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Introduction

Over recent years, as migration flows have increased while mobile networked media technologies have become ubiquitous features of many people’s everyday lives, researchers across a number of fields have directed attention to the interrelationships between human and media mobilities. Scholars have sought to understand how networked media articulate with people’s experiences of place, mobility and social relationships to become meaningful for migrants (Moores 2012), including how these media may transform migrants’ homeland nostalgia by compressing space and time (Mejía Estévez 2009; Metykova 2010); produce diasporic mediaspheres in ways both related to and different from the older diasporic worlds mediated by earlier media forms like newspapers, video and cinema (Cunningham and Sinclair eds 2000; Aksoy and Robins 2000; Sun 2005; Dayan 1999; Budarick 2011); necessitate “digital journeys” as migrants transition between digital environments in home and host countries (Chang and Gomes 2017; Chang, Gomes and Martin 2018); or transform migrant localities into translocalities: places whose “social architecture and relational topologies have been refigured on a transnational basis” (Conradson and McKay, 2007: 168; Collins 2009; Martin and Rizvi 2014). This article contributes to research on “mediatized migrants” (Hepp et al 2011) by analyzing the media practices of a group of Southeast Asian transmigrants interviewed in Melbourne, Australia. We are interested in how these transmigrants’ everyday media engagements articulate with the ways they experience, understand, imagine and feel the world as a series of locations, including how they see relations between those locations and their own relationships with particular places.

We distinguish our approach at the outset from sociological and psychological studies of media’s “impact” on immigrant “acculturation” or “integration”: a question around which a dedicated subfield has emerged in cross-cultural communication studies (see for examples Moon and Park 2007; Miglietta and Tartaglia 2009; Elias and Lemish 2011, Lim and Pham 2016). Like some other media and cultural studies scholars (Fortunati et al 2011: 2; Hepp et al 2011), we are concerned that the acculturation discourse tends to reify both host and origin cultures as bounded and changeless
totalities. This is arguably problematic for any culture in the era of global flows and cultural complexity (Hannerz 1992), but current studies of media engagements by highly mobile people—including the study we present here—suggest that such a reification of cultures as discrete and separable wholes is especially at odds with the experience of these groups (Ong 2009). Instead, we frame our work in conversation with an alternative strand of scholarship on how people’s everyday media practices connect with their experiences of space, place and geographies, both material and imagined (Appadurai 1996; Moores 2012; Couldry and McCarthy eds 2004). We work with a post-foundationalist, performative understanding of culture and geography, asking about “the materialization of lifeworlds through media-related practices” (Couldry 2016: 28–29); that is, how media bring places into being for migrants. In order to prepare the way for our analyses, we will first make three key points about how we conceptualize migration, media, place, and imagination.

First, we propose that our respondents are best understood as transmigrants rather than as simply immigrants. We draw this concept from the work of Nina Glick Schiller and co-authors (1995), who observe that transmigration is a characteristic experience of a growing number of migrants today, thanks in part to technological developments including cheap air travel and new communication technologies. Transmigrants are defined as:

immigrants whose daily lives depend on multiple and constant interconnections across international borders and whose public identities are configured in relationship to more than one nation-state. […] They] forge and sustain simultaneous multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement. (Schiller et al. 1995: 48)

Schiller and co-authors’ conceptualization of transmigration decisively challenges the presumption that migrants’ destiny lies simply in acculturating to the host country. Instead, the transmigrant lives day to day between nations, with connections and loyalties stretching across multiple locations. Such an understanding has been echoed in a wide range of studies on migrants’ transnational lives since the 1990s (Vertovec 2007; e.g. the extensive subfield on transnational families: Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 1997; Bryceson and Vuorela eds 2002; Parreñas 2005; Madianou 2012; Baldassar and Merla eds 2014).
We characterize our respondents as transmigrants based on a number of factors. First, not only were all of them first-generation migrants to Australia, but twelve of the eighteen had travelled along complex, multi-stop migration pathways en route to Melbourne. For example, Sylvie, 63, was born in China and had lived in Hong Kong, Singapore and Brunei before arriving in Melbourne; Yennie, 44, was born in Malaysia and lived in Singapore and Hong Kong before coming to Australia; and Angie, 41, described herself as “travelling back and forth between Singapore and Australia for the past five years.” Second, all but one of our respondents travelled internationally at least once a year—some, several times—most frequently back to their nation of birth but also elsewhere in Asia, Europe and north America, for leisure, work, and/or to visit geographically dispersed friends and relatives. Third, a majority (13) of our respondents retained residency rights in more than one nation, with citizenship in a Southeast Asian nation and Permanent Resident status in Australia (and, in one case, also in a second Southeast Asian nation). This predominance of residency rights held across multiple nations links logically with respondents’ orientation toward continuing transnational mobility. Finally, when asked where they planned to retire, a majority (13) of our respondents, including some who held Australian citizenship, expressed uncertainty about their ultimate destination; a fourteenth stated that she planned to spend her retirement moving between Melbourne and Singapore. In other words, even before we take into account their transnational media practices, most of our respondents could be seen as living somewhat in motion across geographic contexts—a form of mobility that was facilitated in significant measure by their socio-economically privileged status as professional-class adults.

