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**Migration Strategies and Transnational Families:
Vancouver's Satellite Kids**

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ABSTRACT

During the last ten years, patterns of trans-Pacific migration have resulted in the formation of new (transnational) family arrangements between North America and the country of origin. This paper examines one type of transnational family arrangement amongst recent immigrant households from Hong Kong and Taiwan to Vancouver, British Columbia, in the emergence of the 'Satellite kids'. Based upon research conducted between June 1999 and February 2000, I examine the circumstances and experiences of these children, whose families immigrated to Canada, and whose parents subsequently returned to the country of origin. I draw on particular theoretical ideas around transnational migration, 'cultural capital', and the Chinese family to illuminate these findings, suggest the strategic nature of recent household migration patterns in search of educational opportunities for the children, and stress the complex way in which these children experience transnationalism. The paper draws several conclusions regarding the nature of the contemporary "Chinese immigrant family," the possibility of accumulating cultural capital through migration, and the practical and affective implications of transnational family separation.

Key Words: Satellite kids; transnationalism; Vancouver; Chinese immigrant families.

Introduction

The most important thing for people is home and family, because that's the place that they can hide, they can cry, they can do anything. Home will protect you. But I don't have that any more, so I become the...the main structure in my life (Rod, Satellite kid).

In some cases, the flexible logic deprives children of both parents...Familial regimes of dispersal and localization...discipline family members to make do with very little emotional support...(Ong, 1999; p. 128).

Mrs. Palmer, the Vice-principal of a public high school in a suburb of Vancouver, frequently has difficulty contacting the parents of some of her students.¹ They are often, she revealed, found to be out of the country: "It has come to our attention that some parents are gone for the whole year...In order for students to register at our school they need a parent physically present with them. But after the student is registered, sometimes the parents just disappear..." She estimates there to be some thirty children attending the school with no parents around for most of the time, although "they really only come to light when there is a difficulty and we are trying to make contact with the home." It is therefore impossible to know just how many students are in this position. Most of these children are between fifteen and seventeen years old, and have recently immigrated from Hong Kong or Taiwan with their families. They often have substantial material and financial resources at their disposal. Their parents, however, choose not to reside in Vancouver, but instead continue with their business or professional careers in the country of origin, regularly dispatching money across the Pacific, and visiting the children perhaps twice a year.

This paper examines these circumstances, drawing upon research conducted between June 1999 and February 2000 in Vancouver, British Columbia. This included interviews with members of forty-two immigrant families from Hong Kong and Taiwan (with one from Mainland China). Overwhelmingly, migrants entered Canada as 'economic'-class immigrants

¹ All names have been changed to preserve the anonymity of participants.

within the last ten years.² Most have been in Canada for five years or less. Interviews were also conducted with family counsellors (at S.U.C.C.E.S.S.³), school teachers, government representatives, and immigrant agency workers. The focus here, however, is on a smaller aspect of the research, involving in-depth interviews with fifteen young adults aged between thirteen and twenty-two years old. These students shared a number of characteristics: they all entered Canada within the last ten years as dependents of an adult family member, all but one were totally financially dependent on their parents, and all lived in Vancouver without the presence of either parent for the majority of the time. They are the lone children to which Mrs. Palmer refers and have become known, within both local media accounts and the migrant community more generally, as the Satellite kids.

Cases of Satellite kids have been observed in Australia (Pe-pua et al. 1998), New Zealand (Ho et al., 1997; 2000), and the United States (Ong, 1999), as well as in Canada (Waters, 2000), depicting a recent trend in contemporary transnational family arrangements by particular immigrant groups (see Waters, 2001). This is itself part of a wider trans-Pacific pattern of “hypermobility” (Skeldon, 1997) among middle-class families, whereby migration is assumed to represent one strategy in the accumulation of capital (Mitchell, 1995; Ong, 1999).

Existing Information on Satellite Children

Within Vancouver, media coverage of this phenomenon has been largely confined to the Chinese-language press. Several newspaper reports represent the concerns of school staff, regarding the diversion of limited resources to providing extra care for children whose parents work overseas. The notion that schools are in many cases playing a ‘baby-sitting’ role has been a recurrent theme (e.g. Yeung, 1997; also, “Should satellite kids pay ‘baby sitting fee’ to their schools?” *World Journal Daily News*, 13 January 1998). A second issue that has dominated the Chinese press relates to the perceived vulnerability of these lone-children vis-à-vis teenage gangs (Tsang, 1994, Tang, 1999a, 1999b, 1999c). Tang (1999a)

² ‘Economic’ class migration includes highly skilled applicants and person applying under the business migration programme.

³ S.U.C.C.E.S.S. (the United Chinese Cultural Enrichment Service Society) is a non-profit organisation that serves primarily the Chinese community within the Vancouver region.

reports: “It has come to the attention of police that school violence has been increasingly frequent and the participants are from wealthy Chinese families preying on their fellow countrymen...Chi-kwong Lung, youth counsellor from [suburban] north Burnaby, said young people join gangs because they are satellite kids or lonely kids of the astronaut families...they fall prey to the youth gangs and are afraid to report to the police for fear of repercussion” (A1). A recent article in the English-language newspaper, *The Vancouver Sun*, repeats similar concerns over gang membership and extortion: “Ever since a huge influx of Chinese students immigrated to Richmond [a Vancouver municipality] in the 1990s, and now make up at least 40 percent of the school’s student population, the “home alone” problem had been one recognized and criticized by police and school officials. As discovered in the Toi Ching [a gang] and other investigations, a young student living alone is a prime target for criminals for either extortion or gang recruitment” (“Task force dents gang crime in schools.” *Vancouver Sun*, 3 July 2000). The article reports on a special joint task force, launched by the Richmond School Board and the R.C.M.P. against a particular gang comprising immigrant youth from Hong Kong and Taiwan. Significantly, specific links have been drawn between gang recruitment and the Satellite phenomenon: “95 percent of these kids are just scared kids with nowhere else to turn. They don’t really want to become criminals. What they want is their parents to get back over here so they can have a normal life.” (ibid.)

Yet, with few exceptions, there remains a conspicuous lack of academic research specifically addressing the Satellite issue. Ho et al (1997; 2000) have attempted to establish a numerical measure of the ‘parachute phenomenon’ for New Zealand using data derived from the 1991 census of Population and Dwellings.⁴ Pe-Pua et al. (1998), provide a useful, general examination of “the socio-cultural and political implications” of immigrant family arrangements in Australia, focussing on recent households from Hong Kong. They identify a number of different related effects of family separation on the children, including: “a feeling of isolation, longing for a parent figure, lack of discipline, break-down of the parent-child relationship, or juvenile delinquency in the extreme. On the other hand, it could lead to the development of independence and maturity...” (p. 293). Although inconclusive, Pe-Pua et al.

⁴ ‘Parachute’ is often used interchangeably with ‘satellite’ in the literature.

are unusually concerned with the social and *personal* dimensions of recent migration processes on children, who are nearly always neglected in academic accounts.⁵

In short, a review of existing literature highlights the necessity for an in-depth empirical examination of the Satellite situation (where *both* parents are absent) - addressing both the social and theoretical context within which this phenomenon has emerged and the experiences of the children themselves. Put simply, *why* has this situation arisen (in Vancouver at this time), and what are some of its everyday, lived consequences? No studies to date have attempted to answer both of these important questions. In direct response to this concern, this paper has two broad yet related objectives. On the one hand, I hope to indicate some of the everyday circumstances of the Satellite children in Vancouver. On the other, I want to inform my research with reference to wider theoretical and empirical discussions within the social sciences. Before turning to the empirical data gathered through my own research, I begin by indicating some of the key areas of wider debate: recent migration from Hong Kong and Taiwan, transnationalism, and household migration strategies. These will be subsequently considered in more detail with direct relation to the empirical material.

