

Sustaining Families across Transnational Spaces: Vietnamese Migrant Parents and their Left-Behind Children

LAN ANH HOANG*

The University of Melbourne

and

BRENDA S.A. YEOH

National University of Singapore

Abstract: *The continually growing number of Asian migrant workers, the majority of whom are in the prime of their reproductive lives and leave families including children behind in their home countries, raises important questions about how families are sustained across transnational spaces. It is our aim in this paper to enhance understanding of the complex relationship between migration and the family in Asia by exploring bonding and parenting efforts between migrant parents and their left-behind children across time and space. In doing so, we draw on and engage with the literature on global householding, transnational families and emotion. Using qualitative data collected from in-depth interviews with carers of left-behind children in Northern Vietnam, the paper also sheds light on children's attitudes and reactions to their parents' migration as well as changes in their feelings over time.*

Keywords: *Vietnam, transnational migration, children, emotion, family*

Introduction

The development of transnationalism as a conceptual tool in migration studies in the early 1990s denoted an important shift in the way migration is conceptualised and researched. Within this paradigm, transnational migration is defined as “the processes by which

* Correspondence Address: School of Social and Political Sciences, The University of Melbourne, Melbourne, VIC 3010 Australia. Email: lahoang@unimelb.edu.au

immigrants forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement” (Basch et al., 1994, p. 7). While originally focused on individual immigrants, this new approach has ignited further developments that bring the family and household to centre stage. New concepts such as “transnational family” and “global householding” have been developed to capture the transformations of the family and the household as a result of migration. Transnational families are defined by Bryceson and Vuorela (2002, p. 3) as families “that live some or most of the time separated from each other, yet hold together and create something that can be seen as a feeling of collective welfare and unity, namely ‘familyhood’, even across national borders”. “Global householding”, on the other hand, refers to the formation and sustenance of households that are increasingly reliant on the international movement of people and transactions among household members residing in more than one national territory (Douglass, 2006). Both concepts emphasise the resilience and flexibility of the family unit that maintains its significance despite significant adversities, including long-term physical and temporal separation, that potentially put its integrity and solidarity at risk. In other words, relations and obligations in the transnational family “do not end but bend” (Hochschild, 2000, p. 134).

In this paper we seek to contribute to the literature concerned with the phenomena of transnational families and global householding by examining how Vietnamese migrant parents and the children they leave behind in their home villages sustain family ties through transnational communication and visits. Communication over considerable distance represents an important site for the exploration of intimacy and emotional ties in the transnational family, while visits provide us with opportunities to see how emotions are played out in face-to-face situations. Drawing on in-depth interviews with the children’s principal carers, including usually resident parents and grandparents in Vietnam, we explore how migrants make efforts to parent and bond with their children from afar, as well as how children respond and react to these transnational householding efforts and parental migration in general. In our analysis we pay special attention to emotional aspects of transnational relationships that have received less attention in the literature on migration and family than other material concerns, such as remittances, health and education. The paper engages in and draws on the debates on transnational family and global householding as well as the interconnected concepts of migration and emotion that are discussed in greater depth in the following part of the paper. The concepts of “transnational family” and “global

householding” offer an excellent framework to address the deterritorialisation of homemaking. In the sections following the literature review we briefly describe the research contexts and methods before turning our attention to our Vietnam case study, which reveals nuanced accounts of how parents and children maintain emotional bonds across transnational spaces.

Householding in the Age of Migration

By referring to the creation and sustenance of the household as “householding”, Douglass (2006, p. 421) emphasises the continuity of social reproduction that covers all life-cycle stages and extends beyond the family. Social reproduction here refers to an array of activities that is necessary for ensuring the daily and generational continuity of families and communities, including meeting basic human needs; physical and emotional caregiving; and socialising children into culturally appropriate identities, behaviours and belief systems (Peterson, 2010). By going global, the household, charged with the role of social reproduction, transforms itself in such a way that it can continue to bear and raise children while trying to survive and thrive amidst increasing economic uncertainties. In her research on Filipino migrants in Los Angeles, Espiritu (2003) describes how homemaking with very fluid emotional and geographical boundaries becomes “unbounded” when activities and practices become transnational. Earlier on, Caces et al. (1985) suggested the concept of the “shadow household”, which consists of all individuals who do not physically live in a household but continue to be involved in its day-to-day decisions and actions. In the context of transnational migration, members of the household, though scattered over more than one nation-state, maintain the strength and intensity of their commitments and obligations to one another.

Bryceson and Vuorela (2002) brought the theorisation of transnational families to a new level by introducing two concepts – namely, “frontiering” and “relativising” – as the strategies employed by transnationally split members to maintain “familyhood”. While “frontiering” “denotes the ways and means transnational family members use to create familial space and network ties in terrain where affinal connections are relatively sparse” (Bryceson and Vuorela, 2002, p. 11), “relativising” refers to the ways in which individuals establish, maintain or curtail relational ties with specific family members. Since families are conceptualised by Bryceson and Vuorela (2002, p. 10) as imagined communities where the

sense of membership can be a matter of choice and negotiation, members choose to maintain emotional and material attachments of varying degrees of intensity with certain kinsmen while opting out of transnational relationships with others. The concept of “relativising” is particularly relevant to our discussion of transnational communication between parents and children in this paper. However, our data suggest that “relativising” is not always a matter of choice, since migrant parents’ agency can be considerably constrained by the restrictive socioeconomic structures around them.

