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Intensification of traditional mothering ideals in migration contexts: low-income Mainland Chinese cross-border mothers in Hong Kong

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ABSTRACT

Research on migration and mothering has primarily focused on how migration reframes motherhood. Mothers are expected to be the primary caregivers and prioritise their children's wellbeing over their own. However, transnational mothers face tensions between this conventional ideal and migration realities. Most research has concentrated on the strategies of migrating mothers in resolving these tensions. This study, however, reveals that not all migrant mothers could renegotiate 'good mothering' to counter traditional ideals. The authors conducted individual in-depth interviews with 26 low-income cross-border Chinese mothers coming from Mainland China to Hong Kong. The study found that they reinforced and intensified traditional mothering ideals and struggled to meet such moral expectations because their visa status did not allow employment and access to Hong Kong's social security system. Mothers subordinated their own needs and wellbeing to prioritise their children's. They blamed themselves for not being able to care for their family in Mainland China. They also needed to rebuild social networks in Hong Kong centred around their children's needs. The findings suggest that migrant mothers' agency to redefine motherhood in a transnational context is limited by the intersection of their social class and citizenship status.

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Introduction

Traditionally, mothers are expected to be the primary caregivers of their children and to prioritise the children's wellbeing over their own. 'Good mothering' under the imagination of traditional motherhood requires women to give their full and constant attention not only to their family but also to every detail of their children's lives (Maher & Saugeres, 2007). Such an ideology of 'intensive mothering' is found to be associated with the portrayal of an urban middle-class family arrangement in which women assume the full-time caregiving role while men are the breadwinners, and is particularly prevalent in Western capitalist societies (Damaske, 2013). Working-class and single-parent women who need

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to leave their family and children for work are thus seen as violating the norm of mothering (Damaske, 2013; Maher & Saugeres, 2007).

Globalisation has led to the spread of the 'intensive mothering' ideal to non-Western contexts such as China and other East Asian countries (Jin & Dai, 2024). This urban and middle-class oriented image of motherhood is coupled with the traditional patriarchal norm of mothering under the Chinese Confucian philosophy that emphasises women sacrificing their own material, social and emotional needs to commit to their children's education and development (Liu & Xu, 2024). The pressure of this hybrid representation of motherhood results in a sense of guilt and self-blame among lower-class Chinese mothers who have gone through internal migration from rural areas to urban ones in search of work (Li, 2022).

Research on migration and mothering has primarily focused on how the migration experiences reframe motherhood (Juozeliūnienė & Budginaitė, 2018) as motherhood is renegotiated within transnational contexts (Lockwood et al., 2019). Transnational mothers need to address the tensions between the conventional norm of mothering and the migration realities, as they often need to be separated from their family and children. Most research on migration and mothering has focused on the successful strategies of migrating mothers in resolving these tensions.

A frequently researched group is women who migrate in search of work and who leave their children with other caregivers. Under traditional mothering ideologies, these transnational mothers are stigmatised to be defying the conventional ideal of proximity between mother and child (Mazzucato & Schans, 2011; Parreñas, 2001). They produce new meanings and practices of 'good mothering' to accommodate their position of living apart from their children (Juozeliūnienė & Budginaitė, 2018; Lockwood et al., 2019; Madziva, 2016; Parreñas, 2005). They emphasise how they assume breadwinning responsibilities and contribute to family prosperity through sending back remittances (Lutz & Palenga-Möllenbeck, 2012; Molina, 2015). The role of providers is incorporated into the traditional role of mothers as caregivers. Transnational mothers also renegotiate the patterns of care by long-distance mothering through telephone and social media communication to participate in their children's everyday lives despite physical separation (Acedera & Yeoh, 2021; Ballaret & Lanada, 2022; Cotton & Beguy, 2021; Madziva, 2016; Molina, 2015).

Existing literature on migration and mothering tends to focus more on the transnational mothers' renegotiation of 'good mothering' than on their struggles to fulfil the moral ideals of mothering. While some literature highlights that transnational mothering can be filled with stress, anxiety, guilt, inadequacy and self-doubt (Millman, 2013; Paciulan & Preibisch, 2013), the majority still centres on how transnational mothers strategically negotiate and redefine 'good mothering' to counter traditional ideals that demand mothers to sacrifice for their children.

The purpose of this research was to understand the experiences of low-income Mainland Chinese mothers who were relying on temporary visas to care for their children born and attending school in Hong Kong. Hong Kong was a British colony for more than 150 years until its sovereignty was transferred to China in 1997. As a Special Administrative Region of China and an East Asian financial centre where the majority of the population is ethnic Chinese, Hong Kong has a unique cultural landscape under the triple influences of Western Christian thought, neoliberal ethos emphasising individuals'

responsibility of self-reliance and Chinese Confucian familial values (Ip et al., 2025; Tang & Yuen, 2016).

Therefore, as the already pauperised cross-border Chinese mothers were navigating their family lives and childrearing practices in the city, their social and economic marginalisation were compounded by the lack of governmental support and the gendered moral expectation that women are responsible for taking care of their family and children. The findings of this research suggest that this group of mothers were different from what have been documented in the existing literature in that they did not negotiate and redefine 'good mothering' to counter traditional ideals. Instead, they reinforced and intensified traditional mothering ideals and strived to fulfil the moral expectations of mothering. It is argued that negotiating new understandings of good mothering requires financial capital and an adequate visa/citizenship status in the host society, which mothers of this study lacked. In this context, these mothers paradoxically struggled to live up to the ideal of proximity with their children and selfless sacrifice for their children's wellbeing. Consequently, they wittingly or unwittingly centred their lives around their children and prioritised their children's needs to the extent that they subordinated their own selves and wellbeing.

