

Exploring the Assumptions of Attachment Theory across Cultures

The Practice of Transnational Separation among Chinese Immigrant Parents and Children

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Abstract

Prolonged transnational separation between parents and children is a common occurrence for many families today. Typically motivated by the desire to create a better economic future for the entire family, parents who move abroad in search of work opportunities often face limited childcare options in their country of settlement. This causes some parents to send their infants and young children back to the parental homeland to be cared for by relatives for extended periods. In this chapter, serial attachments and separations among caregivers and children in the United States and China serve as a cultural exemplar to extend and situate the meaning of attachment. The goal is to understand how this practice might affirm and challenge various concepts within attachment theory. Attention is given to the concept of monotropy, a basic component of attachment theory that assumes children's healthy development depends on a singular attachment created by sensitive interchanges between a parent and child. In turn, new directions are proposed for its measurement and related constructs.

Introduction

Attachment theory postulates that infants form secure attachment when they receive consistent, predictable, and sensitive caregiving from a primary caregiver

(Ainsworth and Bowlby 1991). This “secure base,” in turn, allows the child to explore his or her environment. A particular challenge to the underlying assumptions of attachment theory derives from the cultural practice of transnational parenting, in which parents and children live in different countries. This arrangement takes place in many Chinese immigrant families: parents send their North American-born infants to China to be cared for by relatives, such as grandparents, aunts, or uncles. These children—known as “satellite babies”—are often reunited with their parents in North America only after their family secures affordable child care, achieves a degree of financial stability, and/or arranges for the child to attend school in North America, a process that can take several years (Bohr and Tse 2009).

Because this phenomenon within the Chinese immigrant community is not well known, with the exception of some media representations (Sengupta 1999; Wang and Wu 2003; Bernstein 2009), we begin with a brief description regarding its prevalence. Reports from New York City suggest that thousands of Chinese children may be separated transnationally from their parents each year; one nonprofit agency estimates that 40% of participants in their childhood education program have undergone this type of separation (Bernstein 2009). In a separate study conducted in New York Chinatown, 57% of expectant women strongly considered sending their newborns to China; among this group, 75% intended to bring their children back to the United States after they turned 4 years old (Kwong et al. 2009). Furthermore, at one New York Chinatown Health Center, it was determined that 10–20% of the 1,500 infants born each year were sent to China (Sengupta 1999). Lastly, in a qualitative study of undocumented immigrants in New York City, 72% of Chinese undocumented mothers recruited for the study sent their infants to China by the age of 6 months (Yoshikawa 2011). In our recent data collection in Boston Chinatown, approximately 20% of our sample of Chinese immigrant parents with children from birth to 10 years of age reported being separated from their children for at least six months, or were strongly considering it. Based on in-depth interviews that we conducted with 28 of these parents, employment instability, job schedule inflexibility, and limited childcare options were identified as factors that could influence the family decision to separate. Furthermore, the practice of transnational separation also appears to occur across socioeconomic levels (Bohr and Tse 2009).

Despite its theoretical implications for attachment theory, limited scholarly work has focused on this particular phenomenon. Previous research indicates that children may form attachment relationships with different caregivers for months or years at a time during different points in their development (Leinaweaver 2014). Leinaweaver (2010) argues that the relationships formed draw upon kinship ties, thus easing the tensions produced by migration, which serves as a method to care for both the old and young. However, as repeated separation and disrupted attachments in early childhood have been associated with poorer developmental outcomes (Karen 1994; Cassidy 2008; Kobak

and Madsen 2008), Chinese children who experience transnational separation may also be more likely to demonstrate problematic socioemotional outcomes. Conversely, it is possible that specific contextual and cultural factors protect children who undergo this experience or may even promote favorable outcomes. Given increased globalization, these separation experiences among Chinese transnational families may remain a cultural norm. As is true of any cultural norm, there are costs and benefits of this practice, which may have implications for our understanding of attachment formation and development. For instance, a limitation in attachment research is the lack of discussion regarding functional costs to the child (and the parents) of putatively good, or secure, attachments.

In this chapter, we provide a cultural exemplar using observations of Chinese transnational separation experiences to extend and situate the meaning of attachment. We focus specifically on parent-child separation within Chinese immigrant families that are settled in North America. We provide a brief overview of how attachment has been understood in relation to culture, followed by a description of the experience of transnational separation that underscores the structural, cultural, and individual factors necessary to consider in relation to attachment. Examples from our review of the literature as well as our direct study of this contemporary phenomenon are included. We also advocate for a framework that takes globalization into account in the development of attachment. Finally, we suggest that transnational separation among families is a cultural norm.

The commonness of transferring children between different primary caregivers, an accepted practice that is assumed to support well-being, challenges the universality and evolutionary argument of attachment theory. A major question that arises is how certain assumptions of attachment are violated through this practice, while families may still survive and thrive. In our discussion, we raise questions and propose new ideas for the measurement of attachment and for its related constructs.

Culture in Attachment Theory to Date

In their seminal paper “Attachment and Culture,” Rothbaum et al. (2007) argued for greater attention to cultural differences in the core tenets of attachment theory, rather than confirming its universality. By contrast, Waters and Cummings (2000) maintained the centrality of the secure base while also emphasizing the need for boundaries of attachment constructs to be better illuminated through cross-cultural research.

