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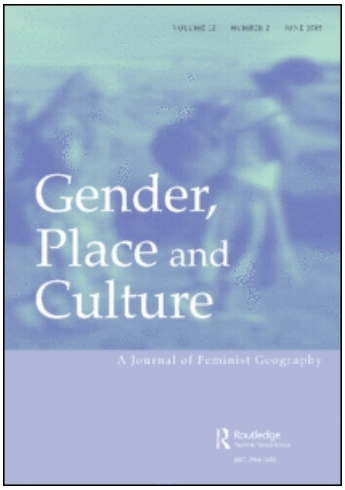

Gender, Place & Culture
Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t713423101

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To cite this Article Chan, Annie Hau-Nung(2008) "Life in *Happy Land*': using virtual space and doing motherhood in Hong Kong', Gender, Place & Culture, 15: 2, 169 — 188
To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1080/09663690701863281
URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09663690701863281

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Gender, Place and Culture
Vol. 15, No. 2, April 2008, 169–188

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

'Life in *Happy Land*': using virtual space and doing motherhood in Hong Kong

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This paper examines how a group of Hong Kong working mothers use the internet in performing and realizing their paid work and domestic role identities. The internet is a technology-enabled space and also what Michel de Certeau calls a 'practiced place', where its nature and functions are necessarily determined by the actions and practices of agents. Through participant observation and the analysis of a sample of chatroom and forum messages from a user-driven Hong Kong-based parenting website called Happy Land, I examine the relationship between this virtual space and its users. I find that the website has developed beyond its technology-mediated nature into a community of face-to-face friendships and social and emotional support. In effect, this virtual space plays a role in the social reproduction of the contemporary dual-earner family by enabling working mothers who use the website to perform roles in production and reproduction respectively.

Keywords: Hong Kong; internet; working mothers; virtual space

Introduction

The rise of the internet as a new form of information and communication technology (ICT) has generated much research over the past decade.[1] It has been pointed out that early research and commentary tend to polarize between overly pessimistic perceptions of the internet and the overly idealistic (see Crang, Crang, and May 1999; Doel and Clarke 1999; Holloway and Valentine 2003; Graham 2004). Early empirical studies focused on the internet's possible (negative) effects on social interactions and inter-personal relationships (Kraut et al. 1988), but in recent years its role in community formation and social support has been increasingly validated, particularly for socially marginalized or disenfranchised groups (e.g. Bargh and McKenna 2004; Bernal 2005; Davis 2004; Enteen 2005; Lacey 2005; Lieberman and Goldstein 2005; Mitra 2004). More generally, the internet has allowed users to access information, pursue interests and hobbies, and to maintain existing and establish new social networks and relationships (McCowan et al. 2001; DiMaggio et al. 2001), but the kind of groundbreaking advances envisioned by cyber-enthusiasts, such as substituting materiality and its undesirable by-products with virtual reality (see e.g. Benedikt 1991), have yet to materialize (Woolgar 2002).

The early dualistic perspective overlooks the role of human agency in on-line social interactions and representations, and undermines how structures of power constrain internet access. For instance, the de-coupling of community and location enabled by the internet (e.g. Wellman 2001) is not immune to inequalities of power and control over

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ISSN 0966-369X print/ISSN 1360-0524 online
© 2008 Taylor & Francis
DOI: 10.1080/09663690701863281
http://www.informaworld.com

access to virtual space. Control over physical space, as illustrated by Foucault's study of the panopticon, is an important source of social power (Foucault 1983), and virtual space is similarly subject to various forms of control. The state, internet service providers, site owners, administrators and advertisers all exercise considerable controls over virtual space, which need to be considered in internet studies (Jordan 1999; Goldsmith and Wu 2006).

More recent studies on uses of the internet in everyday life are much more aware of the social, spatial and cultural structures and conditions which affect the actual space–time where virtual space is used (e.g. McGerty 2000; Bakardjieva and Smith 2001; Holloway and Valentine 2003; Madge and O'Connor 2006). This article contributes to the existing literature on the uses of the internet in everyday life by studying a group of Hong Kong working mothers' use of a parenting website. Although there are numerous studies on how gender identities are constructed and negotiated on the internet (e.g. Cerny and Weise 1996; O'Farrell and Vallore 1999; Green 2001; Kendall 2002), few focus on the relationship between on-line and off-line lives of the users. In what follows, I will provide an overview of the situation of working mothers in Hong Kong and discuss some of the conceptual issues relating to studies of the internet. These will provide the background for my analysis of how a group of middle-class working mothers use the internet to simultaneously cope with their roles as employees at the workplace and as care givers to their families.

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Dual earner families and working mothers in Hong Kong

Surveys have yielded consistent findings on the gender and family ideologies and division of domestic labour in Hong Kong families. Couples were found to mostly adhere to traditional family gender roles and attitudes, with working wives being slightly less traditional than full-time homemakers (Lee 1995; Lau, Ma, and Chan 2006). Even though surveys have found that many couples believed in greater gender equity in the family, domestic and emotional work – in particular the care of children and the supervision and management of their academic and extra-curricular activities– were considered the mother's job (Lee 1991, 1995, 2003; Chu and Leung 1995; Chu 1997). It is common for middle-class families to employ live-in foreign domestic helpers (on average one in every ten families in Hong Kong employs one), but they offer only partial substitution for the mother's care-giving role (Ng, Fosh, and Naylor 2002; Chan 2005). More importantly, despite the fact that 64% of respondents in one survey agreed that a working mother benefits the family (mainly financially), 40% believed that they cannot establish a warm and secure relationship with their children as well as full-time mothers can (Lee 2003, 301). Compared to Britain, Ireland and the USA, more Hong Kong people agreed that it is undesirable for women with small children to work (ibid., 303).

