

LONG TIES, FILIAL TENSION AND TEMPORALITY IN TRANSNATIONAL CHINESE-GERMAN FAMILIES

Jiayin Li-Gottwald

Department of Intercultural and Comparative Education, Helmut Schmidt University, Hamburg, Germany

ABSTRACT

This study examines how Chinese migrant mothers married to German husbands sustain and reinterpret filial piety (尽孝道) within transnational Chinese-German families. Although these households resemble “modern” nuclear families in Germany, the mothers remain morally oriented toward the Confucian ideal of the three-generation family (三代同堂). The aspiration for intergenerational co-presence shapes their emotional labour and obligations to parents in China, generating ambivalent feelings of love, guilt, and responsibility. Rather than weakening kin ties, migration reconfigures filial practice into a transnational project enacted through affective communication, extended visits, and symbolic efforts to reproduce three-generation relatedness across distance. Using a collaborative ethnographic approach (Lassiter, 2005; Rappaport, 2008), grounded in a friendship network of Chinese migrant mothers, the study draws on conversational exchanges, emotion notes, and WeChat messages to trace moments when filial morality is activated. The findings demonstrate how these women sustain and re-embed filial ethics in migration, challenging assumptions about the disappearance of filial morality during migration.

KEYWORDS

sandaitongtang, jinxiaodao, tianlunzhile, filial morality, emotional constraints

LAÇOS DURADOUROS, TENSÃO FILIAL E TEMPORALIDADE EM FAMÍLIAS TRANSNACIONAIS SINO-ALEMÃS

RESUMO

O presente estudo analisa de que modo mães migrantes chinesas, casadas com cônjuges alemães, sustentam e reinterpretam a devoção filial (尽孝道) no seio de famílias transnacionais sino-alemãs. Embora estes agregados familiares se assemelhem a famílias nucleares “modernas” na Alemanha, estas mulheres mantêm-se orientadas, do ponto de vista moral pelo ideal confucionista da família de três gerações (三代同堂). A aspiração à copresença intergeracional molda o seu trabalho emocional e as suas obrigações para com os pais na China, gerando sentimentos ambivalentes de amor, culpa e responsabilidade. Longe de enfraquecer os laços de parentesco, a migração reconfigura a prática filial num projeto transnacional, concretizado através de comunicação afetiva, visitas prolongadas e esforços simbólicos para reproduzir, à distância, formas de relacionalidade entre três gerações. Com base numa abordagem etnográfica colaborativa (Lassiter, 2005; Rappaport, 2008), ancorada numa rede de amizade de mães migrantes chinesas, o estudo mobiliza conversas, registos emocionais e mensagens de WeChat para acompanhar os momentos em que a moralidade filial é mobilizada. Os

resultados demonstram a forma como estas mulheres alimentam e reinscrevem a ética filial em contexto migratório, desafiando pressupostos sobre o desaparecimento da moralidade filial durante a migração.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

sandaitongtang, *jinxiaodao*, *tianlunzhile*, moralidade filial, constrangimentos emocionais

1. INTRODUCTION: THE RECONFIGURATION OF MODERN SANDAITONGTANG

This article examines how Chinese migrant women married to German husbands and residing in Germany continue to pursue and sustain Chinese filial and intergenerational moral commitments through lived experience in their everyday lives (Kleinman, 1999). Although their households outwardly conform to socially recognised nuclear-family forms within the German welfare context, these women remain oriented toward ethical ideals of filial responsibility and three-generation relationality. Their ongoing efforts to maintain care, support, and moral accountability toward parents and elders in China are articulated as a continuing ethical project of *jinxiaodao* (尽孝道, fulfilling filial obligation) across distance. Thus, the paper argues that the *sandaitongtang* (三代同堂, three-generation family) persists under conditions of migration not as a residential form, but as a moral orientation that continues to structure intergenerational obligations across national distance.

The nuclear family in contemporary Germany is widely institutionalised as a normative social formation, anchored in ideals of marital partnership, individual self-realisation, and the moral autonomy of the household (Lück & Ruckdeschel, 2018). Classic and contemporary family scholarship in Euro-American contexts demonstrates that the nuclear family is not a universal kinship structure, but a historically and culturally specific formation that privileges the spousal dyad as the primary locus of emotional and social life (Furstenberg et al., 2020). In this model, kinship is organised around privacy, interiority, and bounded domesticity, with obligations to wider kin networks positioned as symbolically secondary to spousal and parent-child relations. Anthropological scholarship further emphasises that family life is shaped not only by residential arrangements or household structure, but also by broader moral-ontological frameworks — historically situated understandings of personhood, relatedness, obligation, and hierarchy that render particular kinship formations ethically meaningful and socially intelligible (Carsten, 2004; Sahlin, 2013).

