.</i>
	The 3 <sup>rd</sup> workshop	F	10	<i>I like the video call function because when I talk to them, I can get a response right away.</i>
	The 4 <sup>th</sup> workshop	M	11	<i>The video call function is better because we can see each other.</i>
	The 4 <sup>th</sup> workshop	M	11	<i>WeChat video calls are useful when I miss them because at least I can see their faces.</i>
	The 5 <sup>th</sup> workshop	M	12	<i>My dad has been away from home for too long. I could see him through video calls when I missed him. I felt better after I saw him.</i>
	The 5 <sup>th</sup> workshop	F	12	<i>The video calls help ease my emotions.</i>
	The 6 <sup>th</sup> workshop	M	11	<i>It (the video call) could help with 50% of the emotions related to missing my dad.</i>
	The 9 <sup>th</sup> workshop	F	13	<i>WeChat allowed me to see my mom's face and see what she was doing.</i>
	The 10 <sup>th</sup> workshop	F	9	<i>I can see my dad's face through WeChat, so I can recognise him when he comes back.</i>

The interview findings revealed more nuances concerning how children feel about communicating emotions with their parents. The interview results show that children felt that WeChat plays a role in helping them to get “acquainted” with their parents, but not to get emotionally close. Half of the interviewees (5) felt that WeChat had only a minor impact on being ‘*qin*’ with their parents. *Qin* (亲) is an adjective and noun used in Chinese, which means close/closeness and intimate/intimacy. This word was commonly chosen by child participants in interviews when they described their feelings about using WeChat to keep in touch with their parents. When child participants were asked about their feelings when the maintenance of family relationships was reliant on social media, four interviewees recalled that they barely had feelings of “copresence”, as described by (Baldassar, 2016, p145). As one child (F10)

commented: ‘It’s not copresence. She can’t see the process of how I do my homework. What she can see is my face’.

Based on data from the interviews and workshops conducted with child participants, almost every child who participated in this research agreed that online communication is not comparable to face-to-face interactions for building emotional connections in spite of WeChat’s visual affordances. As one 12-year-old interviewee (F2) recounted, ‘Waiting for Mom to come home is too long and painful. Video calls at least can help me partially relieve my loneliness’.

According to the children’s responses, I argue that the concept of co-presence is adult-centred as it does not take children’s viewpoints into consideration. For most of the child participants (33/41), social media like WeChat are seen as a visual enabler that helps them to build acquaintanceships with their parents and cope with the prolonged absence of their parent(s). However, they do not manage to achieve *qin* – the emotional proximity established in parent-child relationships. I will further explain why children do not feel *qin* with their parents and the implications of using WeChat for the maintenance of parent-child relationships in the next section.

## **6.5 Children’s interpretation of mediated family relationships**

Due to the lockdown in home or host cities, some participant families experienced the prolonged family separation. The findings of the child interviews show that there were some unintended benefits for separated families during the COVID-19 pandemic. For those families who endured longer periods of family separation, the pandemic prompted some children to have more frequent contact with their parents because they were given their own digital devices for attending online classes. It also allowed some families in the sample to have the longest family reunion they had ever experienced. Two interviewees who had this opportunity for reunion enjoyed their parents’ company. Unsurprisingly, they felt the contrast between online and offline interactions more deeply and preferred the latter after their parents went back to work. A 13-year-old boy used to have a rocky relationship with his parents because of the misunderstandings caused by physical distance, carers’ interventions, as well as the limitations of mediated communication. He recalled that the COVID-19 lockdown enabled him to develop a more harmonious family relationship because his parents were able to observe and listen to him. The child interviewee precisely articulated the change in his parent-child relationship after his parents left home again.

‘The COVID lockdown helped my relationship with my parents a lot; at least my mom understood me a bit more. But they need to return to work, and we have resumed keeping in touch via WeChat. We were fine at the beginning after they left. The effectiveness of WeChat gradually fades away as family separation extends’.

This is an illustrative example to open up a discussion about the use of social media like WeChat as a means of maintaining family relationships. Nothing remains unmediated as media and communication technologies increasingly shape every dimension of social life, from the global and public to the most intimate aspects (Livingstone, 2009b, 2011). With respect to mediated interpersonal communication, mediation provides a dialectical notion of the tension between the technical and the emotional (Madianou & Miller, 2012a). In order to understand how family relationships are mediated by social media like WeChat in separated families, the next section looks at how children evaluate the impact of online communication on their parent-child relationships.

#### ***6.5.1 The four major obstacles children face when enacting mediated relationships***

When highlighting the characteristics of parent-child relationships via WeChat, child participants tended to compare and contrast online and offline settings. Children who participated in the interviews and workshops pointed out that online interaction was inferior to face-to-face interaction or, more specifically, that online communication was not always desirable when it came to forging parent-child relationships in spite of WeChat’s visual affordances. Data from interviews and workshops show that there are four communication dimensions that matter to children and impact the quality of parent-child relationships. These are physical contact, interactivity, timeliness, and the communication environment. All these dimensions are implicated in children’s feelings of being part of a family from afar.

Social media with visual affordances such as WeChat may offer social cues (e.g. – vocal and facial expressions) but lack other critical intimacy cues, including touch and smell (Baym, 2010). A recurring finding in the workshop responses is that children’s perceptions of good parent-child communication often involve physical touch. Seeing their parents via webcam on WeChat could only partially satisfy their emotional needs. This finding was confirmed by most interviewees who asserted that the core disadvantage of online communication was that they were unable to touch their parents, especially their mothers. It

has been shown that a lack of parent-child interpersonal touch has long-lasting implications for children's physical and psychological development (Aznar & Tenenbaum, 2016). The concept of positive touch refers to touching the child in a gentle manner by 'patting, stroking, holding hands, hugging and kissing or physically guiding the child's behaviour in an encouraging manner' (Stansbury et al., 2012, p. 92). Lack of positive touch is a disadvantage within online communications and cannot be addressed by WeChat. Almost every interviewee reported this limitation when they were asked to reflect on the experience of talking to their parents via WeChat. For example, an 8-year-old girl said, 'I miss my mommy hugging me at night'. Some workshop participants also commented on the lack of physical touch in online communication and a range of responses from workshop participants was elicited as follows:

*Table 5 – Children's responses regarding lack of physical contact*

Theme	Number	Gender	Age	Comments
<b>Lack of physical touch</b>	3 <sup>rd</sup> workshop	M	12	<i>We talk across the screen (during online communication). I can't touch my mom and dad in reality.</i>
	4 <sup>th</sup> workshop	M	11	<i>I feel closer to my parents when they come home because I can hug them.</i>
	6 <sup>th</sup> workshop	M	11	<i>It's better if my dad is by my side. Although I can see him through video calls, I can't touch him.</i>
	7 <sup>th</sup> workshop	F	10	<i>Hugging my dad makes me happy. I can't touch him anytime anywhere during the WeChat video calls.</i>
	7 <sup>th</sup> workshop	M	10	<i>He can hold me when we are talking until his arms are tired.</i>
	10 <sup>th</sup> workshop	F	9	<i>When my dad comes home every year, he buys me a lot of fun and delicious stuff. But there is nothing good to eat or fun to do during a video call. There is no hugging.</i>

From the children's perspective, online communication was also regarded as inferior because of the lack of interactivity. Interestingly, play emerged as a recurrent theme in the findings.

Previous literature indicates that a relationship is an interactional and dyadic process whereby a personal sense of closeness develops through interactions (Gan, 2021). The former involves the act of communication itself whereas the latter emphasises the ways in which people engage with each other, the activities they do together, and the sentiments evoked in the interaction (Gan, 2020, 2021). The interviews and workshops suggested that what children missed the most during family separation were activities that they used to do with their parents, including playing chess or basketball, drawing, or reading books together. According to the child participants, these parent-child activities can boost emotional connections with their families. They believed that communications via WeChat were less interactive and fun than face-to-face interactions. Seven workshop participants wished their parent(s) would come back soon so that they could go and do some leisure activities together, which would otherwise not have been possible online. This is apparent in the workshop responses below.

*Table 6– Children’ responses lack of interactivity*

Theme	Number	Gender	Age	Comments
<b>Lack of interactivity</b>	The 6 <sup>th</sup> workshop	M	11	<i>We can’t do anything fun online. My dad and I will go for a run or play chess together when he comes back home.</i>
	The 6 <sup>th</sup> workshop	M	11	<i>We can play Weiqi (a type of board game) when he (father) is at home.</i>
	The 6 <sup>th</sup> workshop	M	11	<i>Apart from chess, my dad and I also love playing basketball.</i>
	The 7 <sup>th</sup> workshop	M	10	<i>My dad will take me to the square to ride a bike when the weather is neither too hot nor too cold in the afternoon.</i>
	The 9 <sup>th</sup> workshop	F	9	<i>My mommy can play with me when she comes home.</i>
	The 10 <sup>th</sup> workshop	F	9	<i>The first thing I will ask my dad to do when he returns home is to play with me. We can play the puzzle game or cube game. I couldn’t play them with my dad when we talked online. I like playing with my dad because I always play with my</i>

				<i>mom at home, and I rarely have the chance to play with my dad.</i>
	10 <sup>th</sup> workshop	F	9	<i>When my dad comes back, we can play chess and hide-and-seek.</i>

As long-distance communication was also found to not fully meet children's emotional needs, the theme of lack of timeliness recurred throughout the workshops and interviews. Although WeChat provides a synchronous platform, many children were dissatisfied with the interruptions in parent-child communication. Poor internet connectivity was identified as the primary obstacle for children trying to stay in touch with their parents. Half of the workshop participants experienced poor internet connectivity in their parent-child communications. Two interviewees reflected that their parents often used mobile data as there was no Wi-Fi available in their work accommodation or workplace. From the children's side, online communication could be challenging as most child participants were living in rural areas where ICT infrastructure was often undermined by extreme weather. For instance, power cuts caused by heavy snow in F city often interrupted the communication routine for many families in the sample.

Parents' work schedules were also considered as an obstacle that prevented families from getting in touch in a timely manner. Both interview and workshop findings indicated that children felt relatively passive in the process of parent-child communication because they needed to wait for their parents' response to schedule video/audio calls. Eight interviewees reported that the schedules for parent-child communication were entirely dependent on parents' work schedules. Six of them felt that their conversations with their parents were often disrupted because of schedule conflicts. One third of the interview participants stated that their parents also needed to work at weekends as well as during holidays, reported that their parents had very busy work schedules. In these circumstances, communications with parents based on the children's accounts were relatively short and parent-child communications lasted less than 5 minutes per week.

This finding resonates with the concept of 'suspension' proposed by Xiang (2021) who argues that Chinese migrant workers normally 'move frequently, conduct intensive labour, and pause routine life—in order to benefit fast and then quickly escape' (p. 233). As a result of the so-called 'suspension', children's emotional and educational needs were found to be postponed owing to parents' work commitments. According to 18 children in both workshops and

interviews who were in skipped-generation families, they needed to seek help from their parents when doing homework as their grandparents were unable to supervise them. Four interviewees felt helpless if they could not manage to complete homework on their own, which was the moment when they missed their parents and wanted them around. However, they rarely received prompt responses as their parents had hectic workloads. A 11-year-old interviewee gave me an example of seeking help from his mother for his maths homework. He had to wait until his mother had time to call and felt upset by the delay, but, in the meantime, he got used to delayed communication. Yet, as he noted: ‘It happened too many times’.

According to both workshop and interview responses, the communication environment was another important factor that affected the quality of their online communications. According to the child participants, parent-child communication within participant families did not always take place in an ideal environment. Based on findings from both interviews and workshops, this kind of unsatisfactory communication environment impacted both parents and children. Ten children reported that their parent-child conversations sometimes took place in their parents' workplaces while they were working. As one child interviewee observed, ‘The priority of my mother was to work instead of talking to me’. It was common for conversations to be disrupted by parents’ work schedules. One child taking part in the workshop remembered that the conversations with his mother were often interrupted because his mother needed to respond to her colleagues. He did not like being interrupted but could not change this. One interviewee cited an example of his mother who often put her phone on a serving trolley during their video calls, while working. He could not see her face because she kept moving to serve food. He could barely hear what his mother was saying to him as the restaurant was noisy during peak hours. What annoyed him the most was that he had to repeat himself several times as his mother could not hear him clearly even if she wore wireless headphones. Unsuitable communication environments were also evident in carers’ homes. A child living with his paternal grandparents had to find a quiet room to talk to his mother because his grandparents’ loud television set hindered communication with his parent.

A prominent finding in previous studies pertaining to international migration is that transnational families are using ICTs to bridge physical distance and maintain emotional connections. Boyd (2012) uses the term ‘always-on lifestyle’ to characterise the constant connection provided by smartphones in our everyday lives (p. 6). Virtual co-presence via media technologies such as Skype provides the feeling of ‘we are all here together’ (L. Baldassar, 2016b, p. 153). The possibility to communicate at any moment in turn shapes emotional practices in transnational families. King-O’Riain (2015) argue that Skype offers a semi-

embodied experience of being connected, which leads to ‘emotional streaming’ (p. 257). This refers to continuous and ongoing emotional interaction over distance by always keeping the webcam on. However, the findings from both workshops and interviews in this study do not support the findings of previous research. The so-called ‘always-on lifestyle’ or ‘emotional streaming’ seemed to be unrealistic for child participants in the sample due to logistical reasons such as lack of online access, limited availability of media devices, and the work schedule of their migrant parents.

Responses from both the workshops and interviews, when children recounted their experiences of being part of a family through WeChat, showed that ‘waiting’ had become a keyword. They needed to wait for internet connectivity, for their carers to share media access, and for their parents to be available. Theoretically, relational closeness is conceptualised as the interdependence between individuals, manifesting in frequent and diverse interactions over an extended period of time (Goldsmith & Baxter, 1996; Hinde, 1997; Mandelbaum, 2002). Due to the aforementioned constraints, including lack of physical touch, lack of interactivity, lack of timeliness, and unsatisfactory communication environments, children’s needs in terms of maintaining what they believed to be good parent-child communications could not be guaranteed in the participant families. As a result, relational closeness between children and their migrant parents is impacted by the form of online interactions. One 13-year-old interviewee, whose mother left home for 6 years, said: ‘It feels strange when she comes back home as it feels like there is an additional person at home’. Another child interviewee recalled how she felt uncomfortable if her mother kissed or hugged her when she returned home. Eighty percent of interviewees did not feel *qin* with their parents at the beginning of family reunions. It took child participants (11 in both interviews and workshops) roughly 2 to 3 days to get used to a new family atmosphere when their parents returned home for holidays or permanently. Considering children’s adaptation to the new family dynamic and some children’s discomfort interacting with their parents when parent-child interactions shifted to face-to-face, I argue that online interactions through WeChat cannot guarantee emotional proximity between children and their migrant parents.

### ***6.5.2 Children’s understanding of carers’ intervention in parent-child relationships***

In addition to being restricted by the affordances of social media like WeChat, parent-child communication is also implicated in the care arrangements of separated families. Given that kinship care is prevalent in Chinese families, we need to attend to the position of grandparents



and other carers in parent-child communications when we look at family relationships in Chinese separated families. As grandparents are senior family members who hold authority in Chinese family culture (D. Y. Ho, 1994; Hwang, 1999; K. H. Yeh et al., 2013), the analysis of child responses suggests that the involvement of carers may complicate family dynamics. As noted previously, the majority of children (27/41) in the sample did not have their own digital devices and had to borrow smartphones from their carers to contact their parents. According to the carers' perspective, in parent-child communications, carers play the role of facilitators, observers, and gatekeepers. If we compare the carers' perspectives with the evidence provided by children, consistencies and inconsistencies can be identified in their accounts.

There is a consistent narrative in the accounts of some child participants concerning the role of carers in parent-child communications. According to the interview findings, three children said that their carers tried to settle parent-child conflicts during online communications. When child participants were asked to describe their ideal family, it was intriguing to discover that these three interviewees included their grandparents in their ideal family scenarios. For example, one of the interviewees remembered that he shouted at his mother once after he felt she had misunderstood him. His maternal grandmother in this instance helped him to explain to his mother what had happened and helped settle the conflict. Resonating with findings on carers' perspectives with particular regards to how carers facilitate parent-child communications, child participants, especially those who were younger sought help from their grandparents if they had no idea how to respond to or how to continue conversations. This finding has been confirmed by my interview observations. When a young interviewee (F8) did not know how to answer my question, he looked at his grandmother and understood the question after his grandmother explained it to him. In addition to keeping parent-child conversations going, carers were reported to play a role in guiding children's online behaviours. When the child participants were asked about their carers' role in online communication, an 11-year-old interviewee said, 'I was distracted by the television while I was talking to my mom. My grandma asked me to stop watching cartoons and concentrate on the conversation'.

However, the interview results also show that the gatekeeping behaviours of carers may complicate parent-child communications. Three child interviewees recounted having problems keeping in touch with their parents on a regular basis because of the gatekeeping behaviours of their carers. The interview findings also indicate that carer gatekeeping can encroach on communication rights for some child participants. According to one 11-year-old interviewee, she sometimes gets emotional after seeing her mother's face during video calls. Her

grandmother thereafter stopped her from contacting her mother. As she put it: ‘I didn’t know how to let my mom know that I missed her very much’.

According to another interviewee (F1) who was taken care of by different family members, including his aunt and maternal grandmother, his experiences of parent-child communication varied within these two different care settings. He enjoyed more freedom in terms of using digital devices in his grandparents’ home and was allowed to contact his parents whenever he wanted. In contrast, his aunt only allowed him to use the phone when she was, according to him, in a ‘good mood’. In other words, it was entirely up to his aunt to decide if parent-child communications were necessary. In his account, his aunt not only controlled media access but also selectively revealed information about him to his parents. Due to a lack of media access and carer’s gatekeeping, his parents were, in his view, unable to understand his situation comprehensively. Therefore, he felt that living with his grandparents was better owing to more flexibility in contacting his parents. As he explained:

‘There were spare phones at my aunt’s home, but she didn’t allow me to use them... I could not use them anyway as she has set passwords... She may be afraid that the internet speed would be slow if too many devices are being used at the same time’.

Child responses from workshops and interviews suggest that carers are expected to report children’s behaviours to parents. As noted previously, 47% of children were taken care of by the grandparent(s), 49% by their mothers/fathers, 2% by their aunts, and 2% by care home staff. Those children (20) who were looked after by their mother/father at home did not reflect experiences where the parent-child relationship was damaged due to the carer’s intervention, the carer in this case being the other parent. By contrast, children who had experienced parent-child tensions were all from skipped-generation families, which involve the care of other family members.

‘Misunderstanding’ and ‘overreaction’ were two recurrent themes in the narratives of children whose care arrangements involved intergenerational rearing by grandparents rather than a remaining parent. In other words, parent-carer communications via WeChat played a crucial role in the maintenance of parent-child relationships. From the children’s perspective, traditional family hierarchies where grandparents are at the top sometimes prevented them from articulating their feelings and thoughts freely. Some interviewees stated that their behavioural transgressions were exaggerated by grandparents who would report their observations to parents. According to three interviewees, parents often overreacted to their children’s ‘mistakes’

based on reports from grandparents. Thus, the combination of carers and long-distance communication sometimes amplified parent-child tensions. For example, a 13-year-old interviewee was frustrated because his parents trusted his carers instead of him. He believed that he was misunderstood by his grandparents, and that his parents could not relate to him from a distance. As a consequence, he did not know how to explain himself to his parents, since they trusted his grandparents more. According to him:

‘My grandparents treated my dad very well when he was little. So, my dad expects me to be obedient and respect his parents. They (his grandparents) never say good things about me when they talk to my parents. I helped them do lots of domestic chores you know, but they never mentioned... I guess he (his father) wants me to be *xiaoshun* (孝顺 be filial to parents) on his behalf. I don’t know... So, my dad assumed that I did nothing at home and scolded me... They (his grandparents) often exaggerated things and my parents believed them... He (his father) thought I was being wayward when I wanted to explain myself... It was so difficult for me, you know’.

This case is helpful for understanding the power dynamics in skipped-generation families, a common care arrangement found in participant families, where family values articulated through a lens of filial piety shape online family interactions with implications for family relationships. According to four children in interviews, their migrant parents often adopted the same attitudes to discipline as their own parents in order to demonstrate their filial piety. If there were disagreements between grandparents and the children on some issues, the findings from the interviews suggested that parents tended to take the side of the grandparent(s) rather than the children. These were moments when children felt misunderstood and parent-child relationships were affected. According to one female interviewee:

‘My parents assume my grandparents are always right. As they tell me: ‘Their criticism won’t do you any harm. They did it for your sake’.

As Madianou and Miller (2012a) argue, an understanding of the sociality in which relationships are enacted, including the roles and normative expectations within relationships, is relevant to identifying the ways in which each medium frames communication. More importantly, the cultural context and the relationships themselves also contribute to shaping the experience of

communication practices. Previous literature suggests that grandparents represent ‘absolute authority’ in Chinese homes (Yeh et al., 2013, p. 283), and children as a relational category gain much of their meaning from the traditional familial ethic of filial piety. Within the Confucian family ethic of filial piety, children are expected to follow the principle of being respectful towards the senior generation (Hwang, 1999). Filial piety, based on Confucian teaching, refers to ‘the obligation on children to repay their parents for their lives with obedience and loyalty’ (Murphy, 2020, p. 33). Since filial piety has been well demonstrated within parent-child and parent-carer relationships in the participant families, I argue that grandparents’ involvement in online communications shapes family dynamics and complicates parent-child relationships in some families.