Second, rather than seeking focused information about how respondents consume specific media texts or modes of delivery, we took an experiential approach, asking simply: What media content did respondents regularly engage in the course of their daily lives? Where did it come from, how did they access it, and what did it mean to them? This approach is based on a bottom-up, quasi-phenomenological understanding of how media work that takes people’s everyday practices as primary. It draws on a strand of materialist work in media studies that has been dubbed “non-mediacentric” media studies (e.g. Morley 2009; Hepp 2009; Ong 2009; Metykova 2010; Moores 2012; Andersson 2012; Martin and Rizvi 2014). To approach media this way is to see it as a series of practices inextricably interwoven with people’s wider everyday activities (Couldry 2004); it is not to understand media as a sphere separable from other
domains of life, but rather to see “media as culture” and the human world as a “media world” (Bird 2003: 2, emphasis in original). In this way, the ensemble of media that people habitually engage—theorized by Mirca Madianou and Daniel Miller as “polymedia” (2012) and by Nick Couldry as the “media manifold” (2016)—comes to appear as a type of environment, rather than discrete texts and technologies. In advancing his theory of telemediatization—“the increasing implication of electronic communications and media systems in the constitution of everyday experience” (Tomlinson 2007: 94)—John Tomlinson advocates an approach that sustains a “focus on the ‘point of delivery,’ that is, on the interface between the experiencing subject and the ensemble of media technology-system-institution” in order to tackle the key question of “the mode in which the world is constituted, made present for us—made immediate—through telemediatization” (2007: 97). Like Tomlinson’s, our study is concerned at root with how the world—as a series of places and movements between places—is made present for our respondents through their media engagements.

Our third point concerns how we understand the inter-relationships among media, place and imagination. Many scholars across the spatial disciplines have long shared a materialist understanding of places as constituted through human activity: an assumption that places are brought into being through the practices of their inhabitants (Lefebvre 1991). This can be related to media practices in (at least) two ways. First, as Shaun Moores observes, when we understand places as constituted through spatial practices, then as a subset of such practices, “media uses [can be seen] as place-constituting activities, among a range of other such activities in everyday living” (Moores 2012: 46). Second, if, as Gill Valentine has argued, the construction of space includes an imaginative aspect based on “how we imagine space and its boundaries, how we imagine whose space it is, and how we construct ‘self’ and ‘other’” (Valentine 1999: 48), then our responses to media representations clearly play a role in the constitution of such imagined geographies (Appadurai 1996). This article is primarily concerned with the second of these processes: the ways in which transmigrants’ quotidian engagements with media content articulate with their understandings of particular places (including “home,” “Australia,” “Melbourne” and “the world”). At the broadest level, in studying their everyday media uses, we are interested in our interviewees’ imaginations of and orientations toward particular places and social spaces under conditions of intensified personal and media mobilities. Through this investigation, we hope to contribute to the transdisciplinary body of scholarship that is
working to understand people’s experiences of locality, mobility, and sociality in a
globalizing media world (Bird 2003).

Methods

Between May and July 2013, [Author A] (herself a member of the community under study) conducted in-depth, semi-structured qualitative interviews with eighteen ethnically Chinese migrants in Melbourne, Australia: twelve from Malaysia, five from Singapore and one from Brunei Darussalam. Respondents were selected on the basis of place of birth (Southeast Asia), ethnicity (Chinese), residency status (permanent residents [13] or citizens [5] of Australia), migration status (first generation), place of residence (Melbourne), age and occupation (working adults) and mobility patterns (travelling internationally at least once a year). Respondents were all professional-class adults, aged between 28 and 63; as skilled migrants, they belong to Australia’s largest migrant category (Australian Government 2016). They were fluent in English and had varying levels of proficiency in a number of Chinese languages prominent in the Sinophone communities of Southeast Asia, including Cantonese, Hokkien, Mandarin, Hainanese, and Teochew; some also knew some Malay. Respondents had lived in Australia for a total of between two and seventeen years, with one outlier (Sylvie, 63) who had lived there for thirty-three years. Although respondents form a coherent group based on these common characteristics, the small size of the sample means that we cannot claim representative status for our findings; instead, we analyse respondents’ personal narratives qualitatively to add to scholarly understandings of transmigrant media experiences more broadly.

