



A Case Study of Connection between Different Cultures and Continuity of the Family Ties of Filipino and Japanese through a Student Exchange Program

Garcia Lea C*

Professor 5, University of the Philippines Rural High School, 4031, Philippines

Email: lcgarcia@up.edu.ph

Abstract

This qualitative case study traces the ongoing transnational familial ties between a Filipino host family and a Japanese exchange student. The data sources including surveys, photo, elicitation, and emails reveal that the relationship evolved from a formal hosting agreement to a "chosen family" type of bond. We helped as parents in every aspect, deliberately creating cultural scaffolding, and always preparing things through social media. The pandemic's upheaval and a mutual trip to Japan in 2024 were very important for assessing and deepening this friendship. The study propagates the idea that short encounters have the power to hugely mediate the development of real and enduring kinship relationships which in return they challenge the existing concepts of family and cultural diplomacy.

Keywords: case study; intercultural bond; long-term family ties; student exchange program.

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** Corresponding author.*

1. Introduction

International exchange programs for students are activities, which, through schools that are partners in different countries, gather together students. One of their main objectives is to promote academic mobility and global competence [1]. These programs open numerous academic and cross, cultural doors for the students. Moreover, they equip them with significant personal and professional skills, which they might apply outside of the school context. In the era of globalization, such projects are indispensable to build bridges between countries and make people realize that they are all human [2]. However, scholarly research has mainly concentrated on the student experience, while the lasting and profound influences of the host families have been substantially overlooked. The author in [3] claims that the fundamental problem is that there is a huge difference between being aware of the potential of these relations to develop into real international family ties and actually understanding it.

This qualitative case study focuses on the long, lasting transnational family relationships between a Filipino host family and a Japanese exchange student. The data obtained from surveys, photo, elicitation, and emails reveal that the relationship has morphed from a formal hosting agreement to a "chosen family" bond. We took this a step further by being all, around caretakers, intentionally creating cultural support structures, and constantly using social media for coordinating our activities. The pandemic upheaval and their journey to Japan in 2024 were, mainly, the two reasons for the couple to rethink and strengthen their relationship. The article states that brief meetings may immensely contribute to the growth of genuine and long, term relationships, therefore, the local traditional notions of family and cultural diplomacy being questioned.

1.1 Theoretical Framework of the Study

Intercultural Communication Proficiency. Intercultural Communication Proficiency (ICP) is the ability to communicate well and in a way that is suitable between people from various cultures, such as a Filipino host family and a Japanese exchange student. In [4], the creator of the breakthrough model defines ICC as "the ability to communicate effectively across cultural boundaries." This is more than just a language talent; it also requires certain knowledge, abilities, and attitudes. This three-component model offers a robust framework for comprehending the personal dynamics within a cross-cultural family [4] as referenced by the authors in [5].

The first part, Knowledge, entails knowing about the customs and social identities of both your own culture and the other [4]. The family and the student are both learning about Filipino and Japanese social conventions in this case. The second category, Skills, includes the ability to listen, work together, and hold off on making a decision while interacting with someone right away [6]. Lastly, the right attitudes include openness, curiosity, and the willingness to question your own culture and value others' [4]. The "decentering" is the main thing that makes the difference between a shallow interaction and a meaningful understanding.

There are different models, but the one in [4] is the easiest to use in the classroom. The research substantiates its significance; indeed, studies indicate that learners who receive explicit instruction on intercultural communication competence (ICC) are better equipped to navigate intercultural challenges, as noted by the author in [7], and that integrating culture into language instruction is essential for fostering cultural awareness [8]. Nonetheless, a

contentious situation persists as certain individuals prioritize linguistic objectives over intercultural ones [9,10]. This study will utilize Byram's framework to analyze the exhibition and cultivation of information, skills, and attitudes through the family-hosted experience, and how these elements facilitated the establishment of a profound transnational relationship.

Family Systems Theory. Family Systems Theory (FST) offers a perspective to understand how an abroad student might impact a family relationship that transcends different cultures. The theory recognizes a family as a single emotionally complex entity with interrelations, thus it should be considered one system rather than separate individuals [11]. The first notions of the theory are: boundaries, which separate members of a system; balance, which refers to the system's ability to keep it stable under a difficult situation; and the two, way nature of influence, meaning that a change that causes only one member to be affected will, after that, influence all others and the whole system. The assimilation of a Japanese student in a Filipino host family is viewed as a short, but very significant, method of broadening the family's borders. Integration necessitates the establishment of a new equilibrium for both families. The theory posits that the stress of integration, such as cultural clashes, must be examined at the systemic level, as any conflict among members (e.g., a parent and an exchange student) will affect the overall dynamics and cohesion of the unit, akin to immigrant families [12].

The FST also says that families can look at their own processes and see how they work. The host family's deliberate endeavor to impart Filipino culture and engage the student in familial activities can be regarded as intentional steps toward the establishment of a functional framework of the new system. The reciprocal visit to Japan in 2024 is a perfect example of how well the system has been integrated, which means that the new family borders will stay in place and there will be a steady long-term balance even after the exchange has officially finished.

Transnationalism. Transnationalism provides an essential lens through which to view Filipino and Japanese families' continuing interaction as it transcends the nation, state and considers the human connections that are preserved across the borders. We understand "transnationalism" as the way immigrants create and maintain complex social networks that link their home countries and the places where they settle. [13].

This concept indicates a significant shift from a state, centered viewpoint to a focus on the "transnational social fields" created by non, state actors, mainly families. This perspective is particularly pertinent in the context of transnational migration and the social connections that emerge from such movement. Research in this field focuses on how individuals and their families navigate their relationships while simultaneously cultivating a sense of belonging that transcends national boundaries [15]. One of the main worries is that people in these cross-border social areas are always negotiating their identity, which makes the ideas of citizenship and culture less clear. In the context of this research, the initial student exchange program can be seen as a temporary transnational space. The alterations in the pair's lifestyle manner such as they are dealing with each other via the internet after COVID, 19, which broke their visit, and the host family's going to Japan in 2024 as a way of deepening their relationship, show that they have created a strong transnational family bond. This connection is an exemplary case of transnationalism: the intentional restructuring and maintenance of a family relationship which is socially shared in the Philippines and Japan and, hence, does not rely on the formal institutions from which it was taken.