In our view, both perspectives offer opportunities to expand our understanding of culture and attachment, including those that have relied on the Strange Situation paradigm in determining attachment classifications. Comparisons of attachment classification distributions across different cultural groups have

generally found no major differences in the proportion of secure attachment classifications (van IJzendoorn and Kroonenberg 1988). Nonetheless, studies have shed light on cultural differences in the distribution of insecure attachments, including observations of higher proportions of insecure-avoidant types within Western cultures and higher proportions of insecure-resistant types within non-Western cultures. These classification differences suggest that cultural variations of children's exposure to strangers and parental attitudes toward child independence may be associated with attachment (Grossmann et al. 1985). To put it bluntly, it must be kept in mind that the classification system itself was derived within Western cultures from a universalistic assumption that there were only limited and particular forms of attachments, a view that excludes cultural variation. As argued by Rothbaum et al. (2007) and others (Morelli 2015; Keller and Chaudhary, this volume), most attachment researchers tend to take a Western middle-class view of development, which presumes that the mother serves as the primary caregiver and interacts with the child most exclusively. Theorists have acknowledged the need for attachment theory to move beyond the presumption of a monotropic and dyadically organized relationship (Tronick et al. 1987; van IJzendoorn and Sagi-Schwartz 2008), undergirded by research which shows that many, if not most, children in the world are embedded in a multiple caregiver system (van IJzendoorn and Sagi-Schwartz 2008; Morelli 2015). These arrangements challenge exclusive parent-child models of attachment and reveal the ways in which multiple caregiving produces functional bonds between caregivers and children.

While known cultural influences on the Strange Situation Procedure have been invoked in explaining classification differences across groups, we argue for a stronger emphasis on the broader ecological context, cultural beliefs and practices, and goals associated with self-construal and relationships (Keller 2008). The prevailing view of attachment tends to presume a parent-child dyad in which the caregiver has lived with and cared for the child since birth, and in which a shared history and shared experience in culture and language exist. As we demonstrate below, there is an opportunity for the current Western standard dyadic model of attachment theory to consider how economic and cultural practices, beliefs about transnational migration, and meanings of family, self, and relations may play a role in the formation of attachment.

The Concept and Prioritization of Attachment in Transnationally Separated Chinese Immigrant Parents and Children

Close examination of caregiving systems suggests that they are heavily influenced by the economic structures within a society (Archer et al. 2015). This underscores the link between caregiving arrangements and broader societal needs. The type of economic structure in place—whether hunter-gatherer, farming, or industrial—is tied to specific work and settlement patterns, with

households and lifestyles developed to maintain these arrangements. Within these structures lie cultural ethnotheories involving family relationships and child development, as well as socialization agendas and practices that contribute to institutionalized caregiving arrangements. These arrangements, which occur in particular times and places, dictate the whereabouts of caregivers and children and expectations of bonds between the two. Attachment theory must recognize that cultural arrangements not only require additional evaluation, but that its concepts are also inherent and embedded in the way individuals and communities experience the world. That is, ethnotheories are external phenomena that are documented by observers but may also be adopted by the individual. One's own understanding of their place in the world is culturated.

Economic Migration as a Motivation for Family Separation

I thought I couldn't work if the kids were with me. And the tradition of my town is like this: everybody sends their children home. So we also decided to send our children home. We could work here [in the U.S.], and when the kids are older we will bring them here, and by then we might be better off financially. — Fujianese mother in Boston who was separated from child from age 6 months to 5 years old (translated from Chinese)

We lived in a very small place; both of us had to work and no one could take care of him [infant son]. We didn't know where to find help for child care [in the U.S.]. All we knew was that lots of people came here for a few months, and then sent their children back. Because when he's older, he'd recognize people, he won't know people when he's four or five months old, and won't cry too much if he's back, so we thought at that time...everyone sent children back... Because my parents had nothing to do in China, and we were very busy here, so we brought the baby back and asked my parents to help... He's also our first child, we didn't have any experience in child care, didn't know what to do. And having him back [in China] will make it easier for us; I could go back to work. — Fujianese mother in Boston who was separated from child from age 5–20 months (translated from Chinese)

In Chinese society, it is common for members of three generations to live communally (e.g., in the same household) or in close proximity (e.g., in the same village or city); family members all share the same culture and language. In the contemporary period, the three-generation childcare arrangement is maintained for many families in China even when that means that children will be separated from their parents across long distances. As the country's economy has rapidly industrialized, it has become common practice for rural parents to move to urban areas as migrant workers. Millions of these parents leave their children behind in their home city under the care of family members (Waldmeir 2015). It has been estimated that more than 58 million children are currently living apart from one or both parents, accounting for over one-quarter of all rural children in the country (Su et al. 2012).

Transnational separation may be recognized as an extension of this pattern of economic migration. With increased globalization comes the promise of financial opportunity in other countries, driving the movement of families. For Chinese immigrant parents, this encompasses a variety of work and/or educational opportunities, ranging from employment as cooks in the restaurant industry to obtaining graduate education in North America. Our research team has conducted two separate mixed-methods studies on this phenomenon, both of which used quantitative surveys and qualitative in-depth interviews. The first examined the experiences of 28 Chinese immigrant parents in Boston Chinatown who experienced ($n = 25$) or considered ($n = 3$) transnational separation from their children. The second involved retrospective recollections of 40 Chinese American adults who lived with grandparents or extended family in China, Taiwan, or Hong Kong for at least six months as young children ($< \text{age } 13$) while their parents were working or studying in North America.

As detailed above, the 28 parents interviewed in the first study represented approximately 20% of a larger investigation of Chinese immigrant families in Boston Chinatown. Most cited economic pressures ($n = 22$) and/or a lack of parenting support ($n = 21$) as a reason for separating or considering separation. Importantly, 15 parents noted that they felt that they had no other option, while ten endorsed low parent self-efficacy and suggested that their own parents would do a better job raising the child. Seven parents sent one child back as a strategy to manage caring for multiple children. Six participants said that their decision was motivated by their own parents' desire to spend more time with their grandchild. Cultural reasons appeared to play a much smaller role, as only one parent claimed that her decision was motivated by the desire to expose her child to Chinese culture and language (although nine mentioned that learning the language was a positive consequence for children). Of those who made the decision to separate transnationally from their child ($n = 25$), on average, children were 12 months old when they were initially separated from their parents, and separations lasted an average of 2.1 years.