The Australian city of Melbourne offers an interesting context for this study in light of its status as one of the nation’s two major immigrant-receiving cities (along with Sydney) and its strong urban multiculture (Lobo 2010; Forrest and Dunn 2010): characteristics that as we will see below, some respondents associated with the positive value of cosmopolitanism.2 Our questions to respondents focused on their migration histories; their media consumption practices in Melbourne in the rich context of their wider everyday practices in the present, including travel; and their subjective responses to the media they habitually engaged. Guided by our interviewees’ responses, we include consideration of their uses of legacy media (free-to-air and satellite TV, radio, print newspapers, magazines, and DVDs) as well as new electronic and online media (podcasts, blogs, online news and video, online TV). Our focus is on respondents’
engagements with narrative, entertainment and informational media content, as distinct from their uses of media platforms for the purposes of interpersonal communication, which is a major topic meriting separate study (cf. Collins 2009; Madianou and Miller 2012; Lim, Pham and Cheong 2016)—although these two types of usage increasingly bleed into each other.

We found through our interviews that this group of transmigrants demonstrated three notable orientations toward the media they habitually engaged, each of which was linked to an imagined geography: the homeland, Australia/Melbourne, and the global. First: in the memorial-affective orientation, respondents re-engaged Sinophone media familiar from remembered pre-migration childhood and family contexts. Second, respondents primarily took an ambivalent-localizing orientation toward the Australian legacy media they consumed. Several framed these as helping them understand and relate to Australian culture, but this was tempered by their critiques of the parochial and crypto-racist cast of much “Aussie” media, which created a blockage to identification. Third, in the cosmopolitan-global orientation, respondents engaged global corporate, largely Anglophone media in ways that reinforced their sense of themselves as mobile and cosmopolitan. Finally and most importantly, we noted that in our respondents’ everyday experience, these three orientations were often not separate or even separable, but woven into complex admixtures. All respondents habitually engaged a variety of media affording all three orientations, quite often in the course of a single day. And under some circumstances, certain media could activate two or more simultaneous identifications across of the registers of homeland nostalgia, Australian localization, and / or global cosmopolitanism. We consider each of these three orientations in turn before turning to the examples that are most crucial to our central argument: those that demonstrate their interweaving.

Memorial-affective: Remembering homeland

Virtually the only homeland-produced media that our respondents consumed regularly was online news from Singapore and Malaysia. But interestingly, evocative of far richer nostalgic resonance were Cantonese TV dramas produced by Hong Kong’s TVB network, a form of popular Sinophone media that was highly mobile across Southeast Asian Chinese communities in our respondents’ younger years (underlining the central role of generation in shaping media habits based on memory). These were
accessed largely online and functioned as vehicles for linguistic, cultural, and family memory. For example Sufang (a 45 year-old architect from Malaysia, in Australia eight years at the time of interview) observed:

When we first came here, we tried very hard […] the first two years I think, to connect back to the culture where we left—very intensely tried to, we actively got DVDs and all that to watch, because there is nothing here that you could [watch]. At least now you can find more Chinese shows on SBS [Australia’s multicultural broadcaster], but it was hardly available before, you know; you actually [had] to get DVDs or satellite. […] My friend […] is from Taiwan, so we used to get Fenghuang, Phoenix [a Hong Kong-based Mandarin and Cantonese satellite TV channel], which is quite good. The funny thing is that I don’t understand a lot of the Chinese, but it is just good to have, to hear it when we first came. It was very good to think that we have got that access to the Chinese shows and the culture. Because truthfully when I was back in Malaysia, I hardly watched Chinese shows. […] But when I came here, I actually missed having that option to do that.

Sufang’s remembered engagements with Sinophone media highlight the affective basis of her mediatized homeland nostalgia: its roots in sensory, bodily, and non-cognitive engagements. It was not media content that she craved so much as the remembered aural experience of being immersed in Chinese languages and the feel of the familiar “culture.”

Bieng (a 35 year-old lecturer in Business studies from Malaysia, six years in Australia at the time of interview) made comparable observations:

Since I got here, I feel that I got disconnected from the Asian background or news or movies, because you only get to watch some Asian movies late at night on one of the Australian channels. So I did have this problem. Then I complained to my husband and friends that I have not heard or watched any sort of Asian Chinese Cantonese type of movie, and I feel lost. So only up to recently we got a TV that is connected to internet, then only I get to watch some sort of Asian movies. […] I am finally connected back to some culture that I am familiar with, and some movies that I watched when I was young, ten or eight years old, and some languages that I am familiar with.
Bieng explicitly links her desire for familiar Cantonese language and media with childhood memory: the affective resonance of media she knew as a child of eight or ten becomes a remedy for her feeling of being “lost.”

