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Parachute Kids:

The Physics of Struggle and Agency in Transnational Education at Work

The term "parachute kid" refers to a transnational migration practice in which middle-class families from East Asia send their children to English-speaking countries ("parachuting" them) to receive education in the host country (Ngan and Chan, 2022, p. 197-8). The term also applies to the transnational students participating in this practice – and they are indeed participating, not merely being acted upon (Cheng, 2020, p. 826). The term is quite evocative of the complex emotional realities that transnational students such as "parachute kids" experience throughout migration and education abroad, capturing the balance of struggle and agency in the formation of identity among transnational students.

Take a moment and visualize it: a plane soars high overhead, crossing seas and borders, and a lone child steps out onto open air and enters free fall. They fall and they fall until the do-or-die moment arrives. The child rips hard on a cord and a parachute rapidly unfurls from their back like a pair of wings. Drag forces generated by the parachute resist the crush of gravity and a child's hurtling descent toward the earth slows. The child touches down to the ground with their toes, taking stumbling footsteps forward into their futures. There are darker scenarios where the child fails to pull the cord or their parachute malfunctions to consider, of course. But, in reality, what are the gravitational forces pulling parachute kids down as they traverse their transnational education experience? What are the drag forces slowing their descent and cushioning their eventual landings? What *is* their parachute?

Framework

Transnational Students

For the purposes of this research paper, the "transnational" descriptor of transnational students refers to "individuals who establish social relations and live their lives across 'cultural, ideological, linguistic, and geopolitical borders' within nation-states" (Cruz et al., 2023, p. 104). "Parachute kids" as transnational students are also treated as a type of "Third Culture Kid"; that is, individuals who "spend their developmental years outside of their parents' culture" (Cruz et al., 2023, p. 106-7). This paper will also define the parents and nuclear families of parachute kids as "parachute kid" parents and "parachute kid" families, for lack of more precise terminology found among current scholarship.

Scholarship on parachute kids widely recognizes a set of common struggles impacting these transnational students, often fixating on social and educational deficits resulting from their lack of familiarity with their host country and separation from the nuclear family unit (Cheng, 2020, p. 827, 829; Hou et al., 2024, p. 2; Ngan and Chan, 2022, p. 200-1). Yet, there is also growing scholarship on the perseverance of transnational students in general and how students undergo "self-formation" in the face of recognized struggles rather than passively suffer through them (Hou et al., 2024, p. 2; Tran and Vu, 2017, p. 169). The trials and triumphs of parachute kids overlap broadly with those of other types of transnational students and Third Culture Kids. However, there are nuances regarding their cultural and class backgrounds that must be acknowledged.

Transnational Split-Family Models

"Parachute Kids" as a split family model is defined by at least three key characteristics. First, parachute kids originate from East Asian countries, most commonly Taiwan, South Korea, China, and Hong Kong (Ngan and Chan, 2022, p. 198; Cheng, 2022, p. 826). More specifically, these children originate from the upper-class elite and growing middle-class of these countries.

Wealth and status factor significantly into the *before*, *during*, and *after* a parachute kid's migration. "Parachuting" is itself a class privilege while potential further economic gains influence family decision-making when choosing to send a student abroad (Cheng, 2020, p.827; Chih-Yan Sun, 2014, p. 1435, 1442; Ngan and Chan, 2022, p. 201-2). Wealth factors into the physical and emotional upkeep of parachute kids (Chih-Yan Sun, 2014, p. 1432). Finally, wealth and status may both shape parent-child relationships going in adulthood, especially when parachute kids do not return to their origin country upon completing their educations (Chih-Yan Sun, 2017, p. 601-2).

