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ICT's impact on family solidarity and upward mobility in translocal China

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Information communication technologies (ICTs) create new channels and repertoires for mediated communication among parents and their children in mobile locations, thus playing a special role in reinvigorating intergenerational family solidarity in contemporary translocal China. For China’s rapid, uneven economic development since 1978, social mobility has been fast growing and many family members are separated into different locations for seeking upward mobility as reciprocal aspirations. Some cases of translocal Chinese, studying, working, and living apart from their elderly parents were studied to investigate ICT’s impact on family solidarity within the new dynamics of more symbolic and symmetrical family obligations and interactions. Their demonstrations of redefined sociability and intergenerational relationships via connected presence provide a promising new direction for social support and knowledge exchanges in translocal China with a special attention to the multifacets of mobilities and localities in the lives of the contemporary Chinese. A new model of family solidarity is proposed by the proper use of ICTs as new channels for intergenerational communication to supplement but not to replace the traditional ways of ‘togetherness’ by face-to-face interaction among the elderly Chinese parents and their adult children in remote locations. And this is deployed to reinvigorate parent–child relationships of the ‘relational families’ characterized by ‘autonomy of the generations’ in a balance of individualism and collectivism for seeking upward mobility and social cohesion in order to partly solve the social pressure of aging population and rural–urban divide, especially under the special conditions of China’s one-child policy and jumping scale of economic development.

Keywords: family solidarity; ICT; mediated communication; translocality; upward mobility

Introduction
Information communication technologies (ICTs) as a new means of interpersonal communication play a special role in maintaining intergenerational, as well as intragenerational, familial connections among family members who are far away. Because of the rapid, uneven development of market economy in major cities all over the world, social and spatial mobility becomes an indispensable condition in contemporary modern societies, and many family members are inevitably separated into different locations. In the pre-modern imperial era, social mobility was highly constrained by the traditional concept of locality as an earth-bound civilization and the restriction by limited transportation facilities and opportunities in China.

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However, since the post-1970s economic reforms, social mobility has been fast growing and become a general living experience for almost everyone of the new generations for the rise of labor markets mainly in developed cities (Bian, 2002; Oakes & Schein, 2006; Siu, 2006). Many Chinese parents invest heavily in their children (Siu, 2006) to study or to work abroad or in big cities for seeking upward mobility (Meulenberg, 2004). The social bond by traditional family structure is seriously challenged (Hillcoat-Nallétamby, Dharmalingam & Baxendale, 2006) because the traditional ways of face-to-face ‘togetherness’ and intergenerational communication at ‘mealtimes’ and ‘festivities’ for solidarity and sharing among family members (Crow, 2002, pp. 52–56) become more difficult.

Rapid modernization and atomization of modern family have intensified the problems of social support and security especially in terms of the ‘socio-emotional needs’ of individuals ‘related to interpersonal exchanges, social discourse, and personal feelings’ (Colvin, Chenoweth, Bold, & Harding, 2004, pp. 49–51) as reciprocal aspirations of family members and/or filial and parental obligations by caregiving and interactions (Cheung & Kwan, 2009; Silverstein, Bengtson, & Litwak, 2003). Moreover, it is argued that the traditional functions of family solidarity are being depleted as a result of industrialization and modernization that favor increasing individualization (Komter, 2005; Webster, 2004). So, a new model of family solidarity that I name it ‘translocal family solidarity’ using new repertoires for ‘managing social relationships’ by ICTs as new channels for mediated communication (Licoppe, 2004, p. 135; Ling, 2008) with a special attention to the multifacets of mobilities and localities in the lives of the contemporary Chinese (Oakes & Schein, 2006) is proposed. This aims to reinvigorate the intergenerational solidarity (Bengtson, Biblarz, & Roberts, 2002) and to redefine sociability by ‘connected presence’ (Licoppe, 2004) for social support among the elderly parents and their adult children in the face of technosocial changes by modernization. Such a new model is based on the hypothesis that the proper use of ICTs as new channels for mediated communication contributes to establish a new form of intergenerational solidarity among the elderly parents and the young family members who are distant and cannot physically gather together for a long period of time. The global forces of economic and technological transformations undermine the traditional family values and the norm of filial obligation, especially for the dramatic shrinkage of family size under China’s one-child policy. The new model as ‘the intimate-but-distant type’ of family solidarity satisfies the demand of translocal societies with growing social and spatial mobility, but also provides an innovative means to maintain ‘strong family cohesion’ (Sheng & Settles, 2006; Silverstein et al., 2003, p. 191).

For stable, sustainable social development in China, intergenerational family solidarity must be reinforced and the role played by the elderly Chinese must not be underestimated. Certainly, it is also meaningful to maintain such kind of mediated familial connections to ensure the proper quality of life of the elderly Chinese and their distant children in terms of socio-emotional stability (Colvin et al., 2004). Many people worry about the age-based digital divide2 (Czaja & Schulz, 2006) because of their initial concern about the economic productivity directly from the ICT-enhanced elder people. It is inappropriate to consider the elders as direct innovative power for the contemporary socioeconomic development, although there can be exception. However, the elder people can be easily equipped by more user-friendly ICT skills and knowledge for the construction of mediated communication and transmission of...
lifestyles and values as their reciprocal aspirations with their children and family/families for seeking upward mobility. Such social interaction by connected presence may reduce generational gaps via social and cultural exchanges within families (Attias-Donfut, 2000) with a view to construct a new form of family in translocal China (Bian, 2002; Webster, 2004) and provide social support for parents and their children in remote locations. Bearing this in mind, this new model of family solidarity by ICTs does not completely replace face-to-face communication (Wright, 2000) and there are other mechanisms of social solidarities such as friendship, partnership, and love at play (Hillcoat-Nallétamby et al., 2006) for social cohesion in societies. However, ‘translocal family solidarity’ as a contemporary form of family ties does play a significant role in social development of contemporary China where the new qualities of parent–child relationships of the ‘relational families’ are characterized by ‘autonomy of the generations’ (Attias-Donfut, 2000, p. 270) and sharing of aspirations for upward mobility in the process of modernization and individualization. It is demonstrated by those mediated interactions among the elderly parents and the young family members who share aspirations for upward mobility via their translocal social actions in this study.