1.2 The Research Questions

This qualitative case study aimed to address the subsequent research inquiries:

1. How did we, the host family, know what our job was and do it as cultural and social advisors for the Japanese student?
2. How did the two families' connection evolve when the first half of their official exchange was cut short (because of the pandemic) and the second portion was a visit?
3. What does this example show us about the chance that a short-term exchange can turn into a long-term, family-like relationship between people from different countries?

2. Methods

2.1 Research Design and Participants

This is a qualitative case study of the experiences of a Filipino and Japanese family. The Filipino family was made up of the father and mother who were foster parents and the foster sister. The Japanese participant was in 11th grade.

2.2 Data Collection

There are three (3) sources of data collecting. We, as the host Filipino family and the Japanese student, were given a survey with 12 open-ended questions. The people who answered could choose to write big phrases or paragraphs for each question. The other source of data was photo-elicitation, which used pictures from both the 2019-20 stay and the 2024 trip to Japan to help people remember and think about things in depth. The last source of data was document analysis, which looked at communications (such social media messages) that were sent during the separation era (2020–2024).

2.3 Data Analysis

The information collected was subjected to thematic analysis, entailing a comprehensive coding of the questionnaire and document responses to discern the emerging themes. Additionally, data analysis involved articulating the themes to create a coherent narrative that illustrates the progression of the relationship over time.

3. Results

3.1 Answers to the questionnaire

The gist of our answers to the 12 questions is as follows.

1. Why we should host

" Our main motivation was to build cultural ties. We hoped she would learn Filipino culture and language,

while our family could learn about Japanese culture and establish a lasting family connection."

2. Ways to help her learn about Filipino culture

"We used planned weekly activities to introduce her to local culture. These included a 'boodle fight' at Sky Ranch, 18th birthday parties—which were a new experience for her—and family events like a clan Christmas party and a wedding in the Bicol region. She gradually became more confident and engaged."

3. How we see our role

"I saw myself as a substitute parent. My role involved daily reminders about her schedule, ensuring she ate complete meals, and teaching her to navigate public transport safely, including setting boundaries for curfews."

4. Bridging the boundaries between cultures

"We noticed a cultural gap in expressing affection; for instance, she did not hug her father goodbye. We consciously taught her to be more expressive. By the time she left, we shared a heartfelt hug and kiss at the airport. We also introduced her to celebrating birthdays, which she embraced fully."

5. The pandemic brought it to an end quickly

"The pandemic caused an abrupt and difficult end. Planned trips and her graduation were cancelled. She became withdrawn and lonely. I arranged her repatriation and maintained a parental role, instructing her on safety at the airport and during her quarantine in Japan."

6. Keeping in touch

"Her father frequently invited us to visit Japan. We maintained active connection; for my husband's 60th birthday, her father sent a video greeting, reiterating the invitation."

7. Reasons for a return visit

"After the pandemic, we planned our 2024 visit to Japan to fulfill a long-standing plan and rekindle our ties with our Japanese family friend."

8. Effects of reciprocal visit

"Visiting them reinforced our bond. We saw their genuine happiness hosting us. We celebrated Father's Day together—not a typical Japanese tradition—which was a particularly happy moment that symbolized our unique connection."

9. Definition of a current relationship

"She is almost 'part of our family.' We observe her as a special, transformed member of the family with whom we can communicate very freely. Her father also treats us as part of their family."

10. Key factors for lasting connection

"Consistency in rules, a willingness for cultural adaptation, and open-heartedness in sharing personal matters were the most important factors for transforming the short-term arrangement into a lasting connection."

11. Potential for transnational families

"This experience shows that student exchanges can create real, lasting transnational families. The relationship has moved beyond a temporary cultural experience to one of genuine mutual support."

12. What it means overall

"The relationship is lasting because communication is consistently maintained. We can freely discuss anything under the sun, which has been deeply meaningful for our family."

The gist of our instant daughter's answers is indicated below.

1. Pre-Arrival hopes and worries

"I was excited to return to the Philippines after a previous visit, looking forward to reuniting with friends and experiencing the friendly, warm culture again. My biggest worry was whether I, at sixteen with no prior experience, could live alone in a foreign country without my family and cope with a new culture and language."

2. Learning Filipino culture

"I was most impressed by the value placed on family. Families always ate together, unlike in Japan, and Christmas was a family event. I also learned about respect through gestures like 'mano po' and using 'po' in conversation, which showed me that both our cultures deeply value respect and care for others."

3. Host family's role in adjustment

"My host family patiently taught me polite Tagalog greetings and the importance of smiling to be friendly. They included me in family activities like cooking and visiting relatives, which helped me understand their close family bonds and feel like part of their family."

4. Cultural challenges and resolution

"Initially, I was shy about the open affection, like hugging, as Japanese people are more reserved. I was also confused by the more flexible approach to time. My host family was understanding, explained these cultural habits, and encouraged me to adapt, which helped me become more open-minded."

5. Premature end of stay

"The pandemic ended my stay abruptly. The last time I saw my classmates, I didn't know it was a final goodbye, which was sad. The lockdown was lonely and uncertain, and I was disappointed to miss the special 18th birthday party I had looked forward to."

6. Maintaining contact

"We stayed in touch primarily through Messenger. Seeing their updates on Facebook and Instagram helped me feel connected to their lives."

7. Significance of the reciprocal visit

"Their visit to Japan in 2024 meant our bond had grown stronger. I was happy to show them my country, and it was heartwarming to see their interest in Japanese culture. It made me feel proud and grateful to have a family in another country who cares for me so much."