## **6.6 Conclusion**

Since communication is an interactional process, children’s media literacy has become a key factor that determines the quality of parent-child communication via WeChat. Although Chinese separated families have developed a dependency on social media like WeChat to sustain family communications, children in the sample did not always have ample access to communication devices and WeChat accounts because of the combination of China’s real-name registration policy and parental concerns over digital media. There are two implications here: first, children without communication devices need carers to facilitate online parent-child communication; second, lack of media access may affect the range of online activities involved in family communication.

With respect to children’s digital practices, I argue that mediated communication via WeChat is not very child-friendly. There are four aspects that drew my attention to this point while analysing children’s use of WeChat. First, communication skills prevent younger children from expressing their ideas as online communications via WeChat are still language-based without physical contact; second, children are subject to additional pressures due to the time constraints imposed by online communications; third, the presence of carers in parent-child communication can demotivate children and prevent them from sharing their feelings and thoughts freely; finally, online communication gives rise to physical discomfort, which is not always taken into account by adult family members in participant families. These aforementioned factors may limit the range of topics discussed and the depth of parent-child conversations, which in turn may prevent parents from understanding their children.

In terms of the children's interpretations of the role of WeChat in family practices, the data collected from child participants suggest that WeChat plays a pivotal role in enabling parental involvement in their day-to-day lives. Matters such as children's academic performance, screen time, diet, weight, and household consumption come under parental scrutiny. Children confirm that their parents also use WeChat as a surveillance tool to exert control from a distance. In addition, WeChat as a visual enabler can help children ease the powerful emotions that arise from family separation, and thus, it can be seen as an emotional management tool. However, unlike migrant parents who feel virtual co-presence during online communication, children do not share the same feelings. In other words, mediated communication via WeChat cannot fully address children's emotional needs related to family separation.

Given that mediated communication seems to be child-unfriendly, the next main question is how children's family relationships are shaped by social media like WeChat. As shown in the data, there are four limitations (lack of physical touch, lack of interactivity, lack of timeliness, and undesirable communication environment) in online communications that matter to children when seeking to maintain good communication and enact relationships with their parents. All of these factors have an impact on children forging parent-child closeness and proximity. Nevertheless, care arrangements are another crucial aspect for understanding family relationships in Chinese separated families. Resonating with parents' family practices, children believe that carers' intervention in parent-child communications has implications for their family relationships. This is especially the case for children in skipped-generation families. In some families, carers' intervention can settle parent-child conflicts and promote harmony in the parent-child relationships. Yet, hierarchical power structures justify the absolute authority of grandparents and expect junior family members (parents and children) to satisfy the expectations of senior family members (grandparents). This puts children in a disadvantageous position in terms of expressing their views, especially when disagreements occur between grandparents and children. As a result, children may not receive adequate parental understanding and empathy and thereafter parent-child relationships will be affected.

## 7. Conclusion: A multi-perspective analysis of long-distance familyhood via social media

### 7.1 Introduction

This study has aimed to provide a holistic picture of long-distance familyhood in Chinese separated families from the perspectives of parents, carers, and children. Having outlined how parents, carers, and children recruited from a case study school (M school) in Liaoning Province, China, use social media like WeChat to maintain family relations and how they perceive long-distance familyhood via social media, this chapter aims to draw together and compare their digital practices and perspectives to depict a comprehensive picture of family lives within Chinese separated families, which to date has not been covered in the literature. The goal of this conclusion is to draw out the major empirical and theoretical implications of this multi-perspectival analysis in relation to the three main research questions, to highlight the strengths and limitations of the existing study, and to point towards areas for further research.

The data suggest that the overarching theme of digital practices in Chinese separated families is ‘doing family’, but each group of participants emphasise their own priority during online communications.

- From the parents’ perspective, migrant parents mainly use WeChat to undertake parenting from a distance. The key theme for parental digital practices is *long-distance parenting and control*.
- From the carers’ perspective, carers play the role of *facilitators, observers, and gatekeepers* in parent-child communications.
- From the children’s perspective, they are willing to demonstrate their daily lives, development and growth via WeChat. The key theme of children’s digital practices is *seeking parental involvement*.

The key finding suggests that children in Chinese separated families, due to their lack of independent media access, require the facilitation of carers for parent-child communications. This role of carers has received little attention in existing literature. Furthermore, there is limited research on children’s experiences of ‘being family’ through communication technologies, or research that adopts child-centred methods to amplify children’s voices. To address these gaps, this study extends and reframes existing understandings of family

maintenance within Chinese separated families by considering carers as not only caregivers but also as senior family members who play crucial and authoritative roles in Chinese families. In addition, it centres children's perspectives in the analysis, highlighting the intrinsic value of their viewpoints through a child-focused research design. Given the substantial population of left-behind children, their experiences of long-distance familyhood, especially in China, warrant further research attention.

The first section of this chapter discusses how Chinese separated families as a whole engage with WeChat in their everyday lives, focusing on the different perspectives of parents, carers and children. Based on the findings, it is evident that the purposes of using social media, in this case, WeChat, vary greatly among parents, children and carers. The second section highlights and draws together findings about the role of social media in Chinese separated families by juxtaposing the experiences of 'being' families from the perspectives of the three parties (parents, children, and carers). This section reiterates how the expectations of the three parties in long-distance communications shape their understanding of the role of social media in maintaining family relations. Drawing on the theory of mediated relationships, the last section conceptualises long-distance familyhood within Chinese separated families. In the final section, I propose an agenda for future research.

## **7.2 Digital practices via WeChat in Chinese separated families**

The development of a relationship and related feelings of closeness are rooted in interactions (Gan, 2021; Goldsmith & Baxter, 1996; Hinde, 1997; Mandelbaum, 2002). If we want to comprehend family relationships in Chinese separated families, we need to first understand their mediated communications. Given that the digital practices of parents, carers, and children via WeChat have been discussed separately in Chapters 4, 5, and 6, this section sets out to summarise key findings on digital practices and compare the different perspectives of parents, carers, and children to reveal the consistencies and inconsistencies in their accounts on each key theme.

### ***7.2.1 Three perspectives on mediated parenting***

In the context of family separation, social media like WeChat with multiple functions seems to give separated families hope that physical distance can be bridged by synchronous, real-time, and visual communications. However, the collected data show that many unexpected

constraints and difficulties occur in long-distance family practices via WeChat in Chinese separated families.

The data show that parents clearly have mixed feelings about the online mode of parenting. On the one hand, social media like WeChat have created a platform to facilitate parental involvement in their children's lives. On the other hand, survey and interview findings from the parents suggest that the whole process of remote parenting via social media is characterised by the feeling of a lack of parental control and empowerment. Due to spatial and temporal constraints, parents do not have free rein to exert the same level of control over their left-behind children (Boccagni, 2012). The constraints of long-distance parenting affect parents' feelings of competence, particularly because culturally Chinese parents are expected to regulate children's undesirable behaviours and academic performance (P. Wu et al., 2002), but online parenting makes this more difficult. According to parental interviews, some children's behaviours such as bed wetting and children's perceived transgressions and dishonesty, cannot be regulated via social media. Although parents could use WeChat to identify or keep themselves informed about their children's 'problems', some parents had concerns about their ability to intervene through WeChat and some were concerned that they could not provide adequate parental engagement.

From the parents' perspective, physical distance and children's autonomy are perceived as two major obstacles that increase the difficulty level of remote parenting via WeChat and undermine parental authority. Therefore, the process of long-distance parenthood is characterised by feelings of lack of parental control and involvement. Interview findings show that remote parental control is also subject to children's interests and attention spans. From the interviews with parents, it became clear that children's autonomy in online communication sometimes exacerbated what parents perceived to be the problems of online parenting. Some migrant parents felt that children's autonomy was enhanced by family separation and geographical distance. They revealed that their children tended to resist parental control by, for instance, running away from the camera and hanging up during video calls when they sensed they were about to be criticised.

Gender role differentiation was also implicated in long-distance parenthood because the migrant mothers whom I interviewed were particularly impacted by what they felt was their lack of involvement in remote mothering. For mothers, migration can exacerbate maternal ambivalence because migrant mothers need to negotiate two conflicting roles as mothers and workers at a distance (Madianou & Miller, 2012a). By contrast, paternal ambivalence was not evident in data collected from male participants. Chinese cultural norms expect mothers to be



highly involved with and devoted to their children (P. Wu et al., 2002). Given these gender and social norms, many female participants felt guilty about their decision to migrate because they assumed that family separation was not a pleasant experience for their children. Although the visual affordances of WeChat helped to ease mothers' ambivalent feelings about being separated, many mothers recalled that their irregular work hours made it difficult to establish regular video call routines. This increased their feelings of 'powerlessness' because they could not live up to what they considered to be their children's expectations. Carers' observations confirmed the parental view on the persistence of traditional gender roles, which echoes previous literature on transnational families, thus suggesting that parenting is a gendered activity (Madianou & Miller, 2012a; Parreñas, 2005a). Carers recounted that compared to fathers, migrant mothers made more efforts to maintain mother-child relationships and employed WeChat more often to enact their motherhood.

Given the aforementioned constraints related to mediated parenting, some parents attributed their lack of control to grandparents being too 'permissive', 'lenient' and 'over-tolerant'. This finding resonates with wider public concern in China that grandparents are too preoccupied with life matters such as food, clothing and warmth to the exclusion of discipline and homework supervision (Murphy, 2020). Recent studies on Chinese families have revealed a pattern of strict parents and lenient grandparents (Goh & Kuczynski, 2010; Murphy, 2020).

However, the carers I interviewed disagreed with parents' views on intergenerational child-rearing. In other words, carers did not believe that their child-rearing techniques led to children's resistance to parental discipline or guidance. In this research, carers believed that remote parenting was ineffective for four reasons. First, carers believed that migrant parents do not have time to invest in parent-child communications due to their work commitments, which leads children to emotionally detach themselves from their parents. This in turn makes online parenting difficult. Second, according to the grandparents, mediated communication via WeChat only provides a partial picture of real life, but parents do not always make any adjustments to cater for developmental changes in their children. For example, one maternal grandmother observed that her daughter continued to respond to her grandchild's misbehaviours with criticism from afar while failing to acknowledge her son had entered puberty. These parental reactions embedded in online communication were interpreted by some grandmothers as a form of 'blindness' caused by the combination of family separation and mediated communication. Third, children's communication skills and attention spans may impact the quality of parent-child communications. For instance, younger children were observed by carers to lack the communication skills necessary to maintain online conversations.

Finally, children's resistance is another factor that gives rise to parental helplessness. Some grandparents witnessed resistance from children when parents kept reinforcing filial piety: the value that emphasises obedience and hierarchy (Croll, 2000; Hsu, 1985; Yeh et al., 2013). As a result, a common view amongst grandparents was that an overemphasis on parental strictness prevented parents from understanding their children's personalities and development, despite frequent WeChat communication.

It is worth noting that parent-child communication in participant families is not a linear process and children's views also need to be considered. Children's autonomy, as demonstrated through their digital experiences, confirmed what parents had observed from a distance, but also added nuance to our understanding of the parental perception of children's transgressions. On the one hand, child participants recounted that hiding or running away from the webcam during video calls helped them avoid parental intervention and chastisement, which migrant parents however perceived as a lack of control in parenting. On the other hand, what parents and carers did not notice was that children also practised self-censorship to avoid creating parental concerns. Many child participants in interviews and workshops avoided discussing issues such as their injuries, illnesses and unhappy experiences at school, which they thought might worry their parents.

By contrasting children's accounts with the perceptions of parents and carers, it can be asserted that children's autonomy always has negative connotations for adult family members, and is often associated with waywardness, thus reinforcing parental feelings of a lack of empowerment in long-distance parenthood. Children's agency was not always valued by parents or carers, and was perceived as a parenting obstacle that undermines parental authority. Therefore, it can be argued that children's digital practices and the rationale behind their decisions are not fully understood by carers and parents. This finding also explains why the difficulties that children experience in mediated communications are not raised by parents and carers, which I will further discuss in the next sub-section.

### ***7.2.2 Children's experiences of online communication***

Media access emerged as a recurrent theme among child participants in the workshops and interviews. There were three major challenges children faced when engaging with digital devices. First, real-name registration for SIM cards and the current WeChat policy prevent children under 13 from having their own WeChat accounts. Parents need to override the WeChat policy and use additional SIM cards to obtain an account for their children in order to

facilitate parent-child online communication. Second, having a WeChat account does not mean that children have their own digital devices, such as smartphones. Only 10 children in the sample (n=41) had both digital devices (e.g. – smartwatches, smartphones) and WeChat accounts. Third, the school's regulations concerning digital devices on campus limited children's participation in media practices. As Chapter 6 showed, weekly boarders were adversely affected by this regulation because they only had access to digital devices on weekends, and with the permission of their carers.

Media literacy also features as a recurring theme among the children (Chapter 6). The research findings suggest that children's competence in using social media like WeChat is particularly relevant to their access to digital devices in participant families. Child participants with their own digital devices and WeChat accounts could engage with a wider range of online parent-child interactions. For instance, three children who had both smartphones and WeChat accounts not only used the audio/video call functions of WeChat but also knew how to use the 'Friend Circle' function to comment on their parents' daily updates. By contrast, weekly boarders did not have time or opportunities to practise the skills required to use social media effectively. A combination of restrictions on phones on campus for boarders and parental concerns about possible harmful effects led to children (mainly boarders) lacking sufficient access to devices. Age differences also impacted the children's digital experiences. Younger children (aged 6 to 10) preferred using the basic functions of WeChat, whereas older children (aged 11 to 13) could use a wider range of WeChat functions such as receiving pocket money from their parents.

With respect to online communication with parents, the data collected from both workshops and interviews suggest that there is still a gap between children's communication needs and the technological affordances of WeChat. Mediated communications via social media like WeChat are not always child-friendly and have implications for the success or failure of communication in separated families. Based on the children's responses, there were five major difficulties that children often experienced in parent-child communication. Findings also reveal that these difficulties were often overlooked by adult family members.

First, children's communication skills play an important role in maintaining online communication. Younger children (aged 6 to 10) had difficulty articulating their feelings during online parent-child conversations. Social media such as WeChat enable visual contact between parents and children. However, online communication is still language-based, meaning that children are expected to express their feelings through words, which sometimes seems to be a challenging task for child participants. A lack of conversational skills,

particularly among younger children, may shorten the length and affect the quality of conversations.

Second, self-consciousnesses and embarrassment may prevent older children (aged 11 to 13) from talking with ease. As Miller and Jolynna (2014) argue, when faced with a webcam where people see themselves on screen, an individual might experience the same level of embarrassment as in any public arena. Not every child interviewed was comfortable with appearing on the WeChat webcam. For instance, one interviewee (aged 13) felt nervous and stammered when filmed.

Third, time constraints and a lack of consistency in online communication can be considered a hindrance for children to sufficiently share their thoughts with parents. As a result of the limited time available for WeChat calls, children were found to be under pressure in mediated communications. The results of the pen and paper exercises showed that children often felt regretful when they forgot to tell their parents about what they had achieved in school. Findings from the children also revealed 'waiting' as a keyword when children reflected on their experiences of being part of a family through WeChat. For example, children had to wait for internet connectivity to be attained, and for their parents to be available. As a result, the children's communication needs could not be satisfied in a timely fashion, resulting in disappointment.

Fourth, the involvement of carers in parent-child communication is not always desirable for children. The presence of carers sometimes reduces children's motivation to engage in parent-child communication because they cannot express their personal feelings freely in front of their carers. Living conditions in rural areas, where children often have to share living and sleeping spaces with their grandparents, result in a lack of privacy in communication. Within the participant families, there is evidence to support the argument that adult family members have overlooked children's privacy in communication. In addition, carers' gatekeeping of media devices prevents some children from having frequent contact with their parents.

Last but not least, mediated communication is not always child-friendly because it brings physical discomfort, including backache, tired arms, and eyestrain. According to interview data, the discomforts caused by long-distance communications were ignored in participant families as none of the child participants were provided with any equipment to make online communication less physically demanding.

As can be seen from the preceding discussion, parents and children perceive the challenges of parent-child communication in a different way. In response to the constraints discussed above in relation to online communications, both parents and children were found to

exercise their agency to maintain what they consider to be better communication via WeChat. In the context of parent-child communications, carers play a crucial role as facilitators, observers and gatekeepers. In the face of the limitations of long-distance familyhood, the full picture of digital practices in Chinese separated families is that parents, children and carers all use creative methods to enhance family communications on their own terms.

### *7.2.3 Creative ways to be a family from a distance*

From the parental perspective, owing to spatial constraints and children's autonomy, some Chinese migrant parents were compelled to change their parenting style by compromising their authority to engage children. For instance, some parents applied child-centred approaches to engage children in online settings through playful activities such as quizzes and online gaming. For instance, one migrant father played quizzes to extend the length of family communications. Another father employed the multiple functions of WeChat (e.g. – video recording, video calling, sending pictures) to supervise his son's homework. Parental agency was also shown in parental involvement in children's lives. For example, some mothers used WeChat to check their children's physical needs and bought clothes via other online shopping platforms. As physical distance empowered children to resist parental discipline, some parents asked the carers to facilitate their parental discipline to correct their children's perceived transgressions from a distance. This finding is consistent with Gan's (2020) observation that grandparents may facilitate the completion of communications between parents and their young children during online interactions. Thus, I argue that the use of WeChat in separated families has shaped how migrant parents exercise their parenting practices in different ways.

Child participants revealed that they faced many challenges in online communication, which were overlooked by adult family members. However, both the interviews and workshops suggest that children show creativity in addressing the limitations of mediated communications discussed above and navigating difficulties to maintain better parent-child communication. For example, some children were found to use written notes to overcome the lapses of memory that prevented them from sharing their daily lives with their parents in the limited time available. Two interviewees creatively used the webcam to show their growth to their parents; two children in the workshops chose to communicate with their fathers while playing real-time games by turning on their microphones to fill the awkward silence on video calls; some children learned how to fix technical problems such as poor internet connectivity by themselves; and two interviewees used books or mugs as temporary phone holders to avoid the physical

discomfort caused by online communications. Based on these practices, I argue that children actively engage with WeChat to interact with their parent(s) rather than being simply passive recipients of remote parenting.

Carers' exercising of agency was evident in parent-child communications as well as parent-carer communications. Carers would control media access when the video calls between parents and children were deemed to be potentially emotional. As discussed in Chapter 5, carers justified this gatekeeping behaviour by stating it was a means to prevent children from experiencing emotional upset and to avoid creating parental anxiety. In addition to controlling media access, in parent-carer communication, carers also used social media like WeChat to negotiate parenting values and settle disagreements with parents. Some grandmothers admitted that they chose information selectively to update parents on issues related to their children. Some grandparents were found to filter out certain topics (e.g. – children's illnesses or injuries) to avoid worrying migrant parents.

When families are physically separated, it can be observed that parents, children and carers all exercise their agency to maintain what they consider to be better family communications via WeChat. Given that the three parties (parents, children, grandparents) involved in online communication use social media like WeChat for different purposes, it is imperative to take a further step and examine what role WeChat actually plays in family lives from different perspectives.

### **7.3 The role of WeChat in the family lives of Chinese separated families**

One of the main contributions of this thesis is that it has sought to perceive the family as a unit and to provide a comprehensive picture of long-distance familyhood within Chinese separated families. In particular, it has put greater emphasis on children's viewpoints on long-distance family practices to address a key research gap. By bringing the perspectives of parents, carers, and children together, this section discusses how the three parties interpret the role of WeChat in their family lives.

#### ***7.3.1 WeChat: A facilitator for parental involvement and surveillance***

From the parental perspective, WeChat can be seen as a parenting facilitator. This argument is rooted in the fact that WeChat plays an important role in helping migrant parents experience parenthood and exert control from a distance. Children's educational accomplishments are

highly valued in Chinese family culture (Murphy, 2020). This belief was widely held by parent participants and explains why most parents (67%) discussed education-related topics such as homework and school life with their children. During the interviews, most parents recalled the experience of supervising their children's homework via WeChat. Therefore, I argue that visual contact via WeChat provides a platform for synchronous communication, thus enabling parents to ensure parental involvement in children's daily lives from a distance.

Echoing parental interpretations of the role of social media, children in the interviews and workshops confirmed that WeChat is a facilitator of parental involvement from a distance. The findings from interviews and workshops showed that WeChat allows children to include their migrant parents in their daily lives. For example, the children's workshops showed that most children (90%) enjoy sharing their daily lives with their parents, including their academic achievements, school events, and personal improvement. Based on the analysis of children's accounts of long-distance parenting on WeChat, I argue that social media like WeChat play a pivotal role in enabling children to engage with their migrant parents and also to seek parental engagement.

Although WeChat as a communicative environment of affordances heightens parental engagement, interviews from both parents and children suggest that online parenting on WeChat limits the ability of migrant parents to observe children's development and needs, which hinders the depth of their parental engagement. Despite experiencing feelings of parental powerlessness, parent participants did not give up on the idea of monitoring their children from afar. Social media like WeChat in this context are employed by parents as a surveillance tool within Chinese separated families. More importantly, family separation legitimates parental surveillance.

As observers in parent-child communications, carers share the same views as parents about the role of WeChat as an enabler of parental involvement and surveillance. However, carers are sceptical about the effectiveness of remote parenting via WeChat. A prominent finding from interviews with carers is that long-distance parenting and surveillance cannot take place without their facilitation. In fact, parental digital surveillance can only occur with the assistance of carers, such as grandparents and schoolteachers, because they are involved in day-to-day childcare. Migrant parents rely strongly on carers and teachers/schools. This is especially the case for those parents whose children are boarders. Effective collaboration between carers and teachers may help parents to supervise their children and achieve the goal of parental surveillance. Teachers' responses revealed that WeChat plays an important role in keeping parents and carers updated on children's performances at school. Carers also employed

WeChat to update parents on children's development, health, and diet. Carers' involvement in digital surveillance therefore serves to empower parents but also to constrain children in terms of resisting parental control.