Modernity and mobility in translocal China
All social and economic changes in contemporary China are, by and large, related to the concept of modernity. Both media and migration play crucial roles in the process of modernization in unevenly developed, networked Chinese societies. Mass migrations provide physical lived experience of local, national, regional, and global spaces to migrants in different places, while mass media offer mediated images, scripts, and sensations as resources for imagination of the outside world and the production of modern subjectivities to people in a place (Appadurai, 1996). The interconnectedness of media and migration motivates people to discern the opportunity of mobilities and the importance of localities in Chinese people’s lives. This constitutes ‘translocality’ of the characteristics of ‘multifaceted mobilities and localities’ of people who are living and working in different places of different localities. They may seek for mobilities by means of imagination as social practices in different localities, especially from rural to urban localities (Han, 2010; Oakes & Schein, 2006). Some people receive modern images and lifestyles via mass media like film and television and/or information about other places of different localities from friends and relatives who migrate to other places. Besides, some move to other places to achieve modernized lives of other localities. Modernity may be the motivation but the sharing of translocality among people greatly enhanced by ICTs is the tangible driving force to mobilize people to take imagination as social action to transcend and reframe their ordinary social lives. As a result, more Chinese people, especially the younger generations, are willing to live and work in places away from their home town in search of their imagined careers, wealth, and opportunities (Appadurai, 1996; Oakes & Schein, 2006).

In the 1970s, your home would be a gorgeous place for the whole community in any China’s village if you get a television set from your Hong Kong relatives. Relatives outside China and mediated images were the main sources about modernity that inspired people’s fantasies. However, those Chinese people did not take any action because there were still no appropriate economic, as well as technological,
conditions in China yet and their fantasies were connotative thoughts divorced from social actions. (Of course, a number of Chinese tried their best to migrate legally or illegally to Hong Kong.) Here we have to understand that the motivation for people to take social action comes from their imagination but not the fantasy for escape from reality. As Appadurai declares, ‘fantasy can dissipate (because its logic is so often autotelic), but the imagination, especially when collective, can become the fuel for action.’ Individual and collective senses of imagination to modernize contemporary China create social solidarities that are often transnational and operate beyond the boundaries of the nation-state, and that legitimate people to take ‘translocal social action’ in China’s holistic project of modernization. This triggers unprecedented, large-scale mobilization of people, capital, ideas, images, styles, goods, services, and so forth. Such kind of translocality of social and spatial mobilities and interrelations among localities within China is unimaginable in imperial China (Appadurai, 1996, pp. 7–8; Oakes & Schein, 2006).

In late-imperial China, the notion of the local as the ultimate belief of Confucianism’s enduring national and family habits and values constituted the ideology of China’s earth-bound civilization and filial piety – ‘unquestioned respect, responsibility, and sacrifice for family elders’ – that highly constrained social mobility and stabilized intergenerational solidarity of traditional family values and practices associated with loyalty, honor, and reliability (Cheng & Chan, 2006; Kobayashi & Funk, 2010; Oakes & Schein, 2006; Silverstein et al., 2003, p. 183). The imperial hierarchy and bureaucracy ensured approximately zero social mobility that individual social status was inborn and inherited. One was born to a particular class; one was belonging to that class for a life. Seldom had any change happened (Lu, 2004). In Mao’s era, a more rigid social status hierarchy was developed under the state’s spatial restructuring³ that led to unprecedented constraints on personal mobility and a severe decrease in economic activities in China. Social and spatial mobilities were highly restricted by the rigid systems of ‘hukou zhidu’ (household registration) and ‘danwei’ (work unit allocation). As it was almost impossible to convert one’s household registration, Chinese were constrained to their place of birth for their lifetime as a kind of fixed residence. Certainly, under the Maoist state’s translocal project to address the problem of the rural–urban divide, some Chinese were unwillingly sent to other places where they dreamed of return by the arrangement of their belonging work unit (Bian, 2002; Cartier, Castells, & Qiu, 2005; Chan, 2010; Oakes & Schein, 2006).

Since China’s post-1978 economic reforms, social mobility has been fast growing in response to the development of township and village enterprises and the modernization of state-owned enterprises that create new occupations, as well as new working classes, and the need for mobile labor markets to meet the rapid, uneven economic development in the major coastal cities and special administrative regions (Bian, 2002; Cartier et al., 2005; Lu, 2004; Oakes & Schein, 2006; Siu, 2006). On the one hand, the loosening household registration encourages social and spatial mobilities in favor of China’s translocal imaginaries for modernization that aim at developing China’s market economy in a ‘jumping scale’ to meet the living standards of First World⁴ (Oakes & Schein, 2006, p. 12), and allows the rural-to-urban migration of laborers to satisfy the demands of cities (Siu, 2006). On the other hand, household registration still constrains social mobility of many poor rural Chinese leading to the rural–urban divide which is intensified by the jumping scale of
economic developments in the major cities. This causes brain drain from rural to urban seriously and, thus, leaves the less mobile, especially the poor elder parents, in rural areas. For industrialization, more industrial laborers (but educated workers more preferable) are required to sustain the expanding manufacturing industry; for postindustrialization, more migrants are welcome to large cities to provide and enjoy quality services of First World standard (Chan, 2010; Webster, 2004).

