Chapter 2

Emotional Dimensions of Transnational Education: Parent–Child Relationships of the Chinese "Parachute Generation" in the United States

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Abstract

This paper describes the parent–child relationships of upper-middle-class Chinese parents and their adolescent children who were "parachuted" to the United States for private high schools. With parents remaining in China and children in the United States, thousands of miles away, such a transnational educational arrangement complicates the already volatile parent–child relationships during the adolescent years. Through ethnographic interviews of 41 students and 33 parents, I demonstrate different forms of child–parent relationships in a transnational education setting: those who found that the further physical and temporal distance has brought the parent–child relationship closer through frequent communications, children who experienced "accelerated growth" yet questioned the necessity, and delicate parent–child relationships due to increasing transnational cross-cultural or intergenerational differences. These types of parent–child relationships are not comprehensive of all the lived experiences of the "parachute generation," yet they shed new light on transnational education and the unintended emotional dimensions of educational migration. In a transnational context for an economically well-off group, parental absence or separation of children and parents is no longer a clear-cut concept and has different layers of meanings, taking into account the frequency of communication, duration of spring and winter breaks and the existence of third-party agents such as for-profit intermediaries (or educational

consultants) and host families. The diverse patterns of parent–child relations reveal the heterogeneity and complexities of "doing family" across geographic spaces and global educational hierarchies, as well as the roles of communication technologies, the tempo of mobilities and educational intermediaries.

> I have already sent my son away. It is no longer possible to protect every aspect of his life like a mother hen. I can't even protect him now that he's in another system and has left his home country. Even if I have great capacity, I cannot help him anymore. He will have to protect himself (interview with Ying, mother of a 17-year-old boy, Shanghai, June 20, 2016).

Scholars of migration in the past decades have paid increasing attention to the rising phenomenon of transnational childhoods and gradually started to bring transnational young people's perspectives into the spotlight (Gardner, 2012; Mazzucato & Geel, 2022; Orellana et al., 2001). Young people experience the effect of migration in different ways, whether they are the ones who migrate, get left behind, or were born as children of immigrants. In Asian societies, much research work on transnational childhood has focused on the "left behind" children (Beazley & Ball, 2022; Graham et al., 2012; Hoang et al., 2015; Parreñas, 2005; Parreñas et al., 2022) and educational migrants (Huang & Yeoh, 2005; Waters, 2008). This research builds on the "migration-left behind nexus" (Toyota et al., 2007) to discuss the parent–child relations of Chinese "parachute students" in the United States. Bringing accounts of both the parents who are left behind and the children who take the lead in educational migration, this chapter focuses on the parent–child relationships and moves beyond the educational purpose of the educational project, revealing the heterogeneity and complexities of "doing family" across geographic spaces and global educational hierarchies.

The "parachute generation" of mainland China emerged with the rising number of upper-middle-class households in urban China. From 2005 to 2015, the number of Chinese students attending American secondary institutions grew more than 70-fold, from 637 to 46,125. Chinese students make up half of the international students seeking secondary education in 2015, and they were only 2.4% of that population in 2005 (data compiled by the author from the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services). Early studies labeled these students as "parachute kids," "unaccompanied minors," "unaccompanied sojourners," "visa students," "early study abroad students," or "pre-college students" (Chiang-Hom, 2004; Kim, 2014; Kuo & Roysircar, 2006; Pe-Pua et al., 1998; Zhou, 1998). They joined a previous wave of Korean and Taiwanese students from Asia, but in considerably larger numbers. Mostly the only child of their family and mainly from megacities of China, these students are sent on their own by their urban

upper-middle-class Chinese parents to the United States as early as 14 in pursuit of an American private high school diploma, with the expectation of continuing to American universities.