8. Relationship after the visit

"After their visit, our relationship became even closer. It felt more like we were real family. Sharing new memories in Japan helped them understand my life better and solidified how much we care for each other."

9. Cultural relationship definition

"They feel just like my real family. Even from afar, they reply with the same warmth and care as my own parents. I feel lucky to have a second family that makes me feel loved and connected despite the distance."

10. The "glue" that holds the connection

"The 'glue' is love, gratitude, and mutual respect. We truly care for each other like real family and have never forgotten the time we shared."

11. Chance for lasting bonds

"Yes, a short-term exchange can create a permanent, family-like bond. The sincerity of the connection and the shared experiences matter more than the length of time."

12. Overall impact

"This journey made me more globally minded, outgoing, and confident. I learned to appreciate new perspectives and am no longer afraid to step out of my comfort zone to explore new cultures."

3.2 Social Media Communication

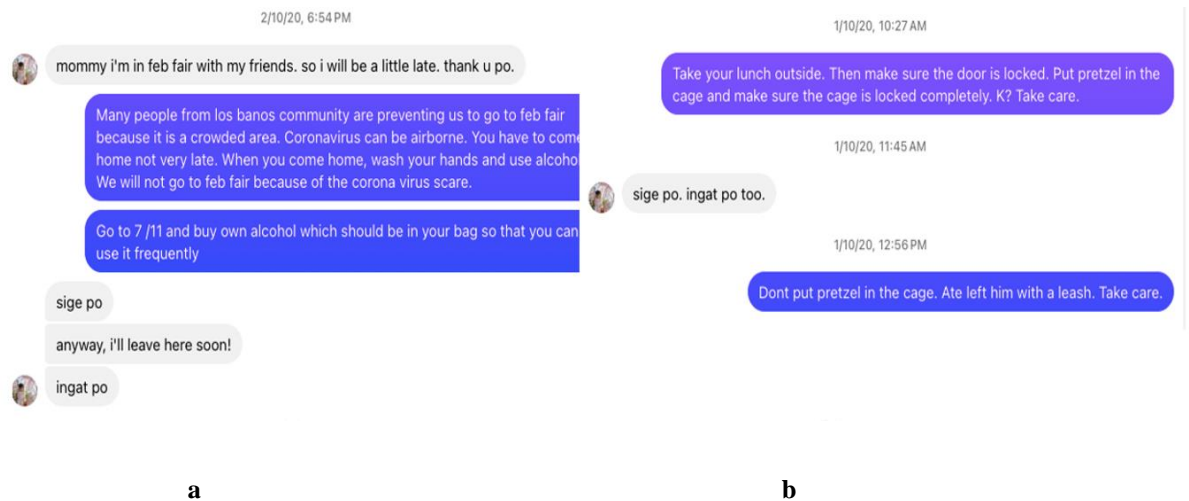


Figure 1 (a & b): Personal conversations with our “instant daughter” regarding my reminders

According to the text, there is an annual February Fair (with rides, food, concert etc.) in the university campus and she messaged me that she’s hanging around with friends. I, as her foster mother, reminded her of the possible corona virus infection since the place is a crowded area." In my talk with her, she cheerfully used some "*Tagalog*" words like "*opo*" (yes as a respectful answer to an elderly), "*sige po*" (yes as a respectful answer to an elderly) or "*ingat po*" (take care as a respectful message to an elderly). She got such polite manners of speaking at home and at school and she used them in all her conversations with us. In another text, I had to remind her of the house chore that she should be locking the door when she’s already out and taking care of the family’s pet. These instances are indicated in Figure 1 a & b.

Our involvement in making her return home possible from the very beginning to the point of giving her detailed safety instructions at the airport and when she arrived in Tokyo, Japan, as well as continuous support during her quarantine in Japan, strongly reflects it, as also shown below (Figure 2 a-d).

