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Dis(playing) mediated filial norms: filial child practices on WeChat among Chinese cross-border students

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ABSTRACT

This study demonstrates the importance of the approach of dis(playing) families in analyzing and conceptualizing mediated filial norms in Chinese cross-border/transnational families. Based upon two years of ethnographic fieldwork in Macao, the study develops a conceptual framework – dis(playing) mediated filial norms – to examine how Chinese cross-border students use WeChat to reconstitute their long-distance filial practices. Findings point to a double dynamic of dis(playing) filial norms, in which mediated filial norms shape their displays of emotions and bodies, whereas playing with filial norms battles the conflicts and burdens behind filial ideals. This study contributes to understanding the practices of mediated filial norms from parent–child dynamic interactions on social media, from multiple-audience perspectives, and from the uniqueness of WeChat in Chinese transnational domesticity. It also offers a conceptual explanation for the contradictions between connected and disconnected intimacy within filial practices.

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Filial piety; mediated filial norms; display family; WeChat; transnational families

Since China's post-1978 economic reforms and the Open Door Policy, the boost in China's domestic economy, the impact of globalization, and the increasing opportunities for migrating abroad, have led to the birth of contemporary Chinese transnational/cross-border families (Guthrie, 2012; Tu, 2016). Alongside the many benefits of these transformations, the major challenge is how to carry on filial piety and familial responsibilities (Tu, 2016, 2019), as filial piety structures foundational parent–child relationships and eldercare in China (Canda, 2013; Lan, 2002). Past studies have shown the roles of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) and polymedia environments in constructing long-distance filial norms and fulfilling filial responsibility (Hsu, 2021; Kang, 2012; Sandel, 2014; Tu, 2016; Zhao, 2019). Whilst these studies have built a foundational landscape of understanding the empirical practices of mediated filial norms and their related problems, few studies have focused on the dynamic interactions of mediated filial practices, the perspectives of multiple audiences, the conceptual explanation for connected/disconnected ambivalence within filial practices, and the uniqueness of WeChat in Chinese transnational domesticity.

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This study contributes to the line of mediated filial piety studies by ushering in a 'family dis(play)' approach. The approach defines displaying families as 'the process by which individuals, and groups of individuals, convey to each other and to relevant audiences that certain of their actions do constitute 'doing family things' and thereby confirm that these relationships are 'family' relationships' (Finch, 2007, p. 67). This display involves internal/external audiences, display tools, and ways of family interaction. Yet previous studies concerned mediated family display in the contexts of transnational mothering, transnational intergenerational solidarity, digital family photos, and mobile photography displays (Cabalquinto, 2020; Ducu, 2020; Shannon, 2022; Share et al., 2018; Waruwu, 2022), which lack attention to Chinese transnational family perspectives, Chinese socio-cultural frames (e.g., filial piety), and China's important display tool – WeChat. In the consideration of mediated filial norms negotiating the responsibilities of the filial child and the desire for individual autonomy (Zhao, 2019), this study further develops family displays with dual meanings – display and play – as a conceptual and analytical framework to understand ambivalence and double dynamics within mediated filial practices.

Based on a two-year ethnographic study of mediated familial interactions among Chinese cross-border students and their left-behind parents, this study investigates how Chinese cross-border students reconstitute long-distance filial practices and their filial roles on WeChat. Specifically, this study seeks to address the following research questions: Why is the approach of dis(play) family important for analyzing mediated filial norms? How are Chinese cross-border students practicing mediated filial norms with a dis(playing) approach? In what manner can WeChat assist in such dis(playing) filial norms?

Family display and play on social media

Finch's (2007) concept of the family display is about understanding 'how families enact relationships and obtain validation from relevant others' (Waruwu, 2022, p. 98). The urge to display family particularly occurs at critical moments when family relationships are challenged by family members or others, such as geographic separation due to migration (e.g., Ducu, 2020). Accordingly, the question of who is giving recognition to their relationships arises as key in displaying long-distance family relationships, which involves the roles of both actors and audiences, direct and indirect feedback, and display tools (Finch, 2007).

Recent studies of transnational families have shifted their focus to the possibility of social media being offered for mediated family display, which has reconstituted audiences of displaying families, tools for display, and ways of family interaction (e.g., Cabalquinto, 2020; Ducu, 2020; Waruwu, 2022). Supporting family displays for internal audiences includes ways of sending messages, sharing photos, and making video/voice calls via social media. Simultaneously, social media extend observed audiences to external members (e.g., social media friends) and the public sphere (e.g., cultural and moral judgment) (e.g., Acedera & Yeoh, 2018; Shannon, 2022). Posts on social media, such as on WeChat and Facebook, recreate the mediated family display into 'a quasi-public field' where relevant others can access, observe, and comment on these posts (McKay, 2018, p. 135). The publicness and visibility of displaying family on social media are critical for transnational

families, as they often confront moral accountability, such as in the case of migrant mothers (Madianou, 2012). Since the justification and legitimization of making the separation decision are largely evaluated by migrants' networks, social media has become an important place for the assemblage of displaying migration and effective engagement in long-distance child-rearing (McKay, 2018). Moral panic (e.g., parent–child separation) can be eased by bringing family relationships under the public gaze.

