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Leaving children behind for cross-border education: Unveiling the emotional agency of international post-graduate student mothers

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Abstract

Despite growing interest in the internationalisation of higher education, the experiences of international student parents, particularly international student mothers, remain largely marginalised in research and policy. This paper examines the emotional agency of international student mothers who leave their children behind in their home countries to pursue education abroad. Focusing on the narratives of nine Vietnamese post-graduate student mothers, the study illustrates how these mothers navigated separation, caregiving and family dynamics across borders. It reveals how they reframed maternal absence, resisted deficit discourses and negotiated care responsibilities through emotional and spatial strategies. This study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the intersections between mobility, motherhood and emotion in the lives of transnationally mobile female students. It argues that the simplistic narratives of international students focusing only on their academic and social integration in the host countries, with no reference to their left-behind family, cannot account for the diversity in their lived experiences and overlook their challenges and emotional experiences.

KEYWORDS

emotional agency, international student mothers, separation, spatialised emotion

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Key insights

What is the main issue that the paper addresses?

The paper investigates international student mothers' decision to leave their children behind and their emotional agency.

What are the main insights that the paper provides?

Emotional agency enables mothers to negotiate and rework maternal frameworks and cultural scripts. Also, international education is a site of emotional capital access and production for international student mothers.

INTRODUCTION

Despite the extensive scholarship on international student experiences such as intercultural adjustment, learning transitions and social integration (Gao, 2021; Inouye et al., 2022; Li, 2021; Nadeem et al., 2020; Wu, 2015), the specific circumstances of international graduate student mothers and their experiences of transformative self-formation remain largely absent. When it comes to being a student, existing discussions often assume a gender-neutral subject, thereby neglecting the particular challenges of students who simultaneously inhabit multiple roles, including that of mother (Phan et al., 2024; Zhang, 2020). They are marginalised not only in institutional policies but also within the physical and social spaces of universities (Moreau & Kerner, 2015). This invisibility becomes more significant as the caregiving responsibilities of international students are often overlooked in institutional and scholarly consideration (some exceptions include Knopf et al., 2022; Phan, 2022b; Phan, 2023; Phan et al., 2024; Zhang, 2020; Zhang, 2021).

In extant literature, international student agency is not a novel area, but for international student mothers, agency is not only exercised in relation to academic and social adaptation, but also through their emotional negotiations of caregiving across distance, their reconfiguration of maternal subjectivities and their resistance to deficit narratives that frame maternal absence as neglect (Phan et al., 2024; Zhang, 2020). As yet, there is little research on agency enacted by this particular group. This paper seeks to address these critical gaps by examining the experiences of international student mothers who pursue international education while their children stay back in their home country. It also contributes to the academic discussion on student agency in international higher education, which is identified by Inouye et al. (2022) in their systematic review as an underdeveloped concept despite a substantial body of research. In this paper, we focus on emotional agency, bringing emotions and agency together. Emotions are central to how individuals make sense of and respond to their lived realities (Hökkä et al., 2023) and emotions are not purely individual experiences but are deeply relational, shaped by power relations and social identities (Pain, 2009). We argue that both emotions and agency are critical in international students' lives, especially international student mothers. However, dominant narratives concerning international students' emotions continue to portray them as passive, vulnerable or lacking, thus overlooking their capacity for agency, resilience and emotional negotiation.

This study presents the accounts of nine Vietnamese post-graduate student mothers who temporarily migrated for international study, leaving their children in Vietnam. Drawing on literature on emotional agency, and spatialised emotion, it aims to understand why these

women made the difficult decision to study abroad without their children, how they experienced and made sense of this separation, and how they exercised emotional agency concerning child rearing within a transnational social-spatial context. We argue that emotional agency became a guide through which the student mothers mediated between the emotional weight of their absence and their aspirations for transnational education mobility. At the same time, emotional agency enabled them to navigate, negotiate, reinterpret and re-work maternal frameworks and cultural scripts of married women and mothers in the context of mobility, which subsequently transformed their sense of self. In so doing, we highlight student mothers as active participants in their lives without overlooking the societal forces influencing their experiences. The paper brings visibility to an under-researched population and contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how emotional agency and educational aspiration intersect in the lives of mobile married women.

Student mothers in transnational mobility and education scholarship

Existing literature on transnational motherhood and mobility has largely focused on migrant worker mothers, for example, domestic workers from the Philippines, Vietnam, Korea and Taiwan, highlighting the emotional and psychological distress of separation from children (Gu, 2024; Hoang et al., 2014; Lam & Yeoh, 2019). Far less attention, however, has been given to mothers who leave their children behind to pursue higher education overseas. Unlike labour migrant mothers who migrate out of economic necessity, student migrants, particularly mothers, pursue education as a strategic project for family futures (Dickson et al., 2024; Zhang, 2021). They follow a different mobility pathway that is education-driven, often shaped by middle-class aspirations, and characterised as educational in nature, temporally bounded and frequently framed as an investment in social and cultural capital (Bustillo et al., 2024). Balancing parental responsibilities with the demands of post-graduate study is widely recognised as one of the greatest challenges faced by students (Brown & Watso, 2010; Castelló et al., 2017; Schriever, 2021). For PhD students, for instance, the heavy pressures of family life are frequently cited as reasons for dropout (Beer & Lawson, 2018; Castelló et al., 2017). Although many mothers successfully complete their doctorates, doing so requires not only persistence and commitment but also substantial personal sacrifices (McAlpine & Norton, 2006; Mirick & Wladkowski, 2020). Pregnancy, childbirth and motherhood can bring additional stress for international female students, who must also cope with the challenges of adapting to a new culture and language (Zhang, 2021). For instance, Asian doctoral student mothers face compounded vulnerabilities, as cultural distance, language barriers and experiences of racism and discrimination intersect with academic pressures and caregiving responsibilities, placing them at heightened risk of depression, anxiety and other mental health difficulties (Houshmand et al., 2014; Koo & Nyunt, 2022; Maeshima & Parent, 2022).