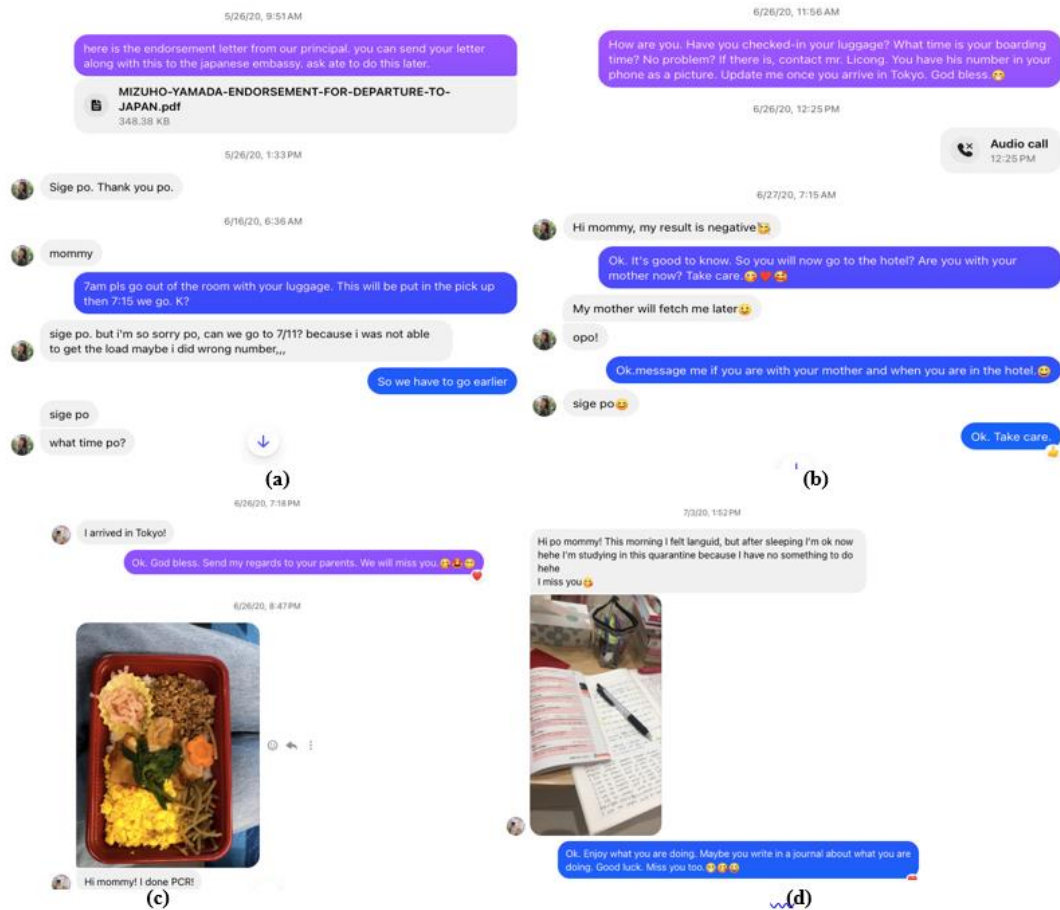


Figure 2 a-d: Text Messages of Conversations (From L-R: Arranging endorsement and preparing to

leave the Philippines, checking on her if she has checked-in her luggage and she reporting to be

covid negative in Japan; arriving in Tokyo eating her food and reporting to have done the PCR.

tasking her to write essays while in the Japan hotel to reduce boredom)

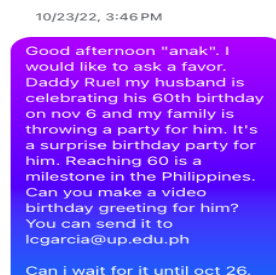


Figure 3: Conversation on asking for her father's video message for my husband's 60th birthday

The father's repeated invitations, the video message for my husband's birthday and the ongoing personal messages between us are illustrated in Figure 3.

3.3. Some Pictures of Our Activities

Our family consciously enacted our role as guides by designing a curriculum of immersive cultural experiences. As we answered in the survey questionnaire, "Every week, there was an activity she looked forward to", our "instant daughter" was so excited to experience a list of Filipino activities we prepared. Thus, the photos below show such activities as a *boodle fight*, her 18th birthday celebration, a clan Christmas party, a traditional wedding, *pamamanhikan* (marriage proposal custom), and visit to important landmarks which are indicated in Figures 4-9.



Figure 4: The Boodle Fight at Sky ranch, Tagaytay City, Philippines



Figure 5: Our "instant daughter's" 18th birthday celebration in our house



Figure 6: Celebrating Christmas in the Philippines



Figure 7: Wedding Attendance in the Bicol Region, Philippines



Figure 8: Attending a Filipino traditional custom (*pamamanhikan*) in the Bicol, Region, Philippines where food is shared by the two families engaged to get married



Figure 9: Visiting Mayon Volcano and enjoying ATV at Cagsawa Ruins in the Bicol Region, Philippines

4. Discussion

4.1 Relational Foundation

The desires and expectations of us as the Filipino host family and “our instant daughter,” the Japanese student, before the exchange indicate that this was not merely a hosting arrangement, but a relationship founded on mutual exchange and previously established good faith, which is a crucial yet often underestimated factor in successful long-term homestays [16]. Our shared aspirations and concerns formed the basis of a connection that would soon transcend cultural boundaries.

Firstly, our hosting drive was a complex one, going beyond the mere act of showing hospitality to a stranger. In fact, our experience in Japan, where we “stayed for 10 days in our Japanese family friend’s house,” was a crucial life-changing moment. As a consequence, we experienced a certain shared obligation and relational equity that changed our motive from simply being interested in hosting to a genuine desire to give back the hospitality they had given us. This aligns with the concept of “generalized reciprocity” in kinship networks whereby one gift or service creates a moral obligation to a later return, thus deepening long, term bonds [17]. Furthermore, our goals to share Filipino culture, know Japanese culture, and build nice family relationships are obvious indicators of our commitment to forming a two, way relationship rather than just a one, way cultural presentation. Such a stance is instrumental in the “co-constructed” familial bond that eventually developed [18].

Simultaneously, the perspective of our “instant daughter” is an essential component of the narrative. Her predominant concern—navigating life alone in a foreign country at the age of sixteen—illuminates the emotional dimensions of student exchanges. The apprehension of isolation and the challenge of adapting to “a new culture and language” are prevalent issues faced by transient adolescents, as noted by the authors in [19]. However, in this instance, these anxieties were significantly mitigated by her “hope,” which was grounded in a positive preconception of Filipino people as “friendly, cheerful, kind, and warm-hearted.” Consequently, her inaugural visit to the Philippines was pivotal, providing her with both a cognitive and emotional framework that allowed excitement to overshadow anxiety, a critical factor in successful intercultural adjustment [20]. It is quite impressive how these different points of views eventually come together. Our longing for a real connection corresponded our “instant daughter’s” bright expectation and need of a safe place. Such a match gave rise to a perfect atmosphere which according to the author in [4] is the essence of intercultural competence: the openness to communication with the other from a base of common interest and respect. Our decision to become our “instant daughter’s” cultural guides was exactly what her need for assistance in dealing with the very cultural and linguistic difficulties she was afraid of. Such a turn of events already hints at the subsequent “amazing cultural relationship” not being an accident but resulting from the relational basis and the shared, though unspoken, bond of mutual learning and support that preceded it.

4.2 Our Role as Cultural and Social Guide

4.2.1 Our Role as "Surrogate Family" and Holistic Guardian

Based on the answers to the questionnaire, text messages, and images, we figured out what our duty was as the

host family for our "instant daughter".

