

# Mothering from Afar: Filipina Domestic Workers and Their ICTs Usage in Hong Kong

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**Abstract:** This paper explores how transnational mothering is practiced through telecommunication among Filipina domestic workers in Hong Kong. It investigates the connection between information and communication technologies (ICTs) usage, especially mobile phone usage, and the practices of transnational mothering from two aspects: (1) how Filipina domestic workers in Hong Kong provide emotional support and care to their children through simultaneous telecommunication and (2) how these transnational mothers supervise and discipline their children via ICTs. By analyzing various maternal practices through telecommunication, we argue that the ICTs usage by transnational mothers strengthens their emotional bonds with their children and empowers them to discipline their children.

**Keywords:** Transnational Mothering, Mobile Phones, the Internet, Filipina Domestic Workers, Hong Kong

## 信息沟通技术与母职

一项关于香港菲佣的实证研究

彭翎旋 黄何明雄

**摘要:** 随着全球化的发展和跨国移民的增多,跨国母亲已经成为家庭研究和性别研究的重要课题之一。香港的菲律宾家庭佣工,作为香港一个庞大的跨国母亲群体,近年来也引起了学术界广泛的关注。本文探讨香港的菲佣,作为跨国母亲,如何利用现代化的信息沟通技术(手机和因特网)重新建构她们的母职。本文基于笔者于2010年在香港进行的定性研究获得的资料,从两个层面探讨现代化信息沟通技术与母职建构之间的关系:(1)香港的菲佣

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如何利用手机和因特网所带来的便利沟通为他们远在菲律宾的孩子提供情感支持和帮助；(2)香港的菲佣如何利用现代化信息沟通技术教育并指导孩子的成长与发展。通过比较信息沟通技术在香港普及前后菲佣的母职建构方式,我们发现,频繁且便利的远程通讯使得跨国母亲们能够克服地理隔绝带来的不便,为她们孩子建构一种母亲的‘虚拟在场’。通过这种‘虚拟在场’,跨国母亲们从情感和道德两个层面履行其母亲职责。在情感层面,菲佣们利用手机和因特网传达她们对孩子的关心和问候、为生病的孩子提供情感支持、并且为孩子们解决实际的问题;在道德和教育层面,菲佣们利用现代沟通技术指导孩子的功课、帮助他们养成良好的生活习惯,并对孩子们的一些不良行为进行教导和规训,不仅重新建构了她们的母职,而且为“母职”一词提供了新的诠释。

**关键词:** 母职 手机 因特网 菲佣 香港

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## INTRODUCTION: MOTHERHOOD AND TRANSNATIONAL MOTHERING

Motherhood is an important topic in family and gender studies. Social constructionists, especially feminist constructionists, believe that motherhood is not biologically determined, but socially constructed (Arendell, 2000; Miller, 2005). They argue that motherhood is not only related to race, social class, age, and socio-cultural location, but is also shaped by the specific social context in which mothers are living (Collins, 1994; Stack & Burton, 1993; Arendell, 2000; Miller, 2005). With the rapid increase of migrant women and transnational families, transnational motherhood has become a new focus and has created new challenges to motherhood discussion. Economic globalization and the commodification of domestic service in developed countries have led millions of women from developing countries to migrate to advanced countries to seek better economic opportunities (Castles & Miller, 2003). Because the immigration laws of most developed nations forbid the resettlement of families, migrant women have to leave their children in their home country. Although many transnational mothers have their children taken care of by their partners or other relatives in their home country, how to mother from a distance has become a central concern, as well as a serious problem, for transnational mothers.

Fundamentally, mothering is understood “as a practice that involves the preservation, nurturance, and training of children for adult life” (Hondagneu-Sotelo & Avila, 1997: 548). By performing

maternal duties, mothers “foster and shape a profound affectional relationship, a deeply meaningful connection” with their children, and “in this relationship of care, the child has physical, emotional and moral claims on the mother” (Arendell, 2000: 1194). In other words, physical support and care, emotional work, and moral duties are three key elements of maternal work. However, for transnational mothers who are physically separated from their children, face-to-face practical care is impossible. This often inflicts feelings of guilt on these mothers. It also threatens their motherhood construction and, rather unfairly, puts them “under constant pressure to conform to the image of a ‘good mother’” (Fresnoza-Flot, 2009: 255). Transnational mothers usually have to rearrange their mothering practices and reorganize their interactions with their children due to the physical separation (Hondagneu-Sotelo & Avila, 1997; Nicholson, 2006; Parreñas, 2010).

Many studies have stated that transnational mothers maintain “their mothering ties and financial obligations” to their children by regularly sending home money and expensive gifts (Hondagneu-Sotelo & Avila, 1997: 557; Parreñas, 2001, 2005; Dreby, 2006; Fresnoza-Flot, 2009). However, other studies on transnational families have indicated that children in transnational families are not satisfied with material compensation and often feel abandoned by their mothers (Parreñas, 2001; Madianou & Miller, 2011). Another way for transnational mothers to mother their children is by expressing their concern and care for their children via communication. Many transnational mothers used to maintain contact and communicate with their children through letters, tape recordings, and short-term visits. Yet, without frequent, instantaneous communication, long-term separation still makes performing maternal duties a formidable challenge for these migrant women (Hondagneu-Sotelo & Avila, 1997; Parreñas, 2001, 2005).