Contemporary Pacific Rim Migration

Thirty years of rapid social and economic development has bred a sizeable aggregate of wealthy individuals. (Chu, 1996; p. 206)

The contemporary story of trans-Pacific migration must begin with the economic transformation in the so-called Asian Tigers (Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea and Taiwan) from which emerged substantial middle-class populations, with both the ability and inclination to migrate. During the 1980s and 1990s, certain cities in Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the United States have been the destinations of choice for unprecedented numbers of skilled and/or wealthy Chinese migrants (Skeldon, 1997), who are themselves highly desired and actively sought through the immigration programmes of receiving countries.

⁵ Unfortunately, their research does not clearly distinguish those cases where one parent is present from those where there is none, except to indicate the possibility for greater 'negative effects' in the latter. Ho et al. (1997) similarly define 'parachute kids' as "the children left with one *or* no parent" (p. 20, emphasis added).

Within the last fifteen years, the profile of immigration to Vancouver exemplifies these trends. Changes in Canadian immigration policy since 1967, and especially since 1986, reflect the desire to attract the wealth and skills of the Asian Tigers to Canada. Katharyne Mitchell (1993) notes a “campaign to sell Vancouver as a secure, profitable and livable city in which to do business and reside” (p. 266). Enacted at provincial and municipal levels of government, the entrepreneurial populations of Hong Kong (and later Taiwan) were particularly targeted, a group who could be attracted by the security provided by a Canadian passport and the necessity of overseas investments in the wake of the return of the territory to China in 1997.

During the 1990s in Vancouver, migrants from Hong Kong and Taiwan dominated immigration statistics. In 1995, these two states accounted for 29.9 percent and 13.6 percent of 37, 215 immigrants respectively, and together constituted over 71 percent of *all* ‘economic-class’ entrants (23, 726) for that year. These immigrant populations were therefore significant both numerically and in terms of the existing and potential financial capital that they possessed.⁶ Although no data set exists to confirm or dispute this claim, considerable anecdotal evidence would suggest that the Satellite kids are found primarily amongst families from Hong Kong and Taiwan who migrated to Canada during this period and fall into the category of ‘economic’ immigrants. I will now turn to discuss briefly the ways in which these immigrant populations have been conceptualised in media and, more particularly, academic accounts, suggesting several perspectives for understanding the emergence of the Satellite kids in Vancouver (and elsewhere).

Conceptualising Chinese Migration

In media reports, government documents and scholarly accounts, the recent migration of families from Hong Kong and Taiwan to Vancouver has been characterised by an image of

⁶ To give an indication of immigrant wealth, since the implementation of the Business Migration Programme in Canada in 1986 over \$4.22 billion has been invested by 16, 417 ‘investor’ immigrants (Citizenship and Immigration Canada).

an “immigrant overclass” (Ley, 1999), invoking generalised assumptions regarding the financial wealth and associated power of Chinese migrant households.⁷

This portrayal reflects much more generally the accounts and theorising of Chinese migration during the 1980s and 1990s, depicted as an inherently powerful process enacted by a privileged class of people. Middle-class Chinese migrants are commonly conceived as a “hypermobile” elite (Skeldon, 1997), utilising their wealth and professional skills to facilitate further financial gain in the context of global economic liberalisation and the increasing mobility of capital (Mitchell, 1995, 1997a, 1997b). Migration is a crucial part of the flexible strategising inherent in this process, and challenges conventional conceptions of immigration, whereby more or less permanent settlement in the country of destination is assumed. In contrast, recent Chinese migration has been observed to frequently comprise *transnational* social arrangements,⁸ entailing both the strategic geographical dispersal of family members in different places, and the maintenance of significant social and economic ties with more than one country simultaneously. The objective of these arrangements is frequently conceived in terms of maximising capital accumulation.

This migration is driven by more than the geography of financial gain, however. Entrepreneurial and professional success within the contemporary international economic arena necessitates the possession of particular cultural knowledge: described by Mitchell (1997b) as “the language of the global economic subject” (p. 551) and captured in Hannerz’s (1996) description of “the cosmopolitan.” Particular symbolic markers, although not obviously related to financial accumulation, are nevertheless closely tied to the successful negotiation of (future) economic business on a global cultural terrain. Aihwa Ong (1999) draws on the work of sociologist Pierre Bourdieu to suggest that the quest for so-called “cultural capital” is an important factor explicating recent patterns of trans-Pacific migration. Amongst middle-class and elite from East and Southeast Asia, the desire for Euroamerican culture is frequently embodied in one key objective:

⁷ Challenged directly by Ley (1999; 2000), this image has come under recent scrutiny by academics concerned in particular with the financial vulnerability of recent economic-class immigrants.

⁸ A widely cited definition of transnationalism is provided by Basch et al. (1994), given as: “the process by which immigrants forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement...”(p. 7).

...for many middle-class Chinese...the ultimate symbolic capital necessary for global mobility is an American college degree, which guarantees that the holder has acquired the cultural knowledge, skills, and credentials that enable the transposition of social status from one country to another (Ong, 1999; p. 90).

Middle-class Chinese cosmopolitans understand the *geography of culture*, therefore, in addition to the geography of financial capital. It is the children of the family on whom the responsibility for accumulating cultural capital ultimately falls.

In addition to the highly modern persona of the cosmopolitan, the particular success of Chinese enterprise is frequently attributed to certain *traditional* cultural elements. Some notion of ‘Chinese culture’ has dominated interpretations of economic success in East and Southeast Asia: Wong (1989), for example, has identified several “major Chinese cultural elements” facilitating the development of capitalist enterprise, including ‘utilitarian discipline’, a stress on high achievement, and a ‘pervasive familism.’ More generally, recent analyses of Chinese business success centre on the conceptual power of the “family.” From Tai’s (1989) ‘affective model,’⁹ to extended family relations and the diaspora (Mitchell, 1995; Cohen, 1997),¹⁰ to the invocation of *guanxi* in explanations of contemporary transnational business transactions (Mitchell, 1995; Hsing, 1997; Olds and Yeung, 1999; Olds et al. 1999), the idea that the Chinese family is in some way a culturally superior means of accumulating capital is pervasive. The commanding principal of familism has not lost cultural significance for the new middle-classes of the Asian Tigers (Chu, 1996). As Wong (1985) here explains, the family remains a powerful check on individual behaviour:

[It is] the basic social grouping uniting individuals. Family ties are permanent, and individuals owe their loyalty to the family throughout their lives...The Chinese consider the family as the primary focus of their loyalty (p. 16).

⁹ The notion of ‘familism’ underpins the “affective model” of Chinese economic development, developed by Tai (1989). Distinguished from a Western model that emphasises individualism, the affective model in contrast extols group orientation and familial “emotional bonds.”

¹⁰ Geographical mobility and the maintenance of kinship ties enabled, for example, the Chinese trading diaspora to operate effectively in the accumulation of capital (Cohen, 1997; Hamilton, 1999).

Transnational Migration and the Family

According to Ong (1999): “It is a cultural logic of many ethnic Chinese in Southeast Asia to organize their families according to strategies of time and space so that over time, the family is distributed over a longer distance or wider expanse of space...”(pp. 93 - 94). She goes on to describe this process in terms of “strategies of accumulation, dispersal and relocation” (ibid.). Mitchell (1993) similarly refers to “a desire” by Chinese elite “to extend family networks spatially” (p. 369).