**Ambivalent-localizing: Learning Australia/ Melbourne**

In addition to seeking out regional Sinophone media to assuage homesickness, all of our respondents also regularly engaged Anglophone Australian media. These included some online sources, especially for news, but most Australian media, at both local (Melbourne) and national levels, were engaged in the “old media” forms of hard-copy print, drivetime radio, and free-to-air TV. Those respondents who spoke in detail about their engagements with local radio and TV, in particular, often framed these as a means of developing an understanding of Australia and Australians. Hwan, a 44 year-old Singaporean market researcher who had been in Australia for 15 years at the time of interview regularly read the free local area *Leader* newspaper in the suburb where she lived, as well as accessing news via the ABC News 24 free-to-air TV channel and Facebook links. She watched a range of Australian and American reality, talk, and drama programs on free-to-air TV, and Chinese historical dramas on DVDs from Singapore. Hwan listened to local radio each morning and evening, and discussed it as follows:

I like the people who host 104.3 in the morning, that’s why I listen to them; the people who host the program, I like to listen to them banter. They talk about topical things that happen in Australia in a casual manner, they are quite different from your normal talk show host like Alan Jones who gets really—he claims to have an in depth understanding of politics, he claims to have an unbiased view of everything that is happening in Australia, but I find his view a little too biased. […] So […] these 104.3 guys, these two jokers, they are basically like DJs and celebrities. They are called Brig and Lehmo, they are very funny but sometimes they will also talk about fairly serious things, like for example they will say: “Let’s talk about the Bali Six. What does Australia think? Do you think we should just let them rot in their cells because they shouldn’t be doing this in the first place, so why should we be spending so much money trying to get them out: they
deserve what they get? So what does Australia think?” So I basically get the pulse of what is happening in the nation through informal channels like this.

In her discussion of the morning radio talk show as a good way to “get the pulse” of Australian public opinion, including through call-in segments on topical issues (like the “Bali Six”: six Australians sentenced to the death penalty in Indonesia for drug trafficking) Hwan interestingly contrasts the comic DJ duo with conservative radio shock jock Alan Jones. Jones, an outspoken critic of immigration who is regularly called out for his anti-Muslim racism, speaks with an obvious bias that switches Hwan off to his claims to represent “everything that’s happening in Australia,” whereas Brig and Lehmo’s informal, colloquial approach to matters of topical interest gives her the sense she is learning about what’s going on in the minds of the Australian-born.

Similarly, IT consultant Malcolm (born in Malaysia, in Australia eight years at the time of interview) described his engagement with reality home renovation TV show The Block:

I guess the shows like The Block where they are talking about home renovations, that’s a very Australian culture of do-it-yourself kind of thing: “Ah yes, we can just do it,” […] everything is doable. […] So that is a big part of Australian culture I think. […] It gives you some common topics to talk about. […] It tells me a bit more of their—you know the people at work are actually DIY: when I talk about things like “I need to do this, I need to do that, I need to get someone to do this for me,” they will look at me and say, “You can do it yourself.” So I get the kind of—I get where they are coming from.

However, the flipside of the frequently observed capacity for drivetime radio and free-to-air pop-factual TV to facilitate the transmigrants’ capacity to “get where [Australians are] coming from” was Australian media’s—especially news and drama’s—simultaneous tendency to alienate them with its often xenophobic, parochial, or crypto-racist cast. We already see a glimpse of this above, in Hwan’s alienation by shock jock Alan Jones. Along similar lines, Bieng (introduced above) observed:

I find that the Australian news is very closed, closed to the outside world. They only look into what is happening in Australia mostly, I would say ninety percent
of it, and probably only ten percent overseas [or] anything outside. […] So eventually, after a while, I stop looking [at] or reading Australian news because it is just too localized […] so that I don’t know what is going on outside. So that’s why I reverted back to CNN. At least they will push you some information that you are interested in about Asia, about US, not just Australia. […] I think if Australia wants to become an open country and society, they need to have more foreign [media] than what they are doing now, otherwise people will not feel […] socially accepted in Australia.

Other respondents even more explicitly contrasted “Aussie” media—especially the long-running, notoriously lily-white suburban soaps Neighbours and Home and Away—with the type of urban, cosmopolitan identity with which they would more readily identify. For example Sufang (introduced above) framed her enjoyment of Network Ten’s drama Offspring in terms of its contrast with “typical Aussie” media and culture:

*Offspring* […] is actually filmed in Melbourne. And Melbourne is quite cosmopolitan in its approach, so that show is not very typical of […] an Aussie family, I think honestly—as opposed to *Packed to the Rafters* [which is] probably a lot more Aussie. And I think even more so would be *Home and Away* and *Neighbours*, which has been here years and years. The stories [in *Offspring*] are not typically Aussie, I can’t imagine everybody’s lives have gone though the things they do but the language they use, the choice of topics that they talk about is quite broad. […] It is not very colloquial, it is probably local to Melbourne because Melbourne is very cosmopolitan. But […] you don’t need that accent: if you change the accent [in *Offspring*] for example, you could probably fit [it] into another country I think. […] It doesn’t exclude as long as you are a fairly modern family, it is quite inclusive in the topics; most people would have gone through one of the family members’ predicaments.