Such public display, however, does not equate to social media self-presentation for two reasons: First, publicly displaying families is merely a form of display, aimed at confirming their family solidarity and their fulfillment of family responsibilities to the observers – their acquaintance networks, rather than presenting a social identity to the general public (Marwick, 2013). Thus, even if both public display and online self-presentation use play strategies, they carry different purposes. Second, the audiences of family displays are 'constantly shifting' within internal and external family members, rather than having 'a clear distinction between actor and audience' during one's self-presentation (Finch, 2007, p. 76).

Concerning the display tools within family members, this study urges concern for the more detailed 'enablers of display' on social media (Walsh, 2015, p. 349), including mutually sharing information, and social-media-mediated emotional and bodily practices. The sharing act itself serves as a way of 'doing family things,' because this mediated family interaction is an aid in maintaining family relationships and conveying certain family meanings (Finch, 2007, p. 67). Moreover, Share et al. (2018) elaborate on the emotional labor (Hochschild, 1979) involved in Skype-based family display, where parents try to mobilize their children's willingness to display on Skype for their left-behind grandparents. Successful family display requires the collaborative effort of parents' guidance, children's actions on video, and interactions between actors and audiences. This alludes to the fact that social-media-mediated display is strategic (e.g., Waruwu, 2022), as it accommodates both the willingness to and the resistance against engagement in family displays.

Accordingly, we develop the concept of mediated family display with a dual meaning – display and play. If display maintains family solidarity, play deals with inconsistencies between family needs and personal needs, between external judgments (e.g., society, communities) and internal practices (i.e., family practices). Nedelcu and Wyss (2016) point out that while new, omnipresent ICT-mediated communication has enabled transnational families to distantly and digitally display family, left-behind family members generate new expectations of continuous 'being together,' which can lead to migrants' feeling of constraint and pressure to meet family obligations and displays. This ambivalence about individuals' desires for autonomy and their family's needs for intensive display paves the way for strategic play, such as the employment of 'mediated absence', that avoids a plethora of undesirable communication (Acedera & Yeoh, 2018). Furthermore, Shannon (2022) examines the dis(play) strategies that people deploy to resist the social norm of posting the idealization of family life on social media, by criticizing others who post 'high point' moments, and instead portraying their family lives in more authentic ways. Therefore, unlike other play strategies stemming from context collapse (Marwick, 2013), play contexts on family issues are built on social, cultural, or moral traditions and conflicts. This offers a space for exploring mediated dis(playing) families within a more elaborate society and cultural norms.

Dis(playing) mediated filial norms in Chinese context

Transnational family studies have recently increased their interest in exploring how long-distance family members practice the socio-cultural norms of their home countries – such as family responsibilities – through mediated family display (e.g., Cabalquinto, 2020; Ducu, 2020; Share et al., 2018; Waruwu, 2022). These studies implicate the importance of the concept of mediated displaying families in re-examining social-cultural norms, which includes multi-dimensional perspectives (i.e., family members and external members), the dynamic displaying process on social media, and the understanding of implicit meanings of family members' actions. So far, there is still a blank slate of studies of Chinese transnational families through the conceptual lens of (mediated) display, not to mention applying it to filial piety studies.

Long-distance filial practices have long captured Chinese scholarly concern (e.g., Tu, 2016, 2019). Mediated filial piety via ICT and social media has seemingly become an antidote to migrant absence issues in Chinese domesticity (e.g., Hsu, 2021; Zhao, 2019). Specifically, providing long-distance emotional care as the core of mediated filial piety is used for compensating for the lack of material/practical care for their left-behind parents (Tu, 2016, 2019). Yet being obedient to parental *guan* (i.e., to govern) is a missing aspect of mediated filial piety in previous studies. Rooted in Confucianism, filial piety is the 'fundamental moral principle of Chinese culture' that denotes what it means to be a child in China (Canda, 2013, p. 215). It connotes the cultural ideal that requires a child to be able to perform a series of appropriate behaviors that correspond to parents' *guan* and cultural expectations; these include the behaviors of family harmony maintenance, respect and obedience to parents, comforting of parents' emotions, as well as provision of material support and emotional care during the parents' old age (Lam, 2006; Lin & Ke, 2010).