The role of social media as a surveillance tool was confirmed by child participants, who perceived WeChat as a tool for parental surveillance concerning matters such as academic performance, diet, screen time, and household consumption. Children also felt that their academic performance was subject to parental scrutiny through parent-teacher group chats on WeChat. Parents, usually mothers, exploited video calls to scrutinise their children's daily lives from afar. However, this close parental surveillance can bring about tensions within families where it is difficult to maintain mutual understanding in mediated communication (Baym, 2010). Children reflected that they needed to put in extra effort into clarifying their views and sometimes resisting digital surveillance to mitigate parental misunderstandings.

### ***7.3.2 WeChat: An emotion management tool for children***

Unlike parent participants who emphasise parental control, discipline, and surveillance, children highly value the emotional aspects of online communications because polymedia can cater to different emotional registers (Madianou & Miller, 2012a). It is clear that there is a mismatch of expectations between parents and children in terms of the focus of online communications. While children were looking to build emotional connections, parents placed greater emphasis on academic performance. One prominent research finding from children is that WeChat plays an important role in helping children manage emotions in the face of prolonged family separation. More specifically, WeChat for children can be seen as a visual enabler that helps ease feelings of being separated when they miss their parents. However, the affordances of WeChat can only partially relieve the strong emotions that result from family separation. Children's emotional needs cannot be fully satisfied by long-distance communication via social media. In particular, children regarded mediated communication as inferior to face-to-face communication for four reasons.

First, the lack of physical touch was perceived as a key limitation of online communication that left child participants unsatisfied. Interpersonal touch enables family members to enhance relational intimacy and closeness and to show love and affection (Guerrero & Andersen, 1991). The research findings show that during periods of prolonged separation child participants long to experience physical touch, notably kissing, hugging, and holding hands, with their parents. which cannot be achieved via WeChat. Second, children



believe there is a lack of interactivity in online communications, which renders some parent-child activities, including playing basketball, reading bedtime stories, or drawing together difficult if not impossible on WeChat. Children see online interactions on WeChat as less interactive and fun than face-to-face interactions. Third, children are dissatisfied with the lack of timeliness in long-distance communication. From the children's side, poor infrastructure in rural areas means that their internet connections are unstable and power cuts are a regular occurrence, which prevents families from getting in touch in a continuous manner. Fourth, parents' work schedules are another obstacle in parent-child communication. Interviews and workshops with children suggested that their emotional and academic needs are postponed if these clash with parents' work commitments. Finally, unsatisfactory communication environments can be seen as another obstacle that affects the depth and quality of parent-child communications.

Children generally favour face-to-face interactions over online communications when it comes to forging parent-child relationships, despite WeChat's visual affordances. This research suggests that long-distance communication via WeChat cannot fully address children's emotional needs and that children do not have the feeling of co-presence as a family across spatial distances. This result does not support previous research on co-presence, which has suggested that virtual co-presence via communication technologies can create feelings of being emotionally connected (L. Baldassar, 2016a; L. Baldassar et al., 2016). This strand of literature contends that the proliferation of media technologies enables emotional proximity and the formation of a sense of mediated co-presence in transnational families (Marino, 2019). However, this research shows that while children accept that WeChat plays a role in enabling and building relationships with their parents, it cannot guarantee the same degree of emotional proximity as face-to-face communication. Many child interviewees did not feel *qin* (亲 close/closeness) with their parents and needed to adjust to the new family dynamic during family reunions. Children's understanding of the role of WeChat was confirmed by carers. As a third-party observer in parent-child communications, carers believed that online communications via WeChat play a deficient role in developing closeness in parent-child relationships. They observed that children can become emotionally detached from their parents. Carers also reflected that geographical distance cannot be bridged by WeChat when it comes to building emotional bonds with children. Physical co-presence was advocated by carers as they felt that this was the best way to understand children's emotional needs and personalities.

## **7.4 Mediated relationships within Chinese separated families**

Having outlined how social media like WeChat are used and what role WeChat may play in participant families from the divergent perspectives of the three parties (migrant parents, left-behind children and carers), this section focuses on conceptualising social media and family relationships in the Chinese cultural context. It is not constructive to ask if social media are beneficial or harmful for maintaining relationships during family separation, as this depends so much on how each family uses social media to manage family relationships. As Baym (2010) reminds us, the tendency to ask what effects media technologies have on us and whether these are good or bad can be described as technological determinism. As shown in the previous chapters, each group of participants demonstrates innovation in terms of ‘doing’ family in a creative way in the face of prolonged family separation. Since the previous literature did not yield many insights into the normative behaviours and moral orders concerning media use in family life (Eklund & Sadowski, 2021), this thesis aimed to address how family relationships are shaped by social media, specifically WeChat, in the Chinese sociocultural context.

The theory of mediated relationships proposed by Madianou and Miller (2012a) with regards to transnational Filipino families enables us to comprehend how digital media have been socialised and mediated in the context of family separation. As discussed in Chapter 2, the framework conceptualises relationships as a triangle consisting of the normative projection of a person (a mother or a left-behind child), the actual person, and the discrepancy between the two. With this triangle in mind, following cultural and social norms, a Chinese migrant parent, for example, may build an idea (and vice versa) that his child should be obedient – a normative ideal that the parent measures against the actual person (his/her left-behind child) – hoping to bring his/her child back into alignment with what a ‘proper’ child should be. This triangle is particularly evident in the situation of long-distance relationships because both the ‘revelations’ or ‘evidence’ of the actual person and the discrepancies between the actual person and the normative ideal rely on the media available to both parents and children (Madianou & Miller, 2012a, p. 141). This compelling theoretical framework provides useful insights for understanding Chinese separated families in the context of internal migration. However, it is too general and needs to be further enriched in ways that permit meaningful comparisons across cultural contexts. Building on Madianou and Miller’s theoretical framework, this study proposed three crucial dimensions that matter to mediated relationships within Chinese separated families.

First, with respect to the media-related aspect, media policy, media access and media literacy significantly impact long-distance familyhood in the Chinese context. I argue that these variables are interrelated, which has implications for mediated relationships in Chinese separated families. As noted previously, although communication technologies have become one of the key means through which families can maintain relationships with one another, children participating in this research were not well equipped to use digital devices. There are regulatory aspects and restrictions that affect children's access to digital devices, which remind us of the importance of the reregulation of ICTs to shape family communications in Chinese separated families. This brings to the fore another topic that can greatly impact mediated relationships: media literacy. Younger children and older grandparents are those participants who lack the media literacy necessary to navigate the 'polymediatric environment' on WeChat (Merla & Papanikolaou, 2021, p.119). As scholars have argued, people construct family relationships primarily through family interactions within which family members build emotional bonds by freely and openly exchanging information, ideas and feelings (Koerner & Schrodtt, 2014; Schrodtt, 2005). Insufficient media literacy may limit the diversity of digital activities via WeChat, which can enhance relational intimacy between parents and children.

Second, unlike family communications in Filipino transnational families, which form the basis of Madianou and Miller's (2012a, 2012b) theory of mediated relationships, the prevalent care arrangement in Chinese families is intergenerational childcare and grandparents mainly take up the role of carers. The communication needs of all three parties (parents, children and carers) in long-distance communications need to be considered while investigating their family relationships. In the mediated relationship framework, the discrepancy side of the triangle is the degree to which an actual person deviates from the normative ideal. In Chinese families, the intermediary role of carers may complicate the relationships between parents and children.

As a result, it is more challenging for parents/children to have an understanding of each other. As noted earlier, different groups of participants have their own communication needs and goals in family communications. For example, from the parental perspective, WeChat has been perceived as a parenting and surveillance tool, and long-distance communication has been used primarily as a means of exerting parental control. From the children's perspective, WeChat has mainly been used as a tool for communicating with parents and seeking parental engagement. From the carers' perspective, parent-child communications involve their facilitation, observation and gatekeeping, and parent-carer communications are used to facilitate online parenting and exchange information related to childcare. One possible cause

of the failure of mediated relationships is that none of the parties' communication needs are fully satisfied during online communications unless the three parties can identify and address these mismatches collectively, which, as the fieldwork material showed, is rarely the case. By bringing different perspectives together, long-distance communications lead to many mismatches of communication needs between the three parties, leading to misunderstandings, which can heighten family tensions, constraining the task of maintaining family relationships. Therefore, I argue that mediated relationships in Chinese separated families are not only built upon parent-child communication but are also impacted by parent-carer communication. Additionally, the likelihood of reaching mutual understanding may decrease if more family members are involved in the care arrangement.

Third, as the family relationship is one type of culturally specific social relation (Murphy, 2020), cultural values act as a crucial variable and are implicated in mediated family relationships. Filial piety and its close association with various aspects of daily life is still at the centre of contemporary Chinese societies (Croll, 2006; Yeh et al., 2013). Therefore, the mediated family relationships of Chinese separated families can be understood through the lens of filial piety. As discussed earlier, authoritarian filial piety emphasising children's obedience to authority has been commonly associated with Chinese separated families. Parent participants needed to coordinate with carers to 'conduct' parenting due to spatial and temporal constraints. Grandparents as senior family members are usually at the top of the hierarchical power structure in Chinese families because filial piety underpins the absolute authority of senior generations over junior generations (Croll, 2006; Ho, 1994; Hwang, 1999; King & Bond, 1985). The hierarchical family structure has two major implications for mediated relationships in Chinese families. First, filial piety prevents children from expressing their opinions openly when they hold different opinions from their parents or carers. This can prevent children from feeling emotionally close to their parents and telling their parents about their emotional problems because children may receive inadequate parental understanding and empathy (Hsu, 1985). Within the hierarchical family structure, I argue that the combination of family values and the nature of mediated relationships put children in a disadvantageous position when seeking understanding from both parents and carers. Second, grandparents as senior family members also expect submissiveness from their adult children. In this case, filial piety may create conflicts between parents and grandparents when the latter's proxy parenting is criticised and challenged. Therefore, I argue that filial piety may be correlated with a higher level of parent-carer conflicts when there are conflicting views on parenting practices.

In fact, the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the problems in mediated relationships within Chinese separated families. The COVID crisis amplified the aforementioned dimensions, which may have implications for mediated relationships in participant families. In terms of the media-related aspect, media access is a key factor that impacted mediated communication between parents and children, especially during the prolonged family separations caused by the pandemic. According to parental interviews, scheduling a parent-child audio/video call was extremely difficult during COVID, since the devices that were often used to communicate were being used to attend online courses. In this sense, the COVID crisis not only interrupted family visits but also posed a challenge to regular and frequent contact between parents and children. However, according to both carers and children, there were unintended benefits that came with the COVID-19 pandemic. The rise of online learning due to social distancing increased the media access of children who had previously only had limited access to devices. Children said that the frequency of communication with their parents increased if they were given their own smartphones during the pandemic, which resonated with what carers have observed. These findings indicate that the asymmetry of media access between parents and children was unexpectedly corrected by the rise of online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic because parents bought their children personal digital devices.

The COVID-19 pandemic further underlined the vulnerability of care arrangements in Chinese separated families. The schoolteachers interviewed reflected that the lack of media literacy among carers hindered left-behind children from receiving adequate online schooling. According to schoolteachers, families with left-behind children usually relied on the school to share childcare responsibilities through boarding before the pandemic. However, in the context of extreme circumstances where left-behind children needed to be taken care of at home, some children in skipped-generation families were reported to have faced obstacles in attending online classes. Grandparents however believed that the underdeveloped ICT infrastructure in rural areas was a greater obstacle to children's online attendance of classes. Although there was a discrepancy between the schoolteachers' and carers' accounts, both perspectives suggest that left-behind children in rural areas were in a disadvantageous position during the period of online teaching.

The COVID-19 pandemic and the ensuing lockdowns have revived the heated debate about the boundary between physical and digital experiences (Popyk & Pustulka, 2021). Even if it is argued that ICT-based communications can alleviate some of the challenges of family separation by offering real-time communication (Brandhorst et al., 2020), many scholars believe that virtual co-presence cannot replace the physical experience of being together

(Rainie & Wellman, 2012). As Baldassar (2008) argues, although virtual and proxy forms of co-presence are greatly valued in migrant families, physical co-presence is still seen as the best solution for resolving feelings of longing, missing out and nostalgia. The COVID-19 pandemic served to shed further light on the family practices of Chinese separated families. This was mainly because some participant families experienced unexpected family reunions due to COVID-related travel restrictions and felt the contrast between both types of co-presence (virtual and physical). Those parents in the sample who could not return to work and had more family time believed that enforced quarantine provided an opportunity to repair relationships with their children. However, not everyone relished these unanticipated family reunions. For example, some interviewees found in-person parenting overwhelming, given the lack of child-rearing practices in their daily lives. This further suggests that long-distance parenthood mediated by social media is not the same as real-life parenting. It could be argued that long-distance parenthood is an incomplete parenting practice and that parents may need to adjust to different interaction modes when online parenting shifts to face-to-face parenting. From the children's viewpoints, mediated communication is inferior to face-to-face interactions because online communication, in their view, was unable to meet their communication needs and created more misunderstandings and tensions in parent-child relationships.

Amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, thousands of families have experienced separation because of travel and meeting restrictions. The 'unconventional' family form of separated families has become a 'convention' in the context of social distancing measures. This global crisis invites us to rethink the role of media technologies when families are separated across large distances. The Chinese case is especially peculiar since there is no sign that the 'zero-COVID' policy is going to be relinquished when countries around the world start lifting COVID-related restrictions. As a result, it remains challenging for Chinese separated families to be family and maintain relationships across distance via media technologies. Therefore, there is an urgency for future research to address many topics touched upon by the current analysis.

## **7.5 Future directions for mediated relationships in Chinese separated families**

This research contributes to discussions on issues of migration, family and media studies in three respects. First, this thesis examined family practices through social media like WeChat within Chinese separated families in the context of internal migration. It not only drew on seminal works on transnational families but also adopted indigenous theoretical frameworks such as filial piety in Chinese culture to discuss the relation between social media and family

relationships. Second, this study recognised the collective effort of Chinese separated families in the maintenance of family relations and brought together divergent perspectives to present a full family picture. Third, by using child-focused approaches such as interviews and workshops, this study addressed a gap in the literature on the digital practices of children in the context of migration. This thesis used the collected data to identify several features of the digital practices of each group of respondents. It also highlighted three key dimensions of family communications that shape family relationships within Chinese separated families. As identified, there are several methodological and theoretical weaknesses in current studies of family and migration. The data analysis also touched upon other research topics which are worthy of exploring in the future.

In terms of methodology, as noted in Chapter 3, online research has produced unexpected benefits for understanding how children experience long-distance communication because it simulates the same environment as that of parent-child communications. However, this contingency approach in the context of COVID-19 lockdowns is not without its limitations. Given children's articulation skills, attention span, and media literacy, to further explore children's digital practices in mediated communications, there is a need to mix online research with face-to-face research activities such as interviews and participant observations. In this way, researchers can compensate for the limitations of each format.

The patriarchal system remains influential in contemporary Chinese society, which means that gender role differentiation affects the division of labour in Chinese families. Although gender has been identified as being key to understanding the dynamics of transnational families (Chib et al., 2014; Hugo & Ukwatta, 2010; Longhurst, 2013; Madianou, 2012; Parreñas, 2001, 2005a), research on Chinese migrant mothers and their long-distance motherhood remains underexplored (To et al., 2018). It will be interesting for future research to adopt the lens of gender to examine online mothering and fathering within Chinese separated families.

In addition, although carers – grandparents in particular – play an important role in childcare provision in Chinese families, research on this topic also remains limited (Murphy, 2020; Santos, 2017). Since the sample of carers in this research is small, more research needs to be conducted to answer the question of how family communications work in intergenerational families. Family communications in separated families not only include parent-child communications but also embody parent-carer communications. Children have mixed feelings about the involvement of their grandparents in parent-child communications. This aspect of family communications also has implications for family dynamics and

relationships. It is therefore worth examining how elderly people in rural China engage with social media to negotiate family relationships.

In terms of studying the digital practices of children, the current theoretical underpinnings are not sufficient for us to understand children's digital practices in the context of family separation. In the literature on children and migration, there is still too little research looking at the digital practices of children. As discussed earlier, the regulations of Chinese digital platforms shape how children participate in media production, which in turn affects children's competence in using digital technologies. It therefore might be worth further pursuing a nuanced analysis of the implications of regulatory aspects of ICTs on children's participation in media production.

This research highlights that age difference acts as an important variable that influences how children engage with WeChat. In this research, child participants were divided into two age bands: 7 to 11 (junior, primary 1-3) and 12 to 16 (senior, primary 4-6). Factors including physical ability, verbal articulation, and attention span were found to be the main obstacles that prevented younger children from accomplishing a successful online conversation with their parents. In contrast, older children in the senior band felt more confident about their verbal articulation as well as media literacy. It would be useful to consider more detailed age bands in future research. In addition, based on the experience of left-behind children in long-distance communication, three major themes were highlighted in this study: children's difficulties, children's agency, and children's communication needs.

- **Children's difficulties:** Children experience many difficulties that have been overlooked by adult family members: 1) children's communication skills affect the length and depth of parent-child communication, 2) children are under pressure due to time constraints in online communication, 3) the presence of carers serves to invade children's privacy, and 4) online communication brings about physical discomfort such as backache, eyestrain, and tired arms.
- **Children's agency:** Children not only exercise their agency to overcome the difficulties that arise from mediated communications, but also apply it to avoid parental chastisement. However, both parents and carers perceive children's agency in Chinese families as a form of resistance and as a parenting hindrance. Therefore, they seek to suppress it in order to restore parental authority in mediated relationships.



**Children's communication needs:** Children's communication needs cannot be met by mediated communications due to lack of physical touch, lack of interactivity, lack of timeliness, and unsatisfactory communication environment.

Since children's family practices are still largely invisible in the literature that focuses on family relations in the context of migration (Merla & Papanikolaou, 2021), more nuanced studies of long-distance familyhood need to consider children's viewpoints and perspectives, alongside those of adults. By comparing the perspectives of adult family members with those of children in Chinese separated families, this study has highlighted that children are left behind physically and metaphorically, given that their difficulties have been overlooked, their agency has been suppressed, and their communication needs have been suspended. Children do show creativity in navigating the uncertainty of long-distance communication/relationships. Yet this adventure is strewn with difficulties, misunderstandings and suppression. At a micro level, parents and carers need to hear children's voices to address their difficulties in online communication in order to maintain a better relationship. At a macro level, the *hukou* system needs to experience some reform in order to fundamentally address rural-urban divisions in China. If this is achieved, Chinese children will not need to be left behind in their rural birthplace and will be able to enjoy equal education opportunities to their urban counterparts.

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# Appendix 1: High Risk — Ethics Modification Review Outcome (7 October 2022) of Original High Risk Ethical Clearance (19 May 2020) — Change to Online Data Collection

Research Ethics  
Office

Franklin Wilkins Building  
5.9 Waterloo Bridge Wing  
Waterloo Road  
London SE1 9NH  
Telephone 020 7848 4020/4070/4077  
rec@kcl.ac.uk



7 October 2020

Dear Xiaoying

**Reference Number:** MOD-19/20-14314

**Study Title:** Social Media, Migration and Family Relationships in China

**Modification Review Outcome:** Approval with provisos

Thank you for submitting a modification request for the above study. I am writing to confirm that your request has been approved with provisos, laid out in the feedback table below.

You are not required to provide evidence that these provisos have been met. However, the approval of your modification is only valid if these changes are made. You must not implement this modification until these provisos have been met.

If you have any questions regarding this application please contact the Research Ethics Office.

Kind regards

Miss Elizabeth Chuck

Senior Research Ethics Officer

**On behalf of**

SSHL Research Ethics Subcommittee

**Major Issues** (will require substantial consideration by the applicant before approval can be granted)

N/A

**Minor Issues related to application** (the reviewer should identify the relevant section number before each comment)

Screener survey

Parents will be asked to complete a screener survey at the end of the anonymous survey to confirm whether they are willing for their children to take part in the online school-based workshops. This should be explained in the initial survey information sheet.

Data from the screener survey must be processed entirely separately from the anonymous survey responses, otherwise you could use contact details to identify survey responses and they would therefore no longer be anonymous.

Please include a forced response question in the screener survey which confirms that the parents have read and understood the workshop information sheet.

**Minor Issues related to recruitment documents**

Information sheets for child participants: Please ensure the 'What if I have further questions, or if something goes wrong?' section is also added to these sheets.

Information sheets – workshop participants: As child participants will be approached by their school (a gatekeeper in a position of authority and influence), please emphasise in the 'Do I have to take part?' section that their decision will not impact their teaching or learning.

Information sheet – parent survey:

Data handling and confidentiality section: As surveys will be completely anonymous, please update this section using the wording from the information sheet for anonymous surveys template and remove the Data Protection Statement link: <https://internal.kcl.ac.uk/innovation/research/ethics/applications/recruitment-documents/recruitment>

What if I change my mind section: Please ensure clear information is provided on withdrawal. This section is currently confusing, as a final date for withdrawal is provided but you also state that responses cannot be withdrawn after submission.

**Advice and Comments** (do not have to be adhered to, but may help to improve the research)

N/A

## Appendix 2: High Risk — Ethical Clearance Letter for Original Research Proposal (19 May 2020) — Data collection with Parents, Children and Carers

Research Ethics  
Office

Franklin Wilkins Building  
5.9 Waterloo Bridge Wing  
Waterloo Road  
London SE1 9NH  
Telephone 020 7848 4020/4070/4077  
rec@kcl.ac.uk



Miss Xiaoying Han

19 May 2020

Dear Xiaoying

**Reference Number:** Review Reference

**Study Title:** Social Media, Migration and Family Relationships in China

**Review Outcome:** Approval with Provisos

Thank you for submitting your application for the above project. I am pleased to inform you that your application has now been approved with the provisos indicated at the end of this letter. All changes must be made before data collection commences. The Committee does not need to see evidence of these changes, however supervisors are responsible for ensuring that students implement any requested changes before data collection commences.