The question of how transnational families sustain ties across time and space has been addressed by a number of empirical studies. Apart from the substantial volume of literature discussing how transnational migrants maintain relationships with and fulfil their obligations towards the family in their country of origin through remittances (e.g. Wong, 2006; Carling, 2008; Thai, 2010), various studies in the Philippines and Latin America have provided interesting insights into the affective aspects of transnational parenting. Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila (1997) made probably the first attempt to understand changing meanings of motherhood among Latina women working as domestic workers in Los Angeles. Migrant mothers in her study expand their definitions of motherhood to encompass breadwinning rather than replacing caregiving with breadwinning definitions of motherhood. Like Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila, other authors writing on transnational mothering (cf. Parreñas, 2001; Schmalzbauer, 2004; Dreby, 2006) reveal intriguing accounts of how migrant mothers, despite the many restrictions and difficulties of their work and life overseas, engage in day-to-day transnational caregiving through the exchange of letters, photos and phone calls. The continued presence of migrant parents in children’s everyday lives despite the fact that they are thousands of miles away is referred to as an “absent presence” by Pertierra (2006), who suggests that by enabling the migrant to be “here” and “there” simultaneously, technological advancements help to eliminate the sense of physical separation.

In general, these studies on transnational parenting underline the resilience of the family unit in the context of transnational migration while at the same time drawing our attention to the fact that communication is crucial in keeping transnational ties alive. The role of information and communication technologies (ICT) in the maintenance of transnational social networks or “kinwork”, as Di Leonardo refers to it, (1987) has been underscored by various studies. According to a study of transnational families in six countries, the use of ICTs creates a

stronger sense of a shared social field, and women tend to be more active than men in transnational kinwork,¹ especially through the exchange of telephone calls and letters (Wilding, 2006, p. 135, 138). In a recent study on female migrant domestic workers in Singapore, Thomas and Lim (2010) find that the mobile phone is more than just a means for the women to communicate with their families back home; it also enables them to “escape” the physical confines of their employers’ homes and maintain an existence beyond their lives as maids. The ability to use ICTs in transnational communication is particularly important for migrant domestic workers, given their usually highly circumscribed and isolated living and working environments. It is indeed common for domestic workers in some Asian countries such as Singapore and Taiwan not to be allowed to use both landline and cell phones, presumably to prevent them from developing social networks outside the employer’s home (Yeoh and Huang, 1998, p. 596; Douglass, 2007, p. 174).

Difficulties in maintaining frequent communications with the family in the country of origin also stem from the limited financial resources they possess and the under-development of ICT infrastructures in some origin countries. Mahler (2001) has shown how limited and poor communication gives rise to imperfections and gaps of information among El Salvadorian transnational families, with detrimental effects on spousal relationships. Non-migrant family members who stay at home, Carling (2008) adds, tend to have greater gaps of information because they have never even been to the country where their migrant relatives lead their daily lives and tend to live in places with less developed communication infrastructure. They are therefore more likely to experience frustration and anxiety over the failure to communicate effectively across transnational spaces. According to Mahler (2001, p. 610), differential access to means of communication exacerbates existing asymmetries, creating unequal power and corresponding dependency. Even in cases where people are able to communicate regularly at relatively affordable costs, as demonstrated by Wilding (2006, p. 138), the sense of distance is not eliminated but might be intensified, especially in times of crisis.

Migration and Emotion

Of the various transnational householding channels, little has been discussed regarding the so-called “emotion work” – namely, activities of nurturing, comforting, encouraging or facilitating interaction (Daniels, 1987, p. 408). Research in sociology and human geography

(Hochschild, 1979; Anderson and Smith, 2001; Turner and Stets, 2005) has, nevertheless, demonstrated the centrality of emotion in social relations. Laurier and Parr (1999, p. 98) define emotions as “complex manifestations of corporeal and psychological aspects of human beings which are simultaneously felt and performed as relations between self and world”. In the context of migration, Skrbiš (2008, p. 236) argues that emotions need to be seen as a constitutive part of the transnational family experience, not least because migration is “invariably a process that dissociates individuals from their family and friendship networks, as well as from other socially significant referents that have strong emotional connotations”. This is reaffirmed by Baldassar (2007, p. 391), who emphasises in her study of transnational Italian families in Australia that emotional and moral support, being intertwined with other types of support such as financial, practical and personal, constitutes the foundation of transnational family relations. Understanding emotion in migration is additionally important in the case of domestic workers where leaving home to live as part of another household, as Huang and Yeoh (2007, p. 197) have pointed out, is fraught with emotional disruptions and disconnections.

In her much-cited essay ‘Love and Gold’, Hochschild (2002, p. 26) equates the migration of domestic workers with the importation of care and love from poor countries to rich countries, amounting to the so-called “quiet imperialism”. The strong interest in the emotional aspect of female migration is not surprising given that emotion work is considered women’s work in many contexts. This emotion work is often perceived as unproductive but crucial in constructing and affirming social relationships (Daniels, 1987, p. 408). The emotional costs of female migration are closely related to concerns about the “care drain” (Hochschild, 2002, p. 17) in the Third World, since care is understood as comprising both physical labour (“caring for”) and emotional labour (“caring about”) (Hooyman and Gonyea, 1995; Lynch and McLaughlin, 1995). While the “caring for” can be easily provided by people other than parents, there is less certainty about the “caring about” – namely, “having affection and concern for the other and working on the relationship between the self and the other to ensure the development of the bond” (Lynch and McLaughlin, 1995, p. 257) – in care relationships.