Recently, scholars (Uy-Tioco, 2007; Horst, 2006; Silvey, 2006; Wilding, 2006) have discovered that information and communication technologies (ICTs), such as mobile phones and the Internet, are becoming significant tools for transnational families and are assisting transnational mothers with child-rearing. For example, Dreby’s study (2006) found that phone calls (from both mobile and public phones) are commonly used by Mexican mothers working in the USA to keep in contact with their children in Mexico. Similarly, Uy-Tioco (2007) argued that text messaging enables Filipino transnational mothers to contact their children frequently at a low cost and allows them to

maintain their position as mothers. Parreñas (2005) investigated children in Filipino transnational families and claimed that text messages, emails, and international calls make children feel close to their mothers working abroad. In Madianou and Miller's study (2011), Filipino transnational mothers reported that mobile communication helps them to remain involved in their children's daily life and to manage their households from afar.

These studies have noted that the frequent contact made possible by ICTs has increased communication between transnational mothers and their children and has made them feel close to each other. However, what needs further exploration is how enhanced telecommunication assists or facilitates mothering practices. Maintaining regular contact is significant in mothering from afar, but it does not automatically guarantee successful transnational mothering. Fulfilling maternal duties largely depends on what transnational mothers can do for their children through the use of ICTs. In other words, transnational mothers' maternal practices via telecommunication are important for us to understand how they mother their children from a distance.

In order to further explore transnational mothers' maternal practices via ICTs usage, we conducted an empirical study on Filipina domestic workers in Hong Kong. Our discussion of transnational mothering via ICTs usage focuses on how, via their ICTs usage, transnational mothers (a) provide emotional support and care to their children and (b) perform their moral duties. We argue that for the children of transnational mothers, the simultaneous communication provided by ICTs usage creates a virtual presence of their mothers. Through this virtual presence, transnational mothers fulfill their emotional and moral duties and therefore successfully perform their maternal duties.

## **THEORETICAL DISCUSSION: MOTHERING AS A PRACTICE**

Motherhood and gender are closely intertwined (Glenn, 1994). Motherhood is regarded as significant to understanding women's identity, their relationship with their family members, and gender inequality in our society. In the existing literature of motherhood, many scholars have distinguished motherhood as an institution from mothering as an experience (Kinser, 2010; O'Reilly, 2010). By using motherhood to signify the patriarchal institution of child-rearing, scholars have investigated

how the patriarchal ideology of motherhood shapes the societal understanding of ‘a good mother’, affects a society’s laws and policies related to the family and child-rearing, and creates gender inequality and dominance both in the workplace and in the family (O’Reilly, 2010).

Recently, more and more scholars, especially feminists, have concentrated on women’s lived experiences as mothers and paid more attention to how mothers perform their maternal duties in diversified social contexts and how they “conform to and/or resist the patriarchal institution of motherhood” through their daily practices (O’Reilly, 2010: 2; Kinser, 2010). Many feminists have pointed out that women’s actual experience of mothering is different from the patriarchal institution of motherhood (Ruddick, 1989; Rich, 1976; Kinser, 2010). Although affected by the institution of motherhood, women’s actual experience of mothering is the product of their persistent practices and complicated interactions with their children (Kinser, 2010; O’Reilly, 2010). As Butler (1990) argued, mothering is a practice which is continuously performed by mothers in their daily lives. Through their continuous practices, women meet three demands which define their maternal work: “preservative love, nurturance and training”, maintain or alter the ideology of motherhood, and construct their identity as mother (Ruddick, 1989: 17).

Meanwhile, mothering is not homogeneous, but rather is contingent upon context (Glenn, 1994; O’Reilly, 2010). Mothers’ practices vary in different social circumstances, depending on the social resources available to them. In other words, mothering is conducted “within specific social contexts that vary in terms of material and cultural resources and constrains” (Glenn, 1994: 3). Therefore, women’s maternal practices may be transformed with the change of time and social context. In the case of transnational mothers, the spatial segregation between mothers and their children has greatly challenged the conventional practices of mothering. Transnational mothers, due to their distance from home, are forced to create new meanings and practices of mothering. Mothers, in the eyes of feminists, are always active agents who are able to mobilize the resources they need and grasp new opportunities to perform their maternal duties and exert their power in child-rearing. With the development of society and the innovation of new technology, transnational mothers have found new means to fulfill their maternal duties (O’Reilly, 2010). The usage of ICTs has enabled them to transcend geographic distances and construct their mothering experiences in a virtual world. Through their intensive communication with their children and their practical help to their children via

telecommunication, transnational mothers can fulfill their emotional and moral duties in child-rearing without face-to-face interactions. Since mothering is widely accepted as subjective, meaning that it is based on context-specific experiences or practices, in the following section, transnational mothers' own narratives will be used to demonstrate their rich experiences of mothering via telecommunication and how they mother their children in a new social context.

## FILIPINA DOMESTIC WORKERS IN HONG KONG

Since the 1970s, millions of Filipinos have moved abroad to work as contract workers. Many Filipino women work as domestic workers in more than 130 countries (Parreñas, 2000). Filipino domestic workers were first introduced into Hong Kong in the early 1980s, and since then, they have gradually become popular among middle-class and upper-class families in Hong Kong (Chan, 2006). According to the data provided by the Hong Kong Immigration Department, by the end of June 2010, there were 133,610 Filipino domestic workers in Hong Kong (47.9 per cent of the total number of foreign workers in Hong Kong), the overwhelming majority of whom were females. Filipina domestic workers represent a good group for studying ICTs usage and transnational motherhood. First, many Filipina domestic workers are transnational mothers who have left their children behind in the Philippines to be taken care of by their husbands or female kin. Furthermore, most Filipina domestic workers in Hong Kong are intensive users of ICTs.