Sufang contrasts *Offspring*’s cosmopolitanism, urban Melbourne focus, global generalizability and inclusiveness with the parochialism, suburban focus, “Aussie”-specificity and exclusiveness of the other three dramas she mentions (all of which are set in suburbia rather than inner-city neighbourhoods, and feature virtually all-white
casts). Sufang describes *Offspring* as “not typically Aussie” because she can’t imagine that most Australians (implicitly, other than Melbournians) would have had the experiences of the show’s characters—yet she also describes it as inclusive because “most people” (implicitly, other than “Aussies”) would have had some of these experiences. The narrow, exclusive, national category of the “Aussie” is thus constructed as the opposite of the broader, inclusive, Melbourne-related category of the “cosmopolitan,” with which Sufang herself clearly identifies.

Kheng, a 43 year-old Malaysian consultant who had lived in Australia for 18 years at the time of interview, sketched out a similar conceptual scheme. After telling [Author A] that he watched no local dramas because shows like *Neighbours* fail to provide “a good representation of the modern Australian society,” Kheng elaborated on the aspect of Australian society with which he more readily identified:

I see myself as more in the evolving modern urbanized city kind of Australian society, just because that’s where I live in, that’s where I work and communicate to people in this community. It may not be the majority or best representative of Australia, but I see myself in the urbanized community of Australia, which means it will have a lot of migrants and always changing with new migrants and new cultures.

Sufang and Kheng’s positive valuation of a migrant-friendly, cosmopolitan outlook in media they associate with urban Australia points the way to the third major media orientation we identified among our respondents.

**Cosmopolitan-global: Imagining mobility**

Unlike local, national, homeland or Asian-regional media, global media both were engaged across a very wide variety of delivery systems (online, on DVD, and via both free-to-air and subscription TV) and spanned the spectrum from hard news and information-seeking to entertainment. Examples included American and British news services, global news aggregators, US TV dramas accessed online or via Australian free-to-air channels, Hollywood and other popular Anglophone movies accessed online or via video subscription services, hobby media, and international travelogues. It was clear from respondents’ repeated mentions of such global examples that they made up a significant portion of their media repertoires. CJ, a Singaporean business studies
academic who was 44 years old and had spent seven years in Australia at the time of interview, provided a summary definition of such media:

It’s because of the internet, they are more readily available […] For example, when we came to Australia, we started to watch *Modern Family* and *30 Rock* and *Big Bang Theory*: these are not Australian shows. […] So we are watching it because they are funny, they are interesting, they are like internationally popular things. I think every country you go, you can find shows like *30 Rock*, or [Indian] *3 Idiots* or things like that. You know some things are just popular culture, like “Gangnam Style”: it’s not specific to a country.

Such global media evoked in our respondents an association with their valuation of cosmopolitanism and mobility. Angie is a Singaporean librarian who undertook her bachelor’s degree in Hawai‘i, was 41 at the time of interview, and described herself as travelling back and forth between Australia and Singapore for the past five years. She read Yahoo News (which tailored the contents to either Australia or Singapore, based on her current location) and accessed a range of other Singaporean news services from Australia, while also enjoying Australian reality TV shows and Chinese movies on SBS2. Interestingly, when asked to name a media example with which she strongly identified in terms of cultural identity, after a long pause, Angie finally responded as follows:

I guess I can’t really say a particular movie or whatever, but for me, I love watching travel channels a lot, so one of the channels I usually watch is Discovery Adventure and Travel. I think it is now [called] Travel and Living. […] That helped me get very much interested in travelling, and that is actually part of me because I enjoy travelling very much, experiencing different cultures, different food, different adventures. […] I think [my watching] started in my university years when I wanted to explore different parts of the world. I would be hopping around the different states in the US when I was studying there. It continued throughout my working life, so even though I came back to Singapore, I was like travelling two or three times a year.
Angie’s strongest sense of cultural identification through media turns out not to be with a geographically-based culture at all, but instead with her desire for and experience of the condition of mobility itself, emblematized in the American Discovery Travel and Living Channel.