As mentioned earlier, migrant parents, particularly mothers, rarely forgo their caregiving duties during their absence, yet the emotional challenges of transnational caregiving are immense. Schmalzbauer (2004, p. 1324), for example, unveils the great distress that

Honduran migrant parents experience in trying to maintain connections with children who were young when they left and thus cannot remember them very well. Similarly, Parreñas (2001; 2008a), in her studies of Filipino transnational families, found significant emotional ramifications for both migrant parents and the children they leave behind in their home country. Emotional charges can be considerable for migrant fathers when they do not adjust their fathering performance to accommodate the needs created by migration but hold on to the macho disciplinarian image. Migrant fathers, she observes, are inclined to maintain only instrumental communication with their families, whereas migrant mothers seek to foster intimate ties with their children through regular communication (Parreñas, 2005a). In the context of Mexico, Dreby (2006, p. 34) also notes differences between mothers' and fathers' communication with children which, she argues, are largely shaped by the prevailing gender ideologies that ascribe the maternal role to women and that of financial provider to men. Men thus tend to grow distant from their children when they believe they are unable to fulfil their breadwinner role, while mothers stay in touch with children even when they cannot afford to remit them money, since what matters most for mothers is the emotional care work they are able to perform from a distance. The tendency for mothers to make greater efforts to maintain emotional bonds with their children is partly attributed to the usually stronger moral expectations of them to do so in various cultural contexts (Chant and Craske, 2003; Abrego, 2009).

There is ample evidence of emotional repercussions of migration on children left behind in countries of origin. In the Philippines, Parreñas (2005a) found that children of migrant men tended to withdraw emotionally from their fathers and children of migrant women experienced feelings of abandonment and a lack of intimacy and affection. Migrant parents' urge to (over)compensate for their absence with money and gifts leads to some level of commodification of parent-child relationships. Studies on left-behind children in Guatemala, for example, reveal that they tend to prefer money to intimacy from their migrant mothers (Moran-Taylor, 2008, p. 89). Also in Latin America, Artico (2003) shows how children's relationships with their absent parents during separation became more like a business exchange than unconditional parent-child love. Upon family reunion, children and parents have a difficult time adjusting to one another after long periods of separation and conflict may ensue when adolescent children refuse to acknowledge the authority of migrant parents (Menjívar, 2000; Artico, 2003). The commodification of children-parent relationships and the

conflicts it entails, as suggested by some studies, can be partly attributed to the fact that parents tend to “relativise their communication”, hiding the harsh reality of their lives in order to avoid worrying their families back home as well as to project an image of success (Goldring, 1998; Levitt, 2001; Schmalzbauer, 2008).

Parreñas’ (2005b) study of left-behind children in the Philippines, nevertheless, suggests that not all left-behind children succumb to the emotional damage associated with transnational families. She observes that children’s feelings of abandonment are soothed when parents, especially mothers, make consistent efforts to show parental concern from a distance. Strong support from resident parents and extended kin also helps children to combat feelings of abandonment. Whilst Parreñas’ study drew on interviews with children, in this paper we examine carers’ accounts to offer further insights into transnational relationships.

Perspectives of left-behind children’s carers have been largely absent from the scholarship on transnational migration and family. Incorporating carers into the research provides us with “third-party” perspectives on transnational relationships as well as an enhanced understanding of the emotion work performed by resident kin members to keep family ties alive despite spatial and temporal separation – an aspect that, as pointed out by Skrbiš (2008, p. 237), has been overlooked in the literature.

Research Methods and Contexts

This study is part of a larger project on transnational labour migration and the health and well-being of left-behind children in four Southeast Asian countries – namely, Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam. Data were collected at two stages: (1) structured surveys with around 1000 migrant and non-migrant households in each country, involving up to three members of the family: a child aged between 3 and 5 or 9 and 11,² the carer of the child, and a responsible adult in the household (if not the same as the carer); and (2) unstructured qualitative interviews with carers in around 50 households in each country. While the quantitative surveys were primarily concerned with the impacts of parental migration on children’s health and well-being, the focus of qualitative interviews was shifted to the care arrangements for left-behind children and the webs of relationships around them. This paper mainly draws on in-depth interviews with 37 carers of left-behind children in Thai Binh Province, Vietnam, but also uses some quantitative data on transnational communication from the surveys. The interviews, which were largely unstructured and lasted around one

hour each, were conducted in Vietnamese by one of the authors (a Vietnamese national) who closely supervised the transcription and translation of the interviews from Vietnamese to English. She was also responsible for coding English transcripts in NVivo – a data analysis computer software program designed for qualitative research – and analysis that involved cross-checks of the Vietnamese transcripts and audio recordings when necessary.

Of the 37 migrant households in our qualitative sample, 23 were mother-migrant, 12 were father-migrant, and 2 were both-parent-migrant. In terms of care arrangements, children in 18 households were being cared for by fathers, 11 by mothers, 7 by grandmothers, and 1 by the grandfather. All the migrant parents were low-skilled workers who secured their job placements through formal labour export channels. Most of them were concentrated in two occupations – domestic work (n = 13) and factory work (n = 14) – while the rest were engaged in various unskilled jobs such as construction, farming and fishing. Major destinations were Taiwan, South Korea, Malaysia and Japan.