Research on Chinese family organisation has highlighted a markedly different moral architecture, in which the three-generation family (*sandaitongtang*) retains strong cultural salience as a genealogically organised moral community in which personhood is constituted relationally across generational tiers. Within this formation, elders are commonly

associated with moral authority and historical continuity, the middle generation with the mediation of reciprocity and upward care, and children with the lineage's moral and temporal future (Ikels, 2004; Yan, 2016). Intergenerational obligation, relational hierarchy, and filial morality remain central ethical orientations, although they are reconfigured under conditions of urbanisation, demographic transformation, and welfare restructuring (Yeh et al., 2013). The three-generation family is therefore best understood not as a residual "tradition", but as a flexible moral formation in which obligation, reciprocity, and affect organise intergenerational life within a lineage-anchored moral horizon.

The contrast between German nuclear-family models and Chinese three-generation kinship lies less in residential demography than in their underlying ethical logics and becomes especially salient in transnational marital and migratory contexts where family life is organised across multiple moral orders simultaneously. Nuclear-family formations centre spousal partnership and the autonomy of the bounded household, whereas Chinese kinship remains oriented toward relational personhood, intergenerational hierarchy, and genealogical continuity as an enduring moral horizon (Barbalet, 2025). These orientations are articulated not only through normative expectations, but also through culturally embedded ethical imaginaries and ideals, such as *jinxiaodao* (尽孝道, the fulfilment of filial obligation), *tianlunzhile* (天伦之乐, intergenerational familial joy), and *chenghuanxixia* (承欢膝下, embodied filial companionship at a parent's side), which together express an ideal of affective proximity, co-presence, and shared intergenerational life.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW: FILIAL MORALITY, TEMPORALITY AND SANDAITONGTANG

Recent scholarship on Chinese family structures has moved beyond modernisation narratives that assume a linear decline of extended kinship and filial obligation. Contemporary empirical research instead demonstrates that intergenerational hierarchy, family obligation, and normative moral expectations remain deeply embedded in Chinese family life, even as co-residential and caregiving arrangements evolve under urbanisation, demographic transition, and welfare restructuring (Barbalet, 2025; Liu, 2024; Shi, 2017). Within this literature, three-generation households and other extended family forms are understood not merely as demographic patterns but as socially meaningful contexts in which intergenerational obligations are enacted, and relational personhood is foregrounded in family practice. Drawing on multi-generational life-history data, Liu (2024) shows that urban Chinese families articulate their relationships through a shared sense of moral continuity across three generational tiers, with elders embodying accumulated symbolic authority and younger generations framing their obligations as participation in an ongoing familial project. Shi (2017) similarly finds that flexible co-residential strategies, such as proximate residence and rotational support, remain embedded in collective orientations to reciprocity and lineage continuity rather

than individualised autonomy. Extending this perspective, Qi (2015) conceptualises filial obligation as an evolving “culture-system”, in which expectations of upward support and moral accountability remain structurally powerful even as their forms adapt to changing economic and social conditions. Likewise, Liu (2023) shows that support for ageing parents reflects a dynamic synthesis of obligation, emotional intimacy, and material constraints, challenging dichotomies that oppose “traditional duty” to “modern individualism”. Taken together, these studies suggest that what persists is not the co-residential three-generation household, but a durable moral framework that continues to organise intergenerational reciprocity, legitimacy, and responsibility across changing institutional and socioeconomic conditions (Yeh et al., 2013; Zeng & Xie, 2014).

The three-generation family has long functioned as a key institutional expression of filial piety in China, organising intergenerational life around the middle generation’s dual orientation toward caring for dependent elders and nurturing the next generation. Within this configuration, moral obligation, emotional reciprocity, and concerns for lineage continuity are embedded within a shared domestic and relational order. Filial piety (孝, *xiào*) operates as a historically layered ethical system in which obligations are distributed along both temporal and relational axes. Classical Confucian texts such as the *Classic of Filial Piety* (孝经, *Xiaojing*; Ames & Rosemont, 2009) and the *Book of Rites* (礼记, *Liji*; Legge, 1967) depict the family as a morally ordered hierarchy in which obligations are graded across generations, with particular expectations placed on adult children to honour, support, and care for aging parents while cultivating, educating, and transmitting moral and ritual continuity to their own offspring. In this sense, the middle generation functions as a pivotal generational hinge, oriented “upward” through respect, provision, and accountability toward elders, and “downward” through protection, socialisation, and the reproduction of ethical and familial values. This dual orientation also entails a relational commitment for the middle generation to sustaining intergenerational continuity through offering opportunities for interaction between grandparents and grandchildren, enabling the affective and symbolic experience evoked in ethical imaginaries such as *tianlunzhile* (天伦之乐, intergenerational familial joy) and *chenghuanxixia* (承欢膝下, filial presence and companionship). Within this broader regime of intergenerational integration, proximity, care work, and the facilitation of grandparent-grandchild relationships are framed as expressions of genealogical continuity and ethical inheritance rather than logistical convenience (Liu, 2024).