Their parents are the beneficiaries of China's economic reform in 1978 and accumulated their wealth through a combination of education, hard work and investment in the stock market and property. The shared feature of this group is the amount of wealth that they have accumulated over the years, which allows them to fund their children's education abroad. The occupation of this group is heterogeneous. Most of them consider themselves "middle-class," even though their ability to spend an average of over $50,000 a year on their children's US education reveals that they belong to the top income bracket in urban China. Most of these families own more than one property in the city where they reside; hence, it is common for these parents to think of their investment in children's education (including 4 years of high school, 4 years of college and 2 years of an advanced degree) in exchange for a property they owned. An average 1000-square-foot apartment in Shanghai or Beijing usually costs more than half a million US dollars. The wealth and class position of the families are important in the description of this chapter because they distinguished their transnational arrangements and struggles with parent–child separation and parental absence from their less wealthy counterparts, who experience mobility as an imperative (Farrugia, 2016). Based on in-depth interviews with 33 parents and 41 students in several Chinese mega-cities, this chapter will discuss how such an economically well-off group is "doing family" in a transnational context and how these practices and strategies propagate different forms of parent–child relationships.

Theoretical Perspectives

I situate the case within three theoretical perspectives that intersect education, migration and transnational families: the perspectives on educational migration of East Asian families, transnational "family-ing," and the "migration-left behind nexus." This chapter not only provides a unique case to engage with these theoretical perspectives but also further complicates our current understanding of parent–child relationships during the process of educational migration in a transnational context. I call for more focus on centering children's voices and considering the unintended consequences of educational migration and the emotional dimension of such an educational choice.

Perspectives on Educational Migration of East Asian Families

There is ample research in migration literature that discusses the relationship between education and migration for East Asian families. Waters (2015) summarizes the important drivers underpinning educational migration as such: the acquisition of cultural and linguistic capital and the notion of children as "accumulation strategies." She points out that for relatively affluent families, an overwhelming concern is the intergenerational reproduction of social status and economic success. Others' research (Fong, 2004; Lan, 2018; Waters, 2008) also

highlights that for the economically well-off classes, children (in the Chinese case, often the only child at home) migrate to get an education to become globally competitive and socially upward-mobile talents.

For those of working-class backgrounds, children often get left behind at home and are told that their parents migrate internally or transnationally to fund their education (Gu, 2022a; Hoang et al., 2015). Although both routes aim to create better educational resources for the children, the class variation of the families makes the educational and lived experiences drastically different for the children. Yet children's voices are largely ignored when examining these "family projects."

Another reference group for educational migration of East Asian families is second- or 1.5-generation immigrants from East Asia in host countries such as the United States. The educational achievement of Asian Americans, frequently portrayed as better than children of immigrants of other ethnic backgrounds, contrary to an essentialist cultural explanation, is a result of combined immigrant selectivity and particular sets of parenting strategies (Lan, 2018; Lee & Zhou, 2015). Thus, it is important to move beyond a cultural framework and document the variegated parent–child relationships for a better understanding of their experiences.

For families of different socioeconomic backgrounds in Asian societies, the "educational project" of children plays a salient role in shaping how families make decisions about and participate in the migration process. In the case of the "parachute generation," Chinese upper-middle-class families, just like their counterparts in other East Asian families, send their children abroad for education and consider it "the best option" (Tu, 2022). Those families make such a transnational educational choice as a silent exit from the anxiety-ridden Chinese education system. Although teenage children are involved in the decision-making process, parents take the lead and choose to exit due to a broad spectrum of reasons, ranging from overall dissatisfaction with the political narrative of the Chinese state to the educational aspiration of a "well-rounded" education and resistance against the test-oriented pedagogical practices at school (Tu, 2022). Like other East Asian parents, they want to convert the family's economic capital into children's institutional, cultural and social capital. Yet, as I will reveal later in the chapter, by including their children's voices, such decisions of educational migration are no longer considered by all, especially the children, as a *necessity*. Children's reflection on the "educational project" will prompt scholars to consider not only educational aspiration but also other aspects of educational migration of transnational families, such as the emotional costs of separation and the growth of teenagers beyond academic development.