Transnational labour migration from Vietnam has been increasing steadily since the country switched from the labour markets of the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe to those in Asia and the Middle East in the early 1990s. By 2008, more than 500,000 Vietnamese migrant workers were working abroad (Dang et al., 2010, p. 12). Nearly 76,000 workers were deployed overseas in 2010 (excluding people migrating through irregular channels and workers sent overseas to work for Vietnamese enterprises), with Taiwan, Malaysia, South Korea and the Middle East being the top destinations.³ Labour migration from Vietnam remains male-dominated - women accounted for 30.1 per cent in 2009. Men mostly work in construction, farming, seafaring or manufacturing industries while the majority of women work in domestic and care services as well as manufacturing industries. The export of labour from Vietnam is strictly under state control – all 167 legally licensed recruitment agencies are state-owned. However, poor state management has led to the development of an informal “migration industry”, inflated migration costs and a high incidence of contract violations. Issues around exploitative brokerage practices in the Vietnamese “migration industry” have been discussed in one of our recent studies (Hoang and Yeoh, 2010). The financially disadvantaged starting point of many Vietnamese migrants, coupled with the low-waged jobs they do, have direct implications for their (in)ability to maintain ties with the family at a distance.

Thai Binh – our study site – is a coastal province 110 km southeast of Vietnam's capital city of Hanoi. With a population density exceeding 1,200 people per square kilometre by 2008, it is among the most densely-populated provinces in the country and known for having a high incidence of out-migration, both internal and international. Thai Binh deployed 2,410 workers overseas in 2010, pushing the total number of overseas migrant workers from the province to over 20,000.⁴ In contrast to the male-dominated out-migration flows at the national level, the majority of workers from Thai Binh are female (81.5 per cent during 2000–05) and most (88 per cent) do domestic work in Taiwan (HealthBridge_Canada, 2008, p. 27).

ICTs and Communication in the Vietnamese Transnational Family

Telecommunication costs in Vietnam are believed to be the third highest in the world, after only Cuba and Guyana,⁵ and five times higher than those in Singapore, primarily due to state monopoly in this sector. Until recently, owning a mobile phone was largely a middle-class marker, not only because the phone is itself expensive but also due to the high mobile tariff averaging VND 2,500/minute (USD 0.15) for domestic calls and around VND 7,000/minute (USD 0.41) for international calls. It is equally expensive to make international calls from a landline phone. The process of privatisation and equitisation of the telecommunications sector in the last five years has resulted in a boom of new companies with competitive deals that drive down domestic phone tariffs, thereby rapidly expanding mobile phone usage. However, international communication tariffs remain high in comparison with other countries in the region.

Both our quantitative survey of 581 migrant households in provinces of Hai Duong and Thai Binh and qualitative interviews with 37 migrant households in Thai Binh indicated that the phone, including mobile and landline phones, was the most important means of communication between the migrant and the left-behind family. Ninety-eight per cent of the households surveyed reported using the phone in transnational communication (for calls and text messaging – SMS) whereas 1 per cent communicated through postal mail and a negligible 0.6 per cent reported using the internet in addition to the phone. The qualitative interviews conducted in Thai Binh a year later still pointed to the phone as the most important means of transnational communication (used by 34 of the 37 households) but nevertheless

indicated a difference in the use of the internet – 21.6 per cent or eight households communicated with the migrant parent via both phone and internet.

Among internet users, only two had computers with an internet connection at home and were thus able to maintain regular or even daily communication with the migrant parent, while the others accessed the internet in local shops on an irregular basis ranging from once a week to once a year. All used the internet to make video calls via Yahoo Messenger; none reported email communication. Although communication via the internet was cheaper than phoning, it had yet to become the most popular means of communication because few parents, migrant or resident, could afford to buy a computer or were computer literate. Travelling to the shops was difficult to do on a regular basis because of time constraints (shops were often far from home and many resident parents were engaged in paid work of various sorts) or the time difference between Vietnam and the overseas location of the migrant parent. However, there was a consensus among those who used the internet about its added value in allowing family members to see one another on the webcam, thereby closing the gap between the migrant parents and children, especially where migration started when the children were very young and would have had no physical impression of their migrant parents otherwise. Each trip to the internet shop was therefore a family activity arranged at weekends or on public holidays when children did not go to school, and conversations typically lasted two to three hours.

Transnational communication via SMS was uncommon among our study households which, according mobile phone users, was because they were not “tech savvy” enough, as they were slow in handling the keyboard. Besides, SMS was not cheap (USD0.15) and had to be reciprocal to be effective, whereas most households maintained one-sided communication with migrant parents who paid less to phone home thanks to the availability of cheap prepaid phone cards in their overseas locations. Only in four cases did the carer tell us that the children, usually the eldest one, sent SMS to their migrant mothers when they thought of them but the exchange of SMS tended to be spontaneous, short and irregular. This stands in sharp contrast to what Parreñas (2005b, p. 328) found in the Philippines, where migrant mothers communicated with their children via SMS on a daily basis. The Philippines is reputed to have the highest rate of SMS usage in the world – flows of around 1 billion SMS per day were reported in 2008 – a phenomenon that has been associated with a large number of temporary migrant workers overseas (Ukwatta, 2010, p. 123).

