Chronotopic (non)modernity in translocal mobile messaging among Chinese migrants in the UK

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Migration is often seen as crossing both space and time, from the traditional past to the modern present, while leading to perceived changes in migrants themselves. This article draws on data from a large ethnographic project to explore the ways in which Chinese translocal families dispersed between China, Hong Kong and the UK exploit mobile messaging apps to negotiate the post-migration value of Chinese-ness and Chinese tradition in geographically dispersed family and social contexts. Drawing on the concept of the *mobile chronotope,* we show how Chinese families and friends employ textual and multimodal resources to negotiate *mobile chronotopes of (non)modernity* in translocal mobile messaging interactions. Our discourse analysis focuses on critical junctures at which modernist chronotopic negotiations are most visible. The article contributes to an understanding of the discursive construction of multiple (non)modernities by showing how migrants (re)position themselves along a gradient of chronotopic modernity in everyday mobile messaging encounters.

Keywords: chronotope, ethnography, migration, mobile communication, modernity

1. Introduction

Migration is often perceived as crossing from the traditional past of the ancestors to the modern present (Koven 2015). At the same time, migration is seen as causing a perceived progressive change in those who migrated, particularly by the families left behind in the home countries. Through the process of migrating, migrants become self-consciously more modern as migration provides them with the potential to free themselves – at least partially – from the ties of the social conventions and values of their home cultures. This post-migration process of reinventing the self is seen as transforming the human subject, “disabused of earlier errors and abstracted from the constraints of former social entanglements” (Keane 2002: 67). A move abroad leads to the migrants being positioned as external to their home realities, the cause-effect of which is unclear, with either the move being a result of a feeling of ill-belonging in the home country or the post-migration outsider status. In either of these cases, however, migrants face the difficult task of navigating their relationships to both the sending and the receiving countries. Rather than homeland-related nostalgia, present-day migrants focus on the “potentialities” offered by migration, which Tsagarousianou (2004: 58) describes as “the various creative possibilities opened by the activities of diasporas in both local and transnational contexts”. In other words, migrants look forwards in seeking to establish their new identities, embracing both their homeland past and their migrant present. This is reflected in the understanding of migration in terms of translocal connectivity, rather than mobility, and an analytical emphasis on migrant engagement in new transnational spaces of experience (Morley 2000).

The importance of both time and space in the construction of the post-migration individual, as well as the necessity to orient themselves to a number of distinct realities, suggest that it might be productive to look at their experience and the resultant negotiation of (non)modernity through the lens of polycentricity (Blommaert 2010) and chronotopic identities (e.g., Dick 2010; Koven and Simões Marques 2015; Li and Juffermans 2015; Blommaert and de Fina 2017). In contrast to the evolutionist framework which sees certain groups as inherently more modern than others, cultural anthropologists recognise the existence of multiple modernities, which are constructed at a local level by the participants themselves. It is the individuals who define their own chronotopic self-placement (Agha 2007) in relation to tradition and the distinction between their past and their migrant lives. The relevant time frames, spatial realms and images of persons and activities that constitute the chronotopic self-placements of social actors, do not occur in isolation but in sets of dynamically co-constituted contrasts, with modern and nonmodern chronotopes constructed alongside each other as dynamic and context-dependent positions (Bauman and Briggs 2003).

In this paper, we bring together constructed (non)modernity and chronotopic understandings of translocal experience in the context of Chinese migrants to the UK. We focus on the relationships they maintain through mobile messaging via WeChat and WhatsApp with their home countries and social networks, and discuss the value they assign to (non)modern selves in their polycentric post-migration context.

2. Modernity

Adopting a person-centered understanding of modernity, we hold that it is individuals who self-consciously construct images of modern selves, which are not by default based on an etic understanding of what constitutes modernity. In the process of constituting modern selves, these individuals cast other people or certain spatio-temporal realities as nonmodern, creating a binary of modern vs nonmodern. It is important to state explicitly that our understanding of modernity is not influenced by modernization theory, whereby the underdeveloped world is represented as a "present-day past" of rurality, while the developed world is treated as a "present-day future" of urbanity (Koven and Simões Marques 2015). Following from this, it is not our claim that migrants always traverse from a less advanced to a more advanced country. Instead, modernity is associated with the migrants' openness to a previously unknown world and their freedom to form judgements about these different realities. In this understanding of modernity, the self is seen as abstracted from material and social entanglements (Berman 1982; Taylor 1989). The subject who aspires to modernity in this way seeks to act as the source of their own authority. This means that they should not be constrained by external influences but live according to internally accepted values, following the principle of sincerity in speech and deeds and exercising their free choice to pursue whatever actions they wish (Keane 2002).

Following Keane (2002), we treat modernity as a term of self-description, which stresses such features as the privilege accorded the individual's agency, inwardness, and freedom; the possibility for individual self-creation irrespective of social positioning; and a historical selfconsciousness that places a high value on social and individual change, in contrast to a relatively devalued “tradition”. Tradition is often seen as existing in opposition to the modern, as unchangeable, restricted, stifled (Papastergiadis 1998: 7) and inherently linked to a particular place. Modernity, on the other hand, is associated with mobility, openness of perspective and the priority of reason over prejudice (Morley 2000: 42). This binary view of modernity and tradition (or modernity and nonmodernity) is, however, misleading, and does not take into account the polycentric reality in which people establish their modernist identities.

Tradition itself is rarely static, but rather flexible and adaptable to new circumstances (Blank and Howard 2013), which saves it from becoming irrelevant or obsolete, a feature that has been identified across cultural and religious contexts (Tibi 2000; Noonan 2005), including in China (Sun 2014). It is also often included in definitions of the modern and “intimately intertwined” with modernist and post-modernist discourses, as in the case of religious beliefs and rituals, where the traditional is associated with purity and the new with corrupting key values (Selka 2007: 6). Modernity does not require a complete loss of a sense of belonging, nor a complete abstraction of the surrounding world of systems, beliefs, and other persons, but a construction of a new sense of belonging in the context of changing circumstances. The tension between striving for abstraction – of freeing oneself from cultural, social and material ties – and the unavoidability of such ties remains. It is clearly visible in the actions and individual choices made by migrants in our study. The multiple temporal and spatial links established and maintained throughout their life trajectories are embedded in the translocal contexts relevant for each individual, with their historicity weaved into current communicative behaviours (Blommaert 2015: 108).

3. Polycentricity in translocal migrant contexts

In the era of global mobility and “intensification of worldwide social relations” (Rubdy and Alsagoff 2014: 2), transnational relocation has become increasingly popular. The ease of international travel and communication has led also to the possibility of migrants’ maintaining close relationships with family members left behind. Studies of geographically dispersed families, including those from the Chinese diaspora, have explored how digital technologies remediate and extend parenting practices (Madianou and Miller 2012; Madianou 2016; Chen 2019), facilitate multigenerational family connections across geographical locations (Kang 2012; Zhou and Xiao 2016; Share, Williams and Kerrins 2018), and enable the co-construction of intimate family spaces for geographically dispersed households (Sukunawa 2014; Zhao X. 2019), all of which are framed as interactional achievements using technologically mediated communication. In a globalised world, families are no longer seen as geographically co-located, but as dispersed units, linked by sharedness of backgrounds and practices (Chan 1997; Ryan 2011). Migration is rarely associated with a complete disconnection, or abstraction, from the pre-migration life, including family and friendship networks, personal beliefs and social positionings. Geographical mobility is therefore characterised by the need to position oneself, in social and family contexts as well as more publicly, with relation to both the host and the home realities.