Under conditions of migration and transnational mobility, filial obligation is no longer anchored in co-residence but unfolds across spatially dispersed, multi-sited social fields. Care, authority, and responsibility must be coordinated across distance, rendering filiality a spatially extended moral project enacted through communication, material support, and affective engagement (Baldassar & Merla, 2014; Kilkey & Merla, 2014). While the absence of co-presence may generate emotional strain, it does not diminish the normative force of filial expectations; instead, these are continuously

negotiated across uneven institutional and social conditions, rendering filial obligation a spatially extended moral project. Within this context, temporality becomes analytically central. Recent work conceptualises temporality as plural, relational, and socially structured rather than linear or uniform (Adam, 1990, 2004). Building on this perspective, this article argues that intergenerational obligations unfold across competing temporal horizons, most notably childhood and ageing, that cannot be synchronised under conditions of spatial separation. As a result, the simultaneous fulfilment of filial obligations becomes structurally constrained. Temporality thus not only organises family life but shapes how filial responsibility is prioritised, negotiated, and lived.

Despite the contributions of the mentioned empirical literature, limited attention has been paid to how such temporal tensions are experienced and worked through in everyday family life. In particular, the interactional, discursive, and semantic processes through which competing obligations are interpreted, articulated, and recalibrated remain under-examined. Moreover, the role of mediated, triadic intergenerational relations in sustaining temporal continuity and negotiating responsibility across distance has received little exploration. This article addresses these gaps by examining how filial obligation is reworked through the discursive negotiation of competing temporal claims and the mediation of triadic intergenerational relations in transnational and transcultural family contexts.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study draws on a long-term ethnographic project conducted among Chinese-German families in Germany as part of a six-year habilitation project. The study focuses on eight families, primarily Chinese-German couples (Chinese mothers, German fathers) raising children (approx. age 5–18), who maintain ongoing intergenerational ties with the wife's parents in China. Participants were recruited through the researcher's existing friendship networks within the local Chinese-German community, reflecting the ethnographic field's relational embeddedness. Data were combined with participant observation, repeated interactional conversations, emotion notes, and WeChat exchanges. The researcher was embedded in participants' everyday lives through shared social and community contexts, enabling longitudinal engagement across both offline and digital settings. Data capture focused on moments when participants reflected on guilt, obligation, and responsibility regarding parents in China.

The analysis follows an interpretive, abductive approach, integrating thematic and discursive analysis. First, materials were coded for recurring themes, including filial obligation, temporality, and intergenerational responsibility. Second, critical emotional episodes were identified and analysed across data sources. Third, a discursive lens was applied to examine how participants interpret and negotiate competing obligations, including the use of culturally embedded categories (e.g. *yuxiao*, 愚孝). Particular

attention was given to how these processes unfold within triadic intergenerational relations (grandparents-parents-children) and through mediated interaction.

Different data types served complementary functions: observations and conversations provided contextualised accounts, emotion notes captured temporally situated reflections, and WeChat exchanges offered insight into real-time interaction and the mediated negotiation of filial relations. Together, these materials enable a multi-layered analysis linking lived experience, narrative interpretation, and situated communication. The study followed established ethical standards (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019). Participation was voluntary and based on ongoing informed consent, with attention to confidentiality, anonymisation, and the secure handling of digital data. Reflexive consideration was given to the researcher's embedded position and to the ethical representation of emotionally sensitive material (Davies, 2008; England, 1994).

4. ANALYSIS

The analysis that follows focuses on emotionally and morally charged moments that emerged across interactional conversations, diaries, and field encounters, where participants reflected on guilt, responsibility, and the limits of care under conditions of transnational separation.

4.1. TEMPORAL RUPTURE AND MORAL CONFLICT

Xin lives in Germany with her German husband and their young daughter. She was raised in Shanghai in a *sandaitongtang* (三代同堂) household, where grandparents, parents, and children shared daily routines, childcare, and emotional life. In her retrospective accounts, this arrangement functioned not only as a form of co-residence but as a moral horizon — a benchmark for intergenerational closeness grounded in continuity, proximity, and accumulated time.

Following migration, Xin and her parents attempted to sustain elements of this intergenerational arrangement across distance. Her parents travelled to Germany in alternating three-month cycles, constrained by visa regulations, to care for their granddaughter. Xin understood this arrangement as a fragile but cumulative temporality: repeated short periods of co-presence that, over time, could establish a meaningful intergenerational bond. This rhythm was abruptly interrupted when her maternal grandparents became seriously ill in Shanghai, leading her mother to remain there to provide eldercare.

4.1.1. EMPIRICAL EPISODE 1

This interruption emerged as a recurring point of emotional tension in interview conversations. Xin described her daughter's early childhood as a finite temporal window that, once lost, could not be recovered:

my poor child will not have a childhood with her grandma... These early years are temporary. After they pass, it will no longer be possible to build that closeness. But my mother chose to stay with her parents. I told her this is *yuxiao* (愚孝). (Xin, personal communication, October 24, 2023)

The term *yuxiao* (“misguided” or “excessive” filial piety) is used here not to reject filial obligation, but to criticise its perceived misallocation. For Xin, her mother’s decision to prioritise eldercare interrupts what she considers an equally urgent moral responsibility: the cultivation of grandmother-grandchild intimacy within a time-limited developmental phase. The absence is thus experienced not simply as logistical disruption, but as a temporal and moral loss.