When ICT and social media de-demonize distance (Baldassar, 2016) and enable mediated filial piety practices, they serve as filial technology (Hsu, 2021) that migrants use to fulfil their parents' emotional needs in a manner of 'committing time and patience to long-distance communication' (Tu, 2016, p. 12). Empirically, the choice of filial technology (e.g., video/voice calls, text) and the frequency of contact work relationally, constructs a hierarchy of filial technology that follows the principle: 'the more social cues the technology has, the more filial and intimate it is' (Hsu, 2021, p. 515). The social cues point to observing and judging by bystanders, which further indicates that displaying filial piety encompasses multiple audiences – 'parents, relatives, friends and colleagues'(Zhang, 2016, p. 14).

Nevertheless, previous studies of mediated filial piety emphasized parent–child interactions, contact form, and frequency (e.g., Hsu, 2021; Kang, 2012; Tu, 2016; Zhao, 2019), whilst lacking the perspectives of multiple audiences and displaying dynamic interactions on social media. Moreover, they lack consistent concepts to interpret the contradictions between connected and disconnected intimacy within a socio-culture frame of filial piety (e.g., Hsu, 2021; Zhao, 2019). Since filial technologies bring both 'blessings and burdens' (Horst, 2006, p. 143), Zhao (2019) noted that Chinese transnational students often used social media platforms to temporarily disconnect from intimate familial relationships, during which mediated filial norms replaced the functioning of filial piety, becoming lubricants between being a filial child and desiring for individual autonomy (Liu, 2016; Zhao, 2019).

More specifically, while social media plays its role in filial relations by providing cheap and convenient communication, parental surveillance and '*guan*' over transnational children becomes a real burden for young migrants (Hsu, 2021; Zhao, 2019). The core of the burden is the balance of filial acts with individual independence. Fang and Gong (2020) illustrate how Chinese parents construct the cultural ideal of the 'proper' child, whereby children are expected to do and say 'the right things' in their WeChat posts (p. 309), such as posting positive experiences and personal achievements. Thus, whether to be a filially obedient child or not is a challenge for the youth of contemporary China. Lin and Ke (2010) find a new practice among the Chinese youth: 'piety but not obedience,' which denotes not only the demonstration of great respect for parents but also the choice to obey or disobey depending on the situation (p. 640). This then explains why privacy management on social media – blocking parents' ability to read some posts – has emerged as a solution (Zhao, 2019).

Accordingly, we propose a new way to re-examine mediated filial piety in the social media age and in modernized China: that is, dis(playing) mediated filial norms. First, mediated filial norms connote the ambivalence between mediated filial piety (i.e., obedience, emotional care) and the desire for autonomy (Zhao, 2019). Second, dis(playing) involves both displaying filial piety and playing strategies to negotiate filial norms. More importantly, the lens of mediated dis(play) shows a dynamic interacting process and involves multiple audiences that fulfil the cultural implications of displaying filial piety and maintaining familial face (*mian-zi*) (Zhang, 2016).

WeChat

Unlike other mediated family displaying tools – such as mobile photography (Cabalquinto, 2020), Skype (Share et al., 2018), and Instagram (Shannon, 2022), WeChat is a convergent social media that encompasses social, informational, transactional and infrastructural functionalities (Chen et al., 2018). Nowadays WeChat 'has already become a super platform where Chinese people start, develop, maintain, and conclude various forms of societal interaction' (Zhu & Miao, 2021, p. 744). The popularity of the app is also attributed to the censorship of the internet within China that 'blocks a variety of foreign websites from Chinese users' (Roberts, 2018, p. 2). Hence, WeChat is an important communication tool in Chinese transnational families (Ho & Chiu, 2020; Zhao, 2019).

By being limited to users' personal social networks (Huang & Miao, 2021), WeChat is about a new relationship between the social, the cultural, and the technological. The main functionality of WeChat shapes the way in which transnational families dis(play) mediated filial norms. These functions include chat, chat groups, and WeChat Moment (*pengyouquan*, a digital place similar to the Facebook Wall where one is allowed to upload pictures and texts, make comments, and share articles) (Shao & Pan, 2019), which offers young migrants multiple options to contact their parents and even show their filial acts to multiple audiences (Fang & Gong, 2020; Zhao, 2019). The 'grammar' of WeChat also decides 'when, whom, how and what' (Share et al., 2018, p. 3016) to dis(play) filial norms to their parents and 'relevant others' (Finch, 2007, p. 67). For instance, Zhao (2019) found that WeChat family chat-groups assisted in confirming their intimate familial relationships, while migrant students emotionally cared for their parents through the daily sharing of recent photos and information. Fang and Gong

(2020) identified two modes of parent–child interaction: the ordinary modes that young Chinese adults use to display parent-desirable images on WeChat Moment (which may maintain their parents' face), and the conflicting modes in which young Chinese depoly playing tactics to soften conflicts, such as limiting the privacy authority on WeChat Moment. These characteristics demonstrate the uniqueness of WeChat in studying transnational Chinese family communication and the socio-cultural practices it carries.