Today, the Chinese family demonstrates spatial flexibility through a strategic use of migration that disperses family members at different global sites, with the ultimate objective of promoting the present and future success of the household through the accumulation of various forms of capital. The Satellite arrangement can be explained (in part) in terms of a spatial disjunction between the two variables of culture and finance - culture is to be acquired in the West, while money, on the other hand, remains most profitably located in the economies of the East. Adherence to tradition (filial piety, a patriarchal structure, and so on) guarantees a certain discipline, enabling the Chinese family to overcome the usual (weakening) affects of distance on social relationships. Individual household members can work to achieve different goals at different geographical sites, in the knowledge that the ‘good of the family’ is at all times ultimately sought. According to Mitchell (1993), Hong Kong elites “negotiate the new spaces of late capitalism to their supreme advantage” (p. 268)...“Parents and children travel and communicate easily and on a frequent basis” (p. 269). She emphasises the “*power* involved in the ability to control the experience of travel, trans-cultural communication, habitation, education and business...” (ibid.).¹¹

Underpinned by a desire to accumulate cultural capital in Canada and financial capital in Hong Kong or Taiwan, the Satellite arrangement can be conceived in these terms - a strategic spatial practice by a privileged migrant population. These ideas will be discussed

¹¹ I have examined elsewhere the implication of these ideas for explicating the so-called ‘Astronaut family’ in Vancouver - a recent feature of immigration from Hong Kong and Taiwan whereby the head of the household will return to the country of origin, after the immigration of his family, to pursue a business or professional career (Waters, 2000, 2001). He will leave his spouse and children behind. Through this transnational arrangement, the family can secure simultaneously the financial security of East Asia and the various benefits of Canada (education, passport, clean environment and so on).

shortly. First, I want to suggest some of the more significant aspects of transnational family migration that these theoretical positions omit.

Alternative Approaches to Transnational Migration: ‘Localisation’ and Family Regimes

So far I have focussed on representations of powerful and privileged middle-class Chinese families, emphasising the ability of this population to conceive and enact migration in terms of transnational accumulation strategies: what Ong (1999) describes as a “flexible logic.” Such portrayals, however, omit an important aspect of transnationalism and household migration, involving the exercise of power relations *within* the household. They have tended to treat the household as a unified, internally undifferentiated unit, making no distinction between ‘the good of the family’ and the benefits of transnational strategies granted to individual members. Doreen Massey has argued that there is a “power-geometry” to ‘time-space compression’ and its associated experiences of global mobility. She writes:

...different social groups and different individuals are placed in very distinct ways in relation to these flows and interconnections. Different social groups have distinct relationships to this anyway-differentiated mobility: some are more in charge of it than others; some initiate flows and movement, others don’t; some are more on the receiving end of it than others; some are effectively imprisoned by it (1993; p. 61).

Recent work on household migration has emphasised that mobility is often a negative, debilitating experience for the female (Man, 1995, 1997; Halfacree, 1995; Silvey and Lawson, 1999), and several authors (Greenhalgh, 1994; Nonini and Ong, 1997; Ong, 1999) have suggested that the contemporary Chinese family may abet the oppression of certain household members. In addition to her focus on migration strategies and ‘cultural capital’, Ong (1999) has explicitly addressed these issues, describing the family as a “regime” and arguing that the “success” of the Chinese family unit (Mitchell, 1995) is achieved by restricting the freedom of certain family members. She writes:

In some cases, the flexible logic deprives children of both parents...Familial regimes of dispersal and localization...discipline family members to make do with very little emotional support; disrupted parental responsibility, strained marital relations, and abandoned children are such common circumstances that they have special terms. When the flexible imperative in family life and

citizenship requires a form of isolation and disciplining of women and children that is both critiqued and resisted, claims that the ‘Confucian affective model’ is at the heart of Chinese economic success are challenged (p. 128).

The “isolation and disciplining of women and children” are two implications of contemporary accumulation strategies involving ‘flexible family’ arrangements. She makes particular reference to “abandoned children” - the so-called Satellite kids. The objective of this paper is to bring some empirical actualities to these different conceptions of transnational accumulation strategies and the much talked of resilience of the Chinese family. With the aid of a few short examples, therefore, I begin my account with a glimpse into how some children have experienced the everyday reality of the Satellite arrangement.

Circumstances of the Satellite Child

Eve and Paul, brother and sister, are aged twenty-two and seventeen. They live in a very large house in an affluent area on the west side of Vancouver, bought for them two years ago by their parents. From that time on, their parents have worked in Hong Kong, visit their children twice a year, and telephone once a week. Eva is responsible for paying the household bills using her mother’s bank account and transporting herself and her brother to school by car. They must both keep the house tidy, and so they confine their activities to the kitchen and their bedrooms to minimise the need to clean. They eat out almost every night: Eva said, “we don’t like to cook ourselves because we have to clean up.” Paul experienced staying alone in the house for the first time when his sister left for a trip to Hong Kong, lasting five months. He had “problems” handling household and personal expenditures. He said:

She [his sister] used to manage all the money and stuff. Just gave me a certain amount every single week, like forty bucks per week and stuff, but...then she left, last five months she left for Hong Kong, so I had to manage by myself and...For the start I thought, like, ‘Oooo! I have tons of money’, right? And then spent a lot on clothes and stuff and then...Yeah, I just spent it, and then I have like, Ahhh! No money for food! *Laughs*...I had to eat, like, canned food and noodles every single meal!

He also spent the money his parents had left him in reserve for emergencies.

Dawn and her brother had been in Vancouver, without their parents, for eight years. She was twelve and her brother was thirteen years old when their parents returned to Hong Kong to take care of their business. When asked to describe how she felt about the situation she replied: “Bad. I was only twelve so...But I realised that they had to work, to earn money for us. Just for us. So I didn’t blame anything.” The children moved into the basement of their guardian’s house and once a week their aunt would visit them and pay their bills. About four times a week their parents would telephone. Now Dawn is nineteen she lives on her own in an apartment - her brother has returned to Hong Kong. She continues to have frequent contact with her parents over the telephone and they send her an allowance of \$150 every week. She wants to return to Hong Kong after completing her education – “To live with them!...my whole family are there”.... “I just want to graduate and go back,” she said.

Mary has been in Vancouver for less than a year. She is thirteen years old and lives in an apartment with two other people – friends of her parents. She is not sure how old they are (“twenty something”) but she is happy because, she told me, “they let me do anything I want.” She had never met her housemates before coming to Vancouver; they were at the airport when she arrived and took her to the apartment where she would live. She is not sure how long she will stay in Vancouver and she had not had much warning that she was going to come. Her parents told her that she was going to migrate to Canada only one week before she left Hong Kong.

When Rod came to Canada he was thirteen. He migrated with his mother and his sister and his father remained behind in Taiwan to continue with his business. They became an ‘Astronaut family.’ While his father claimed to be investing a substantial portion of his earnings, his mother became suspicious of the small amount of money that he was sending to Vancouver. It transpired, after some investigation on his mother’s part, that his father was in fact supporting a “second family” in Taiwan. An extremely stressful period of Rod’s life began, involving physical fights between his parents, an affair by his mother, and the tragic resolution of this when both mother and father left Rod and his sister alone in Vancouver to fend for themselves. Financial support for the children ceased, and Rod was forced to drop out of school in order to make enough money to pay his bills. At one point, he could see no

good in the world, and attempted suicide by jumping from the fourth floor of a building. He said: "I think I have no future...It just crossed my mind, just jump." Fortunately he was unharmed and was subsequently able to think more positively, more constructively. He said:

Since they divorced they don't really give me any support at all, like money support. No.

JW: How do you cope then?

I have to work.

JW: You're not in school?

I was in school for two years after I graduate from high school and then now I start...to go back to school, just the beginning of this year. 'Cos I have to make enough money to support at least the rental for the apartment and then some of the money I have to use for food and phone bill and stuff like that...Now I find that I have some money in the bank and then I think it's time to start...to study. To go back to school...