Motherhood and emotions in higher education

Research across varied contexts highlights the ways in which international student mothers navigate the dual demands of academic pursuits and maternal responsibilities through emotional strategies and affective negotiations (Thomas et al., 2021; Zhang, 2020, 2021). A recurring theme in this literature is the sense of guilt. Koo and Nyunt's (2022) study of Asian doctoral student mothers in the United States reveals persistent guilt associated with leaving children unattended, coupled with anxieties over balancing doctoral study, spousal conflict and caregiving responsibilities. Similar emotional burdens were identified among Filipino

international student mothers who struggled with divided attention and fatigue, resulting in emotional distress and a sense of inadequacy in meeting both academic and maternal expectations (Bustillo et al., 2024). Baluyos and Alvarico (2024) highlight the emotional terrain where stress, guilt and exhaustion coexist with resilience, pride and hope. Their experience of managing dual roles through faith, familial support and strategic planning underscores how emotions become resources for navigating and sustaining motherhood in higher education and manifest how maternal subjectivities are actively negotiated. Oh's (2023) analysis of international graduate student mothers in Sweden similarly shows how emotional struggles such as culture shock and dilemmas of belonging were transformed into opportunities for growth. Through negotiating multiple identities, they drew on resilience and adaptive strategies to reconfigure their sense of self and motherhood, highlighting the transformative potential of emotional agency in cross-border higher education. These previous studies highlight the role of structural and cultural contexts in shaping student mothers' emotional experiences.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

International student agency and emotional agency

A significant focus within the scholarship of international students has been on agency, the capacity of international students to navigate and adapt to their host environments (Inouye et al., 2022), in which their lived experiences become closely intertwined with their ability to exercise agency in transnational mobility (Marginson, 2014, 2024). Common themes in international student agency include self-formation, resilience and identity transformation, where students actively reinterpret constraints and re-orient their aspirations in response to the demands of cross-border education (Heng, 2019; Tran, 2008; Wu, 2015). Marginson (2014) suggests that transnational higher education enables students to reshape their life trajectories through such a self-formation process. He argues that students 'alter their space of possible' (2014, p. 10) and 'become something different, through the device of the "other world", or by "living the other life"' (Marginson, 2024, p. 68). Other scholars support this argument by outlining how international students experience epistemic transformation and academic self-formation by engaging with the host country's academic environment and disciplinary knowledge (Lee, 2021, 2025), and at the same time integrate cultural multiplicity and hybridity into their selves and nomad subjectivities (Brooks & Waters, 2022; Phan, 2022b, 2023; Phan et al., 2024; Yang & MacCallum, 2021). Concurrently, the transformative power of higher education has been asserted as a powerful mediator of student agency development whereby international students 'individuating (not internalising) disciplinary ways of thinking, acting and relating within higher education' (Lee, 2025, p. 4).

While in the scholarship, there has been a plethora of studies on student agency that is critical in their academic and intercultural learning, not much research examines emotion as an enabler of student agency. Despite varied conceptualisations of the term, emotions are generally understood as multidimensional feeling-states that help to organise cognition and action (Izard, 2010). Emotional agency, as a concept, has appeared in scholarships of multiple domains, from workplace to educational settings. In organisational studies, Hökkä et al. (2019) studied organisational leaders and noted the strong role of emotions in leadership and concluded that emotional agency is 'awareness, understanding and finding a balance between personal emotions and externally set expectations/roles and for acting accordingly in everyday work practices'. Recognising the limitations of such definition as it fails to consider both behavioural and dispositional perspectives on professional agency, in their recent research, Hökkä et al. (2023) take an integrative approach to conceptualise emotional

agency, arguing that emotions can significantly inform professional agency. In other words, the enactment of agency is influenced by both rationality and emotional responses to situational demands. They offer a conceptualisation of emotional agency at work, which refers to 'the *competence* to perceive, understand and take into account emotions in oneself and others and further to *influence* emotions within organisational practices, actions and interactions, thus exhibiting the potential to support organisational learning and development' (Hökkä et al., 2023, p. 25, *original emphasis*). Though limited in workplace learning and organisation studies, Hökkä et al.'s (2023) theorisation of emotional agency points to the competence of an individual to understand their emotions in relation to others and take into account the external impacts on such understanding in order to inform further actions. From practice theory, Weenink and Spaargaren (2016) approach emotional agency by positing that emotions indicate what matters to individuals, highlighting the effect of emotions on agency, or in other words, emotions entail agency enactment. According to Hökkä et al. (2023), this approach ignores the reciprocal relationship between emotions and agency, meaning that emotions are equally influenced by agentic actions and competencies.

Emotional agency in educational contexts, particularly among students, has emerged as a crucial area of inquiry, revealing how emotional states influence engagement, learning processes and overall academic success (Polleck, 2024). The concept underscores not only students' ability to recognise and express their emotions but also their capacity to leverage those emotions to support their learning experiences and decision-making. In the case of international students, they often face challenges that influence their emotional experiences in their journeys, such as differing cultural norms and academic environments, disparate weather and climatic conditions, food unfamiliarity or homesickness. Emotional agency of international students is closely linked with their capacity to navigate new cultural landscapes, sociocultural environments and educational systems (Dai & García, 2019). This perspective aligns with the broader turn to emotions in migration and higher education studies post-pandemic (e.g., Cairns et al., 2022) and complements wider debates on international student agency where some scholars underscore students' capacity to shape their educational and personal trajectories despite structural constraints.