Second, parachute kids primarily land in English-speaking countries like the United States and Canada (Ngan and Chan, 2022, p.197). In scholarly literature, the disparate nature of Easten origin and Western host cultures is frequent source of struggle for parachute kids (Tsong et al., 2021, p.154; Cheng, 2020, p.829). These students must actively navigate cross-cultural spaces and undergo self-formation through daily decision-making to navigate associated struggles inside and outside the classroom. Families, despite choosing to expose their students to outside cultures by sending them abroad in the first place, are not always pleased with this development (Chih-Yan Sun, 2014, p.1439-40). The aim of "parachuting" a student into the United States is for the student to obtain an American diploma (and all the advantages attached), not for the student to be "Americanized." (Chih-Yan Sun, 2014, p. 1432; Chih-Yan Sun, 2017, p. 592).

The third characteristic differentiating parachute kids from other transnational students operating within split-family models is that parachute kids fly solo (Cheng, 2020, p. 826). Under other split-family models, one parent may stay with the child either in the origin country or in the host country while they pursue their education (Finch and Kim, 2012, p.486; Aye and Guerin, 2001, pg. 9). There are also split-family models in which the child will reside in the origin country with relatives until it is time to begin their education, at which time they will join both parents in

the host country (Wu and Opstad, 2021, p. 35). Parachute kids may reside with relatives while pursuing their education or accompany siblings overseas, but the lack of parental presence in the host country is a defining characteristic of this split-family model (Ngan and Chan, 2022, p. 198).

It must be noted that many split-family models often compared in scholarship focus on the arrangement of nuclear family members (parents and children) across national borders (Chih-Yan Sun, 2014, p.1434). Transnational families are commonly defined as simply families in which members reside in different countries, but more specific definitions are frequently limited by an insistence on analyzing these families through a Western nuclear lens, often neglecting the roles of larger family networks in cross-border relationships (Tsong et al., 2021, p.147). The role and effectiveness of wider family networks in the rearing of parachute kids is discussed in a later section.

Transnational Student Agency

"Parachute Kids" as a phenomenon having originated out of the East Asian economic booms of the 1970s and 80s, researchers have the benefit of observing the short- and long-term impacts of transnational education on multiple generations of parachute kids (Tsong et al., 2021, p.147; Cheng, 2020, p.826). It is undeniable that parachute kids commonly experience a range of struggles, often stemming from cultural differences, language barriers, and overall social alienation (Tsong et al., 2021, p.154; Cheng, 2020, p.829). Deficit framing of these struggles emphasizes what parachute kids "lack" to enable their success in an "Anglo-Saxon classroom." More recent scholarship shifts the framing of parachute kids away from a passive, receptive "East Asian stereotype," waiting to be acted upon in the western classroom and by adults in their lives (Tran and Vu, 2018, p.169). Instead, scholars have applied the "life-course and identity" approach

to frame parachute kids as making choices and taking actions in their education to shape their own futures, and therefore their own identities (Tran and Vu, 2018, p.170).

Tran and Vu propose four forms of agency employed by students as they navigate transnational education: *needs-response*, *agency as struggle and resistance*, *collective agency for contestation*, and *agency for becoming* (Tran and Vu, 2018, p.168). For our purposes, we will only discuss three of these forms: *needs-response*, *agency as struggle and resistance*, and *agency for becoming.*

Needs-response agency refers to the active attempts of transnational students to fulfill their own particular learning, social, and well-being needs (Tran and Vu, 2018, p.168, 177-9). The transnational student identifies and mobilizes resources on their own behalf (Tran and Vu, 2018, p.177). This could be as simple as asking teachers questions when struggling with a topic and encapsulates the small, daily acts of agency by transnational students in their education that may shape their long-term self-formation. A later section explores the divergent development of parachute kids-turned-adults based on their transnational education experiences.

Agency as struggle and resistance manifests as "resilience, resourcefulness, and capacity to change tack or break away." (Tran and Vu, 2018, p.168, 179-81) The latter component is key as, in essence, this form of agency requires more drastic reflection and "self-formation" within transnational students when necessary to meet their needs. For example, a shy student frustrated by the bureaucracy of an education system they are unfamiliar with and feel marginalized by may develop a much more assertive attitude and lodge complaints directly to get the results they need (Tran and Vu, 2018, p.179-80). In these situations, the transnational student not only identifies themselves as someone seeking a particular resource but as a particular type of person who can take the needed action. According to Tran and Vu, this demonstrates that a transnational student

may change how they see their "self-in-the-world" and subsequently change how they "act-in-the-world." (Tran and Vu, 2018, p. 180) This form of agency speaks to the formation of hybrid identities needed to navigate cross-cultural spaces in school.