Of the 40 adults interviewed for the second study, many reported that their parents' emigration was motivated by the search for a good job or higher income, the desire to provide the child with better educational and other opportunities ($n = 25$), and the opportunity to obtain an education for themselves ($n = 15$). Most participants were between the ages of 2 to 6 years at the time of initial separation and were separated for an average of 2.7 years. They typically reunited when parents achieved more financial stability, which tended to coincide with parents' completion of graduate studies and/or the ability to buy a house or move to an area with better schools. Thus, throughout the migration process, different family structures emerge as relatives maintain caregiving relationships across borders. For many, these arrangements adhere to cultural norms that prioritize pragmatic solutions for the entire family, resulting in parents and children living far apart from one another in different cultural and linguistic contexts.

Cultural Values and Expectations about Family and Child Care

We didn't know much (about day care)... I only learned about day care this year that you can send very young children there. But you know she was so young, I wouldn't have felt comfortable sending her off to day care, so I decided to send her back to China.

—Fujianese mother in Boston (quoted earlier) who was separated from her child for 4.5 years (translated from Chinese)

In China usually people will have a babysitter and it is easy for family and everything is much cheaper. And here because babysitter fee is high, so mommy has to take the job and it is much harder.

—Chinese mother in Toronto struggling to decide whether to send her infant back to China (Bohr and Whitfield 2011)

The lack of preferred childcare options in North America or immediate family support for parents as they pursue economic opportunity abroad is a commonly cited reason for transnational separation in Chinese culture. Bohr (2010) has argued that separation for the purpose of obtaining child care is a coping strategy that addresses the economic needs of these young families. In her work on families from Peru, Leinaweaver (2010) refers to this childcare arrangement as “the outsourcing of care,” defined as “the deliberate act of drawing on social capital, particularly kinship ties...an action that allows migrants to meet both economic and social needs with a minimum of disruption.” Despite the vast geographic distances between infant and parents, the salient cultural norm of grandparents and relatives providing child care in China and other countries allow this arrangement to be viewed as appropriate and viable even across borders (Parreñas 2005; Zontini and Reynolds 2007; Bohr and Tse 2009; Kwong et al. 2009). On a practical level, technological advances for long-distance communication, the use of social media, and parental travel to see their child (Bohr and Tse 2009) are perceived to facilitate greater ease for those who are separated for extended periods. Given the more limited options for caretaking as immigrant families in the United States aim to meet specific goals, these advancements allow different family structures to arise.

Accordingly, it is unknown how Chinese immigrant parents make the decision to *prioritize* these economic opportunities and childcare options versus keeping their infants in the United States or Canada. Relatedly, how do Chinese families view the attachment relationship between parents and children? The various views of parent-child relationships and child development may help us understand how Chinese migrants make these decisions to separate:

My baby is now nine months, I'm afraid that baby will forget about [me]. Seeing her grow up, every day, I feel I can't be separated from the baby. I'm feeling that the baby and I are attached together. I would feel really bad [if the baby had to go to China], if it has to be, then it has to be, but I would feel very bad.

—Chinese mother in Toronto considering separating from her infant (Bohr and Tse 2009)

In a study by Bohr of 12 Chinese immigrant mothers who were considering sending their children back to their home country, all mentioned preferring for their infants to stay with them. These statements reflected their views of attachment:

Okay, so if I sent him back, let's say for two to three years and then we, we don't have a close relationship when we take him back, then I am afraid that he won't trust me and he won't listen to me and it's hard for me to discipline him. The relationship would be blocked; I would feel guilty and self-blame.

—Chinese mother in Toronto struggling to decide whether to send her infant back to China (Bohr and Whitfield 2011)

Among the 25 parents in the Boston-based study who made the decision to separate, 13 parents stated that they would do so again under the same circumstances, while 7 indicated that they would not. Most noted that they would keep their child with them if they did not have to work or if family members were able to come to the United States to assist with child care. (Note: three interviews were incomplete due to recording problems and are thus not included).

These responses suggest that developing an attachment relationship with their child, and/or fears of losing it, are concerns to Chinese immigrant parents. On the other hand, due to structural limitations that parents face, many feel that they “had no choice”—a predicament that service providers within the Chinese community verify. One mother of four in Boston described the decision to send her first child back from the age of 3 months to 3 years as follows: “We had no other options. My husband and I needed to work and didn't have time to take care of him, so we had to send him to China.” The ability to determine risk suggests that families anticipate a range of possible outcomes to separation. Bohr argued that the parents she interviewed often utilized “tolerated ambivalence.” In other words, “while all acknowledged what was often a very painful ambivalence when contemplating separation from their offspring, mothers forcefully referred to the economic problems created for them by the lack of adequate childcare possibilities and the power of culture as influencing their choices” (Bohr and Whitfield 2011). Thus, parents' understanding of attachment formation and its ensuing implications may be just one consideration among many that they must weigh in making this decision.

In key ways, this situation mirrors the calculations made by urban migrant workers in China, who leave their children behind in rural hometowns to be cared for by grandparents and other relatives. In two-thirds of cases, economic pressures and the high cost of living in cities are the main motivators for splitting households (Wang and Wu 2003). Other structural factors, particularly the inability to secure urban residence permits for children that would give them access to education and health care, are primary reasons why parents choose to separate from their children (Burnette et al. 2013). Unlike the North American case, however, Chinese left-behind children are on average older at the time of first separation (9–10 years old) and also tend to be separated for

longer periods of time (3–4 years) (Wen and Lin 2012). In our study in Boston Chinatown, most of the children who had separated and reunited with their parents were between 2–8 months of age at the time of separation and had lived apart for an average of 2 years. In several cases, parents even brought children back earlier than expected for different reasons, including the fear that their relationship was growing too distant or that they were being spoiled by lenient grandparents.

While such reasons together reflect the parent's own or anticipated concerns about the separation, they vary in their understandings of children's experiences of separation and reunification. Children are often infants when separated and presumed to be too young to experience strong emotional reactions to leaving their parents. The mother quoted below was separated from her daughter from age 18 months to 3 years. When asked whether she thought the child understood the separation, she stated:

She probably didn't understand. We went to the airport with my cousin. She knew my cousin...[and] didn't understand she was going to go somewhere very far. But at the airport, she went in, and cried a little...then my cousin played with her, and she became less sad, then she got on the plane and went back... There was lots of fun stuff for her in China...and she got used to them eventually, and she didn't ask to come back to mom.