Given the above findings, it is not surprising that Hong Kong women's labour force participation drops upon childbirth and further declines when children reach school age, with a majority stopping work completely (Lau et al. 2006). Lau Ma and Chan's (2006) study also found that women who chose to stay in paid work after marriage mostly did so to improve family finances rather than for personal development or personal economic security and, regardless of how traditional a woman's gender role ideology is, most women surveyed preferred being full-time homemakers should the family's financial situation allow it. Family and relatives, baby sitters, child care centres, tutorial centres and, for middle-class families, foreign domestic helpers, were variously used by working mothers of different backgrounds to cope with childcare and domestic work, but these substitutes were at best used with reluctance (Tam 2001).

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Men and women use different strategies to cope with the demands of family and work roles (Aryee and Luk 1996; Bulbeck 2005), but work–family conflicts are generally more stressful for women because men and women differ in their understanding of what constitute their respective parental roles (Perry-Jenkins et al. 1999; Luk and Schaffer 2005). Regardless of their relative contribution to family income, men tend to think of their parental role as income provider and women perceive theirs as care provider (Christiansen and Palkovitz 2001). Even when care is partially or wholly substituted, many Hong Kong mothers still regarded their care giver role to be integral to their identity as parents (Chan 2005). Over the years there have been great improvements in education and work opportunities for Hong Kong women but family gender role ideology has been slow to change; the difficulty presented by this situation is evident from the rising ages of first marriage and childbirth, as young women increasingly delay family formation to pursue careers (Wong 2005). The public imagery of Hong Kong's working women remains highly polarized (Aryee and Luk 1996), where the 'successful' working woman is one who manages home and family *equally* well (Lee 2004).[2] Yet this is an ideal only attained by a few, as various surveys have shown that many Hong Kong working mothers face undue stress as a result of conflicting family and work demands.[3]

If the prevailing norm is for Hong Kong's working women to cope with their 'dual-burden', then what kinds of social and emotional support are there to help them do so? Chinese women have traditionally relied on kinship networks for social support (Kuah-Pearce 2004), but the prevalence of the small nuclear family and inter-generational differences on how best to manage child care and domestic chores are making it increasingly difficult for younger mothers to get such support. Traditional Chinese families give elders considerable authority in family matters – something which women of the post-war generation do not always find easy to submit to (Tam 2001). Indeed, it has been found that older people in Hong Kong are less likely than the young to regard women's paid work to be compatible with family roles (Lee 2003, 303), making it less likely for older relatives to be supportive of working mothers.[4] Women were also found to be much more dependent on support from husbands and children than men, who get more support from friends and workmates (Lee 1995, 18).

Given that women in female-dominated occupations are more likely to come into contact with other working mothers, does this mean that is should be easy for them to form strong social bonds with one another? If the nature of their work is relatively isolated (e.g. receptionist, secretary), or they do not have much time to socialize after work (e.g. rushing home after work to help the children with their homework), then there will be little time for them to nourish these networks established at the workplace. Moreover, people they meet at work may not be married or have children, and even if they do, they may not want to share that side of their lives, since their relationship would primarily be a professional one. Working mothers obviously have fewer chances to meet the mothers of their children's classmates and friends, since paid work takes up time which they could have spent volunteering at school or parent–teacher associations. Full-time paid work is therefore likely to limit working mothers' access to social and emotional support networks. However, the increasing accessibility and indispensability of the internet at work and the popularity of office cubicles have created new opportunities for office workers to appropriate work time spent in virtual space for their personal ends (Greenfield and Davis 2002). The modern office cubicle is typically a small workspace partially enclosed by partitions, designed to enhance productivity by minimizing distraction to the worker. However, the privacy enabled by this type of layout, which is the norm in most Hong Kong offices, has enabled virtual space to become a very real 'place' that is distinct from the

workplace as such. As 74% of all clerical workers in Hong Kong are women (Census and Statistics Department 2006), how women use virtual space at work is a particularly relevant issue.

Uses of the internet and conceptualizations of virtual space

Studies on how the internet is used in everyday life often acknowledge that virtual spaces are 'places' where users do a variety of things (e.g. Wellman and Haythornthwaite 2002; Witty and Carr 2003; Bargh and McKenna 2004). Of considerable interest to researchers is the fact that anonymity on the internet enables users to cross social and normative boundaries without suffering great social consequences, and therefore allows them to study aspects of the social self otherwise not accessible in real life (Robinson 2001). However, the degree of correspondence between on-line and off-line personas varies considerably from one community to another. Players of on-line role-playing games, on-line mothers and bloggers all reveal different aspects of their 'real' self in virtual space (O'Connor and Madge 2004; Castronova 2005; Reed 2005). In short, different communities necessarily use virtual space differently, and the study of some communities can allow us to get insights into people's lives which are more closely related to their off-line lives than others.

What kind of 'place' is the internet? The concept of media as 'place' and place as de-linked from location have been explored in Adams' (1992) discussion of the television, where its status as 'place' is defined in terms of its function as a social context, a centre of meaning, and a site for boundary drawing and social reproduction. More recent examples of the conceptualization of virtual space include Adams and Ghose's (2003) study of India-related websites aimed at migrants, which they call *bridgeplace*: they 'enable certain kinds of movements to occur' rather than existing as coherent 'places' (Adams and Ghose 2003, 416). Along similar lines, Madge and O'Connor (2005, 83) call the internet *cyber/space* in order 'to capture the intersecting and simultaneous nature of the virtually real and the actually real', while Janelle and Hodge (2000) stress how cyberspace and geographical space coexist to produce *hybrid space*. Regardless of what scholars chose to call it, there is considerable consensus that virtual space enables actions and practices that are not entirely independent from (and are no less real than) actual space–time and the structured realities they constitute. Doel and Clarke's (1999, 262) discussion on what they regard as the erroneous contradistinction between reality/actuality and virtuality/possibility, 'as if the actual and the virtual were the given and the pre-given, respectively', reminds us that reality is always in the making, and in this sense virtual reality is as real as actual reality can ever be. They go on to quote Wark (1994), who argues that virtual reality is about increasing the 'bandwidth' of sensory experiences while virtual geography is about the expanded terrain from which experience may be instantly drawn. The sociological significance of the internet as a 'time–space distantiation' media lies in its enabling effect of 'extending' reality, not in annihilating or creating it anew. In short, the real and the virtual are necessarily 'inter-dependent'. With these conceptual issues in mind, I now introduce the methodology of this study.