Research background, method, and data

The data used is from a two-year longitudinal project that focuses on the online and offline cross-border lives of mainland Chinese youth in Macao, a Special Administrative Region (SAR) under China. These mainland Chinese youths in their early 20s temporarily migrated to Macao to start their 2–3 year postgraduate program. Living in Macao is different from living in mainland China. Macao was administrated by Portugal for four centuries and then returned to China as an SAR in 1999, whenceforth it was governed under China's policy of 'one country, two systems' (OCTS) (Clayton, 2009). The policy circumscribes physical borders to regulate the mobility of each 'entry and exit' between mainland cities and Macao. The border also tends 'to soften or harden in line with political, socioeconomic, and demographic changes on both sides' (Li, 2010, p. 321), and turns the border-crossing mobility into more of a flow between nations (Smart & Smart, 2008). Ou and Sandel (2021) further identified Macao as a *jingwai* place, that is, having a system outside of China, but being a region within China.

Moreover, most participants in this study are from 'one-child' families. Since China's 'one-child' policy has reconstituted the nation's family structure (of having nuclear families) and thereby China's methods of upbringing (child-centered raising), traditional parent–child relationships have undergone transformation. This includes the weakened authority of parents, the intimacy of family relationships, and the improvement of the family status of daughters (Liong, 2017; Xu, 2017). Nevertheless, parents' child-centered upbringing corresponds to the only-child's obligation to maximize fulfillment of filial practices. This context drives us to pay attention to their filial practiceson WeChat.

This study draws on data collected from an ethnographic study of ten mainland Chinese postgraduates who geographically separated from their parents, traveled and crossed borders, to study in Macao from 2016 to 2018 (Table 1). Informed consent was provided by all the study subjects. The methods include participant observations of their daily lives, online observations of their social media usage, and three rounds

Table 1. Participants' demographic information and travel modes.

Pseudonym	Gender	Hometown	Distance from home (Kilometer)	Ways of travel
Deng	Female	Southwestern China	1320	Fight + coach/train
Li	Female	Northern China	1816	Fight + coach/train
Ma	Male	Southern China	490	Coach/train
Liang	Female	Southeastern China	1428	Flight
Chang	Female	Northeastern China	3480	Flight + Flight
Kan	Male	Central China	1491	Fight + coach/train
Xu	Female	Northern China	1612	Fight + coach/train
Chen	Male	Northern China	2337	Fight + coach/train
Shen	Male	Southeastern China	1616	Flight
Jiang	Female	Southern China	475	Coach/train

of face-to-face interviews. These three-round interviews are longitudinal in natural setting, in which the set-up of three rounds depends on the free-time and personal status of both researchers and participants, and each interview interval 7-to-11 months, with the purpose of naturally tracing their dynamic and multilayer dis(playing) mediated filial norms. The data includes interview transcripts (975 single-spaced pages), field notes (230 single-spaced pages), and WeChat screenshots (4425 screenshots). Considering online activities as part of one's everyday life, online observations captured participants' naturalistic interaction and the self-presentation of their family lives on WeChat Moment (Braga, 2009). During the interviews, we not only asked them about their mediated family practices, but also inquired about the meanings of relevant posts on WeChat Moment. Participants also provided additional information, such as screenshots of their family chat, to better illustrate their methods of dis(playing) filial norms. The screenshots were saved with their permission. The collected data further helps conceptualize dis(playing) filial norms, as dis(playing) involves a process of dynamic interactions that requires online observations while interviews can unpack the implicated socio-cultural scripts and the conveying familial meanings behind such interactions.

Both online and offline data were systematically analyzed on the basis of Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis and Boellstorff et al.'s (2012) ethnographic data analysis. Recurring themes, in which compelling cases, examples, and screenshots are used as illustrations were further generated for the study. Personal details and information have been hidden to keep identities confidential in the WeChat screenshots used below.

Filial piety on display: performing emotional labor in family chat groups

In their family chat groups, participants demonstrated various methods of filial display, such as the display of obedience, whilst the efforts to display WeChat-based filial acts and emotional care involved emotional labor (Hochschild, 1979; Share et al., 2018). Its accomplishment required both the *guan* (child training) of parents and the obedience of children. In this section, we consider three episodes of filial display in Mr. Chen's family chat groups as case studies that illustrate the dynamic process of emotional labor.