Indeed, two policies of the post-Maoist reform play a vital role in encouraging Chinese people's imagination toward translocal openness (Oakes & Schein, 2006) for seeking upward mobility. One is the education system reform and the other is the one-child policy. Education is the main force to modernization, and thus, the Chinese state encourages people to achieve higher education. Since 1977, the higher education enrolment examination in China has been reinvigorated and virtually no class limitations have been preset for all applications. Education regains its power as one of the main resources to get upward mobility in Chinese societies (Lu, 2004). Moreover, higher education and the resulting increase in economic resources help sustain the norm and practice of filial obligation by the Chinese children in cities, as empirically evidenced by Cheung and Kwan's (2009) research. China's unique one-child policy since 1979 has contributed to accelerate the process of modernization as Chinese officials mentioned that it was a policy using the same discipline as economic planning to enhance the Chinese people's 'suzhi' (quality) – 'a word central to contemporary China governance and society' (Fong, 2004; Han, 2010, p. 605) – in a jumping scale. Generally speaking, the financial burden of those one-child families has been reduced and parents are willing to invest heavily to support their singleton children to study or work abroad or in China's big cities for seeking upward mobility as the family sharing aspirations (Fong, 2002, 2004; Meulenberg, 2004).

Social and family solidarities for seeking upward mobility

Giving care to your elderly parents, sharing opinion with your siblings, solving problems with your classmates or colleagues, and donating money to beggars or charity organizations can be demonstrations of social solidarity. Solidarity derived from the Latin term 'solidare' meaning to combine parts to make a strong whole is simple but abstract (Komter, 2005). It is more appropriate to use social solidarities that include family solidarity, community solidarity, and organization solidarity and so on, and reveal the varying degrees of different social relationships like love and friendship to unveil the pluralities of the concept of cohesive social and moral good. For Durkheim, such social solidarities can only be sustained if shared understandings and beliefs of orderly social classifications with boundaries among people are achieved (Crow, 2002). Those social solidarities, especially family solidarity, play indispensable roles in motivating and mobilizing people to take imagination – their mutual understanding and beliefs as aspirations – as social action to achieve upward mobility. However, Durkheim's theory of social order by solidarity has been criticized for boundaries being challenged and recreated by increasing individualization and deterritorialization in contemporary translocal societies (Oakes & Schein, 2006). Durkheim understood the existing conflict of individual needs against the collective social order as 'anomie' in modern societies and developed his argument of division of labor based on mechanical and organic solidarities (Crow, 2002; Webster, 2004).
Family solidarity is the core concept to be investigated in this study and is regarded as one of the most important components of mechanical solidarity. It is important to discern how the sustainability of family solidarity and the relationship between families and individuals help to maintain social cohesion. Durkheim depicted the relationships between individuals and society as ‘mechanical solidarity’ and ‘organic solidarity’ based on similarity among individuals in pre-industrial societies and difference in industrial societies, respectively. Mechanical solidarity puts more emphasis on the human ties in traditional societies while organic solidarity explains different individual needs in modern societies as a compromise between individualism and collectivism for social stability (Crow, 2002; Komter, 2005). However, it is argued that the rise of individualism has increasingly weakened the degree of identification and loyalty with traditional family values (Hillcoat-Nallétamby et al., 2006; Komter, 2005), which upsets social solidarity and reduces the practice of filial obligation. So, new channels and repertoires for mediated communication by ICTs for distant family members (Licoppe, 2004; Ling, 2008) with a view to reinvigorate intergenerational kinship by translocal social actions (Appadurai, 1996; Hillcoat-Nallétamby et al., 2006) are important to regain the social equilibrium by solidarity as the glue to keep people together in contemporary networked societies (Komter, 2005).

Individualism emphasizes the significance of personal self-satisfaction, autonomy, and freedom of choices that are claimed to be achieved by many ‘spoiled’ singleton Chinese under the one-child policy and that undermine the traditional family solidarity (Bengtson et al., 2002; Crow, 2002; Komter, 2005). The Chinese children who move to other cities in China or other countries for seeking upward mobility definitely achieve, to a certain extent, autonomy and freedom in their lived experiences. However, they still need the intergenerational family support in terms of finance and mental advice, and their parents may also enjoy satisfaction when the children successfully achieve higher socioeconomic status via education and career. Indeed, they can share some lifestyles and living knowledge such as Internet and mobile knowledge and mediated images. Especially under China’s one-child policy, the new intergenerational relationships of small families are becoming more egalitarian, leading to a new dynamic of family solidarity of altered family structure and functioning. Active lives of more symbolic and symmetrical caregiving and sharing via ICTs are achieved by the distant-but-intimate relationships between parents and children through their translocal social actions (Goh & Kuczynski, 2010; Sheng & Settles, 2006). The elderly parents may enjoy satisfaction by achieving family common goal through their children who attain upward mobility and through themselves in terms of lifelong and interactive learning. The sociocultural dynamics of individualization and deterritorialization in translocal China apply not only to the young, mobile generations of Chinese but also to their elderly parents who may transcend territorial boundaries and identities of their ordinary social lives by connected social relationships via ICTs in the process of modernization (Appadurai, 1996; Licoppe, 2004; Oakes & Schein, 2006). Their adult children and real, as well as virtual, communities living and working in different places can serve as a new form of intergenerational and intragenerational bonding for the construction of different identities as Castells’ (1997; 1999, p. 298) ‘networks of solidarity.’ Such new solidarities do not necessarily arouse ‘a radical break with the past’ but contribute to a reinvigoration (Crow, 2002, p. 38). ICTs can play a vital role in enhancing social
and cultural exchanges, as well as intergenerational solidarity, among the parents and their children (Attias-Donfut, 2000) by means of mediated communication as this research evidenced.