From the perspective of transnational polycentricity (Blommaert 2010), mobility affects the way in which social actors construct meanings, and themselves as coherent moral personae, using a range of available semiotic resources. Bakhtin's (1981) notion of the chronotope – a socially conditioned configuration of time and space, which reflects and determines the historical, biographical, and social relations within a given interactive context – has proven useful in conceptualising this complex relationship between co-existing realities (Karimzad and Catedral 2018). For example, Koven and Simões Marques (2015) discuss the ways in which variously positioned groups orient to different representations of a stylized Portuguese migrant in France, noting that the versions of a modern/nonmodern contrast co-exist and enter relationships with each other (and see Dick 2010). The imagined world of migrant life leads to speakers reproducing or challenging social inequalities and constructing themselves as particular gendered and classed personae. The need to position themselves in terms of homeland morality emerges also in interviews with transnational migrant women, who discursively manage multiple time-spaces in an attempt to justify their choices and present themselves as moral actors in the context of migration (Catedral 2018; and see Karimzad 2016). In our study, we explore the role that mobile technology can play in shaping how Chinese migrants in the UK position themselves chronotopically towards their multiple realities.

4. Mobile communication and the mobile chronotope

The development of mobile communications technologies since the turn of the twenty-first century has facilitated and shaped the migration experience, including for Chinese migrants (Sun 2002; Sun and Yu 2016). Communications technology enables migrants to keep in touch with their home countries, whilst also establishing local networks and setting up new post-migration lives (Vertovec 2004). The affordances of mobile phones enable instantaneous and synchronous communication between individuals (person-to-person rather than household-to-household) often while they are engaged in other offline activities. Frequent communication on the move can influence the relationship between time and space in mobile communications (Georgakopoulou 2015). This in turn has implications for social ties: the practice of keeping in constant contact can increase feelings of social proximity and intimacy, whilst enabling those back home to gain a window into migrants' everyday lives (Madianou and Miller 2012; Lyons and Tagg 2019). The fluidity of time-space arrangements in mobile interactions is evident in the observation that mobile messaging apps can be exploited not only for recreating speech-like synchronous interactions but also for their asynchronicity and permanence, whereby users can read and respond to messages at their own convenience, sometimes hours or days after a message was sent (Tagg and Lyons 2018).

In the virtual disembodied space of a mobile messaging interaction, interactants work to discursively contextualise their utterances. Physical and other contexts are not irrelevant, but must be brought into the virtual conversation and made relevant by interactants seeking to negotiate a shared understanding. Elsewhere we conceptualise this process in terms of the *mobile chronotope* (Lyons and Tagg 2019), defined as the socially conditioned configuration of time and space within largely text-based virtual exchanges, exemplified by mobile-phone messaging through apps such as WhatsApp and WeChat (used respectively by our Hong Kong and mainland China participants). The construction of mobile chronotopes is influenced by the fact that mobile messaging is always embedded in the immediate physical contexts of the interactants, while providing a window into the chronotopic context of the other and thus opening up the possibility of the co-existence of competing chronotopic references within a single exchange. Similarly to other chronotopes, mobile chronotopes are co-constructed by interactants through the discursive choices they make as they draw on selected aspects of their communicative contexts. They also share with other chronotopes a fluidity in their role as communicative resources in achieving social goals. The concept of the mobile chronotope helps us gain a better understanding of how communicative norms are negotiated across temporal and spatial distance and how complex chronotopic self-placements are formed at the intersection of multiple contexts through which participants process and make sense of their online social encounters.

5. Context, data and methodology

5.1 The Chinese context: migration and cultural values

While only a small proportion of Chinese people live outside Chinese territory, by the twenty-first century Chinese diasporic communities “truly were ‘scattered’ around the world” (Skeldon 2003:52; cf. Latham and Wu 2013: 17). Contemporary patterns of migration chime with traditional assumptions in China that no Chinese person would ever leave permanently but would always “travel as a sojourner” (Skeldon 2003: 52), maintaining ties with their homeland and not seeking to integrate into the receiving country (Liu-Farrer 2016: 508).

Chinese migration is typically conceptualised into waves, the most recent of which involve increasingly skilled and affluent professionals as well as students (Latham and Wu 2013; Liu-Farrer 2016). Census figures for Birmingham, UK, reflect these wider historical trends in Chinese migration patterns. People of Chinese heritage started living in Birmingham around 1911, although they did not settle in significant numbers until the 1960s (Blackledge, Creese and Hu 2015). Although by 1991 migrants to Birmingham from Hong Kong outnumbered migrants from mainland China by three to one, by 2011 there were more migrants from mainland China in Birmingham than from Hong Kong. The participants in our study all worked in or near a city centre district of Birmingham called Ladywood. In the 1980s, the area was redeveloped as “China Town”, and is today home to a number of Chinese restaurants and supermarkets, as well as casinos, betting shops, and Chinese churches. In 2011, census records show that 2155 residents (7.2%) of the ward categorized themselves as ethnically “Chinese”, and Chinese language speakers outnumbered speakers of all languages other than English (the census notes 165 speakers of “Mandarin”, 145 “Cantonese” and 1251 “All other Chinese”) (Blackledge, Creese and Hu 2015). Although these figures point towards the wider ethnic and linguistic context in which our participants work, it should not be assumed that all share the same experiences of migration or settlement in Birmingham. While most Chinese migration to the UK is economic in nature (Latham and Wu 2013:12), the Chinese migrant community includes individuals with various migration motivations, as well as different educational and socioeconomic profiles (Li 2015: 5). As Latham and Wu (2013) point out, Chinese migration trajectories and settlement patterns have diversified since the 1990s, with many wealthier migrants eschewing established Chinese communities in favour of new neighbourhoods and social networks (cf. Ma 2003).

Migrants bring to their host countries the cultural values into which they have been socialised and which themselves are open to change through contact with other cultures. Many traditional Chinese cultural values, influenced by the teachings of Confucius, Buddhism and Taoism, centre around the importance of collectivist living, including family loyalty, respect for elders, social integration, tradition, commitment to others and a lack of self-centredness (Hofstede 1980; Triandis 1995). Collectivist cultural values have been shown to have an impact on lifestyle and ways of thinking, including for example Chinese people's response to health and illness (Chen 2001; Burrows Simpson 2003) and to seeking medical help (Lin et al. 1991; Tabora and Flaskerud 1997). Such cultural stereotypes must be taken with caution – not least because Chinese migrants have often been portrayed as being highly adaptable to local conditions, with practices combining both the traditional and the new (Ma 2003: 29) – and more recent changes acknowledged. On the one hand, developments in communications technologies might be seen as strengthening links with homeland traditions and values (Zhou et al. 2019); on the other, recent economic and social changes in China appear to be effecting a shift towards individualistic and materialistic values (Xiao and Kim 2009).