This tension becomes particularly visible in a WeChat exchange between Xin and her mother. Xin urges her mother to return to Germany, even briefly, framing continued absence as emotional neglect (Figure 1).



Figure 1. *Yuxiao*

Note. Translation: Xin: “when everyone around you is saying that you are practising *yuxiao*, you should rethink yourself”. / Xin’s mom: “My responsibility now is to take care of the people who gave birth to me, and the people I gave birth to. Right now, looking after your grandfather and grandmother is my responsibility, because your aunt is no longer here. I am your grandparents’ only lifeline. There is no such thing as *yuxiao*, this is simply what I must do”. / Xin: “Then we won’t see each other”. / Xin: “If you are not even willing to come for two or three weeks, then I feel you are ignoring my daughter and me. I feel very hurt!”.

4.1.2. ANALYTICAL INTERPRETATION

Xin urged her mother to return to Germany, even briefly, arguing that continued absence signalled emotional indifference toward both Xin and Xin’s daughter. Her messages carried grief and urgency: a desire to preserve a form of intergenerational closeness she felt was slipping away. Her mother responded with moral certainty. Rejecting the charge of *yuxiao* (愚孝), she explained that her parents were frail, dependent, and without alternative care, describing herself as their “only lifeline” and framing her decision not as abandonment but as an ethical obligation. What emerges here is not simply a disagreement over caregiving arrangements, but a divergence in how responsibility is prioritised within a shared moral framework.

The force of this disagreement is rooted in Xin’s own formative experience of three-generation co-residence. Having grown up in a *sandaitongtang* (三代同堂) household

in Shanghai, where grandparents, parents, and children shared daily routines, child-care, and emotional life, Xin understands intergenerational closeness as something that is built through sustained co-presence and accumulated time. Consistent with scholarship that conceptualises the three-generation household as a moral-corporate kin community (Ikels, 2004; Liu, 2024; Yan, 2016), this arrangement functioned in her retrospective accounts as both a source of security and an ethical horizon, shaping her expectations of what intergenerational intimacy ought to entail.

Following migration, Xin and her parents attempted to preserve elements of this moral architecture across distance. Their arrangement — alternating three-month visits constrained by visa regulations — was experienced by Xin as a fragile but cumulative temporality, in which repeated short periods of co-presence might gradually consolidate into a meaningful relational foundation for her daughter. The sudden interruption of this rhythm, when her maternal grandparents became seriously ill, and her mother remained in Shanghai to provide eldercare, did not simply disrupt a practical arrangement. It unsettled the temporal conditions through which Xin believed intergenerational closeness could be realised, transforming absence into a perceived loss that could not be recovered.

This sense of loss becomes particularly visible in the WeChat exchange, where moral reasoning is articulated through contrasting discursive registers. Xin's invocation of *yuxiao* (愚孝) does not reject filial obligation; rather, it questions its proportionality. Drawing on a culturally embedded category of ethical critique, she reframes her mother's decision as an overextension of upward obligation at the expense of the child's time-sensitive need for relational formation. In doing so, she remains within the filial moral order while attempting to recalibrate how obligation should be distributed when temporal resources are limited (Liu, 2023; Qi, 2015).

Her mother's response, however, is grounded in a different temporal and moral logic. By emphasising her role as the "only lifeline" for her own parents, she situates eldercare within a temporality of urgency and irreversibility, in which responsibility toward ageing bodies takes precedence. This position resonates with long-standing formulations of the middle generation as a generational hinge oriented upward through care and accountability, particularly under conditions of vulnerability (Ikels, 2004; Liu, 2024; Yan, 2016). The disagreement between mother and daughter thus reflects not a rejection of shared values, but a divergence in how those values are temporally ordered.

Seen in this light, the conflict is structured through competing moral temporalities. Xin frames early childhood as a finite and irrecoverable horizon, within which intimacy must be cultivated gradually through presence, while her mother's perspective is organised around the urgency of ageing and the non-deferrable demands of eldercare. Each temporal horizon constitutes a legitimate ethical claim within the same normative framework, yet under conditions of transnational separation, these claims become mutually exclusive. The spatial distance that defines Xin's life in Germany makes it

impossible to synchronise these temporal demands, turning what might otherwise be manageable tensions into structurally constrained choices (Liu, 2023; Yeh et al., 2013).