ICTs are well developed in Hong Kong and telecommunication charges are relatively low compared to other international cities. According to an international tariff benchmarking study, telecommunication subscribers in Hong Kong pay as little as one tenth of the telecommunication charges paid by their counterparts in other big cities, such as London, New York, Singapore, Shanghai, and Tokyo.<sup>1</sup> Generally, it costs only HK\$0.1 or HK\$0.2 to make a call via mobile phone in Hong Kong. The low cost of telecommunication has led to heavy usage among the general public in Hong Kong. Meanwhile, ICTs usage is prevalent among Filipino contract workers overseas. Paragas' s (2009) research on overseas Filipino workers demonstrated that in 2005, about 82.5 per cent of their respondents had a mobile phone with a host country SIM card and 76.3 per cent of them owned a mobile phone with a Philippines SIM card; also, about 70 per cent of

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1. Data source: <http://www.info.gov.hk/gia/general/201105/08/P201105060293.htm>.

them owned and used two mobile phones simultaneously. Some Filipino overseas workers are also Internet subscribers. In 2005, about 14 per cent of Filipino overseas workers subscribed to the Internet and another 52 per cent had access to it (Paragas, 2009). The prevalence of ICTs usage among Filipino overseas workers and the affordable costs of telecommunication in Hong Kong have made Filipina domestic workers in Hong Kong intensive users of ICTs, especially mobile phones.

In 2010, we interviewed 27 Filipina domestic workers in Hong Kong, all of whom were transnational mothers with children in the Philippines. We found these transnational mothers through personal referrals and then used a snowball approach to meet others. Interviews were usually conducted at weekends when these domestic workers had their days off. In the interviews, we asked our participants about their history of ICTs usage and their daily communication practices with their children and other family members via ICTs. The interviews lasted from one to four hours. All of the interviews were conducted in English. With the permission of our participants, we tape-recorded the interviews and fully transcribed them.

When we conducted the interviews in 2010, over 33 per cent of our participants were in their thirties and about 48 per cent of them were in their forties; one participant was aged 51 and three were in their late twenties. In terms of the number of children, 15 had two children, six had three children, and one had six children in the Philippines. In terms of the children's ages, 10 had children who were younger than 12, 11 had teenage children, and nine had children who were aged 20 or above. Given the influence of marital status on mothering, we intentionally included Filipina domestic workers of different marital status in our sample. Among our 27 participants, 17 were married, four were separated from their husbands, one was widowed, and five were single mothers who had never been married. Although all of the participants in this study were intensive users of ICTs, some of them had migrated to Hong Kong in the 1980s and had therefore experienced periods without ICTs.

## **BEING A TRANSNATIONAL MOTHER IN THE ERA WITHOUT ICTS**

Before the prevalence of ICTs, letters, postcards, and tape recordings were the main ways for Filipina domestic workers in Hong Kong to communicate with their family members in the Philippines. Many transnational mothers kept writing letters to their children, and

some of them talked, sang, and even cried to their children in tape recordings. They tried their best to be a presence in their children's life. Yet, neither letters nor tape recordings could provide instantaneous communication for transnational mothers and their children. Transnational mothers could not get the latest news about their children, nor could they timely respond to their children's needs by writing letters or mailing tape recordings. The spatial segregation and lack of effective instantaneous communication devices have constrained transnational mothers' ability to perform their maternal duties.

In the 1980s and 1990s, making international calls was a luxury for Filipina domestic workers in Hong Kong. According to the recollections of some of our participants, they used to make international calls to the Philippines using public phones. The cost of making an international call from Hong Kong to the Philippines was once as high as HKMYM3 to HKMYM5 per minute. Many Filipina domestic workers only made international calls once a week, or even once a month, and usually finished a call within 15 minutes. At that time, making an international call was a tough task for them and also one which needed great patience.

Making an international call was very expensive. You had to collect a lot of coins to pay for the call. You dropped one coin into the phone, and then you could talk for several minutes. When your time was almost up, you would hear a sound like "Doo ~." Then, you dropped another coin in. (Cathy, 51, mother of one daughter)

At that time, we used public phones to call our families. We called them only on Sundays. We had to wait for two hours to make a call...A lot of people waited. When you were dialing the number, people who waited outside the phone booth already knocked the door (of the booth) to hasten you finish your call. (Emily, 47, mother of three children)

Due to the inconvenience and high cost of telecommunication, Filipina domestic workers were unable to have frequent, instantaneous communication with their children. Without frequent, instantaneous communication, most of them admitted that it was extremely hard for them to be a transnational mother.

At first, it was very difficult for me (to be a transnational mother). My kids were (physically) very far from me. They were also emotionally far from me. The phone was not a popular

way to communicate. At the beginning, I didn't know how to win their hearts. (Emily, 47, mother of three children)

Many of the transnational mothers we interviewed had experienced their children's emotional alienation and estrangement from them when they went back home after working abroad for a long period of time. Some mothers felt that their hearts had been broken when they finally met with their children but were not recognised by them. In the era without ICTs, transnational mothering was an oppressive experience full of helplessness, pain, and frustration.