Sending gifts and letters through the post or friends was another option, but was much less common than phone calls. All but two households in our study used their own phones in transnational communication. The two phone-less families received calls through landline phones of relatives living next door. However, the ubiquitous presence of the phone in the transnational families in our study does not necessarily mean that transnational communication is trouble-free and unfettered. The transformational power of affordable international phone calls as noted by Vertovec (2004, p. 222) has yet to have an impact on many migrant families we studied in Vietnam. Our Vietnam quantitative surveys revealed that transnational communication was maintained on a daily basis in 8.1 per cent of the participating households, a few times a week in 36.7 per cent, and once a week in 39.6 per cent of households. In more than 10 per cent of the households surveyed, the migrant got in touch with the family once a month while nearly 5 per cent communicated only once or twice a year. This is mirrored by our qualitative study of 37 migrant households, of which only five reported that they maintained daily communication with the migrant parent – four via phone calls and one via video calls on Yahoo Messenger. The majority (n = 25 or 67.5 per cent) communicated once to three times a week, while transnational communication took place once a month in five households and once or twice a year in two households. Transnational communication was almost always initiated by the migrant. The family would take the initiative only when it was absolutely necessary, such as in the event of illness, death or when there were major family decisions to make. The gender-disaggregated survey data show some interesting differences in mothers' and fathers' communication intensity – while migrant mothers were more likely to communicate with the family daily than migrant fathers (9.4 and 8 per cent, respectively), the proportion of mothers keeping in touch with the family once or a few times a week was lower than that of fathers (73.5 and 83.3 per cent, respectively). Mothers were, therefore, more likely than fathers to maintain infrequent and limited communication ranging from once a month to a few times a year (17.5 and 8.0 per cent, respectively).

The (In)ability to Keep Transnational Ties Alive

The fact that some migrant mothers in our study were less likely than fathers to maintain frequent communication with the family contrasts with what has been observed in the Philippines (Parreñas, 2005b) and Mexico (Dreby, 2006), where migrant mothers tend to

communicate with their families, especially children, more frequently than migrant fathers. When delving into the qualitative data for possible explanations for this seemingly counter-intuitive communication pattern, we found that a large number of female migrant workers in our sample were engaged in domestic work, which has been shown by earlier studies (cf. Yeoh and Huang, 1998; Yeoh et al., 2005; Douglass, 2007) to be a highly circumscribed type of work. Thirteen of the 23 migrant mothers in our sample were doing domestic work in Taiwan, and these women tended to communicate with the family less frequently than those who held other jobs. Their ability to communicate was primarily dependent on their employers' generosity, which varied from case to case. In a few instances, such as that of Lien – a 12 year-old girl whose mother was on her third two-year contract as a domestic worker in Taiwan – the migrant could only maintain minimal contact with the family:

She contacts us two or three times a year because her employer does not allow her to use the phone... He does not allow her to buy a mobile phone... He is afraid that she would run away to work illegally if she has a phone ... each time she gets in touch, she has to ask him for permission to use his landline phone (Doanh, 45 years old, father carer, interview, 27 April 2009).

Because Lien's mother could not phone home more often and the family did not have its own phone (Doanh used his brother's landline phone to receive her calls), they resorted to postal mail on an intermittent basis. The mother rarely wrote separately to each person but often sent one-for-all letters to the family. Although Doanh and his children could have phoned the mother rather than waiting for her to get in touch (she was allowed to receive phone calls from her family), they refrained from doing so because of the cost of making international phone calls from Vietnam. Any communication therefore tended to be short and instrumental – focusing on family livelihood issues rather than “trivial” matters such as children's sickness or schooling progress. The mother was thus oblivious to the details of her children's everyday lives. The only thing she could do when she got in touch was to give Doanh a general reminder to “feed them well and buy medicine for them when they are ill”. The inability to communicate at will not only curtailed Lien's mother's presence in her children's lives but also resulted in Lien's continual state of anxiety and distress, referred to by Doanh as “a little psychological problem” (*vấn đề tâm lý nhỏ*). Although it appeared difficult for him to articulate clearly the emotional strain his daughter was experiencing, mainly because she kept herself to herself and refused to reveal her thoughts and feelings to him, we could sense the growing gap between Lien and her mother in Doanh's account of the mother's visits:

She (Lien) was still young and totally normal (in her behaviour) when her mother visited home for the first time but somehow became shy during her mother's last visit... She was shy, not comfortable talking to her mum. She was not confident... Her mother's visit was too short for them to get close to each other again. She and her mum could not be as close as before... Her mother was sad. She did not want things to turn out that way but had to accept it because it was for their education and future. She knew and accepted it... (Doanh, interview, 27 April 2009).

If Lien appeared excited to receive letters or phone calls from her mother initially, she later became withdrawn, and stopped replying to her mother's letters about a year before our fieldwork so letter-sending became a one-sided flow of communication from Taiwan to Vietnam. Doanh's explanations for Lien's change of attitude were not easy to interpret – “she was uncomfortable with something” and “she is shy probably because she has grown up”. Despite the unmistakable emotional distance between Lien and her mother, Lien did not want her mother to re-migrate after her second contract. According to her father, Lien was extremely upset when she returned from school to find that her mother had left for Taiwan. She lost her appetite, started to get bad marks at school, and regained her balance only a month after her mother's departure.