Xin's use of *yuxiao* can therefore be understood as a reflexive attempt to renegotiate proportionality within filial morality under these conditions. The emotional strain she expresses is inseparable from processes of ethical reasoning, as responsibility is not only felt but articulated, justified, and contested in interaction. Kinship, in this sense, emerges as an evaluative and argumentative field rather than a fixed structure (Carsten, 2000; Sahlins, 2013). What this episode ultimately reveals is that filial morality remains a binding ethical horizon, but one whose enactment becomes partial, contested, and affectively charged in transnational contexts. For Xin, sustaining intergenerational relatedness across distance entails a form of transnational filial moral labour, in which commitment persists even as its full realisation becomes temporally fractured.

4.2. TEMPORAL CONTINUITY AND RELATIONAL PERSONHOOD

Bei is raising her two sons in Germany with her German husband, balancing motherhood, professional work, and further training. Unlike Xin, she was raised in a two-generation family in China, as both sets of grandparents had passed away before she was born. In later reflection, she understands this absence not as something felt in childhood, but as a missed intergenerational connection — an unrealised horizon of kinship that shaped her sense of what family life might have been.

In Germany, Bei seeks to cultivate a three-generation moral world for her children that she herself did not experience. She maintains close digital contact with her parents in China through frequent video calls that involve her sons, treating these interactions as a way to keep her grandparents present in everyday life. While her German parents-in-law visit only occasionally, she frames her engagement with her own parents as an effort to give her children a lived awareness of grandparental ties, sustaining intergenerational belonging across distance rather than co-residence.

4.2.1. EMPIRICAL EPISODE 2

Bei articulated this desire in explicitly cultural terms, noting at the beginning of the interview that “a person's life normally reaches three generations — grandparents, parents, children” (Bei, personal communication, September 20, 2023). The ideal of *sandaitongtang* (三代同堂), although not realised in her own life through co-residence, remains symbolically powerful.

Reflecting on her childhood, she explained that the absence of grandparents was not initially felt, but became meaningful later through comparison with others:

when I was young, I didn't feel anything about not having grandparents. But
when I grew older, listening to friends describe going to their grandmother's

house... I realised I don't have anything like that. I want my children to have that concept. (Bei, personal communication, September 20, 2023)

For Bei, what is missing is not only proximity but the experience of intergenerational connection. She expressed sadness that her children cannot grow up surrounded by grandparents, neither on the German side, who are distant and, as she put it, “not very close to children”, nor with her own parents, who remain emotionally close but geographically far away. As she repeated quietly, “It is such a pity” (Bei, personal communication, September 20, 2023).

In this context, regular communication becomes central. Bei emphasised that these interactions matter because she wants her children “to know they have grandparents” (Bei, personal communication, September 20, 2023). Her recent WeChat exchanges illustrate this ongoing effort, not only as expressions of care, but as practices through which she actively involves her sons in maintaining intergenerational relationships across distance (Figure 2 and Figure 3).

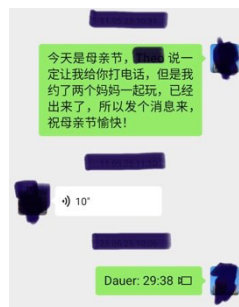


Figure 2. Mother's Day

Note. Translation: Bei: “Today is Mother's Day. Your grandson said I must call you, but I had already arranged to go out with two other mums, and I'm already out, so I'm sending a message instead. Happy Mother's Day!”.



Figure 3. Happy birthday to grandpa

Note. Translation: A short video clip is sent to Bei's father in China to celebrate his birthday. The video shows the two sons addressing their maternal grandfather, and it is accompanied by a written greeting, “Happy birthday to Grandpa”, followed by a brief voice reply from the grandfather.

4.2.2. ANALYTICAL INTERPRETATION

Bei's narrative articulates a conception of personhood that is grounded in relational continuity rather than individual autonomy. Her formulation that a life “normally reaches three generations” (Bei, personal communication, September 20, 2023) does not express

a demographic expectation; it invokes a moral ontology in which the person is positioned within an ethical and temporal chain linking grandparents, parents, and children. In this sense, the self is not imagined as a discrete entity, but as constituted through intergenerational embeddedness and reciprocal obligations across time. This understanding resonates with anthropological analyses of Chinese kinship that conceptualise personhood as realised through lineage, relational positioning, and moral reciprocity, rather than through autonomous individuality (Ikels, 2004; Liu, 2024; Yan, 2016). The ideal of *sandai-tongtang* (三代同堂) thus functions in Bei's discourse as a symbolic condensation of tri-generational moral personhood, even when co-residence cannot be achieved in practice.

Within this framework, the absence of grandparents in Bei's childhood is not narrated merely as the lack of caretakers or emotional companionship. Instead, it emerges retrospectively as the absence of one relational dimension of the moral self. She comes to recognise this absence not in the moment, but through comparison with peers whose life stories can be narrated through generational idioms and embodied memories of grandparental care. What is missing in her account is not simply intimacy but a recognisable position within a tri-generational moral world. It is precisely this absence to situate the self fully within an intergenerational continuum that she refuses to reproduce in her children's lives.