Methodology

The website analyzed in this study is a Hong Kong-based Chinese language parenting site called *Happy Land* ((開心樂園, http://www.hk-farm.com). The site was established in November 2000 by a couple who had recently become parents, and in January 2006 it was renamed *Hong Kong Farm* (香港農場) when the website's interface (but not its URL) was

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changed.[5] Statistics published on the website in 2005[6] showed between 9000 to 17,000 visits per month, with the period between July and September of each year attracting the highest traffic. It is unclear how many registered members there are,[7] but based on my four years of observation, I estimate there to be between 50 and 60 active members (i.e., members who regularly contribute to discussion boards and participate in the chat room). Because of its non-commercial nature *Happy Land* is not the most popular website of its kind in Hong Kong. *Baby Kingdom* (http://www.baby-kingdom.com), a commercially operated website, attracts much higher traffic and many more advertisers. *Haomama* (http://www.haomama.com) is another similar site and is also commercially oriented. Another popular site is *HK Ed city* (http://www.hkedcity.net), which focuses on schools and schooling-related topics.

I first came across these websites when I was researching parents' views on educational reform in Hong Kong. Three features distinguish *Happy Land* from other parenting sites. Firstly, its non-commercial nature means that it is relatively free from advertisers and individuals trying to sell products and services disguised as genuine consumers or users. This feature attracts users who seek like-minded parents looking for information and support rather than advertisements or discount coupons. Secondly, *Happy Land*'s 24-hour chat room is its main attraction; *Baby Kingdom* also has a chat room facility but high site traffic has rendered its operation unstable and therefore only a few people regularly use it. Finally, *Happy Land* is solely user-driver: unlike sites such as *EdCity* and *Haomama*, which brand themselves as authoritative sources, *Happy Land* does not feature 'specialists' such as professional teachers and counselors to answer members' questions. Because of these features, *Happy Land* has much more of a community atmosphere (e.g., there are far fewer incidents of 'flaming' [verbal attacks on the internet], compared to the more popular sites).[8]

My initial involvement with *Happy Land* was restricted to the forum. As a mother of two, I was drawn to some of the discussions on parenting, though I remained a 'lurker'[9] for several months before I entered the chat room for the first time in the summer of 2002. It is hard to stay a lurker in chat rooms as one's entrance is visible to all other users. Once I entered, it was hard not to stay a while, as I was immediately greeted by users and bombarded with questions, literally the minute I entered. They asked me about my children, the area where I worked, what I was planning to make for dinner, if my boss was around. The atmosphere was very welcoming and it did not take long before logging onto *Happy Land* became a daily habit of mine. As my work allows me to stay on-line without having to actively participate in the chat room, I ended up reading the chat messages periodically throughout the day and at the end of each work day participating in discussions and chat when I had spare moments. One weekend evening I logged on to the site and discovered to my surprise that the chat room was nearly as busy as it was in the daytime; logging on in the evenings soon become a daily habit of mine as well. I also visited other parenting websites regularly during this period, but members in these other sites are much more dispersed over many special topic forums, and are therefore much harder to track. And when *Baby Kingdom*'s chat room does work, its users tend to split into different 'rooms', talking only to their friends about personal things. Although *Happy Land* users can also choose to chat in separate rooms (four rooms are available), this rarely happens; members seem to prefer to talk in large groups and will happily chat to newcomers.

The idea of writing a paper on *Happy Land* came a year after I began to participate regularly as a user, and I started systematically saving daily chat and experimented with various coding schemes on the chat messages and forum postings. The data used in this paper is based on my participant observation of the website over a period of three years, my social encounters with users off-line, forum postings and a random sample of 25 days of chat which I saved between September 2005 and November 2006 (the average is around

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2000 lines of chat per day).[10] Internet language in Hong Kong is often a mix of Chinese, Cantonese and English (Figure 1); in this paper I have standardized the translation into English. Chat room messages were coded using a scheme that classifies messages based on user (this allows me to build a 'profile' on each user), theme (main themes such as children, husbands, work, further divided into sub-themes with directional coding, e.g., children/happy, husband/upset) and time of day when the chat took place.

Since I had stumbled upon, rather than deliberately set out to find, a parenting website to study, my identity evolved from a user to user/researcher over a period of time, and issues of research ethics deserve mention here. A few months after I started participating in the chat room, I was invited to a dinner gathering which I accepted, largely out of curiosity but not without anxiety. On that occasion, most attendees have already met before, but there were a few other women like me who were meeting everyone else in person for the first time. It turned out to be an evening filled with laughter and good food. Since then I have met up with other users for barbecues, beach outings, afternoon teas and shopping trips; often we brought our children and husbands, and have even visited one another's homes. My knowledge of them is no longer based solely on interaction on the website. As to my identity as researcher, in general users rarely ask or reveal personal information (e.g. occupation) on the website.[11] I have not deliberately tried to hide my identity as an academic, although through our interaction, many users know that I work in a government-funded organization situated in the area of Tuen Mun, and they know that I have my own office rather than cubicle, making it possible to guess what I do for a living. Over time, as I got to know some users better, a few learned that I worked in a university, but none expressed much interest in my areas of research. I had appeared on local TV programmes and had been interviewed by newspapers now and then in my capacity as a sociologist, but none of the *Happy Land* users ever mentioned that they had seen me in these instances. I did not tell users that I intended to write a paper on them, but I had decided that should any users ask me about my work, I will tell them about this article. In general I have tried to abide by the prevailing norm in the research community regarding internet research; that is, if revealing the researcher's identity might compromise the 'naturalistic' nature of the on-line environment, then it is deemed justifiable to not do so (Buchanan 2003; Pittenger 2003). I have not taken advantage of my identity as a regular user to elicit information which would not otherwise have been available. I am conscious of my role as a participant observer and the potential problems that may arise; when on-line, I try not to think of myself as a researcher, which is a role I consciously reserve for off-line times only. As to observer effect, my postings and participation in the chat room have somewhat decreased after my decision to study it, largely out of my own volition, to minimize any possible unnecessary influence in the field. Users' names have been changed to ensure anonymity.