When I left my children to work abroad, my elder son was four and my younger son was two and half... One and a half years later, I came back home. My younger son didn't recognise me. He asked, "Who are you?" I told him, "I am your mother." He said, "No, you are not my mother! You don't look like my mother." Then, I asked him, "Who is your mother?" He pointed at my mother (his grandmother) and said, "She is my mother." (Betty, 38, mother of two sons)

## **FILIPINA DOMESTIC WORKERS IN HONG KONG AND THEIR ICTS USAGE**

Since the late 1990s, mobile phones have gradually become affordable consumer items and the main communication tools for people in Hong Kong. By January 2005, the penetration rate of the mobile phone in Hong Kong was a remarkable 118 per cent.<sup>1</sup> According to some news reports, in 2009, the mobile phone penetration rate in Hong Kong had reached 163 per cent,<sup>2</sup> which means that, on average, every Hong Kong resident had more than one mobile phone. Constable's (2007) latest study showed that mobile phone usage has become indispensable for Filipina domestic workers in Hong Kong. Nowadays, it is quite common for Hong Kong people to see Filipina domestic workers using their mobile phones in public. All of the 27 participants in this study were intensive mobile phone users. About 90 per cent of them owned two mobile phones, one with a local SIM card and one with a Philippine SIM card. Some of them even had a third mobile phone which was reserved for calls to and from their employer and friends in Hong Kong.

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1. Data source: <http://www.internetworldstats.com/asia/hk.htm>.

2. Data source: <http://asiancorrespondent.com/16552/mobile-phone-use-in-hong-kong/>.

Filipina domestic workers have developed a clever way to reduce their telecommunication costs. When they are about to leave the Philippines to work abroad, they purchase a Philippine prepaid SIM card and apply for the roaming service. By paying 150 peso (about HKMYM 27) for one year's roaming service, Filipina domestic workers can receive short messages from the Philippines for free, and it costs only one peso (about HKMYM 0.18) for their family members in the Philippines to send a short message to their roaming card. When they arrive in Hong Kong, they apply for a local SIM card and purchase another prepaid SIM card from the same local telecommunication service provider. They mail the prepaid SIM card to their family members in the Philippines, usually prepaying HKMYM10 or HKMYM20 as a deposit. When domestic workers send short messages to their family members in the Philippines, they use their mobile phone with the Hong Kong SIM card and send short messages to the prepaid SIM card bought in Hong Kong. It is market practice in Hong Kong that if both cards are provided by the same communication service provider, text messaging is usually free. Therefore, with a roaming card and a local card, Filipina domestic workers can enjoy frequent international text-messaging communication at an extremely low cost. Twenty-six of the participants in our study sent short messages to their family members in the Philippines every day. Six of them described themselves as 'crazy' text-messaging users who could not stop texting.

We are crazy. Texting messaging is a part of our life.

Some of my friends are always holding their mobile phones and texting... Some of them (friends) are so good at text messaging that they don't even need to look at the keyboard when they text. They've already memorized all of the numbers and characters on the key board. (Alice, 34, mother of one daughter)

In addition to the low cost of text messaging, employer's surveillance is another factor that leads to the frequent use of short messages. Foreign domestic workers in Hong Kong are usually live-in domestic workers, meaning they live in the house of their employers. Employers in Hong Kong are usually worried that their domestic workers spend so much time talking on the phone that they will not be able to finish their work. Thus, many of the participants reported that their employers had directly or indirectly forbidden them to make

mobile phone calls in their houses. In order to avoid conflicts with employers, Filipina domestic workers prefer text messaging to making a phone call when their employers are present. They usually call their family members on their days off or when their employers are not at home.

Most Filipina domestic workers in Hong Kong purchase prepaid international calling cards to call their family members in the Philippines. Compared to the low cost of text messages and local calls (HKMYM 0.1 – 0.2 per minute), the cost of international calls is relatively high for Filipina domestic workers. At weekends, it costs HKMYM1 per minute; on weekdays, the cost ranges from HKMYM1.49 to HKMYM1.99 per minute, depending on the local telecommunication service provider. About half of the participants in this study reported making international calls at least twice a week. Even though many of the participants usually completed their international calls within 30 minutes, their high frequency of making international calls meant that they had to pay at least HKMYM200 per month for their phone bills. Eight participants reported that their mobile phone bills were once above HKMYM500. The monthly salary for Filipina domestic workers is usually the minimum wage (or just above it) set by the Hong Kong government for foreign domestic workers: HKMYM3,580 per month. Thus, mobile phone costs of the participants in this study, which ranged from HKMYM200 to HKMYM1,000, were surprisingly high when compared to the low salary they receive in Hong Kong.

Since 2001, Hong Kong has experienced a rapid expansion of the Internet market. By 2010, the penetration of the Internet in Hong Kong was about 70 per cent.<sup>1</sup> Due to the high penetration rate, it is easy and convenient for Filipina domestic workers to access the Internet in Hong Kong. Twenty-one of the Filipina domestic workers in our study were Internet subscribers. Unlike local people who have access to the Internet in their workplace or household, most Filipina domestic workers use the Internet in public Internet cafés or through their mobile phones. Eleven of the participants in this study stated that they regularly visit Internet cafés near their gathering place or their employer's home where it costs them between HKMYM5 to HKMYM10 per hour to use the Internet. Four participants were able to enjoy free Internet services in local churches or in their employer's house. After having spent

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1. Data source: <http://www.internetworldstats.com/asia/hk.htm>.

