"Parachute Kids" in Southern California: The Educational Experience of Chinese Children in Transnational Families

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"Parachute kids" are a highly select group of foreign students who have come to the United States to seek a better education in American elementary or high schools. Upon arrival in America, these children were typically between ages 8 and 17; many were admitted on F-1 student visas; some were on B-2 visitor visas but later adjusted to F-1 student visas. To the extent that they are in their preteens or teens in search of self-identities, however, the parachute kids and other similarly situated immigrant children are subject to similar demands and pressures imposed on them by their families, their American peers, and the host society. This article discusses how parachute kids as a social group have come about and provides an analysis of the risks inherent in transnational families. In an attempt to sort out possible factors influencing the educational experience of parachute kids, the article also seeks to highlight policy implications for educating America's new second generation.

Craig, 18, had been a parachute kid since he was 14; his sister Jenny, 14, joined him from Taiwan a year ago. They lived in a sprawling ranch house in San Marino with an elderly servant who spoke no English. They seemed to adjust well in school, Craig was a straight-A student, and Jenny also got A's in school and was a student-

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government leader. Their parents paid all the bills and made up what they lacked in intimacy with a $3,000 monthly allowance. (Hamilton, 1993)

Jen, 16, arrived in Los Angeles in 1989 when he was 12. His parents ensconced him in a home with a housekeeper who had his favorite meals waiting each evening. At first, he called home daily, running up a $500 monthly phone bill, but soon he managed to live his own life without calling home so often. Worried about theft, he did not let friends know that he lived alone; he drove his Mercedes-Benz 500 SL for daily jaunts and a beat-up Oldsmobile for late-night hangouts. He took honors classes and maintained a 4.0 grade point average. (Hamilton, 1993)

Gina, 16, had lived at the home of another parachute kid's relative in Hacienda Heights for several years. She had trouble obeying her host family, frequently clashed with the hostess, and threatened to bomb her house. In December 1995, she made a bomb, all by herself, and set it off in the house even when she knew that the other parachute kid was sleeping in the room. She was arrested for arson and attempted murder. She pleaded guilty and was jailed. (World Daily, April 18, 1996)

Hong, 16, had been a parachute kid in Los Angeles for 2 years. On his home trip to Taipei in May 1996, he was arrested at the international airport in Taipei for arms smuggling. (World Daily, April 13, 1996)

The stories of Chinese adolescents on their own in the United States, described above, sound sensational, but are not simply the products of media sensationalism. Though unsettling to the American sensibility, the phenomenon is real and increasingly visible in the immigrant-concentrated, upscale suburban communities of Southern California, where it has drawn special attention from public school administrators, teachers, and increasingly, the press. The children involved are known as "parachute kids"—a highly select group of foreign students age 8 to 17 who have arrived in the United States, mostly from Asia, to seek a better education in American elementary or high schools. As the nickname suggests, they have been dropped off in the United States to go to school on their own. This article looks into the adjustment experience of the Chinese parachute kids, with a focus on how changes in the family context and the macrostructural context affect educational achievement.

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BACKGROUND

Parachute kids are a recent phenomenon coinciding with an unprecedented increase of immigration from Asia and rapid economic growth in the Pacific Rim region. These children fly across the Pacific, either with their parents who make necessary arrangements for them and return home, or with "Unaccompanied Minor" tags to be picked up by relatives or paid caretakers with whom their parents have made arrangements prior to their arrival. In Southern California, parachute kids are disproportionately Chinese, but the phenomenon can be observed among Koreans, Indians, and Filipinos as well. Most of the Chinese parachute kids have come from Taiwan (my estimate would peg the Taiwanese share at over 80%), with a smaller number arriving from Hong Kong, mainland China, and Southeast Asia. Unlike most foreign students who have completed their secondary education and arrived in the United States to attend college on student F-1 visas, these parachute kids are mostly minor children. Although many came as foreign students on F-1 visas, approximately one third came with their entrepreneurial parents on B-2 visitor visas, which were later adjusted to F-1 status. Exact numbers are difficult to obtain; however, it is estimated that about 40,000 parachute kids have arrived in the United States from Taiwan since the 1980s, with smaller numbers coming from Hong Kong, mainland China, and Southeast Asia (Hamilton, 1993).

Wealthy families abroad historically have sought to educate their children in American colleges and universities, but the Chinese parachute kids of the 1980s and 1990s comprise a unique group. They are much younger; most of them have come to attend elementary, middle, or high schools. Their arrival has been influenced by macrostructural factors—the gap between educational opportunities and skill demands of the homeland and transnational economic activities of the parents—and they have geographically been concentrated in Southern California's upscale immigrant communities, living in a home rather than in student quarters.