5.2 Data and methodology

Our analysis focuses on mobile messaging carried out by Chinese-heritage migrants to Birmingham, UK, between 2014 and 2018. Data was collected as part of a large ethnographic project, "Translation and Translanguaging: investigating linguistic and cultural transformations in superdiverse wards in four UK cities",[1] which explored the communication practices of migrants working and living in UK cities (including Chinese migrants in Birmingham). Four key participants were selected (Table 1) on the basis that they spoke a "Chinese language" (in practice, varieties of either Mandarin or Cantonese) and had migrated to the UK from mainland China or Hong Kong. The participants were observed and audio-recorded at work over three months, before being given audio recorders to record domestic and social interactions. Mobile messaging data (Table 1) were collected as part of this "home data" stage. The use of WeChat (or *Weixin*) by the two participants from mainland China reflects the mobile phone app's ubiquity in China and among Chinese overseas (Harwitt 2016; Zhang and Wang 2019), helping maintain transnational family ties and heritage language practices (Zhao and Flewitt 2019). Importantly for our participants' identity positioning, WeChat facilitates the use of Chinese characters alongside emoji and other multimodal resources (Zhao and Flewitt, 2019; Sandel et al. 2020), as evidenced in our data.

Mobile messaging data were mainly collected as screenshots of participants' phones. In some cases, mobile messaging log data and attached photos were automatically downloaded and in these cases, we worked with the textual data rather than screenshots. They were translated by the project research fellow Rachel Hu, a Mandarin speaker from mainland China with experience of translating between Mandarin and English, who drew on her rich contextual knowledge of the participants.[2]

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[1] AHRC *Translation and Translanguaging: Investigating Linguistic and Cultural Transformations in Superdiverse Wards in Four UK Cities, 2014-2018.* (AH/L007096/1). Angela Creese (PI). With CIs Mike Baynham, Adrian Blackledge, Frances Rock, Lisa Goodson, Li Wei, James Simpson, Caroline Tagg, Zhu Hua.

[2] Although we agreed with these key participants not to anonymise their identities, the names of their interlocutors (friends and family) have been changed.

Table 1. Participants and data

Participant	Occupation	Language background	Digital data source	No. screenshots	No. messages
Joanne	Advice and Advocacy officer at Chinese Community Centre (CCC)	(standard) Mandarin speaker from north-east China, also speaks Cantonese and English, and has picked up Hakka Chinese from CCC users.	WeChat	323	1825
Kang (and Meiyen)	Butcher, Birmingham city centre market	Minnen Chinese dialect and Mandarin speaker from south China, also speaks Cantonese (which his wife speaks) and some English	WeChat	90	550
Winnie	Customer experience assistant, Library of Birmingham	Cantonese speaker from Hong Kong, speaks Mandarin and English	WhatsApp and SMS	51 (15 SMS+ 36 WhatsApp)	540 (40 SMS, 500 WhatsApp messages)
Joe	Hair and beauty salon manager, Birmingham	Cantonese speaker from Hong Kong whose strongest language is now English, understands Mandarin	WhatsApp and SMS	135 (19 SMS and 116 WhatsApp)	851 (133 SMS and 718 WhatsApp)

As evident in Table 1, our participants come either from mainland China or from Hong Kong, both of which are part of what has become known by some as "Greater China" (Harding 1993). However, the "common Chinese front" often maintained by ethnic Chinese migrants (Skeldon 2003: 62) should not belie the cultural, political and social heterogeneity that these diverse backgrounds entail (Knowles 2017; Zhou et al. 2019). Research from before the British handover of Hong Kong to China suggests, for example, that Hong Kong political culture is more democratic and pluralist than that emanating from Beijing, and their popular culture more individualistic and materialistic (Harding 1993); and that Chinese living in Hong Kong lack a strong sense of belonging or permanence and live instead in the short-term (Baker 1993). Nonetheless, Hong Kong can be described as a largely ethnically homogenous society, of which 92% self-identify as ethnically Chinese.[3] Like Knowles (2017: 458), we acknowledge the diversities present within terms like "Chinese" although it is beyond the scope of our paper to fully engage with them.

Our four participants had distinct backgrounds and migration trajectories, which shaped their orientation to traditional Chinese values and the ways in which they positioned themselves vis-a-vis both their adopted country and their homeland with its associated traditions. We present the participant profiles in the relevant analysis section, as their backgrounds are crucial in understanding their current-day social media practices.

Our observations regarding the ways in which our participants positioned themselves vis-a-vis British customs and Chinese traditions emerged as part of our wider study of chronotopic arrangements in the mobile messaging dataset, and in particular how these are explicitly contested and (re)negotiated at critical junctures (Lyons and Tagg 2019). These negotiations were explored through a moment-by-moment discourse analysis which focused on a range of linguistic and multimodal resources and was informed by our wider understanding of relevant social, cultural and political contexts, gleaned through our ethnographic research. Our methodology enables us to explore not only how chronotopic identities are performed in interview, but how these are maintained and reconfigured in everyday encounters mediated by mobile technology. Throughout our analysis, we refer to project reports to support our observations (Blackledge, Creese and Hu 2015; 2016; 2017; 2018). For the purpose of this article, we selected one representative exchange per participant to illustrate their negotiation of (non)modernity.

6. Analysis

6.1 Joanne (advisor, Chinese Community Centre)

Joanne, an Advice and Advocacy Officer at the Chinese Community Centre Birmingham (CCCB) who was born and raised in Shenyang, Liaoning Province, China, exploits the affordances of WeChat to actively position herself within a nonmodern chronotope of Chinese traditional thinking around the issues of nutrition and health. Joanne moved to the UK after university in China, where she met her husband (originally from Hong Kong). Joanne's account of her move to the UK reflects a belief in personal independence, with migration seen as liberating from family dependence: "you become more independent, more determined, and make tough decisions for yourself" (Blackledge Creese and Hu 2017: 13). She acknowledged that migration had shaped her orientation towards family in positive ways: "you appreciate it a lot more when you go home, when you see your family you realise you need to treat them much better than before".

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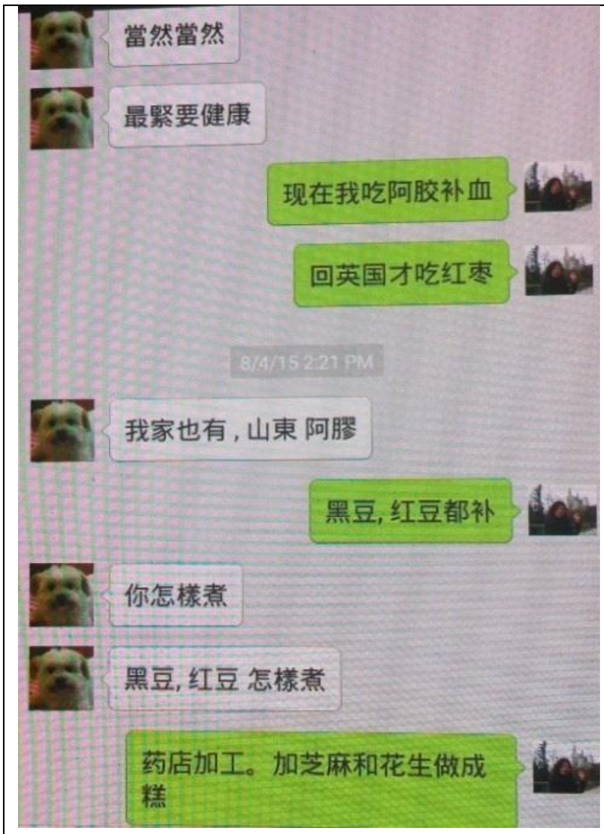
[3] See https://www.bycensus2016.gov.hk/data/16bc-main-results.pdf (accessed 6 December 2018).

