

## “Parenting by Proxy”: Digital Intimacy in Chinese Families With Children in UK Boarding Schools

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### Abstract

This article examines how digital technologies mediate social ties and transnational family relationships within contemporary Chinese elite education migration. It focuses on families who send children, often from the age of 11, to prestigious British boarding schools, while the parents remain in China. For many families, overseas schooling is a long-term project oriented toward mobility, security, and social distinction. Yet physical separation introduces new emotional strains and asymmetries of dependence. Through WeChat calls, digital homework platforms, shared academic monitoring, and regular visits, parents sustain what I term “parenting by proxy”: a form of digitally mediated intimacy that combines affection, anxiety, and oversight. Digital infrastructures embed parents in their children’s daily routines, enabling them to monitor academic progress, advise on friendships, and guide everyday decisions despite geographic distance. Within the boarding school environment, but through a globally connected network of actors, who act as intermediaries, translating parental expectations into institutional norms of independence and self-management. The school becomes a site in which autonomy is cultivated but remains digitally permeable to familial authority. Rather than weakening kinship, distance redistributes care across screens, platforms, and proxy actors. Drawing on ethnographic research conducted between 2021 and 2023 among families, students, private tutors, and guardians, the article introduces the analytical concept of “parenting by proxy” to capture this migration experience and the reconfiguration of family connections amid long-term separation. I examine how digital mediation reconfigures parental responsibility. I argue that distance and outsourced care are managed through digital communication, institutional discipline, and kinship expectations, reshaping parental care and authority across space. Transnational family life, therefore, is constituted not by absence but by mediated presence as intimacy, obligation, and authority are continuously renegotiated across borders.

### Keywords

China; digital intimacy; elite education migration; kinship; transnational family life

## 1. Born “Elite,” Digital, and Transnational

It is 10 pm in Beijing as I close my laptop after finishing an online lesson with Elsa. We started these tutoring sessions two years ago and she has barely missed a class. Ten years old, she appears on my screen each week from her bedroom in northern China, her English workbooks neatly arranged beside her tablet. Behind her, shelves stacked with exam-preparation textbooks frame the scene. There is also a camera on the wall behind her that is monitored by her parents from the living room, to check whether she is listening to the class. She suppresses a yawn but insists that she is “not tired.” Next year, she will leave for a boarding school in England. “I want to get into my dream school,” she tells me with cautious confidence, echoing the language of the Shanghai-based education agency coordinating her application.

Her parents sometimes appear on the motion-tracking iPad screen, and I sense their constant presence. After each lesson, they request detailed progress reports aligned with the entrance examinations, interview performance, and school expectations. How hard-working and creative does she appear? How advanced are her reading and critical thinking skills? Which abilities are most valued at her future school? These repeated inquiries are not merely informational; they constitute a form of affective labour through which care, anxiety, and aspiration are continuously performed and managed.

Like many children in similar elite education-migration trajectories, Elsa is positioned as “born elite” based on parental decisions about international-track education, leading to prestigious independent boarding schools in the UK, made even before her birth. These processes highlight how, years before Elsa physically leaves China, her migration is already digitally and globally organised. Her mother participates in multiple WeChat parent groups dedicated to British boarding school admissions, in which families exchange screenshots of acceptance letters, discuss guardianship arrangements, and compare their children’s trajectories. Through these platforms, separation is anticipated, monitored, and morally negotiated long before it occurs. Although Elsa is still based in China, her life is already oriented elsewhere. Migration, in this sense, begins digitally.

As I observed, similar questions will be asked after Elsa arrives at her new school in the UK. Parents will continue to inquire about her progress, not only asking Elsa herself, but also her teachers, housemistress, private tutors, and education consultants in China who mediate between the school and the family. Digital communication enables a continuous circulation of updates, evaluations, and reassurance, transforming distance into a space of intensified monitoring and sustained affective engagement.

This article examines how digital technologies mediate transnational social ties and reconfigure forms of connectedness within Chinese elite education migration. The central tension for these families lies in how digital mediation reconfigures parental responsibility: How can children cultivate independence while remaining within moral guidance? What does it mean to be a “transnational child” in a family when care is fractured across space, yet continuously enacted through digital platforms? I contend that transnational family life is defined not by absence, but by mediated presence as intimacy, obligation, and authority are continually renegotiated across borders. Drawing primarily on multi-sited ethnographic research conducted both online and in person between 2021 and 2023 as part of my doctoral project, I focus on children sent at the age of 11 to independent boarding schools in the UK while their parents remain in China. In addition, since first moving to Shanghai in 2010, I have observed the educational migration trajectories of hundreds of urban middle- and upper-middle-class students. I therefore draw on long-term participant observation

conducted in Shanghai (2010–2019) and online (2019–present), including research at an elite educational consultancy, where I worked as a tutor. The consultancy served as a key site for observing how educational migration, elite aspirations, and transnational family practices are organised through private educational infrastructures and digital communication.

Contributing to scholarship on mobilities and digitally mediated social ties, this article argues that elite education migration produces not a weakening but a reconfiguration of kinship authority. Rather than functioning as a neutral bridge across borders, digital connection operates as a relational technology that reshapes autonomy, dependence, and belonging. Although spatially dispersed, transnational family life remains infrastructurally embedded, governed through digital dynamics that recalibrate proximity and obligation.