Farm workers also faced considerable difficulties in maintaining communication with home, because of their isolated working conditions usually in remote areas and the financial constraints associated with their low-paid jobs. The parent's ability to communicate was further hampered if s/he migrated to countries without large concentrations of Vietnamese people, meaning that phone tariffs for calling Vietnam were likely to be high and affordable prepaid phone cards were not available. This is illustrated by the story of Yen – a mother of two whose husband had been working on a forest plantation in Brunei since 2006. Yen's husband worked and lived deep in the forest, where phone connection was not available. The only time he could contact his family was at the end of each month when he travelled to a nearby town to collect his wages and buy groceries. Because it was expensive to make phone calls to Vietnam from his place, Yen's husband only sent her an SMS to let her know how he was and she usually sent an SMS back in reply. When they had important matters to discuss, Yen's husband rang her to let her know he was available so that she could ring him back. Each time they talked for five to ten minutes and the children might be allowed to speak to their dad briefly. For this reason, Yen's two children had minimal contact with their father

throughout his absence, especially because, unlike Lien's family, they did not use any means other than the mobile phone to communicate. However, the story Yen told us had a different tone from that of Lien:

Truong (her 5 year-old son) is very happy when he gets to speak to his dad. They (Truong and Thuong – Yen's eldest daughter) would miss him if they don't hear his voice for a long time... When I get angry and yell at him, he feels pity for himself and misses his father because his father usually encourages him (laughing)... He always speaks to his father on the phone... He greets and asks his father first, not waiting to be asked (Yen, 34 years old, mother carer, interview, 28 May 2009).

The emotional attachment between Yen's children and her husband was interesting because he had been working overseas for most of their lives – first in Malaysia, which was not very successful, then, after a few years in the south of Vietnam, in Brunei. He was on his second two-year stint in Brunei at the time of our fieldwork, trying to amass some savings because all the money he could save from the first contract was used to pay the bank loans taken to fund both the first migration to Malaysia and the subsequent one to Brunei. Earning from 6.5 to 7 million dong (USD 400) a month while paying off the new bank loan taken to pay for his re-hire in Brunei, Yen's husband tried to be as frugal as possible, so communication costs were kept at a minimum. The children, nevertheless, longed for him and looked forward to every opportunity to speak to him. This was largely the result of Yen's constant efforts to keep the children's memories of their father alive and to maintain his imaginary presence in their everyday lives. Unlike Doanh, who avoided mentioning his wife to Lien because "it may make her sad", Yen mentioned her husband at mealtimes, and when she encouraged the children to do better at school or punished them for their wrongdoings. The children filled the incommunicado periods with imaginings about their father, what he was possibly doing, and whether he thought about them. They thought about him when they had nice food or received good marks at school:

Yesterday he (Truong) asked me to call his father and ask him to come home to celebrate Tết Đoan Ngọ.⁶ He thinks about his father on festive days when I cook good food for them (Yen, 34 years old, mother carer, interview, 28 May 2009).

However, the loving image of the father painted by Yen appeared more real to her children when he was away than when he was physically present in the family home. The boy totally lost confidence when seeing his father during his visit after his first contract in Brunei:

He was so scared when seeing his father that he didn't dare to say a word... I explained to him that this was his father and he should love him. My husband also cried and explained to him that he [Truong] was small when he left home. He promised to buy the boy such and such if he behaved well. So Truong got closer to his father... Even the big girl is still scared of him. The day their father left home again, the children held each other tight, crying, not daring say anything to him (Yen, interview, 28 May 2009).

Yen used the word "scared" seven times when she recalled the visit, and this seemed to be the children's dominant feeling when their father first arrived. It suggested that no matter how hard she tried to maintain emotional ties between her children and their father, the gap created by physical separation was difficult to bridge. Although her husband, aided by material gifts, was able to become a bit closer to his children during his visit, the temporary closeness was short-lived, and only lasted until he left home again. As the separation was prolonged and the children continued to grow up in the physical absence of their father, it was uncertain whether material gestures would still be useful in overcoming gaps in the future.

The emotional distance caused by migrant parents' extended absence and limited communication was not unique to Yen's and Doanh's families but was common to many households, especially when the migrant had left home when his/her children were too young to understand. This is evident in the different reactions of children in the same family to communication with the migrant parent. Children who were under five when the parent first migrated were more likely to be affected than their older siblings, resulting in them staying outside transnational phone conversations most of the time. The story narrated by Thanh usefully illustrates this:

He mostly speaks to my son because the girl is scared of him. She doesn't speak to him on the phone. The girl was only four months old when her father left for Taiwan. She was so scared of him when he came home to visit us and

she has been scared of him ever since. She is terrified each time I bring the phone near her. She is scared of him because she hasn't seen much of him and she is also a shy girl... When he came home she just glanced at him... She didn't dare get close or speak to him... She is so scared of him that she cannot utter a word when she hears her dad's voice on the phone (Thanh, 31 years old, mother carer, interview, 24 May 2009).