**IMPORTANT CORONAVIRUS UPDATE:** In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, the College Research Ethics Committee has temporarily suspended all primary data collection involving face to face participant interactions until further notice. **Ethical clearance for this project is granted. However, the clearance outlined in the attached letter is contingent on your adherence to the latest College measures when conducting your research.** Please do not commence data collection until you have carefully reviewed the update and made any necessary project changes:

<https://internal.kcl.ac.uk/innovation/research/ethics/applications/COVID-19-Update-for-Researchers>

For your information, ethical approval has been granted for 1 year from 19 May 2020. If you need approval beyond this point, you will need to apply for an extension at least two weeks before this. You will be required to explain the reasons for the extension. However, you will not need to submit a full re-application unless the protocol has changed. You will not be sent a reminder when it is due to lapse.

Ethical approval is required to cover the data-collection phase of the study. This will be until the date specified in this letter. However, you do not need ethical approval to cover subsequent data analysis or publication of the results.

Please ensure that you follow the guidelines for good research practice as laid out in UKRIO's Code of Practice for research: <http://ukrio.org/publications/code-of-practice-for-research/>.

Please note you are required to adhere to all research data/records management and storage procedures agreed to as part of your application. This will be expected even after the completion of the study.

If you do not start the project within three months of this letter please contact the Research Ethics Office.

Please note that you will be required to obtain approval to modify the study. This also encompasses extensions to periods of approval. Please refer to the URL below for further guidance about the process:

<https://internal.kcl.ac.uk/innovation/research/ethics/applications/modifications.aspx>

Please would you also note that we may, for the purposes of audit, contact you from time to time to ascertain the status of your research.

If you have any query about any aspect of this ethical approval, please contact your panel/committee administrator in the first instance (<https://internal.kcl.ac.uk/innovation/research/ethics/contact.aspx>)

We wish you every success with this work.

Yours sincerely,

Miss Elizabeth Chuck  
Senior Research Ethics Officer

**For and on behalf of**

Chair, SSHL Research Ethics Subcommittee

Cc: Supervisor

**Approved with Provisos:**

**B9:** Given that the sample size is only 30 for the children whose work is being collected, the proposed method of anonymisation may still make child participants identifiable at a local level by other people aware of the research being conducted. Please indicate this on the recruitment documents.



## Appendix 3: Ethical Clearance Letter for Online Interviews with Adults

Research Ethics  
Office

Franklin Wilkins Building  
5.9 Waterloo Bridge Wing  
Waterloo Road  
London SE1 9NH  
Telephone 020 7848 4020/4070/4077  
reo@kcl.ac.uk



07/04/2020

Xiaoying Han

Dear Xiaoying

Social media, Migration and Family Relationships in China - Online Interview

Thank you for submitting your Minimal Risk Self-Registration Form. This letter acknowledges confirmation of your registration; your registration confirmation reference number is MRSP-19/20-18127

**Important coronavirus update:** In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, the College Research Ethics Committee has temporarily suspended all primary data collection involving face to face participant interactions until further notice. **Ethical clearance for this project is granted. However, this clearance is contingent on your adherence to the latest College measures when conducting your research.** Please do not commence data collection until you have carefully reviewed the update and made any necessary project changes:  
<https://internal.kcl.ac.uk/innovation/research/ethics/applications/COVID-19-Update-for-Researchers>

Ethical clearance is granted for a period of **three years** from today's date and you may now commence data collection. However, it is important that you have read through the information provided below before commencing data collection:

**As the Minimal Risk Registration Process is based on self-registration, your form has not been reviewed by the College Research Ethics Committee. It is therefore your responsibility to ensure that your project adheres to the [Minimal Risk Guiding Principles](#) and the agreed protocol does not fall outside of the criteria for Minimal Risk Registration. Your project may be subject to audit by the College Research Ethics Committee and any instances in which the registration process is deemed to have been used inappropriately will be handled as a breach of good practice and investigated accordingly.**

### Record Keeping:

Please be sure to keep a record of your registration number and include it in any materials associated with this research. It is the responsibility of the researcher to ensure that any other permissions or approvals (i.e. R&D, gatekeepers, etc.) relevant to their research are in place, prior to conducting the research.

In addition, you are expected to keep records of your process of informed consent and the dates and relevant details of research covered by this application. For example, depending on the type of research that you are doing, you might keep:

- A record of all data collected and all mechanisms of disseminated results.
- Documentation of your informed consent process. This may include written information sheets or in cases where it is not appropriate to provide written information, the verbal script, or introductory material provided at the start of an online survey.  
**Please note: For projects involving the use of an Information Sheet and Consent Form for recruitment purposes, please ensure that you use the KCL GDPR compliant [Information Sheet & Consent Form Templates](#)**
- Where appropriate, records of consent, e.g. copies of signed consent forms or emails where participants agree to be interviewed.

### Audit:

You may be selected for an audit, to see how researchers are implementing this process. If audited, you and your Supervisor will be asked to attend a short meeting where you will be expected to explain how your research meets the eligibility criteria of the minimal risk process and how the project abides by the general principles of ethical research. In particular, you will be expected to provide a general summary of your review of the possible risks involved in your research, as well as to provide basic research records (as above in Record Keeping) and to describe the process by which participants agreed to participate in your research.

Remember that if you at any point have any questions about the ethical conduct of your research, or believe you may have gained the incorrect level of ethical clearance, please contact your supervisor or the Research Ethics Office.

We wish you every success with your project moving forward.  
With best wishes,

The Research Ethics Office

On behalf of the College Research Ethics Committee



## Appendix 4: Ethical Clearance Letter for Pilot Interviews with Parents

Research Ethics  
Office

Franklin Wilkins Building  
5.9 Waterloo Bridge Wing  
Waterloo Road  
London SE1 9NH  
Telephone 020 7848 4020/4070/4077  
reo@kcl.ac.uk



23/04/2019

Xiaoying Han

Dear Xiaoying

Social media, migration and family relationships in China

Thank you for submitting your Research Ethics Minimal Risk Registration Form. This letter acknowledges confirmation of your registration; your registration confirmation reference number is MRS-18/19-11269

*Please note: For projects involving the use of an Information Sheet and Consent Form for recruitment purposes, please ensure that you use the KCL GDPR compliant [Information Sheet & Consent Form Templates](#)*

Be sure to keep a record your registration number and include it in any materials associated with this research. Registration is valid for **one year** from today's date. Please note it is the responsibility of the researcher to ensure that any other permissions or approvals (i.e. R&D, gatekeepers, etc.) relevant to their research are in place, prior to conducting the research.

### **Record Keeping:**

In addition, you are expected to keep records of your process of informed consent and the dates and relevant details of research covered by this application. For example, depending on the type of research that you are doing, you might keep:

- A record of the relevant details for public talks that you attend, the websites that visit, the interviews that you conduct
- The 'script' that you use to inform possible participants about what your research involves. This may include written information sheets, or the generic information you include in the emails you write to possible participants, or what you say to people when you approach them on the street for a survey, or the introductory material stated at the top of your on-line survey.
- Where appropriate, records of consent, e.g. copies of signed consent forms or emails where participants agree to be interviewed.

### **Audit:**

You may be selected for an audit, to see how researchers are implementing this process. If audited, you will be expected to explain how your research abides by the general principles of ethical research. In particular, you will be expected to provide a general summary of your review of the possible risks involved in your research, as well as to provide basic research records (as above in Record Keeping) and to describe the process by which participants agreed to participate in your research.

Remember that if you have any questions about the ethical conduct of your research at any point, you should contact your supervisor (where applicable) or the Research Ethics office.

### **Feedback:**

If you wish to provide any feedback on the process you may do so by emailing [rec@kcl.ac.uk](mailto:rec@kcl.ac.uk).

We wish you every success with this work.

With best wishes

Ms Laura Stackpoole

Research Ethics Office

## Appendix 5: Parental Survey

### Social Media, Migration and Family Relationships in China

---

#### Start of Block: Introduction

##### INTRO

I would like to invite you to participate in this research project which forms part of my PhD research. The purpose of the study is to understand the meanings of social media in the context of internal migration and its implication for families on the move in China, and to examine the role of social media in shaping their family relationships. You are being invited to take part in this study because you are separated from your child/ren due to work. The survey is about your media habits and how you use social media to keep in touch with your child/ren. It will take you approximately 15 minutes to complete this survey. Participation is entirely voluntary and anonymous. Choosing not to take part will not disadvantage you in any way. Please go through the information sheet before you decide if you want to participate in the survey ([Information Sheet](#)). If you choose to take part, you will be asked to provide your consent below. I have read and understood the information provided and I agree to take part in this survey.

- ☐ Yes, I consent
- ☐ No, I do not consent

*Skip To: End of Survey If I would like to invite you to participate in this research project which forms part of my PhD res... = No, I do not consent*

#### End of Block: Introduction

---

#### Start of Block: Personal Information

**Firstly, I would like to ask you a few quick questions about yourself**

---

Q1 1. Age

- ☐ Below 25
  - ☐ 25-30
  - ☐ 31-35
  - ☐ 36-40
  - ☐ 41-45
  - ☐ 46-50
  - ☐ Above 50
- 

Q2 2. Gender

- ☐ Male
  - ☐ Female
  - ☐ Prefer not to say
- 

Q3 3. What is your ethnicity?

- ☐ Han
  - ☐ Mongolian
  - ☐ Other, please specify \_\_\_\_\_
- 
-

Q4 5. Marital status

- ☐ Single, never married
  - ☐ Married
  - ☐ Widowed
  - ☐ Divorced
  - ☐ Separated
  - ☐ Prefer not to say
- 

Q6 6. What is the highest level of education you have completed?

- ☐ I have never been to school
- ☐ Primary
- ☐ Secondary
- ☐ Further/higher education

End of Block: Personal Information

---

Start of Block: Work

Q7 7. What is your current occupation?

---

Q8 8. In which city are you currently working?

---

Q9 9. Can you tell me the reasons why you chose to work in this city?

---

Q10 10. What is your motivation to pursue work away from home? (you may choose more than one answer )

- ☐ To earn more money
- ☐ To develop my career
- ☐ To gain new experiences
- ☐ Other, please specify \_\_\_\_\_

End of Block: Work

---

Start of Block: Care arrangement for your child/ren

Q11 11. How many children do you have?

- ☐ 1
  - ☐ 2
  - ☐ 3
  - ☐ More than 3
- 

Q12 12. Are they boarding?

- ☐ Yes
  - ☐ No
- 

Q13 13. Who looks after your child/ren when you are away?

- ☐ My spouse
  - ☐ The paternal grandparent(s) of my child/ren
  - ☐ The maternal grandparent(s) of my child/ren
  - ☐ Other, please specify \_\_\_\_\_
-

Q14 14. How often do you visit your child/ren?

- ☐ 0 – 2 times a year
- ☐ 3 – 4 times a year
- ☐ 4 – 6 times a year
- ☐ More than 6 times a year

End of Block: Care arrangement for your child/ren

---

Start of Block: Long-distance Communication

Q15 15. What devices do you use to keep in touch with your child/ren? (you may choose more than one answer)

- ☐ Landline telephone
  - ☐ Smart phone
  - ☐ Laptop
  - ☐ Computer
  - ☐ Smart watch
  - ☐ Other, please specify
- 

-----

Q16 16. Do you use social media to contact your child/ren?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

Skip To: End of Block If 16. Do you use social media to contact your child/ren? = No

-----

Q17 17. What social media applications do you use to keep in touch with your child/ren? (you may choose more than one answer)

- ☐ WeChat
  - ☐ QQ
  - ☐ Weibo
  - ☐ Other, please specify
- 

---

Q18 18. How do you use social media applications to contact your child/ren when you are working away from home (Please rank the options starting with 1 for the function you use most frequently. If there is an option you are not using in your daily life, leave the field empty. Assigning the same number twice will empty the previous field)

- \_\_\_\_\_ Audio call
  - \_\_\_\_\_ Video call
  - \_\_\_\_\_ Text Message
  - \_\_\_\_\_ Voice message
  - \_\_\_\_\_ Red package
  - \_\_\_\_\_ Stickers
- 

Q19 19. How often do you contact your child/ren via social media applications?

- ☐ Daily
  - ☐ 2-3 times a week
  - ☐ Once a week
  - ☐ Once every two weeks
  - ☐ Once a month
-

Q20 20. When you video/audio call your child/ren, how long is each call on average?

- ☐ Less than 10 minutes
  - ☐ 10-15 minutes
  - ☐ 16-30 minutes
  - ☐ 31-45 minutes
  - ☐ 46-60 minutes
  - ☐ More than 60 minutes
- 

Q21 21. When you contact your child/ren, which language do you use?

- ☐ Mandarin
  - ☐ Mongolian
  - ☐ Mix
  - ☐ Other, please specify \_\_\_\_\_
- 

Q22 22. Can you please identify the topics that you and your child/ren normally discuss via social media applications? (please choose more than one answer)

- ☐ His/her homework
  - ☐ Food
  - ☐ His/her school life
  - ☐ Relationship with his/her carers or other family members?
  - ☐ My work
  - ☐ Other, please specify \_\_\_\_\_
-



Q23 23. What is the advantage of using social media in terms of the interaction between you and your child/ren?

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Q24 24. What is the downside of using social media in terms of the interaction between you and your child/ren?

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End of Block: Long-distance Communication

Start of Block: Children's media access

Q25 25. Is internet access available at home/carers' place?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Q26 26. What type of internet access is available at home/carers' place?

☐ Cables

☐ Wireless (Wi-Fi)

☐ Cellular (3G/4G/5G)

☐ Satellite

Q27 27. Does the child have his/her own digital devices?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Other, please specify \_\_\_\_\_
- 

*Display This Question:*

*If 27. Does the child have his/her own digital devices? = No*

Q28 28. What digital devices are available at cares' home for child/ren to contact you?

- ☐ Laptop
- ☐ Smartphone
- ☐ Smartwatch
- ☐ Tablet
- ☐ Other, please specify \_\_\_\_\_
- 

Q29 29. Does the child need help from carers when she/he wants to contact you?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Other, please specify \_\_\_\_\_
- 

Q30 30. During the Covid-19 pandemic, has you child encountered any difficulty attending online classes due to limited media access?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Other, please specify \_\_\_\_\_

End of Block: Children's media access

---

Start of Block: Family Relationships

**Finally, I'd like to ask you a few questions about family relationships**

---

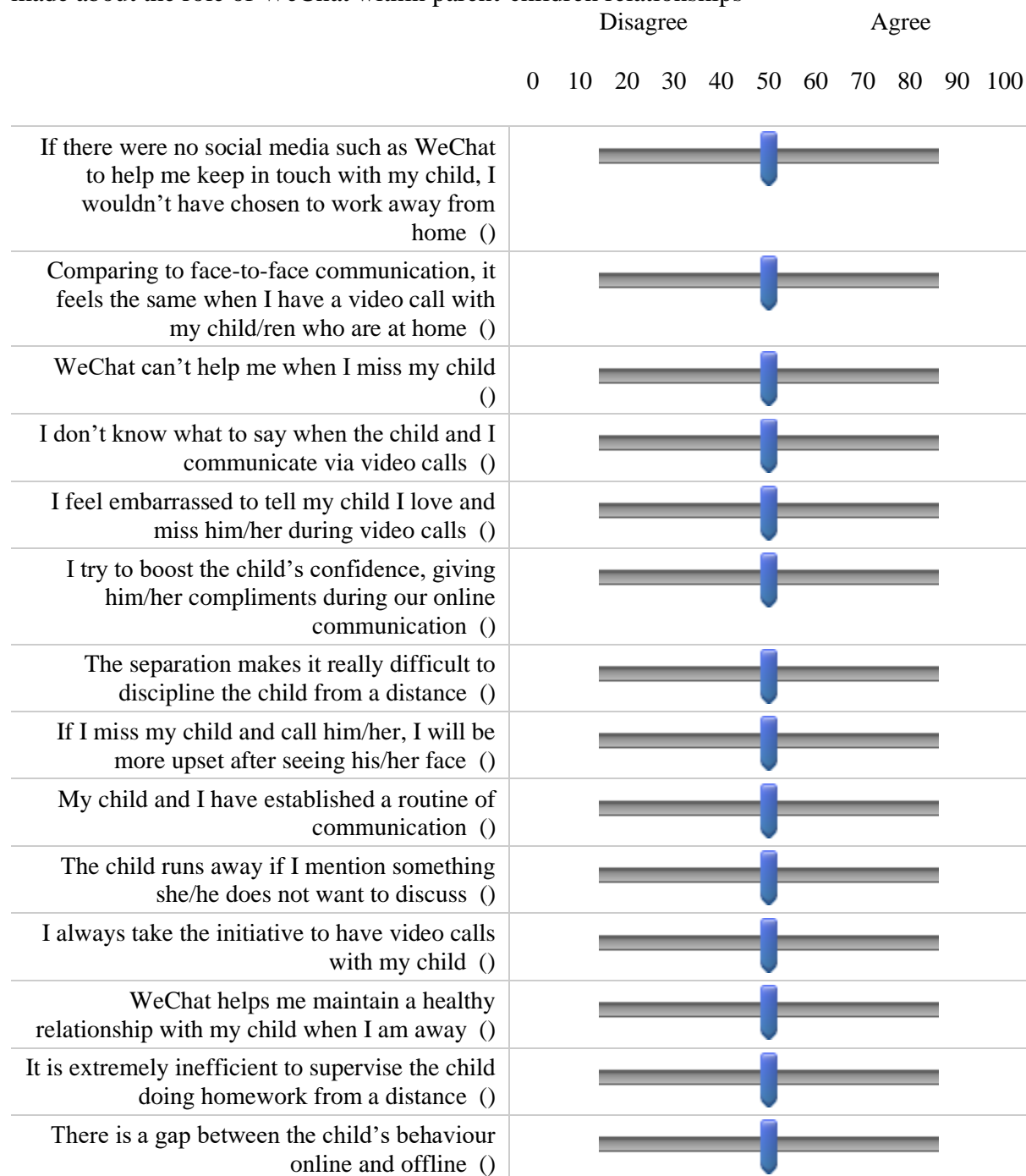
Q31 31. When you miss your child/ren, how would you cope with the feeling? Can you please write down at least three strategies of your own.

---

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Page Break

Q32 32. To what extent do you agree with the following statements that other parents have made about the role of WeChat within parent-children relationships



Q33 33. What do you think about the following statements that other parents have made about their role as a parent?









Disagree Agree

Sometimes I question my decision when I saw my child miss me so much ()	
I get used to the care arrangement in my family. If intensive parenting is needed, I even feel overwhelmed and want to go back to work ()	
I feel sorry for my child because I can't accompany him/her all the time ()	
The child may not understand my decision right now. However, he/she will understand me one day ()	
I will return home when my child attend junior high and has more academic pressure ()	
Sometimes I feel that it is unfair because my child-parent relationship is not good enough. But what I did is for my child/ren to have a better future ()	
It is hard to be a good parent. In the meanwhile, it is extremely difficult to be a good parent from a distance ()	
I tried to make it up for my child by satisfying his/her material needs ()	
I think my child-parent relationship is fine despite the separation because blood is thicker than water ()	
I don't know how to be a good parent. Sometimes, I feel really helpless ()	
I have no choice but to leave the child behind since the whole family expects me to be the breadwinner ()	

Q34 34. What do you think about the following statements that other parents have made about the role of the carers in your family

Disagree

Agree

If I don't have someone whom I can trust, it is very difficult to leave my child behind ()	
The child feels at home when his/her carer is taking care of him/her ()	
The child has a better relationship with the carer since I don't spend much time with him/her ()	
I think my parenting style is more reasonable than the carers who tend to spoil the child ()	
The carers understand the child better in terms of his/her personality ()	
The child would listen to his/her carer rather than following my orders ()	
The carers are not able to help the child with his/her homework, the child's academic performance more or less get affected. ()	
In terms of parenting, carers have their own way to discipline the child. Sometimes, I'm not a big fan of it. ()	

Q35 35. What are the major challenges for you to fulfil your role as a parent from a distance?

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Q36 36. How do you overcome them?

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Q37 37. If given a second chance, what would you prefer?