Her desire for her children "to have the concept of grandparents" (Bei, personal communication, September 20, 2023) is therefore not sentimental in orientation, but ontological in scope. It concerns the conditions under which a person comes to know themselves as belonging across generations as both the child of elders and the parent of future descendants. Even when co-presence and shared domestic life are impossible, she insists that the category "grandparent" must remain real. Without this, the child's moral position in the generational order would be incomplete, and their personhood insufficiently anchored in lineage-based relationality. The cultivation of this awareness, for Bei, is a practice of moral formation rather than the preservation of nostalgic attachment.

This perspective clarifies why the apparent ordinariness of the family's WeChat exchanges carries such moral weight. The habitual gestures of affection, greetings, birthday blessings, and fragments of everyday conversation do not compensate for physical absence at a practical level. Rather, they reproduce the generational positions through which persons become legible within this moral universe. Digital communication does not substitute for labour or co-residence; it substitutes for recognition, reinstating the elder's presence and sustaining the temporal chain that links children to grandparents across distance. In this sense, the present becomes a site of ethical labour, where continuity is maintained through communicative participation rather than proximity.

4.3. FILIAL REPRODUCTION ACROSS GENERATIONS

Yaya lives in Germany with her German husband and their teenage daughter. When her daughter was younger, Yaya's mother spent extended periods caring for her, both in

Germany and in China. Field notes highlight the importance Yaya places on involving her mother in her daughter's upbringing. As she explained, "I am alone here in Germany... what I can give my daughter is the opportunity to stay close to her grandmothers" (Yaya, personal communication, October 28, 2023). She described this relationship, built through shared time and care, as a central form of "family love".

These earlier periods of co-presence take on particular significance in Yaya's current situation. As an only child, she repeatedly expresses guilt about being unable to live near her mother, who now resides alone despite having devoted substantial time and effort to supporting her granddaughter. This sense of guilt reflects not only an emotional attachment but also a moral evaluation of her own position within an intergenerational chain of care. For Yaya, filial obligation is thus experienced through a temporal reversal: the care once provided by her mother establishes an enduring moral claim that cannot be fully reciprocated under conditions of distance. The resulting guilt is not incidental, but emerges from this asymmetry between past investment and present inability. In this sense, her experience reflects a broader transnational condition among China's only-child generation.

4.3.1. EMPIRICAL EPISODE 3

The WeChat exchange below between Yaya and her mother, recorded in the period leading up to Christmas, constitutes an emotional moment that illuminates the moral and discursive negotiation of intergenerational obligation in a transnational, only-child family (Figure 4).

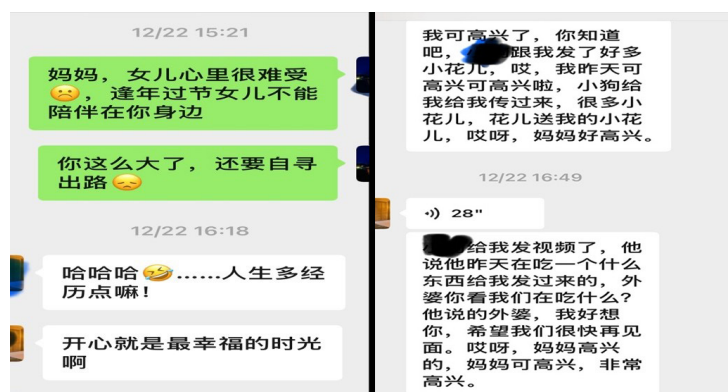


Figure 4. The little one sent me so many little flowers

Note. Translation: Yaya: "Mum, daughter's heart feels very sad 😞, during the holidays, your daughter still cannot accompany you by your side. You are already this age, yet still out there trying to find your own way in life 😞". / Yaya's mom: "Hahaha 😄... Life is about going through more experiences! Being happy — that is the happiest time in life". / Yaya's mom: "I am so happy, you know what, the little one sent me so many little flowers. Ah, yesterday I was really, really happy. The little one kept sending them to me, lots of little flowers, little flowers she gave to me. Mum is so happy, really very happy". / Yaya's mom: "The little one sent me a video. She said that yesterday he was eating something, sent a picture to me, saying: 'Waipo (Grandma), look, see what we're eating?'. She said: 'Grandma, I really miss you. I hope we can see each other again very soon'. I was so happy, really so very happy, extremely happy".

4.3.2. ANALYTICAL INTERPRETATION

Yaya's message is not merely an expression of homesickness or subjective distress; rather, it is articulated as a morally situated stance grounded in culturally embedded expectations surrounding filial conduct in Chinese kinship ethics. Her sense of guilt is oriented toward the fact that her mother is living alone in later life and continues to work and care for herself, a circumstance broadly perceived as incongruent with normative Chinese eldercare arrangements. In framing this situation as undesirable and socially unsettling, Yaya's messages index not only physical separation, but a perceived breach in normative co-presence, in which an ageing parent should ideally be accompanied, supported, and embedded within intergenerational proximity, an expectation closely aligned with what scholars have described as the continuing moral centrality of filial responsibility in Chinese family life (Yan, 2016).