Spatialised emotion

The concept of spatialised emotion can be grounded in theories of emotional geography, which explore how emotions are tied to physical spaces and social contexts. Hargreaves (Hargreaves, 2001a, 2001b) develops this theoretical concept to analyse how emotional experiences unfold in particular environments, describing 'the spatial and experiential patterns of closeness and/or distance in human interactions and relationships that help create, configure and colour the feelings and emotions we experience about ourselves, our world and each other' (p. 1061). Hargreaves (2001a) further claims that emotions have imaginary geographies (Shields, 1991) of psychological and physical closeness or distance, making them subjective as well as objective in nature. This concept recognises that different environments can elicit, amplify or mitigate emotional experiences. According to Hargreaves (2001b), there are six key types of emotional closeness and/or distance that determine the bonds and emotional understanding between people: personal, sociocultural, moral, professional, political and physical geographies. Personal geographies indicate how close to or distant from one another that people experience in the personal aspects of their relationships. Sociocultural geographies refer to the impact of racial, gender, ethnic and cultural differences on how people become close to or distant from others. Moral geographies consider the roles of purposes and senses of accomplishments in widening or narrowing the gaps between individuals. Professional geographies allude to the closeness and/or distance

TABLE 1 Participants' information.

Participant (pseudonym)	Family situation at the time of post-graduate study	Level of study	Study country	Total time of separation from child(ren) until interview time or completion of study
Hang	Married with 1 child (boy) less than 1 year old, child living with grandparents	MA	New Zealand	1 year and 6 months
Tram	Married with 2 children, bringing first child (son) along, leaving second child of 15 months (daughter) behind with grandparents	PhD	New Zealand	9 months before bringing the second child over
Kim	Married with 1 child of 9 years old	MA	Hungary	10 months
Lam	Married with 1 child (girl) of 3.5 years old	PhD	Netherlands	14 months
Thao	Married with 2 children, a son of 6 years old and a daughter of 2 years old	PhD	Australia	7 months
Phung	Married with 2 children (6 years old son and 11-month old daughter)	MA	Belgium	2 years
LinH	Married with 1 child of 3 years old (girl), child living with grandparents, pregnant with second child (girl), giving birth to second child in Japan	MA	Japan	8 months
Nhi	Married with 1 child (girl) of 18 months old, living with paternal grandparents	PhD	Korea	2 years
Hong	Married with 2 children, started international education when the first child was less than 1 year old and living with grandparents, giving birth to the second child and both living with husband and maternal grandmother	PhD	Belgium	3 years (frequent flight back to Vietnam for short visits)

caused by the variant definitions and norms of professionalism that people hold. Political geographies point to how power and status impact the way people place themselves and others. Lastly, physical geographies ascribe importance to time and space in developing or reducing people's relationships.

As Kim (2023) argues, diverse emotions arise through contextual relationships and those emotions create specific spaces. In their paper on emotional geographies of later-life care, Kim (2023) introduces two key theoretical concepts, one of which—spatialised emotion—is particularly relevant to this study. Spatialised emotion refers to 'a specific person or people's emotions that have accrued in specific places and become a source of empowerment or disempowerment in relation to dominant political-economic structures' (Kim, 2023, p. 2). This concept points to the importance of recognising that emotions exist in complicated sociospatial relationships rather than a single, simplified, individualistic phenomenon.

From the literature on emotional agency, emotional geography and spatialised emotion, in this paper, the authors understand international student mothers' emotional agency as the capacity to recognise, understand and regulate one's emotions in a transnational social-spatial context that plays a crucial role in empowering and shaping their experiences in the international education landscape. In so doing, we focus on how students interact with and respond to their environments, including their micro-geographies, which in turn shape their experiences within specific spaces. Studying students' enactment of emotional agency can lead to a more profound understanding of their educational journeys and how they navigate transnational spatial contexts more effectively, as well as cultivate resilience and adapt to new environments. This approach foregrounds the emotional, embodied and situated nature of their educational trajectories, offering a deeper understanding of how they reconfigure meaning and agency while inhabiting transnational and intersectional spaces. It also allows us to explore how international student mothers made decisions on leaving their children behind and drawing on and transforming personal, cultural and social capital to negotiate structural barriers and promote self-development.

METHODOLOGY

This study is part of a research project on international students' mobility where we collected data in 2022. With the first author's institutional ethics approval, we recruited nine Vietnamese student mothers who crossed borders for their post-graduate studies through our personal networks and individual referrals (Table 1 provides information of the participants). As such, the recruitment process outlined the voluntary nature of the participation. Given the focus of the study, purposive sampling was employed to select only those mothers who had experienced separation from their child(ren) for a minimum of 6 months. The duration of separation varied among participants, ranging from 6 months to over 2 years, depending on individual circumstances and family arrangements.

All interviews were conducted online and in Vietnamese. Prior to each interview, participants were reminded of the study's purpose and their right to skip questions or withdraw at any time. Informed consent was obtained before proceeding. Interviews were audio-recorded and lasted between one and two hours. Being aware of the possible sensitive matters concerning participants' personal lives and emotional impacts of revisiting difficult moments, we attended to follow-up care and emotional support for them, including providing participants with information about peer support networks (such as a Vietnamese mother scholars Facebook group). We remained available for post-interview communication where appropriate, allowing participants to reflect on or request the withdrawal of any shared material until two months after the interview. Each interview was later transcribed verbatim by

the authors for analysis. All of the participants' names used in this article are pseudonyms and their identifiable information has been removed to protect confidentiality and anonymity.