By tracing how asymmetrical relationships are sustained and negotiated across distance, I show that elite education migration is maintained through “parenting by proxy” and “transnational neo-familism”: intertwined processes that transform distance into a site of intensified care, surveillance, and moral negotiation. Situating these dynamics within broader debates on digital mediation and mobility, this article demonstrates how technological infrastructures reconfigure kinship, obligation, and belonging in transnational family life.

My article contributes to ongoing debates on the rising digitalisation of transnationalism. In China’s platform-saturated social worlds, the nation-state remains a significant regulatory and symbolic framework; however, cross-border family life is increasingly structured through digital infrastructures of connection, governance, and emotional management. I show how intimacy, authority, and aspiration are reorganised through platform regimes that operate alongside, across, and sometimes beyond national boundaries. Attending to these dynamics suggests that contemporary transnational family life is not only spatially dispersed but also infrastructurally embedded, as digital architectures reconfigure proximity, obligation, and belonging.

The research combines participant observation, informal conversations, and semi-structured interviews with educational consultants, school leaders, and former GoAp staff in both China and the UK. The core ethnographic material, however, derives from long-term relationships with four affluent Shanghai-based families whom I initially met through tutoring and consultancy work between 2012 and 2015. Over time, our interactions extended beyond formal educational settings into homes, restaurants, playgrounds, and family gatherings, enabling insight into everyday family life and parenting practices.

The participating families were entrepreneurial upper-middle-class households pursuing elite overseas education for their children, primarily in the UK. As I was not a member of closed, invitation-only WeChat parent groups, I draw instead on observations from public WeChat posts (“Moments”), my participants’ accounts of their digital communication practices, and existing academic research. This includes the widely circulated 2017 WeChat post, “A monthly salary of 30,000 yuan is not enough for my child’s summer vacation,” which contemporary China researcher Ponzini (2020) discusses in relation to families’ investment in elite education. I also engage with P. Wang et al. (2024) on parents navigating educational anxiety through WeChat groups, and with Beck’s (2022) analysis of “how WeChat simultaneously serves to perpetuate anxiety while also providing mothers with a platform to conceive counternarratives” (p. 191) within the

Chinese diaspora. Together, these sources illuminate how care, authority, and intimacy are maintained and negotiated across borders through mediated forms of transnational parenting.

By exploring how transnational kinship, digital communication, and institutional structures interact to shape care, control, and belonging across distance, I conceptualise these arrangements as “parenting by proxy,” a digitally mediated configuration of transnational family life sustained across distance through technological infrastructures and intermediary actors. Among the many indicators of this form of parenting in social practice, four are particularly central to the concept of “parenting by proxy”: (a) the delegation of parental authority to tutors, guardians, consultants, and school staff; (b) continuous digital monitoring through WeChat, school apps, dashboards, and messaging platforms; (c) the maintenance of affective intimacy despite physical separation through routines of mediated co-presence and constant communication; and (d) the reproduction of elite aspirations through classed digital and educational infrastructures that only affluent families can sustain. Together, these indicators show how parental care, authority, and emotional presence are redistributed across technological platforms and intermediary actors rather than diminished by distance.

The lens of “parenting by proxy” helps capture a contemporary condition of transnational family life characterised by hyperconnectivity, ambient monitoring, platform-mediated intimacy, and outsourced emotional labour among globally mobile elites. This aligns with, and drives the mechanisms of, what I refer to as “transnational neo-familism,” in which parenting becomes a moral project sustained collectively across borders by parents, grandparents, siblings, and intermediary actors. Children are “parachuted” (Ong, 1999; Zhou, 1998) into the UK from the age of 11, yet remain continuously embedded within family life through smart technologies and mediated forms of supervision. In this configuration, children are simultaneously cherished and burdened: protected through constant monitoring, while also being tasked with carrying familial aspirations. Through digital communication, parents remain deeply involved in their children’s daily routines despite geographical distance, producing forms of connection that sustain both intimacy and surveillance.

Recent literature on transnationalism has examined different forms of “being together while being separated.” While Dalakoglou’s (2010) notion of “proxy presence” helps explain how migrants maintain a symbolic and social presence in their home communities despite physical absence, my case differs in significant ways. In the context of my research, parental presence is not delegated to material objects (such as houses purchased while living abroad) but continuously reproduced through digital communication, educational infrastructures, and everyday practices of monitoring and care.

Suárez-Orozco et al.’s (2002) work on immigrant family separation and reunification is particularly important for understanding the emotional consequences of migration-related separation. However, their framework does not fully capture the digitally mediated and institutionally distributed forms of parenting examined here. Their focus is primarily on rupture, attachment disruption, and the challenges of reunification, whereas “parenting by proxy” describes a condition in which parental authority, care, and emotional presence are continuously sustained across distance through platforms, tutors, guardians, school staff, and education agents. In this context, separation does not produce absence in any straightforward sense. Rather, it generates a mediated form of presence that sustains intimacy while simultaneously intensifying surveillance, comparison, and anxiety.

Similarly, Baldassar and Merla's (2014) concept of "care circulation" provides an important framework for understanding how transnational families maintain emotional connection, reciprocity, and co-presence across distance. Yet their framework does not fully account for the institutionalised and technologically-mediated delegation of parental authority that characterises elite educational migration. Their analysis privileges the circulation of care within kinship networks, whereas "parenting by proxy" draws attention to the redistribution of parenting itself across digital infrastructures. In this configuration, parenting is not merely maintained through care and communication; it is reorganised through regimes of surveillance, discipline, emotional oversight, and classed educational aspiration.