As in Yen's case, transnational communication in Thanh's family was kept to a minimum as her husband could not phone home frequently due to the high cost, and each phone conversation lasted only a few minutes. Interestingly, while it was common to find resource constraints as the main reason for migrants' infrequent communication with their family in our Vietnam study, it has hardly been discussed by migration studies in other contexts. The prevalence of financial difficulties among Vietnamese workers, we argue, is attributable to the highly exploitative "migration industry" in Vietnam (Hoang and Yeoh, 2010) and the racialisation of the labour market in destination countries that often relegates Vietnamese workers with low levels of education and poor language proficiency to the bottom of the occupational hierarchy (cf. Liang, 2011).

Out of Sight, Out of Mind

Though common, "scared" was not the only feeling young children had toward their migrant parents. Some became indifferent when parents' physical absence and transnational phone calls became routinised as time went by. Many carers told us that the children gradually "got used to" parental absence and stopped mentioning the absent parent unless prompted. Although most still spoke to their migrant parents on the phone when asked to do so, they became bored with repetitive conversations on the same sets of issues and gradually lost interest, which is reflected in Thach's account of her 10 year-old daughter's reaction below:

She speaks to him most of the time but sometimes refuses to answer his calls because "he always talks about the same things". Her dad always asks her about her health, schooling and food (laughing) (Thach, 28 years old, mother carer, interview, 22 May 2009).

Children's lack of interest in transnational communication was exacerbated by the carers' lack of efforts to remind them of their migrant parents, especially when children were taken

care of by resident fathers and grandparents. In line with Wilding (2006), who has highlighted women's active role in transnational communication, our study shows that mother carers tended to be more mindful of the need to maintain children's affection and longing for their migrant fathers, as illustrated by Yen's case. Reminding children of their migrant father was also used by mothers as a form of discipline or an incentive for them to do well. Some children even refused to answer their migrant parents' calls, particularly when they had something more "interesting" to do or bad marks to hide:

He has refused to speak to his mum many times (laughing) ... when he is busy with something else, he refuses to answer the phone and runs out of the house. Only the little girl speaks to her mum (laughing); she speaks as soon as she is given the phone. The big boy doesn't care... She (the mother) asks me to give the phone to the boy; he just refuses to speak to her. He doesn't like it ... he simply tells me that he doesn't like it. That's it (Thong, 37 years old, father carer, interview, 6 May 2009).

They (his children) don't even expect their mum's calls now. The big one is a very active boy and sometimes refuses to answer his mum's calls. Sometimes he can see clearly on the screen that his mum is calling but he just presses the Reject button (Quang, 35 years old, father carer, interview, 4 May 2009).

Children's reactions to transnational communication with their migrant parents did not appear to be gender-specific since there was an equal mix of girls and boys who reportedly refused to pick up transnational calls and both mothers and fathers had their calls rejected by their children. However, we observed a tendency for children to become more shy and uncomfortable in communication with migrant parents when reaching adolescence, as in the cases of Lien and Thai – Thong's son – described above. According to Thong, Thai did not mind exchanging SMS with his migrant mother but felt uncomfortable speaking to her on the phone. Similarly, Giang – a 32 year-old mother carer – remarked that her 11 year-old son would refuse to speak to his father on the phone when other people were around because "he is embarrassed". Accounts of migrants' visits provide us with additional evidence of the emotional distance, indifference and confusion that the children experienced in their relationships with their absent parents. They refused to sleep with the visiting parent at night or to go out with them, and called them "auntie" or "uncle". Some migrant parents even had difficulty recognising their children, as in the case of Tien's wife, who mistakenly held her

niece instead of her daughter in her arms when the family picked her up at the airport. In an effort to win back their children's affection, migrant parents showered them with gifts and treats and cooked them the best food they could afford, which only made their re-migration more painful for the children, many of whom took a considerable amount of time to return to their normal selves. This was sometimes aided by white lies from resident parents and relatives trying to mitigate the effects of the sudden disappearance of the migrant parent.

This is not to say that all was bleak for the children in the transnational families we studied. When families could afford daily communication (in five of 37 cases), most children appeared to respond positively to the "absent presence" of migrant parents (cf. Pertierra, 2006), actively engaging in conversations with them over the phone or Yahoo Messenger, telling them how their day was and singing songs to them. In one of the two families that had an internet connection, online conversations between the family and the migrant father in South Korea became such a routinised part of daily life that those on both sides could not go to bed before seeing one another on the webcam, even for a few minutes. Transnational ties in these families were further cemented by migrants' visits, which were more likely to happen in such families than in those that could not afford frequent communication. This clearly shows that the (in)ability to maintain transnational ties reflects economic disparities as transnational families do not have uniform access to the so-called "social glue of migrant transnationalism" (cf. Vertovec, 2004). It confirms geographers' view that technologies favour pre-existing authority structures, thereby accentuating socio-spatial polarisation (Graham, 2002, p. 36; Adams and Ghose, 2003, p.146). Returning to Bryceson and Vuorela's (2002) concept of "relativising" in transnational relationships, we add that people's decisions to maintain transnational ties at varying degrees of intensity do not always reflect their preferences but are largely conditioned by the socioeconomic contexts.