The student mothers were asked to reflect on their emotional experiences as they lived far away from their children, their decision-making process of leaving their children behind, their juggling roles as an international student and a transnational mother and their emotional regulation. It should be noted that while the geographical proximity of the study destination might shape the frequency of visits or ease of maintaining family contact, in this research, distance itself did not emerge as a strong differentiating factor in participants' narratives. The student mothers described their emotional struggles primarily in relation to separation from children, academic demands and their efforts to sustain transnational care.

To analyse data, the authors followed a six-phase process by Braun and Clarke (2021) to thematically code the data. We started by familiarising ourselves with the data through transcribing and data organising. We then focused on descriptive understanding via retelling participants' stories in a time sequence before the initial coding. After that, we open coded the data, identified units of meaning arising from each interview separately, then picked out recurring patterns to generate initial themes. We focused on the words, phrases, content and contexts at this coding phase such as 'lack of time', 'self-care', 'trust my parents', 'guilt', 'compensation', 'model for children', 'social judgement' or 'husband's disapproval'. We also applied the theoretical framework and the literature of student agency and migration in this open coding process. To ensure reliability, we each independently coded the interview transcripts. We then compared our analytic codes, discussed our interpretations and reached a shared understanding. Finally, we reviewed potential themes and agreed on a final set of codes and theme names, which will be presented in the next section. While the six phases were organised in a logical sequential order, we moved back and forth through the phases as much as needed since thematic analysis is a process that evolves as the researcher navigates different phases (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

All authors of this paper were Vietnamese female academics who used to be international doctoral students in Anglophone countries. As Vietnamese women and scholars with personal and professional experiences of international education and migration, we approached this study with a strong degree of cultural and linguistic proximity to our participants. Our familiarity with Vietnamese social norms surrounding motherhood, marriage and mobility further enabled us to interpret subtle references and idiomatic expressions without loss of meaning in translation. Regardless of our familiarity with the cultural heritage shared with the participants, throughout the analysis, we engaged in reflexive dialogue to question how our interpretations might be influenced by our knowledge as both an insider and an outsider.

FINDINGS

Temporal dimension of motherhood and education

Time in the motherhood project and international education endeavour

Across the literature, the most prominent challenge faced by student-parents can be captured in a single word: time (Dickson et al., 2024). Similarly, in this study, lack of time was commonly cited as the main reason why the student mothers chose to leave their children behind, or in some cases, one of their children behind, as they believed that staying would benefit the children better. Tram, for instance, said in the interview:

PhD study is demanding, I was busy with my study and also taking care of my older child...if I'd brought the younger one too, I'd neglect them both...I wouldn't

have much time for them, so I felt they'd be worse off with me than staying back home.

The quote above reminds us of Conway et al.'s (2021) description of how student-parents frequently contend with 'time poverty' as they navigate the demands of work, study and home life. This struggle is particularly acute for student mothers, since traditional patriarchal norms often place the primary responsibility for childcare and family organisation on them. Mothers' gendered relationships to and experiences of living in time depend on the idea that an 'ideal' or 'good' parent is one who practises time efficiently, devotes time to her child (Estes, 2011), and who practises intensive mothering (Hays, 1996). As the student mothers shared their views, a good mother was someone who could give her child her full time and presence. 'I think children don't really need much, what they need most is to be with their mother,' Linh explained. Hong reiterated, 'children just want time with their parents.' Another student, Phung, noted several times during the interview that the notion of being a good mother in Asian culture is closely tied to physical presence, dedicated time, constant care and emotional closeness. To illustrate, a student, Thao, made a comparison that 'between not having a father and a mother around, it was obvious that the mother's absence would be harder on the child'. This comparative framing ties maternal presence to essential care, while paternal absence is viewed as manageable loss.

Meanwhile, time to study is regarded as a luxury rather than a necessity (Edwards, 1993; Phan, 2023; Phan et al., 2024). For the Vietnamese student mothers, time to study was a given because of the geographical distance and the reduction of actual time for household duties to dedicate to full-time study and re-prioritise their commitments to self-development. Time to study was enabled by both the emotional and childcare support provided by their extended family in Vietnam. More time also means more control over their studies and transnational lives. The engagement with international education, in that sense offered them a space where they could exercise agency on how to live their space and time in a more liberating way, signalling the values of the sojourn to their identity. Although at times the student mothers had to work around the needs of the family, they did not attend to those instantly but through the temporal orchestration of care from afar.

Temporal orchestration of care and reliance on care network

The student mothers often juggled and coordinated 'discordant times' (Moss, 2004) and navigated time zone differences to maintain their maternal visibility.

Because of the time difference, about 5 to 6 hours, there were two choices for me. I could either step out during lunch with my classmates to have a private conversation with my child, or I could wait until later, but then it would already be close to her bedtime. So I always had to make a choice: either sacrifice social time with my peers or risk missing that moment to connect with my child before bedtime.

(Hong)

That feeling of missing the kids could only be eased by keeping track of the time difference. For example, when it was 2 pm here, it would be 8 pm over there. And at that exact time, I wouldn't do anything else. I'd just keep staring at the clock, waiting to call home. I had to see my child's face every single day to feel reassured that she hadn't forgotten me.