Construed narrowly as a phenomenon in which children are sent to the United States on their own, "parachuting" has steadily declined since the mid-1990s, due to changing political conditions at home and the tightening of U.S. immigration policies. As understood sociologically, however, the parachute world has been growing due to the new pattern of familial relationships established by entrepreneurial parents who maintain trans-Pacific careers. These parents have come to the United States on immigrant visas, but established transnational businesses that require them to spend a substantial amount of time abroad. Consequently, the children have been left on their own at home or deposited in the care of relatives and other nonrelative guardians while their parents live as "astronauts," flying frequently between Asia and the United States to manage their transnational businesses on both sides of the Pacific. Thus, the parachuting phenomenon has retained its significance in school districts where parachute kids and the immigrant children of entrepreneurial parents maintaining trans-Pacific careers are concentrated.

DATA AND METHODS

Data on parachute kids are extremely limited. Occasionally, the media has selectively reported information about them only to appeal to a public that is hungry for sensational and exotic stories. Because of the paucity of available data and the lack of substantive understanding of the parachute phenomenon, I rely on field interviews, conducted during the Spring and Summer of 1996, with a sample of parachute kids, parents, caretakers, school counselors, and community social workers from Southern California. For practical reasons, a convenience sample of 33 Chinese parachute kids was selected; 25 attended college, and 8 attended 12th grade. Boys made up 53% of the sample; 82% were from Taiwan (27) and the rest from Hong Kong (3), mainland China (2), and Singapore (1). Face-to-face and telephone interviews were conducted using a semistructured questionnaire with open-ended questions by a team of three research assistants. I made several prearranged home visits in Monterey Park, Alhambra, and Arcadia and conducted a number of in-home or telephone interviews with a handful of astronaut parents who either were back home or visiting their children in Southern California at the time. I also talked, either in person or on the phone, to a number of school counselors and community social workers who had worked with parachute kids in San Marino, Monterey Park, Alhambra, Arcadia, and Hacienda Heights, where many parachute kids were concentrated.

I acknowledge the severe limitation of such sampling procedures. Our sample contains college students and high school students with definite intentions to go to college. Therefore, the sample selectively leans toward high achievers, because attending college and planning to attend college are two important measures of success. Absent from the sample are those who have failed. Although exact drop-out numbers are unknown, schoolteachers and administrators dealing with parachute kids informed us that this group had a drop-out rate slightly lower than the school average. We were not able to approach any of these dropouts: Most of them already had been flown back home by their parents; and the few who refused to return had become integrated into local youth groups, making it difficult to identity them. Also absent from the sample are those who have graduated from college, because most of the college graduates have returned to their homeland. The exclusion of failures and inclusion of success cases inevitably pose a problem for
generalization. However, because this study is an attempt to identify the possible factors influencing parent–child relationships and educational experiences and is less concerned with measuring their effects, the use of interviews with current parachute kids and their parents and of the second-hand information given by school counselors and social workers can help gain insight into the parachute phenomenon.

In the following pages, I will first discuss how parachute kids as a social group have come about and analyze the risks inherent in transnational families. I will then sort out the possible factors influencing the educational experiences of parachute kids. Finally, I will highlight implications for research on the new second-generation—the children of contemporary immigrants.

REASONS FOR PARACHUTING

The origins of parachuting lie in a complex set of interrelated factors—not just with the usual “pushes” and “pulls,” but with a new set of considerations giving rise to “transnational” or “transmigratory” situations, in which people concurrently try to live in two societies. On the push side, concern with education provides the single most important reason for parachuting. Cultural beliefs in China emphasize excellence in learning as the key to prestigious social positions, which, in turn, make school attendance a crucial step toward upward social mobility. However, opportunity structures in most Chinese societies historically have constrained the realization of this Confucian precept even among middle-class families, much less among average working-class families. Until after World War II, the Chinese educational system had been established deliberately to select only the most talented rather than to offer equal opportunities to everyone who desired to learn. Educational opportunities were further restricted by gender and class: Only young men were encouraged to obtain an education, and only those from well-to-do families were able to do so.

Since World War II, dramatic social changes and rapid industrial development in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and mainland China have slowly opened up the rigid educational system for women and for working-class urban families and peasant families, but opportunities for secondary and postsecondary schooling has remained highly selective. Taiwan made junior secondary education compulsory in 1968. In the late 1960s, the transition rate from elementary to junior secondary schools was almost 100% (up from 62% in 1967), and the transition rate from junior to senior secondary schools was 80%. Less than half (44%) of the senior secondary school graduates went to postsecondary schools, and a much smaller proportion was admitted to accredited universities and colleges (Zheng & Yu, 1996). Hong Kong extended its compul-

sory education to 9 years only after 1978, but was close to universalizing its entire secondary education in the 1980s (Luk, 1990; Morris, 1991). Comparatively, mainland China lagged far behind. Although tremendous progress has been made since 1949, the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s and 1970s resulted in a major setback, the consequences of which are still being felt. The expansion of the educational infrastructure has simply not keep pace with the rapid growth of the population. Only 46% of the youngsters aged 12 to 14 were enrolled in junior secondary schools in 1983, down from 63% in 1979; the transition rate from junior to senior secondary schools was only 24%, also down from 37% in 1979; and only about 10% to 15% of senior secondary school graduates went to college (Thogersen, 1990; World Bank, 1985). Throughout the 1990s, China still was striving to universalize its elementary education, but schooling beyond the elementary level still was limited.