As the Chinese axiom ‘xue nong yu shui’ (blood is thicker than water), family and kin relationships are possibly unbreakable bonds among people in terms of traditional family solidarity, unless we discern people’s increasing individualistic desire to live a life of one’s own autonomy and freedom of choices leading to family diversity such as increasing rates of divorce and cohabitation, working mothers, single parenthood, and homosexual ‘families of choice’ in contemporary societies (Crow, 2002). People should envisage the weakening intergenerational kinship solidarity and family ties (Hillcoat-Nallétamby et al., 2006), and the changing functions of families ‘to influence and transmit essential attitudes, values, and resources across generations’ in the process of familial socialization (Bengtson et al., 2002, p. 2). Furthermore, people have to acknowledge the irreversibility of family diversity in the process of individualization that demands contemporary societies to search for a new equilibrium between individual freedom and social cohesion. In other words, new concepts of family togetherness and responsibility for social support are required to reinvigorate family solidarity in contemporary individualistic but networked societies (Crow, 2002). Especially for the more mobile younger generations, a new model of family solidarity by ICTs to incorporate new channels and repertoires for managing social relationships by connected presence of distant parents and children via mediated communication is necessary to maintain family connections (Licoppe, 2004; Ling, 2008). This reinvigorates intergenerational solidarity of more interdependent and symmetrical family obligations among the parents and their children with regard to their participation in inevitably increasing translocal activities under the rapidly changing ‘new technosocial situations and new boundaries of identity and place’ as a result of the global changes in economy and technology (Ito & Okabe, 2005, p. 260; Sheng & Settles, 2006).

In the process of modernization, China’s social structures concerning educational opportunities, labor market conditions, and governmental welfare policies have tremendously changed and influenced people how to seek upward mobility for their aspirations of better lives and how to carry out family responsibilities by innovation and new dynamics of intergenerational relationships of more symbolic and symmetrical obligations for reciprocal aspirations (Bengtson et al., 2002; Sheng & Settles, 2006). Similar to those experience in Western industrialization and postindustrialization, the costs of education as a main route for seeking upward mobility have exponentially increased and caused unfair educational opportunities (Lu, 2004), and unevenly larger labor markets have been developed in the major coastal cities and led to the rural–urban divide, though the Chinese state has advocated the ‘Xibu Dakaifa’ (Opening the West) project to develop the inland regions (Oakes & Schein, 2006). Likewise, the state has withdrawn from previously ‘all-encompassing urban social welfare programs’ and reduces budgets for ‘state-sponsored health, welfare, and retirement benefits’ (Woronov, 2007, p. 31), and expects the adult children take a more major role in family support and care for their elderly parents (Fong, 2004; Komter, 2005). The one-child policy since 1979 has intensified the burden of the singleton adult Chinese, especially for the supposed emerging ‘4-2-1 constellation’ that one grandchild has to support two parents and four grandparents in China’s family (Meulenberg, 2004; Sheng & Settles, 2006).
Though it is just an assumption that is not quite realistic in modern society featured by ‘autonomy of the generations’ (Attias-Donfut, 2000), it arouses the concern of social problem of the aging population in China that neither social pensions nor singleton adult children can solve independently. Anyway, problems of social inequalities have emerged and should be envisaged for increasing income disparities and rapidly expanding income gaps between the rural and urban areas in China (Woronov, 2007). Maybe the Chinese state’s ‘Opening the West’ project will improve the divide. More importantly, for the young inlanders, as well as other Chinese, migrating to the developed coastal areas for seeking upward mobility, strengthening the new forms of intergenerational linkages among the family members in mobile locations by ICTs, can create powerful symbols of family solidarity and reciprocity by connected presence and relationships in contemporary translocal China (Bengtson & Harootyan, 1994; Licoppe, 2004; Ling, 2008).

Research questions and method
This study is concerned with the social impact by the new model of family solidarity via mediated communication by ICTs for translocal Chinese seeking upward mobility in contemporary China’s jumping scale of modernization. What are the major differences between the new and old models of family solidarity and the parent–child relationships? How are distant parents and their children using ICTs to achieve social and mental support and different knowledge exchanges to encourage and/or encounter increasing mobilities? How do the reinvigorated intergenerational relationships among the elderly parents and their adult children in mobile locations facilitate their interaction and sharing of translocal imaginaries and reciprocal aspirations for seeking upward mobility? The corresponding answers may reveal the significance of a new model of family solidarity by ICTs to reinvigorate the intergenerational family support by new dynamics of filial and parental obligations different from traditional Confucian expectations of filial piety. This helps envisage social problems by the increasing mobilities of the new generations, the collapsing traditional social bond by family structure, and the aging population of demanding social support in contemporary China. The situation and challenge to the adult children, especially singletons, and the aging parents have become even more complicated under China’s unique one-child policy.