Aside from experiencing the loss at separation, after acclimating to new caregivers, children can undergo further loss when they reunite with their nuclear family, a reality that parents acknowledge. According to the mother quoted above, when her daughter first returned to the United States, "She was very sad. She was sad about leaving her grandma." Despite children's possible confusion and pain at being separated from their primary caregivers, parents tend to assume that children will adjust easily to new circumstances and to living with their nuclear family again. Hence, few of the parents we interviewed spent much time emotionally preparing their children to move back to the United States. One mother who was separated from her infant for 7 months described how much her son missed his grandmother once he had returned to Boston:

His grandma missed him too and Skyped with him. He saw her on the screen and knew it was his grandma, so he cried. He cried and then asked for his grandma, trying to hug her...[This] lasted for two weeks.

Such responses suggest that for some children, adjustment to the second separation, this time from grandparents, was much more difficult than the initial separation from the parents.

Whether parents and caregivers prepare children for separation and unification and in what ways can provide further insight into how parents believe their children will respond to the separation or reunion. For instance, in the sample of 40 Chinese American adults who lived in China, Taiwan, or Hong Kong as small children while their parents were in the United States, most were

too young at the time of initial separation to recall whether they received any emotional preparation from their parents or other family members. Of those who could remember, 18 reported that their family members provided little to no preparation for the initial separation from their parents. One 21-year-old male college student who lived in Taiwan with his grandparents from ages 4–7 while his parents pursued graduate degrees in the United States recounted his experience:

They didn't really give me a talk. They didn't really sit me down because I figure they didn't really understand the importance of sitting kids down and then talking them through the process. I just feel like this probably isn't something that Asian parents do, whether it's transitioning through life or just, so to speak, dumping your kids in your home country.

Furthermore, 21 individuals in our sample reported receiving little to no preparation for their reunion with parents (and often, siblings) in the United States, which many viewed as a situation that made the transition even more emotionally difficult. In one case, a 28-year-old male respondent, who lived with his grandparents in China from ages 4–11, recalled the lack of information he received about his reunion:

I really don't think I understood too much about why I was leaving China. I remember thinking that I didn't really want to leave. Like, I'm the type of person who back then really didn't like change, so any change was really stressful.

One explanation for the lack of preparation given to children about separation or reunion may be the importance that Chinese families place on kinship relationships, or blood ties. The belief that “blood is thicker than water” promotes social harmoniousness and group mindedness but also mutual dependency and relationship-centeredness (Lam 1997). This kinship norm and the underlying emphasis on maintaining a strong family network may be viewed as transcending geographic location. On one hand, biological kinship may confer the belief that attachment ought to take place indiscriminately with different members of the extended family. Another possibility is that kinship produces the expectation of automatic parent-child attachment, regardless of the time and distance apart and lack of shared experience (e.g., maternal sensitivity in the context of physical caretaking that characterize the typical dyadic attachment model). To the extent that kinship has served as a social safety net for cultures that espouse more interdependent ideals, some families may even see this as cultural preservation of relationships despite the physical separation, based on the belief that they will have a typical parent-child relationship once the child returns. Most parents from the Boston Chinatown study felt that children should not be away from their parents for more than a few years so as to maintain an intimate bond. However, one mother who sent her son to China from the age of 5 months to 4 years speculated that the ease of their reunion could be attributed to biological ties:

As soon as [my son] got back, my husband told him that I was his mom and he immediately came over to me. He's not like other kids who ignore you or cry or whatever. Maybe it's because of blood. He's not scared of us and he wanted to be with me. (Translated from Chinese)

A question that emerges from this discussion is how attachment theory considers the prioritization of this dyadic attachment within the notion of kinship, an issue that we will address in the following section.

Models for Expanding Understanding of Attachment in Transnationally Separated Families

A Bioecological Model as a Basis for Understanding Transnational Separation on Children's Development

With the implications of economic, cultural, and dyadic processes playing a role in transnational separation, Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model provides a concise theoretical framework for examining the effects of transnational separation on a child's development (Bronfenbrenner 1977). We briefly provide examples for how such processes are situated within the bioecological model's components of *person*, *process*, *context*, and *time*.

Person and Process

By definition, the experience of transnational separation is a disruption in a child's proximal processes. The child's regular interactions with his primary caregiver(s) are interrupted and replaced by interactions with others. Both the child's and caregivers' adaptation to these transitions may be influenced by a child's person-level characteristics. These characteristics, such as an infant's uninhibited temperament, may elicit sensitive behaviors from caregivers across contexts. By contrast, a fearful or inhibited temperament may exacerbate the challenges of separation and reunion with caregivers. One parent interviewed in Boston Chinatown highlighted her son's "adaptable" temperament as a key factor in his smooth reunification with his parents, even after a separation of over four years:

[It] was weird, right, because my friends sent back their children, too, and when their children came back they spent some time to get close with their children, but my child felt, I don't know how to put it into words...When I first picked him up, he was really happy. That night he hugged me and called "Mom" incessantly, and asked, "Mom, can you read me a story?"....To someone who didn't know, we looked like we had never been separated before...His adaptability is really good...he basically didn't have any problems adjusting. (Translated from Chinese)