**Entangled engagements, hybrid geographies**

In focusing in turn on each of the three main orientations toward media engagement that we noted among our respondents, we may have risked giving the impression that these orientations are completely separate, working in isolation from one other and perhaps monopolizing individuals such that migrant A could be described as having a memorial-affective orientation, whereas migrant B is more cosmopolitan-global, and so on. Such an approach has been taken by Andreas Hepp and co-authors (2011), who classify the Moroccan, Russian and Turkish migrants they interviewed in Germany according to a taxonomy that distinguishes between “origin-,” “ethno-“ (diaspora) and “world-oriented” individuals. But such neat classification proves impossible in our sample, since respondents habitually engaged a wide variety of media that typically included examples from across local, national, homeland, Asian-regional and global Anglophone mediaspheres, resulting in daily media engagements strongly marked by geo-cultural hybridity. The interweaving of their media orientations goes further, as well, insofar as when analysed in the rich contexts of transmigrants’ wider experiences, it emerges that certain media could activate two or more simultaneous orientations, so that these orientations become inseparably entangled. Below, we offer two examples by way of illustration.

Jade is a Singaporean who had lived in Australia for two years and was 57 at the time of interview. She planned to spend her retirement years living between Singapore and Melbourne, had travelled extensively in the past, and currently travelled at least twice a year back to Singapore, to London to visit friends, or to visit her two daughters who were studying in California. She also enjoyed travelling within Australia, and described a memorable extended road trip with a friend through country towns along Australia’s east coast. She had learned knitting while in Melbourne, and had taken European cookery classes. Like other respondents, Jade’s media habits were wide-ranging, spanning global media, homeland news, local news, and Australian national television. But what most stood out during Jade’s interview was her reflexivity
regarding her project of watching mainland Chinese films on DVDs from Melbourne City Library. She recalled:

Initially when I first got here, […] I kind of miss, I truly miss the Chinese movies, I don’t know why. […] So I went to borrow Chinese made films, made by mainland China. […] From [the] City Library. [Director] Zhang Yimou and some of the others have quite deep meaning. […] I enjoyed those shows. […] I actually watch so many that I have never seen before. I have never in my life seen so many Chinese movies previously, because in Singapore I was really busy […]. For the first time [here] I managed not even the Hong Kong movies, you know, but it is [from] mainland China. I watched it: the civilization, went through a bit of their history, went through how they went through the Mao Zedong time and after the Mao Zedong time, how they revolutionize, how the people live their lives even though their lives in the villages are very tough. […] To me it was an eye opener. I have been back to China several times already. […] I have been back quite many times into the villages […] to my Dad’s kampong [village].

Jade’s discussion of Chinese-language media as a remedy for homesickness soon after arrival in Australia echoes the stories told by Sufang and Bieng, above. But instead of seeking out familiar Hong Kong fare, Jade sought mainland Chinese Fifth Generation arthouse films, which she had actually never seen before. Nevertheless, the Chinese DVDs symbolically articulated with Jade’s sense of her family history through her memories of return visits to her father’s ancestral village on the Chinese mainland (described using the Malay word, kampong). But while Jade’s engagement with these films began as a kind of phantasmatic homeland-seeking, watching them soon became an outward-focused, cosmopolitan self-education project. Through the films, Jade informally studied up on Chinese social history, exercising her characteristic zeal for cultural exploration through media she had originally sought out for their cultural and linguistic familiarity.

Intriguingly, Jade went on to explain how the learning journey that began with the Chinese films ultimately continued in other directions:

But then, now this year […] I didn’t borrow so much of the Chinese movies anymore. I began to see another side of people around me like Europeans. So I
began to borrow a lot of DVDs from Italy—but not Italian-speaking, they are English-speaking kind of shows. […] Showing scenes of Italy and maybe the food and the walks. Italy, France, England […]. I began to look for another side of it because after I have satisfied the hunger of the Asian side and I thought enough of the Asian, I began to look towards Europe. […] I just move on from the Asian world into the European world. […] I was interested in their culture, like really interested in how they live, their food—like how would a farmer live in Greece for example or in a part of the countryside in Italy in Tuscany, or how would a French family live. […] I wanted to know how the Welshmen for example, the different Irishmen, how do they live.

Here it is as if Jade’s self-educational orientation toward the Chinese films has expanded into a more generalized cosmopolitan orientation toward the wider world. Together with Jade’s broader everyday practices, including her European cooking classes and frequent travels, her engagements with the Europe-themed travel and lifestyle programs demonstrate a cosmopolitan orientation in both ethos and social practice (Christensen and Jansson 2015: 32). We see here an example of transmigrant media engagements spanning and connecting both a homeland-directed memorial-affective orientation (through regional Chinese-language media), and a global-cosmopolitan orientation privileging the subject’s capacity for imaginative and physical mobility (through global Anglophone media). This assemblage is materially enabled, in turn, by Jade’s access to local-level legacy media resources in Melbourne: DVDs at her local library.