Transnational Families and Childhoods

Another stream of literature has explored the emotional costs of "doing family" for transnational families of different class profiles (Lan, 2018; Ong, 1999; Parreñas, 2005; Waters, 2005). Parreñas (2005), for example, depicts the emotional insecurity of Filipino female-headed transnational households in which

mothers go abroad as domestic workers to achieve financial security but struggle to "mother from a distance" in order to conform to the traditional gender ideologies. Ong (1999) documents the "flexible family system" that well-off male entrepreneurs continue to do business in Hong Kong while sending their wives and children to North America. She argues that the flexible logic of global capital accumulation deprives children of both parents and disciplines family members to make do with very little emotional support. Transnational arrangements of "doing family" challenge the traditional understanding of how families work, yet also in many ways reinforce existing gender norms, especially when it comes to the gendered division of labor in parenting. In the case of the Chinese "parachute generation" in the United States, most mothers still take the main responsibility for maintaining parent–child relationships. Yet it is not static. In this research, I also document fathers' participation in such relationships. One particular case demonstrates how the father mediates the relationship between the mother and the child of the family. Such a case did not serve as a getaway to generalization, but as a window to look into diverse forms of parent–child relationships.

Apart from the variances within transnational family arrangements and the complexity of the parent–child relationship, a growing number of researchers recognize the general tendency toward "adultism" in telling the stories of transnational migration and call for more work to pay attention to the role of children and young people in transnational families (Dobson, 2009; Dreby, 2007; Orellana et al., 2001; Tu & Lutz, 2022; White et al., 2011). Children were previously treated as "luggage" and a "source of anxiety" (Dobson, 2009), which neglected their agency and also overlooked the impact of migration on their lives and emotional well-being. Along with many scholars, this research calls for more focus on children as active agents and the bearers of the consequences of a family's migration decisions. This chapter will further demonstrate the case of upper-middle-class Chinese families' emerging patterns of "doing family" with abundant economic resources, while also facing challenges in a transnational context.

Migration Left-behind Nexus When Children Take the Lead

Previous work on internal migration and children in China and international labor migration in Asia has focused much on the "left-behind children" (Ge et al., 2019; Graham et al., 2012; Toyota et al., 2007). The often-loaded term "left-behind children" has negative connotations of parental negligence and insufficient care among lay people as well as in public discourses (Gu, 2022b). Toyota et al. (2007) call for bringing the "left-behind" into view in Asia and understanding the consequences of migration through a framework of "migration left-behind nexus." Previous work on the "left-behind children" examines intimate family relationships through the lens of transnational care arrangements. With a similar focus on parent–child separation as a result of migration, this chapter shifts the perspective from "left-behind children" to "left-behind parents." When children take the lead in a case of educational migration, this research

intends to highlight how relative economic abundance can shift the narratives of how families negotiate their transnational relationships.

Data and Method

The empirical basis of this chapter comes from a larger research project on the Chinese "parachute students" in the United States and their upper-middle-class urban families. For the larger project, I conducted sequential interviews in both China and the United States to trace: (1) parents who sent their children to US high schools ($N = 33$); (2) adolescents who have studied or are currently enrolled in US private high schools ($N = 41$); (3) consultants at Chinese educational consulting agencies ($N = 17$) – among them, one was previously an admissions officer of an elite American high school. The parents' occupations vary. Among them, there are doctors, university professors, medium-sized business owners, county-level government officials, software developers, managers and bankers at multinational firms. Many of them have an associate's or college degree. Twenty-seven out of 33 parents are mothers, and the rest are fathers. This corresponds to the focus of previous research (Huang & Yeoh, 2005; Jeong et al., 2014; Kang, 2012) on transnational mothering, as mothers still do the heavy lifting in this process. The students I talked to consist of 29 girls and 12 boys.[1] They were at different stages of their educational journey. At the time of the interview, six of them have finished college (aged 22–32 years), four were attending universities (aged 18–22 years) and the rest were still in American high schools (aged 14–18 years). Twenty-seven of them have attended or are attending boarding high schools, and the rest chose day schools and have stayed or are still staying with host families. The analyses in this chapter are more focused on teenagers who were still enrolled in American high schools.