HKMYM1,000 and HKMYM750 per month respectively on their mobile communication bills, two participants purchased a laptop in order to enjoy use of the Internet. Compared to mobile communication, the biggest advantage of Internet communication for Filipina domestic workers is that it provides instant video communication at a low price. Videoconferencing is the most popular Internet function among Filipina domestic workers in Hong Kong.

Every weekend, we go to the Internet café and chat. I pay only 5 dollars per hour. You can talk, and you can see each other. It is better than mobile phone communication. You can see each other and you can save money at the same time. (Joan, 25, mother of two children)

In addition to having videoconferences with their family members in the Philippines, Filipina domestic workers send emails to their relatives or friends scattered in other countries, search for information they need, share their pictures on Facebook, and download popular music from the Internet. With the help of mobile phones and the Internet, Filipina domestic workers can break the spatial separation and maintain frequent, spontaneous communication with their children as well as with other family members and friends.

## **MOTHERING VIA ICTS: EMOTIONAL BONDS AND INTIMACY**

Mothering is shaped by the patriarchal ideology of child-rearing in a society and the specific social context in which mothers live (Collins, 1994; Stack & Burton, 1993; Arendell, 2000; Miller, 2005). In Filipino culture, mothers have always been regarded as the emotional heart of the family (Parreñas, 2008; 2010). They are the people who hold families together and who can instinctively and naturally respond to the emotional needs of their family members, especially their children (Parreñas, 2008; 2010). This ideology of motherhood causes children to make an emotional claim on their mothers. Due to the powerful influence of the gendered ideology of motherhood throughout the whole Filipino society, children's emotional claims on their mothers remain unchanged even after their mothers leave their home country and work abroad. As Parreñas (2010: 1830) pointed out, children in transnational families "feel abandoned not because they receive inadequate care when their mothers migrate but instead because they have been denied the provision of care that follows the traditional gender order of the family in the Philippines, which is that mothers are the nurturers of children and that

fathers are breadwinners.” Influenced by the patriarchal ideology of motherhood, many transnational mothers believe they are still responsible for emotionally supporting and taking care of their children after they migrate. Before the prevalence of ICTs, even if most transnational mothers desperately wanted to maintain emotional intimacy with their children, they had no efficient way of doing so. With the help of telecommunication, transnational mothers can now obtain the latest information about their children and are able to timely respond to their children’s various needs (Dreby, 2006; Fresnoza-Flot, 2009). Many of the transnational mothers in our study pointed out that effective communication is the key to them being able to mother from afar.

For me, communication is best for my family... They (children) always ask me, “Mummy! Can you call? Please!” I have no choice. As their mother, I have to call... You have to communicate with them. Talk to them; ask them, “What’s the problem? What you want? How do you feel?” (Amy, 35, mother of two daughters)

Through frequent text messages and international calls, many transnational mothers actively participate in their children’s daily life and are available all day for their children. They create a virtual presence or an absent presence for their children (Gergen, 2002; Baldassar, 2008).

I call them (children) and send them SMS messages (short messages) every day. I call them in the morning, during lunch, in the afternoon, and at dinner time. I call them to make my presence felt there. (Amy, 35, mother of two daughters)

Every morning, I give my son a wake-up call. I say “Hello! Morning! Are you awake?” He replies, “Yes, I’m getting up now.” I tell him, “Have a bath, have your breakfast, change your clothes, and then go to school.” He says, “Yes, mom.” At lunch, I call him again; I ask, “Did you eat your lunch?”, and he says “Yes.” I feel so good doing this because it makes me feel that I am very close to him. (Ella, 47, mother of one son)

By making their virtual presence felt by their children and intensively getting involved in their children’s daily activities, transnational mothers continue to affect their children’s lives after they migrate and to make their children feel their mother’s concern and care for them. This may also provide children with a sense of security, as their mothers can be

reached by just sending a short message or making a call.

Furthermore, a mother's support and comfort becomes very important in some special situations. For example, when their children get sick, some transnational mothers frequently call and send short messages to comfort the ill child. Amy has two young daughters in the Philippines. Even though Amy admitted that her young daughters are being very well taken care of by her husband and parents-in-law, she still believes that a mother's care and emotional support is indispensable for children, especially when they are sick and emotionally vulnerable. Every time one of her young daughters was ill, Amy's mobile phone bill for that month would dramatically increase as she called more frequently than usual to comfort her child.

When the kids are sick, I always call them. I call them to make sure they're OK, to comfort them...I always ask them, "Are you all right?" and "Did (you) take your medicine? If there anything wrong, you can tell mummy." I also always tell them, "Sorry mummy is not there. But, mummy will always call you to let you know that she loves you. So you don't need to worry, I'm here. Be strong." (Amy, 35, mother of two daughters)

Another transnational mother, Betty, reported that she exchanges frequent greeting messages with her sons and talks to them as she would to a close friend. Betty separated from her husband several years ago as her husband had another woman. When Betty is working in Hong Kong, her parents take care of her two sons. She stated that telecommunication via ICTs helps her to rebuild her emotional connection to her two sons. Before the emergence of mobile phones and the Internet, Betty was unable to have regular communication with her sons; that was why her younger son did not recognise her when she went back home after her first migration. Nowadays, Betty not only calls her sons and sends them short messages every day, but also sends pictures that she has taken in Hong Kong to her sons via e-mails. Based on their constant communication, Betty has developed "friend-type" relationships with her sons and always helps them to solve the problems they encounter in school. When her younger son was bullied in school, Betty called him to express her concern and to teach him how to be a strong boy.