Agency for becoming refers to a transnational student's decision-making and actions with respect to a possible future that the student envisions (Tran and Vu, 2018, p.168, 183). Using this form of agency, undertaking transnational education as a means of achieving an envisioned future is then itself an act of self-formation. For parachute kids, this poses an interesting question, as involvement in the decision-making process behind their education abroad is often a family exercise, not an individual decision (Tsong et al., 2021, p.154). However, upon arrival, it is up to the parachute kid to engage their studies and host community to achieve whatever possible future they or their families envision. Academic success and highly valued foreign diplomas feature frequently in the future envisioned by "parachute kid" parents (Chih-Yan Sun, 2014, p. 1432; Chih-Yan Sun, 2017, p. 592).

Motivations to Migrate

As previously discussed, the wealth of "parachute kid" families plays a significant role in the experiences of these transnational students. Two primary motivations for "parachuting" children are to prepare students to compete in a global labor market and therefore perpetuate social class into future generations (Chih-Yan Sun, 2017, pg.159) To this end, the upper- and middle-class families of East Asia find western education, particularly in the United States, to be quite appealing (Chih-Yan Sun, 2014, p. 1432, 1437; Chih-Yan Sun, 2017, p. 592; Ngan and Chan, 2022, p. 202; Cheng, 2020, p. 833).

Even if a student eschews tertiary education at an elite western university, a background in liberal education and cross-cultural experiences, including proficiency in English, are highly valued in the global labor market, making parachute kids highly competitive as adults (Chih-Yan

Sun, 2017, p.592). The ability to send a child to be educated abroad, in short, the very ability to engage in global mobility, is a status symbol among upper- and middle-class East Asian families (Cheng, 2020, p. 827). The future economic success of their children following the completion of their education ensures the continuation of this affluent status into the next generation.

This, of course, puts a great deal of pressure on parachute kids to academically succeed and make the most of their education upon arrival. "Parachuting" is itself an expensive undertaking, hence it being a status symbol (Cheng, 2020, p. 827-8). Complicating this, student participation in the decision to "parachute" varies between families and, despite the limitations of the split-family models discussed previously, there is often a wider family network to consider when making these decisions (Tsong et al., 2021, p.154; Chih-Yan Sun, 2014, p. 1437). As with real-life parachuting, "parachuting" a transnational student it is not a truly solo act. There is a crew manning the plane.

Transnational Student "Home" Lives

Accommodations outside of the classroom are a major consideration when families contemplate "parachuting" a child. While many parachute kids reside with host families, at boarding schools, or even alone, many land in the households of relatives already based in the host county (Tsong et al., 2021, p. 147; Cheng, 2020, p. 826; Chih-Yan Sun, 2014, p. 1438). These extended family members are tasked with substituting or supplementing parental authority over and responsibility for the parachute kid (Chih-Yan Sun, 2014, p. 1439, 1446). However, studies paint a complex web of family dynamics between parents, extended family, and parachute kids themselves playing into these negotiations and expectations, known as *kinscription* (Chih-Yan Sun, 2014, p.1445).

Kinscription refers to "the ways in which families are 'continually rounding up, summoning, or recruiting individuals' to perform reproductive labor," commonly including

extended family networks enlisted to assist with childrearing across borders (Chih-Yan Sun, 2014, p. 1434). Due to their wealthy statuses, "parachute kid" families navigate transnational childrearing slightly differently from fellow transnational split-families from poorer backgrounds. The delimitating factor is how relationships between parents and caregivers of children are managed. Poorer migrant families may compensate relatives taking care of their children through financial remittances; this is commonly seen within split-family models where children are left behind in the origin country while parents migrate to the host country to work (Chih-Yan Sun, 2014, p. 1435). "Parachute kid" parents staying behind in the origin country employ additional means to manage relationships with caregivers in the host country and otherwise compensate them, in part due the careful decision-making surrounding the selection of caregivers who serve both material and immaterial preferences of "parachute kid" parents by acting as cultural and economic role models for parachute kids (Chih-Yan Sun, 2014, p. 1437-8).