In sequential interviewing, as proposed by Mario Small (2009), each case provides an increasingly accurate understanding of the research question (Yin, 2013). This method treats each interview as a case and adjusts interview questions based on the previous case. I brought the expanded knowledge and context I learned from the previous interviewees to the interviews that followed. Sometimes, I asked the interviewees about their take on the previous interviewees' opinions. I stopped collecting new interviews once I reached the theoretical salutation point, that is, when I kept hearing repetitive and familiar accounts on the same sets of questions. I discussed with parents their motivations for sending children to American private high schools, their main concerns about such an educational option, and their children's educational path in general. I learned from the children regarding their motivation for choosing or following this educational option, their actual lived experiences at the schools, including

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[1]I actively sought out male students but had little success. It could be that female students are more likely to open up to a female researcher, but there is no clear and definite explanation for this discrepancy. There is no official number for the gender ratio of the number of "parachute" Chinese students in the United States.

schoolwork, interaction with host families (if any), teachers and classmates, as well as their educational and career aspirations. This chapter mainly focuses on the accounts of parents and adolescents and centers on their narratives around parent–child relationships. Out of the 74 parents and children I talked to, seven pairs of them come from the same household.

Most of the interviews with parents and students (47 out of 74) were conducted in mega-cities such as Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou, where the urban upper-middle-class families are mainly situated, during three consecutive summer breaks from 2015 to 2017 and the winter break in January of 2017. Each interview ranges from an hour to six hours, with an average of an hour and a half. I talked to several key informants more than once when they were available. The time I chose to visit China resonates with the students' academic school year schedule. During the break, international students were more likely to go back to China to spend time with families, and most of the high school and college recruitment events and workshops organized by educational consulting companies occurred around that time. I conducted 10 interviews with "parachute students" in New York City and one interview with a parent who happened to visit her child in the city. None of them were attending NYC-based private high schools. I scheduled meetings in advance with them during their trips to the city. Since the "parachute students" were very spread out geographically in the United States, I experimented with interviewing them via video chat (such as Skype or WeChat video) and ended up interviewing 10 students this way (I also interviewed four parents via audio chat when it was hard to figure out a face-to-face meeting time that worked for all of us). The students tended to share very intimate experiences with me that they claimed they had never shared with their parents or friends. This was especially common when I conducted interviews with them via video chat. The sense of anonymity and distance probably made them treat me as a therapist rather than a researcher. The intention of the research is not to check their educational achievement and school performances, but to understand their lived experiences through their accounts. I found video chatting a valid way to proceed with my research. All names that appear in this chapter are pseudonyms I created based on their real names. I audio-recorded all the interviews, transcribed them verbatim and used grounded theory analyses with the help of MAXQDA. The topic of transnational parent–child relationships is a pattern that emerged from such analyses.

From "Left-behind Children" to "Left-behind Parents": Diverse Forms of Parent–Child Relationships

The educational decisions of Chinese upper-middle-class families to send their teenage children to US private high schools are different from the previous generation of South Korean (Byun, 2010) or Taiwanese families (Sun, 2014) who let the children take the lead to move the whole family to the United States for the long term. Most Chinese parents consider it mainly an educational decision and most children told me that they will return to China after getting an advanced

degree. The children's accounts have much to do with growing up in a rapidly developing China and their discontent with isolated high school life in the United States. The teenage students are born around the turn of the century and have always experienced China as a prosperous nation that is still "on the rise" from their class position and the urban setting that they grew up with. Such educational decisions nonetheless changed the way these families maintain parent–child relationships and arrange their transnational family lives.

Teenage students enter an unfamiliar school environment and develop different practices regarding how they interact with their parents. On the one hand, parents become the ones who are "left behind" and wait for their children to contact them, visit them over the break and decide what to share with them. On the other hand, they still pay for all the costs of their children and, therefore, at least maintain the financial authority to "supervise" their children.

The forms of the parent–child relationship differ greatly given the frequency and quality of communication. Some at least communicate once a day, whereas some barely talk to one another once a month, even with the convenience of WeChat and other telecommunication tools. Some parents track their children's daily movements through instant notifications of credit card payments. The duration of spring and winter breaks also makes a huge difference as some children spend at least a quarter of the year in China and do not lose touch with their home country whereas others spend more time with classmates and host families. Those who go back to China during all breaks get to spend more quality time with their parents compared to the Chinese students who attend public schools in China and have to spend the majority of their breaks preparing for the College Entrance Exam.