We as the host family redefined our function from mere landlords to an influential cultural educators and substitute family members. We played this role with a "guided immersion" strategy, using the intimacy of the family and selected cultural experiences to not only facilitate the integration of our "instant daughter" but also to generate a real, deep cross-cultural relationship. The main representation of our family's role surpassed the idea of "hosting" and reached the level of kinship and comprehensive care. All conversations show that as foster parents, our Japanese "instant daughter" calling us "mommy" and "daddy" and foster sister "Ate" demonstrating the actualization of kinship.

As I said in the questionnaire, *"I saw myself as a substitute parent. Every day, I had to remind her to wake up early, eat breakfast... I scolded her because she came home very late. We instructed her to eat complete meals every day,"* this is a parental model of hosting, which mainly focuses on discipline, well-being, and safety. As a "substitute parent", there are instances like scolding and giving dietary instructions which show that the levels of responsibility and emotional involvement are very high, thus positioning us as the primary provider of structure and nurture. This is in line with the concept of host families offering "parental care and support" which is a key factor in an adolescent's adjustment to a new environment [16].

In this report, the vitality and variety of the support system that relatives have given us were clearly shown. The support system that the relatives have given us was the main part of the vital and diverse system that the report has illustrated effectively. It shows how the support system has gone beyond the level of formal hosting and is in line with the category of surrogate kinship and holistic guardianship. We saw this first, hand in their care through the protective oversight, the implementation of familial, cultural values, and the taking up of domestic responsibilities as a form of trust.

Protective Oversight. The instance when we warned about the coronavirus risk at the overcrowded fair, in a very proactive way, is a typical parental guardianship act (Figure 1a). This parental intervention is a perfect example of an "in-loco-parentis" situation - i.e. a legal and moral duty to act in place of a parent - which is the basis of the role of host family [16]. Our move was not only a gentle urging but also a clear demonstration of our very heartfelt concern for her physical well-being, which is a fundamental aspect of holistic care. It is in line with the notion of host families as the most effective when they become a "safe base" from where students can venture out, and at the same time provide guidance to avert possible risks [21]. We performed this protective intervention through our warning, thus ensuring her safety in the new social environment.

Linguistic Integration. One of the most unequivocal illustrations of the attainment of the students as a surrogate family is our employment of the quite respectful Tagalog terms: "*opo*," "*sige po*," and "*ingat po*." Language is not just a means of communication but, essentially, a carrier of cultural and social identity [4]. Her deliberate and conscious decision to use those honorifics—which are naturally connected with the Filipino value of respect for elders (*paggalang*) and the idea of *pakikipagkapwa-tao* (shared humanity)—indicates that she has deeply integrated her social position in our family's structure. Functional language was not what she was doing; it was relational language that explicitly recognized our authority and her role as the respectful junior member of the

household. Such a linguistic change reflects what the author in [22] refers to intercultural development as one of the major outcomes - the capacity to "de-center" from one's own cultural frame and be able to work within another effectively. The fact that she was using "po" shows that she was no longer a visitor but a "fictive kin" member who not only understands but also voluntarily follows the family's cultural and relational norms [23]. In the questionnaire answered by our "instant daughter", she confirmed learning about our language as she said,

"My host family helped me adjust to life in the Philippines in many ways. They patiently taught me how to greet people politely in Tagalog and how to use respectful words like "po" and "opo."

Entrustment of Domestic Responsibility. The family's reminding her to lock the door and take care of the dog is (Figure 1b), undoubtedly, a very subtle but highly pointed and significant indication of her status as an integrated member. In a normal host-guest relationship, the security of the home and the execution of core chores are usually the responsibility of the hosts. Consequently, by giving her the task of these activities and at the same time reminding her about it, we were, without words, treating her as one of the household members who can handle the responsibilities. This one deed embodies two very important elements that characterize dynamics of a surrogate family – trust and shared responsibility. Moreover, we granted her the security of our home and the welfare of the pet, which are profound ways of inclusion and belongingness. On the other hand, we also subjected her to the same level of contribution as the other family members, thereby emphasizing that this home, which is also her home, is now the place where she needs to help manage and safeguard. The move from the position of a passive recipient of care to that of an active, accountable participant of the day-to-day functions of the household is a pivotal one in family life and is embodied in the present expectation [24].

4.2.2 Intentional Cultural Scaffolding and Social Integration

This was not accidental tourism but a deliberate strategy. Each activity was chosen to demonstrate a specific Filipino cultural practice—from communal eating (*boodle fight*) and life-cycle rituals (birthdays, weddings) to family structures (Christmas party) and traditional customs (*pamamanhikan*) (Figures 4-8). Visiting historical places was also made possible (Figure 9). This method of "learning by doing" is a core tenet of experiential learning, which is highly effective in developing intercultural competence [4].

The questionnaire answered by our "instant daughter" confirmed learning Filipino culture as she compared it with the Japanese culture as she said,

"What impressed me the most about Filipino culture is how much they value family. For example, in the Philippines, families always wait until everyone is present before eating together. In Japan, however, it's common for family members to eat separately or to have meals with friends or coworkers instead. I also noticed a big difference in how people spend Christmas. In Japan, many people celebrate Christmas with their partners, but in the Philippines, it's a time to be with family and relatives. That made me realize how strong the family bond is in Filipino culture."

Likewise, a key part of our social guidance was actively embedding our "instant daughter" within our own social networks and the wider community. Based on the text, "It was also our wish that she is able to make connections

with others in her school... She also attended her classmate's 18th birthday party... we introduced her to my extended family... she went with us in a pamamanhikan." By introducing her to our extended family, and involving her in intimate family rituals, the family provided her with a pre-vetted social circle. This made her feel less lonely and gave her real-life situations to practice her language skills and learn about social norms. This creation of *communitas*—a sense of fellowship and shared experience—is important for turning a visitor into a member of the community [25].