Life in *Happy Land*: a portrait of on-line working mothers

Most topics in *Happy Land* forums are issues that concern mothers; topics with the most messages are 'free talk' (53,000+ posts),[12] 'primary school' (19,000+ posts), 'child rearing' (12,000 + posts), and 'kindergarten' (16,000 + posts). Topics attracting the fewest posts are 'pregnancy corner' (500 + posts) and 'secondary school' (800 + posts). These figures show that most active members are women with young children. From the contents of the messages and also based on my participant observation, it is evident that most users are in full-time paid work with one or more school age children. A large proportion of them are office workers such as secretaries, receptionists, administrators and personal assistants, but there is also a small group of professionals including school

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(11:53:07) **YM**: wowwow> good morning
(11:53:08) **MC**: YM> welcome!
(11:53:18) **wowwow**: YM> hi
(11:53:22) **LBT**: MC> yes ar, 我仔都唔係易教, 佢好多理論架
(11:54:05) **LBT**: YM> 加埋細孖同小玲呀三, 正, 完美組合
(11:54:12) **W_Bot**: unsny was idle for too long and has been disconnected.
(11:54:25) **LBT**: YM> 岩岩好一條街四個角位四條友
(11:54:32) **YM**: LBT> 喂!你女識咩樂器呀?呀大孖識長笛 wor,學定一樣好 wor
(11:54:50) **LBT**: YM> 我女跳舞呀嘛
(11:55:23) **MC**: LBT> 仔主觀好多. 第日頂心頂肺. 俾心機 la
(11:55:28) **YM**: LBT> 呀三著數 d,細孖識拉 2 胡
(11:55:46) **LBT**: YM> 扮盲都得
(11:55:59) **LBT**: MC> 依家頂緊架啦
(11:55:59) **MC**: LBT> YM 哈....哈.....
(11:56:24) **YM**: LBT> e...長笛配跳舞....絕呀....
(11:56:49) **wowwow**: YM> 我都係叫我女第日冇野做, 去隧道拉二胡乞食 ga
(11:57:06) **LBT**: YM> yes ar, 佢兩個高級 d
(11:57:18) **YM**: LBT> 我 d 扮哮喘好到家 ga

(11:57:29) **YM**: wowwow>
(11:58:05) **LBT**: YM> 咁我女 d 眼淚好快喇出黎架, 嘩, 掂呀

(11:58:20) **wowwow**: YM> 高檔 d 可以去大酒店都厄到餐 ga
(11:58:54) **YM**: wowwow> 呀細孖 try 過係餐廳表演,全場拍手仲有份免費早餐

(11:59:19) **wowwow**: YM>

(11:59:54) **YM**: LBT> 好掂呀
(12:00:38) **LBT**: YM> 笑死我
(12:00:45) **wowwow**: YM> 大酒店, = 賓儀館 ar

(12:00:58) **YM**: LBT> 好好笑
(12:01:04) **EEETIE**: *eeetie back
(12:01:19) **YM**: wowwow>
(12:01:20) **Ecmm**: 妳地好攪笑
(12:01:29) **LBT**: YM> 我地真係要係度發下神經先減到壓
(12:02:21) **EEETIE**: LBT> agree
(12:02:32) **YM**: LBT> 係呀!係呀!將佢地 d 衰野美化呀

Figure 1. Sample of chat from 15 February 2006.

teachers, computer technicians, systems managers, librarians, doctors and lawyers, with only a few full-time home makers. Amongst the regular users there was one single mother, three women whose husbands lived overseas and a few whose husbands worked in mainland China and only came home at the weekends. All users were Hong Kong Chinese women. Only a handful of them lived with their parents or parents-in-law or did not employ a foreign domestic helper. In short, most users were in dual-earner, small nuclear families, which represent the majority of Hong Kong households.[13]

Happy Land's chat room was open all day every day. During weekdays, the earliest member entered the chat room at around 7 am, and from 9 am onwards other members began to log in. During office hours, on average, there would be anything between 10 and 15 members chatting at any one time, and the maximum I have seen was 22. People drifted in and out throughout the day, but many remain logged on even when they are not actively chatting. As members started to log out towards the end of the working day the chat room usually emptied out between 6:30 pm and 7 pm. After around 8 pm members started logging in from home, with the number of users peaking after around 10 pm, after their children had gone to bed. There were fewer users in the evenings with normally no more than 10 at any one time. One by one these women started logging out again after midnight, and by 7 am the chat room became active again. On weekends several 'hard core' members could still be found in the chat room during the daytime, but numbers were visibly lower than weekdays. On weekend evenings users were more likely to have gone out for meals or gatherings with family and friends, but many still logged on just for a short while to say hello to other users.[14]

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What did the users chat about?

Favourite topics in the chat room were children and their schoolwork, extra-curricular activities, the discussion and comparison of schools, and children's (usually schoolwork-related) discipline. Topical issues relating to local and international news, celebrity gossip, or shopping bargains also featured regularly but not nearly as prominently, nor discussed with as much enthusiasm, as child-related topics. Here is an excerpt of a typical chat on children's schoolwork:

M > S: Oh no! I forgot to give the stapler to my girl!

S > M: what to do? Is your husband at home?

S > M: your girl is at daycare, can she borrow one there? I can bring one to her, if she can't borrow one.

M > S: well, never mind, it is just for stapling the worksheets together.