Context

The context component of the bioecological model conceptualizes the various systems of influence in transnational separation. In addition to the microsystem-level proximal processes described above, mesosystem-level influences may play a key role in children's adjustment to transnational separation. For example, communication between a child's biological parents and his or her current caregivers may vary in both quality and quantity. Caregivers in Asia may provide a child's biological parents with regular, detailed updates on the child's development and daily activities, and may facilitate regular parent-child interactions. This has been demonstrated in other populations, such as Filipino mothers who work abroad, where media can allow for "a more complete practicing or intensive mothering at a distance" (Madianou and Miller 2012:83). At the same time, fractious relationships between parents and temporary caregivers may result in sparse parent-child engagement during the period of separation and thus provide parents only minimal insight into their child's development. In our study in Boston Chinatown, most parents described having daily online communication with their child and caregiver during the separation. This was a marked difference to our sample of adult Chinese Americans with early separation experiences, who typically had very limited contact with their parents in the pre-Internet era. Yet despite technological advances allowing for easier communication, there were also perceived limitations, as explained by one mother who sent her 9-month-old son to China for two years:

Although the technology was very developed and we could Skype online, he knew seeing Mom on Skype was different from seeing Mom in person. It was a strange feeling, and it wasn't an intimate relationship. (Translated from Chinese)

Here the nature of the relationship may be mediated by the media rather than through "co-presence," as argued by Madianou and Miller (2012). A question is how attachment can be formed through representations of the other individual, which can vary based on the form of communication (e.g., Skype, telephone, and emails).

The broader exosystem and macrosystem levels may be seen as influencing parents' decisions to initiate, prolong, or terminate transnational separation. At the exosystem level, a parent may be working multiple low-paying jobs without provisions for health insurance or child care, or may be a full-time student in a highly demanding graduate program. Both situations may contribute to a parent's decision to send their child temporarily back to their home country. Among the 24 parents in the Boston Chinatown study who mentioned economic pressures as a motivation for separating from their children, many specifically mentioned the competing demands of parenthood and employment:

Even if I sent [my child] to a day care...at the time I worked in a Chinese restaurant, the working time was long, sometimes from 10 in the morning to 10 at night, and on weekends, Fridays and Saturdays it's even later, sometimes until

11 pm. So, since my husband also works at a restaurant, the timing was not right.
(Translated from Chinese)

Even parents in the Boston Chinatown sample who held advanced degrees found transnational separation to be the best solution for balancing work and parenting demands. One mother described how she and her husband decided to leave their daughter in China while he pursued postdoctoral training:

[The separation] temporarily benefits my husband and me since we get time to gradually settle down and adapt to the environment. My husband can focus on his research, while we both have time to plan for our future. We can do research on schools and housing before she gets here...If we brought her over without having the time to do any of this, it would be a lot more challenging...If we brought her out with us...we would have so much stress on top of the financial, employment, environmental stress we're already facing. (Translated from Chinese)

Finally, a number of macrosystem-level influences—cultural norms regarding transitional separation, immigration policies and laws, and beliefs about the nature of the parent-child relationship—can all be salient factors when a parent weighs the benefits and consequences of transnational separation. Three parents in the Boston Chinatown sample specifically mentioned how cultural norms regarding transnational separation motivated and informed their decision to separate from their child:

We knew that a lot of [Chinese immigrants] who had just arrived for 3 or 4 months send their children back before they get older and recognize you...so we thought that since everyone's doing it, we would do it, too.

A lot of us who come from Fujian [separate from their child] after seeing other people do this...I think a lot of people from Fujian think this way. There are other people who want to focus on work and so they can't take care of their children. Having their children stay here wouldn't be good either. That's why they send them back.

Where we are it's like a tradition. Everyone sends their kids back home, so we decided to do that, too and we can still work here, and bring them back when they're a bit older, and we might be doing better economically at that time.

Time

As it subsumes all other components of the bioecological model, time (the “chronosystem” of the bioecological model) may be the most relevant factor in transnational separation and its effects on a child's development. The pressures for an immigrant family to separate transnationally are often at their peak during the first few years in their new country of settlement; indeed, parents who make the decision to separate from their children often note that their primary goal in doing so is to establish a firm financial foundation for

their family. One mother who sent her 5-month-old son to China for 7 months described her reasoning:

I wanted to keep my child with me and better understand his life from all aspects. Yet I also considered many other factors. For example, at that time, only my husband worked, and expenses were high. So I thought about sending my child back for some amount of time, and when our economic status improves we could take him back and take better care of him. (Translated from Chinese)

Finally, the time course of transnational separation—namely, its duration and the developmental period in which it occurs—can also impact aspects of a child’s development. For example, the son of one parent in the Boston Chinatown study was cared for by his grandfather from 3–6 years of age. The mother describes her belief that this experience, particularly the time in her child’s development at which it occurred, had a lasting impact on her son’s relationship with both her and the grandfather:

My relationship with him now is...I was just thinking about this yesterday. He’s actually closer with his grandpa than he is with me. He’s a teenager now and he doesn’t tell me a lot of things, but he tells them to his grandpa when he visits... When his grandpa visits, he still sleeps with his grandpa. He’s 15 years old now and he still sleeps with his grandpa. When he can’t fall asleep at night, he asks his grandpa to read him stories....He’s closer with him than he is with me.

In reflecting on her experience, this mother specifically underscored the impact of the child’s age and the duration of the separation:

We sent him back at that age...Don’t let them be separated from you for too long. I think those 3 years were his golden developmental time...a precious age where you start to learn how to behave, rules, language, all these different aspects. We sent him back during this time period.

Indeed, responses from a number of parents in the Boston Chinatown sample indicated thorough considerations of the role played by the child’s age at separation in his or her subsequent adjustment. Some of these developmental considerations were drawn from their personal experiences, while others were observations of others’ experiences with transnational separation:

My younger sister has a son and a daughter. The older daughter came back around 4 or 5; she behaves poorly and was not close to her mom. My sister immediately got her 1 year and 8 month old son back, and the son is close to his mom. I don’t agree that you should send your children back after they are over one and a half years old. Because after they are one and a half years old, they already have some relationship with their parents.

I have a friend who’s from Fuzhou. She sent her child back. When he came back, he was already at the age for high school. Now he doesn’t even go to college and he just dates around, plays around. His parents can’t do anything about it because he’s old now. You weren’t with him when he was young. You don’t know how to

communicate with him. You have no idea what goes through his head....there's no way for you to control him now.