(Lam)

The above excerpts highlight the invisible cognitive and emotional labour that the student mothers had to perform in order to organise and perform their maternal roles while navigating time zones. They had to invest emotionally in the time and structure blocks of time that privilege some routines over others, such as the connection with their children over socialisation with friends. Their division of time and dedication to specific hours at specific places (their study countries) suggests that temporal coordination has become a source of care and an extension of emotional labour whereby they would be digitally available at the right moment as a substitute for physical presence. In other words, the navigation of discordant times was an enactment of emotional agency that empowered them to orchestrate time to show care and affection to their children.

In order to pursue their education abroad, the student mothers trusted their familial support network because they believed their parents and husbands were capable of providing trustworthy care for their children. Notably, for many participants, their parents used to work in the education and healthcare sectors.

My mother was a teacher and my father a doctor, so my child was exceptionally well cared for. They looked after the children attentively, taking them to and from school, indulging them, helping with homework, and my son thrived academically... I felt completely at ease.

(Phung)

Sending my child to my parents made me feel really at ease. My mom's very meticulous about meals, sleep, and keeping a proper routine, because she worked in healthcare...I was lucky because my mom worked in pediatrics, so whenever the kids got sick, I felt reassured that they'd be in good hands.

(Tram)

My child was still so young, less than one year old...I honestly didn't worry when I left my child in my parents' care...My mother used to be a teacher.

(Hang)

The kinship networks and importantly, the intergenerational care, functioned as emotional scaffolding for the mothers. They believed that their children were placed in good hands, at least as good as in their own care when it came to time, energy, attention and emotion involved in child rearing. In other words, even though their children would not receive intensive mothering, they would be provided with 'intensive care' from grandparents. The transfer of care provision to other family members functioned not only as a substitute for the care labour of the mothers to maintain their family organisation back home but also as the best possible resort for the children (Hoang et al., 2014; Lam & Yeoh, 2019). The care networks also provided an infrastructure that allowed the mothers to reframe their absence as a strategic redistribution of care labour within trusted hands.

It is noteworthy that socioeconomic resources played an important role here. Most participants in this study came from relatively privileged socioeconomic backgrounds where their parental occupations and professional engagement suggested a solid upbringing. Many had parents working in education or healthcare, having stable incomes and, in some cases, access to paid domestic help in Vietnam. These resources provided significant amounts of cultural and social capital (Bourdieu, 1986) that enabled distribution of care labour and shaped their navigation of transnational motherhood and international education.

The gendered aspect of emotions

Guilt and resilience

While the student mothers trusted their substitute caregiving, knowing that their children were being loved and they were building emotional bonds with their extended family, guilt was a prevailing emotion.

I felt guilty every day, every hour, every weekend. Every time I went out on the weekend, I felt so guilty. I'd ask myself, 'why am I out having fun?'. My child is at home with his grandma, maybe I should be working a little harder so I can go home to him earlier.

(Hong)

Every time I called and my child burst into tears, I'd find myself questioning everything, why I was even here, what I was studying for, what I was doing in this place. I kept wondering if my choice was right, whether everything I had sacrificed was really worth it...

(Linh)

When he was sick, I just felt so heartbroken. I missed him so much... I felt regret, I felt sorry for my child, and I felt completely helpless. I had mixed emotions... maybe even resentment, or self-blame.

(Hang)

I felt a strong sense of guilt... I wasn't earning money, I wasn't contributing financially... Everything felt like a struggle. I was confused, full of regrets. I kept asking myself, Why did I even choose this path? Will I even be able to finish it? I cried, I felt lost.

(Nhi)

The mothers themselves also experienced the sense of loss: the loss of being the symbolic home, the loss of being the embodiment of belonging and comfort, which had become part of their self-perceived identity as a mother. This was when the feeling of fear emerged. Tram, for instance, expressed her concern:

Sometimes my kid would mistakenly call her uncle 'dad'... I was afraid she would forget me, she wouldn't remember that I'm her mother. Or that she might become more attached to someone else, like her aunt, more than to me, and that made me feel like I wasn't a good mother.

While the care arrangements supported family life, they often left mothers marginalised or excluded from daily decisions. The mothers, therefore, experienced escalating guilt in certain critical moments when their absence altered family dynamics and challenged their authority within the domestic sphere. It reminds us of the complex power dynamics that migrant women face in transnational families (Hoang et al., 2014; Lam & Yeoh, 2016, 2019). Simultaneously, the mothers' feelings of guilt and loss were seen as a gendered bond in transnational families (Vermot, 2015). These feelings cannot be fully understood without reference to the cultural norms that shaped their experiences of motherhood and womanhood. In the Vietnamese context, Confucian ideals of womanhood and motherhood such as the three obediences and the four feminine virtues position women as primary caregivers

whose moral worth is tied to sacrifice, filial responsibility and obedience (Phan, 2022a). Such values were reflected in participants' accounts of guilt and their perception of social judgement: separation from children was not simply experienced as physical absence but as a moral tension against expectations of constant maternal presence.

Paradoxically, these values also appeared to reinforce their resilience. The students reframed their sacrifice as 'fit-for-purpose', aligning their sojourn with a broader narrative of the family's interests such as economic advancement and upward social mobility and capital. As Kim asserted in her interview, 'this is for my family'. In this sense, guilt and resilience were not opposing forces but are both structured by the Confucian ideals of motherhood and womanhood: sacrifice for family. Such reframing is evidence for their emotional agency that emerged as culturally mediated and was shaped by norms of motherhood. Since the mothers framed their education as a strategic choice for long-term family benefit, the emotional burden was shifted to their parents who shouldered intensive caregiving roles, sometimes under pressure and scrutiny. At the same time, they recognised their familial support as sources of strength and resilience that could be transformed into motivational capital and contributed to their emotional agency.