The existence of for-profit intermediaries complicates the relationship, as some consultants offer "accompanied growth" (*pei ban shi cheng zhang* 陪伴式成长) service for their clients. In such cases, parents almost outsource their parenting to these intermediaries. Such intermediaries will advise students on how to choose courses at American high schools, handle potential conflicts between the student and their classmates, provide suggestions on arrangements and activities over the breaks and deal with any problems that emerge in the process of the educational migration. They are in direct contact with school teachers, parents and children themselves. If necessary, they help parents hire extra professional assistance, for example, if the child is involved in any legal disputes, they will hire local lawyers to take care of such emergencies. The cost of such a service is around $10,000 per year. The educational consultants provide monthly reports to parents. Such service alleviates the anxiety of some parents who fear that they lack knowledge of the American private secondary educational system, while sometimes also further removing their parental involvement in their children's transnational schooling experiences.

Apart from these identifiable variables that impact parent–child relationships – the frequency of communication, the arrangement of the breaks and the utility of intermediaries' service – three shared narratives emerge from both parents' and children's perceptions of their relationships. I will explain these three narratives in the following section. It is worth noticing that such narratives are not exhaustive

of the diverse forms of parent–child relationships, nor are they mutually exclusive. One set of parent–child relationships may fit into multiple narratives. These are not an attempt at categorization but an attempt to capture the complexities of "doing family" in such a specific transnational context.

"Distance Brings Us Closer": Maintaining an Intimate Relationship in a Time-Space Compression

Information and communication technologies (ICTs) have made communication between family members convenient. With the prevalence of video calls through social networking sites, the costs of such communication are also minimal. With the removal of the technical and financial barriers to communicating seamlessly, the parent–child intimate relationship seems to be easy to maintain in a time-space compression in this globalized world. However, plenty of thought was put into whether to initiate the calls from both the children and the parents.

Some students talk about how studying abroad brings them closer to their parents as they start to miss them while being isolated in American boarding schools and can empathize more with their parents' concerns. This does not necessarily bring about more communication between the children and their parents. For example, as Lingli, a 16-year-old girl from Guangzhou, mentioned,

> [My] parents worry about disturbing me, so they don't call me very often... Sometimes I texted my mum at 3 am or 4 am her time, and she replied immediately. I thought that I had woken her up. Then I don't dare to text her around that time anymore... In the end, we have a call every two or three weeks, or even once a month. I only called them when I was really unhappy. That's not good.

Although Lingli only talks to her parents when she is unhappy, she starts to appreciate her parents' unconditional love for her, especially when she has a hard time making close friends at the American school and does not like the teachers she encounters. She went on to share her shifting attitudes toward her parents and their improved relationship when she gets to go back home,

> I used to fight with my parents a lot. Now, I cherish my time with my parents [when I'm back in China]. I am with them all the time. They will allow me to eat anything. Our tastes are quite close. They won't bother me too much. It's better to stay with my parents [than spend time with classmates or teachers at the U.S. boarding school].

From the parents' side, they also tend to think twice before calling their children. As Ying, a mother of a 17-year-old boy from Shanghai, demonstrates,

> We Skype almost every day. I do not initiate the call. The teachers suggest that we would better not call them [to disturb their everyday activity] … Sometimes, my son leaves me a WeChat message, saying that he was busy that day and didn't have much to report… We have established a habit of having some contact every day. I told him that it would not take too much time. I just want to listen to your voice and know that you are physically and mentally well. I can then rest my heart… [Tearing up] I have sent him away, and I cannot protect him in every aspect anymore… He has to protect himself."

Many parents express similar feelings as Ying. They make themselves available all the time, even in the middle of the night. Their mobile phone is always on, and they are always prepared to pick up a call from the other end of the world to wake them up from sleep. Both the physical and temporal distances do not stop them from providing distant caregiving and creating a sense of "distant co-presence" (Baldassar, 2016). Fanghua, a mother from Hangzhou of a girl who has graduated from an American boarding school, demonstrates this form of caregiving quite precisely,

> I want my daughter to know that, as long as you need me, I will show up next to you. If you want to talk to me, I am always there for you. If you want to keep it to yourself, I will give you the space you need and respect you as well.