S > M: my girl needs to go to Kumon [a tutorial centre] this morning, didn't have time to revise one more time … I hope she will be careful, do well …

M > S: when my girl used to go to Kumon, whenever she has exam at school, I will take her off Kumon, just take the worksheet home

M > S: My girl has ballet class this morning, but told her she is not going because of the exam

Hong Kong parents highly value their children's academic achievement, much more so than their happiness and obedience (Wong 2003), so it is not surprising that users often talked about their children's work with great concern. They often wondered 'aloud' about how their children might be doing in a test or exam, and those whose children attended the

same schools often exchanged information on class scores and rankings, as these two mothers did in the quote below:

E > 2M: Did you go to the PTA seminar Friday night?

2M > E: no ...

2M > E: did you see teacher on sat then? ...

E > 2M: yes, I did, with my husband

E > 2M: I suppose P2 [scores] will drop a lot by then, Let me think, median: Math 38x, Eng 36x, Chinese 390

2M > E: This year our Eng and Chi[nese] median are only 36x and math is 35x

2M > E: hhhaaa?? eng 36x?

E > 2M: but median is not a good indicator, mean may tell us more

E > 2M: I am surprised at how low the Eng Median is, and how high the Chinese median is

2M > E: Let me check last year, wait

2M > E: last year, Eng 36x, Chinese and maths both 38x

Even though most users were in their workplace during daytime chat they rarely talked about their paid work. Superiors and colleagues were mentioned invariably when their chat was being interrupted (e.g., when called to type up a document or attend a meeting) or when they were in danger of being spotted by co-workers or superiors to be chatting online. In the following conversation, user *BB* complains about her boss, 'the nutter':

BB > BQ: *The nutter is mumbling to himself again*

BQ > BB: *What's wrong with him today*

BB > BQ: complaining to me about his backache ... Everyday he is sighing and moaning and complaining ... Really ruins my mood

BQ > BB: he is menopausal ☺ He needs HRT ... recommend him a doctor! hahah

BB > BQ: circling around my desk, talking rubbish, as if I have a lot of time ... I have work to do!

BQ > BB: help him to find a chatroom for menopausal men!

Users sometimes spoke of their annoying clients, frustrations with co-workers or unreasonable demands made by their superiors. As users work in many different industries it is not surprising that work-related topics often took the form of airing discontents rather than the actual work itself. Below are more examples of how work was mentioned:

SN > MG: Someone just swore at me on the phone!

MG > SN: ? What happened?

SN > MG: He wanted someone to prepare the papers to apply for his daughter in law to come to Hong Kong. I asked him more information, and told him his son has to be the applicant, but he said cannot 'cos his son already applied for his first wife!

MG > SN: What? Two wives?

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SN > MG: yes, he is crazy. I told him polygamy is illegal in Hong Kong and then he swore at me! And then slammed the phone down on me!

MG > SN: He is an idiot. Tell him to go see a doctor. Then call the police on him.

* * *

MC > TE: I prepared the accounts yesterday, so busy! Didn't leave until 7:30

TE > MC: end of year audit?

MC > TI: yes, then my boss called me after 5 mins. said I typed a 4 in front of a figure so the amount went up by 400,000:-p

TE > MC: Did he scold you?

MC > TE: no, but he was not pleased

TE > MC: *just careless mistake, it is his job to check too.*

MC > TI: I know but I feel so bad! And I was thinking, If they will fire someone I will be the first.

TE > MC: Don't beat yourself up.

Thoughts and musing on paid work were rarely mentioned with enthusiasm. More typical would be the following quote, where two working mothers revealed their feelings about paid work and motherhood:

LE > CS: … Never mind, as long as you get paid

CS > LE: That's what I think too. After all, I'm just a c9,[15] *I don't ask for much. As long as I can get home on time to take care of my daughters.*

LE > CS: ME 2

CS > LE: Working now is to get money for my daughters' school fees, if not, I'd have quit long ago

The feelings expressed above reflect the general sentiments of Hong Kong people, who tend to agree that it is acceptable for married women to work if it helps with family finances (Lee 2003). This mentality underlies users' feelings about staying in *Happy Land* during work hours. *Happy Land* is a welcome distraction, a place where they can talk about things which they *really* care about – i.e., their children and domestic life.

Emotional lives of on-line working mothers

Happy Land is a place where users share their joys and vent their frustrations. The most common source of joy is their children's achievements, academic and otherwise. Although losing a few pounds and finding a great pair of shoes get mentioned every now and then, they pale into insignificance compared to the joys brought to them by their children:

SN > CC: One time I took him to have his haircut, he told the barber he has 100 girlfriends. The barber said: You have 100 girlfriends? Can you introduce some of them to me? My son asked him: are you married? Where is your wife now? lol

MG > SN: Has your son gone out with his girlfriends? Any space for you to tag along?

SN > MG: Hahaha … I don't know ….

* * *

CH > SD: My girl was so good this morning! Hahahah so happy.

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SD > CH: why?

CH > SD: She woke up all by herself and brushed teeth and got dressed! No need for alarm clock!

SD > CH: very rare for a P1! Congratulations! My son needs three morning calls at least!

CH > SD: hope she can keep it up la! Hahahah I feel so blessed!

However, analysis of my sample shows that for every one line of chat devoted to the joys brought by children, there were five lines of complaints and frustrations about them. The most common complaints about children are schoolwork-related. Not finishing work in time, and getting poor results in tests and exams, often cause considerable grief to mothers. In the quote below, *BU* was feeling down about her daughter's progress at school. Support, understanding and encouragement were given liberally by *MC* and *LB*:

BU > MC: My girl's [school] *circular said there is English test today, but she said her teacher didn't say. These few weeks there's assessment continuously, don't know if there is assessment today.*

MC > BU: If the teacher didn't say, that means no assessment. The circular is just referring to general ... like, yesterday Chinese test, but not for Primary 5

MC > BU: If there is test, teacher will write it on the assignment book

BU > MC: OIC, I didn't revise. Should I say, I don't know how to revise.

MC > BU: Call me if you have problems!