According to daily conversations and interviews, Mr. Chen and his parents often displayed fragments of their daily lives and care to family members in the family chat group, which constitutes everyday forms of doing family. Asymmetrical text-based conversations, video calls, article sharing, and short videos of their daily lives were the technological tools used for the display. On 10 May 2018, when Mr. Chen finished his morning fitness routine and was on his way back to the dormitory, he used TikTok (a popular short video social media platform in China) to film a short video of himself and then sent it to his family chat group. It was a means of displaying his daily life in Macao to internal audiences (i.e., family members); it created a sense of 'emotional closeness' or 'being there for each other' (Baldassar, 2016, p. 145). For entertainment, Mr. Chen employed filter effects in the video that distorted his appearance, made him look like he was fat, and had make-up on. However, media ideologies influence people's understanding and experience of social media (Gershon, 2010); Mr. Chen's mother, who holds divergent ideologies, misunderstood her son's video footage and thought it was real. As he explained in his third interview:

> So, she wrongly thought that my morning appearance was to have red cheeks, put on makeup, and had a silly hairstyle. And because [I] haven't been exercising after returning (to Macao), my face was swollen, and I was even fatter than at home. That's what my mother thought.

According to Mr. Chen, his mother was upset about the video for three reasons: First, his son's visuals were against traditional masculinity; second, his mother worried about Mr. Chen's health, since he was once obese and put in a great deal of effort to lose weight; and third, and most importantly, Mr. Chen was to take graduation photos that afternoon and should have dressed appropriately. Therefore, his mother initiated a conversation on the chat-group to display mediated mothering, and reminded Mr. Chen to do the right thing (Figure 1).

Taking graduation photos was an important family activity. Although Mr. Chen's parents were far away from Macao and could not attend the event, WeChat broke the constraints of time and space and allowed them to continue 'doing family things' (Finch, 2007; Nedelcu & Wyss, 2016). WeChat also reshaped their engagement as audiences (to watch their son's display via the chat group) and as actors (to perform their parenting roles when their son did not conduct himself expectedly and appropriately). Therefore, his mother used the 'grin' emoji and the 'are you kidding' remark to connote her desire for her son to act appropriately and be wary of his personal image. Subsequently, Mr. Chen's mother reminded him of the impending formal occasion and that he should consider the propriety of his appearance. Toward the end of the conversation, his mother urged him to send her a photo of himself looking 'normal.'



Figure 1. Mr. Chen's family chat group, named as 'My dad, my mom and I.'
Mr. Chen represents 1, his mother represents 2
1: [distorted video]
2: Are you kidding [emoji-grin]
Today [you're] taking photos, right?
1: Taking photos this afternoon
Just finishing with workout
2: Send a normal one.



Figure 2. Mr. Chen represents 1, his mother represents 2
1: A selfie [with normal appearance in the graduation suit]
I'm ready to go out
2: Handsome [emoji- thumb up]
1: A video [with graduation suits and proper behaviors with classmates]
2: [emoji- thumb up]

Mr. Chen's emotional labor and filial display were demonstrated both during the display of his daily life to his left-behind parents, and the display of obedience in response to parenting. By caring for his parents' emotions, Mr. Chen did not argue with his mother's admonishment of him for his 'undesirable' image on TikTok; instead, he tried to relieve his mother's worries by explaining that he was still in the habit of exercising and that he would dress up well this afternoon. Following his mother's request, Mr. Chen returned to the dormitory, changed into proper clothes, filmed a new look, and sent it to his mother.

Audience feedback examines the quality of the filial display. That afternoon, before taking graduation photos, Mr. Chen continued sending photos and videos to his parents where he was wearing the graduation gown in expected ways (Figure 2). This filial display, as he explained, was intended to further reassure his mother.

His filial acts received positive feedback, and his mother praised him for his obedience and used the term 'handsome' and the 'thumbs up' emoji. The emoji is used to signify encouragement for her son's obedience and appropriate social behavior during critical moments. Through the three episodes – sending of short videos of daily life, initiation of mothering, and display of obedience – the study exemplifies how emotional labor works as a tool (or an enabler) for filial display. It further demonstrates that filial display is a collaborative circulation which involves WeChat's technological support, the efforts of parenting and children's filial acts, the continuous switch between actors and audiences, and audience feedback.