4.2.3 The Evolution from Authority to Trusted "Ate" (Elder Sister)

The dynamic relationship has evolved from a conventional paternalistic framework, characterized by hierarchical protection, into a more familial and mentoring connection. My daughter said on the survey that *"Up until now, she still calls me her ate [elder sister] and asks me for different advices in the aspects of her life."*

Our "instant daughter" still looks up to her, our daughter. It is also clear that our "instant daughter" helps her Ate wash the dishes, which is a vital job. There was also a time when "our instant daughter" lost her phone, and it was her Ate who took the time to go with her to the store to get a new one. Our "instant daughter's" ongoing pursuit of guidance demonstrates that the temporary hosting arrangement has successfully reestablished a familial bond rooted in trust and mentorship, fulfilling the family's initial aspiration of "building a cultural connection." This signifies the formation of "fictive kin" relationships, a profound outcome of effective homestays, wherein the connection transcends formal limitations [25].

4.2.4 Navigating Cultural Gap

The situations we talked about here, along with our "instant daughter," show that cultural gaps are not only problems, but also important learning opportunities that can improve intercultural understanding and strengthen relationships if handled correctly. The problems we identified—mainly those related to emotional expression, views of time, and habitual practices—show the deep cultural backgrounds, and the ways we as the host family solved the problems show a more advanced type of intercultural pedagogy.

The most emotionally difficult part was the different ways of showing emotions. The difference between the Japanese student's "shyness" and her discomfort with physical affection, on one hand, and the Filipino family's report of a reserved farewell with her father, on the other hand, shows a basic difference between low-context and high-context communication styles [26]. For example, in Japanese culture, which is mostly high context, love and respect are shown through actions, control, and implicit understanding rather than directly giving the physical side. The Filipino approach, which is very expressive and uses verbal and physical demonstrations of affection, at first created a moment of cultural dissonance.

Our response as the host family to the challenges was not passive but actively educational. They not only introduced "our instant daughter" to our culture but also engaged in cultural mediation. Our choice to "teach her to be very expressive" aligns with the concept of host families facilitating "decentering"—the capacity of an individual to position themselves outside their own cultural framework and comprehend another [22]. Our approach was one of "guided participation," as described by the author in [27], wherein we immersed "our instant

daughter” in the customs of birthday celebrations and affectionate farewells, thereby providing her with a supportive framework to internalize new cultural scripts. “Our instant daughter’s” tears of joy at her birthday celebration and her warm, physical farewell serve as evidence of the efficacy of this proactive, empathetic approach.

Our “instant daughter’s” experience unveils a similar process of mutual adaptation. While we, the host family was the main cultural guide, “our instant daughter” showed considerable cognitive flexibility in altering her perception of “Filipino time.” Her initial puzzlement over the less strict approach to punctuality changed into an understanding of “enjoying the moment,” which means that she made a transition from a monochronic concept of time (linear, task-oriented) to a polychronic one (fluid, relationship-oriented) [28]. This was not simply a giving up of her own cultural background but rather an enlargement of her behavioral and cognitive repertoire. It was significant that she recognized us as her host family as “always kind and understanding,” since a supportive environment has been identified as a factor leading to successful intercultural adjustment [19].

Our “instant daughter’s” challenges to her Japanese customs did not simply result in her replacing Filipino ones. Rather, it led to the formation of a “third cultural space” — a shared relational environment in which new, hybrid understandings and practices could develop [29]. Here our “instant daughter” was able to keep her Japanese identity while she also adopted expressive Filipino gestures quite naturally. We as the host family, therefore, received an enriched understanding of the cultural origins of her initial reserve. This change of cultural differences into bridges of mutual understanding is, indeed, deep intercultural competence, which the foundation for the deepest, family-like bond, we eventually, achieved, is characteristic.

4.3 The Impact of the Pandemic and the Reciprocal Visit

When the cultural exchange suddenly stopped because of the COVID-19 pandemic, what was supposed to be a happy ending turned into a deep crisis. At the same time, it was a test and eventually a confirmation of the familial relationship between our “instant daughter” and us. Our shared experience of the interruption shows that we are no longer just cultural guides but also protective guardians. This also demonstrates how the transition from a formal hosting arrangement to a close, transnational kinship can be rapidly effected by the experience of a crisis situation together.

The pandemic disruption and the subsequent visit were not merely logistical events; they constituted pivotal moments that tested and illuminated the relationship, ultimately deepening it and transforming it from a formal, time-limited cultural exchange into a resilient and enduring transnational familial connection. Therefore, the themes below were recognized based on the interview answers and short messages.

4.3.1 Shared Trauma

Both of us initially felt a deep loss and strong uncertainty due to the pandemic. Our “instant daughter’s” experience was filled with the loss of the unfinished goodbyes - “I never thought it would be our last goodbye” - and the grief of missing out on the milestones, most especially her 18th birthday (supposed to be in a private resort), a culturally significant event in the Philippines. This is consistent with the psychological impact research of interrupted

sojourns, which can result in feelings of ambiguity, loss, and "unfinished business" that make the re-entry process more difficult [30]. The fact that she mentioned days being full of uncertainty, loneliness, and anxiety clearly indicates that the abrupt, forced shut down affected her emotionally.

While this was happening, we also closely followed the emotional estrangement and loneliness of our "instant daughter," which deepened as time passed. The cancellation of the trips and graduation ceremonies that had been planned was not only a failure of plans but also the end of the future we had dreamed of building together. The shared experience of loss and disruption led to the formation of a "communitas of crisis," which is a very intense emotional connection resulting from communal suffering, as explained by the author in [24]. This, in turn, made our emotional relationship even stronger.

4.3.2 The Pandemic Reveals the Depth of "Surrogate Family" Commitment

One of the biggest effects of the pandemic was that it changed how we felt about our responsibilities. Our main job changed from running a cultural program to making sure the students were safe and happy during a global crisis. For example, my ongoing efforts to "arrange her repatriation" go beyond the usual host family mission of parental advocacy. This is in line with the idea of "in-loco-parentis" during a crisis, when host families feel a deep, almost family-like obligation to protect their charge [16].