In her construction of self, Joanne appears to value tradition and to see traditional ideals as an inherent part of her post-migration (modern) identity. Her orientation to Chinese cultural traditions comes across most strongly in her concern with health, which revolves around traditional Chinese beliefs that harmony between the body and its natural environment is central to maintaining health (Chen 2001: 270), and that certain foods enable a body to achieve equilibrium. Diet is an inherent part of traditional Chinese ideas about health (Kang 1984) and continues to shape people's responses to illness (Burrows Simpson 2003).

Joanne keeps in regular contact with friends and family members in China through WeChat. Below, we focus on her interactions with Kathy, a former colleague at CCCB and her good friend. Kathy is a Cantonese speaker from Hong Kong who is some twenty years younger than Joanne and now lives in Hong Kong with her family. The pair's sociocultural and migratory backgrounds explain their occasional use of English-language resources in their WeChat interactions.

Throughout her mobile interactions with Kathy, Joanne positions herself as an expert on traditional Chinese dietary concerns who is engaged in passing on traditional knowledge. This is likely sanctioned by her greater age and by her mainland Chinese origin (which sanctions certain regional knowledge). In Figure 1, for example, Joanne recommends EJiao (阿胶), a traditional Chinese medicine ingredient considered in China to be good for females, in particular after an operation or giving birth, as it nourishes the blood (Pan 2004). Note that Kathy uses traditional "complicated" Chinese script while Joanne uses the simplified system. The two scripts are mutually intelligible (we noted a similar trans-scripting practice between Mandarin-speaking Kang and his Cantonese-speaking customers).

 當然當然 最緊要健康 现在我吃阿胶补血 回英国才吃红枣 8/4/15 2:21 PM 我家也有，山東 阿膠 黑豆, 红豆都补 你怎樣煮 黑豆, 红豆 怎樣煮 药店加工。加芝麻和花生做成糕	K: [Sure sure] K: [Good health is the most important] S: <Currently I'm taking EJiao to nourish my blood > S: <only have (Chinese) dates when back in the UK> 8/4/15 2:21 PM K: [I have EJiao at home as well, EJiao from Shangdong (Province)] S: <black beans, red beans are both nourishing> K: [how do you cook them?] K: [black beans, red beans, how to cook them?] S: <(Chinese) herbal medicine shops will process it. Sesame and peanut are added to turn it into cakes.>

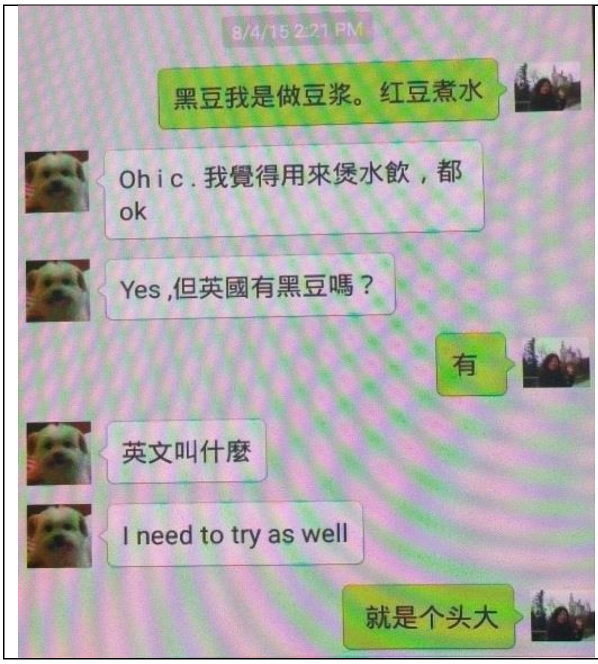
 8/4/15 2:21 PM 黑豆我是做豆浆。红豆煮水 Oh i c . 我覺得用來煲水飲，都 ok Yes ,但英國有黑豆嗎？ 有 英文叫什麼 I need to try as well 就是个头大	8/4/15 2:21 PM S: < I turn the black beans into soya milk. Red beans are boiled in water to make soup.> K: Oh I see. [I think if cooked in water to make soup, both are] ok K: Yes, [but are there black beans in the UK?] S: <There are> K: [What is it called in English?] K: I need to try as well S: < It's such a bother)>

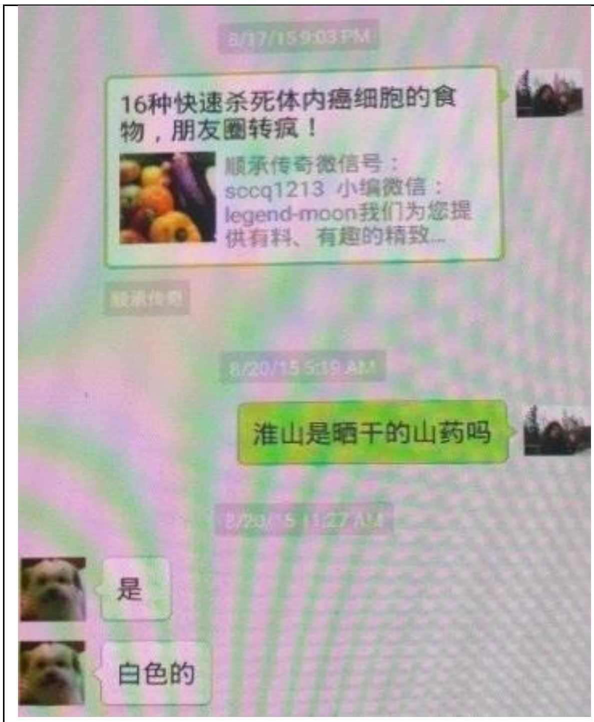
Figure 1. Joanne and Kathy (1) (traditional Chinese script in square brackets, simplified Chinese script in angled brackets)

In this extract, Joanne's expertise is conveyed through statements of fact ("black beans, red beans are both nourishing") and accounts of her own practice ("I'm taking EJiao (阿胶) to nourish my blood"). Kathy accepts her position as novice within the participation framework established by their shared chronotope, aligning with Joanne's belief in the benefits of EJiao (

阿胶) and acknowledging Joanne’s greater expertise with her question “how do you cook it”. Joanne confirms Kathy’s position as the less experienced interactant by suggesting she take EJiao (阿胶) to the local herbal shops to be “processed” rather than cooking it herself.