Playing with filial norms: domestication of WeChat against moral burdens

The principle of playing filial norms on WeChat was not to fight against one's parents, but to manipulate WeChat functions to achieve a balance between direct conflict avoidance

and the satisfaction of personal needs. Following the definition of the filial obligations of young Chinese adults, particularly in terms of the maintenance of family harmony and demonstration of respect and obedience to parents (Lin & Ke, 2010), we found that the participants dealt with family conflicts and moral burdens through playing filial norms.

Some of the female participants explained that they usually displayed filial daughterhood as '*guai guai nü*' (an obedient girl), while the domestication of WeChat to play with filial norms occasionally occurred during family conflicts. During our daily conversations with Ms. Deng, she depicted experiences of playing filial norms during family conflicts. Before the summer holidays in 2017, Ms. Deng volunteered for an NGO program in a South Asian country. Since this was a decision that required reporting, she made a WeChat voice call to her parents to seek their permission and financial support. However, her parents viewed the voluntary program as a meaningless event that would waste both time and money, and disagreed with their daughter's participation in the program. The conversation ended with a parent–child conflict in which Ms. Deng expressed her disappointment and unhappiness with her parents' decision.

That night, her mother initiated a WeChat video call and attempted to communicate further with her. In order to avoid direct conflict and not show disrespect to her parents, Ms. Deng refused to attend the video call. Instead, the ambivalence of the burden of moral obligation forced her to choose the tactics of text-based communication (rather than virtual absence). Yet, the conflict remained unresolved. For the next few days, she fragmentarily sent short videos of her daily life to the family chat group to relieve conflict, even though she did not contact her parents via text-based messages or WeChat calls. It was her filial play, wherein she negotiated personal needs and filial obligations by playing on various WeChat functions.

The omnipresence of WeChat and the formed quasi-public field (McKay, 2018; Nedelcu & Wyss, 2016) render participants' WeChat Moment as fodder for parental surveillance and control. Obedience to one's parents in posts is related not only to the filial practices of internal audiences (i.e., family members), but also to the social judgments of external observers (i.e., people who are part of the parents' networks). In the summer of 2016, Ms. Li flew to Latin America to visit her boyfriend, during which time she frequently posted travel photos with her boyfriend and demonstrated their intimacy and happy moments. However, Ms. Li comes from the northern part of China, known for being conservative about intimate relationships and valuing the criticism and evaluation of one's family by others. As Ms. Li added her parents and their friends as her WeChat contacts, her travel posts came under parental scrutiny and social judgment, which resulted in a double moral burden:

> My mother called me and said, 'Oh, my child (*wa-wa*), did you just update your *pengyouquan* (i.e., WeChat Moment)? I think updating *pengyouquan* is not good, as it makes others feel that you are travelling everywhere, and staying with a boy you aren't married to.' At that time, my boyfriend and I hadn't decided on marriage yet. Yes, because my mom's colleagues can read my *pengyouquan*. Moreover, when the three of us (referring to her and her parents) are chatting, my parents would say, 'look at XXX's kid (i.e., a child of her mother's friend) who just updates posts, hanging around here, hanging around there; the person is very *lang* (i.e., idling, doing no decent work).' They continued to say, 'Look, XXX is always a public display of her affections with her boyfriend [on *pengyouquan*], showing this, showing that. Oh, I particularly don't like such show-offs.' (Ms. Li, in her second interview)

Ms. Li thought that her mother expected her to perserve the image of '*guai guai nü*' (an obedient girl) to the public. In this sense, obedience of parental governance over the freedom of updating *pengyouquan* as she so wishes goes beyond family practices and has become a matter of public and social judgment. In other words, emotionally caring for her parents involves the consideration of her parents' feelings with regard to how society evaluates their daughter's behavior. By listing the socially unacceptable conduct of other young people, Ms. Li's parents implied to their daughter that she should stop updating such travel posts, as such behavior has caused her family to lose face. Her parents' point of view is deeply rooted in China's shame culture that strongly emphasizes 'face, criticism, and evaluation in interpersonal relationships' (Fung, 1999). Playing filial norms, however, offers an effective solution to Ms. Li's double moral burden. As a child who performs filial piety, Ms. Li used the tactic of 'piety but not obedience,' which reshaped her play on WeChat; she continued to update such posts and photos, but applied privacy management to prevent her parents and their friends from reading relevant updates. Through this play tactic on WeChat, Ms. Li was able to achieve her personal freedom while avoiding moral judgment.