Her daughter is now in her thirties, and she is among the early wave of "parachute students" who went to American private high schools when there were not many other Chinese students on campus. During her daughter's decade-long study in the United States, Fanghua, who occupies a high-level managerial position in a private company, always lived up to her promise to "be there" for her daughter.

Aria, a 17-year-old girl from Beijing, told me that she did not always share her negative emotions with her father because she knew he would have booked a flight if he had known about her situation. With abundant economic resources, many Chinese upper-middle-class parents can provide instant care for their children, by picking up their calls, sending agents to take care of their needs, or even directly flying for more than 12 hours to meet their children. Children also appreciate both the financial and emotional investment of their parents.

Due to the routinized school hours that children have to keep, the children's schedule dictates the rhythm and frequency of communication more than their parents. Acedera and Yeoh (2019) demonstrate through the case of Singapore-based Filipino migrants and their left-behind husbands that the rhythm and frequency of transnational communication reflect the temporal priority while "doing family." In this case of "parachute students," both children and parents understand that education is the priority in such an arrangement. Parents do not want to "disturb" their children, and children do not want to share their negative

experiences while parents are far away. The temporal and physical distance between these family members, in some cases, makes them develop a deeper mutual understanding. They get to avoid some of the conflicts that might exist when they live together and only see the good sides of one another. At the same time, it is inevitable that, in some cases, the lack of communication due to such distance also pulls them away from one another.

"Accelerated Growth / Ripening": Questioning the Mobility Imperative

Although students generally gain ample understanding of the importance of the educational project, some of them still question whether such pains of separation and growing up somewhat on their own are necessary. The students who attend boarding schools have the typical experience of being in a "total institution" (Goffman, 1961) and are taken care of by teachers and staff of the schools, whereas those who attend day schools stay with host families. Some host families have a long-time collaboration with the day schools, and the "host parents" tend to be schoolteachers or parents of current students or alums of the schools, while other host families are facilitated by third-party agencies to specifically fulfill the needs of international secondary school students. The host families are paid monthly and are supposed to provide room and board as well as pick up the students from school and extra-curriculum activities. From the students' account of this study, each host family has a different understanding of the degree of involvement that they should have in the students' lives. Some consider themselves surrogate parents and may scold the students for spending too much time on video games and not doing household work, or they will take the students out and introduce them to various family weekend activities, such as fishing, or bring the student with them to Sunday church service, while others do the bare minimum and treat the student as a tenant of the house rather than a family member. Although the families can select and change host families in the process, the children are the bearers of such uncertainty, whether it turns out to be an overly positive or negative experience.

Wei, a 16-year-old girl from Beijing, had a very painful experience with her host family. She spent most of her time at home with a "host father" who did not trust anything she said. She complained about the absurdity of spending her adolescent years with "a middle-aged male who is not [her] dad." She also had a hard time in a conservative Christian private day school when she realized that her bisexuality is not even allowed at school. To deal with all these incidents, she forced herself to grow up. She shared with me that,

> My family has witnessed my change from a spoiled girl to what I turned out now. Back then, even if I wanted to drink water, my grandmother would bring it to me. Now I become a very considerate person and know how to take care of our family members. They [my family] think it's quite nice. They talk about how grown-up I am. I usually answer that with a smiley face. Yet,

deep down inside, I am soaked in blood and tears. The huge cost…it's not necessary.

Many students share her sentiment of "reporting only what is good while concealing what is unpleasant" (*bao xi bu bao you* 报喜不报忧), a Chinese phrase with which many students identify: they do not want their parents to worry from thousands of miles away, so they force themselves to become more mature and deal with challenges.

Nea, an 18-year-old girl from Beijing, echoed that when I told her about Wei's account and said,

I agree with her. Becoming more independent and more mature is not necessary at this stage. I might be more at ease facing this when I grow up. A child does not need to become so independent as a "parachute student" during the ages of 14 to 18. It could be the last time in my life that I experience unconditional help. Why is the parent-child relationship cut off so early? It's utterly unnecessary.