JW: So your parents don't send you any money now?

No, actually, sometimes. Not very often. Probably like once a year. It depends, like, because right now the economy in Taiwan is not good, so sometimes they are having their own problems, have to deal with their own things too...So sometimes \$1000 once or twice...Just to support school a little bit.

Vince had been on his own for just one week. For the past two years a friend of his mother had lived with him in his parents' house, acting as his guardian and taking full responsibility for the household chores. His parents ran a business in Hong Kong. When he turned eighteen the guardian immediately moved out, and his mother returned from Hong Kong to give Vince an intensive, week-long instructional course on the basics of running a home. His mother has now left him, and he is not confident that he will be able to cope: "I feel like I will have financial problems after a couple of months. I won't be able to handle a thousand dollars of doing...paying things. I wouldn't know how much to have for myself and then how much to have for the bills." He is also learning to be a landlord; the upper floor of the house is now rented to university students.

Daily Lives and Practical Responsibilities

Before turning to a more theoretical examination of the empirical data, I want to outline some of the daily, practical responsibilities faced by the Satellite kids. The living arrangements of the participants varied, indicating some different experiences in this regard. Some students lived totally alone, although it was usual for a sibling to be present; slightly more of those interviewed lived in a house than in an apartment. Some students have experienced living with a ‘home-stay’ family¹² (this did not reflect current circumstances for any of those interviewed), and four have experienced living with a guardian. Seven out of fifteen presently live with a sibling. Vince found it especially difficult to adjust to living with another family in Vancouver. He is an only child and demanded significant attention from his parents in Hong Kong:

It was really tough because...my own parents, like, spoiled me...and then, when I come...umm...The auntie got her own daughter and own son...and so it was pretty tough on me.

Living under the same roof as a guardian does not necessarily indicate that the child receives any particular adult guidance. For several years Dawn and her brother lived in the basement of their guardian’s house. Their guardian, she told me, paid them little attention and had no

¹² A ‘homestay family’ charges a fee to let a young student live with them. This can include family, friends, or placement through an agency. In the Vancouver region an industry has grown up around the need to find homes for young parent-less children with sufficient financial resources. There are six so-called ‘home-stay agencies’ in the area, whose role is to provide families for young international students and also (to a lesser extent) Satellite children. I interviewed Liane Gebauer, Director of Placement for Canada Vancouver International Homestay Ltd. The agency has dealt with Satellite children. Sometimes the agency is phoned for advice when parents leave a child in Vancouver with another family member or friend and that person wishes to pass on the responsibility. Several Vancouver schools use this and other agencies in order to place children too young to be on their own. The agency runs substantial checks on the volunteer families and attempts to match a child with a family according to mutual interests and will place children for up to two years. Of significant interest is the fact that this particular agency offers a ‘guardianship service’ for younger students. For a fee, they will become the child’s legal guardian and be “responsible for their housing, education, allowance and airline ticket home. We work with an immigration lawyer and a bank to take care of everything. An account is set up for the child as a trust and a transfer is made into the account every month.” The youngest child they have taken on is fourteen years old, although requests have been made for the placement of younger children.

interest in their lives.¹³ The feeling was mutual: “We just ignored them...They cooked for us...That’s it.”

Several of the children interviewed live without any adult presence, and almost every aspect of the day-to-day running of their lives is thereby in their charge. In some cases they are responsible for undertaking all the domestic chores themselves, in several cases a part-time cleaner would attend to the house once a week. Claire gets help from a housekeeper with washing her clothes, and a gardener tends to the lawn. Although Vince is responsible for paying the bills on time, his domestic chores are greatly reduced by a hired help, who also cooks for him. He said:

My Mum has paid for a woman to come every Monday and then she gives me three meals and cleans up all the house...Only three, so it’s three days of meals. Four days I need to go out... If there is a meal in my fridge then I will have my meal, if not then I’ll go and find someone to go and eat with me.

Vince does not consider the possibility of cooking for himself. Paul tries to minimise the time spent preparing his meals. He said: “I cook a lot, but it’s all like...instant food! *Laughs*”... “I usually eat out with my friends or cook a microwave dinner.” The majority of participants eat out on a regular, sometimes daily basis.¹⁴ Several participants felt ill-prepared to cope with domestic and other responsibilities in the absence of their parents:

JW: How did they [parents] prepare you to stay on your own? What did they tell you?

Nothing, nothing. Just nothing... They just rent us a house, and we don’t know how to drive... They do nothing about it. We just learn by ourselves. (Eva)

Disagreements between siblings have more serious implications when there is no adult to intervene. Dawn felt “fighting” with her brother to be the biggest problem she has faced in the absence of her parents: “we always fight and no-one can help. I’ve got no-one to talk to.”

The management of finances was consistently mentioned as a ‘problem’ during interviews, and several incidents of “overspending” were relayed. Frank found that he

¹³ The Vancouver School Board, in a questionnaire response, expressed a concern that many guardianships are “paper guardianships” only, by which they mean that the guardian takes little interest in the day-to-day activities of the child in his/her care.

¹⁴ Schools have indicated concern over the nutritional content of the diets of these children.

overspent by a couple of hundred dollars every month for the first few months on his own. In the four months that Richie has been in charge of the household bills, he has been “off budget every month.” His parents send him money, he has to allocate it, and anything left over from the domestic expenditures is for him. Paul’s first experience of dealing with the finances came when his sister left for a trip to Hong Kong, and his overspending on clothes meant a diet of “canned food and noodles” for the rest of the month. Claire’s job was easier: she has only to fax bills to her parents as they arrive, and they handle the rest. Every week her mother will write her a cheque for her allowance. With one exception, parents appeared to provide generous financial support for their children.

Transnationalism and Accumulation Strategies: The Satellite Privilege

I want to explore the notion that this migration scenario represents a significantly privileged display of strategic geographical mobility, exemplifying the ‘flexible family’ discussed earlier. On one level, privilege is apparent by the very fact that permission for immigration to Canada was granted (according to criteria that reward particularly valued skills and wealth). I am more concerned here, however, with the reasons behind maintaining this transnational arrangement. If immigration to Canada was not the objective of the whole family, then what was?

In some cases, participants indicated that their parents would have remained in Vancouver had they not faced financial constraints, imposed through barriers to employment. Dawn and her family immigrated in 1990. Her parents could not speak English and found this to be a significant obstacle to finding work. After two years of unsuccessfully seeking employment they returned to Hong Kong, leaving Dawn and her brother behind. Richie and his parents faced a very similar situation of failed attempts to secure employment. Paul suggested that his parents “have no choice” but to work in Hong Kong in order “to gain money so that they can pay for our school and stuff.” He implied that his parents considered the potential earnings achievable in Vancouver to be insufficient to meet the family’s needs. Mothers and fathers commonly worked in the same family business; Frank’s mother spends around six months of every year in Taiwan helping his father to run the company. Clearly, financial ‘necessity’ (or perception of it) has kept some parents from seeking residence and

employment in Canada. In most cases, however, children implied that the parents could simply “earn more money” in Hong Kong and Taiwan, justifying their absence from Vancouver in terms of calculated financial expedience.

Reasons for migration were unambiguous. One participant indicated parental concern over potential political instability in Taiwan. For his parents, a Canadian passport was a way of securing some insurance against future uncertainty. In another example, the parents had applied for ‘landed immigrant status’ so that their son could avoid the mandatory military service required of Taiwanese males. There was clearly one intention, however, that surpassed all others, and was consistently mentioned during interviews. When asked why they were in Canada, “education” was the reason given most frequently by participants.