When he came over here, he was 5 or 6 years old. I still had the chance to guide him, communicate with him, educate him....He still needed to listen to us. When they're older and have experienced separation for that long, there are endless difficulties you need to deal with.

One mother drew a contrast between two of her children who had both been sent back to China, and concluded that the one child's "bad habits" were a result of the younger age at which he was sent back:

[My younger child] went to China when he was too little. When [my] older child was in China, he was...almost 2 years old. He already knew many things and didn't need to be taken care of too much by his parental or maternal grandmothers...but many grandparents in China pamper young children too much and just do anything for them. Thus, [my younger child] was so used to being taken care of and being pampered. He had many bad habits when he returned to the U.S.

In sum, each of these responses indicate parents' acute awareness that a child's age at the time of separation, as well as the duration of the separation itself, are critical factors in their children's subsequent adjustment. Process and context, with the time component of the bioecological model provides a theoretical framework for conceptualizing the influences of separation on children's development. With this, it is perhaps not the fact that attachment theory has focused on dyadic relationships that is the problem, but rather that attachment theory has failed to acknowledge the importance of the many systems that make up the ecologies in human development. This oversight has repercussions for our understanding of attachment across all cultures.

Caretaking Arrangements and Family Lifestyle on Attachment

With respect to the development of attachment, we build upon the bioecological model by considering the effects of serial attachments and separations that take place across a great geographic distance. Existing caregiving models that have been informative for understanding attachment relationships may be initially useful in informing this phenomenon. For instance, multiple caregiving can take the form of communal or institutional child care, although these relationships take place simultaneously, rather than sequentially. In these arrangements, there is not necessarily great geographic distance between caregivers and children. The foster care arrangement may approximate the attachment relationships that take place with caregivers sequentially, as children are removed from their parents and live with a foster parent, before possibly being reunited with their parents or being placed in a different household. While the children may live apart from their parents, as is true of transnationally separated children, in many cases foster children are removed because of some form of maltreatment and parents do not necessarily wish to separate. Transnational

separation among Chinese immigrants, on the other hand, generally does not occur under such forced or adverse circumstances, and parents themselves, in large part, proactively make this decision.

However, understanding the effects of caregiving on attachment in the Mainland Chinese context may be an important starting point. In a study of Chinese mothers from Shanghai, grandparents and caregivers provided child care for most of the mothers who had to return to work within 4 months after giving birth. The study found that infants who slept with multiple caregivers and nonparental caregivers at night were associated with insecure mother-infant attachment (Ding et al. 2012). However, in a recent study of a larger sample in China, no differences were found in attachment classifications when assessed between mothers and infants where up to two-thirds of the primary caregivers were grandparents (Archer et al. 2015). Aside from the potential problems of applying attachment classifications across cultures and settings, these studies point to the need to study attachment by understanding the child's experience of having multiple caregivers, while holding the possibility that attachment with other caregivers may be culturally or developmentally adaptive.

Additionally, regional differences in cultural values in China may be associated with infant attachment. It has been argued that the Northern Chinese value independent self-construal relative to Southern Chinese, who may emphasize an interdependent self-construal (Talhelm et al. 2014). Indeed, a greater proportion of Southern Chinese infants than Northern Chinese infants were found to have the resistant insecure type (Archer et al. 2015). There is also evidence that migrant Chinese mothers moving from rural to urban settings for work emphasize a value of independence similar to Western mothers (Zheng and Shi 2004).

Despite scenarios that involve multiple nonparental caregivers, most scholarly assessments remain focused on parent-child attachment. An issue is how attachment classifications derived from parent-child dyads are ecologically valid with these variations in caregiving arrangements and cultural values, and importantly, whether these classifications are in any way predictive in diverse family communities.

Cultural Value Systems Regarding Transnational Separation and Expectations for Parent-Child Relationships

Cultural value systems of independence and interdependence, as well as their related psychological goals for autonomy and relatedness across development, have played a notable role in describing the beliefs and practices of Western and non-Western societies. The Chinese may see themselves as embedded in a web of a relational network (Bond and Hwang 1986), where individual achievements and behaviors that reflect autonomy are performed to maintain stability for the whole family.

This orientation of interdependence within Chinese culture promotes connectedness among family members and is maintained by transnational families. According to Yeoh et al. (2005:308), the transnational family “derives its lived reality not only from material bonds of collective welfare among physically dispersed members but also a shared imagery of ‘belonging’ which transcends particular periods and places to encompass past trajectories and future continuities.”

Concepts central to attachment theory, such as maternal sensitivity and assumptions of mothers being physically present, may not be similarly prioritized in situations where the idea of “family” is maintained despite distance between members over long periods of time. This is not to say that either physical and/or emotional availability or day-to-day consistency and sensitivity are unimportant. However, the value of relationships may be maintained at a broader kinship level rather than at a dyadic level. That is, feeling secure may be “anchored” in an individual dyadic relationship or in a family or in a group. In this view, the security of attachment as equivalent to a dyadic relationship in the West is the consequence of a primary dyadic caretaking system, whereas in other caretaking systems, security and relationships do not overlap. Indeed, even in the West, children may not feel secure with individuals with whom they have wonderful relationships (e.g., grandparents, cousins). Furthermore, it could be possible that attachment needs of the adult parents may be met through the support of their kin, even within the transnational separation experience, producing greater emotional well-being for biological parents.

To the extent that a sense of security for children is important, as well as the well-being of the parents, this could be derived, developed, and maintained through a longstanding kinship between members of Chinese families even when parents are physically separated from their children for extended periods. Understanding attachment as a more general phenomenon may supersede a physically proximal and dyadic secure attachment, the development of a secure base, and the promotion of individual exploration (Madianou and Miller 2012).