35 year-old Malaysian Bieng was introduced above, but we have yet to explore the affiliation at the heart of her sense of self and belonging as expressed in her interview: her membership of a transnational Buddhist community. Bieng mentioned two instances of media practices relating directly to her Buddhist affiliation. First, she engaged with a Facebook group: “Every Thursday we have a sutra reading group. […] They sometimes put up on the Facebook certain clips and teachings in a very short manner, [which] I like to read as well.” Second, when asked to name a media text with which she had identified particularly strongly, Bieng cited a Chinese Buddhist film:

I quite like The 6th Patriarch, the Liu Zu Hui Neng movie. Yes, and it touches me a lot. And the idioms that he wrote, the verses that he wrote, it’s me. When I
watch it, I say “That’s me!” That is something that I can associate [with], that is something that I am very familiar with in terms of the temple lifestyle, chanting, meditation. [...] The 6th Patriarch, it was actually shown on the internet, it came out in the cinema too.

Looking into Bieng’s personal history, it becomes clear that underlying the intense interpellative power of the film—its capacity to make her feel, “That’s me!”—is her deep attachment to Buddhist beliefs and practices. She explained how her whole family in Malaysia had followed a particular master, since before her birth. The master had multiple temples across Malaysia, and was “the first person who entered US and started preaching Buddhism [...] very long ago, 1960s.” After she moved to Singapore, Bieng lost touch with the master’s group, only to reconnect after moving to Melbourne. Bieng’s renewed affiliation with the master now lent impetus to her activities across both the US and Melbourne:

Initially I started [in Melbourne] with [ Taiwanese Buddhist group] Fo Guang Shan, but now I got back with my master who is from US. That is why every year I go to US, and I do a lot of translation and help out with them via internet. So we have a small group and we started a small office for free book distribution for that particular master. [...] We started the so-called Melbourne Dharma Circle [...] we usually would have gathering at [a member’s workplace] or at our home where we do our meditation. [...] We just had a dharma talk not too long ago, we flew in two dharma masters: one from US, a PhD. [...] and I actually invited [...] another nun [...] she is a Taiwanese.

Bieng’s involvement with the master and his transnational Buddhist group sees her making far-flung connections across Malaysia, the USA, Taiwan and Australia. She also noted how she particularly valued the chance to provide meditation instruction to her mainland Chinese friends, since in China they’d had no chance to learn about the practice. And when asked about her sense of community belonging, Bieng linked it with her membership in the transnational religious group rather than any specific geo-cultural territory:
I always feel home when I go back to that master’s temple. It’s always home to me no matter where it is. I think that’s the community you are referring to: it’s not tied down by location. Because they have a temple in Gold Coast, when I go back there, I feel I am home, I treat everything like my house; and when I go to […] their San Francisco branch, I feel like it’s my home. So I think that’s my community. […] I feel a sense of belonging, I feel home. Even though the people around me could be someone I have never met, I still feel that this is the place.

The life history and quotes above illustrate that Bieng’s intense affinity with the religious master whose teachings she follows spans—and in spanning, interweaves—a wide range of spatial registers. Her sense of connection with the master and his followers is global, insofar as she experiences the temples in San Francisco, the Gold Coast, and Malaysia as a kind of transcendental home that is “not tied down by location.” At the same time, Bieng’s affective connection with the master’s teachings seems connected with a primordial homeland memory, since her family had followed this master’s teachings during her childhood in Malaysia, “even before [she] was born.” Her connections with the group are also Asian-regional, in that they bring her into contact with Taiwanese and mainland Chinese practitioners and prompt her intense identification with a Sinophone film. Finally, these connections are local insofar as Bieng and her husband have created an outpost of the group in Melbourne, run both online via Facebook, and offline in the meetings at various members’ homes and workplaces around the city. So, when Bieng is interacting on the Melbourne Dharma Circle’s Facebook page or watching The Sixth Patriarch via online video streaming, is she engaging with homeland, Asian-regional, Melbourne-local, or global media? The answer, of course, is simply yes: experientially, much of the time, she is engaging all of these overlapping registers simultaneously.

**Conclusion: Transmigrant media and topological space**

Taking an experiential perspective on the media engagements of these professional-class transmigrants suggests that for them the locations of homeland, host country, local neighbourhood and global culture cannot be understood as discrete or separable. Instead, their practical, affective, and imaginative engagements with each of these locations seem inextricably entangled, such that a film sought out for its homely affective resonance leads to cosmopolitan exploration of unfamiliar cultures; or a
Facebook page run by a community group in Melbourne articulates both with deeply embodied homeland memory and with a global sense of belonging that transcends geography. To return to the conceptual starting points we introduced in the first part of this article: if people’s media uses contribute to materializing their lifeworlds (Tomlinson 2007; Couldry 2016), then these transmigrants’ media engagements produce worlds where locations across a wide range of spatial registers materialize as juxtaposed and imbricated. It might be assumed that the ready availability of networked digital media, which enables transmigrants to stream or download homeland, regional and global media content, would facilitate their disembedding from their immediate locality. However, the extent to which our respondents are simultaneously engaged by local and national legacy media, such as radio and free-to-air television, is striking. As we have seen, some respondents recalled early days in Australia as a dark time when occasional Sinophone movies aired by multicultural TV broadcaster SBS barely met their needs, before more plentiful and on-demand content from the region became available online. But these transmigrants’ accounts do not suggest that the new availability of networked digital media somehow disengages them from local social life. Instead, the spatial registers they inhabit hybridize due to the intermingling of local, national, regional, global and homeland media in their everyday experience.