Cultural Capital and the Quest for Education

The issue of ‘cultural capital,’ discussed earlier, offers a potentially useful way of understanding the Satellite arrangement. Expounded by Ong (1999) with regards to the accumulation strategies of a present-day Chinese business elite, my findings give weight to the assertion that the acquisition of education is an important factor motivating contemporary trans-Pacific migration (Mitchell, 1997b; Ong, 1999). Here, the Principal of an international high school in Vancouver gives three reasons why children from East and Southeast Asia are increasingly attending his institution:

To learn the world language of the future, which is English. It is clear that that is going to be the language of commerce for the future. It’s going to be the language for the European Union and certainly for trade with Asia in Canada. Secondly, many of them come from families who have a business and they want their children to have at least reasonable English so they can come back and help with the export-import part of the business, and so they will do the language. And then thirdly, prestige. If they can get a degree from a Canadian university then that will go a long way. To say, “my son has a degree from the University of Toronto or U.B.C.”...A foreign university, right? North America.

In his response he clearly indicates the combination of cultural and financial considerations underpinning the burgeoning numbers of young Asian students seeking an education in North America. The picture he paints corresponds to that of the powerful,

geographically flexible Chinese family, seeking out specific cultural capital in the English language and Western qualifications, while considering the potentially global scope of future family business activities. Turning to the experiences of the children themselves, the complex reality of migration in some ways supports this contention, while in other ways, the notion of 'cultural capital' acquisition is undermined.

Most students revealed only a vague idea of why education in Canada was regarded so highly by their parents: "it's better" was the usual and unelaborated response. Rod articulated his understanding of educational opportunities in Canada more fully:

We believe that in Canada there's a better education programme than Taiwan...[In Taiwan] teachers don't care about what kind of talent you have. They just want you to study and then get into university.

Certain subjects (e.g. languages and mathematics) are favoured in Taiwan, undervaluing children who do not excel in these specific areas:

They don't care for sports, music...some people, they really have a talent in that but they don't really care. Even though you are good in P.E. or very good in music, they don't care. They think you cannot get any good job after that...People will treat you like useless people in Taiwan.

Rod's conception of a Canadian education reflects an assertion made by many parents interviewed during the course of this research: that Canada offers the possibility of creative thinking and a wider range of subjects, compared to a more rigid system in Hong Kong and Taiwan. In some cases, the desire for a particularly Western education was clear:

And English is more important in the future, because national boundaries are...English maybe get around the world. If you have good English communication it is better for you in the job. (Frank)

Dawn explained why she came to Canada:

They [the parents] told us that it's because good for study. Yeah, right, because they want us to learn English instead of staying in Hong Kong....

I just want to graduate and go back...My mum wants me to stay and get a better education. I don't know.

Yet, the particular desire for a *Western* education (Ong, 1999) was not always apparent. Several participants intimated that migration to Vancouver was necessary because of certain barriers to their continuing education in Hong Kong and Taiwan. Students referred to higher standards and stiffer competition for high school and university places in their country of origin. Unlike the situation in Canada, the passing of examinations, I was told, is a necessary requirement for continuation at various stages of schooling, and several participants indicated that they had either *failed* these exams, or that their parents had *feared that they would* do so. It is a common conception amongst recent migrants from Hong Kong and Taiwan, therefore, that a Canadian education is inherently *easier*. Writes Ke (1998), for the *Ming Pao Daily News*: “in Hong Kong and Taiwan...youngsters may not be allowed to graduate if their results are poor. Here in Canada, as long as one goes to school, one will sooner or later graduate.”

Before migrating, Rod had been aware that achieving success in the Canadian educational system was not so dependent upon the passing of examinations: “I’d heard about, like, you don’t have to have any provincial tests or something to get into high school... It’s really common, like, once they can’t get into Hong Kong, like, grade eleven or whatever, they just come here...It’s like a way to solve a problem...” Finding himself in this position, Paul’s family had sought immigration to Canada:

I wasn’t doing too well in Hong Kong in grade nine...So I can’t get in grade ten ‘cos Hong Kong has a different system than here. You have to pass an exam to get in grade ten...I can’t get into grade ten so my Mum decide to send me to Canada. Vancouver, right? Because it’s easier. It’s not like bad education, but it’s easier to get in university and more opportunity and stuff.

What these data show, I believe, is the importance of education as ‘cultural capital’ amongst middle-class households from Hong Kong and Taiwan. They show the perception of a Canadian education as being in someway desirable (whether as “Western”, “easier” or more accessible) and they suggest the importance of education in motivating the migration of families from Hong Kong and Taiwan to Canada. The Satellite arrangement is explained in terms of financial necessity or expedience, whereby it is perceived that more money can be made in the country of origin than in Canada. On one level, it reflects a calculated geographical strategy, involving the strategic dispersal of family members at different sites for the achievement of different objectives. To conclude about the success of this apparently

‘flexible’ family arrangement, however, we must of course examine the outcomes. Firstly, what types of cultural capital are in fact achieved? And, secondly, how do the children experience this arrangement?

Some Consequences of Absent Parents: Freedom from Patriarchal Control

The notion that the Chinese family is particularly flexible due to adherence to traditional values of filial piety, ‘utilitarian discipline’ (Wong, 1989) and a patriarchal structure is brought into question in the experiences of the Satellite kids. The physical distance that this migration strategy places between family members is shown to significantly diminish the amount of control that parents can command over the lives of their children, attenuating the strength of parental discipline. Given the educational intentions underlying migration, it is perhaps ironic that in the absence of their parents, children often felt little pressure to pursue ‘acceptable’ academic subjects, to study hard, or even to attend school. And it is not simply distance from the parental hand that creates problems for the presupposed strategy of cultural accumulation. As Pe-pua et al. (1998) have pointed out in their examination of Satellite children in Australia, “as children get acculturated...they begin to accept values and norms which may challenge the traditional Chinese values of their parents...” (p. 292). In short, immigration involves substantial interaction with a new place, where pre-existing local and regional cultural attributes will affect the types of symbolic capital these children acquire. Rod here exemplifies this point, describing the differences he perceives between Canada and Taiwan:

Taiwan and Canada, there is a big difference. Canada is pretty slow. Everything is very slow...relaxed and slow. But in Taiwan every second is like war...You have to fight for every second...If you do something too slow, probably other people might take your job away.

This notion of ‘slowness’ vis-à-vis the fast pace of Taiwan and Hong Kong was pervasive in interviews with parents and children alike. And the appeal of a perceived “Vancouver lifestyle” was expressed on several occasions. Frank here compares Taiwan with Canada:

If I can stay here that will be good...I’m already used to the lifestyle here, but my parents don’t like me that way.

JW: Why?

They think I am too slow.

JW: Too slow?

It's like...it's like, outside of Canada, you know, everything is like...for example, outside of Canada everything is like a Pentium 3. To be here is like a Pentium 1.

JW: And you like that?

...for the retired people this is a really wonderful place. I think it's a wonderful place. But for young people, I would say probably too slow.

Even from a distance, Frank's parents are aware that their son's cultural "education" in Vancouver extends beyond the acquisition of the desired Western certificate, to the cultivation of a somewhat 'laid back' attitude to work and life.

Paul has developed his own ideas regarding his education in Canada:

There's stuff I want to study that you can only study in Vancouver. Can't study in Hong Kong...I want to do drama and music...I'm not going into science or whatever...I want to go to Emily Carr.¹⁵

Languages, sciences or commerce, Paul explained, are the subjects that Chinese parents expect (and demand) their children to pursue. He said:

When I first came here and I first decided that I want to take, like, drama, music or design, she's [Paul's mother] kind of, like, against it, right? Because in Chinese culture the parents always want their children to take, like, science or like business or...to have a good career. They don't like their children to take, like, art, to become an artist or whatever.