Next Steps: Assessing Core Assumptions of Attachment through the Lens of Transnational Migration

Thus far, we have focused largely on macro-level factors that play a role in the separation and reunion of families, including economic and cultural influences, and culturally specific attitudes toward attachment. A major step for attachment theory and its measurement (see Chapter 13, this volume), given the understanding of the practice for transnational migration, is to determine how this practice challenges and informs core assumptions of attachment at both macro- and micro-levels.

Figure 7.1 embeds the various attachments and their formation and separation with each caregiver across two cultural contexts as characterized within a

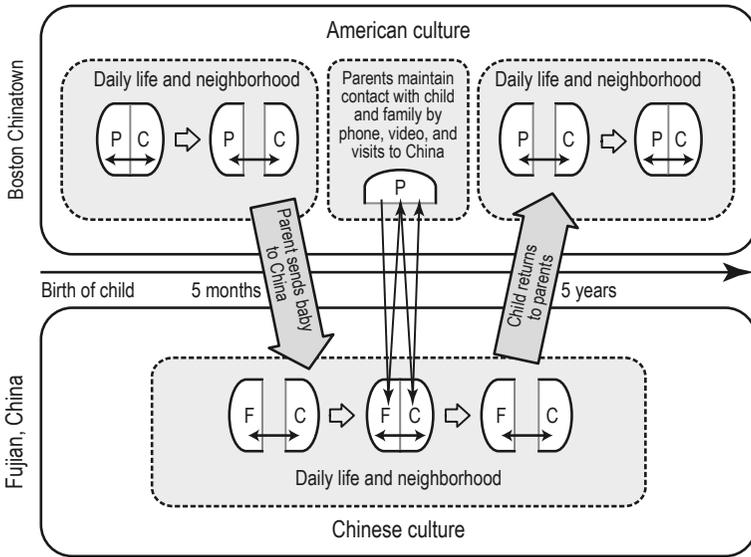


Figure 7.1 Simplified example of a transnational separation between parents (P), family member (F), and child (C) between Boston Chinatown and Fujian, China. Semi-circles and gray arrows display the dyadic relationship and its formation and separation over time; proximal environments (extended family, neighborhood) are represented within dotted lines. Black arrows display the relationship processes within each dyad.

typical Chinese immigrant transnational separation. Referring back to the challenges of attachment theory articulated by Rothbaum et al. (2007), regarding the sensitivity, competence, and secure base hypotheses, we argue that each hypothesis needs to be examined at both levels among transnationally separated families, as each construct may be emphasized in different ways when considering continual shifts in practices or views of a cultural practice.

The sensitivity hypothesis assumes that the mother’s ability to respond sensitively to her infant’s signals leads to secure attachment. In relation to transnational separation, the practice of sending an infant far away to be cared for by others may be driven by the mother’s view that the grandparents in China will be available and able to respond sensitively to the infant’s signals and to provide the continuous physical caretaking that is desired for the child. Because parents must work long hours, they often feel that sending them to grandparents will allow their baby to receive one-on-one care that they themselves would not be able to provide. As one mother in Boston who sent her 9-month-old son back to China for two years reflected:

I thought his grandparents taught him wholeheartedly, and he learned a lot. His way of thinking was easily developed. Had he been with me, I wouldn’t have spent all my time with him—I would have spent half of my time at most. His

From “The Cultural Nature of Attachment: Contextualizing Relationships and Development,” Heidi Keller and Kim A. Bard, eds. 2017. *Strüngmann Forum Reports*, vol. 22, series ed. J. Lupp. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. ISBN 978-0-262-03690-0.

grandma spent more time and energy taking care of him and educating him, which I couldn't have done myself. (Translated from Chinese)

Therefore, despite being separated for prolonged periods across a great distance, some parents find this type of one-on-one attention preferable to living in the same home with the child and placing the child in an expensive daycare setting. Furthermore, in our interviews, a number of individuals mentioned feeling low self-efficacy as parents after bearing their first child; they thus felt more at ease sending infants to live with grandparents, whom they viewed as having more childcare experience. Grandparents themselves can also exert pressure on parents to send the child to them. One mother who had her first child in her mid-20s explained why she decided to leave him with his grandparents in China for 7 months after taking him back for a visit:

Because my child went back, and I saw my parents loved him a lot, hoping he could stay for some time. This was also the case with my mother-in-law. Plus, how to put this in words, I myself thought it would be hard to take care of the first child. So it was like, okay, when he grows older I would take him back.

Thus, sensitivity may be valued but not necessarily seen as a requirement for the biological mother. This may be a view that is aligned with those from multiple caretaking societies but seen as more extreme given the geographic distance and prolonged separation. However, it certainly differs greatly from the Western middle-class assumption of the mother being the primary caretaker for the child.

The secure base hypothesis refers to the concept of infants feeling safe and comforted by the presence of a caregiver, providing a secure base that allows them to feel comfortable exploring their environments. Chinese culture emphasizes close and physical caregiving; however, whether this particular experience is seen to serve as a foundation for children to develop a secure base is an important question, especially among Chinese immigrants that undergo transnational separation. First, and as is the case for other types of serial separations and reunions such as foster care, the timing and length of separation and reunion and children's experience with each of the caregivers, may impact their establishment of a secure base. Second, and in taking a macro-level perspective on the secure base hypothesis, a major question that arises is whether a secure base may extend beyond the primary caregiver to other caregivers; that is, what reference group is considered as a source of security and how is this experienced by the child? Might the importance of kinship relations reflect this secure base and reinforce expectations about a child's attachment to a caregiver? Measuring the security and how it is developed in attachment relationships as well as through other means (e.g., through the instantiation of kinship) would be an important step in determining the scope for this construct of security. Finally, there is the question of how the Chinese view the importance of a secure base and subsequent exploration. Traditionally, this exploration has been thought to characterize Western cultural values, given that it reflects the

development of independence and autonomy. Nonetheless, with the growth of China's market economy and increasing globalization, Chinese parents are placing greater value on autonomy and self-sufficiency (Chen et al. 2010). It is unclear if and how possible shifts in cultural orientation affect parents' understanding of the function of a secure base.