Relatively little research has explored how family members, especially the elderly parents, use ICTs in modern society for social support (Colvin et al., 2004; Wright, 2000). This exploratory study investigates the changing intergenerational relationships by mediated communication via life histories of 12 translocal Chinese studying, working, and living apart from their home towns or rural areas, by face-to-face communication or Internet relay chat (IRC). As intergenerational communication is difficult to be quantified (Crow, 2002), life histories are used to understand the details of caregiving, sharing, and interactions among the informants and their parents from physical togetherness to, more importantly, mobile communication in remote locations. Face-to-face interview provides more intimate interactions and additional information by body language, but IRC maintains anonymity for interviewees facilitating the discussion of more private and sensitive experiences. However, it is better to conduct the time-consuming life history by face-to-face communication of more verbal and vivid discourses. (The one studying in America is
also interviewed during her visit to Hong Kong.) IRC interviews that save time for transcription are chosen only for those informants not approachable in person. All the informants have been, most of the time, studying and working in different China’s cities away from their homes after high school. They (four males, eight females) are all singleton Chinese born in the 1980s except one living in Mexico. One of them has just finished her postgraduate study and started working in Hong Kong while all others are postgraduate students in remote locations during my interviews: nine in Hong Kong, one in America, one in Mexico, one in Russia. Most of these informants and their Chinese classmates in universities are singletons having no siblings and enjoying higher standards of living and education in urban areas for heavy parental investment and support. The one studying in Russia comes from a relatively poor rural village in Fujian and, so, cannot afford to study in America as he explained. Three informants – two in Hong Kong and one in America – employed a lot Internet and web camera to communicate with their parents in China, while all others mainly relied on telecommunications. The impact of ICTs on family solidarity in terms of caregiving and interpersonal communication among these informants and their family members evidenced a promising new direction for social support by mediated communication in contemporary China.

Translocality and new model of family solidarity

‘Translocal family solidarity’ is a proposed new model of family solidarity to advocate the proper use of ICTs as new channels and repertoires for managing social relationships by mediated communication (Licoppe, 2004; Ling, 2008) to establish contemporary distant-but-intimate intergenerational links among the elderly parents and their adult children for seeking upward mobility and practicing family obligations at remote locations. Bearing in mind, it is only used to strengthen but not to replace family solidarity by physical togetherness and face-to-face communication (Crow, 2002; Sheng & Settles, 2006; Silverstein et al., 2003). Translocality is related to multifaceted mobilities and localities in networked societies of people who are seeking for upward mobility to achieve higher socioeconomic status and quality of life by means of imagination as social action in the process of modernization (Oakes & Schein, 2006; Webster, 2004). More Chinese understand that more choices of possible lives are offered in accord with their mobility in societies, and, moreover, many Chinese parents try their best to support their children, especially singletons, to move to other more well-developed cities, as well as countries, for seeking upward mobility as mutual understanding and reciprocal aspirations. Although Chinese mobility is still restricted by one’s household registration, one of the informants, Mary, told me that she could get the official change of her household registration when she graduated and got a job in Beijing. Even though she did not own one in Beijing, she could buy an apartment and live there. Such phenomena prove both the flexibility of the loosening household registration and the limitation of social mobility for the poor rural people in contemporary China that encourages surplus agricultural laborers to join the industrial labor force in big cities but to stay and live in the countryside or regional cities (Oakes & Schein, 2006). Such inequality in social mobility draws our attention to skills and knowledge by education as the critical criterion and investment for changing social status.
Many people argue that China’s one-child policy creates spoiled children; nevertheless, all evidences I have got from the singleton Chinese do not legitimate this accusation. Susan, born in 1981, is belonging to the first generation of Chinese singletons under the one-child policy and has just finished her master’s degree and continued to work in Hong Kong – one of the special administrative regions in China. She open-mindedly confessed the advantages of better living conditions and educational opportunities for her singleton status, but she also mentioned a lot of pressures from her parents. She said that she did not get any reward or endorsement when her test result was 95 instead of 100 (full marks), and she always felt stress to study hard for parents’ heavy investment to allow her join in a number of different tutoring classes. Indeed, many Chinese singletons have to face intense intergenerational pressures from high expectations of their parents and intragenerational competition for seeking upward mobility from educational and job opportunities. Bearing in mind, unlike those children of siblings who can share similar social and cultural experience and support each other, singletons have to greatly rely on intergenerational family support from their parents. On the contrary, singleton adult Chinese are regarded as the main source of support for their elderly parents’ post-retirement lives, medical treatments, and nursing care (Fong, 2004). Susan told me that she had to get part-time jobs to pay for her parents’ flat mortgage and her own living expenditure every month when she studied in Hong Kong. But she is willing to pay for seeing her parents living comfortably. The social burden on singleton adult Chinese is gradually emerging because many of the first generation of singletons have finished their higher education and joined the job markets, they will get marry and have their children, and their parents will get older and require more demanding social support. For both their parents and children, apart from social welfare from the Chinese Government, intergenerational family solidarity definitely plays an indispensable role in future China.

Nonetheless, the social problems encountered by singletons in contemporary China might be a little bit better because of the complicated social ecology: (1) the one-child policy has never been strictly executed in the rural areas (Fong, 2004) and many Chinese parents like Jimmy’s refused to follow the policy even though they have to pay a huge amount of penalty; (2) many Chinese parents have also attained higher socioeconomic status by means of developing their own business (Lu, 2004) during China’s economic reform like Jimmy’s parents running merchandising business and opening restaurant in China and Mexico, respectively, and earned good enough money to support the family; and (3) some modern Chinese parents influenced partly by their children as reciprocal role models and partly by the social change have become more independent and enjoyed more individualistic lifestyles within the new dynamics of family solidarity of more symmetrical and egalitarian parent–child relationships (Sheng & Settles, 2006). A relatively optimistic perspective toward the burden of singleton adult Chinese like Mary, whose husband has a younger brother and may share family responsibility, for social support to the elderly parents is preserved, provided that the fast-growing economy with a low inflation rate in China and the corresponding rise of Chinese people’s financial competitiveness will continue (Funke, 2006). Besides, the increasing independency and continuous family support of the vigorous old Chinese of longer and healthy lives will contribute to the intergenerational solidarity for social support to the younger generation.
Locality with regard to a particular place like home as a reference to the traditional concepts of Confucianism’s family is no longer applicable to translocal imaginaries of multi-placed Chinese and networks of localities for identification and imagination in the networked societies (Cheng & Chan, 2006; Cheung & Kwan, 2009; Oakes & Schein, 2006). Such translocal imaginaries arouse the contention concerning the uneven economic development of the rural–urban areas leading to the rural-to-urban migration (Chan, 2010; Siu, 2006) and the digital divide among the information have-no/have-less parents and the information have-rich young family members resulting in the weakening of intergenerational family connections (Cartier et al., 2005; Harwit, 2004; Hughes & Wacker, 2003; Qiu, 2009). Fortunately, in modern societies, the elderly parents can be more easily equipped by user-friendly, minimal ICT skills and knowledge for the construction of mediated communication and transmission of lifestyles and values as a reduction of generational gaps via social and cultural exchanges by means of ‘intimate-but-distant type’ of family obligations (Attias-Donfut, 2000; Silverstein et al., 2003). This facilitates the foundation of translocal family solidarity as an innovative intergenerational family link to hold Chinese family members in remote locations and strengthens the family functions of reciprocal aspirations, as well as the practices of filial obligation, in symbolic occasions (Sheng & Settles, 2006). Indeed, all informants and their parents of this study heavily rely on ICTs to achieve caregiving and sharing by connected presence except some rare (mostly festival) physical gatherings (Licoppe, 2004).