Resistance to social prejudices

In their roles as a married woman and a mother, the participants also felt socially isolated and judged. For instance, Phung shared her reflection:

I think when women, especially Asian women like us, study abroad, we often face a lot of societal prejudice. Things like, women shouldn't study too much, or shouldn't be more successful and academically knowledgeable than their husbands... or that further study means you're outshining your husband. My husband constantly received comments like, 'Your wife went overseas? That's no different than leaving your motorbike unlocked'. Those ideas are wrong.

Phung's heartfelt sharing powerfully illustrates the intersection of gendered cultural expectations and the stigmatisation of women's educational mobility within an Asian context. The social pressure was placed on not only the women but also their spouses. The metaphor that compared a wife studying abroad to a motorbike left unlocked alluded to mistrust and loss of control over female mobility and autonomy. It reflects a patriarchal mindset in which a woman's physical distance from home is equated with moral vulnerability and potential disloyalty, thereby reinforcing the idea that a woman's rightful place is within proximity to her husband and family. However, Phung proudly challenged such stigmatisation, explicitly criticising it as 'wrong', which demonstrates her agency to resist the dominant narratives. Her reflection also reveals how the stigma of married woman's educational mobility was deeply relational and embedded within the wider community and the impact it had on her spouse. This indicates a type of spatialised emotion accrued in the home country context that empowered her to change:

Now, as a woman I've changed, I now dare to think and act without worrying about my age. I dare to wear what I want, say what I want, and do what I want—without being afraid of judgment like I used to be.

'Women may have to emphatically defend their study time. Women must also manage to take their academic aspirations seriously themselves when they are trivialised or deemed questionable' (Carter et al., 2013, p. 345). Phung was not the only one who was struck by

social prejudice. Hang's account also revealed how maternal decisions were often met with social judgement. When her son was hospitalised and she couldn't be there, the doctors asked, 'Where's the child's mother? Why are only the father and grandparents here?'. Her father explained she was studying abroad, to which they responded, 'Wow, she's really brave to leave the child behind.' To Hang, 'brave' felt more like disapproval than praise. 'I understood 'brave' as 'heartless'. It didn't feel like a praise; it felt like judgment, like I had failed as a mother.' The criticism stayed with her: 'Was it sarcasm, implying I'm an ambitious woman who abandoned her child?' This encounter marked a turning point in her emotional journey, leaving her with a sense of loss: 'I was losing a part of motherhood.' Hang's reflection highlights an implicit criticism of her responsibilities and commitment as a mother who was expected to provide constant physical presence and self-sacrifice by the society. This decoding underscores her navigation of emotional misrecognition shaped by distance and cultural expectations in a specific place which is a hospital in her home country where medical professionals expected the present mother during a child's illness.

Transformative aspects of progress towards educational attainment may shift women's sense of power and identity in ways that unsettle the status quo (Wall, 2008) in their personal lives and home country. They trusted their decision to pursue international education because it would benefit their own self, and they deserve the opportunity:

People think that studying abroad is a luxury, that it's all enjoyment. They assumed I was lucky, that I got to eat well, have fun, and not have to take care of my child or deal with responsibilities... I left for my professional career, not to challenge anybody's authority.

(Lam)

I deserve to have the life I want, and I shouldn't use my child as the reason to make myself endure things. I just need to live my life, and I believe my child will understand.

(Nhi)

The student mothers were also committed to their cross-border educational journey because they believe it would benefit the future of their children. Many mothers viewed their pursuit of international education not as a suspension of their maternal role, but as an extension of it. They sought to enhance their future earning capacity through improved career opportunities, but more importantly, they aimed to set an example for their children through resilience, determination and the value of education. For instance, Thao wanted her kids to experience living overseas, revealing her intention to expand her children's horizons and positioning her transnational absence as a beginning for their adventure rather than a rupture of their life. Similarly, other mothers voiced their desires for long-term gain and future-oriented investment,

I want to give my child a solid economic foundation, so that later on they can grow up without feeling disadvantaged like I once did, without feeling left out, lost or insecure. ... I also want to show my child that as a woman, it's not just about having a family, we should also have a career of our own.

(Linh)

I believe study abroad changes one's perspective, and I believe I am a mother who knows how to learn and has seen the world. Only then can I guide my child, so that my child can have a broader outlook and become courageous.

(Phung)

I told my son: 'Mommy went to study abroad for myself, yes, but I hope you understand that I also made sacrifices. If I succeed in my studies, I'll have better job opportunities when I come back. I didn't go just for myself; I went for our family, for you.' ...It wasn't about selfish ambition, it was about thinking ahead, thinking long-term for our future.

(Hang)

[My study abroad] is a stepping stone for the future...This is the only way, I am not rich, but I can help my child to have a better future this way.

(Kim)

The participants' reflections illustrate how their academic sojourns abroad are deeply tied to processes of self-formation, where the pursuit of education is simultaneously a project of personal transformation to become a 'better' mother. Their educational mobility was an expansion of perspective and learning capacity, which enabled them to interpret and act in the world differently (Marginson, 2014). Their reflection further reveals how the transformation of the mother's self is inseparable from the imagined transformation of her child and family.

Their agency was also manifest in gifts and remittances sent back home to maintain material care and provision and fulfil their maternal role from afar, which is also a way for them to resist the idea that their time to study was 'time for self or selfish time' (Moss, 2004, p. 294) that should have been dedicated to child rearing.

I wanted to both study and still be able to provide something for my child...My scholarship gave me a little extra, so I sent this extra home for my child...Every month I made sure to send money home to cover the cost of formula milk.