- ☐ I'd rather stay at home with children
- ☐ I'd still choose to work away from home
- ☐ I don't know. I need to think about that

End of Block: Family Relationships

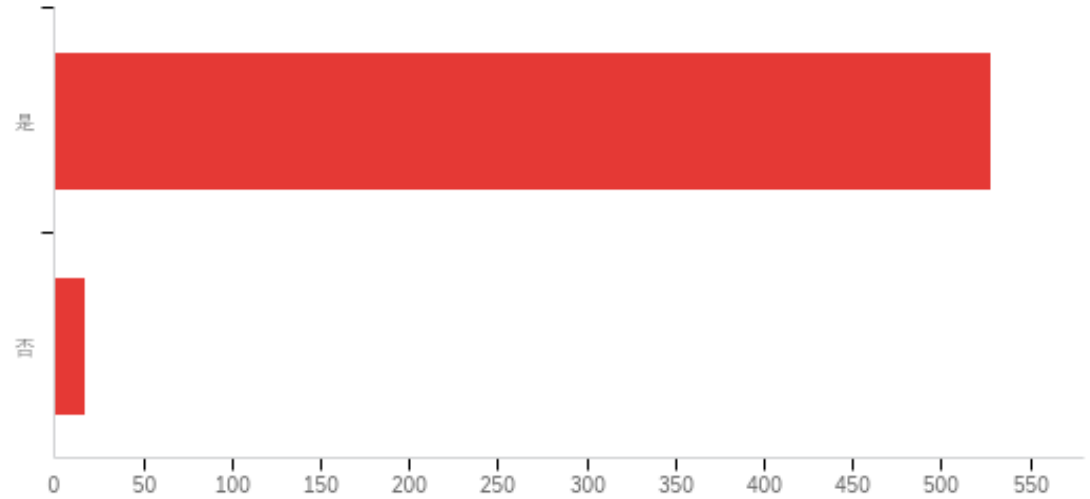
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## Appendix 6: Parental Survey Results

社交媒体视阈下中国人口流动与家庭关系研究

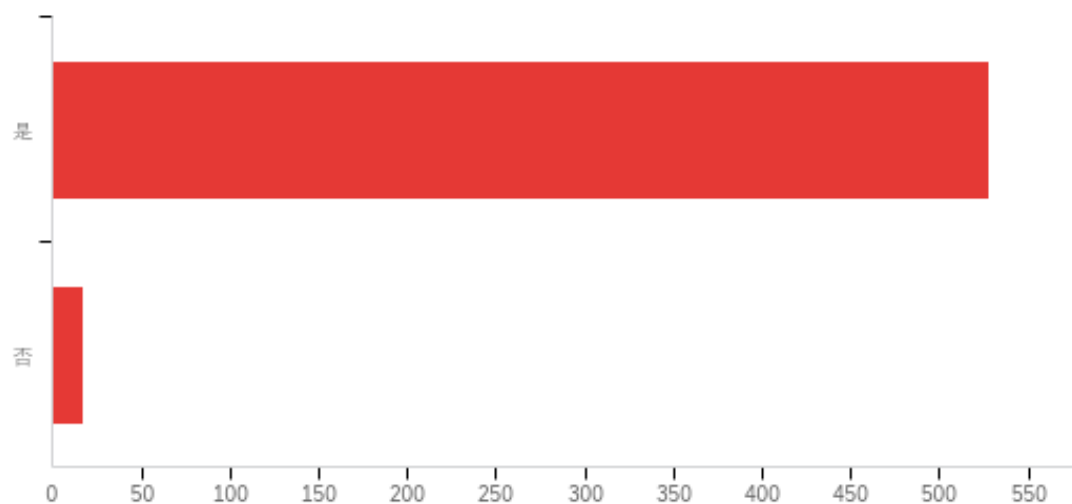
June 28th 2023, 11:06 am MDT

### New Custom Page





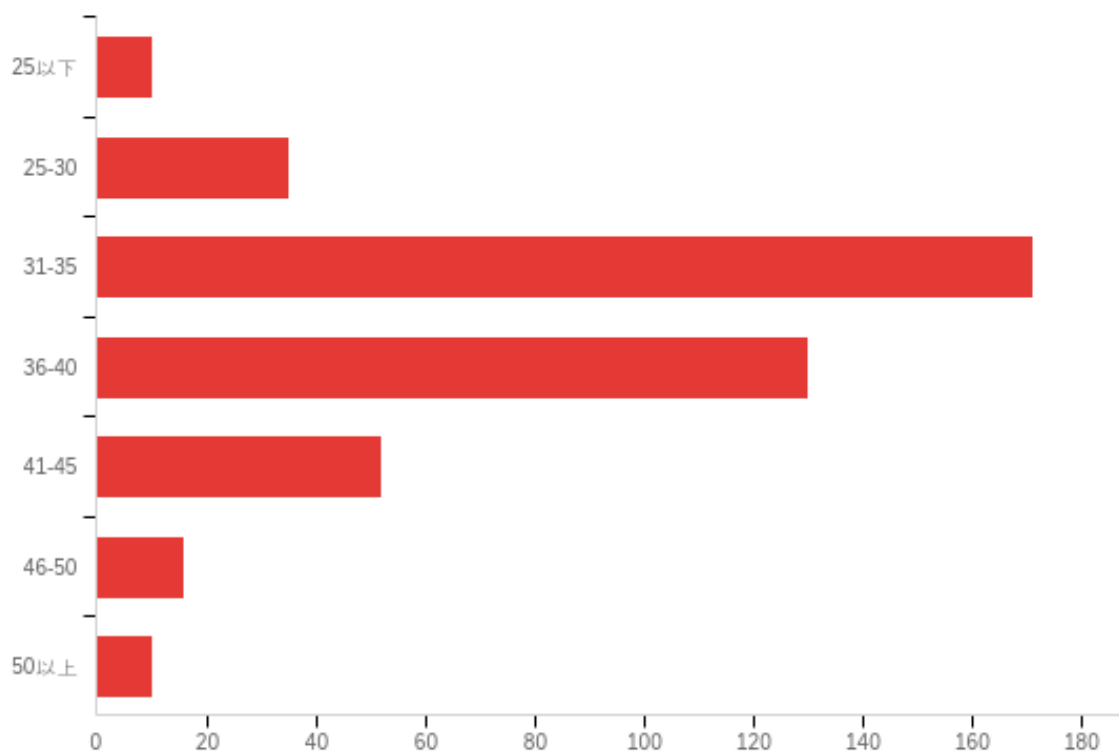
## Q2 - 我阅读了项目信息说明， 同意参与以下问卷。



#	Field	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std Deviation	Variance	Count
1	我阅读了项目信息说明， 同意参与以下问卷。	1.00	2.00	1.03	0.17	0.03	545

#	Answer	%	Count
1	是	96.88%	528
2	否	3.12%	17
	Total	100%	545

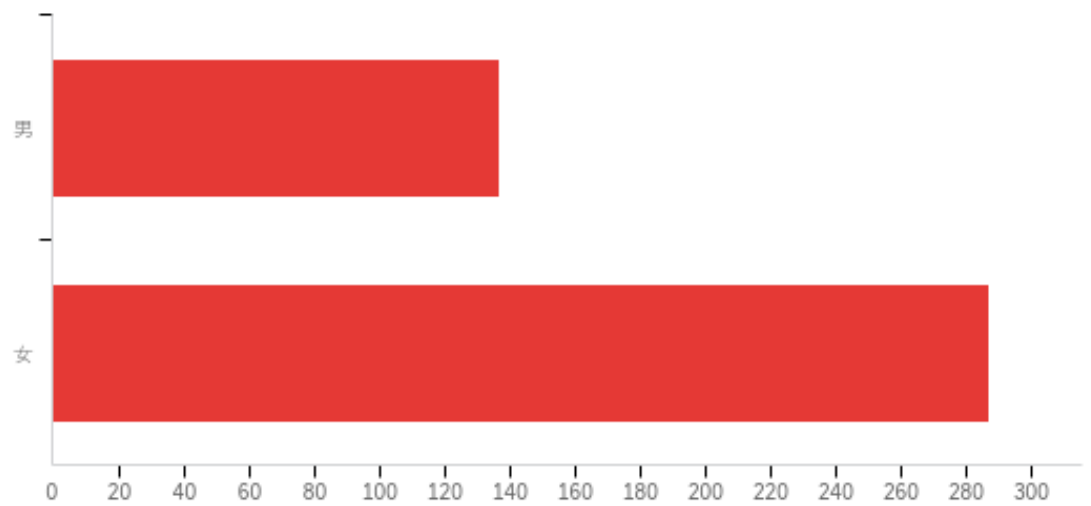
### Q3 - 1. 年龄



#	Field	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std Deviation	Variance	Count
1	1. 年龄	1.00	7.00	3.63	1.14	1.29	424

#	Answer	%	Count
1	25以下	2.36%	10
2	25-30	8.25%	35
3	31-35	40.33%	171
4	36-40	30.66%	130
5	41-45	12.26%	52
6	46-50	3.77%	16
7	50以上	2.36%	10
	Total	100%	424

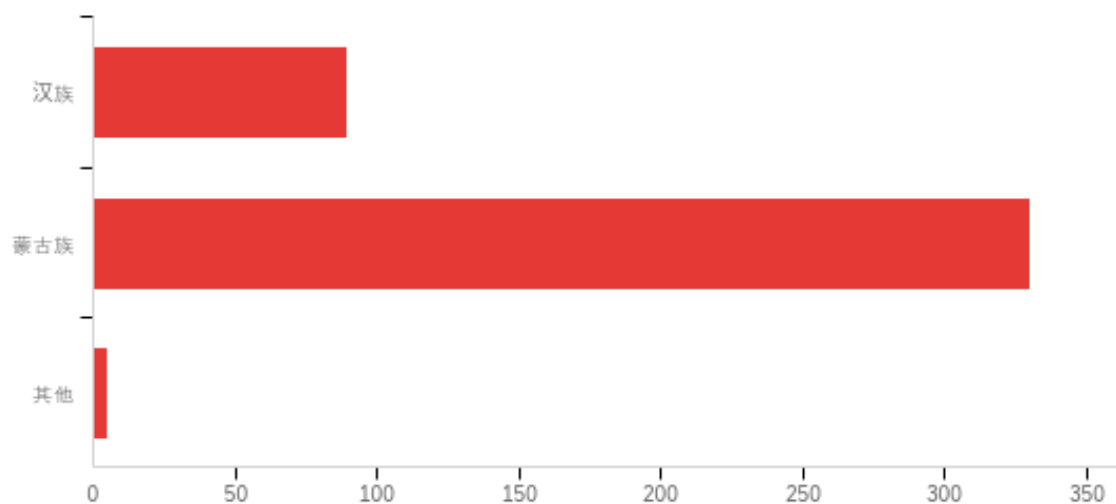
#### Q4 - 2. 性别



#	Field	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std Deviation	Variance	Count
1	2. 性别	1.00	2.00	1.68	0.47	0.22	424

#	Answer	%	Count
1	男	32.31%	137
2	女	67.69%	287
	Total	100%	424

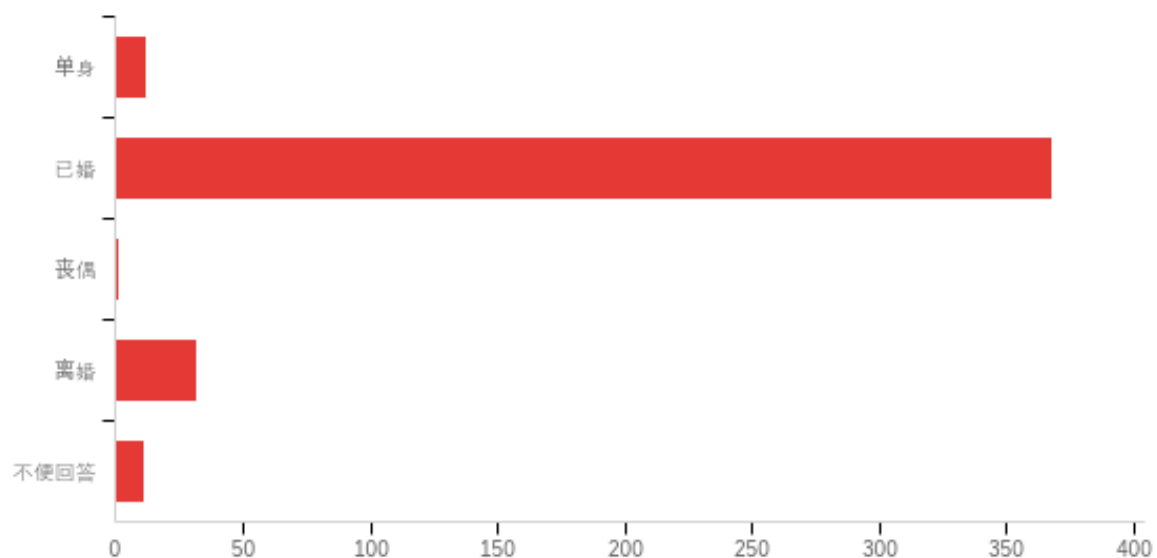
## Q5 - 3. 民族



#	Field	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std Deviation	Variance	Count
1	3. 民族 - Selected Choice	1.00	3.00	1.80	0.43	0.18	424

#	Answer	%	Count
1	汉族	20.99%	89
2	蒙古族	77.83%	330
3	其他	1.18%	5
	Total	100%	424

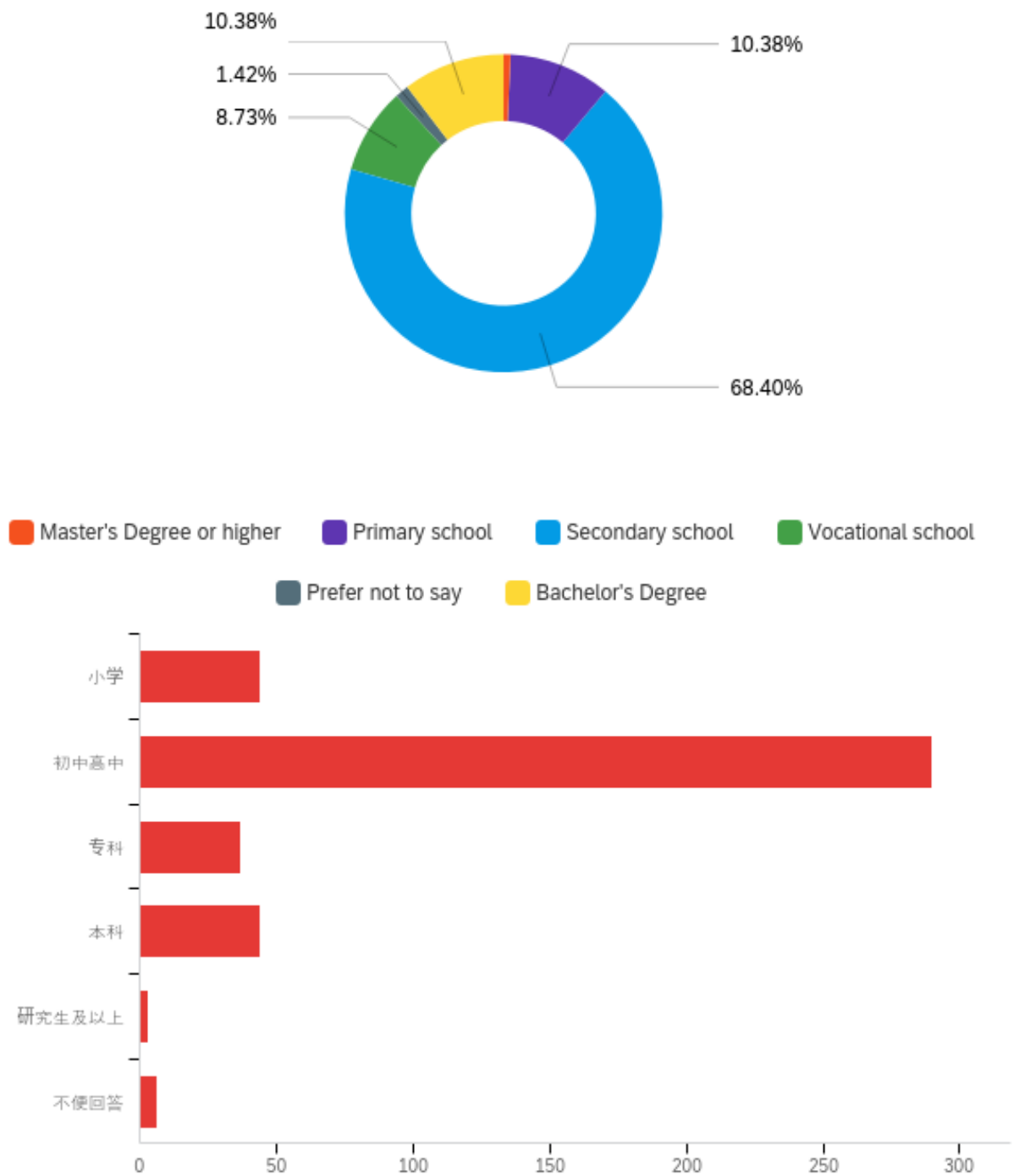
## Q10 - 5. 婚姻状况



#	Field	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std Deviation	Variance	Count
1	5. 婚姻状况	1.00	5.00	2.20	0.72	0.52	424

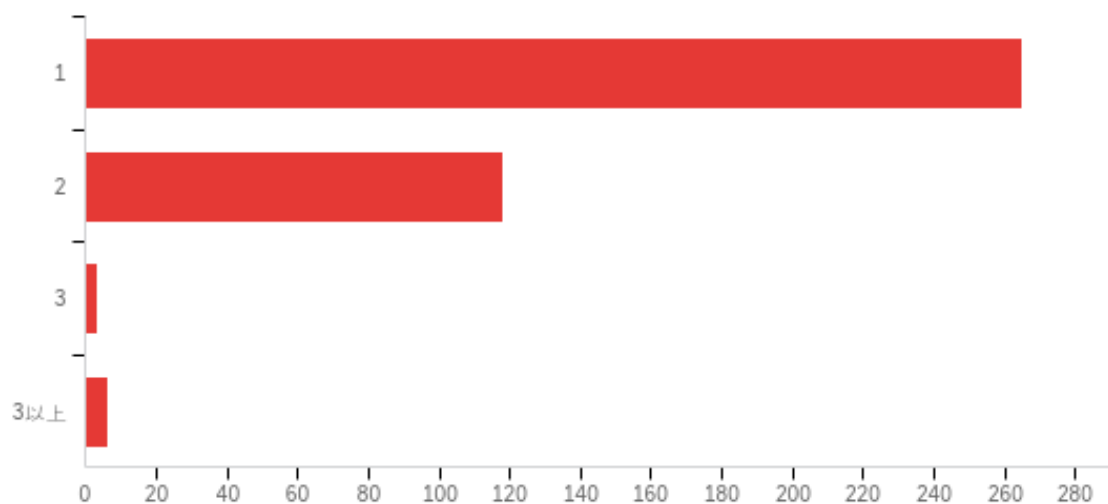
#	Answer	%	Count
1	单身	2.83%	12
2	已婚	86.79%	368
3	丧偶	0.24%	1
4	离婚	7.55%	32
5	不便回答	2.59%	11
	Total	100%	424

# Q11 - 6. 学历 Q11 - 6. 学历



#	Field	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std Deviation	Variance	Count
1	6. 学历	1.00	6.00	2.27	0.91	0.82	424

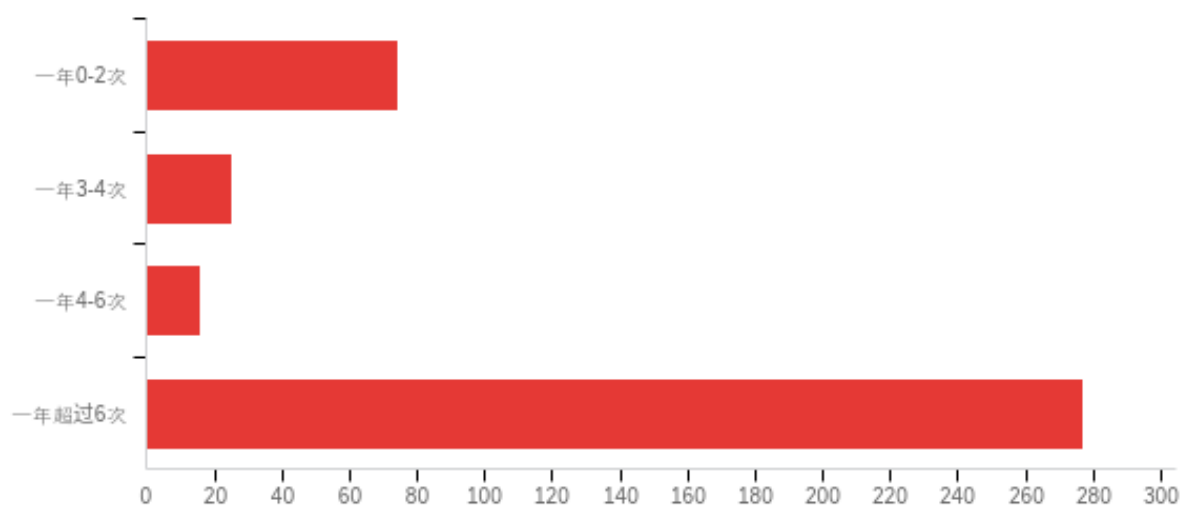
# Q17 - 10. 您有几个孩子？



#	Field	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std Deviation	Variance	Count
1	10. 您有几个孩子？	1.00	4.00	1.36	0.58	0.34	392