Literature review

Migration and mothering among low-income mothers

One key group that the literature on migration and mothering focuses on is working-class or low-income transnational mothers migrating from third-world countries to advanced capitalist economies, such as Latina mothers coming from Mexico to the United States (Hondagneu-Sotelo & Avila, 1997; Vesely et al., 2019) and Filipino mothers doing paid care work in post-industrial East Asian regions like Hong Kong (Peng & Wong, 2016). These mothers, who are separated from their children due to their own migration, usually seek better job opportunities with the aim of improving their family's financial situation. The literature primarily explores the negotiations around the concept of 'mothering,' defined as the practices and work of protecting, nurturing and training children (Ruddick, 1989). Dominant narratives of mothering construct the pivotal role of mothers as being the primary caregivers for their children (Hoang et al., 2015; Mazzucato & Schans, 2011; Parreñas, 2001; Pedersen, 2016). Central to this ideology is the notion that good mothers should stay close to their children (Mazzucato & Schans, 2011; Parreñas, 2001). Physical separation of mother and child is seen as defying 'good mothering,' leading to the stigmatisation of transnational mothers as 'bad mothers' who fail to perform care duties in the traditional way (Hoang, 2016; Juozeliūnienė & Budginaitė, 2018).

The stigmatisation of transnational mothers involves blaming them for disrupting family relationships and negatively affecting their children's psychological wellbeing and behaviours (Juozeliūnienė & Budginaitė, 2018). In facing this stigmatisation, mothers often experience acute feelings of anxiety, guilt, inadequacy and self-doubt (Hoang, 2016; Millman, 2013; Paciulan & Preibisch, 2013). Transnational motherhood is particularly taxing because caregiving from a distance is emotionally stressful for both parents and children, and it challenges prevailing traditional norms of motherhood

(Hondagneu-Sotelo & Avila, 1997; Parreñas, 2005). The emotional responses of guilt, regret, sadness and incompleteness not only impact their relationships with their children but also affect their relationships with their spouse (Brettell, 2017).

The need to negotiate multiple and often conflicting roles impacts women's sense of self and wellbeing (Lockwood et al., 2019). Mothers, rather than fathers, tend to bear the moral and practical burden of transnational parenting (Paciulan & Preibisch, 2013). In short, transnational mothers, especially low-income ones, are not only confronted with material deprivations in the host countries, but also with social stigma and high levels of emotional strain. However, rather than emphasising the difficulties, challenges and struggles these mothers have to endure in order to fulfil the mothering ideals, existing studies have focused more on mothers' agency and their various strategies to counteract the label of bad mothers. While these mothers contest stigmatisation, they do not challenge the core moral imperative that mothers should be responsible for their children. Instead, they redefine 'good mothering' to accommodate their transnational status and convey new practices that justify them as good mothers. In this process, they use different strategies to rework the meanings of mothering (Hondagneu-Sotelo & Avila, 1997).

One strategy is to present themselves as actively engaging in mothering during times of global mobility and changing gender relations, and highlighting how transnational mothering integrates both material wellbeing and caring for children (Juozeliūnienė & Budginaitė, 2018). These mothers take on a breadwinning role to improve their children's standard of living (Hoang et al., 2015; Juozeliūnienė & Budginaitė, 2018). Some mothers frame their migration within the collectivist needs of the family that aims to secure family prosperity (Lockwood et al., 2019; Lutz & Palenga-Möllenbeck, 2012).

For instance, transnational mothers perform 'good mothering' by sending remittances back to the family to care for their children (Hoang et al., 2015). Breadwinning, which is traditionally the father's role, is encompassed in this new meaning of mothering (Parreñas, 2010). Their migration is supported and valued as it enhances family prosperity (Lutz & Palenga-Möllenbeck, 2012). A related set of literature has focused on how transnational mothers contest conflicting public discourses and make sense of their mothering (Juozeliūnienė & Budginaitė, 2018; Lockwood et al., 2019). For example, Latina migrant mothers in Los Angeles understand their mothering practices as both breadwinning and nurturing from afar (Hondagneu-Sotelo & Avila, 1997).

Another strategy involves adopting modern mothering practices. These include organising transnational care chains through the use of new technologies, mobilising family members, kin and personal networks and re-negotiating family responsibilities (Juozeliūnienė & Budginaitė, 2018). With increasingly affordable communication and travel options, parents can remain actively involved in their children's everyday lives, even from a distance (Parreñas, 2001, 2005). Studies found that Filipino (Parreñas, 2001; Peng & Wong, 2016) and Mexican women (Dreby, 2010) participate in caring from afar through online media and phone calls. 'Long-distance parenting' becomes a new form of mothering for transnational mothers (Madziva, 2016; Molina, 2015).

The ways in which and the extent to which transnational mothers redefine motherhood depend on the intersection of a number of factors, such as mothers' social class, race/ethnicity, age, legal status in the host society and more. For example, relatively young, highly educated and privileged Latin American mothers coming from Colombia

to the United States have sufficient resources and knowledge to secure a legal status with relative ease, can be stay-at-home mothers without working precarious jobs and can also send their children to high-rated private schools (Wright, 2024). They are thus able to distinguish themselves from the negative, gendered and racialised image of 'bad mothers' associated with lower-class Latina migrants (Wright, 2024). On the other hand, working-class documented Latina mothers who are able to find a job and experience a certain degree of increased financial contributions to their family, are capable of negotiating traditional gender roles by redistributing family and childrearing responsibilities with their husband (Vesely et al., 2019). Nevertheless, undocumented mothers who are usually unable to work due to their legal status or who can only work limited and precarious jobs without labour protection endure constant anxiety and self-doubt as they struggle to fulfil the moral expectation of supporting their children on their own (Vesely et al., 2019).

Therefore, the intersection of social class and legal/citizenship status shapes transnational mothers' agency and ability to negotiate good motherhood. Indeed, one commonality in the strategies of low-income transnational mothers is their reliance on their contributions to the family and children to counter the 'bad mother' stigma and to make sense of their motherhood. A crucial factor that gives them the agency to negotiate is the (limited) financial gain that contributes to the children and the family. Such gain is usually enabled by their visa or citizenship status in the host society that allows them to work. This raises the question of what happens when mothers lack the resources to counter the demands of traditional mothering.

Unlike transnational mothers reported in existing studies, the low-income cross-border Chinese mothers in this research did not experience financial gain from their migration. Quite the contrary, their migration worsened rather than improved their family's financial situation, as they relied on a temporary visa that prohibited employment and business activities in Hong Kong. These mothers thus provide a lens through which to understand the situation of mothers in migration contexts whose material conditions do not enable their agency to counter conventional demands on ideal mothering. The unique situation of the mothers in this study demands an extension of the current literature on migration and mothering that takes into consideration the intersectional effects of social class and citizenship status on mothers' lives.