References to other aspects of their physical realities challenge their co-constructed chronotopic space, fostering intra-interactional chronotopic shifts aimed at highlighting Joanne’s distance from the physical context of their home country. Joanne admits that she uses Chinese dates in the UK where both EJiao (阿胶) and Chinese herbal shops are difficult to find. Kathy aligns with this chronotopic shift when she questions whether Joanne has access to black beans in the UK. Kathy’s subsequent acceptance that she will try Joanne’s suggested remedy repositions her former colleague as expert within the Chinese nonmodern chronotope. Interestingly, Kathy chooses to express this alignment in English, a language that both interactants shared in Birmingham and which still constitutes Joanne’s everyday linguistic reality. Given this shift in chronotopic arrangements, Joanne’s expertise is now predicated less on her Chinese authority and more on the pair’s existing relationship and shared history in the UK.

In another chronotopic shift, as the two go on to discuss Chinese yam (“shanyao”) and the herb made from dried yam (“huaishan”) (Figure 2), Kathy takes on the role of specialist in Hong Kong cooking styles. This role is granted by Joanne, who asks: “is Huaishan dried Shanyao” and then elicits information about the use of these ingredients (“Fresh Shanyao is not good for soup brewing, right”). Herbal remedies – which traditionally comprise various herbs boiled up into a drink or soup – are a common traditional Chinese treatment (Hesketh and Zhu 1997), particularly among people living in Hong Kong as well as areas of Southeast China. The shift highlights the different scales at which chronotopes can be established (Blommaert 2015): Joanne is a Chinese diet therapy expert at a national scale, but Kathy is the specialist at a lower-scale local level.

8/17/15 9:03 PM 16种快速杀死体内癌细胞的食物，朋友圈转疯！ 顺承传奇微信号：sccq1213 小编微信：legend-moon我们为您提供有料、有趣的精致... 顺承传奇 8/20/15 5:19 AM 淮山是晒干的山药吗 8/20/15 11:27 AM 是 白色的	8/17/15 9:53 PM (S shares an article titled) <16 foods which can quickly kill cancer cells in one's body, being circulated like crazy as post for Friends' Circle> 8/20/15 5:19 AM S: <is Huaishan dried Shanyao> 8/20/15 11:27 AM K: [yes] K: [It's white]

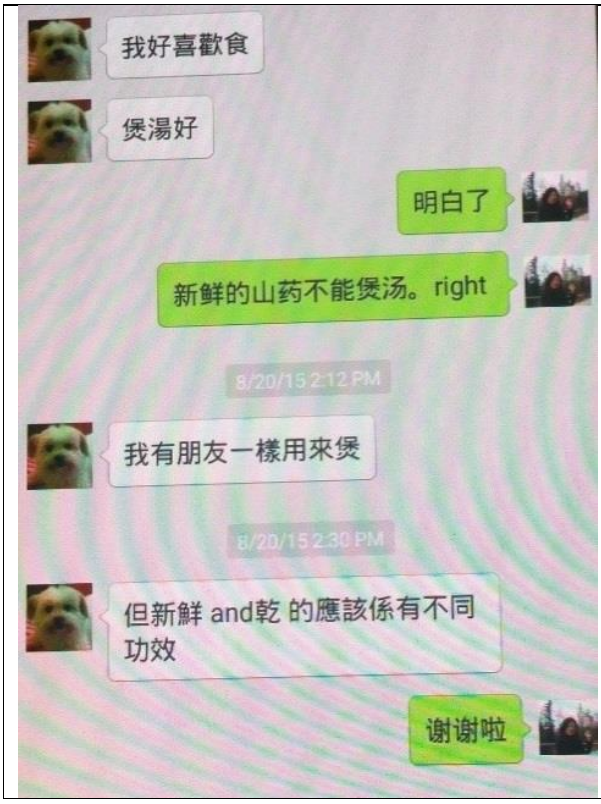
我好喜歡食 煲湯好 明白了 新鲜的山药不能煲汤。right 8/20/15 2:12 PM 我有朋友一樣用來煲 8/20/15 2:30 PM 但新鮮 and乾 的應該係有不同功效 谢谢啦	K: [I really like eating those] K: [good choice for soup brewing] S: <I get it> S: < Fresh Shanyao is no good for soup brewing.> right 8/20/15 2:12 PM K: [I have friends who cook it the same way as dried ones to make soup] 8/20/15 2:33 PM K: [but the fresh ones] and [dried ones should have different effects] J: <Thanks a lot>

Figure 2. Joanne and Kathy (2)

The affordances of WeChat are then foregrounded as Joanne accesses and shares an article originating in China and written in Chinese, in the process of which she takes on the role of cultural mediator within a China-oriented chronotope despite her geographical position in the UK. The recourse to this and similar articles reflects the polycentric nature of contemporary life, shifting the centre of authority from an individual towards an external published source. The mobile chronotope sanctions the authority of networked resources given the communicative norms of mobile and social media *sharing* (John 2017). So, the authority behind Joanne's shared article is itself polycentric – it comes not only from the published source but also from Joanne's credibility as sharer.

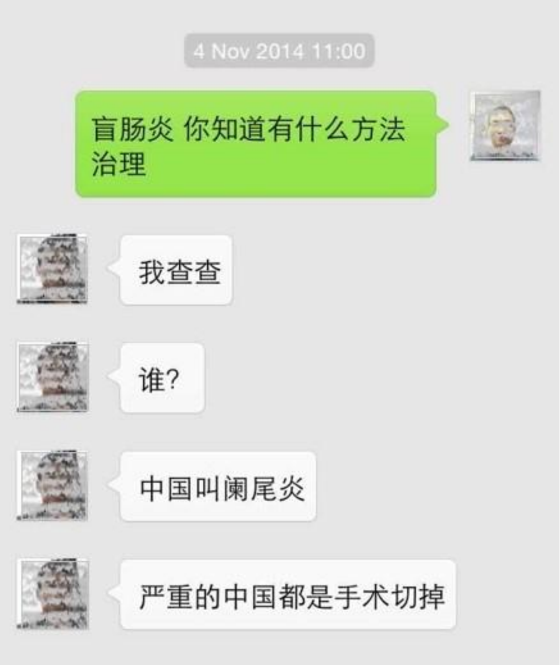
As the extracts illustrate, WeChat plays a key role in facilitating an everyday exchange between remotely located participants, creating a communicative space in which Joanne orients chronotopically to traditional Chinese thinking and social roles, passing on cultural values and advice. Migration has freed Joanne from the cultural and social constraints imposed by family back home, but it has not entailed a break from the traditions associated with her pre-migration past. She draws on the affordances of the mobile app in constructing a polycentric modern identity which orients simultaneously towards personal independence and Chinese tradition.