#	Answer	%	Count
1	1	67.60%	265
2	2	30.10%	118
3	3	0.77%	3
4	3以上	1.53%	6
	Total	100%	392

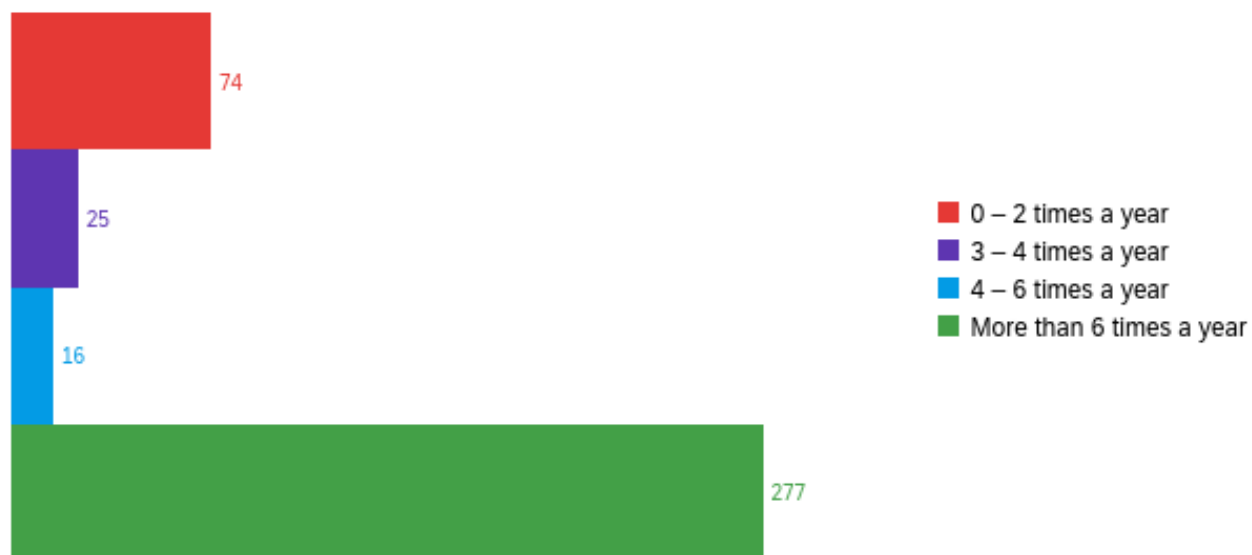
## Q20 - 13. 您多长时间和孩子见一次面？



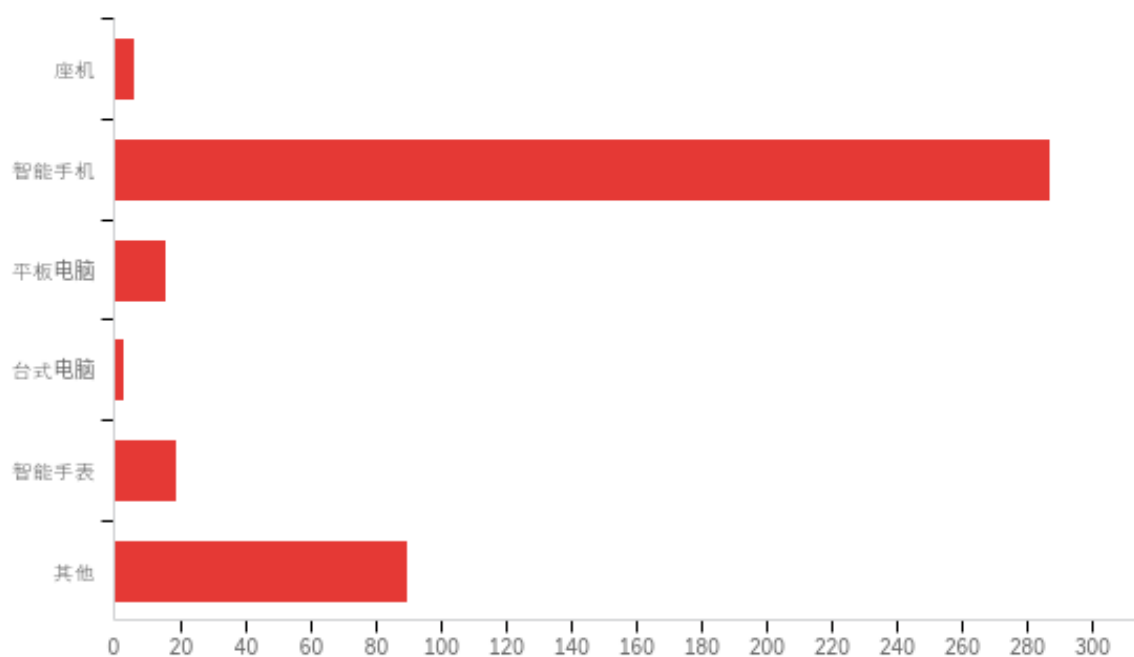
#	Field	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std Deviation	Variance	Count
1	13. 您多长时间和孩子见一次面？	1.00	4.00	3.27	1.21	1.46	392

#	Answer	%	Count
1	一年0-2次	18.88%	74
2	一年3-4次	6.38%	25
3	一年4-6次	4.08%	16
4	一年超过6次	70.66%	277
	Total	100%	392



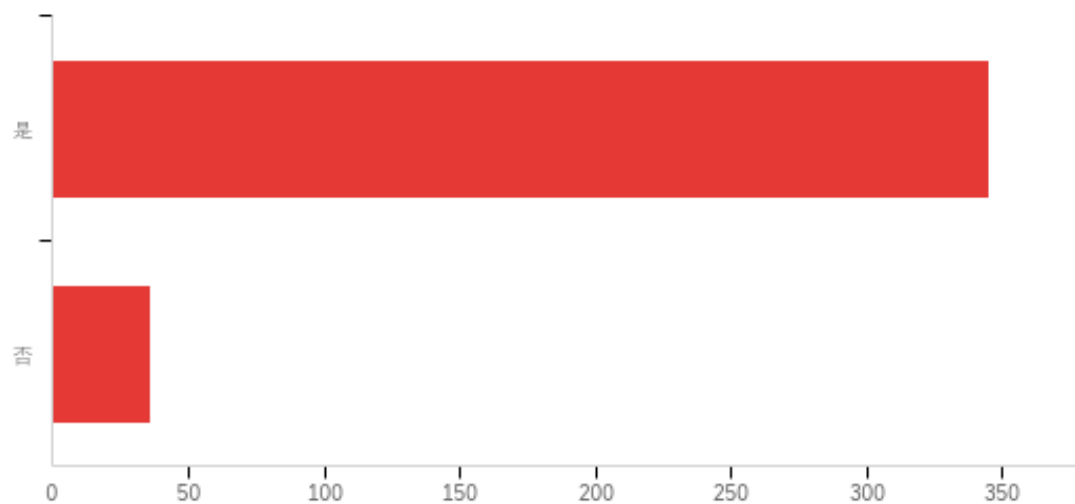


### Q23 - 14. 您平时使用什么设备和孩子保持联系？（多选）



#	Answer	%	Count
1	座机	1.43%	6
2	智能手机	68.17%	287
3	平板电脑	3.80%	16
4	台式电脑	0.71%	3
5	智能手表	4.51%	19
6	其他	21.38%	90
	Total	100%	421

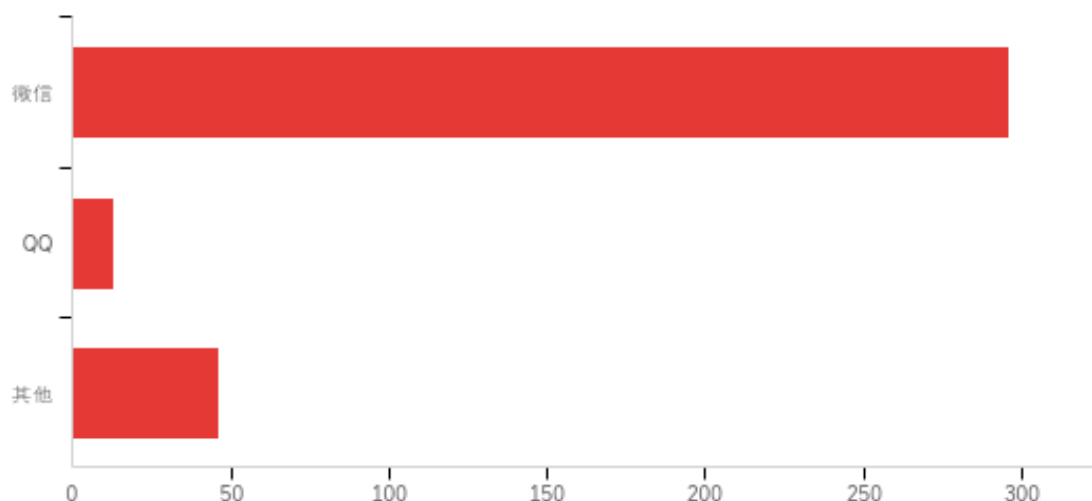
### Q24 - 15. 您会使用社交媒体(如微信)和孩子保持联系吗？



#	Field	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std Deviation	Variance	Count
1	15. 您会使用社交媒体(如微信)和孩子保持联系吗？	1.00	2.00	1.09	0.29	0.09	381

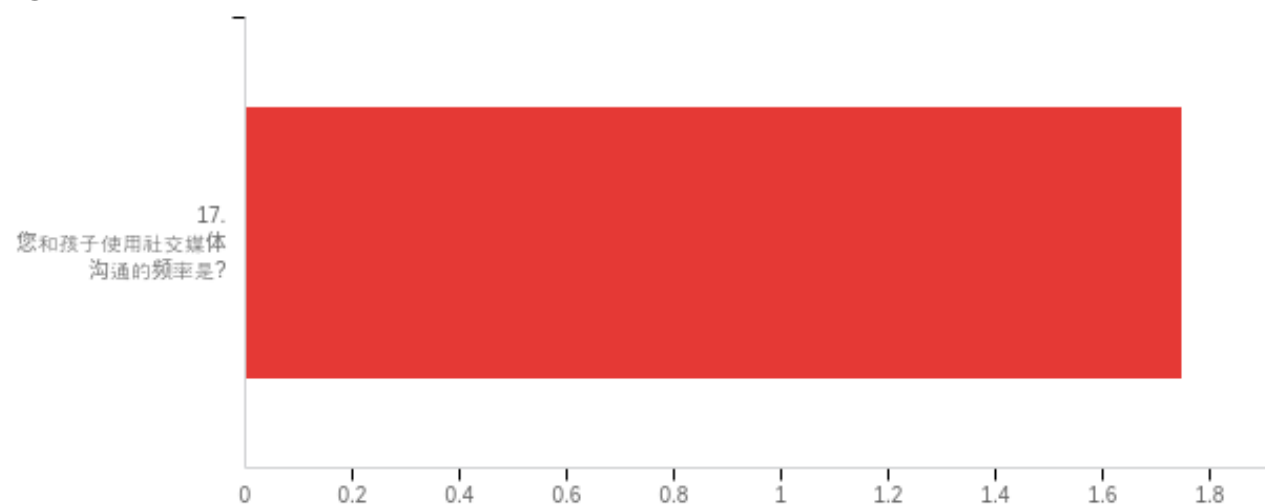
#	Answer	%	Count
1	是	90.55%	345
2	否	9.45%	36
	Total	100%	381

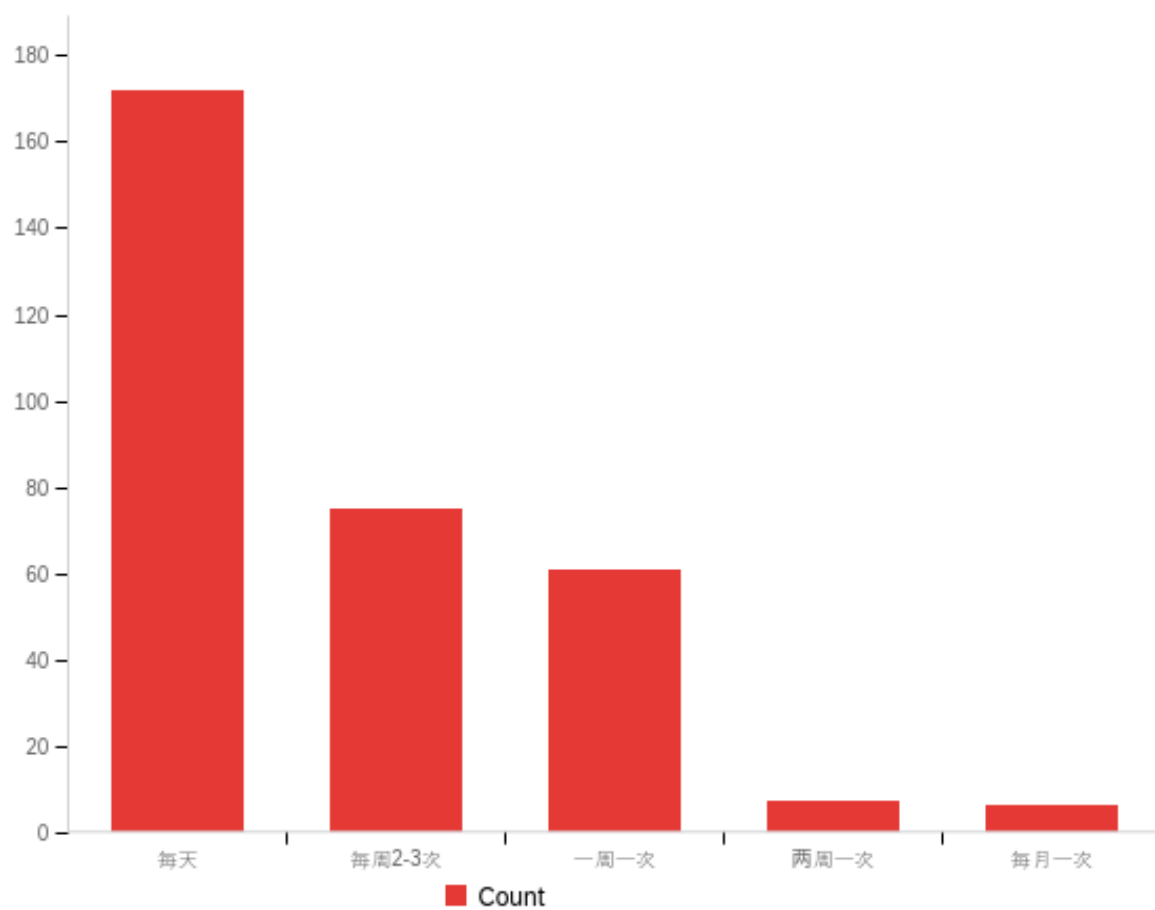
**Q25 - 16. 您平日会使用什么社交媒体软件与您的孩子保持联络？（多选）**



#	Answer	%	Count
1	微信	83.38%	296
2	QQ	3.66%	13
3	其他	12.96%	46
	Total	100%	355

**Q26 - 17. 您和孩子使用社交媒体沟通的频率是？**

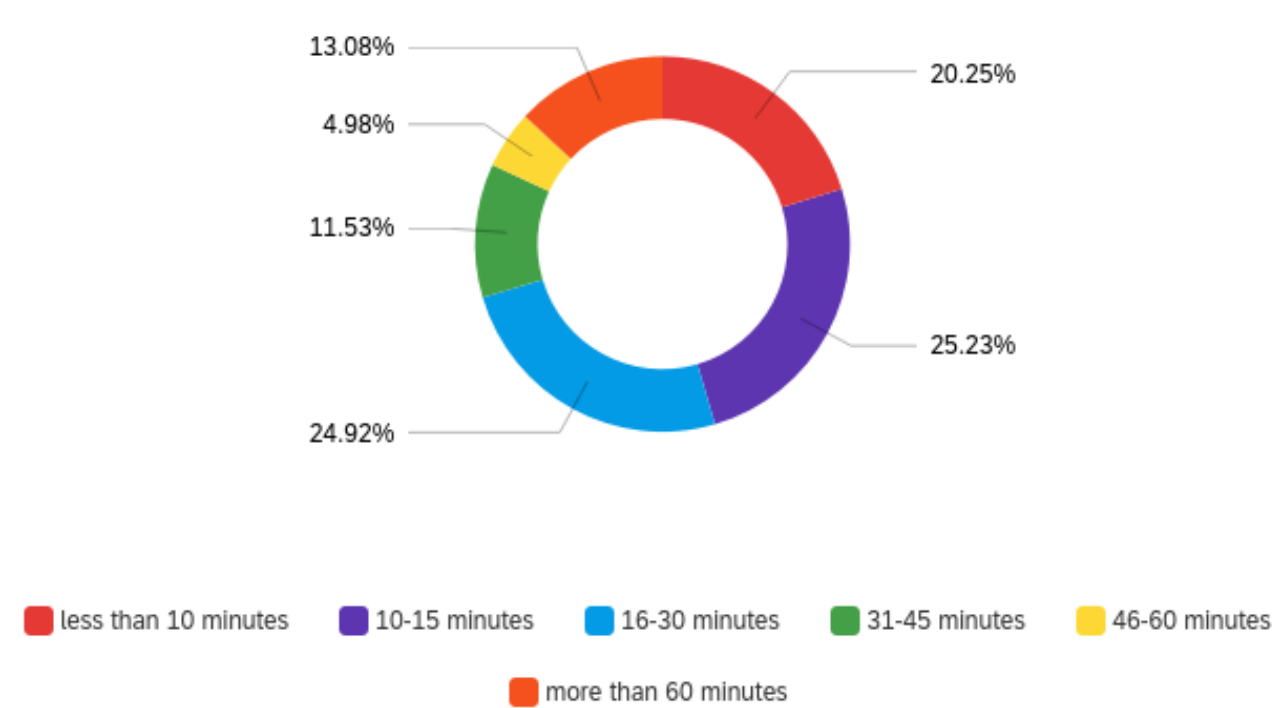




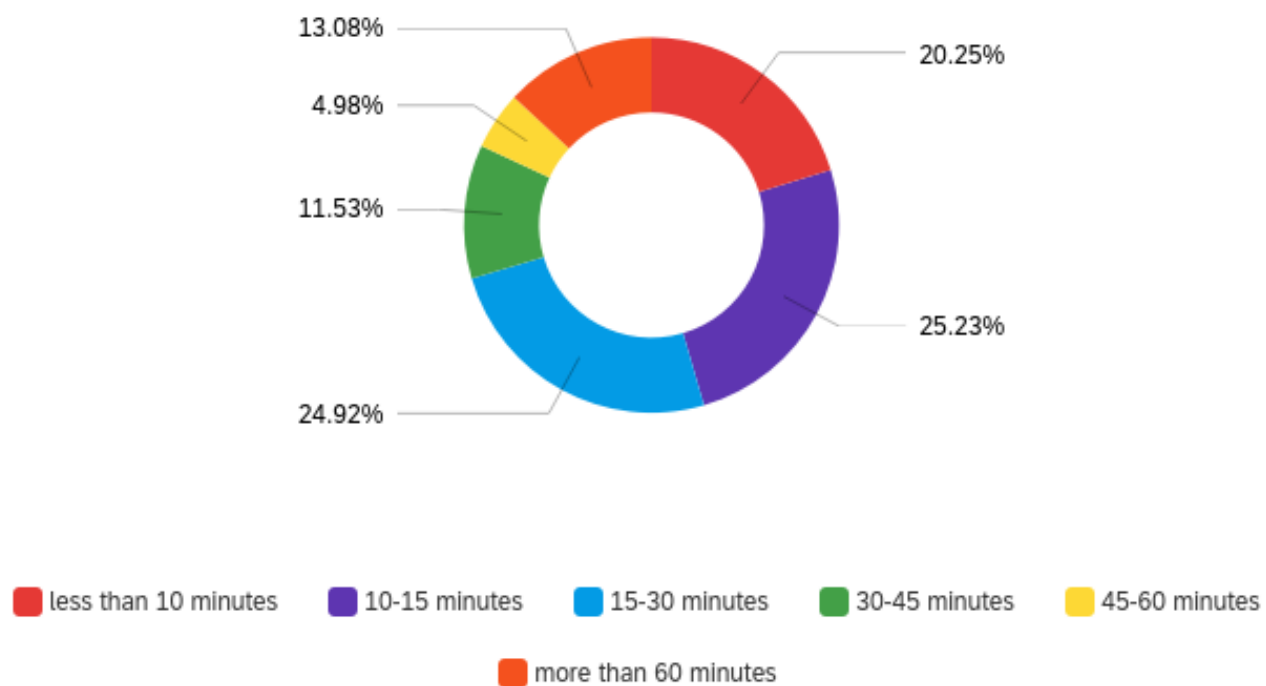
#	Answer	%	Count
1	每天	53.58%	172
2	每周2-3次	23.36%	75
3	一周一次	19.00%	61
4	两周一次	2.18%	7
5	每月一次	1.87%	6
	Total	100%	321

Q27 - 18.