Boccagni's (2012) account of transnational motherhood likewise highlights the emotional ambivalence of parenting at a distance, particularly the tension between affective commitment and the perceived inadequacy of long-distance care. However, his framework remains centred on migrant mothers' attempts to compensate for absence through remittances, communication, and hopes of reunification. It does not fully capture the digitally saturated and institutionally delegated forms of parenting examined here, where parental authority is not simply weakened by distance but redistributed across platforms and intermediary actors.

Importantly, the concept also has analytical portability beyond the specific case of Chinese elite education migration. It may be applied to contexts such as "study mothers" and "parachute children," migrant professional families, platform-based parenting, digital family life, and potentially even future forms of AI-mediated caregiving. The term "proxy" is particularly productive because it operates on multiple levels simultaneously: proxy caregivers who translate parental expectations into institutional norms of discipline, independence, and academic achievement; a proxy presence through digital co-presence; proxy intimacy, in which screens substitute for embodied closeness; proxy authority enacted remotely through mediated discipline; and proxy parenting as a classed infrastructure sustained through economic and technological resources.

Platforms such as WeChat and digital homework systems enable parents to remain embedded in children's everyday routines despite geographic separation, rendering intimacy inseparable from practices of monitoring, evaluation, and emotional oversight. Parenting is therefore redistributed across screens, institutions, and transnational networks in ways that sustain the perception of uninterrupted familial connection while simultaneously intensifying anxiety, comparison, and moral pressure. Although elite boarding schools cultivate autonomy and self-management, children remain digitally tethered to familial authority through continuous communication and mediated feedback. Digital infrastructures thus do not simply bridge distance; they reorganise it into a site of intensified care, surveillance, emotional labour, and moral negotiation, demonstrating that parenting is not weakened through separation but instead reconfigured through technologically-mediated continuity.

Elite boarding schools in the UK, among other benefits such as an entry to the global elite through globally accepted education credentials and social connections, promise independence through the experience of growing up in a foreign country without the physical presence of close family members. Yet the students' phones carry nightly messages from parents, tutors, and online networks that travel with them across borders, who check in regularly to see how they are doing emotionally and academically. Using Gershon's concept of "porous social orders" (2019), I describe this condition as "porous enclosure." Boarding schools, as gated communities, are materially bounded spaces that cultivate discipline and autonomy, yet remain

digitally permeable to familial authority and transnational attachment. Thus, physical distance does not sever intimacy; rather, digital connectivity allows separation without detachment.

Family members often shared their struggles with distance, describing how they missed one another on a daily basis. To understand why such arrangements are sustained despite this emotional strain, I extend Yan's (2009) concept of neo-familism into a transnational context. Yan argues that post-socialist transformations in China have redistributed responsibility for risk management and social reproduction onto families, intensifying moral obligations toward the "treasured child," who becomes the family's central moral project and around whom aspirations for future stability and success are organised.

I consider how this intensified focus on the child and their educational credentials places significant pressure on them. The child may be perceived as "spoilt," yet simultaneously carries the burden of securing success for the entire family. It is this "transnational neo-familism" that drives elite education migration strategies. Building on Yan's framework, I suggest that contemporary education migration reflects a transnational extension of post-reform familial values.

At the same time, overseas schooling functions not merely as a strategy of social mobility, but as an ethical project embedded in an intergenerational process in which the child's well-being is central and the family remains the primary site of care and security. Decisions about separation, schooling, and mobility are framed as acts of sacrifice and care, justified through aspirations for present well-being, social distinction, and future security which digital communication facilitates. Extending Yan's classic concept, I call this configuration "transnational neo-familism": a moral project sustained between parents, grandparents, and siblings in China and children "parachuted" into the UK.

Through this affective turn within migration strategies there emerges a paradox of aspiration: Although elite educational pathways abroad are perceived to serve the interests of the entire family and to secure the child's well-being and future success, distant parenting simultaneously transforms the meanings of care, belonging, and authority in transnational family life. Digital communication thus aims to compensate for this paradox and alleviate anxieties.

## 2. WeChat as Emotional Infrastructure

Active groups on WeChat, the most widely used social media platform among local and diaspora Chinese and actors in the global education-migration infrastructure, play a crucial role in sustaining this emergent affective economy. These digital communities function as emotional infrastructures that absorb and circulate the moral consequences of migration. For instance, many parents exchange stories of children's burnout, breakdowns, and fragile recoveries; they share examples from popular psychology books, links to mindfulness podcasts, and screenshots of therapy recommendations. Through these interactions, they collectively reframe distress as a normal, even necessary, component of "raising a global child."

Within the boarding school ecosystem, teachers and guardians in the UK, education consultancy agents in China, and globally dispersed online tutors act as intermediaries who translate parental expectations into institutional norms of discipline and independence. They monitor children's academic progress and well-being, relay updates across borders, and sustain parental oversight at a distance. While this arrangement maintains everyday transnational connections, it also generates heightened anxiety for both parents and children.

On the one hand, separation intensifies parental fears of relational weakening and diminished influence over their child's future trajectory. Digital communication sustains connection, yet it may also strain parent-child relationships, as children experience frustration under forms of remote moral supervision. Messaging applications, platform-based updates, and mediated reports enable constant oversight, producing emotional ambivalence: love expressed through distance, care intertwined with control.