Our sense of responsibility was even stronger, and this made it clear how committed we were to her, which was much more than what was expected of a host family. As stated in the questionnaire and shown in the photos, we arranged for her to leave the Philippines, we told her to check in her luggage when she went to Japan by herself, and we asked her to report back to us when she got there. The follow-up guidance, such as giving her tasks to do during quarantine to keep her from getting bored (Figure 2 a-d), shows that we still care about her well-being even after she leaves. This kind of ongoing support system is very important for reducing the negative psychological effects of a crisis-ridden repatriation [31].

The abrupt change of the planned, celebratory ending to a crisis-management scenario was a "critical incident". Therefore, an incident in general represents a moment that "reveal underlying values, beliefs, and patterns of behavior" [5]. Our reaction - which was dominated by protective care (repatriation efforts, safety instructions) and continuing mentorship (giving productive tasks during quarantine) - showed that our role as a "surrogate family" was not dependent on the existence of the ideal exchange environment. This is consistent with research on homestays during crises, which indicates that families providing unwavering support in such times become, very deeply, and very long, connected [23]. Saying goodbye at the airport with tears and handing down detailed instructions was a strong ritual that, among other things, helped to establish the family nature of our bond rather than the formal one.

4.3.3 Holding on Through Digital Kinship and Reciprocal Invitations

After she came back, both sides were equally involved in trying to keep the connection going. So, we changed it from a "transnational social field" that was physically present to one that was managed online.

Keeping in touch with the relationship digitally and sending repeated invitations (Figure 3) is typical of a transnational family way of life [13]. The use of video messages and open-ended invitations are not simply polite gestures; they are "symbolic tokens" of belonging to the family unit [32]. The fact that both families reached out shows a mutual commitment, thus they are no longer in a host-guest relationship but have become peer families. The continuous contact enabled them to keep a sense of "communitas"—the shared feeling of community—despite the geographical separation [24].

4.3.4 The Reciprocal Visit as "Ceremonial Reaffirmation" and Cultural Contextualization

Our 2024 visit was essentially a task of fulfilling a promise that had been for a long time and to "reconnect," however, it went far beyond that; it was the formal recognition of the family bond again. The survey used as evidence showed that the visit was helping to achieve the goals of "long-planned fulfillment" and "bonding with our 'instant daughter' and her family" through shared activities, social drinking, and celebrating Father's Day in their home. The event was a "rite of intensification" in itself, a ritual that strengthens the group's support [33].

For us, the journey was described as the "fulfillment of our longtime plan" and an attempt to "regain ties." The words used suggest that the relationship was considered as unfinished business, an "obligation of kinship" that had to be honored despite the pandemic's disruption [34]. The visit was a deliberate move to ensure the relationship's survival, going beyond digital interaction to physical presence together. Through this act of coming to the student's home country, we completed a very important moment of mutual exchange, thus making our role not only as single-sided hosts but also as shared family members. Such a return to mobility is one of the characteristics of mature transnational relationships, where the bond is kept alive through shared experiences in both cultures [35].

For "our instant daughter" the visit was extremely significant, and it was a very sentimental event for her. Her statement that it "*felt like our bond had grown even stronger*" and that they had "*truly become like real family*" indicates that the visit was a "rite of intensification" - a ceremony which strengthens the feeling of solidarity within us [33]. The return of hospitality - "*I was so happy to finally show them my country - just like they had welcomed me*" - was a very strong declaration of her own agency and an important moment in the process of the relationship becoming equal again. Such a return of love and care is necessary in the process of changing a bond in which one is dependent on the other's care into a bond of mutual respect and partnership [23]. The Japanese family, therefore, was the exchange of the previous hospitality, through which they invited us into their life and home, thus altering the bond from that of host-guest to that of shared host-family. In addition, the trip gave us the cultural background we needed. Since we were very interested in Japanese culture, "our instant daughter" became a cultural guide herself, which helped her feel proud and more connected to her identity. This change from being a "guest" in the Philippines to a "host" in Japan allowed her to present herself in a more complete way, which deepened our understanding of each other [36]. Our "instant daughter's" expression that she has "*two new kids in my family*" and our statement that we want to see their "Japanese family" together illustrate the development of a "chosen family" or "fictive kin" according to the authors in [37] which is a bond that is created voluntarily, is emotionally charged, and all the members acknowledge it as family, irrespective of biological ties.

4.3.5 The Reciprocal Visit as a Catalyst for Transnational Kinship

When we went to Japan in 2024, it was a big deal that changed both the level and the way we thought about our relationship. Our tales illustrate that the most crucial thing we did to change the emotional and loving "host-guest" relationship we had into a family link that was just as strong and balanced around the world was to be together in the student's home culture.

Our time in Japan gave us actual, shared experiences that helped us become this new kind of "true family" in harmony. We were informing each other about our daily lives in a way that was more like living like a real, integrated family than cultural tourism. For example, "*We went out every day as they led us...*" "*We drank socially at their house every night.*" Family bonds are so strong because they know so much about both the ordinary and the extraordinary [35].

The best example of this integration was the celebration of Father's Day, which is not a widespread event in Japan but was "happily celebrated" by our "instant daughter's" family... "with our family." This show of shared, mixed family culture is a key feature of transnational families that successfully blend the customs of both origins to form a unique, shared identity [13]. It was a way for the Japanese family to show that the Filipino father was a part of their family, both publicly and emotionally.

4.4 The Nature of the Enduring Connection

The primary points that both the Japanese student and we made after the whole thing show that our relationship has grown beyond a normal cultural exchange. It also shows that we have built a strong and lasting global network of extended relatives. The link that we both call "real family" didn't just happen by happenstance; it was a deliberate interaction that they constructed together, depending on the supports they wanted to use.