BQ > MC: Don't know why, I don't feel so good these days ...I think my girl is under-level

M > BU: Why? There must be a reason. Don't put pressure on yourself.

BU > MC: In the last GS assessment she only got 42/50, I thought she wasn't that bad, but turns out she was second last in the class ☹

LB > BU:Don't be like this, cheer up!

LB > BU: Why the classmates are so smart? How do you know your girl is second last? Maybe there are a lot of second last!

MC > BU: Maybe she was careless, You need to give room for her to improve. If you know what she did wrong, just teach her. I want to tell you, doing exercises, is about quality not quantity. It's not that if you do a lot she will be okay. The important thing is she understands. ...

BU > MC: Yesterday her English assessment results came back. Again only 17/20. She is very careless. And Chinese test yesterday, she said she didn't know many of the answers. ☹ sigh. I find that I can't help her.

LB > BU: When my girl was in Primary1 she only had ranking in one term, but now she is doing okay!

BU > LB: So these few days, when I hear that she is like this, I feel so down. Like being dragged down, tied to a rock.

From the quote above, we can see that even though user *BU*'s daughter got 42 out of 50 in one assessment and 17 out of 20 in another these were not deemed good enough. Hong Kong's educational system is highly competitive, with free, compulsory education provided for nine years only. Schools are divided into government schools, subsidized schools, direct subsidy schools, private schools and international schools. Government and subsidized schools are 'banded', and in many schools years are also streamed into 'elite'

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and 'remedial' classes. Government funded degree places are available to only 18.7% of all young people in the relevant age group (University Grants Committee 2006). Allocation of these places is determined by public examination results, and attending tutorial classes and having private tutors are common amongst most middle-class families. Getting into the 'right' school is seen as paramount for a child's educational career, and failure to do so is perceived as having grave consequences for the child's future. The stress created by this situation can be stifling, and often results in much angst:

MB > MC: I was so angry. I asked her nicely to quickly finish her homework, she went to cut the bloody craft paper in the middle of it. It was already after 1 in the morning!

SL > MB: Wow!

MB > MC: her paper cutting is not an assignment. Her heart really was doing I don't know what!

MC > MB: Never mind, she is still small, she was tired too

SG > MB: She wanted to have a break, but didn't know how to manage her time, sigh.

MB > SG: Breather my ass! In the morning her dad let her play with the craft paper, so she's still thinking about playing ...

SG > MC: yes, my girl is like that too. She knows she has to do it, but when she sees the list she wants to get away from it .... Sigh.

MB > SG: And she never picks up stuff she left on the floor.

SG > MB: You can't let people like them play, they don't know how to distinguish what they should and shouldn't do!

JY > SG: They only care about play.

SG > JY: Yes, play first, everything else comes next.

MB > SG: I said to her, I told you nicely, you don't do it. You want me to scold you ...

MB > JY: You know my son is only 2 years old, he also needs mother ... My son will come in and ask me to stay with him, he doesn't want his daddy ...

JY > MB: ☹ You need to watch one kid each, if not, it's very hard on you. There is only one you.

The fact that *Happy Land* users are almost exclusively responsible for overseeing their children's academic careers plays no small part in contributing to their stress and anxiety. Routine tasks of monitoring children's homework, packing their school bags, helping them revise for tests and exams, are mostly done by the mothers. In families with older children who are in lower secondary school, users sometimes mentioned that their husbands took up some of the revising and supervising, but these were exceptions rather than the norm.

In the evenings, it was not unusual to see users in the chat room taking a break from their children's homework and revision. Whether at work or at home, the chat room was a place for working mothers to 'take a breather', as shown in the quote below:

SN > SL: tomorrow GS (general studies) test, 3 chapters, only finished 1 chapter now

SL > SN: take a break then

SN > SL: I want to go to sleep, it's 11:00 already! I let her play for 10 mins.

SL > SN: You can chat for 10 mins ☺

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SN > SL: yes, I need a break more than she does

S > SN: Where is your husband?

SN > SL: He went to bed an hour ago already!

Complaints about husbands and maids were also common themes. Husbands were often portrayed as incompetent and indifferent, playing only a minor role in parenting and domestic affairs generally. One user called her husband 'his majesty', because he never does anything around the house. Another called hers 'my boy's father' because she saw his 'function' as nothing more than the biological fathering her child; as that has been completed, he was seen as useless. Downplaying husbands' roles and ridiculing them for their domestic incompetence were often done in a light-hearted manner, but there were also plenty of cases where users were enraged by their husbands. Foreign domestic workers were another commonly criticized group, who were sometimes portrayed as incompetent, cunning, and dishonest. The following conversation shows how the husband and the maid were both seen as unable to take care of things in user *SU*'s absence:

SU > B: Today my husband is sick, stay at home to rest

SU > BB: The Indo[nesian maid] *saw him, didn't ask him if he wanted lunch, just ignored him*

BB > SU: Couldn't see him? She didn't realize he didn't go to work?

SU > BB: He is … he didn't ask her to cook him lunch, he just sat in front of the computer, when he realized he was hungry it was already 1pm

BB > SU: Maybe the maid thought he work for a while at home and then he would leave, didn't think he was sick

BB > SU: that's why you find the men when they are at home they want the maid to do something, they will call you to call home to talk to the maid, they won't go into the kitchen to tell the maid. When [my son's] *dad is at home he is usually like that*

SU > BB: Exactly

BB > SU: I told him, tell your son, ask him to go into the kitchen to tell the maid

SU > BB: But right after he will complain this and that about the maid, why don't you just talk to her yourself! So fussy.

BB > SU: yes yes, everything the maid does looks wrong to him, even when the dishcloth is not mopping up the water quickly enough … but he doesn't nag the maid, he nags me.

Domestic workers and other care givers, such as relatives and husbands, were seen to require constant and close supervision, and this supervision was done mainly through use of the telephone whilst these women are at work. However, telephone communication is audible to others in physical proximity, making it an unfeasible option for constant surveillance. Instead, new developments on the domestic front were reported and discussed in the forum and the chat room, each episode lasting anything between five minutes and two hours, allowing users to involve themselves in domestic affairs and to act out their family role identity as care givers whilst at work. As computer screen windows can be minimized or closed, chat can be paused or resumed at the click of a button, making it less visible to co-workers.