Mainland Chinese cross-border mothers in Hong Kong

Hong Kong was returned from Britain to China in 1997, but under the 'One Country Two Systems' policy, there are still restrictions for Mainland Chinese to enter Hong Kong for settlement. The legal status of a Hong Kong permanent resident (HKPR), who has the right of abode in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) of China, was first established in the 1984 Sino-British Joint Declaration. It was later stipulated into the Basic Law, the mini constitution of Hong Kong enacted after the transfer of its sovereignty (Chan, 2008). Article 24(1) of the Basic Law states that Chinese citizens born in Hong Kong shall be permanent residents. However, in practice, not all Hong Kong-born Chinese babies could obtain the right of abode in the HKSAR. In the first few years after 1997, Paragraph 2(a) of Schedule 1 to the Immigration Ordinance stated that Chinese citizens born in Hong Kong were entitled to permanent

residency only insofar as one of their parents was already a Hong Kong resident at the time of their birth (Chan, 2008). In other words, if a person's parents were both Mainland Chinese citizens, even if that person was born in Hong Kong, she or he would not be able to obtain the right of abode.

The 1999 Chong Fung Yuen v. Director of Immigration case resolved this legal discrepancy, allowing Chinese babies whose parents are not Hong Kong citizens to obtain permanent residency. Chong's parents, visiting on a temporary visa, gave birth to him in Hong Kong in 1997. The Immigration Department intended to repatriate Chong, but his grandfather filed a lawsuit in 1999, claiming that the Immigration Ordinance was unconstitutional. In 2001, the Court of Final Appeal ruled in favour of Chong, citing a violation of the Basic Law (Chen, 2001). Despite this, restrictions still limited Mainland Chinese from visiting Hong Kong, preventing an immediate influx of births (Chee, 2017; So, 2011).

The turning point was the 2003 introduction of the Individual Visit Scheme (IVS) under the Closer Economic Partnership Arrangement (CEPA) between Hong Kong and China. The IVS allowed Mainland Chinese citizens easier access to Hong Kong, and thus increased tourist numbers from 6.8 million in 2002 to 34.9 million in 2012 (Census and Statistics Department, 2013). An unintended consequence was the rise of birth tourism, with Mainland Chinese women using a temporary visa to give birth in Hong Kong. This created an industry supporting visa applications, the acquisition of obstetric services and hotel bookings (Chee, 2017; Huang et al., 2019). Consequently, births to non-local parents rose from 620 in 2001 to 26,715 in 2012, about 29.2% of all babies born in that year (Census and Statistics Department, 2017).

Hong Kong people labelled these babies 'double nots' (Shuāngfēi, meaning that both of their parents were not Hong Kong citizens) to signify the illegitimacy of their permanent residency (Choi & Lai, 2022). As obstetric services in Hong Kong were already limited for local people, there was a public outcry against having more 'double nots' in the city (Huang et al., 2019). Eventually, the Hong Kong government launched the 'zero-quota' policy in 2013 and stopped Mainland Chinese women from giving birth in either public or private hospitals (Chee, 2017; Choi & Lai, 2022).

Giving birth in Hong Kong was an attractive option for Mainland Chinese women for three major reasons. Firstly, living under traditional patriarchal pressure and social expectations, many Mainland Chinese women felt compelled to have a second or even third child until they had a baby boy. However, doing so would put them at risk of severe penalties for violating China's one-child policy (which ended in 2015), such as unaffordable fines and forced sterilisation (Chee, 2017). Childbirth in Hong Kong was thus an expedient alternative, enabling them to escape such punishments. Secondly, securing a Hong Kong identity card for their children implies the possibility of future upward social mobility. As Hong Kong citizens, their children would have access to Hong Kong's bilingual (English and Chinese) and internationalised education system, which could facilitate opportunities for studying abroad and even migration to Western countries (Choi & Lai, 2022). Thirdly, under certain conditions, Mainland parents might obtain their own Hong Kong permanent residency after their Hong Kong-born children become adults (Choi & Lai, 2022).

However, in reality, having Hong Kong-born children produced more difficulties than benefits. For lower-class Chinese mothers, their nightmare began when their Hong

Kong-born children reached school age. Because their children were born in Hong Kong, they do not possess a household registration (hukou) in China. Many schools in China would thus treat them as international students and demand them to pay an unaffordable 'sponsorship fee' (zànzhùfèi), a one-time lumpsum payment ranging from a few thousand to a few hundred thousand RMB required for the admission of a non-Chinese student. As children in Hong Kong receive free education, sending their children to a Hong Kong school became the only viable option (Chee, 2017; Chee & Ip, 2019). To do so, Chinese mothers would need to rely on a temporary visa called two-way permit to stay in Hong Kong and care for their children. The permit must be renewed in their hometown every three months and does not allow any employment or business activity in Hong Kong. They therefore became cross-border Chinese mothers who had to go back and forth between Hong Kong and Mainland China for their children's education (Chee & Ip, 2019).

Lower-class cross-border Chinese mothers faced severe economic hardship in Hong Kong, not only because their visa status prohibited them from working, but also because they were excluded from Hong Kong's social security system, even though their children are Hong Kong permanent residents (Chee & Ip, 2019).

Little is known about how migration shapes the experiences, practices and understanding of mothering among low-income mothers who accompany their children to study abroad. This study seeks to fill this gap through the lens of low-income Mainland mothers who stayed in Hong Kong on temporary visas to care for their children attending school in Hong Kong. Although Hong Kong is politically not considered abroad *per se*, due to the city's special administrative status, crossing the border between Mainland China and Hong Kong is practically migration.

Method

Sample and data collection

Since 2014, both authors had been participating in two non-governmental organisations in Hong Kong that provided social services to low-income Mainland Chinese cross-border mothers and organised advocacies to advance their welfare rights. The authors engaged in group meetings and activities of these organisations in which mothers received various forms of support, shared their stories and experiences, built networks and prepared for campaigns and social actions. Thus, prior to conducting the study, the authors had built a good rapport with some of the mothers, especially those who frequently attended organisational gatherings.