Figure 1 is the model of intergenerational relationship between parents and children by Bengtson and his colleagues (2002) to represent the horizontal processes through which parents shape children’s educational and occupational aspirations by parental investment, role modeling, and parent–child kinship relationship in a more straightforward and patriarchal-feudal manner of traditional family solidarity. In the late-imperial and Maoist state, hierarchy and bureaucracy of social structures were as tough as the structure of orthodox Chinese Confucianism’s families, and thus social mobility was greatly constrained (Oakes & Schein, 2006). Similar to this model, chances of upward mobility were very rare and parental socioeconomic status highly determined children’s status that might only allow horizontal mobility (Lu, 2004), for instance, a change of status from shoe-making to car-manufacturing worker. However, this old model of family solidarity is not eradicated but reinvigorated to the new model of contemporary intergenerational family links in Figure 2. Chinese family bonds between parents and children are still a vital source of intergenerational support but have been weakened (Cheng & Chan, 2006; Cheung & Kwan, 2009; Hillcoat-Nallétamby et al., 2006; Komter, 2005) and become bidirectional (exchange

![Figure 1. Relationship between parents’ socioeconomic status and children’s status aspirations (Bengtson et al., 2002, p. 61).](image)
and negotiation between family members in more egalitarian and symmetrical manner for seeking a balance of individualism and collectivism in modern societies) (Bengtson et al., 2002; Sheng & Settles, 2006). Both parents and their children provide some investment in terms of education and knowledge exchanges; both are role models to each other; caregiving and sharing of aspirations by filial and parental obligations is achieved via more interactive channels and repertoires of intergenerational relationships by mediated communication. A main difference of the new model is translocality that provides multiple mobilities and networks of localities for identification to both parents and their children. They share reciprocal aspirations, work together, and influence each other to achieve upward mobility by translocal social actions via mediated and symbolic communication as those cases in this study demonstrated.

For instance, Jimmy has migrated to Mexico with his whole family including his elder brother and younger sister, and further studies postgraduate course in university at another distant city. He confessed that he had asked for financial support and personal advice from his father by telephone. Indeed, he is very independent because he had left home and lived alone since attending high school in China. And Susan, who possesses very individualistic personality, said, ‘Sometimes my mother talks to me. She feels happy if I am happy. But I do not think it is appropriate to me. Her happiness is her own business; I am happy for my own happiness. If I feel sad, I think difficult to make myself happy. I still have to cheer up myself; otherwise, it will make my mother unhappy. I feel it is very strange.’ Her mother’s concern typically represents mother’s role and commitment to the intergenerational family links ahead of rational
calculation of individual interests (Crow, 2002). Susan was scared and stressed because of the conflict between individualism and collectivism. However, it does not mean that the process of individualization completely erases the habits and values of family solidarity. In Susan’s case, she believed that her own family after marriage would not be a continuity to her parents’ one. Two families should be individual units from her perspective of individualism. Nonetheless, she bought a flat and has been continuing to pay for the mortgage for her parents in Nanjing. She remarked, ‘I still get a place called “jia” (home) to go, even though I fail in my career and lose everything.’ Actually, all informants acknowledged the importance of their families and parents to their growth and personal cultivation before maturity. After that all parental influences do not disappear suddenly but precipitate to constitute their children’s personality.

With regard to Attias-Donfut’s (2000) concept of ‘relational family’ of changing parental role and new qualities of parent–child relationships, I draw attention to the multiple functions of ICTs which constitute both material and symbolic forms of mobility and provide new channels and repertoires for connected relationship management by mediated communication to strengthen intergenerational relationships between the Chinese parents and their children in different places (Licoppe, 2004; Ling, 2008). Indeed, people do not need to move in order to get different localities, as well as subjectivities, to satisfy their aspirations by translocal imaginaries. By translocal mediated communication via ICTs, social and cultural exchanges within families may lead to rebounding effects of upward mobility by children to their parents as regards a rise in the standard of living in industrial society or the quality of life in post-industrial metropolis (Attias-Donfut, 2000; Webster, 2004). Like Susan and Linda’s ‘net-moms,’ exchange of ICT knowledge and Internet culture helps their mothers attain upward mobility and construct new communities of solidarity for their retirement lives. Especially for Linda’s mom, she proactively learns to use Skype to facilitate more rich and contextual video-chatting with her daughter in America. Those ‘net-moms’ and their children’s acting and sharing via ICTs as mediated communication show reciprocal investment and role modeling within the new dynamics of intergenerational relationships. Their mothers’ Internet knowledge may not highly contribute to China’s economy, but caregiving and interactions within their families and Internet communities via QQ, MSN, and Skype do provide meaningful social support for the elderly Chinese parents and their adult children as reciprocal aspirations (Colvin et al., 2004; Wright, 2000). For example, Susan preferred to use Internet instead of telephone to communicate with her mother because of the highly contextualized multimedia that she could share her digital pictures of peoples and places with her mother by Internet attachment or immediate transfer, and she could satisfy her own socio-emotional needs when seeing her mother, as well as father, healthy via the webcam and vice versa. In this case, both Susan and her mother serve as caregivers and care-receivers by practicing filial and parental obligations via connected presence that is important to reinvigorate family solidarity and to release social pressure of increasing aging population in translocal China.