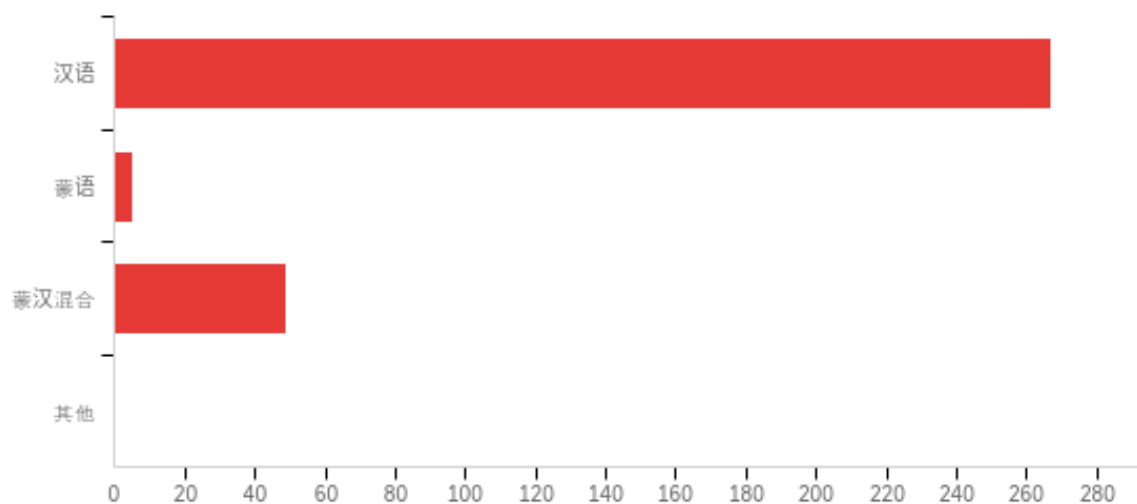
当您使用视频/语音通话与孩子保持沟通时， 每次通话时长是多少？



#	Field	Mini mum	Maxi mum	Me an	Std Devi ation	Vari ance	Co unt
1	18. 当您使用视频/语音通话与孩子保持沟通时， 每次通话时长是多少？	1.00	6.00	2.95	1.60	2.55	321



## Q28 - 19. 您和孩子线上沟通时会使用什么语言？

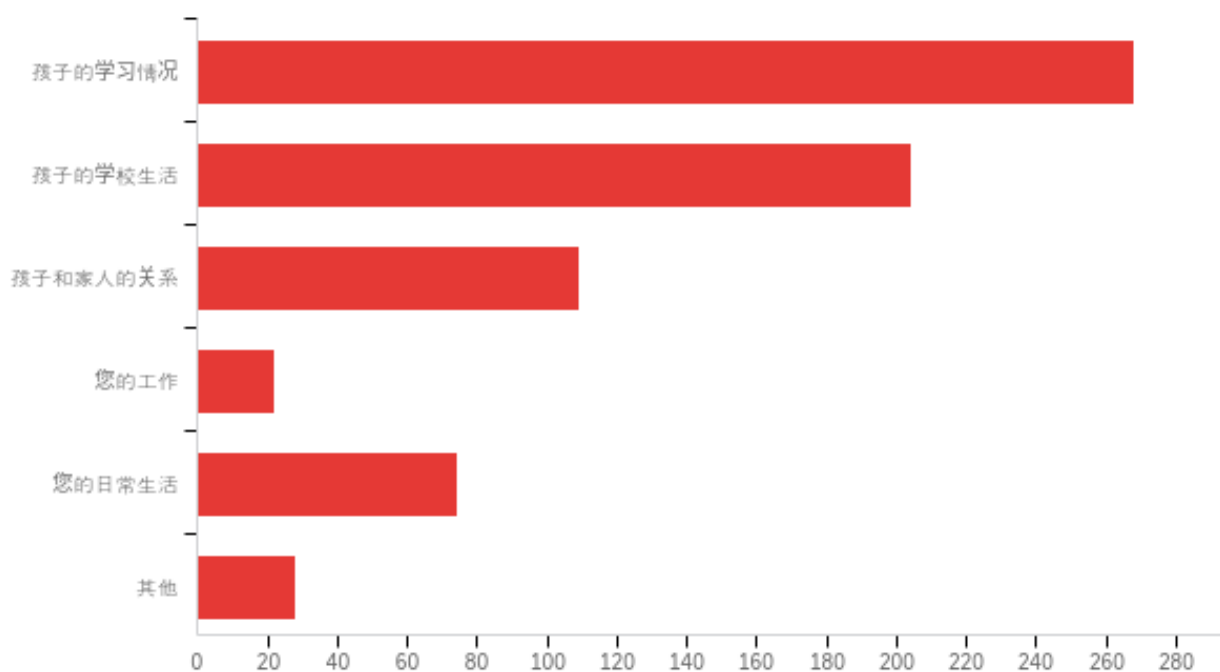


#	Field	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std Deviation	Variance	Count
1	19. 您和孩子线上沟通时会使用什么语言？	1.00	3.00	1.32	0.72	0.52	321

#	Answer	%	Count
1	汉语	83.18%	267
2	蒙语	1.56%	5
3	蒙汉混合	15.26%	49
4	其他	0.00%	0
	Total	100%	321



## Q29 - 20. 您和孩子使用微信沟通时会讨论什么话题？（多选）



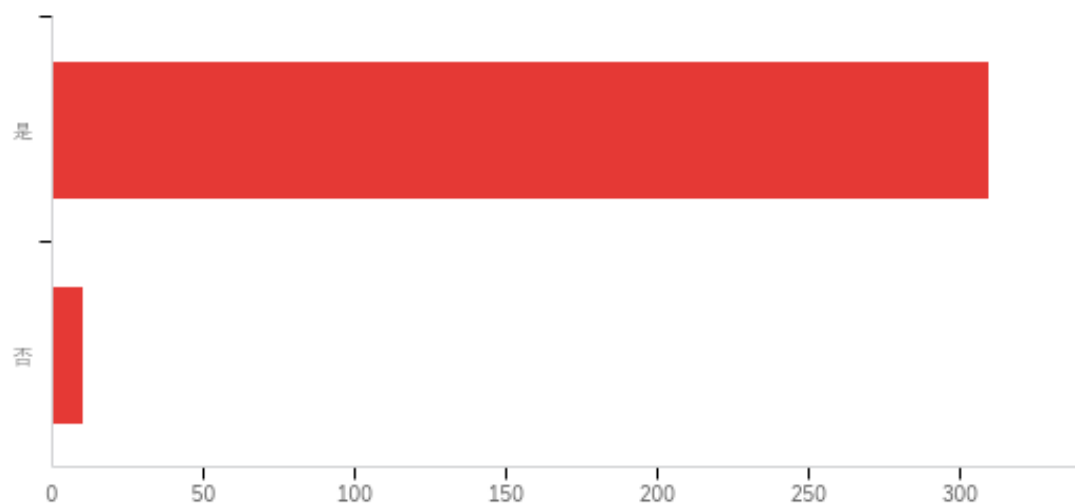
#	Answer	%	Count
1	孩子的学习情况	38.01%	268
2	孩子的学校生活	28.94%	204
3	孩子和家人的关系	15.46%	109
4	您的工作	3.12%	22
5	您的日常生活	10.50%	74
6	其他	3.97%	28
	Total	100%	705

## Q29\_6\_TEXT - 其他

其他 - Text

都有

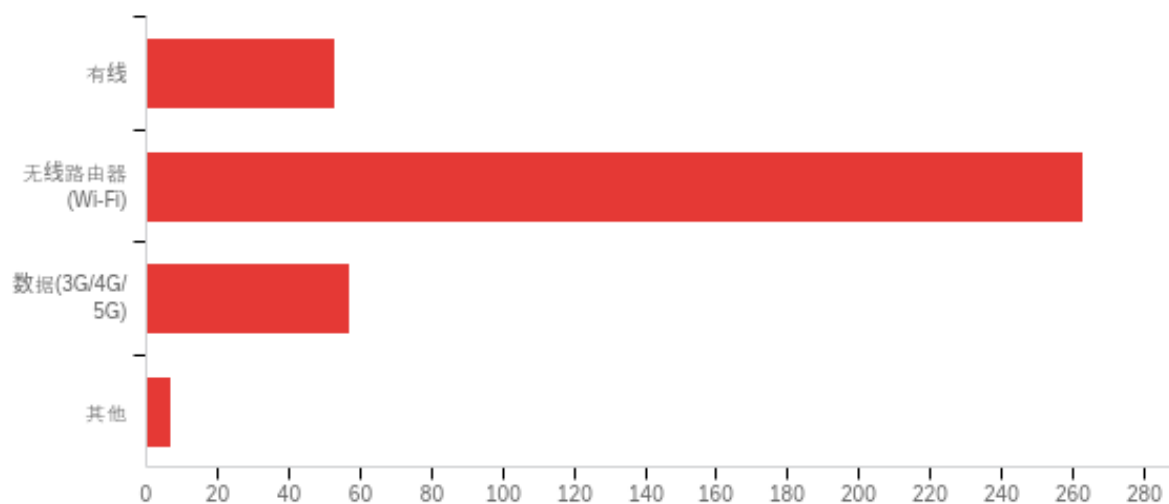
### Q32 - 23. 孩子的抚养人家中是否有网络？



#	Field	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std Deviation	Variance	Count
1	23. 孩子的抚养人家中是否有网络？	1.00	2.00	1.03	0.17	0.03	320

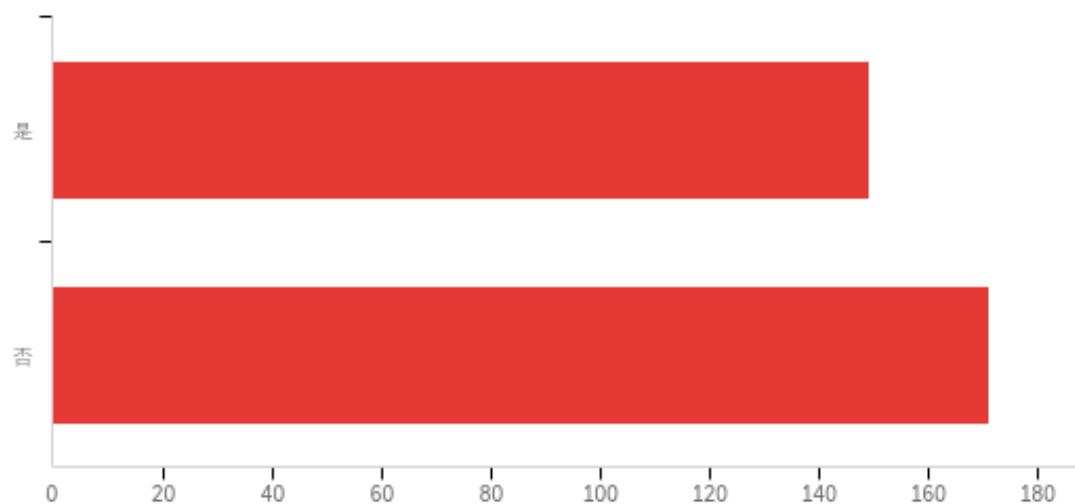
#	Answer	%	Count
1	是	96.88%	310
2	否	3.13%	10
	Total	100%	320

### Q33 - 24. 抚养人家中是什么种类的网络？（多选）



#	Answer	%	Count
1	有线	13.95%	53
2	无线路由器 （Wi-Fi）	69.21%	263
3	数据 （3G/4G/5G）	15.00%	57
4	其他	1.84%	7
	Total	100%	380

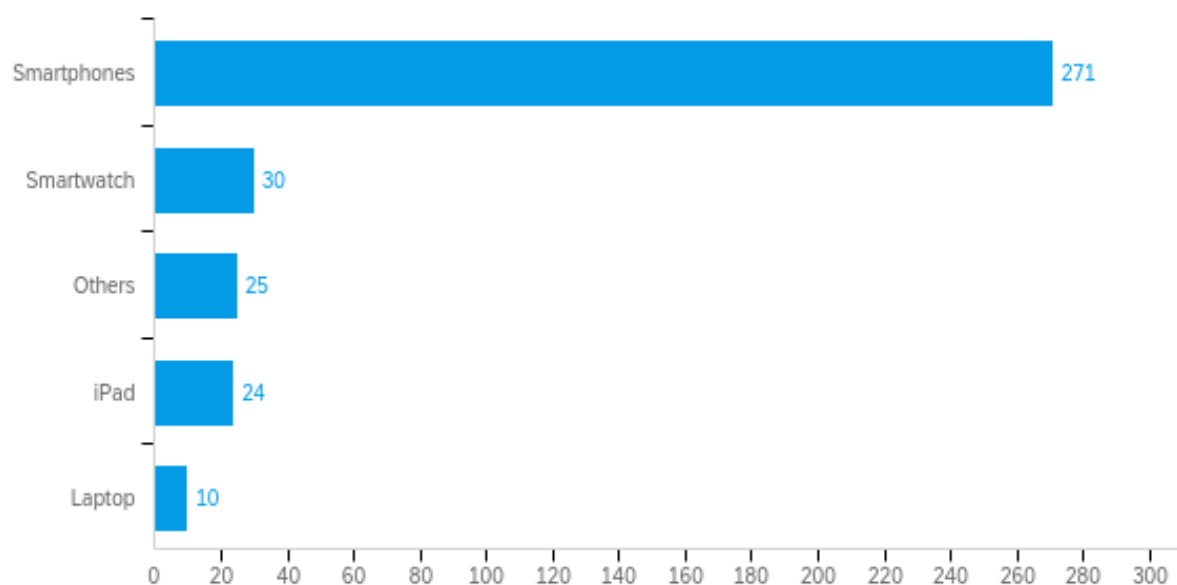
### Q34 - 25. 您的孩子有自己的通讯（电子）设备吗？



#	Field	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std Deviation	Variance	Count
1	25. 您的孩子有自己的通讯（电子）设备吗？	1.00	2.00	1.53	0.50	0.25	320

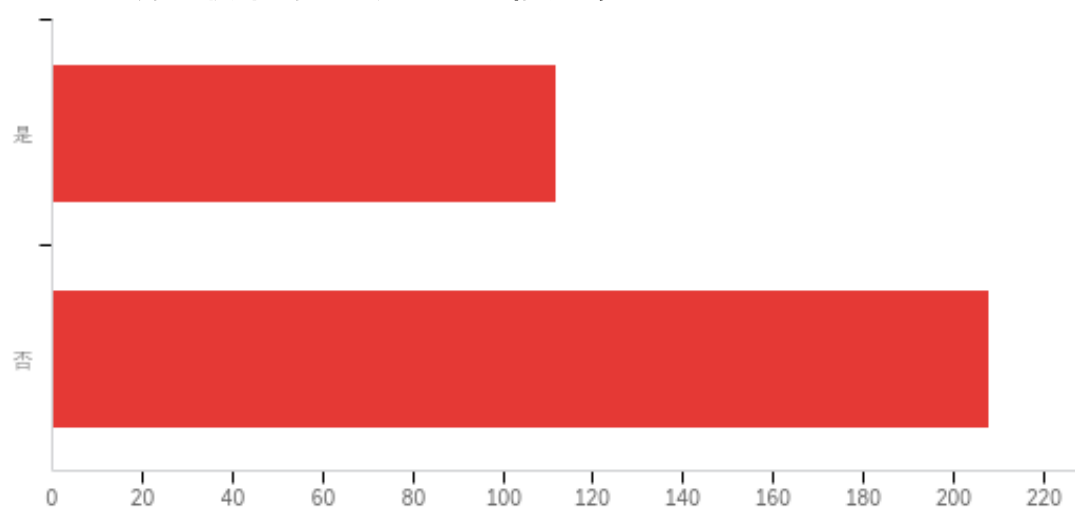
#	Answer	%	Count
1	是	46.56%	149
2	否	53.44%	171
	Total	100%	320

### Q35 - 26. 孩子日常使用什么电子设备与您保持联系？（多选）



#	Answer	%	Count
1	笔记本电脑	2.78%	10
2	智能手机	75.28%	271
3	智能手表	8.33%	30
4	平板电脑	6.67%	24
5	其他	6.94%	25
	Total	100%	360

### Q36 - 27. 孩子与您线上联系时需要他人的帮助吗？



#	Field	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std Deviation	Variance	Count
1	27. 孩子与您线上联系时需要他人的帮助吗？	1.00	2.00	1.65	0.48	0.23	320

#	Answer	%	Count
1	是	35.00%	112
2	否	65.00%	208
	Total	100%	320

# Q40 - 31.

对于其他家长关于“微信在亲子关系中作用”的看法，您在多大程度上赞同或者反对？（请选择您觉得赞同或者反对的程度）

#	Field	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std Deviation	Variance	Count
1	我觉得和孩子视频聊天时的感觉和线下面对面沟通差不多。	1.00	5.00	2.97	0.98	0.96	273
2	如果非常想念孩子，视频看到他/她的样子后，我会更加难过。	1.00	5.00	3.16	0.92	0.85	245
3	有时候用微信和孩子聊天时，我都不知道该说些什么，说“想他、爱他”挺尴尬的。	1.00	5.00	3.04	1.08	1.16	224
4	远距离、线上管教孩子其实比较困难。	1.00	5.00	3.80	0.88	0.77	205
5	我在外工作期间，微信帮助我与孩子保持了比较健康的亲子关系。	1.00	5.00	3.63	0.90	0.80	211
6	孩子线上和线下的行为是有差异的，我对于孩子实际的行为缺乏了解。	1.00	5.00	3.75	0.88	0.77	209

#	Question	非常反对	比较反对	既不赞成也不反对	比较赞同	非常赞同	Total
1	我觉得和孩子视频聊天时的感觉和线下面对面沟通差不多。	8.79%	24%	20.15%	39.93%	10.9%	273
2	如果非常想念孩子，视频看到他/她的样子后，我会更加难过。	4.90%	12%	15.51%	44.49%	10.9%	245
3	有时候用微信和孩子聊天时，我都不知道该说些什么，说“想他、爱他”挺尴尬的。	10.27%	23%	19.20%	33.04%	7.4%	224
4	远距离、线上管教孩子其实比较困难。	1.95%	4%	6.83%	18.54%	38%	205
5	我在外工作期间，微信帮助我与孩子保持了比较健康的亲子关系。	3.32%	7%	5.69%	28.44%	60%	211
6	孩子线上和线下的行为是有差异的，我对于孩子实际的行为缺乏了解。	1.44%	3%	7.18%	24.40%	51%	209

# Q41 - 32.

对于其他家长关于“父母在家庭中角色”的观点，您在多大程度赞成或者反对？（请选择您觉得赞同或者反对的程度）

#	Field	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std Deviation	Variance	Count
1	当看到孩子那么想我时，有的时候我也会质疑自己外出工作的选择。	1.00	5.00	3.58	0.92	0.84	261
2	我比较习惯现在和孩子的相处方式，如果亲子时间太长我有不适应的感觉，特别想回去工作。	1.00	5.00	2.84	1.08	1.17	224
3	对于孩子我感觉有点抱歉，因为没有在身边陪伴他/她。回家时我会有补偿孩子的心态，尽量满足他/她的物质需求。	1.00	5.00	3.43	1.03	1.06	222
4	孩子现在可能没有办法理解我的选择，可是他/她长大了就能理解了。	1.00	5.00	3.65	0.81	0.66	217
5	孩子上初中或者高中学业压力变大了，我会考虑回到孩子身边陪伴。	1.00	5.00	3.98	0.72	0.51	215
6	我的亲子关系非常好，即使我们分隔异地但是毕竟血浓于水。	1.00	5.00	3.55	1.04	1.09	211

#	Question	非常反对	比较反对	既不赞成也不反对	比较赞同	非常赞同	Total
1	当看到孩子那么想我时，有的时候我也会质疑自己外出工作的选择。	2.68%	8.43%	30.65%	44.83%	13.41%	261
2	我比较习惯现在和孩子的相处方式，如果亲子时间太长我有不适应的感觉，特别想回去工作。	11.61%	27.23%	32.59%	22.77%	5.80%	224
3	对于孩子我感觉有点抱歉，因为没有在身边陪伴他/她。回家时我会有补偿孩子的心态，尽量满足他/她的物质需求。	4.95%	12.16%	31.53%	37.84%	13.51%	222



4	孩子现在可能没有办法理解我的选择，可是他/她长大了就能理解了。	2.7 6 %	6	3.2 3 %	7	30.88 %	6 7	53. 00 %	1 5	10. 14 %	2 2	2 1 7
5	孩子上初中或者高中学业压力变大了，我会考虑回到孩子身边陪伴。	0.4 7 %	1	0.9 3 %	2	20.93 %	4 5	55. 35 %	1 9	22. 33 %	4 8	2 1 5
6	我的亲子关系非常好，即使我们分隔异地但是毕竟血浓于水。	5.2 1 %	1 1	9.0 0 %	1 9	28.91 %	6 1	39. 34 %	8 3	17. 54 %	3 7	2 1 1

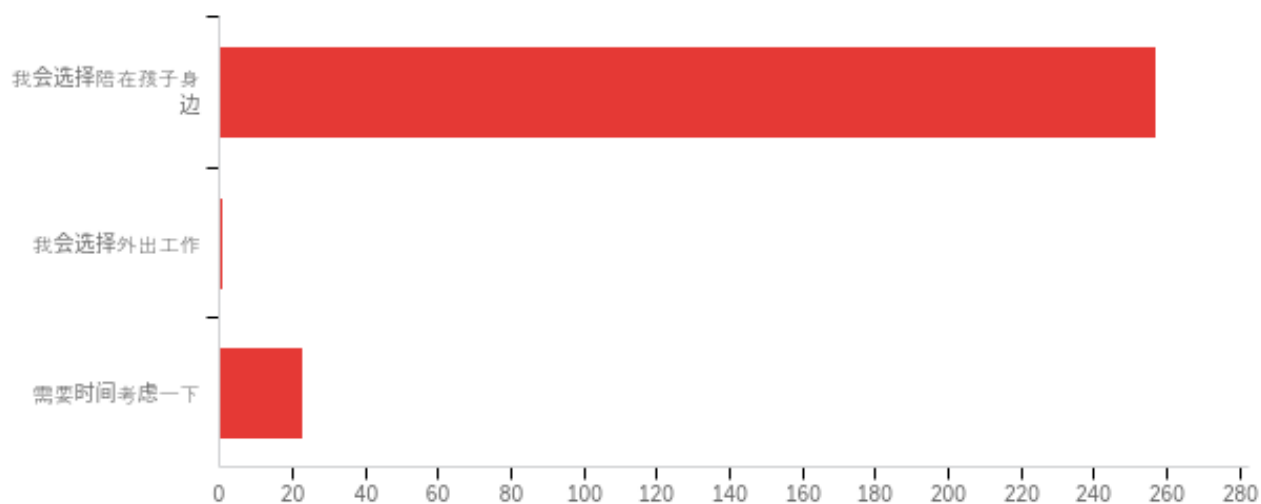
### Q42 - 33.