Being "parachuted" into a private high school in an unfamiliar society comes with a high level of risk and uncertainty. For many students, it accelerates their growth or even forces them to become mature as teenagers. Different from the "left-behind children" in South-East Asia (and those in rural China) who see the separation as inevitable and accept the "mobility imperative," "parachute students" have more choices and consequently, they have the capacity to question the necessity of such a school choice and educational migration decision. This capacity is similar to what Appadurai (2004) called "the capacity to aspire," a navigational capacity that is more likely to be acquired by the more privileged to "explore the future more frequently and more realistically and to share this knowledge more routinely with one another than their poorer and weaker neighbors" (p. 69). The capacity to question makes the main difference between the "parachute students" and their less-resourced counterparts. They do not consider educational migration and separation from their parents to be their only options because they can imagine alternative paths that are not taken, such as attending a boarding and international school in China or remaining in a domestic Chinese school and taking the college entrance exams. Yet they mostly still become understanding toward the family's educational choice (in some cases, they were the initiators of such choice) and bear the consequences of such "accelerated growth."

"Handle With Care": Negotiating a Delicate Parent–Child Relationship

Parents are not completely unaware of their children's discontent. Several parents find maintaining parent–child relationships in such a transnational context "delicate." Some of them even attribute it to the cultural differences in individuality in the Chinese and US contexts.

Hongyuan, the father of an 18-year-old boy from Shanghai shared with me his son's dissatisfaction with a forced smile,

> It is hard for me to decide whether it was the right decision to send my son abroad. Sometimes I truly regretted it. My son even asked me, "why did you send me here to eat bitterness (*chi ku* 吃苦)?" I said you consented back then. I did not force you to do so... I hope that he can be more independent, law-abiding, safe, and self-disciplined. I do not care much about his degrees and credentials.

He went on and explained that he struggled to maneuver between his son and his wife. His wife visited their son in the United States, decided to rent an apartment and stayed with him for a while. They had massive fights over personal boundaries. Hongyuan told me about one of the incidents between the mother and the son,

> My wife would contact my son's classmates to know more about him [when she visited the U.S.]. My son found that ridiculous and grew apart from her. He does not talk to her at all. I now have to handle it with great care. I treat him delicately and carefully and try to maintain his relationship with his mom. Currently, the mother and the son each occupy a room and do not talk to each other. They have reached an impasse. Cultural and conceptual differences are hard to deal with. There is no such thing as right or wrong. It's hard to say.

In Hongyuan's family's case, the son has already embraced the so-called "American" understanding of individuality and expects his parents to respect his personal boundaries whereas his mother still demonstrates her care the old way by asking anyone who knows her son to collect more information about him. This is not necessarily a cross-cultural or even transnational conflict, as it is also common for teenagers and parents to understand personal boundaries differently. However, with the added layer of transnational family-making, the negotiation is more difficult, and conflicts can escalate easily.

Hongyuan's wife's initial decision to spend extended time with her son is also worth noticing. Although this is not a common choice, many mothers in my research have spent considerable time in the United States, usually a month or two, out of concern for their teenage children. Ailin, a mother of an 18-year-old daughter from Beijing, decided to quit her job for such month-long stays. She said,

> I did that after the first six months of her study. Somehow, I felt like I owed her a lot. I was too busy back then, and I cannot ask for a month-long leave from my work. She was just thirteen or fourteen years old. I found her so young, yet she did not need me

> to stay longer. Therefore, I usually come here [the U.S.] for a month or two, just to see how she's doing, and then I'll leave. . . We communicate a lot. But I do not want to act like a Chinese parent, like those who just guard their children. It's not good for the kid. I appreciate her host family in Florida. They are very American. It was a very free household and they let her understand the U.S. better.

Many parents explore the "American" way of parenting through their children's schooling experience. The gendered perspective of the parent–child relationship is slightly different from the previous relevant work on "study mothers" in Singapore (Huang & Yeoh, 2005) or the gendered expectation of "mothering from a distance" (Parreñas, 2001). Mothers still play an important role in maintaining parent–child relationships and sometimes sacrifice their careers voluntarily in exchange for a more flexible schedule. Yet most of them had a highly paid career before and still do private practice or project-based work even after quitting the job. Although they made the decision to quit their job to travel to the United States and spend more time with their children to compensate for their physical absence in general, compared to the labor migrants who have to "mother from a distance," they have the family financial security to support their choice to be more physically involved from time to time to show their presence in this transnational family-ing process.