(Nhi)

I constantly bought chocolates, clothes, anything... I bought a lot of clothes, and every time someone was flying back to Vietnam, I'd send gifts home... I spent a lot of money on gifts. It was my way of giving back, even in small ways.

(Phung)

Gifts and remittances functioned as a way to lessen the mother's guilt and also an act of refusal to detach themselves from their maternal duties. Lam proudly stated that 'I could buy formula milk for my child, and sent money back to her. I felt much better. I could contribute to raising her'. While individual remedies like sending remittances and materialising care did not ease mother guilt and family conflict, they primarily helped address the gap in maternal care, balance the care and financial roles between spouses and express gratitude for grandparents' support. This act of material reciprocity reflects how emotional agency manifested through economic gestures, a form of emotional compensation rooted in the mothers' awareness of their enriched life experiences abroad and the sacrifices by their families, who could not access the same opportunities and sensorial and emotional experiences.

DISCUSSION

In this paper, emotional agency is used as the capacity to intentionally mobilise emotional understanding to shape the (re)understanding of self, (re)positioning and decision-making within transnational mobility contexts of the student mothers. Emotional agency therefore involves more than feeling, recognising or reflecting on emotions. It refers to how the mothers actively work with emotions such as guilt, worries or moral tension to reconfigure their sense

of responsibility and identity and resist judgement. In this section, we discuss how emotional agency is framed as resources for strategic actions or qualitative self-transformation, rather than as affective states or subjective experiences.

Strategic motherhood in international education landscape

As women and mothers constitute a symbolic home for others and are idealised as 'the stable, symbolic centre – functioning as an anchor to others' (Massey, 1994, p. 180), their absence could disrupt that sense of safety, security and comfort among the left-behind children. Nevertheless, the care chain arranged by the mothers shows that maternal responsibility could be shared, redefined and sustained through familial ties and expanded across generations and households. This arrangement and trust in the familial care chain, mostly provided by their own parents, can be understood as a collective caregiving arrangement and in some situations, an extension of their transnational motherhood.

The student mothers justified leaving their children behind as a strategic choice. This rationalisation served to mitigate negative judgements of their maternal identities and soften internalised guilt. It enabled them to resist simplistic notions of maternal absence as abandonment and themselves as absent figures but as thoughtful and responsible actors making emotional sacrifices for future-oriented lives of their families and children. Time away from family turned into a drive for the mothers since separation time could be quality study time. They demonstrated their emotional agency by being prepared emotionally and engaged in deliberate planning of caregiving practices while maintaining their maternal roles from a different spatial structure. The student mothers can be understood through England's (1996) conceptualisation of 'active, knowledgeable strategising agents' who were 'able to plan and learn new ways of acting and possibly change their sociospatial context to better fit their needs' (p. 113).

The separation decision was, in fact, a manifestation of emotional agency enactment. To some extent, the geographical distance could function as a strategy that Lynch (2008) explains as separating family and academic spheres: not bringing their children into their academic lives, and not bringing their academic work into their family lives. Within motherhood scholarship, it has been reported that migrant mothers need to navigate between parallel or conflicting modes of motherhood to fit their new context, which resonated with the participants' experience (DeSouza, 2006; Lam & Yeoh, 2016). In this light, the sojourn can be seen as complementary to mothering, rather than detracting from mothering, and functioned as a form of investment for both themselves and their children. Additionally, in contrast to the common narratives of transnational motherhood that focus on separation, remittances and care reduction, in this study, strategic motherhood highlights agentic, future-oriented and emotionally strategic dimensions. As an emergent theme in this study, strategic motherhood functions as a possibility to re-theorise Hays (1996) intensive mothering. While intensive mothering emphasises normative *social expectations* of constant presence, emotional and self-sacrifice, strategic motherhood draws the focus on the *individual agency* of mothers to foreground how mothers reinterpret and partially suspend these norms and negotiate the degree and structure of 'intensity' of their mothering practices through physical absences and virtual presences while away.

Emotional agency enactment through education mobility

The Vietnamese student mothers' emotions were not merely internal experiences, but were also embedded within and shaped by the geographies and temporalities they inhabited: their

host countries and their homes left behind. These emotional geographies significantly influenced how the mothers interacted with their environments and how those environments, in turn, shaped their identities and actions. On the one hand, rather than viewing emotions as internal states to be managed or suppressed, these mothers engaged emotions as knowledge that shaped their choices and strategies. Their guilt, for instance, prompted a renegotiation of what 'being present' could mean across distance. On the other hand, the sojourn for international education also opened up space for some mothers to challenge traditional parenting ideologies, experiment with alternative forms of mothering (such as intergenerational care) and reform their understanding of selves. Exposure to new academic environments and cultural contexts encouraged them to question 'old wives' tales' (DeSouza, 2005) and imagine more flexible approaches to caregiving.

In previous studies, role conflicts between higher education studies and family care responsibilities are found to cause barriers to access to university education and learning for mothers (Green Lister, 2003). Meanwhile, in this study, the transnational space and geographical distance initiated a change in the self among the sojourning mothers, allowing them to reconfigure their time and place, (re)affirm their academic and professional advancement aspirations and reinforce their agency in international education endeavours. Unlike the mothers in Green Lister's (2003) study who did not see themselves as a 'whole person', the international student mothers found their border-crossing academic pursuit as a renewed sense of a whole person who could structure time in a way that prioritised their learning commitments, socialisation and self-care practices. Again, the separation did not mean they no longer had to straddle between the two 'greedy institutions' of family and education (Edwards, 1993, p. 62). Nonetheless, the geographical distance helped the students to avoid feeling 'the sense of disjuncture' faced by adult learners returning to education (Warner Weil, 1989, p. 113). Their absence from family care duties allowed for their presence in education, thus awarding more agency in academic and professional development. Echoing Lee's (2025) proposition of self-formation and mobility, we argue that the separation is an environment that is conducive to students' self-formation in both academic growth and maternal subjectivities and understanding.