Many singletons under China’s one-child policy probably achieve the heavy parental investment because their parents do not need to consider how to allocate resources fairly among children and they understand the positive correlation of educational levels with socioeconomic status in contemporary China (Crow, 2002; Fong, 2004). Nevertheless, singleton parents may also create unbearably high
pressure on their children that may further weaken intergenerational family links among them. Singleton girl Liu Yiting, for instance, was cultivated by her mother’s detailed child-rearing plans that were published as a manual for seeking the best ways to attain upward mobility. She finally became the first Chinese student to get a full scholarship for undergraduate study at Harvard. I doubt about the consistency and effectiveness of such kind of child-rearing manuals to raise every children ‘scientifically’ but the toughness of certain trainings is harmful to children’s personality development and intergenerational family links among the children and their mothers. The singleton children who are trained like Yiting and separated into diverse locations have less and less chances for family gatherings at mealtimes and festivities in China and may become more individualistic and calculating to any commitments for family solidarity (Crow, 2002).

Fortunately, not all Chinese mothers raise their children like Yiting’s mom and many women still play a central role in maintaining family solidarity as much reciprocal aspirations as those moms and singleton daughters in this study witnessed. The preparedness of mothers to make commitment for arranging meals and activities is always the primary condition to set family togetherness possible. However, family togetherness does not guarantee the strengthening of family solidarity among family members. The core of family togetherness is its symbolic meanings of community and sharing among family members, especially shared conversation. Women, mothers, and daughters in the family, who develop better and closer intergenerational relationships based on shared skills and practical activities, as well as higher family loyalty and a sense of duty, are generally speaking smart, talkative discussants, and negotiators in the mood of family conversation. But the main problem that the contemporary Chinese people encounter is accessibility of the younger family members who are far away from parents’ home or not willing to go home frequently for physical togetherness (Crow, 2002; Komter, 2005). Therefore, mediated communication by ICTs plays a crucial role in maintaining and strengthening intergenerational solidarity among parents and their children by means of new channels and repertoires for managing intergenerational relationships via connected presence (Licoppe, 2004; Ling, 2008). Mothers and daughters normally play more active roles in such kind of distant telecommunication through their skills of conversation and interaction, and commitment to the new values of distant-but-intimate family solidarity in contrast to men’s more individualistic and calculating manners to their own situations (Crow, 2002; Silverstein et al., 2003). All cases in this study reveal that the distant children spend more time to telecommunicate by mobile and/or Internet with their mothers than fathers. Mary, for instance, may spend more than 20 hours a week to chat with her mother but just a few hours with her father. Indeed, more women than men keep regular contacts with their parents (Komter, 2005) and many working singleton daughters who enjoyed unprecedented parental support and investment because of China’s one-child policy provide their elderly parents emotional and financial support on behalf of family solidarity (Fong, 2002). Again, this is evidenced by the lived experiences of those informants.

The proposed new model of family solidarity by ICTs puts more emphasis on freedom of choices and autonomy of the generations (Attias-Donfut, 2000), that is, parents and children can decide time and space, as well as channels of communication, for better interaction and social and cultural exchanges with family members in
more egalitarian and symmetrical manner (Sheng & Settles, 2006). Like Susan’s ‘netmom,’ she once upon a time sent an abnormally long email to Susan to admonish her managing carefully her daily expenditure by credit card instead of using their favorite webcam chatting. Obviously, she tried to avoid accusing her daughter in a more face-to-face manner. There may be more advantages to use ICTs as new ways of intergenerational communication for reinvigorating family solidarity among the elderly parents and their adult children to achieve reciprocal aspirations for upward mobility. Moreover, such mediated interactions as many informants explained enforce their wishes to have physical family gatherings and face-to-face communication with their parents. All these communication opportunities can provide necessary support to family members with a view to maintain and strengthen social solidarity to solve social problems like the aging population and the rural–urban divide.