Whether in Taiwan, Hong Kong, or mainland China, a college education has been a highly desired but hard-to-attain goal for most high school graduates. A prime example is the rigorous unified national examinations at both the high school level and college level. In the 18-year-old cohort, only 8% in Taiwan enrolled in college, compared to 30% in Japan and 50% in the United States (Shi, 1995). The proportion for Hong Kong was much lower, and for mainland China was less than 1% (U.S.—China Education Clearinghouse, 1980).

The emphasis on educational attainment and fierce competition for limited educational opportunities at home have produced class-based outcomes. On the one hand, average working-class families generally give up on their children’s higher education, with the exception of a few who push their most promising children (usually boys) extremely hard. On the other hand, many middle-class families seek to “purchase” an alternative abroad for educating their children. Political considerations add to the motivation to pursue educational options abroad. The fear and anxiety over Taiwan’s relationship with China, the uncertainty of post-1997 Hong Kong, and unpredictable government policies in China have pushed many wealthy families to choose parachuting as a strategy for protecting the future of their children. The effect of these combined factors can best be traced in the Hong Kong case, where the number of students studying abroad rose rapidly in the late 1980s, and the average age declined, reflecting a growing anxiety to seek an escape route as 1997 approached. Although most left for postsecondary education, the number that left for secondary or even primary schools grew steadily. Many families viewed studying abroad not only as a way to gain credentials but also as a possible way to obtain residence in the host country (Mak, 1991).

The United States has been the most preferred destination for students from mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, partly because of its liberal
educational system and partly because of immigrant and foreign student networks. The multiple layers of the U.S. educational system guarantee relatively open and equal access to anyone who desires to learn. Moreover, the U.S. system is geared toward practical training for the global economy with a high marketability of credentials. As the United States leads the world economy, degrees from U.S. colleges of any rank are highly valued at home and tend to be considered more valuable than those attained at home for successful labor market placement. In the 1980s, students from Taiwan dominated the pool of foreign students on U.S. college campuses. During the same decade, mainland China sent about 60,000 students, and Hong Kong sent about 12,000 to study in the United States (Bray, 1991; Postiglione, 1987). This influx of college-bound students into U.S. colleges, coinciding with liberal immigration policies and a rapid increase in immigration, has in turn created networks of information and support that perpetuate the parachute trend.

However, the impetus for parachuting only partly derives from the myriad factors inducing students to pursue studies in the United States and elsewhere. In addition, the dynamism of the East Asian economies and the gains to be realized by maintaining business on both sides of the Pacific Rim have induced changes in the familial system and, most important, in the location of its parts. Many first-generation immigrants and potential international migrants are deciding that the West no longer offers as many promising economic opportunities as they can now find at home. In part, this “reverse brain drain” reflects the activities of Asian governments and private sector leaders who have sought to recruit their best educated and most qualified expatriates and emigrants by showering them with promises of high salaries and rapid career advancement (Shapiro, 1992). A recent study reported that in the 1980s, over 40% of students from Taiwan studying in foreign countries went back home each year upon completion of their studies, up from less than 10% in the 1950s and 1960s (Du, 1992). A 1992 study conducted by the Center for Pacific Rim Studies at the University of California, Los Angeles, reported that only 5% of those holding advanced degrees returned to South Korea, Taiwan, China, the Philippines, Singapore, and Indonesia in the 1960s, but that in 1980, almost one fourth of them returned (Ong et al., 1992). As entrepreneurial immigrants have discovered new opportunities in the homeland, they have decided to capture them by turning themselves into transnationals, or astronauts.

But for a variety of reasons, these new transnationals seek to have their children educated in the United States. On one hand, the same factors that encourage college and university students to seek education abroad discourage transnational parents from bringing their school-age children back to the homeland. On the other hand, even as they pursue economic opportunities at home, wealthy Chinese entrepreneurs want an “insurance policy” abroad. Many families expect their parachute kids to return home after the completion of their schooling abroad, but eventual settlement in the United States would be an acceptable alternative. If circumstances make return difficult or impossible, the children can stay in the United States to pursue careers at relative ease, have their nonimmigrant status adjusted, and eventually get permanent residence. In this sense, dropping parachute kids in the United States not only fulfills the family’s educational goal of the family, but also provides a practical way of investing in the future.

Finally, a practical reason for parachuting affects those from Taiwan, which explains why Taiwanese dominates the parachuting phenomenon. In Taiwan, military service is mandatory for young men aged 18 and over. All young men must serve in the military for a minimum of 2 years before they are allowed into the labor market, and boys over 15 years of age are forbidden to leave the country for any extended period of time to prevent fraud. This law applies to every family, rich or poor. Because it is difficult to get away with military service, many families have chosen to send their sons abroad before they reach the age of 15 years. Three of the male interviewees who had arrived before age 15 mentioned that their parents would not have sent them away at such a young age had it not been for the military service requirement, and that they were aware of this reason before arrival.