On the other hand, this dynamic reveals a deeper paradox. Families often remove children from what they perceive as the dehumanising pressures of educational competition in China, only to place them within a qualitatively different, yet equally demanding, educational and social environment in the UK. In a context in which educational aspiration is oriented toward certainty, stability, and future security, digitally enhanced productivity, parents checking in daily about academic progress and urging greater effort, and constant connectivity intensify moral dilemmas about what constitutes "good" parenting and the "best" education. Digital connection thus simultaneously sustains and strains transnational family ties, exposing the unresolved tension at the heart of contemporary elite mobility projects.

These same digital networks can also amplify anxiety. Advice chains move quickly from empathy to prescription, from compassion to comparison. When one parent confesses that her son has begun therapy for depression, another counters with her daughter's resilience as evidence of proper parenting. In this way, emotional sharing becomes moral judgment. The boundary between care and competition blurs, mirroring the broader dynamic of social involution (内卷; Liu, 2021; Q. Wang & Ge, 2020), the growing self-awareness of the pointlessness of an arms race of affective competence and its consequent feeling of burnout.

This ambivalence reveals the double-edged character of a digital community. On the one hand, WeChat groups enable mutual recognition among parents who feel isolated by geography and secrecy. On the other, they reproduce the hierarchies of performance that propel families into the migration system in the first place. Infrastructures designed to sustain solidarity ultimately extend circuits of pressure: not only for children, but for parents themselves.

### 3. Institutional Mediation and Remote Care

Sending children alone to UK boarding schools generates heightened anxiety for both parents and children. Separation intensifies parental fears that emotional bonds may weaken and that their influence over their child's future trajectory may diminish. For many families, education is not only an individual project, but a collective one: The child's achievements accrue prestige to the family and open pathways into global social networks. The perceived financial, emotional, and reputational stakes heighten the urgency of maintaining oversight.

This dynamic is especially pronounced in the context of migration, which unfolds as a long-term family project. Overseas schooling is framed as a strategy to secure the child's well-being and future success by removing them from a hypercompetitive education system, while simultaneously enhancing the family's social status through the child's achievements. Parents coordinate this project through a global team of education-migration actors, who collectively mediate care, discipline, and aspiration across borders.

Digital communication sustains connection, yet it also transforms it. WeChat calls, mediated updates from educational staff, and constant messaging enable forms of remote moral supervision. Children often experience this as intrusive or frustrating, particularly as schools promote autonomy and independence. The result is emotional ambivalence—emotions expressed through distance; care intertwined with control.

#### 4. The Moral Dilemma of Global(ised) Aspiration

In a context where educational aspirations are oriented toward certainty, stability, and future security, education migration is imagined as a pathway that promises both present well-being and the concerted cultivation of a future elite, an attempt to secure advantage in an unpredictable world. Yet digitally enhanced productivity and constant connectivity intensify moral dilemmas around what constitutes the “best” education and the “best” form of parenting.

As Froerer argues in her recent work on education, aspiration, and social mobility among marginalised Adivasi (tribal) youth in rural India, “education simultaneously represents a strategy for mobility and a tangible risk, whose transformative potential is far from guaranteed” (Froerer, 2026, p. 104). This ambivalence is not confined to marginalised contexts, nor is it unique to Chinese elites. Across social classes and cultural settings, education operates as both promise and gamble, an investment saturated with hope while shadowed by uncertainty.

Digitally enhanced education amplifies this condition. Learning through apps, global tutors, and platform-based systems extends opportunity while simultaneously expanding the terrain of comparison, evaluation, and responsibility. Rather than stabilising aspiration by offering guarantees for future success, digital infrastructures intensify its precariousness, multiplying the points at which success can be measured, judged, and found wanting.

#### 5. Digital Tools and the Extension of the Familiar

Preparation for elite UK boarding schools begins years before formal applications, sometimes even before a child is born. One father recalled selecting an international kindergarten while his wife was still pregnant: “We already knew that our child would go abroad. That was never a question.” Overseas education was imagined as a carefully engineered plan.

From early childhood, children are enrolled in international kindergartens and British-style primary schools. Parents hired foreign tutors to cultivate not only English language proficiency but also accent, classroom behaviour, and confidence in communicating and learning through “Western” pedagogical norms (especially critical and creative thinking skills and debating). Summers in the UK or the US further normalised these orientations. Preparation was described as “getting used to the Western system” (not just through globally accepted exams) long before departure, so that adjustment to a new system abroad would be smoother.

Digital tools were central to this process of normalisation. Many students studied online with UK-based tutors months or even years before physically relocating. Crucially, these relationships often continued after the move. Several children told me that they still met the same tutor online once enrolled at boarding school

in the UK. The platform changed little; the faces on the screen remained familiar. One student explained, “Even when I moved, my tutor didn’t change. So, it didn’t feel completely new.”

In this sense, digital education provides continuity between home and the new environment. Children are already globally connected long before relocating, studying with tutors based in the UK and online across the world. Parents also use similar digital apps to communicate with the teachers while the child is in China and after they move to the UK. In China, as one mother once put it, laughing ironically:

I’m constantly checking my phones for updates on Ding Talk (钉钉) from the school and what we have to do. I wanted to have a digital detox for a month, but I can’t do that even for a day!

Once the child moves abroad, parents communicate with the UK school through the education consultancy that uses WeChat, so the familiarity of the digital, accelerated dynamic continues, but on a global scale.