My younger son is very shy. He cries when he is teased by his classmates. Once, my elder son told me, "Mama, my brother was crying in school this morning." I called my younger son and asked him, "Why were you crying?" He said, "Because they were teasing me. They said that I am gay. I am

not gay.” I told him, “If you want to show you are not gay, you need to be firm.” (Betty, 38, mother of two sons)

When their children encounter serious problems in school, transnational mothers can directly intervene and solve the problem for their children via telecommunication. Emily is a dedicated mother of three children, but her husband is an alcoholic who seldom performs his parental duties. Emily stated that she is worried about her children’s growth and development as it is impossible for them to get proper care and supervision from their alcoholic father. She had decided to take on all child-rearing duties even though she is physically far away from her children. Emily said that she maintains intensive communication with her three children by sending dozens of short messages every day. Emily’s eldest daughter was a senior college student in 2009. When she was about to graduate from her university, she was told that she had failed one of her subjects. The young girl was scared as she knew that failing her course might jeopardize her graduation and lead to a large number of delay fees. She cried on the phone when she called her mother. Emily decided to intervene in this matter directly even though she was thousands of miles away. Solving a complicated problem such as this via telecommunication is not easy. Emily first made lots of international calls to get information about what had happened with regard to her daughter’s subject.

At the beginning, I didn’t understand the management and operation of a university. So, I first sought information. I called the general enquiry number for my daughter’s university. After I was connected, I said, “Would you please connect me to the Engineering Department?” Then, I asked the secretary (of the department) to give me the telephone numbers of the department head and the teacher who taught that subject. They were surprised when they received my calls. I talked to them and asked them, “Can you fax me my daughter’s grades?” I asked them to fax them to my employer’s office. I talked to the teacher and asked “What is the problem? Why has my kid failed?”

Emily believed that her daughter had been unfairly treated by the university. From her intensive contacts and communications with her daughter, Emily knew that her daughter had worked very hard in her subjects.

Every time I called my daughter, she was studying and doing design work. She studied hard and worked very late at night. But, in the end, was she going to fail? I needed an

explanation of why they were going to fail my daughter.

In order to push the university to deal with her daughter's issue, Emily even called the dean of the university.

I called the dean, "Good morning, Dean. I am a mother calling from Hong Kong. You may hear from the teacher about my daughter failing her subject. How is my daughter's performance in your class?"...I told him, "As a mother, I have the right to know."...It turned out that the registry had made a mistake. My daughter had passed the course. But, according to the registry, she had failed. It was the registry's fault. The department head apologized to me...My daughter passed the course.

As a result of Emily's persistent efforts, her daughter's problem was finally solved. Emily was proud of the fact that she could protect and provide practical help for her daughter. As she said,

Making an international call is very expensive. But, you have to call. If you really want to help, especially with a critical problem, you have to call...I always tell my children that I will support them until I die.

Emily said that she feels greatly rewarded when her children tell her how much they appreciate her support and help. Compared to the feelings of helplessness and loss she had experienced as a transnational mother after her first migration, Emily stated that she is now more confident about her capacity to fulfill her transnational mothering duties with the help of mobile communication.

Internet usage is less frequent than mobile communication among transnational mothers. However, Internet usage has its unique advantage in helping transnational mothers to build up emotional bonds with their children. Videoconferencing, the most popular Internet function among Filipina domestic workers, enables these transnational mothers to have visual communication with their children and see their children's reactions and facial expressions when they are talking. Many mothers claim that they can tell the state of their children's health or well-being by directly seeing their children on the Internet. This eases their anxiety or worry for their children. Children are also more than happy to see a vivid image of their mother via the camera. This virtual co-presence (Baldassar, 2008) can promote greater feelings of intimacy than would otherwise be experienced through telecommunication via mobile phones. This function is especially important for mothers who have young children. When children are too young to understand the meaning of their mother's words or express their feelings by using sophisticated words, visual chat can

ease their communication with their mothers.

My son is two years old. We can't talk too much on the phone. We just say "Hi" to each other... But, on the Internet, we can see each other. I can talk with my son on the Internet for an hour. He is very happy to see me on the Internet. When we have a talk online, he always asks me things like "Have you eaten?" and "Where are you?"... We even pray together when we chat online. (Barbara, 29, mother of one son)

My daughter is four. Every week, I talk to her on the Internet for two hours... My daughter talks a lot. When she sees me on the Internet, she doesn't feel sad. She is so happy that she sings and dances (in front of the camera). (Fiona, 31, mother of one daughter)

Through various usages of ICTs, transnational mothers can continually demonstrate their concern for their children and their ability to support and practically protect them. Through their intensive telecommunication and interactions with their children, transnational mothers believe that they can successfully meet their children's emotional needs, even if they are thousands of miles away from their children. The emotional bond between transnational mothers and their children can not only be maintained by frequent communication, but also by what transnational mothers do for their children via their virtual presence. Mothers' practical help makes their maternal practices via telecommunication go beyond the boundary of the virtual realm and be regarded as 'real-life' interactions. Emotional support and practical help have become central to transnational mothering.