Yet, sending young children abroad is not done merely to avoid military service, but also to acquire better language proficiency, because families believe that their children will be better prepared for college in terms of language and culture if they spend most of their high school years in America. At least 40% of the parachute kids are girls. For whatever reason, the parachute kids are clear about one thing before arrival: Being in America means going to school. This goal is clearly articulated in all the children we have interviewed.

TRANSMATIONAL LIVING
AND ITS INHERENT RISKS

Unlike other immigrant children who live with their parents and whose adaptational experience is filled with socioeconomic hardships of settlement and head-on intergenerational clashes, most of the parachute kids live in a world that American teenagers only dream about: a fully furnished house of their own in upscale neighborhoods, a fancy car, a cellular phone, plenty of cash, and no parents. For these children, going to school in America is considered not only the opportunity of a lifetime for a better future, but also an extraordinary adventure in searching for one’s self and for adulthood. However, this transnational path is not without risks.
Transnational Living in Intact Families

One of the most distinctive features of parachute kids is the trans-Pacific living arrangement under which the children live apart from parents, who either remain in the homeland or frequently travel across the ocean. It is not uncommon in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and mainland China to find children living separately from their parents. A small but visible number of families make such arrangements for various reasons, such as seeking better child care or better schools, presumably in the best interests of children.

In the United States, however, "home alone" among minor children, as in the case of parachute kids, is illegal; and separate living between minor children and their parents is extremely rare except under severe family disruption, such as divorce or a sudden change of socioeconomic, physical, or mental conditions of the parents. In regard to children living in intact families, studies have shown that the children living in institutions, in one-parent families, or even in blended families tend to be disadvantaged with regard to socioeconomic circumstances, psychological function, behavioral problems, education, and health, and these risk factors severely limit their life chances (Hernandez, 1993).

For parachute kids, however, the risks may associate less with the family's physical separation than with the social environment. One of the parachute kids talked about his experience with a shrug: "It [living apart] has happened for a good part of my life. Nothing's really changed. It's not bad or anything." Because education takes priority in parachuting, the children involved tend to relate the situation to the fact that their parents care about them and are serious in selecting what they think may be the best available option, although the children express their dislike for being away from their parents. The following remarks made by our interviewees reflect their feelings:

I didn't like being away from my parents and my family. But think about the kind of money my parents have spent on me just to get a good education. I feel they really care about me and love me. (Taiwanese girl)

I don't think the nature of the relationship with my parents has changed. I no longer talk to my parents as much as before but that is just part of growing up. Teenagers don't want to have anything to do with their parents. My parents do not have to send us away, but they do it because they care and because they want us to have a better future. (Taiwanese boy)

I am glad I'm here now because there's so much more freedom here compared to Taiwan. More freedom to pursue my goals. And I thank my parents for it. (Taiwanese boy)

I feel my parents have always taken care of me. (Taiwanese boy)

There is a qualitative difference between separate living in the homeland and parachuting abroad, however. When children live apart from their own parents in the homeland, they are likely to be placed in a familiar sociocultural environment where similar values, norms, and behavioral standards are enforced. They also are likely to confront, as well as be controlled by, an adult society similar to the one of which their parents are a part. In a foreign country, parachute children are not only away from their families, the social networks of support and control, and the customary mechanisms of social relationships between children and adults; they also are subject to the attraction of American consumer culture and anti-intellectual youth subcultures. Before departure, however, neither parents nor parachute kids seem to anticipate such drastic differences in the social environments of parachuting.

Most of the parents are well aware that the quality of American schools depends largely on the socioeconomic standing of the neighborhood, so they tend to choose host families or purchase homes for their children in upscale middle-class neighborhoods, where the quality of schools is generally good and the peers are likely to come from similar socioeconomic backgrounds. These parents can use their financial resources to ensure that their children are in the care of reliable relatives or caretakers, live in safe neighborhoods, and attend good schools. However, they can no longer provide the access to the social capital resources in a foreign country that help children not simply cope with adjustment difficulties but also ease bicultural tensions between the sending society and the host society and between two conflicting adult worlds in the host society—the immigrant community versus the mainstream community. These parents have little knowledge about the potential risks arising from transnational living that detaches parachute children from an important environment in which both support and control are exercised effectively through particular social networks that connect children, their parents, and other adults.

When looking back at their experience, several parachute kids who attended college offered insights into a major risk factor—there is too much "free" time after school and too little adult supervision. Astronaut parents cannot be there to supervise children's homework and to arrange for their children's various after-school activities available in the local community that are crucial to a child's educational experience. Even if parents manage to have some activities arranged (the most popular one being the Chinese school), they cannot ensure that their children actually attend. In an environment in which youth-oriented consumerism and anti-intellectualism are so pervasive, it is unrealistic to expect even the most self-disciplined parachute kids to be mature enough to keep themselves occupied in the academic track and to withstand the distraction from the powerful influence of the popular Ameri-
can culture, which is not necessarily conducive to educational achievement. One college student summed it up when he recalled his earlier parachuting experiences: "Three to ten is a long time to be on one's own. I didn't like it at all. I got bored, turned on the TV, played video games, ate junk food, hung out in cafes with other parachute kids and friends. Good thing that none of my friends were in gangs."