I think, most of my Hong Kong friends, they'll all be studying science, doctor, business. Actually I don't think that's what they want to take. I don't think that's what they're into, 'cos I talk to lots of my friends: 'I take it because my parents want me to take it.' Like, they'll probably get a good job but it's not what they want to do.

In contrast, he has observed that his "Caucasian friends" "do what they want": "I think that is the difference between them. Different attitude." His parents are gradually

¹⁵ Emily Carr is the name of the Vancouver Institute of Art and Design.

accepting their son's independence, however; he is aware that they support him in his own trajectory. Reflecting on what success means to him, Paul said: "I think if I can find a job that I enjoy, the pay is not, like, a really big thing...Well, I care, of course, but it's not the main issue. I want to have a job I like...reach all the goals I set and stuff. I want to be happy, right?"

In several conversations with school staff, absenteeism and the habitual skipping of classes were routinely linked to the Satellite circumstance. Given that education is, in most cases, the primary objective of this family arrangement, the reality of this situation is significant. As exemplified by Dawn when she was asked to leave her school because of frequent truancy, the strategy of cultural capital acquisition can easily fail to produce the desired results. She explained:

Like, you skip one class and then after that there's homework that you can't catch up, and then after you catch up then you want to skip again and then there's a bunch of homework that you can't really catch up. So you don't want to come again.¹⁶

The situation may have been different if her parents had been present, yet she feels that they abandoned her in Canada. She therefore feels no obligation to their wishes:

They won't force me to do anything, because they're not here. They know that they can't be responsible for me anymore...They won't force us to do anything because they know that they left us here.

The issue of education aside, in the absence of adult supervision, and assisted by access to considerable material and financial resources, the Satellite circumstance clearly bestows a degree of personal freedom on the children (often in stark contrast to strict adult disciplining experienced in Hong Kong and Taiwan). As one participant expressed:

If I want to turn bad or do anything that they don't want me to it's so easy for me...especially with my situation. I can just lie to them, right?...So, yeah. They trust me totally. (Angel)

¹⁶ A useful future project would be to examine the extent to which immigrant children with absent parents underachieve in school, as there is a clear sense that this might be the case from the discussions around this research topic.

This notion of “trust” seems to suggest different connotations to the “disciplining of family members” assumed by Ong (1999) to be inherent in these transnational household arrangements. As this one participant implies, children are fully aware that their parents have *lost* a significant degree of control over their behaviour. Paul compares his life without his parents in Vancouver to his life when he was in Hong Kong:

I have to study in Hong Kong. I don't get to go out as much as here. Because here I've got freedom, so I can go out any time I want, but like in Hong Kong I had to stay home on weekdays so every week night I'd be seeing them...Every Sunday is a family day. So the whole day I'd probably see them. Saturday night I'd probably go out, but I have to be back like ten or eleven. That's my curfew.

He is very conscious of the implications of his parents' absence:

I have a lot of freedom so it really, like, depends on yourself. If you want to...turn bad it's really easy...If I choose to do the bad stuff I can do it, like, really easily because...I can do whatever I want...But...since I was born my parents were really strict...they taught me a lot, so I know, like, which is good and which is bad.

They always ask me, like, don't smoke or don't do bad stuff...It's really rely on yourself, because you can lie to your parents, right?...They won't know or anything...Actually, like, to be honest I try a lot of stuff. I try smoking, I try drugs – weed, like. Just for...my curiosity.

With freedom, however, comes also an awareness of self-discipline and responsibilities:

In Hong Kong it is sort of different. I have a maid in Hong Kong. People always do in Hong Kong. So I don't have to do anything. I don't have to cook, I don't have to clean the house, I don't have to fix the bed, I don't have to wash the clothes, or whatever. Here like, well...comparing me now to back two years, then I change a lot. I'm more...independent and more mature to manage over myself. Back then I was dependent on my parents for everything. But now I can, like, live by myself pretty much now.

As will become clear, the Satellite kids live an unusual, ambivalent existence, where the appearance of exceptional freedom granted by the absence of parental discipline can also be experienced as extremely limiting, enveloping loneliness, and a lack of direction in life.

Limits to the ‘Flexible Family’: Negative Experiences of the Satellite Child

Interrogating representations of the contemporary middle-class Chinese family, Aihwa Ong (1999) argues that the *affective model* (Tai, 1989) of capitalist development, based upon a romantic depiction of the ‘good of the family’ (see also Ong and Nonini, 1997), excludes the possibility that individual family members may experience oppression under this “regime”. Descriptions of recent Pacific Rim migration frequently invoke some similar notion of Chinese tradition, combined with a pervasive portrayal of a highly skilled, wealthy cosmopolitan class of immigrants (Skeldon, 1997; Mitchell, 1997; Olds, 1998; Ley, 1999, 2000), and resulting in the image of the ‘flexible family.’ Ong (1999) suggests that far from being uniformly ‘empowering’, some family members experience migration in terms of ‘powerlessness’ and ‘localisation’.¹⁷ I will here apply these arguments to an analysis of the children within the apparently ‘flexible family’ and consider the extent to which they may experience feelings equivalent to oppression, powerlessness and localisation in the Satellite arrangement.¹⁸

At the outset, it was clear that participants exercised little power in either the decision to migrate, or the circumstances in which they found themselves after migration. Invariably, migration to Canada was forced upon them against their will.¹⁹ Eva, whose older brother is studying in Toronto, explained why she is unable to go back to Hong Kong:

They [her parents] won’t allow me to do that. They say I’m too childish...They say if you don’t finish your degree here you can’t come back because...you have your future.

I cried and I cried and I begged for her [the mother] to send me back. I don’t want to be here. And she say, ‘you just not used to being here. You miss your friends only.’ But after two years I still want to go back. Not just I miss my friends...I don’t want to stay here.

¹⁷ There have been increasing attempts in recent years to understand the differentiated nature of household mobility (Silvey and Lawson, 1999), by feminist scholars in particular. These attempts, however, have been most fully involved with explicating the female experience of migration, and the experiences of children continue to be significantly underrepresented in migration research.

¹⁸ Attempts to look *within* the family towards differential power relations and oppression have tended also to ignore middle-class and apparently privileged migrations (e.g. Zlotnik, 1995; Silvey and Lawson, 1999).

¹⁹ Only one participant indicated that it was her decision to move to Vancouver.

I noted earlier that one participant – thirteen year old Mary – was told of her migration only one week before she boarded the plane. Claire has had several, negative experiences of moving. She had previously been sent to Singapore, then to Cuba, before coming to Canada. She was deceived about the purpose of her travel, and told that she was going on a weeklong excursion. She described her experience of moving:

So hard to...to learn a new place for when I am here by myself...I already learn a new place, and then a year later I need to go to Canada and learn a new thing again. It's very difficult...Always change, change, change.

It is revealing to compare Claire's sense of mobility to Aihwa Ong's (1999) theoretical conception of the migration strategies of economically privileged Chinese. Ong writes:

...under conditions of transnationality the new links between flexibility and the logics of displacement, on the one hand, and capital accumulation, on the other, have given new valence to such strategies of manoeuvring and positioning. Flexibility, migration, and relocations, instead of being coerced or resisted, have become practices to strive for *rather than stability* (p. 19, emphasis added).

The way in which participants clearly demonstrated the *need for stability* in their lives suggests the inadequacy of theories invoking transnational flexibility in explanation of the migration experiences of the Satellite kids. Frequent mobility has prevented Claire from establishing a sense of belonging in any one place, and the absence of her parents must only intensify the lack of familiarity and constancy in her daily life. For Rod, the meaning of home as a place where stability and comfort can be sought has been lost through his experiences:

The most important thing for people is home and family, because that's the place that they can hide, they can cry, they can do anything. Home will protect you. But I don't have that any more, so I become the person I love the most, who will become the main structure in my life.