## **MOTHERING VIA ICTS: MORAL RESPONSIBILITY AND DISCIPLINING**

In the traditional gender ideology of Filipinos, the father is the one who displays parental authority and imposes discipline on children. Filipino fathers keep their expressions of emotional ties with their children to a minimum and maintain their responsibility and authority for discipline (Parreñas, 2008). However, this does not mean that Filipino mothers have no responsibility for disciplining their children. In many societies, supervising and disciplining children is a key component of motherhood. Mothering not only refers to "the social practices of nurturing and caring for dependent children" (Arendell, 2000:1192) but also includes socializing children to become members

of society. In the dominant ideology of intensive mothering in Western societies, mothers are regarded as being fully responsible for their children's development. Mothers are judged as good or bad mothers largely on the basis of their children's outcomes and misbehaviors. Due to the hegemonic nature of intensive mothering, people in other societies also partly internalize the ideology of intensive mothering. Studies on Filipino transnational mothers (Parreñas, 2001; 2005; 2010) have discovered that these women feel incredibly guilty about their separation from their children and that people are more likely to blame these mothers for their children's misbehaviors. Although the 'mother-blaming' attitude has been challenged by feminists in western societies, this does not change the reality that this attitude still affects many women in performing their maternal duties. For example, many of the transnational mothers in our study believed that they should take, or at least share, moral responsibility for child-rearing. For single mothers and mothers who are separated from their husbands, disciplining children is not optional. Without the help of the children's fathers, these transnational mothers have to play the dual role of mother and father. Some of them may be lucky enough to have kin or friends to help them with child-rearing. How to fulfill moral responsibilities via ICTs is another question which transnational mothers have to deal with, no matter whether they can get help from others or not. Although transnational mothers' understanding of moral duties is shaped by the traditional gendered ideology of Filipinos and the hegemonic ideology of intensive mothering, they are not passive recipients of these ideologies. Instead, they react to these two ideologies by their strategic practices of mothering via ICTs usage. Through their creative usage of ICTs, transnational mothers modify or reconstruct the proper ways of fulfilling moral duties in a new social context and reinterpret the meaning of mothering practices. Moreover, many transnational mothers in our study argue that they are responsible mothers because they are able to discipline their children in various forms by telecommunication.

We discovered that many transnational mothers supervise their children's homework via emails, videoconferencing, short messages, and international calls to ensure that they finish it. Jane provided a typical example. Jane is a mother of two sons. She is separated from her husband and supports her sons by herself. When she is working in Hong Kong, she spends more than HK\$600 every month on

international calls to supervise her younger son doing his homework. As she put it, I call him and say “Carlo, have you done your homework?”, and he usually says “Not yet.” I say to him, “What is your homework? Can you please read it to me?” As he reads it to me, I listen, and then I ask him, “Do you understand what you have read?”, and he replies “Um...not really.” I then say, “What do you understand about it?”, and he explains what he knows. Then I tell him, “OK, you need more information. Your explanation is good, but lacks deep understanding. You need to understand it better.” (Jane, 39, mother of two children)

Some mothers argue that it is very important for a good mother to teach her children to develop good habits. Mary has one daughter and one son who are taken care of by her husband. Mary argues that women are more attentive and patient than men. She believes that as the mother, she is better than her husband at teaching her children to cultivate some subtle but important habits. When she is working in Hong Kong, Mary keeps sending text messages to remind her children to brush their teeth before they go to bed.

I text them every day (to remind them to brush their teeth)... At night, I check up on them; I ask them, “Have you brushed your teeth?”... Since I began working here, I keep sending my children text messages saying “No teeth brushed, no sleep.” They have got used to this. (Mary, 29, mother of two children)

Purchasing expensive gifts or sending remittances are typical ways used by many transnational mothers to compensate for their physical absence from their children (Hondagneu-Sotelo & Avila, 1997; Parreñas, 2001, 2005; Horton, 2009). However, many transnational mothers have discovered that expensive gifts and remittances result in their children having desires for endless consumption and exert a negative influence on their development. Many mothers wisely use ICTs to discipline their children to control the consumption desires. In order to provide good guidance to her children, Amy strictly controls her children’s desire for expensive gifts. Not only does she tirelessly argue with her husband about this problem on the phone, but she also talks with her daughters on the phone and directly teaches them the correct concept of “no pain, no gain”.

If they (daughters) want something, they have to struggle, they have to earn. For example, when they get top grades in school, they can have an iPod. I told her (younger

daughter), “If you want something, show me you can be a good girl; show me you can achieve a high grade. If you reach the grade, I’ll give you something you want.” They have to struggle; they have to work for it (what they want). (Amy, 35, mother of two daughters)

Another transnational mother, Lida, said that she uses videoconferencing to teach her daughter how to budget the money she sends to them. Lida’s daughter is required to get her mother’s permission first before purchasing any items. She is also required by Lida to report detailed information of all her purchases. By doing this, Lida believes she can help her children to develop good consumption habits.

If I send money back (to the Philippines), I have to teach them how to spend it. So I use online chat to do this. It’s very convenient ... Every time she (her daughter) needs to buy something, she tells me. She says, “Mom, I need to buy shampoo, books, and pants.” (Lida, 48, mother of two children)

For mothers with adolescent children, disciplining recalcitrant teenagers is a tough task. The mothers who participated in this study were especially worried that their teenage children’s puppy love might have a bad influence on their studies. Betty discovered that her 15-year-old elder son had a girlfriend at school. Betty was extremely worried that her son would be distracted from his studies. She called her son and had a long heart-to-heart conversation with him.