Studies on gender differences in communication tell us that women tend to react to outbursts of frustration by offering support, encouragement and understanding, rather than offering solutions (Arliss 1991; Weatherall 2002). *Happy Land* offered users the

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opportunity to obtain practical advice and information, but just as important was its function in allowing users to air their grievances and offer each other support and encouragement (Jackson et al. 2001). But how did the website compare to other forms of support which these women had access to? How did users value *Happy Land* as a source of support? Answers to these questions can be found in events that took place in late 2005, when the webmaster announced that, due to falling user numbers and financial problems, the site would be closed at the end of that year. This news caused much distress amongst users, who quickly came up with various suggestions to raise funds and boost traffic, including the introduction of a webmail service and monthly membership contribution. Regular users were more enthusiastic than ever in posting messages in the forum, and many introduced their friends to register as members in a bid to boost traffic. On the eve of the supposed final day of the website's operation, outpours of sadness and reminiscence of good old times filled the forums and the chat room ('Where will I go when this place is gone?' 'Where can I air my frustrations?') Some members actively prepared themselves for the loss of *Happy Land* by trying out alternative chat programmes and websites weeks before the deadline. And when the webmaster (in no small part moved by the actions of the regular users) entered the chat room to announce at the last minute that *Happy Land* would continue,[16] members were ecstatic. This episode demonstrates how important this virtual space is for these women and how this virtual space functions in ways which are just as, if not more, real than physical space.

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Conclusion: technology, space and gender

Two inter-related themes run through my analysis of *Happy Land*, namely the situation of working mothers in today's Hong Kong, and the use of internet-enabled space to perform and realize aspects of family gender role identity at the location of paid work. The relative lack of social and emotional support, the prevailing norm that a woman's role lies in the domestic sphere, and a competitive education system have created inordinate stress for many Hong Kong working mothers. *Happy Land* users have built a community of emotional and social support primarily via internet access at their workplace, where they act out their gender role identity as mothers whilst physically situated at their workplace.

Industrialization and urbanization have rendered domestic/private space a primarily reproductive space, leaving production largely to work/public space (Walby 1990; Gardner 1994). However, this divide between the public versus the private on the one hand and the productive versus the reproductive on the other is far from clear-cut, as there are many examples where this boundary is crossed. In Hong Kong, for instance, in the 1970s there were home factories and outsourced manufacturing work that was done mainly by women at home (Lui 1991); in the 1980s and 1990s direct sales and family oriented businesses such as *Amway*, *NuSkin* and *Disney* attracted many Hong Kong mothers to work as sales representatives outside the confines of a factory or an office. These work arrangements, which allow women to work in domestic and non-specific locations, benefit capital as well as these women and their families. They also offer women the flexibility to cope with both work and domestic demands. *Happy Land* functions in a similar way by enabling working mothers to bring domesticity via virtual space into the workplace, enabling them to enact their gender identity as mothers. As a community, *Happy Land* provides a platform for working mothers to cope with their family and work roles, to get social and emotional support, and to meet other women who are in similar situations on-line as well as off-line. Access to and perceptions of space(s) – increasingly shaped by technology – are important elements of gender identity (Massey 1994), a point also

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brought out in my study of *Happy Land*. While the workplace physically limits working mothers' ability to perform their duties as care givers, *Happy Land* enables them to perform the care giver identity via a context of social interaction in virtual space. In short, access to virtual space has made it possible for them to reduce the compromises to their gender role identity as mothers.

If space is a 'practiced place', in that it is made possible only through practice (De Certeau 1984, 117), then virtual space is 'practiced space' *par excellence*. To de Certeau, place is about elements, each being 'situated in its own "proper" and distinct location, a location it defines' (ibid.) (much like a workplace, located in an office, situated inside a building), whereas 'in relation to place, space is like the word when it is spoken ... it has none of the univocity or stability of a "proper"' (ibid.). This conceptualization is highlighted in *Happy Land*, where it is primarily users who have made this on-line community possible and their active participation that has defined its nature. Internet access, provided for the purpose of production, has been appropriated by *Happy Land* users to serve the purposes of reproduction, specifically for realizing and performing their roles as care givers of their family. Not only did *Happy Land* users have few scruples about chatting on-line at work; during work hours they also searched the internet for information related to their children (e.g. ex-curricular activities and on-line resources); or scanned, photocopied, and sent worksheets to one another. At the same time *Happy Land* provided a platform of mutual social and emotional support for users to cope with the pressures and frustrations of being working mothers. Life in *Happy Land* was and is inseparable from users' off-line lives. Specifically, it is those aspects of their lives as mothers, wives and care givers that are *extended* into virtual space (Doel and Clark 1999). Their situation at the workplace limits the enactment of their gender role as mothers, yet at the same time it is the workplace that allows them access to *Happy Land*, where those limits are stretched. The inter-dependency between on-line and off-line lives is especially apparent not only in how networks established in *Happy Land* developed into face-to-face friendships (largely made possibly by virtue of Hong Kong's high density urban space where most people live and work in relatively close physical proximity), and how users invited their off-line friends to join *Happy Land*, but also in how that connection is rooted in the realities of gender and family ideologies (i.e. the feminization of routine non-manual work and the gendered division of domestic labour).