However, despite more than a decade of preparation for overseas boarding, psychological adjustment remains fraught. Among the Chinese international students I came to know through my research in the UK, as well as local students who experienced long-term boarding, narratives of psychological struggle are now more openly discussed, as some recent literature also mentions (Duffell, 2000; Schaverien, 2015). I heard numerous accounts of homesickness, anxiety attacks, insomnia, and eating disorders, which also circulate widely on Chinese-language social media and within guardianship networks. British schools, increasingly attentive to safeguarding obligations, have expanded counselling provision and introduced mindfulness training. Yet, extensive preparation does not eliminate vulnerability; if anything, it heightens the emotional stakes of success and adaptation.

For many students, however, these forms of institutional care remain culturally unfamiliar. As one student put it:

Sometimes we want to talk about our problems, homesickness or conflicts with parents or friends. Or living in a foreign country. Even though there are counsellors at the school and there is no language barrier, they don’t have a transnational experience and they don’t really understand us Chinese students.

This points to the longer-term consequences of outsourcing parental responsibility through early family separation, and highlights both the limits of institutional care and the marginalisation of children’s voices within transnational education arrangements.

Regular digital check-ins softened geographical separation. Parents in China continued to monitor homework, exchange messages with tutors, and receive updates through familiar platforms, even after their children passed through the physical gates of British boarding schools. Time zones were negotiated through late-night calls and early-morning messages. One mother described watching her daughter’s progress online from Shanghai: “I want to still see what she is doing.” The digital interface extended parental presence across borders.

Familiarity was reinforced not only academically but socially. Children consumed the same social media content before and after migration, continuing to follow the same influencers while in the UK, watching the same short videos, participating in the same global youth culture online. Several students described feeling “already connected” to life abroad because their digital worlds had long transcended national boundaries. The move to the UK was spatial, but their online sociality had already been transnational.

When students arrived at their boarding schools, they encountered digital platforms for assignments, reporting, and communication that operated through similar logics to those they had used in China: homework uploaded online, feedback delivered digitally, performance tracked through dashboards. The technological environment did not feel foreign. As one student put it, “It works the same way.”

Digital tools thus produced continuity across borders: Students encountered academic, relational, and affective continuity. The gates of elite boarding schools were materially real, yet digitally porous. Tutors remained globally reachable. Parents remained informed. Peers in China remained accessible through social media feeds on Red Note (小红书, similar to Instagram), Douyin (抖音, the Chinese TikTok), and WeChat. Migration, then, did not sever connections; instead, it reorganised them through platforms.

For these families, digital tools transform migration into extension rather than interruption. Children study with the same tutors before and after relocation. Parents maintain regular affective check-ins across time zones. Academic systems operate through familiar interfaces, while social media cultures remain shared. The future abroad is rehearsed daily on screens at home. Mobility, in this sense, is experienced as continuous because its infrastructures are continuous. The unfamiliar is rendered familiar in advance through platforms, relationships, and constant digital presence. The boarding school may stand behind gates, but digitally, it is already within reach.

At the same time, this continuity was inseparable from regimes of monitoring and optimisation. Parents described constant notifications and the pressure to respond immediately. Care took the form of surveillance; intimacy became dehumanised control at a distance, enacted through proxies. To monitor was to love, to check was to protect. The same systems that provided reassurance also intensified responsibility and comparison. Performance was visible at all times.

This infrastructural continuity is not accidental. As Latour (1991) argues, social worlds are stabilised through networks of human and technological actors. Xiang and Lindquist (2018) similarly suggest that migration is organised through infrastructures that precede and structure movement. In the lives of these families, educational and digital infrastructures were assembled transnationally before departure. What migrated was not only the child, but also a pre-existing alignment of tutors, platforms, evaluative standards, and mediated relationships.

Importantly, this assemblage is class-based (Liu-Farrer, 2016). Maintaining the same tutors across borders, enrolling in elite schools both in China and the UK, purchasing consultancy services, and sustaining high-speed digital connectivity require substantial economic resources. The smoothness of transition, the sense of familiarity rather than rupture, is produced through sustained investment. Digital continuity becomes a form of capital that cushions mobility and renders elite integration as natural.

Overall, digital infrastructures do not merely accompany mobility; they pre-structure it. By sustaining the same tutors, platforms, communicative rhythms, and peer cultures across borders, they transform elite migration from rupture into managed continuity. This manufactured familiarity, affectively reassuring yet disciplinarily intensive, is itself a form of capital, available only to those who can afford its economic and temporal costs. The smoothness of transnational transition, therefore, is not natural, but is instead infrastructurally produced, revealing how digital continuity functions as a quiet yet powerful mechanism of elite reproduction.

## 6. Digital Tools and an Immersive Experience at a Gated Community

One of the primary reasons that parents gave for sending their children to boarding school at an early age was the promise of “immersion” in British and international culture. Immersion was imagined as transformative: linguistic fluency, cultural ease, independence, and distance from what several parents described as the intensity of Chinese schooling and parental oversight. Yet this immersion was never intended as permanent detachment. Most parents anticipated that their children would eventually return to China, whether after university or later, and thus needed to remain, as some of my research participants put it, “comfortable,” “confident,” and “know[ing] the culture” in both worlds.

Immersion therefore unfolded within a layered dynamic of digital attachments. While children relocated to the UK, their parents largely remained in China. Children travelled home during half-term breaks, at Christmas, and especially for the summer holidays, often for extended stays. Physical distance was sustained, but digital proximity remained constant.