I told my son, “Don’t waste your time on that girl because you are still too young. When you have finished your studies, you can find a better one. I am not telling you not to have a girlfriend. I am asking you to think about your future. Finish your studies first...You are 15. I don’t want you to have a deep relationship (with that girl).” I think he was really touched by what I said. Then, he realised the problem... Several months later, they broke up. (Betty, 38, mother of two sons)

Lida also admitted that when her two children were in their adolescence, they gave her a hard time. Using mobile communication, Lida always checked on her children and set a curfew for them in order to prevent them from hanging around outside with bad friends at night. She made calls to the landline phone in their house; if her children did not answer the phone, she knew that they were outside and would scold them for it later.

I am a disciplinarian mother. I didn’t like them doing things that

I did not like. They always liked to go out and play with their friends. So, if they went out and came back late at night, I told them, “This is the last time you do that! Next time, you will not be allowed back into the house!” Then, they stopped (coming back late at night). (Lida, 48, mother of two children)

When her young daughter went to college and had a boyfriend in college, Lida was worried that her daughter might get pregnant and drop out of school. As the mother, Lida believed that not only was she the appropriate person to talk to, but that she also had a duty to discuss this issue with her daughter. Lida called her daughter and directly expressed her worries.

I directly told her, “Don’t ever do that. Don’t get pregnant and become a single mother.” Actually, some of her friends had got pregnant and had become single mothers. I was afraid of that. I told her, “Daughter, please! This is for your future! What we are doing is for your future. You should be careful. Don’t give up your future.” My daughter said, “Yes, mom. Don’t worry. I know that you are working hard for us.”

Lida also took the advantage of advanced communication technology to contact her daughter’s boyfriend, for example, by meeting him on Facebook and talking with him via short messages. When the boy visited her home in the Philippines, Lida directly talked to him on the phone.

My daughter didn’t like that, but I told her “Don’t worry. I won’t say anything bad in front of him.” I told him, “Rex, I just want Kate to finish her studies. Please, don’t distract her. OK?” He replied, “Don’t worry, ma’am, I won’t.” I think they just have a pure relationship.

Convenient communication empowers transnational mothers to discipline and supervise their children. The use of ICTs has provided transnational mothers new means to directly monitor their children’s behaviour and have more say in their children’s development. Through their various practices in child disciplining, transnational mothers have demonstrated that they can overcome the difficulties in mothering caused by geographic distance and can continue to exert their power and influence in child-rearing after their migration. Fulfilling moral duties via telecommunication also helps transnational mothers to cope with the pressure of being a responsible mother, which is imposed on them by the Filipino culture and the patriarchal

ideology of motherhood.

## DISCUSSION

In this article, we have described how transnational mothers have created a new form of mothering practice to suit their needs in performing maternal duties in a transnational context. Transnational mothering via ICTs usage is significantly different from the dominant intensive mothering in Western societies as well as the conventional mothering in Filipino culture. In this new form of mothering, ICTs, as fast evolving technologies, have dramatically changed the way in which transnational mothers interact with their children. Various forms of instantaneous telecommunication play a significant role in constructing the virtual presence of mothers and provide channels for transnational mothers to provide emotional support and supervision to their children. Transnational mothering is mainly expressed in the form of emotionally absorbing and communication intensive practices. Transnational mothers utilize the advantages of telecommunication to perform their maternal duties in various ways, such as providing emotional support to ill children; helping their children from a distance to solve problems; supervising homework; and imposing strict discipline. Their maternal practices have not only enriched our understanding of transnational mothering, but also demonstrated that women's agency and creativity can construct empowering mothering experiences in an oppressive situation. For transnational mothers trying to perform their maternal duties from a distance, technology is on their side, as devices continue to get more sophisticated and popular. As long as transnational mothers are able to constantly adjust their practices and mobilize various resources to perform their maternal duties, transnational mothering can be a positive experience for them.

Realistically, one would expect transnational mothering made possible by ICTs to be a positive development, but in some ways it could magnify existing problems or even create new ones. As Wilding (2006: 133) argued, the disjuncture between the imagined proximity brought about by telecommunication and the actual separation between mother and child creates new opportunities for conflict. Some transnational mothers have reported that it is painful for them when they talk with their children on the phone but feel the connection between them gradually fading. Other mothers have complained that the ubiquitous connection gives them nowhere to hide from bad news about their

children (e. g. , sickness or poor academic performance in school). Five of the transnational mothers in our study admitted that their attempts at transnational mothering had failed due to various factors. ICTs are only tools for transnational mothers to keep in contact with their children. The key in performing transnational mothering lies in women's active agency in, and creative usage of, telecommunication. Since mothering is always regarded as mothers' practices and experiences within their specific social context, it is not surprising to discover that some mothers grasp the transnational mothering opportunities provided by ICTs and benefit from them, while others fail to do so. The complicated factors which shape the different results of mothering from afar via ICTs usage need further exploration. Due to the limitations of our data, some other important questions also remain unanswered in our research, for example, how do children in the home country interpret the relationship between ICTs usage and transnational motherhood? As those both receiving the care of transnational mothers and acting as the other party in telecommunication, the perspectives of children are important. Another related question is "What are the key factors shaping various maternal practices in transnational mothering via ICTs usage?" In addition to transnational mothers' strategic use of ICTs, their demographic characteristics and the collaboration of the caregivers in the home country may also affect the pattern of transnational mothering. In our future research, these questions will be further explored and discussed.

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