Rod reflected on the difficulties he has faced since being on his own, without his parents:

The biggest problem? Lonely...First of all I feel like I have nobody to trust...And then, it's kind of hard to find new friends. Because parents should be the ones that you trust the most and they betrayed you totally, and then who can you trust?...

Eva expressed similar, disturbing sentiments:

I don't want to be alone here just, like, helpless here...But my Mum don't understand this.

I don't like it [Vancouver], because I feel so lonely here. I can't get any help. Our parents are not around us. I want to be back.

On several occasions, it was apparent that students found it hard to reconcile their apparent freedom with their sense of aloneness. In a brief but revealing interview with thirteen-year-old Mary at her school in suburban Richmond, such ambivalence was clearly discernible. She displayed a sense of pride in the fact that her parents trusted her to be responsible. And as for her guardians: "They let me do anything I want." When asked how she felt about the situation, she described it as "good." Yet she then went on to say: "...But sometimes I think 'how come no one cares about me?' Yeah." Paul revealed a similar confusion, describing here how he feels about the absence of his parents:

Well, the first year I don't really miss my parents because I have a lot of freedom, right? So I quite enjoy it. 'Cos when I was in Hong Kong my parents were really strict...The last five months I spent by myself I quite miss them now. All of my friends is like, 'Oh! You're so lucky! You have a big house and you're by yourself.' But I also think it's not that lucky when you, like, when it actually happen to you...If your parents and your family are away from you it's not that great. Really lonely and sad. If you want to talk to someone you can't. No one supports you or anything.

He had his first experience of living completely alone when his sister visited Hong Kong for several months:

For the last five months I was by myself in this house. I was pretty alone and scared for the first half month...I usually go out...with my friends, and then I just come back and then go right in my room.

He would spend as little time as possible on his own in the house. During this period, the house was burgled while slept:

I was by myself and I was in the bedroom and I was sleeping...and they came in the basement and they took the computer and they were gone. Luckily they didn't, like, harm me or anything.

Within three months, a second break-in occurred. This time Eva was back from Hong Kong, and came home from school to find that the front door had been broken. They called the police, who did not arrive until the next day. They were unable to get the door fixed that night: “we slept together in my Mum’s bedroom because the master bedroom’s got a lock.” Eva insists that her parents’ absence makes the house more vulnerable to burglary:

The police say this...this is a target house for the thief...I think they know there’s just...there’s just me and my brother in here. Maybe they just keep looking at us for a long time, so they know when we are out. So they just came...and they know where the alarm system is.

There are no immediate neighbours to watch over them; the house next door has been empty for two years since the owners returned to Hong Kong. Like Paul, she feels very alone in the house, on several occasions describing her fear.

There was often reluctance amongst participants to reveal their sense of personal vulnerability to friends:

Actually I don’t really talk to anyone...I don’t express my sad feelings or anything...Even though I’m sad I won’t express it. I’ll just pretend I’m happy: to my parents, to everyone. (Paul)

Parental presence is an important source of emotional comfort. In the absence of the parents, some children have no one to whom they feel they can turn:

Friends cannot be always...be always with you, like, twenty-four hours. And even though you have some kind of problem that you really want to find someone to talk about it, they cannot always be there to listen...The worst part is very lonely. (Rod)

My research does not provide any clear picture of the effects of the Satellite arrangement on the affective relationship between parents and children. Rod’s circumstance is hopefully a tragic exception - his relationship with his parents has broken down since his mother left him and his sister three years ago. When I asked him what advice he would offer a friend in a similar situation he replied: “I say, well, whatever your parents say about you, just throw it in the garbage can. That’s not what they meant. When people are stressed, when

people are losing control, what they say is just to hurt you...Whatever they blame on you, just throw it in the garbage can.”

JW: What is your relationship like with your family now?

Pretty cold...Not as close as before...I still care about them but I just don't want to contact them.

JW: Do they contact you?

Yeah. Not very often because they're afraid to hurt me...Because when I hear their voice, their conversation, it might hurt me, so they try not to call me...and I try not to call them too.

A recent report by the B. C. Children's Commission noted a high rate of suicide amongst immigrant children, and suggested that cultural and social adjustments to a new environment are likely to be an important explanation (Pemberton and Culbert, 2001). Compounded by the absence of parents and, in Rod's case, the withdrawal of financial support, my small number of interviews revealed that the experience of stress in the Satellite circumstance is a common consequence of the flexible family arrangement.

A Social Problem? A School's Perspective on the Satellite Children

We cannot be parents and counsellors and psychologists and psychiatrists and everything. We simply solve our problems and...I have a school to run, right? (Principal, Vancouver High School).

Questionnaire and interview responses from staff at a small number of Vancouver high schools indicated a considerable awareness of the existence of the Satellite arrangement amongst pupils attending their school.²⁰ It was noted earlier that concern has been expressed in the media regarding the perceived 'baby-sitting' roles that schools must undertake in the absence of parents. Many school staff articulated their personal involvement in the lives of Satellite kids in similar terms. Teachers are faced with a difficult, sometimes moral, dilemma.²¹ The position of the Vancouver School Board conforms to the Horne

²⁰ Schools were selected randomly from the telephone book.

²¹ Legally, in terms of the protection of the children, under the age of eighteen there must be a guardian present. During this research I uncovered no examples of children found without guardians, although several school staff members and a representative from the Vancouver School Board highlighted concerns about 'paper guardianship', indicating that guardians often took no real responsibility for the children. There are other legal

Memorandum, which states that: “students whose parents are not ‘principally resident’ in Vancouver do not have the right to have their kids in Vancouver schools.”²² I was informed that if it comes to the attention of the Board that parents are not resident, students should then be asked to leave the school. In practice, however, this policy is not easy to implement. The main difficulty lies in the fact that schools have no way of knowing whether parents are or are not present. Children are frequently reluctant to divulge this information. In the following extracts, taken from an interview with the Vice-Principal of a public high school in Richmond, the problems with identifying the Satellite circumstance are clearly felt.²³ There are a number of children in Astronaut families attending this school, although these are not a concern:

It’s the students with no parent that we are most concerned about. There are quite a number and it is difficult to determine how many there are as they really only come to light when there is a difficulty and we are trying to make contact with the home.

Most of the students discovered without parents are between fifteen and seventeen years old, and from Hong Kong or Taiwan. She explained the types of related problems the school encounters:

Well, any kind of disciplinary problem in the school – either not coming at all or...missing some of the classes. Sometimes when we look at the student’s marks and see that they are doing poorly, so we request a parent conference, and there is no parent...Sometimes the students are reluctant to tell us that the parent has left...Sometimes the student is the eldest person in the home. Usually they will have someone coming to check in on them and in some cases they will have a relative living with them. But in some cases they are on their own and will have the added responsibility of caring for younger siblings.

implications to this situation, however, even if a guardian has been appointed. All the children interviewed for this research entered Canada as ‘landed immigrants’. Under the age of nineteen they are unable to apply for immigration themselves; it is therefore highly likely that one of the parents will have applied for the visa, and the child will have entered Canada as a dependent. However, in order to maintain the landed immigrant visa, the principal applicant must be resident within Canada for at least 183 out of 365 days in the year. When both parents are absent for more than 183 days in the year, their absences conflict with their legal immigration status. This illegality contributes to the substantial silence around the issue of Satellite children in Vancouver.

²² Information was gained through a postal questionnaire response by a representative of the Vancouver School Board.

²³ The City of Richmond is a suburb with the highest percentage of Chinese origin residents of all municipalities within Greater Vancouver.