Data collection began from January through May 2018. The target of this study was Chinese mothers who met all of the following criteria at the time of the study: (1) Neither they nor their current spouse were Hong Kong permanent resident; (2) They had at least one child who was born and currently residing and attending school in Hong Kong; (3) They were residing in Hong Kong using a two-way permit to care for their Hong Kong-born children; and (4) They had sought financial/material assistance from the Hong Kong Social Welfare Department, a food bank, a church and/or an NGO after residing in Hong Kong. Mothers who had a good relationship with the authors were first invited to participate. They were then asked to introduce the project

to other cross-border mothers with a similar socio-economic background who were not in the two NGOs. In order to explore the common and also diverse difficulties and challenges facing low-income cross-border Chinese mothers, recruitment was not confined to a particular age range, city of origin and marital status. A total of 26 mothers, aged 31 to 55, were recruited. Table 1 shows the demographic details of the participants.

It is important to note the advantages and disadvantages of the snowball sampling strategy as noted above. One the one hand, via key gatekeepers like the two NGOs as mentioned earlier, snowball sampling allows researchers to recruit disadvantaged and marginalised social groups that are usually difficult to get access to and are often overlooked or underrepresented in probability sampling techniques (Browne, 2005). On the other hand, recruiting participants from a small and marginalised community, wherein people know each other's story well, might jeopardise the anonymity of the research (Woodman, 1995). Gatekeepers or community leaders, such as the staff of the NGOs who might have access to academic resources via university networks, might be able to identify participants from the descriptions in the paper. To avoid this problem, pseudonyms were employed to refer to informants in this research. Some of the mothers' demographic details that did not have an effect on the findings and arguments of this study, such as their age and number of years residing in Hong Kong, were slightly altered.

Five family visits were first conducted with each participant for the purpose of gaining an initial understanding of their everyday lives, and also for building rapport with mothers who had not participated in the two NGOs before the study. Fieldnotes were written immediately after each visit to record observations and informal conversations

Table 1. Demographic details of participants.

Pseudonym	Age	Year started residing in HK	Number of children born in HK	Youngest child's age	Marital status	Receiving CSSA?
Tang	Unknown	2016	1	6	Married	No
Pang	47	2015	1	6	Divorced	No
Lee	47	2015	1	6	Married	No
Mui	49	2013	1	7	Divorced	Yes
Lam	31	2007	3	7	Divorced	Yes
Szeto	51	2015	2	4	Divorced	No
Hung	46	2012	1	6	Married	No
Hui	46	2015	2	13	Married	No
Wu	Unknown	2016	1	6	Single	Yes
Chan	36	2015	2	3	Married	Yes
Po	50	2008	1	11	Widowed	Yes
Chau	47	2014	1	8	Divorced	Yes
Ling	39	2015	1	5	Married	Yes
Chung	39	2014	1	9	Married	No
Leung	44	2012	1	9	Divorced	Yes
Ng	38	2012	2	10	Married	Yes
Tai	40	2010	1	7	Single	Yes
Wong	39	2010	1	8	Married	Yes
Yuen	43	2009	1	11	Married	Yes
Kwok	45	2014	1	8	Married	No
Fong	50	2009	2	9	Married	No
So	55	2005	1	14	Married	Yes
Lau	47	2014	1	9	Married	No
Ku	40	2012	1	8	Divorced	Yes
Mok	41	2011	2	10	Married	Yes
Au	50	2008	2	12	Married	Yes

with mothers. The family visits produced vivid and first-hand observations of mothers' daily routines, their family relationships and dynamics and their relationships with neighbours, friends and other mothers. The rich details gathered from the visits enabled the authors to design individual interview questions to follow up on the observations and prompt mothers' in-depth accounts of their experiences and predicaments in Hong Kong. Then, a formal, semi-structured individual interview was conducted with each mother at their home or a nearby restaurant. All formal interviews were done in either Cantonese or Mandarin and were later transcribed verbatim and translated to English for analysis. Prior to data collection, the authors explained the objectives and procedure of this study to each mother, and all of them provided their written consent before the first family visit.

Analysis

Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was performed to identify common themes that indicate key aspects of mothers' lives in Hong Kong. The first author of this paper used MAXQDA 2020 to code all fieldnotes and transcripts to maintain consistency. To minimise the effects of the coder's prior assumptions and values on the interpretation of data, this study did not use a structured codebook to feed data into pre-established categories. Instead, the grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2006) was adopted to conduct open and inductive coding.

The coder first read all fieldnotes and transcripts before coding. The generation of raw codes, categories and themes was directed by the research question: What is the experience of childcare and mothering among Mainland Chinese cross-border mothers in Hong Kong? Second-order categories were formed whenever there were at least four to five raw codes sharing similar meanings. The coder then kept refining these categories by constantly comparing them with newly generated raw codes. Categories with similar or related meanings were then grouped into more general themes. Subsequently, the second author thoroughly reviewed all themes, categories and codes to ensure that the interpretations were reasonable and in accordance with what mothers said in their interviews. The review did not result in any substantial disagreement. Only a few wordings of some of the categories and themes were slightly revised to better align with the meanings of the raw codes.

Findings

Three major challenges confronting mothers in this research were identified. First, as cross-border mothers had to leave their families in Mainland China to raise their children in Hong Kong, they faced a conflict between maintaining family relationships and child-rearing. This separation often led to feelings of guilt and tension as they tried to balance these competing responsibilities. Second, taking care of their children alone in Hong Kong paradoxically led them to cut ties with their existing friendships and social networks in Mainland China. This isolation exacerbated their feelings of loneliness and alienation, making it more difficult for them to find emotional and practical support. Third, given their lack of social and economic resources to survive in Hong Kong, mothers needed to prioritise their children's wellbeing and personal development over

their own. This often means sacrificing their own health, career and long-term economic security to ensure that their children could receive free education and better opportunities in Hong Kong.

These challenges often resulted in cross-border mothers' constant subordination, self-blame, alienation and minimisation of their own needs. Through this process, they internalised and even justified their sufferings and sacrifices as necessary for the prioritisation of their children's interests, wellbeing and development. They blamed themselves for not being able to care for their family and children in the Mainland. They replaced their past social networks with a set of child-centred networks in Hong Kong for survival.

In essence, their sacrifices were done for the future development of their Hong Kong-born children. In other words, they internalised and intensified the conventional mothering ideals that mothers should selflessly sacrifice their own interests for the wellbeing of their children. This self-sacrificial stance further entrenched their sense of duty and responsibility, often at the cost of their own wellbeing and personal fulfilment.