This moral register is intensified by Yaya's positionality as a member of the only-child generation born between the 1980s and 2000s, for whom eldercare responsibility is effectively singularized rather than distributed across siblings. Her message thus performs a form of relational moral self-positioning: she aligns herself as the accountable actor while expressing affective self-reproach for being unable to enact expected forms of proximity, co-residence, and everyday support. In this configuration, her transnational mobility is discursively constructed as a condition that generates both opportunity and moral deficit, producing ambivalence within the terrain of filial responsibility — a dilemma widely documented among China's one-child generation, who experience both expanded life possibilities and intensified moral obligation toward parents (Fong, 2004).

The mother's response does not simply function as reassurance or emotional consolation. Instead, it enacts a strategic reframing of the moral terrain by shifting the interactional focus away from solitude and lack of care toward the enduring relational vitality of the grandmother-grandchild relationship. Her narrated happiness is articulated through accounts of the granddaughter's digital gestures, photographs, drawings, short videos, and affectionate voice messages, and is presented not as an autonomous emotional state but as a relationally curated stance. By foregrounding the child's mediated presence, the grandmother implicitly denies the image of solitary ageing, redefines accompaniment as emotionally rather than physically constituted, and repositions herself as socially connected rather than neglected. In doing so, she mitigates the culturally problematic status of an older woman living alone and reasserts her embeddedness within an active kinship field.

The episode marks a shift in footing from a dyadic mother-daughter frame toward a triadic, three-generation relational configuration, in which the granddaughter operates as an affective mediator through whom continuity, reciprocity, and care are enacted. Digital contact, in this sense, does not merely facilitate communication; it functions as a symbolic substitute for co-residential care and enables the three generations to reconcile normative expectations of filial presence with the lived realities of

transnational separation. The grandmother's narrative simultaneously reassures Yaya emotionally and morally legitimises her absence by demonstrating that intimacy and obligation continue to circulate through mediated intergenerational bonds. The positivity expressed in Yaya's mother's message is thus best understood as a form of discursive labour of optimism, oriented toward alleviating filial guilt while sustaining the moral coherence of the family.

Crucially, the strength and emotional resonance of the grandmother-grandchild relationship, which becomes so central in this exchange, are not incidental. It is deeply rooted in Yaya's earlier efforts, together with her mother, to ensure that her daughter spent extended periods of time with her grandmother during childhood, both in Germany and in the grandmother's home country. Through these periods of shared caregiving, co-presence, and intergenerational participation, Yaya actively created the conditions for the ethical and affective ideal of *tianlunzhile* (天伦之乐, intergenerational familial joy) to become experientially possible within a transnational life.

Although sustained temporal co-residence was not attainable, these relational investments enabled moments that approximate the moral imaginary of *chenghuanxixia* (承欢膝下, filial presence and embodied companionship at a parent's side), realised not through permanent proximity but through episodic togetherness and repeated return. The affective bond that now sustains intimacy across distance is anchored in these earlier encounters, in which grandmother and grandchild inhabited a shared temporal and emotional world.

In this sense, Yaya's facilitation of close contact between her mother and her daughter can itself be understood as a meaningful enactment of filial morality. Even where continuous physical accompaniment is not possible, she ensures that love, recognition, and moral reciprocity are transmitted across generations by cultivating a strong grandmother-grandchild relationship. The continuing digital exchanges between them and the emotional assurance they provide to Yaya's mother are therefore not merely compensatory practices of mediated intimacy, but contemporary expressions of filial emotional care shaped through triadic kinship relations, in which the ethical horizon of *tianlunzhile* (天伦之乐) endures as a lived, if partial, relational possibility.

5. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

This article has examined how Chinese migrant women married to German husbands and living in Germany continue to pursue, reinterpret, and sustain Chinese filial and intergenerational moral commitments within the normative framework of German nuclear-family life. Drawing on insights from moral anthropology, kinship theory, and contemporary scholarship on Chinese intergenerational relations, the analysis shows that filial piety does not disappear under migration nor retreat into the domain of sentiment. Rather, it persists as a binding ethical orientation and as a lived horizon of

obligation, affect, and accountability, even where its embodied forms are reconfigured by distance, welfare regimes, and competing temporal demands, a finding consistent with anthropological accounts of separation, obligation, and the continuing moral force of kinship in Chinese family life (Stafford, 2000).

Across the three cases, filial morality emerges not as a singular or uniform cultural script, but as a differentiated moral terrain in which women inhabit distinct positions within the intergenerational order and negotiate the limits and possibilities of care in different ways. In Xin's narrative, the impossibility of reconciling the temporality of ageing and illness with the fleeting horizon of early childhood produces acute moral tension. Her experience illustrates how migration can fracture the temporal logic of *sandaitongtang* (三代同堂) and generate feelings of grief, loss, and ethical insufficiency, even as filial obligation remains firmly recognised. The moral conflict in her account does not signal withdrawal from filial ethics, but rather the pain of inhabiting a moral world in which competing obligations cannot be simultaneously realised.