We also understand that the key elements were not left to chance; they were the outcome of careful efforts to make a lasting connection. The text says, "*We did not fully treat her as a full-time visitor... We treated her as a member of our family.*" We think that "Consistency" in the regulations and "Open heartedness" are two of the most significant parts [21]. We made the choice not to treat her as a "visitor" at all, and that was the turning point. The circumstance aligns with the notion of "communicative competence" among host families, which entails fostering an environment conducive to collaborative tasks and open dialogue, so transcending the service-provider paradigm [25]. The family rules were always the same, which made the family structure stable and predictable. Members also got closer and more intimate by sharing personal problems, which is how open heartedness works. This kind of interaction is a mutual vulnerability, which is the basis for strong, resilient relationships [23].

Our intentional nurturing is complemented by our "instant daughter's" profound emotional reaction. The author in [17] says that our relationship is based on the idea of "generalized reciprocity," which means that help is given without expecting anything in return. By calling "love, gratitude, and mutual respect" the "glue," she not only confirms this, but she also shows that this is the kind of relationship that is common in families and close kin networks. One of the most prominent examples of this is the absolutely non-transactional support that comes from her biological father in Japan, who on his own accord gave financial aid for a school activity in the Philippines.

This is a very important indicator of moral solidarity and the merger of the two families' domains of obligation, which means that they are now one social and economic unit [38].

The result of this process is the creation of a "chosen family" or "fictive kin" [39]. This bond is said to be the product of feelings and is a clear family connection. The study says, "*Our instant daughter is almost 'like a real family'... a very close family member...*" We were taken to the father's photo studio for our pictures, as if we were family. My daughter also calls the relationship "my little sister and friend." We all accept our kinship voluntarily and jointly, even though we are not biologically related or geographically close. For example, we call our "instant daughter" "almost part of our family," and the student clearly says that we are her "real family." According to the author in [35], "thick communication" is keeping this relationship going. This means that we can talk about "anything under the sun," which makes us feel close even when we are apart. When we went to Japan as a family in 2024, it felt like we were all one large family when we went to the store to obtain the ingredients for the Filipino meals (garlic rice and "*pansit*") that we made for dinner. This terminology implies the establishment of "fictive kin," a relationship wherein characters physiologically external to the familial network are integrated into a family system and accorded the status and rights of kinship [39]. The phrase "almost 'part of our family'" suggests that the line between the biological family and the chosen family has been blurred. The photo studio session and the cooking session at their home constitute a significant ritual of familial display, wherein families exhibit their unity and belonging to themselves and others [34]. This deed made it clear to everyone that we were coming together as a transnational unit.

Ultimately, this case reinforces the notion that the value of student exchanges is assessed not by their time but by their depth. Our "instant daughter," who is very observant, says that the "sincerity of the connection" is more significant than the "length of time." The experience made her a more "global and confident person," and at the same time, she "gifted" the host family with a transnational kinship that "lasts." This shows that such programs can be the "architects" of "profound, permanent family-like bonds" that not only change identities but also create new, lasting forms of belonging across borders.

There is still a strong relationship between them since they talk about significant things a lot, which is strange because the bond is still being retained. The inscription says, "We are still in touch." "We're not at all afraid to talk to each other about anything." These aren't just meetings that happen every now and then; they're what communication researchers' term "thick" communication—interactions full of personal news, emotional substance, and shared memories [40]. The ability to converse about "anything under the sun" demonstrates the strength and depth of the relationship, a characteristic of intimate familial connections, essential for transnational links to endure over time and distance [35].

5. Conclusion

A beautiful example of holistic guardianship is our family hosting our "instant daughter" and working together. We provide protective care (health reminders), which made the home a safe environment where both family and cultural values (respectful language) could be learned naturally.

This sensation of belonging made it possible for our "instant daughter" to take on genuine home duties, like

keeping the house safe and taking care of the pets. This good circle demonstrates a surrogate family model where care, cultural transmission, and mutual obligation were well balanced, and the link that was both protective, empowering, and familial got stronger.

The link was not just "stronger" during the pandemic; it was also different since the bond itself had changed. The pandemic put the relationship to the test as a strong and unconditional one. The visit from both families altered the relationship from a hierarchical one (host-student) to a symmetrical one (family-to-family). The relationship was no longer defined by the structure of the original program. Instead, it had become a self-sustaining, international familial network that could survive any disruption and flourish via the exchange of goods and services.

It is through the student exchange program that all the events involved here have resulted to culture awareness and evolution of "chosen families." The long-term partnership, which is not a fortuitous accident, but instead the consequence of the host family's intentional integration philosophy that created an environment of stability, openness, and shared values. The relationship has evolved into a naturally functioning, cross-border familial network, significantly fostered by profound communication, marked by a common identity and unconditional mutual support that transcends the ephemeral nature of its origins.

6. Recommendations

Exchange Program Administrators should make sure that host families understand the program's goals and continue to support it. This way, they can remind them that they are not just the people who run the program; they are also their cultural mentors and stand-in family. They also need to get the host families ready so that they may stay close to the students even after the program is over. This will help them make long-lasting connections across borders.

Host families should not just treat the student like a guest; they should make them feel like part of the family. They should also take the lead in creating a "curriculum" of immersive cultural experiences that will help the student learn more about the local family life and customs.

Subsequent research may build upon this work by employing a bigger and more heterogeneous sample size to determine if these strong familial bonds are a prevalent consequence. The author also suggests that longitudinal studies be conducted to observe the development of these transnational family interactions over a period beyond ten years.

7. Limitations of the Study

This is an example of a single case study, where the focus is on the detailed, in-depth qualitative aspects of the relationship. However, the findings may not be generalizable to other Filipino, Japanese homestay relationships or to the broader field of intercultural dynamics. Still, the personal experiences highlighted the kind of relationship we had with the Filipino host family and our "instant daughter," the Japanese student.

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