These strategies may include direct financial compensation for the additional costs of hosting the parachute kid, but also frequently entail exchanges of caregiving responsibilities (Chih-Yan Sun, 2014, p. 1438). For example, this might entail a parent of a parachute kid taking responsibility for the caregiving of an elderly relative residing in the origin country on behalf of the more directly related relative residing host country who have taken responsibility for the parachute kid (Chih-Yan Sun, 2014, p. 1438). Within the wider family network, these relatives can fulfill certain familial obligations as compensation and expressions of gratitude toward one another.

In general, the care-giver selection process that "parachute kid" families employ is a careful weighing of compensation and gratitude against boundaries and preferences. In addition to exchanges of caregiving responsibilities, "parachute kids" parents often transfer parental authority

to hosting relatives and take a step back from their own children in terms of discipline and structure (Chih-Yan Sun, 2014, p. 1439). Even in cases where "parachute kid" parents disagree with their relatives on parenting styles or their degree of discipline with the parachute kid, there is hesitation to interfere given the favor that the hosting relatives are doing the "parachute kid" family by hosting their child (Chih-Yan Sun, 2014, p. 1439). This can contribute to tension between parachute kids and their parents in the long run.

There might be additional strain between parachute kids and their parents as a result of these *kinscription* arrangements when hosting relatives are tasked with the roles of "cultural keepers" (Chih-Yan Sun, 2014, p. 1444). One of the major selling points on sending a parachute kid to reside with relatives rather than to a host family, boarding school, or even alone is ensuring the reinforcement of cultural values and language (Chih-Yan Sun, 2014, p. 1444-5). As mentioned previously, "parachute kid" families are frequently most concerned with the economic benefits of transnational education and less so concerned with the development of global citizens. For many "parachute kid" families, "Americanization" or similar developments in hybrid identities within parachute kids are unwanted and something that residency with extended family should prevent.

However, parachute kids navigate cross-cultural spaces everyday in the classroom and frequently do not feel especially "at home" with extended family meant to guard their cultural identities (Chih-Yan Sun, 2014, p. 1441). Parachute kids frequently resist their "cultural keepers" and develop complex hybrid identities to navigate their unique experiences in transnational education (Chih-Yan Sun, 2014, p. 1444). In this way, parachute kids who might not have had much of a choice in their initial migration exercise agency *in spite of* their families and caregivers to best meet their own needs and fulfill their life course goals.

Academic Agency

Deficit framing tends to emphasize the struggles of parachute kids as sources of potential trauma rather than as opportunities for these transnational students to express agency. Indeed, parachute kids are subject to numerous stressors in school, ranging from language barriers, academic culture shocks, xenophobia and racism, loss of support systems, and general stress associated with acclimating and adapting to a new cultural environment (Tsong et al., 2021, p.154; Cheng, 2020, p.829). Nevertheless, studies have found that one of the "facilitating factors of overall wellbeing" in parachute kids is having a "strength-based and positive mindset" (Tsong et al., 2021, p.154).

The "life course and identity" approach to transnational student agency highlights the critical life stage parachute kids are at during their education abroad: they are not only undergoing the same cultural adaptation and acclimation processes that working adults and older students often struggle with, but also caught in the throes of adolescent development (Tran and Vu, 2018, p. 148). Studies on the academic experiences of parachute kids details various ways that parachute kids were able to express agency in their environment in order to meet their own needs, contributing to the self-formation of the independent and mature identities common to parachute kids (Tsong et al, 2021, pg. 148, 153).