However, several questions remain. Why does *Happy Land* not attract more users if it is so useful and important for working mothers? Why are there not more websites like *Happy Land*? These questions bring us back to the earlier discussion on how uses of virtual space are grounded in actual space–time. An internet-based community like *Happy Land* is accessible only to women who have relatively unrestricted access to the internet at work and at home, and only those with jobs which allow them the privacy and spare time to spend on the internet; for most Hong Kong women, however, these are matters of luxury.[17] Space and time made available by technology may have resulted in more coping methods for working mothers, but two important issues remain. Firstly these coping methods are only available for a small minority of working women. Secondly, they have also ameliorated or even pre-empted the pressure for more equitable, less gendered division of domestic labour in middle-class dual-earner households. In the case of *Happy Land*, despite the users' many complaints and frustrations about life as working mothers, the realities of the gendered division of domestic labour remain relatively unchallenged. More often than not, users mutually reaffirm their gender role identities through reiterating stereotypes and by offering one another emotional support in the chatroom. While the

possible transformative properties of virtual space are not apparent in this study, *Happy Land* is undoubtedly an important space in which users perform their gender identities.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to the three anonymous reviewers and the editors for their careful reading of my manuscript, and whose comments and suggestions have greatly helped improve this paper.

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Notes

1. So much so that there is discussion on whether 'internet studies' constitutes a discipline in its own right (see Hine 2006).
2. This is made evident in a recent television advertisement produced by the Women's Commission of Hong Kong, which shows dramatized images of women under stress from family and work demands. The voiceover tells the audience that family members need to be more supportive and understanding of the mother's difficulties, while the women themselves need to learn how to de-stress (Hong Kong Women's Commission, http://www.women.gov.hk). The message encourages women to manage both the best they can, preferably with the help and understanding of family members.
3. Luk and Shaffer (2005) found that Hong Kong's working mothers, more so than fathers, feel the pressure caused by the conflicting demands of work and family. A more recent telephone survey carried out in 2006 on more than 1000 married working women found that 67% of them need to work overtime, 37.3% often bring work home to finish, 81.4% experience pressure from work, and 65% felt pressure from dealing with family affairs. 80.7% said they could not deal with family matters due to tiredness from work, and 72.2% said they had reduced time spent with family due to work. Half of all respondents said they would give up a chance of promotion if it affects their family duties, and 30% said they want to quit their jobs to take care of their families (Hong Kong Women Development Association, http://www.hkwda.org.hk/cp-08-20.htm). In another telephone survey, a significant proportion of married women agreed that they are under stress because of the demands of work and family (*China Daily* [Hong Kong edition] 2006). This survey also found that more than 22% of married women in the 36–45 age group are stressed because of work and children. More than 20% said they did not get adequate support from social welfare or the community. Local newspapers have reported on mothers who are increasingly turning to parenting specialists to help them cope with their children (*South China Morning Post* 2006) and how work-family conflicts affects families (*The Standard* 2007).
4. Lee (2003) found that couples are more likely to seek help from family and relatives when practical help was needed, such as 'when there was someone sick in the family' and 'when the family was troubled by financial matters', but much less so when help is needed with work and career difficulties or when advice or information is needed. Compared to a similar survey conducted a decade ago, fewer men and women today seek help from family and close circles of kin and relatives, in all areas of life, from work and career-related difficulties to emotional support.
5. I will refer to the website by its original name *Happy Land*, as most of the data used here were collected prior to the name change.
6. Since then, the webmaster has taken this information off the website and had declined my request for further information.
7. The webmaster has declined my request for this information.
8. The website was featured in *Sing Tao Daily* (2001), in which the community spirit of the website was also highlighted.
9. Lurkers are internet users who only browse but do not participate.
10. A 'save' function on the website allows a registered user to save the chat of that day.
11. There is a 'private talk' function which allows users to speak to one another without the message being publicly visible.
12. All figures as of March 2006. After this date, all previous posting statistics were 'deleted'. Current statistics available on the website refers only to figures from April 2006 onwards.

13. According to the 2006 population census, 67% of all Hong Kong households are nuclear families, and the labour force participation rate of now married women is 49.6% (Census and Statistics Department 2006).
14. It is the norm that users announce where they are ('I'm using my son's computer now' or 'I'm still at work!'), what they are doing ('I'm watching Discovery Home and Health anyone else watching too?'), what they have been doing ('Went to Ocean Park today – just came back, so tired!') and what they are going to do ('I'm off to bed now, good night all!'). My description here is based on what users reveal in their chat messages.
15. 'c9' is short for *si-lai*, a Cantonese term referring to married women who are unkempt, ignorant and generally petty.
16. The webmaster announced that an easier to maintain web page interface and a smaller server will be used, in order to cut operating costs.
17. Hong Kong's internet penetration rate in 2005 is 68.2% – the highest in Asia (http://www.internetworldstats.com/top25.htm retrieved July 25, 2007) – but a 2000 survey shows that only 20.7% of employed persons had used internet services at work (Census and Statistics Department 2000). Low paid, low skilled and jobs with long hours in Hong Kong's service sectors (e.g. cleaners) are mostly taken up by women (Census and Statistics Department 2006).

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ABSTRACT TRANSLATION

La vida del 'en tierra feliz': usando el espacio virtual y haciendo maternidad en Hong-Kong

Éste papel examina cómo utiliza un grupo de madres-trabajadoras en Hong-Kong el Internet para desempeñar y realizar su trabajo pagado y sus identidades domésticas. El Internet es un espacio de 'tecnología-permitido' y también lo que llama Michel de Certeau 'un lugar practicado', donde sus características y funciones son determinadas necesariamente por las acciones y las prácticas de agentes. Haciendo uso de la observación participante y un análisis de una muestra de mensajes del chatroom y el foro de un sitio de web – 'Happy Land' – para padres manejado por los usuarios y basado en Hong Kong, se examina la relación entre éste espacio virtual y sus usuarios. Se encuentra

que el sitio de web se ha superado su característico de tecnología-mediada hacia una comunidad de amistades de 'cara-a-cara' y de apoyo social y emocional. En efecto, éste espacio virtual tiene un papel en la reproducción social de la familia contemporánea de dos ingresos a través de permitir que las madres-trabajadoras que utilizan el sitio de web realicen papeles en la producción y la reproducción respectivamente.

Palabras claves: Hong Kong; Internet; madres-trabajadoras; espacio virtual

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