Maintaining family relationship and childrearing: competing demands

Cross-border mothers experienced significant tensions in maintaining their family relationships because most of their family members were residing in Mainland China. As noted earlier, their children born in Hong Kong were often the second or third child. This situation means that when they left their hometown to care for their younger children in Hong Kong, they also left behind their husband, older children, parents, parents-in-law and other family members in the Mainland.

Migration to Hong Kong thus posed unique challenges to cross-border mothers as they navigated the ongoing process of upholding their marriage, supervising their older children and communicating with their parents, all while being physically separated from their family. Consider the case of Mok, a 41-year-old mother of four children. Her youngest daughter and her son were born in Hong Kong. She started to reside in Hong Kong in 2011 as she could not afford the extra educational cost of her two younger children. Her husband continued to stay in Mainland China in order to work and care for the two older daughters. Before she came, some of her relatives tried to persuade her not to do so, because:

> If I brought my children here to go to school, I would be separated from my husband for a very long time, and it would actually be very risky because it would be easy to get a divorce. Actually, I saw many of these cases. But then I thought, if he was going to change, then he would change even if I was alongside him.

Cross-border mothers would often face the difficult decision of whether to bring their children to Hong Kong for better educational opportunities, knowing that this choice might lead to prolonged separation from their spouse. This separation carries inherent risks, including the potential for marital strain and even divorce. Mok's decision to bring her children to Hong Kong for schooling reflects a prioritisation of their educational opportunities and overall wellbeing. This choice, while fraught with personal sacrifice, underscores the mother's commitment to providing the best possible future for her children.

The physical and emotional separation between Mok and her husband strained their marriage. They needed constant communication and effort to maintain their relationship

despite the distance. Paradoxically, Mok refrained from asking too much for the fear that her husband would feel constantly monitored:

> I never asked him what he is doing. I am a woman. I don't ask him. I don't ask what a man does … I would ask him before we got married. But I have never asked him since we got married. Men hate women questioning them.

Mok thus minimised communication with her husband to maintain an already fragile marriage. She internalised the traditional patriarchal belief that a woman should not question what her husband does in the public sphere, which corresponds to the Chinese Confucian ethos that wives should be submissive to their husband's authority (Gao, 2003). By adhering to this traditional gender role, she sacrificed her power, say and position in her family to buffer the tension between maintaining her marriage and raising her children alone in Hong Kong.

Ironically, geographical separation also means that cross-border mothers were unable to fulfil the duties of a wife or a mother under traditional and patriarchal gender norms that women are fully responsible for care work in the family and raising all children. Hung, a mother of two sons in her mid-40s, provided another illustration of the struggle to be a 'good wife' and/or 'good mother' while staying in Hong Kong. She started living in Hong Kong in 2012 to care for her younger son, who was attending a local elementary school. One significant change in her family relationships after residing in Hong Kong was the deterioration of her marriage to the point where divorce became a constant topic between her and her husband:

> Our relationship has changed a lot. When I was in the Mainland, we didn't have to spend too much money. But now that I'm in Hong Kong, I have to ask my husband for money, but he doesn't really have much. We've been stressed, always arguing with each other. He isn't really caring for the family there. My husband is not quite independent, he's macho, and he's the kind of person who needs me to cook everything for him and feed him. He cannot get used to the situation where I'm not here. We've been spending a lot more time arguing than before … My husband is feeling insecure, always suspecting if there are some guys who'd flirt with me, or if I'd leave him for another guy. He feels unsafe, but these are all his imaginations only. We never really talked about divorce before, but now we always talk about it.

Hung could not maintain the role of a stereotypical wife who is always standing by her husband and doing everything to serve him. The effect of this 'failure' on her marriage was particularly detrimental because her husband was a macho and self-centred man who always wanted to have his wife under control. Yet, unlike Mok who chose to silence herself to avoid conflicts with her husband, Hung argued a lot with hers, leading to the deterioration of her marriage. Furthermore, Hung's older son, who was a high school student born in Mainland China, became increasingly detached from her. He had been dissatisfied by the birth of his younger brother, because it means that his parents would pay less attention to him. After Hung came to Hong Kong, her older son became reluctant to talk to her and their relationship was worsening:

> He doesn't listen to me anymore. He feels like the whole world has betrayed him. He thinks his girlfriend is the only one being nice to him. In the past he was my priority, I gave everything to him, and he felt like dad and mom loved him … But now, I think he relies on his girlfriend, because I'm not doing enough for him, making him feel like suddenly mom doesn't care about him, mom's no longer at home.

Hung thus blamed herself for not being a 'good mother' to her older son, believing that his detachment and reliance on his girlfriend were due to her lack of attention to him while taking care of her younger son in Hong Kong. Indeed, self-blame was not uncommon among the informants when they were making sense of their struggle with maintaining relationships with family members in Mainland China. They often felt guilty for not providing enough care to family members especially children in the Mainland, even though in fact they had done a lot more than their husband to raise their children in Hong Kong while trying to remotely supervise their older children.

What stands in stark contrast to this self-blame is the fact that none of these cross-border mothers fundamentally questioned why they, by default, had to be the one going to Hong Kong for raising their younger children. Cross-border mothers like Mok and Hung would often internalise patriarchal assumptions that women should be fully responsible for childrearing and maintaining the family. They and their family members did not see migration and structurally shaped separation as valid reasons for not upholding traditional family arrangements. As such, these mothers placed themselves in an alienated position where they imposed on themselves a series of impossible family responsibilities while feeling guilty for not being able to fulfill them. This shows that, instead of being able to renegotiate the gendered roles of 'good wives' and 'good mothers,' cross-border mothers upheld such norms while struggling to fulfil them.

Isolation from existing social networks

Cross-border mothers often faced significant social isolation after moving to Hong Kong as they distanced themselves from the social networks they had established in Mainland China. This isolation was in part driven by both geographical distance and the socio-economic disparities between their new lives in Hong Kong and the expectations of their friends and family back in the Mainland. While Hong Kong residents often label Mainland Chinese as uncivilised, lazy and greedy (Ip, 2015; Sautman & Yan, 2015; So & Ip, 2020), Mainland Chinese on the contrary view Hong Kong people as rich, metropolitan and arrogant (Guan et al., 2010). Many cross-border mothers, who came from lower-class backgrounds and were unable to work due to visa restrictions, were living in poverty and failed to meet the standard of being a 'Hong Konger' in the eyes of their Mainland friends. This disparity often led to feelings of shame and the decision to cut ties with their old social networks.