Changes in Parent-Child Relationships

Parachute kids do not have intimate, face-to-face interaction with their parents on a daily basis, but this experience is by no means unique. In many Chinese families, there is a general lack of demonstrative affection among members, and parent-child interaction tends to be more formal and rigid and less emotionally expressive than in American families (Sung, 1987). Partly influenced by the ways in which they were brought up and partly by different styles of socialization, Chinese parents are generally less likely than their American counterparts to treat their children as friends, play with them, and show affection explicitly or in public (Sung, 1987). At home, these parents are authority figures expected to exercise control and discipline to make sure that parental expectations are met.

In the parachute world, routine interaction between children and parents is by weekly telephone calls or by mail. In our interviews, parachute kids were quite ambivalent about this mode of interaction. When asked what they disliked most, over half of the children said that being away from their parents, or not being able to talk to their parents in person, was what they disliked most. Although these children missed physical closeness among family members, they felt relieved from having to endure rigid face-to-face interaction with parents. Thus, the same group of respondents said that being independent from parental control and being able to do things without parental consent (e.g., filling out parental consent forms themselves) were the aspects of the parachute kid experience that they valued most. A parachute kid said, "The nicest thing is that we don't have the curfew disagreement," a common spark of parent-child conflict in both immigrant and native families. In a way, living apart from parents gives parachute kids more independence and less head-on intergenerational clash in the home compared to other immigration children. Our respondents reported that, as long as they kept up with their grades, they could do almost whatever they wanted.

Over time, though, many parachute children have managed to overcome the anxiety arising from the ambivalent feeling of leaving home. Their trans-Pacific communication with parents became a matter of routine, and the frequency decreased with time. One of our male interviewees recalled,

I used to call home twice a week in the first few months, telling my parents what I did during the week and let them know that I did well, and that I missed them. They would also give [me] lectures like they did at home, things like to work hard, to focus, no drugs, no smoking, no dating, and no this, no that. That kind of phone call got boring after awhile. Now I call home only because I am expected to. I really don't have much to say on the phone with them.

Another parachute boy said,

I call home regularly just so my mom doesn't get worried, but I really don't have much to say. My parents don't live here and don't know what problems and what needs we have here. I don't think they understand what I have to say.

At times, parents may visit the children, usually once or twice a year, and the children can make home visits about once a year. When together with their parents, many children no longer feel the same. They still respect their parents, but they no longer obey their parents the way they used to when they were younger. Parents, on the other hand, gradually, but often reluctantly, accept the change with hopes that they children will turn out to be the same as they have expected. One parent commented, "We have always kind of betted on our belief that our children are good kids. If they decide to go the opposite way, you lose them. You really can't do much to make things work for them. They are on their own."

Parents are indeed worried and concerned about the gradually changing relationship. A Taiwanese mother who flew over to visit her parachute children (a 17-year-old son and 14-year-old daughter) recalled,

I remember in the first few months, my children called frequently. They cried on the phone saying that they missed home. I was sad but kept saying to them that they were not babies any more, and that they should act like a big boy or a big girl. But after awhile, they didn't call as much. When they did, there were just those simple responses such as "yes" or "no" or "okay." Then I became very worried.

For both children and parents, there is a bitter feeling of being so far apart from each other. Many parents have developed a sense of guilt and become more easygoing with their children. Children, on the other hand, have got used to living by themselves and have become more independent; some even have turned manipulative to take advantage of their parents' sense of guilt to get what they want. A potential risk arising out of this changing relationship is that, as children grow more alienated from their parents, they also may run loose from their parents' social networks in the United States, on which most parents depend for information and control.
FROM DIRECT CONTROL TO REMOTE CONTROL

Parachuting poses a challenge to parental authority. Most of the parachute kids in this study have come from families with strict jiajiao. Jiajiao, literally "home discipline," encompasses the teaching of moral values and norms and the development of responsibility and clear rules of conduct. It is taught and enforced by parents at home, and traditionally serves as the central mechanism of control (Zhou, 1997b). If children do not show respect for the elder or demonstrate self-discipline or proper behavior, they are considered without jiajiao, and parents are to be blamed for not raising children properly. When children live apart from parents, this central mechanism of control is losing ground. How then do parents of parachute kids exercise their power to ensure that their children hold onto jiajiao principles that they have learned at home? Based on our field interviews, there seem to be two main means: One is parental social networks of relatives, friends, and caretakers in the United States, and the other is the monthly allowance.