Discussion and Conclusion: More Than "Educational" Migration in Transnational Family-Making

In this chapter, I analyze the case of Chinese upper-middle-class families who send their children to the United States for private high schools and focus on the diverse forms of parent–child relationships that emerged in this educational migration process. It extends previous work on transnational families, the "migration-left behind nexus," and educational migration. When children from well-off families take the lead, transnational family-making seems more fluid, owing to the relative ease of family members moving between two countries. Previous research on the educational migration of East Asian families has heavily emphasized the educational imperative, focusing on the educational consequences of the migration, such as children's various forms of capital accumulation and the potential for class reproduction in such a process. This research still engages with those aspects but also invites the readers to keep an eye on other consequences of educational migration beyond its original educational purpose, specifically the changing parent–child relationships that emerge, for better or worse, from such an educational migration choice. Such changes are part of the process and the lived experiences of transnational families that choose such an educational migration route, but they are usually not taken into consideration in the decision-making process, thus being unintended consequences of educational migration. Ngan and Chan (2022) argue in their work on parachute kids-turned-parents from Hong

Kong that research into transnational migration benefits from a life-course perspective and more explicit attention to the emotional dimensions of migration. This chapter not only echoes their argument but also provides a rich account of the emotional consequences of educational migration in transnational family-making. I also plan to follow these cases and will thus provide a full analysis of the long-term impact of educational migration on these families.

Moreover, this chapter starts to center the voices of teenagers more to compensate for the previous research's tendency toward "adultism" (White et al., 2011). In addition to that, although not the main focus of this chapter, this research introduces the role of various intermediaries, including educational consultants and host families, in cocreating the transnational care of the "parachute students." The involvement of third-party agencies is part of the infrastructure of educational migration and is still relatively understudied. The rising demand from economically well-off families that lack the cultural and social capital of the country of destination makes this migration industry for the wealthy increasingly diversified.

Moving from "left-behind children" in the traditional sense to "left-behind parents," the children, in this case, are the ones who have heterogeneous lived experiences in a society that they are not familiar with and need to actively deal with challenges, and the "left-behind" parents become the respondents to their children's situation if they share with them and seek help. I described three emerging directions of parent–child relationships: physical and temporal distances become the incentive for further mutual understanding; children's accelerated growth and its emotional toll make them question the necessity of the transnational educational choice, and parents compensate for the decision to "parachute" their children abroad for education with extra delicate care. The gendered division of labor within transnational parenting is a theme that future research can explore. This chapter shows some fathers' involvement in the care arrangements. Potential new forms of transnational fathering are another potential theme to elaborate on, which may be different from the "goose fathers" (*gireogi appa*) (Jeong et al., 2014), who mainly provide financial means for their children's educational migration and let the mothers accompany the children.

Relative financial security gives these families more capacity to choose, reflect and change their strategies for doing family in a transnational context but does not necessarily make this process easier. The huge initial time and money invested in realizing this school choice make it harder for these families to abandon this educational migration choice altogether. Yet the parents get to hire intermediaries to intervene, change host families if the situation comes to that, or travel across the Pacific to be with their children. The children also get to reflect on the transnational care arrangement and question the necessity of such a choice. Social scientists and policy makers inevitably are curious about class production or reproduction through this transnational educational option. It is still too early to conclude whether a "global middle class," or globally minded affluent class from previously less developed countries, can be produced through educational migration and transnational family-making. With increasingly uncertain geopolitical dynamics and the lingering impact of the pandemic, the fluidity and

freedom of movement that was previously enjoyed by these families are fading away. Yet educational migration remains a viable choice for families to achieve transnational capital and fulfill their global aspirations. Understanding the emotional costs and complexities of transnational family-making is important not only for scholars of migration but also for these actors who are deeply entangled in this process.

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