Isolation was also attributable to the fact that cross-border Chinese mothers often did not have close friends or relatives in Hong Kong from whom they could receive social, emotional and material supports. In the rare occasions where some mothers did have a few Hong Kong relatives, who also belonged to the lower social strata of the city, their relationships would quickly worsen as mothers began repeatedly asking them for financial and childrearing assistance. Moreover, unlike Mainland China where Mandarin is the official and the most common language, Hong Kong is a Cantonese-speaking city in which the majority of the Chinese population do not speak native Mandarin, and Hong Kong people often see Mandarin or Cantonese with a Mandarin accent as an inferior language (Shum et al., 2023). This language barrier and the discrimination against Mandarin-speaking people became an obstacle for cross-border mothers to seek support and resources from the community they were residing in.

The feeling of loneliness and lack of support was common among the informants. Chan was a 36-year-old mother of a daughter and a son, both of whom were born in Hong Kong. She started to live in Hong Kong in 2015, as her daughter was approaching to the age of elementary school and yet they could not afford the educational cost in the Mainland. When we asked her about her thoughts on the decision to come to Hong Kong, she expressed regret:

> Actually, I wanted to go back. If anything happens here, like if they are not feeling well, I have to face everything alone. When I was looking for a school for them, I had to fill in everything, I had to think about everything. Life here is really stressful. Even when I am feeling unwell, I still have to care for the two kids by myself.

Chan's sense of isolation was partly due to leaving her Mainland family and facing economic hardship in Hong Kong. Additionally, her responsibilities left her with no energy to maintain friendships in the Mainland. When she was paying her full attention to the trinity of childrearing, regular border crossing (for visa extension) and enduring economic hardship, she lacked motivation to be in touch with her friends in the Mainland, let alone spending time with them:

> My old friends in Mainland China too have to care for their family. Now it's really hard to find some time to hang out and chat. Actually, we would hang out in the past. In the past I had more time when I was at home, and so I got more chances to hang out with them.

If Chan's isolation from her social network in the Mainland was unintended, then Yuen's isolation can be seen as intentional. Yuen was a 43-year-old mother of two. Her older son was born in Mainland China, while her younger daughter was born in Hong Kong. She moved to Hong Kong in 2009, when her younger daughter was at the age of elementary school. Before giving birth to her daughter in Hong Kong, she had never come to this city. Everything she knew about this city was from watching television. However, because television programmes made in Hong Kong have been censored in the Mainland, news programmes showing different social issues have not been shown to the public, and Mainland Chinese could only watch entertainment programmes like drama. This means that people like Yuen, her family and her friends could only get access to the metropolitan and prosperous image of Hong Kong before they came here (Newendorp, 2008). This image helped consolidate the stereotype of Hong Kong people being 'rich' in the eyes of Mainland Chinese, which cross-border mothers like Yuen could not live up to:

> My impression about Hong Kong was so good before I came here … I watched television drama only. They won't broadcast news programmes from Hong Kong. They won't allow it. Only things like television drama. Those people in television drama were really rich. You can never know the true environment in Hong Kong before you come here. Like some of my friends, they have never been to Hong Kong, and they all think that we are living really well here. Usually when we go back to the Mainland, they'd call me 'Xiānggǎng pó [i.e. Hong Kong aunt]' or 'Fùpó [i.e. rich aunt]' … That's why sometimes I won't have the courage to keep in contact with my friends. My friends and schoolmates all have their own property, their own car, and now I'm like … haha.

Yuen felt embarrassed to contact her Mainland friends due to the disparity between their expectations and her reality. Indeed, many of the informants reported similar disenchantment of the reality of Hong Kong after residing in this city. Unlike Yuen, many of

them had come to Hong Kong for tourism and/or visiting their relatives before giving birth here. However, like Yuen, they could only get the prosperous impression of Hong Kong because they had only gone to shopping malls, Disneyland, hotels and the like. Before giving birth in Hong Kong, they could have never imagined that they would need to live in a subdivided flat of less than 100 square feet in impoverished communities and survive on unstable welfare support after moving to this city. As a consequence, many of them had also been facing the social pressure of living up to the stereotypical image of 'rich' Hong Kong citizens that led them to intentionally isolate themselves from their friends in the Mainland.

In lieu of their old social networks, mothers developed new networks through their children's connections, often by befriending parents of their children's classmates who were facing similar challenges. These parents, who were also low-income cross-border mothers that had lived in Hong Kong for a longer period, would often introduce mothers in the current studies to churches, NGOs, food banks and other non-governmental social services. Through these channels, mothers not only acquired financial and material assistance (although unstable), but also gained access to a larger network and community of Chinese migrant mothers for mutual social and emotional support. This was how many of the participants in this study joined the two NGOs in the first place.

But these new networks were different from their old ones in that the former were primarily instrumental. These networks provided essential support, such as information about government subsidies, access to food banks and mutual assistance among mothers. Yuen, for example, told us that:

> When my daughter was in the first year of elementary school, I didn't know we could apply for vouchers [i.e. the Pre-primary Education Voucher Scheme, a government policy subsidising elementary education of Hong Kong children]. But later I heard from her classmates' moms about this subsidy, and then I went to talk to the principal, and learned how to apply for it at the Student Finance Office.

Cross-border mothers also supported each other. One important example is a co-mothering arrangement, in which mothers took care of each other's children. Because their visa, the two-way permit, is a temporary one only allowing them to stay in Hong Kong for three months, they had to extend their visa on a regular basis. And since the visa is issued by the Mainland Chinese government, they had to go back to their hometown for doing so. However, if they brought their children with them, their children would miss a lot of school days because the visa extension process could take about one week. Therefore, when a cross-border mother was going back to the Mainland for visa extension, she would ask another mother who was still staying in Hong Kong to care for her children before she could come back with a renewed visa. Later, she would return the favour to the mother who offered help. Wong, a 39-year-old mother who was taking care of her younger son in Hong Kong, noted this co-mothering arrangement:

> I go back to the Mainland every three months to process my visa. If it's the holidays, then I'd bring my son with me. But if it's not, then I'd ask other parents to help care for him for a few days. Some are really passionate to help … Other parents from my child's school are all helping each other. I help them and they help me. There are many parents who come to Hong Kong and share similar situation. Many of them are like me.