For example, parachute kids can struggle with the differences of teaching styles between their origin country and host country. In many English-speaking classrooms, particularly in the U.S., teachers are perceived as less available to students as compared to East Asia, maintaining stricter professional boundaries outside of school hours while expecting students to hold themselves accountable to manage their time and assignments and to ask questions if struggling (Cheng, 2020, p.834-5). Many parachute kids struggle with these expectations as not only do host country teachers feel less approachable than those in their origin countries, who generally expect

greater deferment from their students and are more available outside of school hours, but parachute kids also lack their parents' guidance and may not be receiving or receptive to guidance from relatives and host families (Cheng, 2020, p. 835). This is just one of many potential stressors that parachute kids struggle with in education. Other issues include tensions with classmates and a sense of alienation resulting from their ESL status.

Many parachute kids end up retreating from the stress through coping mechanisms. Parachute kids are prone to turning to one another for support, when possible, in lieu of forming connections with local classmates and communities (Cheng, 2020, p. 835-7). In its most extreme form, parachute kids have been known to participate in gang activity alongside other parachute kids and immigrant youth as a means of accessing community (Cheng, 2020, p.829). In the absence of other parachute kids or transnational students, certain parachute kids simply retreat from most social interaction outside of school. Video game addiction is a documented issue with parachute kids, particularly young men, who are seeking a relief from their daily stressors (Cheng, 2020, p.833).

At the opposite end of the spectrum, there are parachute kids who appreciate the differences between the academic cultures of their origin and host countries. For example, some parachute kids come to appreciate the independence expected in host country classmates (Cheng, 2020, p. 835). Others actively sought out social opportunities beyond the classroom, primarily by participating in student clubs that allowed them to mingle with open-minded local students and practice their communication skills (ex. debate club, theater club, and Model UN) (Cheng, 2020, p. 837). Though it must be noted that parachute kids with greater agency in their initial migration had markedly better experiences with their education abroad and making decisions to improve that education, when possible, as compared to peers with less agency in their migration (Tsong et al.,

2021, p. 154). Additionally, the role of teachers and counselors in fostering environments conducive to the development of transnational students cannot be understated either. Many parachute kids who struggle just as much due to a lack of support within school systems as well as outside the school (Tsong et al., 2021, p. 155; Cheng, 2020, p. 830, 840; Tran and Vu, 2018, p. 184).

When Kids Grow Up…

Successful parachute kids are noted as being independent, mature, open-minded, and resilient, to name just a few of their common accolades as transnational students. Yet, what becomes of a parachute kid when they are no longer a kid? And moreover, what becomes of their family dynamics and their attitudes toward their culture? The answers are highly contingent on the individual experiences of parachute kids and how they exercised agency and navigated struggle throughout their education abroad, resulting in either an overall positive or negative experience. How a parachute kid perceives their experience with transnational education continues to impact their decision-making beyond adolescence, including whether or not they plan to "parachute" their own child.

Emotional Distance versus Independence

Parachute kids who reflect upon their transnational education as a positive experience tend to highlight similar long-term benefits in terms of personal development (Ngan and Chan, 2022, p. 204-5). Grown up parachute kids are not only identified by scholars and employers as independent, mature, and open-minded; parachute kids who reflect positively on the experience self-identify these strengths and link them directly to their transnational education. These traits are correlated directly with experiences inside and outside the classroom, including the necessity to be responsible for one's own schoolwork as discussed in the previous section (Ngan and Chan, 2022, p. 205-6).

However, this sense of independence does not necessarily always come without long-term costs. Scholarship around parachute kids continually reenforces findings that many feel emotionally detached and distant from their parents well into adulthood as a result of spending their formative years abroad (Ngan and Chan, 2022, p. 206; Tsong et al., 2021, p.153). Many parachute kids do not return to their origin country upon completing their education abroad or otherwise becoming adults; those that do return might not feel particularly obligated to consider their ageing parents' opinions regarding future migration decisions or other life-decisions, sometimes in defiance of cultural expectations (Ngan and Chan, 2022, p. 206; Chih-Yan Sun, 2014, p.1435). It is not typically a matter of actively hating or even disliking their ageing parents. It is a matter of ageing parents lacking an influence on adult parachute kids (Ngan and Chan, 2022, p. 205-6). Scholars refer to this complex dynamic in terms of "transnational ambivalence", arguing that typical paradigms of support or conflict cannot properly encapsulate "the multilayered feelings and competing perspectives on family relationships experienced by [ageing] parents during transnational separation" (Chih-Yan Sun, 2017, p.591).