Remote Control via Transnational Networks

Initially, parents would arrange to settle their children in the homes of relatives, friends, or unrelated caretakers whom their friends know well. They believe that, through these connections, they have the ears and eyes to watch out for their children's behavior effectively. In the homes with grandparents, close relatives, or close family friends, who really care and make a strong commitment to help, parachute kids usually feel similar or even more pressures to obey jiajiao as they would at home with their parents. Becky, a high school senior, recounted her situation and said,

I am living with my aunt. My parents do not pay her for taking care of me. I guess she is doing my family a favor. She's more than my mother when it comes to rules and discipline. I don't like her much but I have to obey her because she's my mother's eye. Whatever I do, she knows and my mother knows too.

Although some relatives and friends are under the pressure and responsibility to be stricter than parents with the children, others are more lenient. Leslie, a college freshman, told the interviewer that she had lived with her grandmother for the first 2 years of parachuting in high school.

My grandma was quite nice. She did not nag as much as my mother, except that she tried to feed me more than I needed. But one thing I used to get annoyed about was that my mother seemed to know a lot of details about my life and behavior here. So I had to watch . . . my behavior in front of my grandma.

Larry, another college freshman, who used to live with a family friend, said, "Because they are my parents' friends, I will have to watch my behavior."

Many parachute kids agreed that the chief reason for their parents choosing Los Angeles was because there were relatives and family friends around. However, things do not always work out smoothly. There were some extreme cases, as when parachute kids rebelled violently against relatives who were considered too nosy and too strict. Gina's case, which is quoted in the beginning of this article, is one such example.

For children living with paid caretakers (related or unrelated), the remote control button does not always work properly. Usually, parents pay these caretakers money in exchange for room and board and a home atmosphere. Parents expect the host families to take care of their children and watch out for improper behavior, and many caretakers are responsible. John talked about his relationship with his caretaker.

I had few problems communicating with my caretaker. She gave me general direction and told me what to do. I basically could tell her my problem and she would give advice in return. But sometimes, I had difficulty communicating with her, especially when she overacted over problems and yelled at me to discipline me.

But some of the caretakers are reluctant to deal with children's problems for fear that any active roles would lead to strained relationships with children, causing not only trouble but a loss of income if parents decide to remove the children from their homes or if children decide to leave. Although in our sample, we had not come across a single case in which the children and their caretakers were at war with one another. Quite a few children reported that they disliked their caretakers or were indifferent toward them.

The negative relationship between children and caretakers indirectly alienates these children from their parents. After a few years, parachute kids, especially those in high school, will move out of the homes of their host families to live on their own, either by renting or by moving into houses owned by their parents. Parents have to support the decision of moving out. Ironically, independent living frees the children from parents' networks of control; meanwhile, it puts them in a high-risk situation because of the lack of adult supervision at home.

Remote Control via Bank Transfers

Another means of control is through monthly allowances. School performance is what the parents are concerned with most. Parachute kids are expected to report weekly about their schoolwork, and parents double-check it with the caretakers. The children also are expected to fax copies of graded
homework and report cards on a routine basis. When these reports do not fit parents' expectations, monthly allowances often are cut as a punishment. "They can't ground us, since they are so far away," Ming said in an interview. "But if I don't listen to them, get good grades, they won't send money."

How much money do parents spend on a parachute kid? On average, the costs of sending a parachute kid to the United States is estimated at $40,000 annually (Hamilton, 1993). The costs add up when a family sends more than one parachute kid. In our sample, about a quarter of the parachute kids came with one or two siblings. Our interviews did not include questions about parental earnings, because many of the children did not know how much their parents made. Instead, we asked how much financial support they received from their parents. The average bank transfers into the children's bank accounts was about $15,000 per year. This amount did not include caretakers' fees and tuition. In most cases, parents send the monthly allowance from the homeland. In two cases, the monthly allowance comes from rent collected from the parents' rental properties in the United States.

The amount of monthly allowances varied. For example, Sally, the most affluent parachute kid we interviewed, had been a parachute kid for 3 years, including 2 years in high school and 1 year at college. She received $3,000 to $4,000 from her parents monthly for her expenses. When she went to college, her parents bought her a house and a Mercedes, and spent another $12,000 on college tuition. Rod had been a parachute kid since he was 14 years old. He received a $1,200 monthly allowance from his parents, which came from a house his parents rented. He said that his parents had promised to buy him a new car when he went to college.

Parachute kids are aware that the money and material promises are rewards for educational achievement. If they do not do well in school or fail in school, their ultimate punishment is usually a one-way airplane ticket to go home with shame. Although many parachute kids are willing to fax report cards to parents because they get good grades, others do so only selectively. Ken said, in an interview, "When they [parents] are here, I watch what I do. When they're not here, there are no restraints. When they call and I'm not here, I make up an excuse, like I was in the shower or something." There is also room for improper behavior. During the research period, we found out that one boy in our sample, a parachute kid for 3 years before going to college, had gotten married and that the marriage was only for the purpose of obtaining his citizenship. His parents had not been told about this marriage, and still thought that he was doing fine.