Cross-border mothers in Hong Kong faced significant isolation and socio-economic challenges. To survive, they built new support networks centred around their children's connections. These child-centred networks became vital resources, helping to mitigate loneliness and stress and enabling these mothers to navigate the complexities of their new lives. However, in doing so, they subordinated their own social networks to those centred around their children, transforming their social landscape to better support their families in a challenging environment.

Prioritisation of children's wellbeing over their own

Cross-border mothers in this study mostly came from rural areas or urban working-class families. This was the main reason why they could not afford the 'sponsorship fee (zànzhù fèi)' and had to bring their children to Hong Kong for free education. However, this move exacerbated their financial strain and trapped them in extreme poverty.

Being one of East Asia's most advanced financial centres, Hong Kong is known for its high real-estate price (Chong & Li, 2020) and expensive cost of living (Cheung & Chou, 2016). Cross-border families were ineligible for affordable public housing due to the mothers' visa status and must rent small, subdivided flats at high costs, often exceeding US$600 per month. Mothers were also prohibited from employment due to their temporary visa status, leading many to rely on the precarious and low-paid income of their husbands, who were often still supporting their families in the Mainland. Some mothers managed to secure financial support for their children from the Comprehensive Social Security Assistance (CSSA) scheme, the only social safety net in Hong Kong that provides a subsistence income to eligible families living far below the poverty line. But even this support was insufficient and complicated by policies that put mothers at risk of various forms of abuse and reduced the amount of money they could receive. Consequently, these families depended on unstable support from food banks, churches and NGOs.

Faced with such dire circumstances, cross-border mothers prioritised their children's health and subsistence over their own wellbeing. This often means minimising their own resource consumption to ensure that their children's needs were met, even at the cost of their own health and safety. Tai was a 40-year-old single mother of a 7-year-old daughter. Unlike most other informants, her partner was a Hong Kong citizen. However, after she was pregnant with her daughter, her partner disappeared. Because they never got married, Tai could not become a Hong Kong citizen. Since 2010, she had been relying on the two-way permit to live with her daughter in Hong Kong. The following passage from Tai best illustrates how cross-border mothers dealt with the tension between childrearing and their own personal wellbeing:

> When I feel sick, I cannot do anything … Sometimes I'd just use alternative methods originated from my home village, like boiling water with some Chinese herbs, and that's it. I won't go to a hospital or a clinic. My daughter is covered by CSSA, so she won't need to pay if she goes to a public hospital. But still, I need to pay for transit cost when I bring her to the hospital. And sometimes if she's suddenly sick at midnight 3 a.m. or 4 a.m., we definitely need to take a taxi, and that is already a few hundred dollars. So, I just won't go to the hospital when I get sick on one or two occasions.

Tai's narrative highlights how she forewent her own medical needs to reserve resources for her daughter's health emergencies. Such self-sacrifices, together with the fact that she needed to go back and forth between Mainland China and Hong Kong because of her visa status, resulted in a serious deterioration of her health in recent years. In the few months before her interview, her back had been experiencing constant and enormous pain, a condition she got after giving birth to her daughter and gradually became worsened in subsequent years. She was diagnosed with spinal disc displacement, which caused her pain.

Although some mothers like Tai could secure financial support from the CSSA scheme for their children, the policy of this scheme created more predicaments for their families. In 2008, the Social Welfare Department in Hong Kong added restrictions to all CSSA applications coming from cross-border Chinese families. It required every Hong Kong-born Chinese child to apply through a local household unit that was already receiving CSSA. Cross-border Chinese families had to find a local family by themselves, and the family would act as a local 'guardian' of the Chinese child and would be responsible for receiving the CSSA money for and distributing them to the child (Chee, 2017; Chee & Ip, 2019).

Such a requirement led to more hardships for cross-border mothers. Firstly, without sufficient social networks and connections in Hong Kong, it was extremely difficult for them to find a local family who would agree to help. Secondly, when they did successfully find someone, usually their neighbour, to be their children's legal guardian, the guardian would often make harassing requests as conditions for offering help, such as asking mothers to do housekeeping, and even for sex. Thirdly, because of mothers' visa status, they were not counted as part of the local household, and thus the amount of money their children could receive would not cover mothers' living costs. Moreover, the amount of money would be further reduced and less than the normal amount a local child could get. CSSA is a policy in which the more members a family has, the less the amount of money each family member can get. By adding a Chinese child into a local household, in theory each member of that household would get a smaller amount of money. Therefore, it was required that a portion of the cross-border family's CSSA money be taken out to compensate for the loss of the local household (Chee & Ip, 2019).

Ng, a 38-year-old mother of three, faced additional emotional labour and the risk of sexual victimisation due to the CSSA scheme. Ng moved to Hong Kong in 2012 to care for her two younger twin sons who were born here. Lucky enough, her neighbour, a single old man in his 70s whom she called 'Bóbo (uncle),' agreed to be her sons' guardian so that they could receive CSSA. But while she and her husband respected Bóbo as an elder, treating him like their grandfather, Bóbo obviously wanted something more from her. He expected Ng to provide free care to him in exchange for his help, including housekeeping, physical care like massaging him when he felt pain and emotional care like listening to him and talking to him. But his expectations went beyond such daily caregiving activities. Ng reported that, on numerous occasions where her husband was absent, Bóbo expressed sexual interests in her and made implicit sexual requests in front of her. For example, once Bóbo told her, 'I usually don't help people. Those I helped often sleep with me.'

She had no choice but to keep providing daily care for Bóbo, because she thought that he would stop helping her two sons if she did not do so. She was also too afraid to tell her

husband about Bóbo's sexual requests, fearing that her husband would get into a fight with the former. She thus had to constantly maintain a proper distance with Bóbo, while engaging in extra emotional labour serving his daily needs so that he would keep helping her sons.

Ng's case shows that cross-border mothers often needed to put themselves in risky situations for their children's wellbeing because of extreme economic predicaments. Their visa status, together with an exclusionary social welfare system in Hong Kong trapped them in a prolonged poverty in which they had to self-sacrifice on an everyday basis. Such a process not only compromised their health condition but made them vulnerable to the risk of more serious problems like sexual victimisation.