Digital media did more than preserve family contact; it maintained continuity. Students followed Chinese social media platforms, consumed the same online content as peers at home, and participated in ongoing linguistic and cultural exchanges. Several told me they felt “up to date” with trends in China despite living abroad. This sustained familiarity was viewed by parents as strategic: Keeping children connected to Chinese language, humour, popular culture, and social norms would ease eventual readjustment. Mobility was framed not as exit, but as a temporary extension.

Boarding schools presented themselves as spaces of structured independence: functioning through regimented routines, communal living, monitored study hours, and pastoral care systems. Students were expected to navigate schedules, free time, friendships, and academic work with increasing autonomy. At the same time, parental authority did not disappear; it was recalibrated through screens. Regular digital contact reintroduced familiar hierarchies. Several boarding staff observed that some students avoided calls after receiving poor grades, anticipating anger or disappointment from afar. Others described children temporarily refusing communication, expressing resentment or a sense of abandonment. As one housemistress explained, noting that frequent WeChat contact could hinder adjustment, “The mother calls and sometimes children don’t want to talk to them. They are too upset that they have to be here alone.”

This dynamic resonates with Madianou’s concept of “ambient co-presence” (2016, p. 183), developed in her work on transnational Filipino families. She describes a form of low-intensity yet continuous awareness made possible through ubiquitous social media and mobile connectivity. Rather than relying solely on direct interaction, family members remain peripherally attuned to one another’s daily rhythms through notifications, feeds, and updates. Such constant, often subtle, awareness can generate reassurance and emotional closeness, but it also enables new forms of surveillance and moral evaluation.

A similar condition emerges in elite education migration. Parents in China do not communicate with their children only at scheduled moments; they remain loosely yet persistently aware of their academic performance, moods, and social lives through school apps, WeChat updates, tutor reports, and digital messages. Immersion therefore unfolds within a condition of ambient parental presence.

In this sense, WeChat operates not merely as a tool of communication, but as an infrastructure of social life, embedded in everyday labour, family practices, and social organisation. As X. Wang (2016) argues in *Social Media in Industrial China*, digital media are not “virtual” supplements to offline life, but are structuring its conditions. Based on fieldwork among migrant workers in southeast China, X. Wang describes a “second migration”: a movement from offline to online worlds. This shift is not simply metaphorical. Rather, it reflects the convergence of two transformative processes, through which online spaces come to provide a sense of dwelling and belonging for those who otherwise feel displaced.

Similarly, for transnationally mobile students, digital infrastructures do not merely connect two locations; they reshape the experience of presence itself. Immersion abroad remains partial. Online communication sustains Chinese-language interaction and preserves affective dynamics from home. The very distance intended to foster independence is softened, and at times complicated, by constant connectivity. As one staff member remarked, “These children are here, but not entirely here.” Another noted, half-jokingly, that “sometimes we have to ‘discipline’ the parents to call less.”

Yet immersion was also vividly real and positive. Many of the students I spoke to described their much-anticipated time in England through romantic images of castle-like buildings reminiscent of Hogwarts, chapel bells, regimented daily routines, and a close-knit community. They evoked expansive green fields, quiet towns, and an atmosphere that felt both cinematic and contained, an aestheticised imaginary of Britain that is shaped as much by global cultural references as by institutional branding.

They emphasised what they perceived as more relaxed hierarchies with their teachers and boarding school staff: first-name exchanges, shared meals, and small everyday intimacies such as a housemaster’s dog wandering through the common room. Boarding school life, enclosed behind gates and somewhat removed from everyday British society, was often described as safe, cohesive, and aspirational. In contrast to the digitally saturated, carefully monitored transnational family life that preceded and accompanied their departure, the boarding school appeared as a bounded pastoral world that was rhythmic, face-to-face, and seemingly self-contained. Many students missed home deeply, yet also appreciated being away from what they called “strict parental eyes,” even as those eyes remained present through screens. One of my research participants, Christy, while she was 15, at one point told me, lowering her voice, that her parents still expected perfect scores, keeping an eye on her across the boarding school gates when they came to visit and online across from China.

Digital connection complicates this transformation. On the one hand, WeChat calls and messaging sustain emotional bonds and mitigate loneliness, potentially buffering against long-term psychological distress associated with early separation. On the other hand, digital communication reintroduces the authority structures the move abroad was partly designed to loosen. Local tutors in China continued to supervise work remotely; parents monitored grades and offered to correct their work from afar. Another contradiction surfaced poignantly in a conversation with students I spoke to who were studying at UK boarding schools.

They described how their daily timetable, filled with music lessons, sports training, language study, and exam preparation, did not feel that different from life in China.

Parents closely monitor grades, league tables, and UCAS (Universities and Colleges Admissions Service) outcomes from afar and exert pressure on the children through WeChat conversations: As one mother said, “We don’t want to make the mistake of not helping them succeed in the UK.” The remark captured both an awareness of the costs of early separation and an unresolved belief that international education remains necessary, even as policies aimed at reducing involution struggle to contain its everyday reproduction. The immersive “British boarding school environment” was therefore never fully sealed.

The immersive experience, then, is neither purely national nor fully enclosed. It operates within a porous enclosure. The boarding school is materially bounded, gated, regimented, and spatially distinct, yet digitally permeable. Through daily messages, shared tutors, grade monitoring, and social media feeds, familial authority, linguistic habits, and cultural familiarity traverse its boundaries.