In addition to indicating the burdens of responsibility faced by many children in the Satellite circumstance, she highlights the silence that surrounds it - an issue of significant importance, with potentially serious implications for the vulnerability of the lone-child:

Students are sometimes reluctant to reveal that their parents are in Hong Kong because they are concerned about what that may mean for their continued school enrolment...Sometimes because they don't want their parents to hear that they are not doing particularly well.

The children themselves may be caught up in deploying various tactics of concealment. The Vice-Principal continued:

I have had, in the last two years, two fake parents, because I have been insistent upon making contact with a parent...

I had a student this month who insisted that his parents were here, and even when I made calls at ten o'clock in the evening there was no parent: 'Oh, he's just stepped out...' He turned up the following day with a man that he claimed was his father and I asked the man, 'are you his father?' and the man said 'yes' he was, and started talking about the boy and what the concerns were...While I was talking his cell phone rang, and I said, 'that's surprising because every time I've tried your cell number it says that the customer is not available.' I asked him for some identification and at that point he said, 'I'm not really his father'...When the boy finally did admit that his parents were out of the country, and gave a number for his Mum, and I spoke with the Mum...The man that the boy had brought was a family friend.

And last year I had a similar situation where a boy was missing a great deal and he brought a woman in who he said was his mother. And she looked familiar. I asked her if she had been in before and she said that she had, with another student...She let the cat out of the bag there! And it turned out that she was the housekeeper for another student, because he didn't want to acknowledge that his parents weren't here.

During this interview, concern was expressed about the pressure that some children appear to be put under, *by their parents*, not to reveal the fact that they are out of the country. She explained her involvement in one case where there was a need for "intervention" by the Ministry of Children and Families. She said: "When we did speak to the Mum...she was very angry with us and very angry with the...boy who finally revealed that she wasn't here. To the

point that...we felt that there may be some physical abuse when she returned to the country...”

My interviews with the children uncovered similar evidence - in some cases, children revealed that their parents had given them explicit instructions to conceal their Satellite status (from even their closest friends). During a difficult period at school, Angel found that she was forced to confide in a teacher and admit that her parents were not in Vancouver:

I'd been pretty much an 'A' student, right? And suddenly my grades were falling, right? And she [the teacher] kind of knew that something was wrong...I was crying and all that 'cos I did really bad on my test...She gave me a little talk, and I told her about this [the Satellite circumstance]...She was being very nice about it and I was, like, 'Can you please not tell anybody about this'...The school is small and teachers do gossip, you know...

Divulging this information had, however, been against the clear wishes of her parents:

When my parents first left we kind of had this...It's not really an agreement but, you know, we agreed that we should keep it a secret for my own sake...Not to (*quiet voice*) let people know that I'm alone and all that.”

JW: Did your friends know at that time?

No...Now I'm letting some people know – my really close friends.

JW: But the ones you invite home, I suppose, would realise...

No they don't...I'm a good liar (*Laughs*).

When Paul's house was burgled the first time, the incident did not get reported. Said

Paul:

We didn't call the police. I asked my Mum...Of course, they're in Hong Kong and they're not supposed to be in Hong Kong because of their immigration in Canada, right? They have to stay here. So my Mum is scared if they call the police they will find out they're in Hong Kong and stuff so they didn't call the police.

Perhaps the second break-in, which occurred a short time after, may have been prevented if the police had been alerted in the first instance. Not only is Paul's school unaware that his parents are absent, they do not even have his correct living address. He told me:

I can't use this address to apply for the school in Delta, right, so I use my Mum's friend's address in Delta...So whenever the school have, like, any letter or news or anything...I have to tell my Mum...None of the teachers have any contact with my Mum's friend or my Mum.

The Vice-Principal perceives the difficulties that this situation presents for the children:

I think that they have really conflicting feelings about it...On the one hand...they want to protect their parents. On the other I think that they sense from me and from other people here that we think that it's wrong that their parents have left them. So they're struggling with that. (Vice-Principal)

She continues: "they are just kids and they have so much to cope with. Not just normal teenage stuff; they've got home responsibilities and then no parental support for guidance. It's difficult."

There are additional circumstances that preclude recognition of the Satellite "problem" by Provincial government. As the Vice-Principal explains: "We find that most of the students that are left without parents are left with quite extensive resources: a bit of money, usually a nice car, cell phone, usually a nice house." The parents often run successful businesses in the country of origin and providing their children with money in Canada is not a difficulty. The school, however, often perceives less tangible neglect, involving loneliness and other forms of emotional suffering. The B.C. Ministry of Children and Families is concerned primarily with issues of material deprivation and, on establishing that the child is well housed and sufficiently fed and clothed, rarely recognises a 'problem' in the Satellite kids.²⁴ A picture of material wealth, privilege and power is one side of the story of recent immigrant families from Hong Kong and Taiwan. However, as one Principal has himself experienced:

The other side of this is that there are unfortunately some parents who don't care very much...and don't pay very much attention and are happy to see their children off somewhere...Out of mind and out of reach...That's unfortunate, but that's true.

²⁴ A representative of the B.C. Ministry for Children and Families confirmed this stance. Their only policy with regards to Satellite children concerns issues of neglect.

These parents have “virtually zero” contact with the school. He described the circumstances of one student from Hong Kong, who has not seen his parents for five years: “I’ve been like a father. But the whole issue of family life and family relationships for him has virtually disappeared, right?”

Conclusions

Drawing upon existing theoretical literature, it was suggested that through the Satellite arrangement, middle-class families from Hong Kong and Taiwan enact geographical strategies of capital accumulation. The children are placed in North America (or New Zealand or Australia) for their “education,” acquiring the necessary symbolic/cultural capital and ensuring a future generation of cosmopolitan capitalists and the continuing success of the family. At the same time, economic ties are maintained with the country of origin, maximising the immediate acquisition of wealth. It has been assumed that traditional Chinese values - prioritising the ‘good of the family,’ deference to a patriarchal household structure, and the enduring command of ‘filial piety’ - facilitate a particular division of labour within the household in spite of the significant spatial distances separating family members. At first sight, the image of the powerful Chinese immigrant, so prevalent within both popular media and scholarly accounts, would seem to have some meaning in explaining the circumstances of the Satellite kids.

Yet close examination of the empirical evidence revealed some rather important ways in which these accumulation strategies are undermined. Perhaps the most significant of these is seen in the attenuation of parental authority, as children, in the absence of their parents, commanded control over almost every aspect of their daily lives. The strategy of cultural capital accumulation, based on the acquisition of a Canadian education, is clearly strained when children lack the motivation to complete homework and attend classes. Far from being bound by tradition, patriarchal authority and filial piety, the Satellite kids suggested many examples of freedom from family restrictions.

Freedom, however, was certainly not the whole story. The Satellite circumstance demonstrates clearly the way in which household migration can have profoundly different

implications for different family members. The children found themselves placed in a new environment, away from family and old friends, often having to take responsibility for running a home and caring for a sibling. The emotional strain of these circumstances was especially potent in the interviews - participants commonly invoking loneliness and fear to describe their experience of life in Vancouver. School staff had powerful stories to tell and significant concerns about the lives of the Satellite kids, and the potential dimensions of the Satellite circumstance as a 'social problem' were brought to the fore.

This research has offered some insights into the nature of so-called transnational social relationships at the same time as it foregrounds some traditional concerns of social geography. The separation of family members with its lack of face-to-face interaction *does* have implications for the *quality* of social relations, in addition to the practical conduct of daily life. Even with use of the telephone, the internet, and fast and convenient transport providing a sense of time-space compression, the existence of meaningful relationships between parents and children is significantly attenuated through the Satellite arrangement. There is a continuing need to examine such "transnational social morphologies" (Vertovec, 1999) in terms of the ways in which people experience spatial separation, the local nature of everyday life, and the changing meaning of family relations.

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²⁵ Articles in Ming Pao Daily News translated by Priscilla Wei.

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