In the parachute world, children must learn to manage their own finances at a much younger age. Before high school, the spending money usually is controlled by the caretaker. Even then, the children can decide to spend on a much wider range of things than they would at home, and their caretakers are more likely than their own parents to satisfy whatever demands they may have as long as these demands are within the limit of the monthly allowance. In high school and beyond, the spending money is sent directly to parachute kids. In this way, the children have total control over when and how to spend the money. As a result, this newly developed independence has subtly changed the ways children respond to parental control. For example, John complained that each time he got a B or lower grade, his mother would threaten to cut his allowance. "They never did, though. But that made me want to just ignore or even cheat on them." Sally did not have a problem with money because her parents always sent her a lot. "More than I need," she said, "so I can afford getting B's or C's or even flunking. They [parents] don't have to know."

DETERMINANTS OF SUCCESS

In the absence of parents and in a new social environment, however, the majority of the parachute kids were doing well in school. According to high school counselors who worked with parachute kids, most of the children graduated from high school with honors and went to college afterward. Of those who attended college, over 90% of them graduated with a degree, and quite a few of them continued or expressed interest in graduate studies. If the attainment of a college degree measures success, what accounts for this success? Based on our sample of college students and high school seniors with a strong intention to go to college, the subsequent discussion focuses on what really works, highlighting some of the main factors influencing success.

Parachute kids are uniformly from wealthy families. In our sample, all but two were from upper-class families, and all came from two-parent families. Two thirds of these children reported that their parents either held professional occupations or operated their own businesses. Mothers' educational levels were generally lower than that of fathers, but over 60% of the children reported that their mothers had attained college degrees. These children enjoy similar economic advantages as their American peers who attend schools in middle-class communities. However, their exposure to sociocultural advantages in the community in which parachute kids live is quite limited, because of double isolation—from their own families and from local communities. This lack of access to social capital available in communities through dense networks of social relationships can jeopardize their chance of success.

This source of vulnerability may be offset by the cultural resources on which parachute kids can draw. The frequently cited cultural value affecting Asian American schooling is Confucianism, which emphasizes education as
facilitate or hinder the educational process (Sue & Okazaki, 1990). When educational opportunities are scarce, and the entrance to the system is too competitive, cultural values can only help the most talented few but discourage the average majority. When the educational system is liberal and open, cultural orientations influence outcomes only in those contexts where they are at once valued and enforced (Zhou & Bankston, 1998).

In this case, long-standing cultural practices as well as situational responses breed a strong commitment to educational success. Individual motivation requires a strong sense of self, optimism, and self-discipline. Many parachute kids were aware of the fierce competition at home and actually initiated parachuting themselves. As one parachute kid remarked: "You have to be certain that you are doing it for yourself, not for your parents or anyone else." A parent who was visiting her two parachute children provided a similar remark from her perspective:

We think "parachuting" is the best option possible for my children. They were very good students and probably would have gotten into any universities they liked in Taiwan. But they said they wanted to do it so we simply supported them. The "push" only came later, because we had invested so much and wanted to make sure that they did well and not be distracted too much.

In our sample, over two thirds of the respondents said that they had wanted to do it and initiated the journey. Some even said that they had convinced their parents to send them abroad. For parachute kids, success in school is not only a matter-of-fact expectation from the parents, but a value internalized in the self through early socialization at home, in kindergartens, and in elementary schools. Because education defines the parachute phenomenon, doing well in school becomes the sole goal and an important measure of self-actualization. The following comment by a student offers insight: "I want to come to America because I want to learn more about computers, including graphic design. The schools here are better. The knowledge is more advanced. I am not trying to prove to anybody but myself."

Our interviews and field observations indicated that those children who took the initiative in the decision making were likely to fare better than those who took orders from their parents. Self-motivation also is fed by the belief in educational rewards and a sense of optimism about the future. Parachute children who make their own decision to go abroad tend to be more appreciative of the educational opportunity abroad and more optimistic about future educational rewards than those who were forced to do so by their parents. A high school senior explained in an interview,
You need a college degree to get a good job in Taiwan, but it's very difficult to get into good universities. Going abroad is the best option if your family can afford you. Also, a U.S. college degree is worth more than a degree from an average local school when you compete for jobs. So I am not just trying to please my parents, I'm doing this [parachuting] for myself.

Another high school senior echoed,

We were raised to respect education. Back home [in Taiwan], getting good grades is not just for your parents but for yourself. But getting good grades is not enough, you have to be able to compete and stay on top all the time. You may be the best in your class but may still flunk the entrance exams for college. In Taiwan, people almost have to kill themselves to survive annual comprehensive entrance examinations for high school and college. You feel fortunate that you can be here. In Taiwan, even if you are highly motivated and work hard, you are not sure whether you can succeed. But over here, you know that if you focus and work hard, you can succeed. That's a big difference!

Although the liberal educational system in the United States allows these children to pursue their educational goal, the social environment that the children encounter is filled with contradictory and conflicting demands and expectations that may erode the commitment to educational success. In particular, the social environment that parachute kids encounter upon arrival in America is unlikely to be fully supportive. The prevailing youth culture glorifies the contempt for authorities and overemphasizes peer recognition, materialism, and the freedom of personal choices, especially in dress, dating, and sexual practices unavailable in their homeland. Thus, the pressures to acculturate can overwhelm these young newcomers (Gans, 1992; see also Zhou, 1997a).