Cross-border filial child: reshaping emotions and bodies in filial dis(play)

The aforementioned analysis concerns the effects of obedience on dis(playing) filial norms. However, the core of cross-border filial child is built on the filial notions of 'avoiding parental worries' and 'taking care of one's own body' (Hsu, 2021; Sandel, 2014). Participants summarized their filial acts as 'telling parents only good news,' which reshaped their display and play of negative emotions and health issues on WeChat. In practice, these cross-border young adults tend to display positive aspects of their daily lives to their left-behind parents; these include the updating of positive posts on WeChat Moment and sharing 'good news' through WeChat messages and calls. They believe that telling them about the bad news, with reference to emotional and physical difficulties, should be avoided.

During his first half-year of moving to Macao, Mr. Ma experienced a period of loneliness and emotional difficulties. In daily conversations and during his first interview, Mr. Ma repeatedly mentioned the root of his sufferings (a break-up with his girlfriend), and the difficulties of adapting to Macao's new environment. During that period, he could hardly find a friend who really understood him. These emotional difficulties, however, changed the mode and frequency of contact with his parents on WeChat. Using the tactics of virtual co-presence (i.e., voice-based or video-based calls) avoidance and maintenance of minimum contact (i.e., text messages), Mr. Ma made a filial play out of his negative emotions via WeChat:

> Parents know when I am down, I won't contact them, and I won't talk to them about those things. Firstly, I feel like I'm not in a good situation, and I'm adjusting myself. Secondly, the children who are studying outside only tell good news to their parents and avoid parents' worries. If I just let these negative emotions out, my parents would be especially worried about me. So, I don't [let them know]. During that period, I tried only sending my parents WeChat [message], and the situation lasted for about two or three weeks, to almost a month. That was, every day [I would ask them] 'What are you doing?' and then said one or two sentences about it. But [I] would neither make a phone call nor send WeChat voice messages. I didn't want to talk too much about this with my parents at the time. (Mr. Ma, in his first interview)

Mr. Ma was not willing to tell his parents about his negative emotions; this reshaped his filial play into text-only and minimum-communication modes.

Not updating negative posts, or at least concealing negative posts from parents, seems to be the consensus amongst our participants, especially when they are suffering from health issues. Mr. Kan contacted his parents on a regular basis and made calls every weekend. Although his mother started using WeChat to provide him with more contact opportunities, he insisted on posting only positive updates and sharing good news to avoid worrying his mother. He also explained the cultural meaning behind why the bad news is avoided:

> Tell the good news, not the bad news. Everybody does this. For example, if I recently had a tumble injury, I wouldn't tell my family. Things such as having a cold or illness; I don't mention it generally. But for things like encountering new things, I will share with them. … So, the reason I'm not telling them the bad news is because they're at home whilst I'm in Macao, which is a place far away from home. They couldn't offer any help; they can only worry. [I] just feel that it's not necessary to tell them such things. (Mr. Kan, in his second interview)

Mr. Kan considered that being in poor health, such as having the flu, illness, or a physical injury, were all bad news. According to Chinese child-rearing ideology, parents, especially mothers, take responsibility for looking after their children's 'bodily functions and needs' (Hsu, 1985, p. 105). Accordingly, a child who is far away from his parents should take care of his own body and avoid worrying about his parents. Thus, concealment of health problems is linked with 'the corporality of filial piety' (Hsu, 2021, p. 518).

Morgan (1996) pointed out the importance of the body and bodily practices in family practice, as the body is closely related to what people talk about in their everyday family living, such as birth, growth, and sickness. For instance, parents and children would practice bodily monitoring and family gaze on health issues (Morgan, 1996). The body is also important in China's filial culture, which directly impacts WeChat-mediated filial display and play on bodily issues. In May 2017, Ms. Xu sprained her back and posted several updates about her state on WeChat Moment over the next few days. Keeping to the principle of 'not telling the bad news,' she made such posts available only to her friends and not her parents. However, she forgot to hide a post that made her mother suspicious (Figure 3).

In the post, a person can be observed receiving physical therapy on her back, her legs are lifted up and she is wearing Snoopy socks. However, the person's face is covered with hair so people cannot see her face. Quickly, after eight minutes, her sensitive mother read the post and immediately sent WeChat messages to ask her daughter what happened to her (Figure 4).

In terms of bodily issues, WeChat-mediated filial display tends to hide posts about physical difficulties, while filial play works when the display fails. Ms. Xu's playing tactic is to cheat her mother on the issue of whose body is in the photo. Thus, this negotiation becomes what Morgan (1996) proposed as 'bodily practices,' which operate at the interface between the public and the private (Morgan, 1996). This points to the process of how Ms. Xu publicly displayed her body receiving physical therapy on WeChat and thereby misled her mother into believing that the body was not hers via private chat. According to Ms. Xu's second interview, her filial play was aimed at avoidance of her mother's 'blindly worrying.' Since her mother was geographically separated from her, she would overestimate the severity of her sprain by looking at the photo. This case thus stretches Morgan's (1996) notion of 'bodily practices' into cultural norms (i.e., filial piety), cross-border contexts, and ICT-mediated family practices.