6.2 Kang (butcher, Birmingham city market)

Like Joanne, Kang's mobile communications point to the polycentric orientations that shape his construction of a modern self in a post-migration context. Originally from Fujian, in the south-east of China, Kang arrived in the UK in 2001. He met his wife Meiyen in 2006, when they were both working in a take-away restaurant. Meiyen (from Furong, Malaysia) had come to the UK with her sister when she was eighteen on a two-year student visa. At the time of our data collection, the couple had three children, all born in the UK. Their narratives of becoming – the stories of learning to be butchers in the UK, as told in interviews – involve physical endurance, survival strategies and future aspirations (Blackledge, Creese and Hu 2015). Kang describes his post-migration experience as mixed; despite the financial reasons to live and work abroad, he feels that "the stress and struggle is just too much, while life in [his] village is like living in heaven". He said he could never be as relaxed and comfortable in the UK as being "in [his] own country speaking [his] own language" (Blackledge, Creese and Hu 2015:14).

During the period of data collection, the butchers frequently interacted by WeChat with Kang's brother Chen, who lives in China. He also speaks Minnan dialect and Mandarin and does not speak English. Much of their WeChat interaction concerns family matters and the transaction of goods and money between the two countries. As we describe elsewhere (Lyons and Tagg 2019), there is repeated reference to Chinese customs across the WeChat data, through which the interactants discursively negotiate a shared chronotope of traditional values across geographical distance, highlighting the importance of their pre-migration chronotopic identity to their present reality.

In the extract in Figure 3, Kang turns to his brother for advice regarding his employee BJ's ongoing stomach condition. He refers to BJ using the term *gui lao*, a derogatory term to refer to foreigners. He also exploits the WeChat affordance of voice messages (the content of which we did not access).



4 Nov 2014 11:00

盲肠炎 你知道有什么方法治理

我查查

谁?

中国叫阑尾炎

严重的中国都是手术切掉

4 Nov 2014 11:00

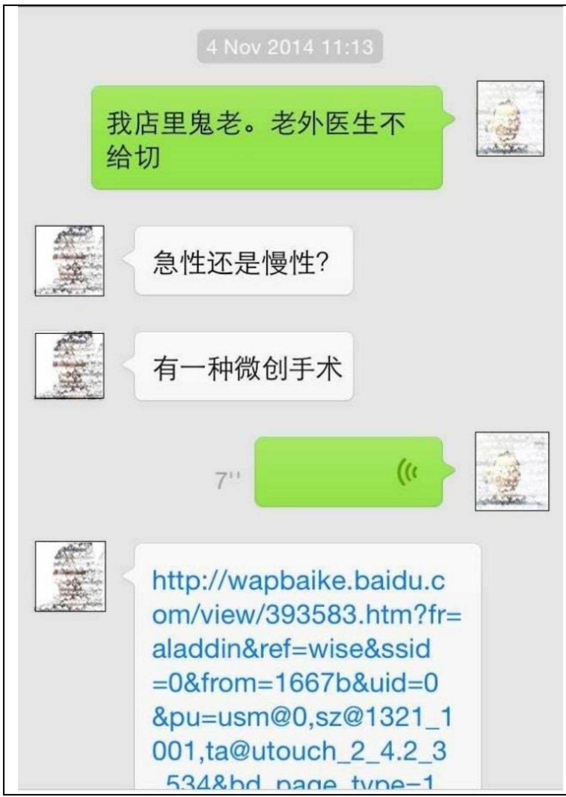
Koo: <Appendicitis do you know the treatment for it>

Chen: <Let me search for it>

Chen: <Who?>

Chen: <In China it's called *lanwei yan*>

Chen: <If it's serious, in China it's always surgically removed>



4 Nov 2014 11:13

我店里鬼老。老外医生不给切

急性还是慢性?

有一种微创手术

7''

http://wapbaike.baidu.com/view/393583.htm?fr=aladdin&ref=wise&ssid=0&from=1667b&uid=0&pu=usm@0,sz@1321_1001,ta@utouch_2_4.2_3534&bd_page_type=1

4 Nov 2014 11:13

Koo: <The *gui lao* working on my stall. The western doctor here won't remove it for him>

Chen: <Acute or chronic? >

Chen: <There's keyhole surgery>

(7 second voice mail message)

(web link)

Figure 3. Transnational communication between Birmingham and China (the angled brackets indicate use of the simplified Chinese script)

BJ's stomach complaint is a frequent source of concern for the butchers, and our offline data reveal that they discussed various solutions ranging from a healthier diet to the removal of BJ's appendix. The butchers' initial openness to Western medical opinion positioned them as modern (having the freedom to access and act on non-traditional knowledge), but their disappointment with what they saw as the failure of Western doctors to solve the problem, led them to look for solutions elsewhere. Their subsequent diagnosis of appendicitis – which prompted them to seek help from Chen through WeChat (Figure 3) – represents an attempt to solve the problem, and as such can be seen as part of their aspirational narrative of agency, self-creation and the overcoming of material and social challenges (cf Keane 2002). It is an assertion of their own authority, which involves discursively positioning themselves against conventional medical advice and aligning with Chinese medical systems which combine Western and traditional medicine (cf. Hesketh and Zhu 1997). In this context, Kang's query about the treatment for appendicitis does not imply that Chen has the necessary medical expertise (as shown in Figure 3, Chen sends Kang a link he found through the Chinese search engine Baidu), but serves as an acknowledgement of Chen's role in co-constructing a chronotope of Chinese medical tradition.

Kang's exchange with his brother also invokes a mobile chronotope of familial intimacy through which he maintains his transnational support network. This chronotope is facilitated and shaped by the expectations established by the mobile space, its asynchronous nature and the affordance of perpetual contact. The brothers do not engage in the social niceties or lengthy opening and closing sequences associated with phone calls (Schegloff and Sacks 1973). Instead, an ongoing conversational style is keyed through discursive choices such as Kang's blunt opening gambit: "Do you know the treatment for appendicitis?". The 13-minute gap between turns suggests that Kang is moving between online and offline contexts, aligning either with his offline chronotope of business interaction or with the mobile-based chronotope of traditional Chinese beliefs. This intermingling between different chronotopic contexts shows how chronotopic identities are shaped in a polycentric reality of contemporary migration. On the one hand, his use of the app allows Kang immediate access to advice regarding a pressing problem at work, whilst simultaneously maintaining his transnational family ties and connections to Chinese traditions. On the other hand, the extent to which Chinese values inform Kang's chosen chronotope of modernity becomes a matter of individual agency, regulated by his chosen level of exposure to Chinese input over mobile messaging. This demonstrates the importance of migrant agency in (dis)allowing chronotopic influences.

Much entrepreneurship on the part of Chinese migrants in other countries has been described as combining the traditional power of personal relations (*guanxi*), increasingly through WeChat (Lisha et al. 2017), with that of modern Western corporate culture (Ma 2003: 29). This ability to adapt to new chronotopic expectations in a host country whilst maintaining traditional practices is reflected in the butchers' chronotopic orientations throughout the data. Kang orients both towards the modern – as encapsulated in the couple's struggle to assert themselves as entrepreneurs in a new country – and the nonmodern, as represented by Chen and by Chinese medical values; an attempt to "get ahead" without losing sight of traditional morality (Dick 2010). His construction of a modern polycentric identity is a deliberate choice through which he seeks to manage his post-migration experience.