The competence hypothesis refers to the relationship between one's attachment style and the ability to predict later outcomes, with secure attachment specifically seen as leading to competence and better coping skills later in life. However, there are several concerns with viewing competence as an outcome. At minimum, those with insecure attachments may be highly competent in various domains. In regards to cultural definitions, competence has been largely defined through a lens of Western values that prioritize independence, emphasizing exploration, autonomy, self- and emotional regulation. On one hand, individuation may be a priority for families that experience transnational migration. Indeed, many of the Chinese American adults we interviewed who had early separation experiences reported having a greater sense of independence. One 18-year-old female respondent, who experienced two different separations from her parents between ages 2–5 and 7–10, described how she was affected by these experiences:

For me I think it definitely has made me more independent, like I don't really like relying on other people. I think the separation definitely had something to do with that...In a way I think that, I guess it's a bad thing to say, but in a way, when I was growing up I thought, "oh, I only have myself to rely on," because I was switching between so many people to live with, and I am the only thing that's constant in my life.

It is unknown whether this self-reported independence is adaptive or functional, as it could also reflect a lack of trust and what could be considered an insecure, avoidant attachment style. Thus, competence ought to be defined from within a culture. Some ways of assessing this may include examining the expectations for outcomes among families and individuals that have chosen to separate transnationally and to study the socialization practices that play a role in these outcomes. Furthermore, it is unclear whether the idea that security experienced and established in early childhood translates to affective experience holds across cultures. While Chinese caregivers often place a premium on physical safety, its relation to children's affective experience may not be considered a priority, especially given the different cultural values placed on emotion expressivity and regulation. Altogether, studying transnational families could help to identify some parameters for defining the secure base as well as its purported outcomes within attachment research.

Finally, transnational separation provides an opportunity to consider the unique experiences a child might have with different caregivers across different stages of development and, furthermore, how these experiences do or do not transfer to other current and later relationships (Tronick 2003). Of

particular relevance to Tronick's theory is the "thickness" of relationships, or the variety of time-activity contexts, including feeding, diaper changing, putting to bed, and other infant-related care activities. These regulatory activities may take place with the parent in the United States prior to separation, with another caregiver such as a grandparent in China during the separation, and then transfer back to the parent after reunion. As such, regulatory patterns are developed between each caregiver and the infant, characterized with implicit knowledge within the individuals in the relationship, and co-regulated. It has been argued that "thicker" relationships are more differentiated and therefore their regulatory patterns are less likely to be transferable to other relationships. The notion of differentiation and intransferability challenges modern attachment theory to specify exactly how attachment transfers or if it is necessary that it transfers across individuals. There is an assumption that the parental/maternal primary caregiver relationship is prototypical. If relationships become increasingly unique, then serial relationships could pose a very serious problem indeed. This is an important consideration in the study of attachment processes within the context of transnational migration, since infants may be sent back to China as early as infancy, develop a (likely) thick attachment with their grandmother, and then be expected to develop a relationship with their parents after their return to the United States. As illustrated in Figure 7.1, infants may have to contend with serial, multiple ruptures to their most fundamental relationships. In our interviews with parents, many recall challenges in their children's initial adjustment after being brought back to the United States. One mother recalled her son's adjustment period when he returned at nearly 3 years of age:

There were some language issues because he spoke Chinese in China...his spoken English wasn't good enough. Sometimes he spoke Chinese and sometimes English. After he came back to America everything changed, no matter if it was living, eating, people, the environment or other aspects, which he wasn't used to in the beginning and needed time to adjust to. (Translated from Chinese)

Despite these challenges, parents tend to believe that children are resilient and eventually adjust to the new family, cultural, and educational environment. Even so, there is a general consensus that bringing children back earlier is better for their adjustment. One full-time working mother from Boston Chinatown who was currently separated from her infant described how her thoughts on separation had changed:

I originally planned to have the child stay there until the child was 3 years old so that the child can go to daycare centers in the school. But if possible, I want to have the child back next year, or when the child is one and a half years old. I don't want to leave her in China for too long. There are many cultural differences between China and the U.S. I don't want my child to learn some bad things, so I want to have the child back to the U.S. soon. (Translated from Chinese)

Myriad factors may play a role in children's adjustment, including new relationships with peers and teachers across development, which likely contribute

to these outcomes. New research is needed to identify these moderators for later outcomes for children who were transnationally separated.

Summary

Transnational separation is a phenomenon that provides an opportunity to closely examine the assumptions of attachment theory. Important insights from transnational separation can expand the meaning and utility of attachment theory, by considering factors that are meaningful for relationships. For example, it is necessary to develop ways to assess the locus and strength of security as well as to assess other independent qualities of relationships. The bioecological model provides a framework that pulls together the multiple contexts that underlie transnational migration, and most notably emphasizes the macro-level factors involved in the decision of families to send their infants to China. Cultural value systems and the expectations family members have of their relationships, including the formation and development of attachment between caregiver and child, play a role in this decision. These cultural beliefs and attitudes may contrast greatly with assumptions of Western-oriented attachment theory, challenging the current definition of maternal sensitivity, the prioritization of establishing a secure base, and the idea that competence arises from an early secure attachment. Such systems that articulate person, process, context, and time—all which underlie the development in individuals and relationships—have yet to be fully incorporated into attachment theory. Finally, the serial attachments and separations across different caregivers and time produce unique relationship experiences for infants. This provides an opportunity to understand how the formation of a dyadic relationship with one caregiver (e.g., a grandmother in China) might transfer to the relationship with another caregiver after reunion (e.g., a mother in the U.S.), and whether other relationships and factors moderate child outcomes that produce resilience or risk. The phenomenon of transnational separation questions if and how transferability of attachment relationships takes place and also its effect on outcomes in both individuals and families. Altogether, transnational separation is a cultural phenomenon that offers a range of promising new directions for the study of attachment and child development.