Once again, the wealth of "parachute kid" families plays a significant factor. Within other transnational split-family models where parents and children are separated, the transfer of needed remittances between adult children and ageing parents mitigates ambivalence between families, as continued separation can be more easily rationalized as "a necessary evil" for dissatisfied parents (Chih-Yan Sun, 2017, p. 601). "Parachute kid" parents and adult children tend to be financially secure; as a result, remittances have little impact on transnational ambivalence (Chih-Yan Sun, 2017, p. 602). The use of technology is a more useful bridge between ageing parents and adult parachute kids, but studies show the most successful strategy for maintaining relationships into adulthood is regular in-person contact (Chih-Yan Sun, 2017, p. 602). However, the burden of travel

often falls on parachute kids rather than their parents and this is not always a burden these adult children are willing to undertake for the benefit of parents (Chih-Yan Sun, 2017, p. 602).

Nostalgia

On the flipside, parachute kids who perceived their transnational education experience negatively have a greater tendency toward nostalgia and appreciating kinship bonds in adulthood (Ngan and Chan, 2022, p. 207, 210). While their peers who reflect positively on their transnational education value the independence the experience promoted, parachute kids who reflect negatively on their transnational education link the experience to a strong sense of yearning for family, even when living with relatives, and a pervading sense of "dislocation" from their environment in which the parachute felt unable to "do things [their own] way" (Ngan and Chan, 2022, p. 208). In short, these students were unable to effectively exercise agency or were not effectively enabled to exercise agency in order overcome their struggles as parachute kids, namely isolation. These parachute kids commonly seek a sense of "family-togetherness" in adulthood, leading them to foster close relationships between not just themselves but between their own children and their ageing parents (Ngan and Chan, 2022, p. 207-9).

Repeating Patterns

It comes as little surprise then that parachute kids who reflect negatively upon their transnational education experience are less likely to consider "parachuting" their own children (Ngan and Chan, 2022, p. 209-10). Parachute kids who reflect positively on the experience are more likely to perpetuate the cycle into the next generation, identifying the struggles they experienced as worthwhile opportunities that their own children may benefit from (Ngan and Chan, 2022, p. 205). Neither group is wrong; both are running a cost-benefit analysis based on their own lived experiences and reflecting on how decisions made in previous life phases impacted

their current positions. Most importantly, both groups are exercising agency in the best way they know how given their past experiences.

For the nostalgic parachute kids, not "parachuting" their own child allows them to exercise agency aligned with their own objective (family togetherness) while hopefully not infringing upon their child's agency as they felt was done to them in the past. For independent parachute kids, "parachuting" their own children grants them abundant opportunities to exercise agency with greater independence. In turn, they hope to see the next generation undergo a similarly positive self-formation process resulting in maturity, open-mindedness, and independence – the same traits they value in themselves.

Conclusion

At this point, there have been multiple generations of "parachute kids" and it appears, global tensions notwithstanding, that certain patterns will repeat, for better and for worse. Another plane will cross the ocean and another child will step out onto the open air. They will fall, pushed down to earth by the forces of language barriers, unfamiliar academic cultures, unwelcoming "home" situations, and overall social alienation. The time will quickly come for the student to exercise their own agency in this situation, perhaps for the first time since their family began contemplating their future. The child will rip hard on a cord, deploying a parachute. They ask questions in class and seek resources to meet their needs; they engage in their school environment and moreover their host community. The force of these actions slows their descent to an exhilarating (and more importantly, safe) trip down, so they meet their future on their own two feet. What is a parachute kid's parachute? The self they form through their own decision-making and actions as transnational students, by taking their futures into their own hands and ripping that cord.

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