Conclusion

As the major contemporary social scholars like Bell, Castells, and Giddens are all intensively engaged with and even politically committed to understand the ways of development of the world and the direction/redirection of its change for the better, this study is ‘engaged with discerning the future (which is not the same as prediction)’ based on ‘identifiable trends’ of social changes (Melin, 2004, pp. 81–82). This is an initial exploration of the change of family solidarity and the new channels and repertoires of intergenerational communication by ICTs among family members, especially the elderly parents and their singleton adult children, in translocal China within the new dynamics of parent–child relationships under the global forces of economic and technological transformations. The main difference of the new model of ‘translocal family solidarity’ is translocality, whereupon the intergenerational relationships and family obligations among the Chinese parents and their children are more mobile, interactive, symmetrical, and egalitarian. As those cases in this study evidenced, the elderly parents and their adult children invest in terms of time, money, and emotion for mutual understanding and support, and serve as role models to each other via connected presence by ICTs as mediated communication. Social and mental support among family members is, by and large, not reliant upon traditional family bonds and togetherness but mutual agreement of a balance of individualism and collectivism for translocal imaginaries. Social and cultural knowledge is exchanged between family members in remote locations using ICTs for the distant-but-intimate type of intergenerational relationship management to achieve upward mobility as reciprocal aspirations. Especially for singleton parents, connected presence with their adult children in mobile locations plays important role in maintaining and strengthening family solidarity under the circumstances of increasing social and spatial mobility in contemporary China. Moreover, the singletons still have a home for return, although they may regard their own home/family as independent unit. Most importantly, many interviewed Chinese adult children acknowledged that mediated communication by ICTs with their elderly parents enhances their wish to go home for physical togetherness to some extent. As the new model reveals, ICTs as mediated communication strengthen family cohesion by connected presence, which is restructuring instead of eradicating family linkages and obligations between parents and their children.
More empirical researches are required to further legitimate the arguments and the variables such as reciprocal aspirations and translocal social actions for seeking upward mobility proposed in the new model of family solidarity. Social scientific surveys would be useful, but it is acknowledged that the expression of family solidarity through intergenerational communication is difficult to be quantified (Crow, 2002). Interview, focus group, and ethnographic studies of members of contemporary Chinese families would be the most invaluable data for studying the changing intergenerational family relationships and the new ways for the practices of filial obligation. And triangulation by different methods would be most preferable, but the scale and resources of these researches are incredibly huge, and sampling is extremely difficult in contemporary China of the largest world population. However, such kind of micro-to-macro analysis is necessary to unveil the fundamental social problems that every Chinese in the networked societies may encounter in the process of modernization and individualization. And family is the most basic and important social unit of analysis to investigate social solidarity.

The problem of aging population does not only emerge in China but the Chinese population reaches 1.33 billion, and the rapid modernization of contemporary China also means the emergence and intensification of social problems in a jumping scale. These include the rural-urban/inland-coastal divide due to uneven economic development and increasing social mobility leading to brain drain toward the major developed cities. The rising costs of education and the collapsing social pension systems lead to unfair educational opportunities for seeking upward mobility and problems of social support to aging population, respectively. Last but not the least, the digital divide among the elderly people and the younger generations, among the information have-no/have-less and the information have-rich, facilitates widening generational and knowledge gaps, and weakens social solidarity. Fortunately, more researches concerning such problems from micro-to-macro-levels of analysis have been conducted (Cartier et al., 2005; Harwit, 2004; Hughes & Wacker, 2003; Oakes & Schein, 2006; Qiu, 2009; Xia & Lu, 2008; Zhu & He, 2002). This study focuses on the young generations in translocal China playing the major role models and initiators of mediated communication by ICTs among the Chinese parents and their children for reinvigorating intergenerational family connections. More studies concerning the elderly Chinese and their adult children, especially singletons under China’s one-child policy, whose first cohort has left schools and joined the economic markets as major workforce, who may take on responsibility to support their elderly parents in the face of the collapse of the state-sponsored health, welfare, and retirement benefits (Woronov, 2007), should be taken from both the singletons and their elderly parents’ perspectives. Although those life history discourses of the informants include many details of their parents’ social lives and experiences of mediated communication by ICTs for familial connections and show a high degree of face validity, further studies by life histories and ethnography of the parents can provide more attractive two-side story to fully depict the new dynamics of the contemporary intergenerational relationships via connected presence. The diffusion of knowledge about ICTs for the elderly Chinese can contribute to undermine the age-based digital divide and to provide new channels and repertoires for mediated communication to maintain and strengthen family solidarity, especially when social and spatial mobility becomes an indispensable condition for the young generations in translocal China. Indeed, according to UNFPA’s statistics, half of the global human population over 3.3 billion
live inside the major cities in 2008, which is the first time that cities accommodate over 50% population, and the population of the major cities is quickly growing by an average of 1.2 million each week (Ming Pao, 2007). Pretty surely, mainly poor and older Chinese of relatively lower mobility will have stayed and lived outside the major cities. Especially the elderly Chinese needs social support in terms of family and community solidarities that can be enhanced by the proper use of ICTs in translocal societies as explicated in this study.

Notes
1. Intrigenerational familial connections regarding the relationships among siblings that disappear in the generations of singleton children family are not the focus of analysis in this study.
2. Digital divide is defined by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) as ‘the gap between individuals, households, businesses and geographic areas at different socioeconomic levels with regard both to their opportunities to access ICTs and to their use of the Internet for a wide variety of activities’ (Harwit, 2004, p. 1013).
3. Under Maoist rigid social status hierarchy, Chinese were classified into different social status groups according to four structural and behavioral dimensions: (1) ‘a rural–urban divide in residential status,’ (2) ‘a state-collective dualism in economic structure,’ (3) ‘a cadre-worker dichotomy in occupational classification,’ and (4) ‘a revolution–antirevolution split in political characterization’ (Bian, 2002, pp. 92–93).
4. Fong (2004, pp. 2–3) mentioned that a generation of young, ambitious, well-educated children under China’s one-child policy would lead the country into the First World. Here the First World is used to represent the high standard of living in developed countries like the United States while the Third World represents those developing or underdeveloped countries like China of people with the lower socioeconomic status and living standard.
5. According to UNFPA’s report in 2007, the average life span of male is 70.7 (the top is 79.2 in Hong Kong) and that of female is 74.4 (the top is 86.3 in Japan) in mainland China, and Chinese population has reached 1.33 billion (Ming Pao, 2007).
6. For informants’ privacy, pseudonyms are used for them in this article.
7. As Jimmy mentioned, his parents did not receive any higher education at all. So, other than formal education, lifelong learning from societal and children’s experiences also provides parents opportunities to get upward mobility to satisfy their aspirations.

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