Conclusion

In this study we have shown the crucial role of communication in migrant parents' efforts to perform homemaking at a distance. Equally important for the sustenance of transnational relationships is the quality and intensity of the emotion work performed by carers to build a positive image of the migrant parents in the minds of left-behind children. Gaps in transnational communication not only result in a great deal of uncertainty and anxiety for people on both sides but also lead to estrangement and emotional damage between migrants

and their children. Even when migrants succeed in maintaining a virtual presence in the family home through frequent communication, their participation in their children's lives can remain superficial as it is devoid of the warmth and intimacy present in actual (and not merely verbal) contact infused with the mundane details of everyday life. Clearly, as illustrated by Thong's account, while access to technologies helps members of transnational families to keep abreast of one another's day-to-day affairs, it does not create a shared social field for them – older children see parents' efforts to show love and care via the phone line as a form of surveillance, discipline and control. As physical separation continues, the celebrated virtue of the phone in allowing people to "hear a person's voice" (Panagakos and Horst, 2006, p. 115) becomes a burden rather than a blessing for growing-up children who feel more comfortable with less direct communication such as SMS. Contrary to popular discourses about processes of deterritorialisation as a result of globalisation and technological advancement (cf. Appadurai, 1996), our study demonstrates that national borders, state policies and socioeconomic divides maintain their significance, particularly for the less privileged people in the developing world. ICTs are not powerful enough to challenge the barriers and spaces created by these structures, especially when it comes to the emotional dimension of family life.

While our case study in Vietnam to some extent supports Hochschild's (2002) idea of "quiet imperialism" – that is, Third World children's deprivation of love and care due to transnational labour migration (to enrich the First World) – it shows that this deprivation is not restricted to female migration but also applies to the migration of fathers. The exploitation is thus not only gender-based but also rooted in the structural asymmetries of the global economic hierarchy. A sense of powerlessness was overwhelming in carers' accounts of how migrant parents failed to maintain their presence in their children's lives at a distance, with or without frequent communication. Extended separation from the family had turned the father into a figure of fear for young children, while the mother was reduced to a familiar but inconsequential voice on the phone and, occasionally, a generous source of gifts and treats.

Our study has also pointed out that transnational communication between Vietnamese migrants and their children is less likely to be shaped by gender norms as has been observed in the Philippines and Latin America (e.g. Dreby, 2006; Parreñas, 2008a) than by the restrictive socioeconomic structures around them. Migrants in our Vietnam study communicated more or less frequently with their children not primarily because of what was specifically expected of them as mothers and fathers. In fact, most of the positive accounts of

transnational communication were between migrant fathers and children. This, as we have suggested earlier, was due to the fact that a large number of migrant mothers in our study (and also from Vietnam in general) were performing domestic work – a job that tended to pay less and be more circumscribed than, say, factory work that was male dominated. The fact that Vietnamese fathers were no less keen than mothers to maintain emotional ties with their children is unsurprising given that various studies (cf. Long et al., 2000; Locke et al., 2009; Hoang and Yeoh, 2011) have shown how the construction of fatherhood in Vietnamese society encompasses not only breadwinning but also involvement in childcare and setting an example for children to follow.

Because our research draws on carers' narratives, and not those of the children themselves, it is unclear how children in different circumstances actually think and feel about their parents' migration and absence. However, even in the gloomiest pictures such as the case of Lien, we did not sense the feelings of abandonment, helplessness and permanent fracture that characterises depictions of transnational families in the Vietnamese or international media (e.g. Parreñas, 2002, p. 41). Instead, we argue that the presence and support of kin networks as much as the quality of (surrogate) care, as we have seen in Thai Binh, we argue, are critical in alleviating the emotional hardship that children in transnational families are subjected to. This is supported by a study built on the quantitative survey of our project that shows no significant differences in psychological well-being between children living with both parents and children in transnational households in Vietnam (Graham and Jordan, 2011). It is, however, too early to conclude that the integrity and solidarity of the family unit are not compromised by migration because our research was designed as a cross-sectional study and the children in our sample were 11 years old or younger. Research in other contexts has pointed out that the effects of parental migration on children are usually more pronounced in adolescence (cf. Artico, 2003; Smith et al., 2004; Dreby, 2007). Furthermore, transnational migration is a rather recent phenomenon in Vietnam, and the length of separation between parents and children in our Vietnam study is generally shorter than has been observed in the Philippines (cf. Pingol, 2001; Valerio, 2002; Parreñas, 2008b). The maximum length of separation in our study was six years (with home visits between contracts), whereas it is not uncommon for many Filipino migrant workers to be separated from their families for ten years or more, especially in cases of irregular migration to Europe and North America. This suggests that the effects of transnational migration on the family are determined by various factors and uneven across different social, cultural and economic contexts.

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Notes

¹ Di Leonardo (1987, p. 440) defines kinwork as “the conception, maintenance, and ritual celebration of cross-household kin ties”.

² These two age groups of preschool children and children in middle childhood were chosen to focus available resources and ensure adequate observations in each group to support a range of analyses including comparisons of health outcomes based on biometric measurements.

³ <http://laodong.com.vn/Tin-Tuc/75850-LDVN-di-lam-viec-o-nuoc-ngoai/23376>, accessed 8 November 2011.

⁴ http://www.thaibinh.gov.vn/ct/news/Lists/CulturalSocial/View_Detail.aspx?ItemID=4950, accessed 28 November 2011.

⁵ <http://vietbao.vn/Vi-tinh-Vien-thong/VN-Cuoc-vien-thong-quoc-te-dat-thu-ba-the-gioi/40055239/217/>, accessed 28 November 2011.

⁶ A festival celebrated at noon on the fifth day of the fifth lunar month in some East Asian countries.

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