Internal education as a site of emotional capital production

The international education endeavour was a site of emotional capital access and production. On the one hand, it enabled the student mothers to access 'family capital' (Webber & Dismore, 2021) such as the support for knowledge-seeking aspiration, sharing child and homecare responsibilities, grandparents' professions and expertise, as well as encouragement and reassurance. On the other hand, the mothers produced resilience, self-esteem and self-efficacy as their own emotional capital. Echoing Aitchison and Mowbray (2013) and Webber and Dismore (2021), this emotional capital could act as a boost of academic confidence and post-graduate study success and an antidote to guilt or doubt over the decision of moving far away from home.

It is, however, worth noting that first, the mothers' capacity to mobilise emotional capital was closely tied to their socioeconomic background, family capital and the presence of intergenerational and transnational care networks. Second, the agency was enacted within structural constraints, including moral judgements surrounding maternal presence and sacrifice and the ongoing pressure to reconcile academic productivity with intensive mothering norms. Therefore, emotional agency is unevenly enabled and structurally conditioned. It emerges through and within structural constraints such as familial duties, gendered expectations or social norms. Emotional agency should be understood not simply as individual but relational and thus should not be romanticised as easily resourced and unproblematic. In

many other cases of international student mothers with fewer resources or weaker support networks, their agency, including emotional agency, could take a different shape and form and draw on alternative forms of capital.

Student mothers' self-formation

The findings also demonstrate that emotions such as guilt, pride, hope and frustration were interpretive, meaning that emotions shaped how the mothers made sense of separation and their international education journey. Their emotions were transformative and contributed to shifts in their sense of self, enabling them to view higher education as an extension rather than a suspension of motherhood. We argue that emotional agency is itself a mode of self-formation. As Lee (2025) contends, 'mobility is not only a context for agency, but also an embodiment of agency itself, because of student self—formation' (p. 5). In this paper, we echo this proposition and extend it further by arguing that emotional agency is critical in this self-formation process. It both enables and is enabled by mobility, so much so that international mobility is not only primarily culturally transformative but entails changes in their sense of self.

Emotions such as guilt or longing for reunion were productive as these emotions drove the mothers toward certain actions (such as focusing on study to become a model for the child, maintaining frequent contact, sending gifts or planning for family reunification) while resisting social prejudices (such as judgement of maternal absence or women studying abroad). While resilience was prominent in all the mothers' narratives as a result of their emotional agency, it is critical to acknowledge that their emotional agency was enacted by the depth of emotional labour involved in sustaining familial ties, grappling with social judgement and cultural expectations, making peace with their perceived maternal inadequacy and demonstrating determination to academically excel. Here, there is a change from *domesticity* that is usually attached to the motherhood role to *internationality* that is attached to their personal identity. In contrast to previous research when women disguised their enjoyment if it undermined the labour of work (Moss, 2004), the student mothers in this study were open about the pride that they deserved for the time committed to studying.

The findings also allow us to revisit and expand Sharon Hays' (1996) concept of intensive mothering. Instead of being defined by constant presence and self-sacrifice, the Vietnamese student mothers engaged in what we posit as strategic motherhood, a reflexive and future-oriented project that extended maternal care into academic achievement, transnational caregiving and intergenerational care coordination. In this study, the participants reframed maternal worth as capability-building rather than physical proximity. These practices exemplify Marginson (2024)'s notion of students as self-forming agents, consciously fashioning new selves amidst structural constraints.

CONCLUSION

This paper investigates how nine Vietnamese student mothers engaged in emotionally and socially complex practices of temporary separation from their children to pursue border-crossing education. The findings of this study illustrate the multi-layered and gendered practices of Vietnamese student mothers as they attempted to rebuild their social infrastructure and sustain attachments with their children and the complex emotional and structural negotiations they undertook. Their narratives reveal how agency is exercised not only academically and socially but also through emotional and relational negotiations across borders, challenging the silences that have not been much examined in higher education research.

The study demonstrates how the emotional agency of international student mothers acts as an agentic feature that enables them to reconfigure their understanding of motherhood, their sense of self and maternal duties. The findings not only challenge the notion of intensive mothering but also re-theorise it by showing how cross-border higher education transforms women's roles, subjectivities, mothering practices and identities. In this sense, cross-border education is not only an academic pursuit but also a catalyst for reconfiguring their mother and women's roles and identities. For student mothers, the process of self-formation intersects with the emotional and practical negotiations of care, suggesting that higher education does more than demand coping with maternal absence; it reshapes the meaning of motherhood across borders.

Within institutional frameworks that are often premised on assumptions of student performativity and individualised responsibility, caregiving responsibilities and transnational family arrangements of international students are rarely recognised, being treated as personal circumstances. Our findings suggest that policies and support structures from institutions that see students, particularly international students, in their different roles will help to enable students' emotional agency, reinforce their well-being and mitigate the emotional burdens, which will allow them to engage better both academically and socially. We acknowledge that the participants' experiences may not fully represent all international student mothers, who might face more difficulties in childcare arrangements or greater financial stress. Nonetheless, it presents how even in contexts of those who have relative privilege in terms of family capital, their international education still entails complex gendered emotional negotiations and disruptions.

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The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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