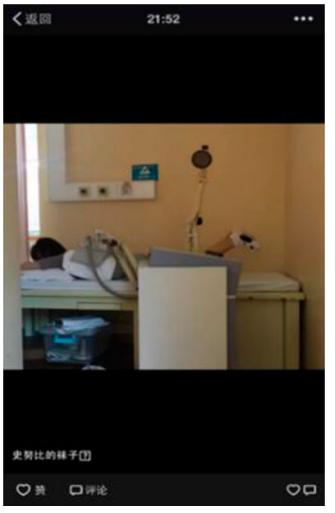


Figure 3. Updated on May 19th, 2017.
Text: 'Snoopy's socks [emoji]'.

Concluding remarks

Based upon an ethnographic study of cross-border young adults, this study demonstrates the negotiation of long-distance filial norms through WeChat-mediated display and play that shapes what it means to be a filial child in contemporary Chinese families. Theoretically, this study contributes to bringing in the approach of dis(playing) mediated filial



Figure 4. 1 represents her mother, 2 represents Ms. Xu
1: Your updated-post, what happened? Went to the hospital?
2: That's my classmate
Giggle
[Emoticon] kiss
[Emoticon] kiss
1: It's like your hair.

norms as an analytical and conceptual frame for understanding long-distance filial practices. By considering dis(playing) emotional labor, emotions, and bodies as filial practices, this study first reveals that the dis(playing) approach is embedded in sociocultural frames and involves dynamic parent–child interactions. Moreover, the multiple-audience perspective (e.g., parents, children, and acquaintance networks) better coincides with the nature of filial piety that is not merely about parent–child relationships but relates to societal evaluation and family face. Accordingly, a filial child often carries moral burdens, including obedience and familial face-saving, whilst playing with filial norms on WeChat offers them a way to negotiate filial norms. In this sense, dis(playing) mediated filial norms help in explaining the ambivalence of filial obligations and burden resistance, which provides a conceptual explanation for the contradictions of connected/disconnected intimacy associated with filial practices.

Moreover, the construction of a long-distance filial child relates to cultural and technological relationality. Therein, the practices of dis(playing) mediated filial norms demonstrates how human and non-human entities – involving cultural norms, technologies, and people – may work in relation to each other and thereby enact filial practices at a distance (Ahlin, 2018). Filial notions such as 'avoiding parental worries' shape how cross-border children dis(play) their emotions and bodies on WeChat. Technologies (e.g., WeChat) are also no longer a neutral tool; they have the capacity to act as quasi-agents with their own trajectories (Baldassar, 2016), and frame the fields that their affordances create (McKay, 2018).

Accordingly, we further suggest that the approach of dis(playing) mediated filial norms is not limited to WeChat and China's transnational family context, but can extend to many other social media platforms (e.g., Facebook & Instagram) and other transnational family contexts. Particularly, the multi-audience nature of mediated dis(play) is also present in other social media. For example, Facebook has similar functions as WeChat, including family chat groups, video/voice calls, text messages, and Facebook Wall, which assembles both internal audiences and external observers. These social media platforms also create a double dynamic that not only reconstitutes long-distance filial displays but also battles the burdens behind cultural filial ideals.

This study reflects upon the redefinition of mediated filial piety in contemporary Chinese families, especially among young adults and their healthy parents. Long-distance emotional care is not the only pattern of mediated filial practices (Hsu, 2021; Tu, 2016), and obedience to parental '*guan*' should be also taken into consideration. Simultaneously, the strategies of escaping parental surveillance and control on social media do not always stands in contrast to filial acts; instead, they often aim at continuing their filial requirements of being obedient and maintaining family harmony (Lam, 2006; Lin & Ke, 2010). The omnipresent filial obligations point to both a moral and digital tether (Clark, 2012) in particular to those from one-child families. On the one hand, the one-child policy leads to intimate and intensified parent–child communication, and thereby 'a more straightforward structure of the distribution of family care … and emotional interactions' (Kang, 2012, p. 160). On the other hand, these one-child dividends turn out to be a yoke for this generation to maximize their filial practices that exceed any other generation in China's history.

Nevertheless, the findings have several limitations. The study relied on a small number of research participants; thus, the generalization and application of the findings

require further concern. Second, this study mainly focuses on analyzing cross-border filial practices, whilst ignoring diverging gendered experiences such as sons/daughters and fathers in dis(playing) filial norms. Future studies could include more cases in transnational/cross-border Chinese family studies and examine this from a gendered perspective.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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