6.3 Winnie (customer experience assistant, Library of Birmingham)

Winnie (originally from Hong Kong) migrated to the UK around 1990 with her husband, leaving behind her mother and siblings. In interview, reflecting on her migration trajectory, Winnie showed her belief in both independence and belonging, suggesting she is abstracting herself from Chinese influences but at the same time constructing a chronotopic self mediated by her cultural and biographical history. Winnie described her pre-migration self as a particularly independent young woman, with a social conscience and a curiosity about the world, who rejected mainstream Chinese values which were "all about money, money, money" – an observation likely explained by the growing consumerist culture in contemporary China and Hong Kong (Xiao and Kim 2009). She supports her adult children's independence and love of travel, and places value on personal growth. Her orientation towards China and Chinese migrants to the UK is nuanced: she distances herself discursively from Chinese customs, said that she appreciates "the British way of doing things" and is intolerant of those who she feels have not integrated into British society although also critical of second generation migrants who abandon their family roots, highlighting the fact that migration requires change in the migrant self, but that complete assimilation to the host culture may be undesirable. She told us, "I always say 'no place is perfect'. ... I accept and learn different culture and values, e.g., in English society people respect you as an individual, abilities and ideology" (cf. Blackledge, Creese and Hu 2016). This modernist attitude to integration– openness to new ideas in order to progress in a new environment – is foregrounded in Winnie's construction of a chronotopic identity more directly than we noted for Joanne or Kang.

The values which shaped her post-migration social roles and relationships – their Chinese roots and British re-imaginings – are re-enacted in her use of mobile messaging: her belief in politeness, strong work ethic, the importance of learning English, and particular parenting values (Blackledge, Creese and Hu 2016). She sees mobile messaging as a new space in which to enact openness in the context of migration by learning new ways of being and communicating, demonstrating the role that digital media played in her construction of the modern self.

During our fieldwork, Winnie appeared to show her rejection of many parenting values stereotypically associated with Chinese parents. The traditional Chinese parenting style is complex, but in comparison with Western approaches has often been described as authoritarian or authoritative rather than permissive or neglecting (Chan, Bowes and Wyver 2009). Chan, Bowes and Wyver (2009: 851) suggest that Chinese parents in Hong Kong typically attempt to exert psychological control over their children, by being overly protective and manipulating a child's emotions in a way that they describe as "warm but controlling": informed by Confucian beliefs, parents are expected to devote themselves to their children and children repay this debt through obedience and respect. This multi-faceted parenting role is captured in Chao's (1994) concept of *guan*: to restrict but also care for. Winnie's alignment with so-called Chinese parenting values is most evident in her views on education: she is adamant about the sacrifices she needed to make to ensure her children received a good "foundation" for their future (Blackledge, Creese and Hu 2016). In relation to her construction of a modern self, however, Winnie presents herself as a laid-back and open-minded parent (Blackledge, Creese and Hu 2016: 27) who does not endorse *guan*, but expresses support for young people who want to work, travel and be independent, and is scathing of marriage as a desirable life goal (Blackledge, Creese and Hu 2016). Her parenting style is evident in messages shared through a WhatsApp group set up by her son Tim, which comprises Winnie, her children, and her husband's sister. In this space, Winnie expresses concerns for her children's safety and happiness, but accepts they now led independent lives. We also see her extending her existing roles and relationships with her children to include digitally-mediated parenting at a distance, and exploiting particular semiotic resources to do so.

After graduating from university, Winnie's daughter Ally took up an internship role in South Africa and her brother set up the WhatsApp group as a way to maintain transnational contact with Ally. All the messages are in English, the language which Winnie uses with her children, her British husband and husband's family (who does not speak Cantonese). Tim draws on the structural affordances of WhatsApp to invoke an intimate family-oriented mobile chronotope actively positioned towards reducing the sense of distance between the family members. Note that the chat log was downloaded from WhatsApp in this case, rather than being collected through screenshots.

> 03/03/2015 17:28:01: Tim changed the subject to "[family name]"
> 03/03/2015 17:28:02: Tim changed this group's icon
> 03/03/2015 17:28:18: Tim: <image omitted>
> 03/03/2015 17:28:55: Tim: How was your first internship day? What's the hostel like? More photos!

Below, Ally aligns with the suggested chronotope through communicative choices such as the omitting of full stops, a practice associated with digital writing.

> 03/03/2015 18:06:25: ally: First day was good
> 03/03/2015 18:06:34: ally: We are going to karaoke tonight

In other informal online contexts, the use of full stops has been seen to index negative orientations such as anger or insincerity (Gunraj et al. 2016) and signal the end of an ongoing conversation (Androutsopoulos and Busch 2017). Here, the lack of full stops in Ally's messages may therefore indicate a convivial open-ended conversation into which interlocutors can drop at any time (Ito and Okabe 2005).

Less than two minutes later, Winnie posts the following message to the group.

> 03/03/2015 18:08:06: Winnie: Have fun. Take a taxi back to hostel if it is late. Mum x

In her message, Winnie orients towards the informal mobile chronotope established by her children, acting out her role within it as concerned but laidback parent. Her concern for her daughter's safety is evident in her suggestion to "[t]ake a taxi back to the hotel", but the interest she shows in her daughter's travels is limited: she appears to finish the conversation, without asking her daughter any questions, with her customary sign-off, "Mum x". This seeming abruptness is in part a realisation of her particular written style, which reflects the value she places on polite communication and correct English as well as her lack of familiarity with more informal styles associated with mobile communication. It also reflects Winnie's wider attitude towards the upbringing of her children. She once said to Rachel, "I don't want an essay from them, just a few words to tell me they are safe and sound that's enough". In this sense, the informal mobile chronotope of the chat group appears to suit Winnie's parenting style; it provides a space in which her children can keep her assured of their safety, without requiring deeper commitment in the form of extended conversation (cf Yu, Huang and Liu 2017).

Winnie's mobile interactions show how she responds to the informal mobile chronotope established by her children whilst upholding the conventions of her offline chronotopic values, enacting a particular parenting role. Her parenting style reflects her modern values, as she rejects what she sees as traditional Chinese parenting styles which require an involved, authoritative approach. Instead, she adopts a more laidback approach which incorporates central aspects of her constructed modern self such as her beliefs about personal independence.

6.4 Joe (hair salon manager)

Joe, who arrived in the UK from Hong Kong at the age of 14 with his younger brother, distances himself from Chinese values and any claim to "Chinese-ness" in his construction of a post-migration identity. Joe and his brother attended boarding school in the UK, returning to Hong Kong for school holidays. In interview, Joe claimed his childhood experience was pivotal in making him "quite an independent person". Joe graduated from Southampton University and worked in Manchester, before going into business as co-owner of a beauty and hair salon in Birmingham, where he lives with his partner. Outside work, he has a close network of friends who do not speak Chinese language-varieties; he claims not to have Chinese contacts in Birmingham and positions himself as being British. Although he maintains contact with his family in Hong Kong, both by WhatsApp and in person (Blackledge, Creese and Hu 2017), there is no indication in our data that he perceives or treats them as a link to Chinese tradition or that they act as cultural mediators for Joe (as Chen does for Kang). Instead, they share updates on family matters and the everyday, such as advice on a broken washing machine or keeping safe when travelling. Although members of his family used Cantonese in their WhatsApp group, Joe responded in English and there is no indication across the dataset that he ever wrote in a Chinese script. We noted only one instance in which he wrote in Pinyin, the romanisation of Standard Chinese (analysed below).