The spatial imaginaries revealed in our respondents’ discussions also tend in some cases to confound expectations about the meaning and value of particular places. Unsurprisingly, mainstream Australian legacy media including radio shock jocks, white suburban soap operas and TV news were regularly experienced by these transmigrants as exclusionary, parochial and alienating. But they experienced homely affect not so much through actual homeland media as through transnational Sinophone media and (in Bieng’s case) in media associated with a transnational religious community. Cosmopolitanism as a positive value, meanwhile, was associated not only with global media, as one might expect, but also with mainland Chinese films as an educational resource, and with media associated with Melbourne as an urban multiculture. Parochialism and cultural exclusivity are tethered to host-country national media, then, but these respondents’ sense of homeliness is rather deterritorialized, while for them cosmopolitanism attaches at different times to Asian regional, global Anglophone, and local Melbourne media.

These transmigrants’ mediated experiences of place could be taken to support geographer Ash Amin’s proposal that the ontology of spatiality is transforming in the
era of globalization (Amin 2002). With intensifying mobility and connectivity, Amin observes, people’s experiences of location become increasingly de-tethered from the necessity for geographic contiguity, so that space as experienced may change shape: stretch or crumple or twist or contract. From this perspective, “we cannot assume that local happenings or geographies are ontologically separable from those ‘out there’” in global space; and positivist understandings of space, which assume the ontological givenness of space as territory and scale, are challenged by “a topology marked by overlapping near—far relations” (Amin 2002: 386). Amin therefore proposes:

a topological sense of space and place, a sense of geographies constituted through the folds, undulations, and overlaps that natural and social practices normally assume, without any a priori assumption of geographies of relations nested in territorial or geometric space. (2002: 389)

Importantly, this does not mean that location ceases to matter. Rather, people—perhaps especially hyper-mobile people like transmigrants—come to inhabit multiple places simultaneously, and as a constitutive condition of their inhabitation of any given locality (Martin and Rizvi 2014). This is precisely what our interviews reveal: our respondents’ engagements with an intensely syncretic media repertoire suggest that they are simultaneously inhabiting the in-here (the Melbourne local, the Australian national) and the out-there (the homeland, the Asian-regional, the global) in ways that undercut any ontological distinction between near and far, manifesting their lifeworlds instead as forms of topological geography. While Amin’s speculations on transforming geographic ontology refer to people’s experiences of place very broadly in a global context of intensifying media and human mobilities, transmigrants opens up these possibilities particularly clearly, given their multiple mediated attachments to a range of different physical, affective and imagined places.

All of this underlines the need to continue complicating conceptualizations of here/ there, homeland/ hostland, and local/ global in our study of migrant media use. In some cases, as we have seen, particular media engagements do indeed facilitate or hinder migrants’ sense of belonging, and that is certainly important to understand—but an understanding that stops here cannot grasp the complexity of the articulations people experience between migration, media, and place today. Our respondents’ media engagements enable the everyday intertwining and unpredictable hybridization of
attachments to homeland, host country, and a range of other locations, material and imagined in ways that thoroughly scramble the coordinates of approaches based on the assumption of the self-evident discreteness of cultures and locations.

Works Cited


http://www.lse.ac.uk/media@lse/research/mediaWorkingPapers/pdf/EWP21.pdf


Notes

1 All respondent names are pseudonyms; other proper names have also been changed in cases where they might identify individual participants.

2 Recent Census figures show that Melbourne’s population is characterised by higher-than-national-average concentrations of residents with non-Anglo ancestry and country of birth, as well as a greater proportion of residents with both parents born overseas than those with both parents born in Australia, inverting the national trend (ABS 2016).

3 Although these orientations resonate in some ways with the findings of Elias and Lemish among Russian immigrants in Israel and Germany (2011), our approach is distinct in that we do not evaluate the effects of homeland, host and global media in advancing cultural transmission versus integration. There is also an echo here of Hepp et al’s (2011) “origin-, ethno- and world-orientations”: see discussion below for more on this.

4 There have been several Chinese-language films and series released with this or closely related titles; it’s not clear which one Bieng referred to.
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