By contrast, Bei's account reveals a different moral configuration, centred less on rupture than on the generational ontology of personhood. Her reflections foreground the significance of belonging across three generational tiers, not only as a family arrangement but also as a way of knowing oneself within relational continuity. Her desire for her children "to have the concept of grandparents" speaks to the enduring force of *sandaitongtang* (三代同堂) as a symbolic and ethical formation, even when material co-presence is structurally unattainable. Distance-mediated caregiving, coordination, and digital everyday contact are not experienced by her as compensatory substitutes, but as meaningful participation in a tri-generational moral world within which she continues to occupy, and to transmit, the position of a daughter.

Yaya's case, finally, highlights the intergenerational labour required to make possible the ethical and affective ideals associated with *tianlunzhile* (天伦之乐) and *chenghuanxixia* (承欢膝下) under transnational conditions. Through her earlier facilitation of sustained contact and episodic co-presence between her mother and her daughter, Yaya laid the groundwork for a durable grandmother and grandchild bond to form. In the present, this bond sustains emotional well-being and moral reciprocity across distance. Here, filial morality is enacted not only in the daughter's relationship to her mother, but through the triadic relational field she actively nurtures. The moral project of *jinxiaodao* (尽孝道) is thus extended forward into the next generation, revealing the middle generation as a conduit through which intergenerational continuity, recognition, and ethical attachment are sustained, an intergenerational dynamic also observed in studies of transnational motherhood and emotionally mediated caregiving (Parreñas, 2005).

Taken together, these cases demonstrate that the contrast between Chinese three-generation kinship and German nuclear-family models cannot be reduced to differences in household structure. It lies rather in the distinct ethical logics that orient intergenerational life. The women in this study do not abandon these moral orientations

upon migration; they continue to live within them, albeit in fragmentary, negotiated, and at times painful ways. Their experiences show that the nuclear household does not constitute a closed or self-sufficient social unit. Instead, it remains embedded within transnational moral and affective networks that extend across generations and across borders, shaping subjectivity, responsibility, and emotional life.

The analysis further suggests that what migration disrupts is not only the organisation of care, but the temporal and ontological conditions through which relational personhood is constituted. The ideals of co-presence, genealogical continuity, and intergenerational joy are neither erased nor nostalgically preserved; they endure as moral possibilities, sometimes partially realised, sometimes deferred, sometimes painfully unattainable. The work these women undertake to sustain kinship across distance may thus be understood as a form of transnational filial moral labour, echoing findings that Chinese migrants continue to reinterpret and sustain filial obligations across borders (Tu, 2016). This is labour that is affective and ethical as much as practical, grounded in obligation yet permeated by aspiration, uncertainty, and ambivalence. In this sense, the study contributes to broader debates in kinship and migration research by demonstrating that filiality remains a powerful moral infrastructure within transnational family life, even when its enactment departs from classical forms of co-residence and proximity. It invites us to conceptualise Chinese migrant motherhood not merely as a site of cultural negotiation or adaptation, but as a space in which intergenerational ethics are actively reworked, sustained, and lived, often at high emotional cost, yet also with enduring moral commitment. Far from signalling a decline of filial morality, these women's narratives reveal its continued vitality as an ethical horizon that exceeds, complicates, and quietly unsettles the normative boundaries of the nuclear family in contemporary Germany. In doing so, this article strengthens the sociology of the family by reconceptualising families not as co-resident units, but as ethically organised, transnational relational fields sustained through enduring moral commitments. It contributes to migration studies by demonstrating that transnational family life is structured not only by mobility and care circulation, but by persistent moral infrastructures that continue to shape obligations, subjectivities, and intergenerational accountabilities across distance. Finally, it advances analyses of the temporal dimensions of social relations by showing how migration generates moral tensions through the misalignment of life-course temporalities, thereby repositioning time as a central analytical category in the study of kinship and transnational life.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Jiayin Li-Gottwald (李佳音) is a research fellow at Helmut Schmidt University in Hamburg, Germany. She is also Professor of People and Culture at Northern Business School, University of Applied Sciences, Germany. Her research interests include transnational migration, transnational families, artificial intelligence and cultural diversity, digital culture, and intercultural communication in both professional and private contexts. She is an expert in international cooperation between Europe and East Asia. Li-Gottwald holds a PhD. from the Department of Culture, Communication and Media at the Institute of Education, University College London, and is currently pursuing her habilitation qualification in Germany.

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9250-2483>

Email: kittyjl500@yahoo.co.uk

Address: Holstenhofweg 85, 22043 Hamburg, Germany

Submitted: 03/01/2026 | Accepted: 12/04/2026



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