In Figure 4 below, we illustrate our argument regarding Joe's self-positioning with an extract taken from one of his WhatsApp groups which includes Joe, his partner Drew and two close friends, Sue and Gina. This is the only instance in the data where his friends refer to his Chinese-ness. Gina asks Joe for Chinese lessons to enable her better contact with a Chinese parent at her child Fraser's school. Joe responds without embracing his assigned role as cultural mediator.

INSERT FIGURE 4 HERE

Gina's request does not suggest a great deal of knowledge about Chinese: she explicitly positions herself as non-expert in that she is uncertain how to spell her son's friend's name, asks for Chinese lessons and – more implicitly – conflates Vietnamese and various Chinese language-varieties under the label Chinese. Her mention of Chinese lessons should not be read as a serious request but rather as a coda or punchline (introduced by "So Joe") which exploits a connection between her narrative and her audience, the intended humour signalled by the grinning emoji. For his part, Joe somewhat reluctantly takes on the stereotypical role of a Chinese person. He obliges to some extent in providing a Chinese-language lesson (addressing her spelling query and request for a lesson), but his replies are uncommitted and minimal, while his English-to-Chinese translation of "bye" as "bye bye" appears designed either to ridicule the task or to amuse. This topic seems to be largely treated as a source of amusement – of bolstering personal friendship ties – rather than any real engagement with Chinese cultures or languages. This is also shown in the way in which the friends resort to sharing series of emoji in a display of “ritual appreciation” (Georgakopoulou 2017) – somewhat conventionalised turns focused primarily on indicating participation and alignment, rather than serious interest in the topic.

The humorous response from Joe’s partner (“Is Fraser has Chinese boyfriend like me”) – with the non-standard grammatical construction playfully indexing a non-native English speaker – cements the impression that Joe’s Chinese-ness is tokenistic, a source of fun and not a serious element of his identity. Elsewhere in the project, we found that stereotypes were deployed “as flexible and intricate resources to find common ground” (Creese, Blackledge, and Hu 2018: 848) among people from different national and cultural backgrounds. In this exchange, Joe’s Chinese-ness is similarly called upon as a way for the friends to enact their friendship, but the nature of Joe’s participation suggests that – while not denying it – he is distancing himself from his Chinese heritage.

7. Discussion and Conclusion

Our moment analysis of mobile messaging interactions, supported by non-digital ethnographic data, suggests that modernity in the context of migration should be discussed in terms of a spectrum, rather than a binary distinction between modern and nonmodern, which is accessible through interview data alone. This *gradient of chronotopic modernity* (Figure 5) results from a complex interplay of multiple historicities in a single individual’s relationship to their polycentric reality. It is observable in translocal digital communication and facilitates the construction of mobile chronotopes (Lyons and Tagg 2019), including the mobile chronotope of (non)modernity. As noted by Blommaert (2015: 113-114), relevant multiple historicities project “different forms of factuality and truth”, determined by the sociolinguistic context of their existence. What counts as authentic, and therefore desired, is fluid and determined not simply based on the essentialised norms imposed by either the host or home country, but in the process of semiotic manoeuvring, aimed at achieving recognisability in a number of centres and at a number of scales.

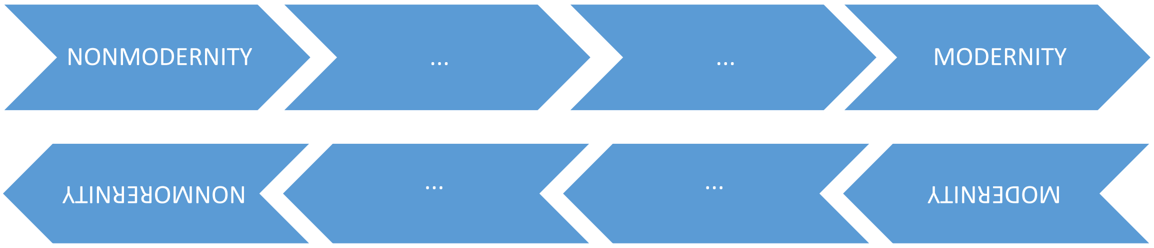


Figure 5. The gradient of chronotopic modernity

Mobile chronotopes (Lyons and Tagg 2019) play a vital role in enabling migrants to establish their chronotopic self-placement (Agha 2007) in the context of post-migration modernity, where they physically exist in the host country, whilst not fully detaching themselves from their home realities, beliefs and traditions. Migrant chronotopic modernity, as evident in our data, is a result of a complex interplay of openness to the “new” or “different” and the striving for the “moral” and the “traditional”. Through mobile-messaging, with its instant feedback and potential for constant connection, migrants perpetually straddle two separate realities and navigate the respective chronotopes associated with them, adjusting their chronotopic self-placement in the process. This adjustment takes place along a continuum between modernity and nonmodernity, between more and less traditional values, and reflects a user’s (non)modernity-related self-image. The resultant gradient of chronotopic modernity allows migrants to take steps towards more or less modern selves in a fluid process of becoming.

Migration relieves migrants from the ties of their home cultures’ social conventions (at least partially) and allows them to strive for an abstraction from their home values and traditions and to re-invent themselves in the context of chronotopic modernity. As total abstraction is not possible, migrants remain constrained by the unavoidability of material and social mediations in their links to their nonmodern chronotopic past. Selected (non)modern chronotopes are representations of the battle between submitting to the rules imposed by external sources (including being socialised into something) and the individual’s interiority – usually in the form of freeing themselves of existing ties. This is not to say that a migrant’s choice will always be to reject tradition and strive for the new or different. Our data have shown that there are clear differences between participants’ social media participation frameworks (with family or friends in China, friends in the UK, or with family dispersed translocally) and in their modernist inclinations. Joanne is the most drawn to tradition, while Joe has a passive relationship with his home country and tradition. Both Winnie and the butchers metalinguistically negotiate their positioning on the modern-nonmodern continuum as they partially reject traditional Chinese values. None of the participants, however, denies their roots or completely severs the links with their pre-migration reality.

Social media communication facilitates the negotiation of the mobile chronotope of (non)modernity and provides an opportunity to enact the chosen chronotopic self. In our data, this is evident in the case of the butchers when they draw on the brother’s expertise of traditional Chinese medicine, and also in Joanne’s case as she builds her credibility to advise her China-based friends. Joanne’s geographic displacement allows her to free herself from the authority of tradition and take on the authority herself. Distance affords migrants the possibility to form and express opinions which are not entrenched in the traditional socio-cultural structures of their home country.

Our research, with insights into naturally occurring mobile exchanges of Chinese migrants residing in Birmingham, allows access to projected or performed modernity in their post-migration context. This chronotopic alignment comes through everyday discourse at the intersection of the past and the present and stands in opposition to the migrant-perceived modernity accessible through participant interviews. Our blended ethnographic approach provides both angles on the question of the chronotopic negotiation of post-migration (non)modernity in the Chinese migrant context and is therefore a rich source of information on the migrant construction of post-migration selves.

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