Nevertheless, it would be mistaken to assume that the self-sacrifices of cross-border mothers would end if they went back to the Mainland. In fact, most informants had to quit their job in the Mainland in order to come to and stay in Hong Kong. For example, Lau, a 47-year-old mother of two sons who came to Hong Kong in 2014 to care for her younger son, expressed her sentiment about sacrificing her job and career:

> It was really hard for me when I came here. I didn't think I would need to give up my career in the Mainland. Before I came here, I was working in an insurance company, I was doing good, I had my job rank, and I was earning some RMB$10,000 [i.e. about US$1,500] to RMB $20,000 [i.e. about US$3,000] per month. Then I gave up my job and came here to care for my son, I devoted myself to raising him. Indeed, we devoted a lot. Now I'm relying on my savings to live in Hong Kong, we can't work, and we don't have an income. It's getting harder for us every day.

Giving up their jobs means that they not only sacrificed their own career and personal development for their Hong Kong-born children but would also lose access to important future resources that are key to their long-term economic security, such as their social insurance in China. Since the economic reform in the 1980s, China's social security system has moved from protecting workers in state-owned enterprises to a social insurance model in which employees would benefit from the contributions they and their employers made to a national pool and a personal account (Tang & Ngan, 2001). In this sense, although the informants mostly worked in low-paid, unstable and precarious jobs in the Mainland, they were entitled to certain types of social insurance, such as pensions and medical insurance. However, some of these social insurance programmes require minimum contributions before employees can claim their benefits. For example, retired employees can only receive payments from the basic social pension programme if they have contributed to it for at least 15 years (Cai & Cheng, 2014). Because most of our informants had to quit their job too early in their career, they stopped contributing to the social security system before the required minimum. Thus, it is foreseeable that they will not be able to receive some types of social benefits in China upon retirement age.

Discussion and conclusion

Migration profoundly reshapes the understanding and practices of motherhood. Unlike previous studies that emphasise the renegotiation of 'good mothering' among transnational mothers (Juozeliūnienė & Budginaitė, 2018; Lockwood et al., 2019; Lutz &

Palenga-Möllenbeck, 2012; Madziva, 2016; Molina, 2015; Parreñas, 2005), this study reveals a paradoxical reinforcement of traditional mothering ideals among cross-border Chinese mothers in Hong Kong. Having a low socio-economic status and living in this neoliberal city where the ethos of self-reliance, an exclusionary social welfare system, the Western ideology of 'intensive mothering' and the Chinese Confucian ideal of self-sacrificial motherhood converge, these mothers intensified their adherence to the cultural expectations of self-sacrifice and proximity with family rather than redefining their roles. Their experiences contrast sharply with the more empowered narratives often portrayed in the literature. Cross-border Chinese mothers had very limited capital or even diminishing capital due to their social class and visa status in Hong Kong. They thus lacked the agency to counteract conventional demands of idealised motherhood, such as physical and emotional proximity with children and prioritisation of children's needs (Parreñas, 2001, 2005; Dreby, 2010). Consequently, these mothers internalised and intensified the demands of maternal sacrifice, leading to the subordination of their own needs and wellbeing.

This research identified three ways in which cross-border mothers struggled to keep up with the norms of ideal motherhood. Firstly, they blamed themselves for not being able to provide proxime care to their family members living in Mainland China, even though they were the ones who endured prolonged social, mental, physical and economic predicaments to care for their Hong Kong-born children. Secondly, they faced social isolation and loneliness as they cut ties with their social networks in the Mainland. To cope with this, they established new networks in Hong Kong, but such networks were instrumental ones centred on securing resources for the well-being of their children. Thirdly, they sacrificed their own health, career and future financial security to ensure that their children could continue receiving free education in Hong Kong.

The findings of this study resonate with the existing literature that documents the emotional toll of transnational mothering, such as feelings of guilt and inadequacy (Millman, 2013; Paciulan & Preibisch, 2013). However, they also underscore the unique circumstances of mothers lacking the financial and social capital necessary to challenge traditional norms. This absence of resources restricted their agency and compelled them to prioritise their children's needs over their own, leading to a cycle of self-blame and alienation. The observations of this research align with the argument made by Juozeliūnienė and Budginaitė (2018) regarding the emotional strain of caregiving from a distance but extend the conversation by highlighting how economic vulnerability can exacerbate these pressures.

Furthermore, this research prompts a re-evaluation of the narratives surrounding transnational mothers, particularly those who do not possess the means to redefine their mothering practices. Much literature focuses on how mothers negotiate their roles to counter the stigma of 'bad mothering,' but this is possible only insofar as the legal status of migrant mothers allows them to work and secure an income, however small it is. Contrarily, this study illustrates how some mothers may lack the agency to negotiate at all because their citizenship status excludes them from the job market and social security. They thus internalise and amplify societal expectations. The findings of this study therefore point to the importance of considering how the intersection of migrant mothers' social class and visa status in the host

society can affect their ability to cope with the contradictions between conforming to ideal motherhood and migration.

To mitigate the economic predicaments of low-income cross-border Chinese mothers in Hong Kong, the Hong Kong government may consider the following policy changes. Firstly, the Hong Kong government may allow mothers to work so as to reduce their economic precarity. Secondly, to avoid different forms of abuse and victimisation, the Hong Kong government may ease the application process of CSSA for these mothers. For example, as many mothers suggested in their interviews, the Social Welfare Department or its delegated social workers could act as the guardian of the Hong Kong-born children to administer the assistance, so that mothers would not need to seek help from a stranger or neighbour.

There are several limitations of this study. First, as this research was based on a small, non-probability sample of low-income mothers, the results may not be generalisable to all cross-border mothers in Hong Kong. Second, this study was conducted before the COVID-19 pandemic, meaning that the experiences of mothers in the current sample might have changed afterwards. The pandemic might have reduced some of their previous difficulties but also created new ones. Indeed, as some of them told the authors, during the lockdown period, the Chinese government eased cross-border mothers' visa application and allowed them to renew their permit in Hong Kong without travelling back to their hometown. However, due to closure of the border between Hong Kong and the Mainland, some of them were not able to visit their Mainland families for a prolonged period. It is thus imperative for future research to explore the impacts of COVID-19 on these mothers.

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