Nevertheless, a variety of factors can offset the pressures of the broader social environment. Most of the parachute kids have been through careful screening and selection by their parents. Jane, a college freshman who had been a parachute kid since she was 15, explained, “Not anyone who want to come here can come. Those allowed to come are the ones whose parents believe them to be capable of self-discipline and self-control.” It is this selectivity that interacts with premigration culture values. When asked what determined success, a parachute kid responded,

It's just self-discipline, I guess. I learned this long before I came here. I guess I know what is right and what is wrong. I think it is myself, I know what to do. That keeps me out of trouble.

Second, the parachute kids remain involved in parental social networks, even if the parents themselves are not on site. Parental control continues through the children's involvement with people whom their parents know well. Though out evidence may not be strong enough to warrant a conclusion, there is a clear tendency that those who live with or near their close relatives and family friends are more likely to watch out for their behavior and for the kinds of activities they engage in after school.

A third important factor is the pattern of peer-group association. Ironically, the social world of many parachute kids is limited. When parachute kids move to America, their connection to the original friendship circle is broken by physical distance. Yet, because they enter the American school system in between grades, they find it hard to make friends with other American children because they are outside the already established friendship circles. They are further kept out by language and cultural barriers. What kind of friends do they make, and how would this friendship association affect their school experience? The following examples are illustrative:

- Kent said that, at first, his English wasn't fluent enough to communicate with other kids in class.
  So I kept quiet for fear that I might say something weird or stupid. Most of the kids already had their groups and it was really hard to break in. I didn't even try. I ended up hanging out mostly with other parachute kids like myself or other Asian immigrant children who were also transfers.
- Emily said that she got through school because she was not a wild person.
  She was quiet and always made sure not to "fool around" that much. Her only significant outside activity was going to church every week. "Most of my friends were at church."
- Jimmy hung out with other Asian students like himself. "It's not because of a particular preference or anything. I gonna study and I gonna have friends who also study. It just so happened that they are mostly Chinese."

In their responses to the general question about success or failure, most of the parachute kids agreed that “If you hung out with people who were having too much fun, you would be in trouble too,” and that “Some failed because they hung out with wrong people and didn’t work hard.”

CONCLUSION

In this article, I have discussed the phenomenon of parachute kids, what risks they and their parents are likely to encounter, and what determines their
educational success. Although the findings are inconclusive because of the sampling constraints, the experience of the parachute kids has suggested several implications for understanding the adaptation process of immigrant children. First, like their immigrant peers, their adjustment to school is intrinsically linked to the structural opportunities offered by the American educational system. But compared to other immigrant children, they are less likely to take these opportunities for granted and tend to have more clearly defined goals. In many respects, parachute children do not have a choice between going to school or doing something else, which is what makes them a unique group.

Second, like their immigrant peers, parachute kids have experienced significant changes in parent–child relationships. In transnational as well as immigrant families, parents, middle-class and working-class alike, generally believe that education is the key to future success in life and thus expect their children to do well. But many parents lack language proficiency, cultural literacy, or even literacy, to effectively supervise their children’s schoolwork, communicate with schoolteachers, and keep their children on the right track. Moreover, the dwindling parental authority as a result of living apart (for parachute kids) and as a result of role reversal (for immigrant children) has changed the family dynamics, widening the generational gap. Insufficient family communications, in turn, have significant negative effects on children’s self-esteem, psychosocial well-being, and academic aspirations (Rumbaut, 1996). 

Third, the changing parent–child relationships within individual transnational or immigrant families can be a risk factor, but it may not necessarily always frustrate children’s successful adaptation to a host society, because families are not the only sources of influences on immigrant children. The children whose families hold high expectations for them and whose parents stress hard work and education may still perform poorly in school, especially when they have close ties to youths from disadvantaged native minorities (Portes & Stepick, 1993). The immigrant community in which individual families are involved can play an important role in mediating bicultural conflicts between individual families and the larger social environment (Zhou & Bankston, 1998). Just as parachute kids are affected by their parents’ social networks, immigrant children also can receive support and control from ethnic networks of social relationships that connect themselves to parents in immigrant communities.

Fourth, peer groups play an important role in promoting or hindering the school success of immigrant children. The pressure to fit in and to look cool among peers is overwhelming when children struggle to develop their own identities as adolescents. When children associate with other children who are involved in parental networks of social relationships in the immigrant community, their goal orientation is likely to be consistent with that prescribed by the parental world, even though they may display rebellious behaviors and develop separate identities. By contrast, when the children associate with a peer group that is alienated from the parental world, they are likely to be disoriented and to take an oppositional stance. In the case of parachute kids, their isolation from American peer networks keeps them tied to the parachute world and to their parents’ social networks in the immigrant community, and thus maintains conformity with the expectations of parents.

NOTE

1. All names used throughout the text are pseudonyms.

REFERENCES


World Daily [Chinese], April 18, 1996.