对于其他家长关于“监护人在家庭中作用”的观点，您在多大程度赞成或者反对？（请选择您觉得赞同或者反对的程度）

#	Field	Min imu m	Max imu m	M ea n	Std Dev iatio n	Var ianc e	Co un t
1	孩子在爷爷奶奶/姥姥姥爷/其他监护人家里生活地比较适应。	1.00	5.00	2.81	1.06	1.12	263
2	因为相处时间更多，爷爷奶奶/姥姥姥爷/其他监护人，更加了解孩子的个性，他们的关系更亲密。	1.00	5.00	3.16	1.00	1.00	220
3	我教育孩子的方式更合理，隔代抚养有溺爱孩子的倾向。	1.00	5.00	3.64	0.93	0.87	218
4	老人没有办法辅导孩子的功课，孩子的学习成绩或多或少受到了影响。	1.00	5.00	3.84	0.88	0.78	214

#	Question	非常 反对		比较 反对		既不 赞同 也不 反对		比较 赞同		非常 赞同		T o ta l
1	孩子在爷爷奶奶/姥姥姥爷/其他监护人家里生活地比较适应。	14.83%	39	20.15%	53	36.50%	96	25.86%	68	2.66%	7	263
2	因为相处时间更多，爷爷奶奶/姥姥姥爷/其他监护人，更加了解孩子的个性，他们的关系更亲密。	7.27%	16	15.91%	35	35.45%	78	35.91%	79	5.45%	12	220
3	我教育孩子的方式更合理，隔代抚养有溺爱孩子的倾向。	3.21%	7	8.26%	18	24.31%	53	50.00%	109	14.22%	31	218
4	老人没有办法辅导孩子的功课，孩子的学习成绩或多或少受到了影响。	1.87%	4	5.14%	11	21.50%	46	50.00%	107	21.50%	46	214

# Q45 - 36. 如果可以选择，您的选择是？



#	Field	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std Deviation	Variance	Count
1	36. 如果可以选择，您的选择是？	1.00	3.00	1.17	0.55	0.30	281

#	Answer	%	Count
1	我会选择陪在孩子身边	91.46%	257
2	我会选择外出工作	0.36%	1
3	需要时间考虑一下	8.19%	23
	Total	100%	281

## **Appendix 7: List of Indicative Questions for Interviews with Parents**

### **Personal Background**

- Could you please describe your family background?
- How old are you?
- Where is the location of your hometown?
- What is your marital status?
- How many children do you have? (gender/ age)
- Why did you choose to work away from home?
- What is your occupation?
- Would you mind telling me your income?
- How long have you been working here?
- Who is/are taking of your child/ren and why?

### **The Use of Social Media**

- How do you keep in touch with your child/ren? (e.g. phone, online conversations, text)
- How often do you keep in touch with your child/ren?
- Which social media or online platforms do you use to contact your child/ren?
- What do you think of the use of social media, in terms of connecting with family members, for example?
- Which function of social media do you like most and why?
- What is the downside of using social media to interact with your child/ren?
- Are there any differences between the online communication and communication in person?

### **Family Relations**

- What is the impact of being a migrant worker on your family?
- Have you considered bringing your child/ren with you in future? What are your concerns?
- What role do your child's carers play in helping you to maintain contact with your child/ren, and how does that work?
- What are the major challenges for you to maintain a healthy family relationship? How do you overcome them?

## Appendix 8: Example of Transcription of Interviews with Parents

*Interview 17th June 2020 with Jie (Pseudonym) PRC aged 31 years, Female.*

*The information below is extracted from a cleaned and anonymized transcript of a two-hour online interview.*

Researcher: How do you communicate with your daughter/ now?

Jie: I use WeChat to video chat with her. She hasn't contacted me for a month because I work the night shift, and her phone is used for online classes, so I have to find the right time to talk to her. When we chat, she shows me videos of him dancing, and I respond with voice messages. We can't always video chat because of my work schedule. When we have holidays, we can video chat and talk for a while.

...

Researcher: Do you feel that communicating with your child through WeChat is the same as face-to-face communication?

Jie: It doesn't feel the same, but sometimes she ignores me to watch TV. When we video chat, she tells me when she's watching TV. When I'm at home, this doesn't happen. If she runs off during a video chat, I tell her grandmother to chase after her. Sometimes, I just hang up if she runs off. When we video chat, I let her play with her phone or play games during online classes, but not for too long as it can be bad for her eyes.

Researcher: How long do your video calls usually last?

Jie: It varies. If she's in a good mood, we can chat for two hours. But sometimes, she gets impatient or my mother-in-law wants to play mahjong, so we have to end the call.

...

Researcher: How has the pandemic affected the time you spend with your child?

Jie: I've been home much longer than usual and have been spending way more time with her. In the past, I would only stay for about a week during Chinese New Year before heading back to work. But this time, I ended up staying for over two months, which is the longest I've ever been at home.

Researcher: How has WeChat helped you communicate with your child and educate her?

Jie: WeChat is helpful, but video calls don't work well for disciplining her. She doesn't listen to me on WeChat. I have to talk to her in person for her to listen. WeChat is good for keeping in touch and alleviating feelings of missing each other.

...

Researcher: How do you feel about being a long-distance mother?

Jie: It's not ideal because I can't be there for her all the time. But I try to make up for it by spending quality time with her when I'm home.

Researcher: How do you feel about WeChat's role in solving communication problems between parents and children?

Jie: WeChat can't replace face-to-face communication. Video calls are like watching TV, and the emotional connection is not as strong. WeChat can alleviate feelings of missing each other, but it can't solve communication problems.

...

Researcher: What do you think about the long-distance motherhood and its impact on parenting?

Jie: Giving our children material things is not enough. We need to give her love and attention. Parents in China are too focused on material things and competition... Although I provide her with food and drink, I feel like I'm not doing a good job because I'm not spending enough time with her. A good mother not only provides good food and drink but also spends time with her child. We may provide material things, but without love, it's not enough.

Researcher: How do you feel about your parent-child relationship?

Jie: I haven't experienced the situation where my child doesn't want to be with me, and when I do go back home, I take her to play wherever she wants to go, and I buy her whatever he likes, regardless of the cost. I try to strengthen our relationship by spending more time with her. When you finally have the chance to meet, you need to talk to her and communicate with her.

## **Appendix 9: List of Indicative Questions for Interviews with Carers**

### **Personal Background**

- Could you please describe your family background?
- How old are you?
- What is the relationship between you and the child/ren?
- How long have you been taking care of the child/ren?
- Would you mind telling me why you are taking care of the child/ren on behalf of their parents?

### **The Use of Social Media**

- Which social media or online platforms do you use to contact the parents of the child/ren?
- How often does the child/ren keep in touch with their parents?
- How do you facilitate the communication between the child/ren and their parents?
- What do you think of the use of social media, in terms of connecting with family members, for example?
- What is the downside of using social media in terms of the interaction between the child/ren and their parents?

### **The role as a carer**

- What role do you play in helping parents to maintain contact with their child/ren, and how does that work?
- What are the major challenges for you to be a carer? How do you overcome them?

## Appendix 10: Example of Transcription of Interviews with Carers

*Interview 17th June 2020 with Mei (Pseudonym) PRC aged 55 years, Female.*

*The information below is extracted from a cleaned and anonymized transcript of a two-hour online interview.*

Researcher: When your child was 18 months old, how did you communicate with his parents?

Mei: At that time, my son and daughter-in-law worked near their home, so they often came home to visit. When WeChat was introduced, they started video chatting.

Researcher: Were you present when they video chatted, and did you help them with the technology? Can your child use a phone by himself?

Mei: Now that he is older, he can video chat by himself, but he doesn't like to talk much. It's like he and his parents have grown apart.

...

Researcher: Do you communicate with his teachers about his school life on behalf of the child's parents?

Mei: Yes, I communicate with his teachers. My son and daughter-in-law don't communicate much with the teacher, and they don't know much about his school life.

Researcher: Are you the only one in the parent group chat, or are his parents also in it?

Mei: I am in the WeChat group for parents, and I added his mother to the group. I don't want her to feel distant from her son. His father is not in the group.

...

Researcher: Do you think there are any differences between online communication, such as video chats on WeChat, and face-to-face communication?

Mei: WeChat and face-to-face communication are different. His parents may not pay attention to what's happening on via the phone. I know what's happening when he's at home. It's like when he's in online class, the teacher can see what he's doing, and when he's at home, I can see what he's doing.

Researcher: Do you think there are any differences in your child's reaction to online and offline environments?

Mei: When he is on video, he rarely talks. It's his mom and dad who initiate the video calls. He doesn't actively seek to talk to them like other children do. Even when his parents call him on video, he doesn't speak to them much. He doesn't chat with them for more than a few sentences before running away.



Researcher: Why does he run away?

Mei: Sometimes he goes off to play, and sometimes he just doesn't feel like talking. In fact, my grandson likes to talk, and when his mom and dad come home, he talks to them just like he talks to me. But when they leave for work, he seems to become distant and doesn't want to talk.

Researcher: Why do you think he doesn't like to talk during online communication?

Mei: When my grandson is on video with his mom and dad, I tell him, "Talk to your mom and dad." And my grandson asks me, "What should I say? I don't know what to say."

Researcher: How do you continue the conversation when he doesn't talk?

Mei: I have to teach him. I say, "Ask your mom if she's at work. When will she be home?" After he says those few sentences, he asks me, "What else should I say?" He also says, "Mom, I miss you." And that's all we say. He never initiates video calls with his parents.

...

Researcher: Do you usually communicate with your son through video?

Mei: If there's something at home, we'll call. If there's nothing, my son doesn't like to talk much. He's like other men. Sometimes he video calls me to chat with my grandson. My daughter-in-law video chats with us every two or three days, but my son sometimes forgets to call for several days. He doesn't like to talk much. When he video chats with me, I hand over my phone to my grandson. My grandson asks, "What should I say?" And I say, "Just say whatever you want. He says a few words and then run away."

...

Researcher: What's his favourite WeChat function?

Mei: I guess voice messages.

Researcher: Does the child send voice messages to his parents on his own initiative?

Mei: No, if I don't tell him, he won't send any message.

Researcher: How often do you remind him to contact his parents?

Mei: If he's not in school, every two days.

...

## Appendix 11: Child-focused Interview Template

### Session 1 – How do you use WeChat (40 minutes)

Core themes	Example Questions
<p><b>Introduction</b></p> <p>The interview will start by welcoming the child and the carer(s) and thanking them for their help and participation. The researcher will introduce herself and the project. The researcher will then seek verbal consent from the child.</p>	<p><b>Description of the project</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I am Xiaoying, from the Department of Culture, Media &amp; Creative Industries at King's College London. I want to talk to you about my PhD project that I gave you information about before. Now I would like to confirm some of the details of the project to make sure you understand what your participation will involve.</li> <li>• The purpose of the study is to find out how children use social media such as WeChat to communicate with their parents when they are away.</li> <li>• The reason why you are being invited to take part in this study is that you are aged 7-16 and use social media like WeChat to keep in touch with your mum and/or dad.</li> <li>• The interview will take about 40 minutes and your carer [your grandma (Mrs X) will be with you all the time]. The interview will be audio and video recorded.</li> <li>• Taking part in the online interview sessions will not harm you in any way.</li> <li>• Your data will be treated anonymously and kept in strict confidence. That means your name will not appear anywhere. I will give your parents an overview of how you and other children, in general, think about social media. The overview</li> </ul>

will simply discuss the general observations and conclusions.

- Your personal data will be stored carefully with password protection. That means only I can access the files. The data will be kept for 2 years after the completion of the project.
- Taking part is completely your choice. You can leave the project at any time without having to give a reason. You can withdraw consent for the interviews by yourself or you can also ask your parents/carers to withdraw it on your behalf.
- You can withdraw your interview data from the study up until **September 30, 2021**. If you choose to quit the project, I will not keep the information you have given thus far.
- The results of the study will be summarised in my PhD thesis and other publications.

#### **Seek verbal consent**

- If you decide to take part, I will record your verbal consent.
- You can contact me if you have any questions. My contact details are [xiaoying.han@kcl.ac.uk](mailto:xiaoying.han@kcl.ac.uk).
- Do you still want to take part?
- If you change your mind at any point, just tell me that you want to stop the interview; it is absolutely fine to do that.

	<p>If there are any issues you don't want to discuss, just tell me and we can move on.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I would like to audio and video record this conversation so that it will help me write my notes later. I am not going to share the files with anyone, and I will change your name in my notes to protect you. Is it okay to record the conversation?</li> <li>• Is there anything you want to ask me before we start?</li> </ul>
<p><b>Warm-up games</b></p> <p><b>In order to engage the children, there will be a pen and paper exercise at the beginning, allowing the researcher to get to know each child and build a trusting atmosphere.</b></p>	<p>Let's draw each other's portrait while you answer the following questions.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Are you living with your grandma or auntie or someone else?</li> <li>• Are you boarding?</li> <li>• Do you like your school life?</li> <li>• Can you describe your best friend at school?</li> <li>• Can you describe your favourite teacher at the school?</li> <li>• How good are you at using WeChat?</li> <li>• Ok, now it's time to reveal our portraits.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Discussion about digital activities</b></p> <p><b>The researcher and the child will discuss the worksheet completed prior to the interview and find out how the child uses WeChat on his/her own terms.</b></p>	<p>Thank you very much for completing the activity. Shall we discuss your digital skills?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How good are you at using WeChat?</li> <li>• Prompts about WeChat functions: text message, voice call, video call, voice message, red package, stickers, games, sharing moments with friends.... Is there</li> </ul>

	<p>any function that you find difficult to use? How did you overcome it?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Prompt for details: can you show me how you use different functions of WeChat, and for what purpose?</li> <li>• Can you tell me a function that you frequently use when you communicate with your parent(s) via WeChat, and show me how you use it?</li> <li>• Which function of WeChat do you find easy to use and which do you find difficult? (why)?</li> <li>• What do you think about WeChat?</li> </ul>
<b>Close the interview</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Thank you so much for taking part in the interview session. You did really well.</li> <li>• Is there anything you'd like to add? Is anything important to you that we haven't talked about?</li> <li>• Would you like to continue to take part in the second session?</li> </ul>

*Table 9 – Topic guide for the second interview session*

**Session 2 – How do you use WeChat to maintain family relationships? (40 minutes)**

Core themes	Example Questions
<p><b>Opening</b></p> <p><b>The interview will start by welcoming the child and the carer(s) back and thanking them for continuing to offer their help and participation. The researcher will talk with the child.</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How was your school life over the last week?</li> <li>• Do you have anything exciting that you want to share with me?</li> </ul>

<p><b>Warm-up games</b></p> <p><b>The researcher will conduct an icebreaker activity to help the child feel at ease. Using an online map, the researcher will plot the route overland from his/her home to the city where his/her parents live and discuss it with the child.</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do you know how many kilometres you and your parent(s) are separated from each other?</li> <li>• Do you know all the different places you would have to pass through along the way?</li> <li>• Have you been to the city where your parent(s) live(s)? If yes, what did you do there? Did you like it?</li> </ul>
<p><b>Use of WeChat</b></p> <p><b>The children will be given time to elaborate on their experience of using social media to communicate with their parents.</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How often do you contact your parents online?</li> <li>• What's your favourite topic to talk about with your parents on WeChat? Why?</li> <li>• What don't you like to talk about with your parents via WeChat? Why?</li> <li>• What do you like better, talking online or face-to-face communication? Why?</li> </ul>
<p><b>Family relationships</b></p> <p><b>The child will be encouraged to talk about their feelings in maintaining familial bonds with their parents via social media, and how their carers facilitate their communication process.</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What do you think a family is? Can you draw it?</li> <li>• What do you think about the role of each family member? What are the responsibilities of a father, mother, carer/grandparent, and child?</li> <li>• Do you think that social media/WeChat help bring your family together? Why or why not?</li> <li>• How do you feel about the fact that your parent(s) are looking after you from a distance?</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do you understand why they chose to leave home and work in another city?</li> <li>• What do you feel when your parents are home?</li> <li>• Prompts for details: When you have problems with your schoolwork, who would you ask for help? When something great happens to you, and you want to share happiness with someone, who do you approach first, your carer or parent? When you feel a bit sad and want to have a little chat, who would you approach? Explain your choice.</li> <li>• Do your parents treat you the same way online/offline? Explain a bit more.</li> <li>• Prompts for details: Would you react differently when you have online conversations with your parents? And why?</li> <li>• What is the main difference between being taken care of by your parents online and offline?</li> <li>• What do you do if you really miss your parents?</li> </ul>
<b>Close the interview</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Thank you so much for taking part in the interview session. You did a great job.</li> <li>• Is there anything you'd like to add? Is there anything important to you that we haven't talked about?</li> <li>• You can contact me if you have any questions. My contact details are xiaoying.han@kcl.ac.uk.</li> </ul>

## Appendix 12: Workshop Design Template

Online Creative Workshop Outline	
<p><b>Introduction (10 minutes)</b></p> <p><b>The workshop will start by welcoming the children and thanking them for their help and participation. The researcher will introduce herself and the project. The researcher will also seek verbal consent from the children.</b></p>	<p>Description of the project</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I am Xiaoying, from the Department of Culture, Media &amp; Creative Industries at King's College London. I want to talk to you about my PhD project that I gave you information about before.</li> <li>• The purpose of the study is to find out how children use social media such as WeChat to communicate with their parents when they are away.</li> <li>• The reason why you are being invited to take part in this study is that you are aged 7-16 and interested in using social media like WeChat to keep in touch with your family members.</li> <li>• You will attend a 60-minute workshop along with 2 other children. One of your schoolteachers will also be there. The workshop will be audio and video recorded.</li> <li>• In the workshop, you will participate in creative activities such as games and writing to show how you use social media in your daily life.</li> <li>• Taking part in the workshops will not harm you in any way.</li> <li>• Your data will be treated anonymously and kept in strict confidence. That means your name will not appear anywhere and your personal data will</li> </ul>



	<p>be stored carefully. I will give your parents an overview of how you and other children in general think about social media. But I won't share your name and details with anyone, including your parents and carers.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Your personal data will be stored with password protection. That means only I can access the files. The data will be kept for two years after the completion of the project.</li> <li>• Taking part is completely your choice. You can leave the project at any time without having to give a reason. You can withdraw consent for the interviews by yourself or you can also ask your parents to withdraw it on your behalf.</li> <li>• You can withdraw your data from the study up until September 30, 2021. If you choose to quit the project, I will not keep the information you have given thus far. Please note that it is not possible to delete workshop data completely because your data is interlinked with other children in the workshops.</li> <li>• The results of the study will be summarised in my PhD thesis and other publications.</li> </ul> <p>Seek verbal consent</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• If you decide to take part, I will record your verbal consent.</li> </ul>
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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• You can contact me if you have any questions. My contact details are xiaoying.han@kcl.ac.uk.</li> <li>• Do you still want to take part?</li> <li>• If you change your mind at any point, just tell me that you want to quit; it is absolutely fine to do that. If there are any issues you don't want to discuss, just tell me and we can move on.</li> <li>• I would like to video and audio record the workshop so that it will help me write my notes later. I will not share the recording with anyone, and I will change your name in my notes to protect you. Is it okay to record the workshop?</li> <li>• Is there anything you want to ask me before we start?</li> </ul>
<p><b>Warm-up (5 minutes)</b></p> <p><b>The researcher will encourage children to talk to each other and enable them to familiarise themselves with each other.</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In the beginning we will introduce ourselves. You will each say your name and you can also tell us the last time you contacted your parents – which platform did you choose, what did you talk about on the call, and was it fun?</li> </ul>
<p><b>Access (10 minutes)</b></p> <p>Children will be given time to discuss their access to the internet (devices, comparison with peers), time spent</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do you have your own digital devices that you can use to access the Internet?</li> <li>• Whose devices do you use to contact your parent/s?</li> </ul>

<p>online, and activities carried out online.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Prompts for details: If you don't have your own devices, how do you manage to keep in touch with your parent(s)...Do you want to have one in order to contact your parent(s) whenever you want?</li> <li>• Do you sometimes have any difficulty getting online? Why?</li> <li>• How often do you go online? Where? For how long? When do you go online the most (time of day/week)? and for what purpose?</li> </ul>
<p><b>Long-distance communication (10 minutes)</b></p> <p><b>The children will be given time to discuss how they use social media to communicate with their parents. The emphasis here is on examining the role of social media in the context of peer interaction.</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What media or platforms do you use to keep in touch with your parents? Do you mainly use WeChat?</li> <li>• What do and don't you like about social media?</li> <li>• Prompts for details: What exactly do you like or dislike about talking online with your mom/dad?</li> <li>• If you could change something about WeChat, what would you change? Or if you could talk to the person who designed this App what would you tell them?</li> </ul>
<p><b>Role-playing game (5 minutes)</b></p> <p><b>The role-playing game will be built upon to make the children feel at ease. They will roleplay a scenario where the child reunites with his/her away-</b></p>	<p>Imagine the following scenario:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• One day a parent working in another place returns home. The child and the parent have not seen each other (physically) for 6 months. What will the scene look like?</li> </ul>

<p><b>from-home parent(s). The researcher will observe their interactions.</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can someone volunteer to take up the role of 1) the child, 2) the parent and 3) the carer?</li> </ul>
<p><b>Family relationships (10 minutes)</b></p> <p><b>In order to identify the role of social media in shaping family relationships, children will be encouraged to express their agency freely.</b></p>	<p><u>Care arrangement</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can you tell us who is taking care of you when your parent(s) work(s) away from home?</li> <li>• Are there any differences between living in your own home and your grandparent's/auntie's?</li> <li>• Prompts for details: did it take time for you to get used to the new care arrangement? Do you feel at home when you are at your carer's place?</li> </ul> <p><u>Relationships</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What is the difference between being taken care of by your parents online and offline?</li> <li>• Do you miss your parent/s when they are away from home?</li> <li>• What do you do if you miss them?</li> <li>• Does talking via WeChat help or not help? Why?</li> </ul>
<p><b>Pen and paper exercise (5 minutes)</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Please write down two things you often want to tell your parent(s) but never get around to, what are they?</li> <li>• Please keep the note that can remind you to tell him/her when you have a video call next time.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Close the workshop (5 minutes)</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Thank you so much for taking part in the workshops. You did very well.</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Is there anything you'd like to add? Is anything important to you that we haven't talked about?</li><li>• You can contact me if you have any questions. My contact details are <a href="mailto:xiaoying.han@kcl.ac.uk">xiaoying.han@kcl.ac.uk</a></li></ul>
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