This porosity does not negate immersion; it reshapes it. Students learn independence within an environment that remains digitally tethered to home. They inhabit British institutional routines while continuing to participate in Chinese familial expectations and cultural life. The enclosure produces safety, cohesion, and elite socialisation, but its permeability ensures that transformation is negotiated rather than absolute.

If digital infrastructures pre-assemble familiarity before migration, they also sustain continuity after arrival, preserving cultural fluency for anticipated return while softening separation in the present. Elite transnational mobility is thus organised not through rupture, but through carefully managed thresholds: immersion without severance, distance without disconnection.

## 7. “Transnational Neo-Familism” in the Digital Era

Despite the intensity of digital connectivity, many parents insisted that technology could not replace physical closeness. “Video calls are not the same as being together,” one mother told me. Their reflections resonate with long-standing work on attachment and embodied presence. For instance, Montagu’s (1986) work on the significance of touch emphasises the physiological and psychological need for tactile contact, while attachment theory underscores the importance of proximity in cultivating security. Screens can transmit voice and image, but they cannot reproduce touch.

This tension becomes particularly acute within contemporary Chinese neo-familism, where the child is positioned as the moral and emotional centre of family life. Intensive parental involvement in education is not merely aspirational, but is also normative. Success is collective; responsibility is shared. Early overseas boarding, however, requires physical separation at precisely the stage when neo-familial intimacy is culturally heightened.

Here, neo-familism intersects directly with what I have described as “porous enclosure.” The boarding school is spatially bounded, designed to cultivate independence through routine, discipline, and communal life. Yet its enclosure is permeable. Parental voices travel through phones; expectations circulate through messages; tutors continue online across time zones. The child resides within the institutional microcosm of

British boarding, but remains embedded in familial oversight and affective obligation. Homework can be checked remotely; grades monitored instantly; emotional states assessed through late-night video calls. The child's relocation does not dissolve parental authority, but instead reorganises it.

Digital mediation thus resolves and reproduces a contradiction. It allows elite families to pursue transnational mobility, a strategy of making the best choice for future success, without fully relinquishing proximity. At the same time, it intensifies monitoring. To remain connected becomes a moral imperative. One parent remarked, "If I don't check every day, I feel I am not doing my duty. And I also think I miss out on their lives and our time together." In this sense, care becomes inseparable from surveillance.

This arrangement is not neutral: It reflects an invested capacity to sustain both distance and connection. Maintaining daily international communication, coordinating private tutors across borders, and ensuring technologically-mediated oversight requires economic resources, temporal flexibility, and sustained emotional and organisational labour. Elite mobility depends not only on the ability to send a child abroad, but on the capacity to remain digitally present afterwards.

At the same time, digital transnationalism introduces new anxieties. Parents distinguished between "productive" platforms, school-sanctioned apps and tutoring systems, and the broader online environment, which they associated with gaming, inappropriate content, and peer influence beyond their supervision. As public debates increasingly warn that excessive screen time may undermine children's well-being (Haidt, 2024), children were perceived as both more reachable and more exposed. The digital extension of neo-familial care thus expanded the terrain of perceived risk.

"Transnational neo-familism" in the digital era therefore does not necessarily weaken family bonds; it "technologises" them. Physical absence is compensated for through intensified communication, and emotional attachment is maintained through screens while authority persists across borders. The result is a family form that stretches rather than breaks, sustained through infrastructures that make elite mobility appear compatible with intimate parental involvement.

If "porous enclosure" describes the institutional condition of elite boarding schools, then "transnational neo-familism" describes its affective foundation. Digital tools enable separation without severing intimacy, and immersion in a new environment without full detachment. Elite mobility, in this sense, is not a departure from family centrality, but its reconfiguration through technologically mediated continuity.

## 8. Reimagining the Global: Digitalism and the Reshaping of UK-Bound Mobility

In conversations with children and parents, it became clear that overseas education was rarely imagined as a permanent departure. Rather, there was a strong and explicit need to sustain connections with China, which was increasingly described as a "good place," perceived as safer and, despite economic slowdown, still more stable than "other countries." Parents repeatedly emphasised that their children must not "lose the China connection" while abroad. Many arranged supplementary lessons in Mandarin, Chinese history, literature, and essay writing (both in Chinese and English) to ensure linguistic fluency and cultural competence were maintained. As one parent explained, "They must be able to integrate again into a Chinese company and work with Chinese colleagues and teams when they come back."

Overseas education was thus framed as a strategic long-term plan rather than exit. The child's mobility was future-oriented and hypermobile, as imaginaries of their future job, travels, and social connections were extended globally, while maintaining familiarity with Chinese culture, language, and professional norms was considered essential for eventual reintegration.

Therefore, what some education consultants previously described as the “honeymoon period,” when the UK (along with the US) was regarded as the ultimate educational destination, appears to be waning. Until the late 2010s, education-migration was widely imagined as a pathway to the “good life,” with Britain occupying a privileged symbolic position and student numbers steadily rising from the early 2010s (Boarding Schools' Association & Connexcel, 2023). According to the Independent Schools Council (2025) report, mainland Chinese students whose parents live overseas constituted by far the largest group of non-British pupils at UK boarding schools in 2025, numbering 10,959. The second-largest group came from Hong Kong, with 7,226 students, out of a total of 61,750 non-British pupils (Independent Schools Council, 2025). Although applications from mainland China to the UK dropped sharply during the Covid-19 pandemic, in my conversations with families in China I increasingly heard reluctance to separate from children at such a young age, often as early as 11. A mother explained their decision to delay overseas study for a 10-year-old child:

My second child will go to England at a later stage. Or they may not go at all! I can't bear the thought of having all my children abroad. I want to keep the family together longer. And we have lessons available here too. Maybe it's enough to go just for Sixth Form, to prepare for A levels.

Among my participants, the fading allure of the UK was attributed not only to structural constraints, such as tightening immigration regimes, but also to everyday affective disappointments: complaints about food, climate, and social life, as well as, significantly, parental regret over early family separation.

More importantly, the decline of the imaginary of the UK coincides with a diversification of what counts as “international.” Families increasingly map aspirations onto a regional geography of prestige in which Singapore, Japan, Hong Kong, and other Asian hubs emerge as alternative centres of global schooling. Simultaneously, the growing concentration of Chinese students in UK selective schools is perceived by some parents as diluting the promise of cultural immersion. If elite institutions no longer reflect an imagined British social world, the symbolic value of “going abroad” as a transformative encounter weakens.

This shift signals a rescaling of aspiration from transnational mobility toward what might be described as “global but China-oriented”: destinations that offer English-medium education, safety, and international credentials without the emotional and logistical costs of long-distance separation.

One key driver of this reorientation is the rapid rise of Chinese-style international schools (CSIS; Probert, 2024), which align closely with Chinese cultural values while maintaining international accreditation. These institutions often loosen *hukou*-based access restrictions (state schools in China admit students based on their *hukou*, the location-based household registration system; see Kipnis, 2011) and create “abroad-path” tracks within China itself. As market competition intensifies, long-term study in the UK appears less necessary. For many families, overseas education becomes a shorter, targeted investment, frequently limited to sixth form as preparation for university, rather than a prolonged formative relocation.

In this context, nationalist discourses resonate strongly. China is increasingly reimagined not as a place to leave behind, but as stable, culturally coherent, and comparatively secure in an unpredictable global environment. For many families, remaining physically together for longer becomes desirable, even if educational credentials remain internationally oriented.

Digital infrastructures play a crucial role in this recalibration. Global online tutoring, transnational school platforms, and constant communication reduce the perceived necessity of early and prolonged physical relocation. Educational capital can be accumulated across borders without fully crossing them. As a result, families are able to delay departure, shorten periods abroad, or strategically time mobility around key examination stages. Mobility itself is being reorganised: Long-term migration gives way to shorter, targeted, and reversible movements. The global is no longer synonymous with distance; it is increasingly assembled through digitally mediated proximity.

## 9. Conclusion

This article examined how digital technologies mediate Chinese elite education migration to UK boarding schools and reconfigure kinship, care, and belonging across borders. Following children “parachuted” to the UK at the age of 11 and families who remain in China, I have shown that separation does not weaken parenting so much as reorganise it through platforms, institutions, and intermediary actors. What I term “parenting by proxy” describes a digitally enabled assemblage in which tutors, guardians, school staff, and education agents translate parental expectations into everyday educational and pastoral practices, while platforms such as WeChat sustain continuous oversight, reassurance, and evaluation. Distance, in this sense, is not simply an absence to be bridged, but a condition actively managed through infrastructures of connection.

At the centre of these arrangements lies a tension between the boarding school’s promise of autonomy and the persistence of familial authority across distance. Drawing on Gershon’s notion of porous social orders, I have characterised elite boarding as a porous enclosure: an institutional world designed to cultivate independence, yet digitally permeable to parental presence and transnational attachment. Digital connectivity enables what might be described as “separation without detachment,” softening rupture while intensifying surveillance, responsibility, and emotional labour.

Extending Yan’s concept of “neo-familism” into a transnational context, I have argued that these practices are sustained by a moral economy in which the child becomes the central ethical project of intergenerational life. Thus, “parenting by proxy” reflects more than technological transformation alone. It emerges from “transnational neo-familism,” in which parental and grandparental obligations, aspirations, and anxieties are stretched across borders and maintained through continuous digital mediation. The infrastructures that make overseas education possible simultaneously sustain intimacy and intensify pressure, generating what I have called the “paradox of aspiration.”

Finally, the article has situated these dynamics within a broader reshaping of UK-bound mobility. As the symbolic dominance of the UK becomes less taken-for-granted and China-based international schooling expands, digital infrastructures increasingly reduce the perceived necessity of prolonged physical relocation. The “global” is no longer experienced solely through distance and departure, but through digitally-mediated proximity. Contemporary elite education migration, therefore, should be understood less as rupture than as an infrastructurally produced continuity: class-based, technologised, and morally-driven.

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## About the Author

**Andrea Szinay-Kis** is a research associate in the Department of Social Anthropology at the University of Sussex. She lived and worked in Shanghai between 2010 and 2019, and her doctoral research drew on longitudinal ethnography (2021–2023) to examine global education-migration infrastructures, with a particular focus on elite private tutoring and transnational Chinese families who send their children to UK boarding schools. Building on Yan Yunxiang’s (2009) concept of “neo-familism,” she develops the notion of “transnational neo-familism” to trace how family values and socio-cultural processes circulate across borders, and to analyse the everyday tensions between individual aspirations and collective family obligations that are intensified by transnational mobility. Her current research explores processes of social and infrastructural involution, focusing on how families engage with digital educational technologies in domestic settings and how these engagements reshape state–individual and parent–child relationships, practices of self-making, and competing moral values.