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Transnational youth transitions: becoming adults between Vancouver and Hong Kong

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Abstract *In the context of the academic interest shown in the enduring transnationalism of contemporary migrants and in the modes of transitions to adulthood in different global settings, in this article we examine the transnational lives of adolescents moving between Vancouver (Canada) and Hong Kong. While there is a lot of literature on the parents' political and economic calculations, there is very little on how adolescents in these situations articulate their geographical sensibilities. We draw on three periods of fieldwork undertaken in 2002, 2008 and 2010 during which we employed a transnational methodology to interview young people in Vancouver and Hong Kong. We argue that becoming an adult involves a process in which, in their discussions about the geographical and emotional distance between themselves and their families, young people articulate their own complex emotions towards specific places in their transnational social field. Their families sporadically interrupt the adolescents' otherwise independent lives with fragmented modes of supervision. By examining the complex intentions and emotions behind circular migration from the perspective of transnational youth in a community of split families, we advance the discussion on transnational geographies, particularly of the family in the context of a flexible global economy.*

Keywords TRANSNATIONALISM, FAMILY, TRANSNATIONAL FAMILIES, MIGRATION, CIRCULAR MIGRATION, VANCOUVER, HONG KONG, EMOTIONAL GEOGRAPHIES, YOUTH, TRANSITIONS TO ADULTHOOD, AGE

In this article, we explore how young people in transnational family arrangements spanning Vancouver and Hong Kong emotionally articulate their adolescence. These familial strategies are common among Vancouver's Hong Kong families, though the exact numbers are uncertain (Waters 2002, 2010). The available information

generally refers to adults. As Ley (2010: 92) reveals, a study by the Chinese Canadian Historical Society of British Columbia showed that two-thirds of Hong Kong Chinese men aged between 25 and 44 live and work outside Canada (Cerniteg 2007). In 1991, SUCCESS, a leading immigrant settlement agency in Vancouver, claimed that 40 per cent of Vancouver's Hong Kong Chinese migrants had lived at some point in a transnational family arrangement (Man 2007).

While previous studies focused on the decisions of adults in this transnational social field, we interrogate the agency of young people in these family arrangements to choose futures for themselves, taking into account the burgeoning literature on geographies of youth transitions (Ansell et al. 2011; Hopkins and Pain 2007; Valentine 2003; van Blerk 2008; Worth 2009; Young 2004). Drawing on three separate periods of fieldwork undertaken during the 2000s in Vancouver and Hong Kong, we argue that the transition to adulthood involves a process in which young people articulate complex emotions about specific places in their transnational social field as they discuss their families from a distance. Our argument follows Ho's (2008a) critique of transnational studies for failing to incorporate insights from emotional geography, namely a 'positive recognition that emotions *already have* an important place' in underpinning geographical processes (Bondi et al. 2005: 1). Acknowledging the continuing need to explore 'the feelings and emotions that make the world as we know and live it' (Anderson and Smith 2001: 9), we explore how the emotions of young people in these calculating families form their attitudes towards fellow family members and geographical sites.

As we shall show, these emotional articulations are often self-contradictory. We start this article with an account of the need to blend work on youth transitions with work on transnationalism before going on to explain our trans-Pacific transnational methodology. Our empirical study begins by exploring the frustration of many young people who feel that during their formative years their parents simultaneously isolate them in Canada *and* function as occasional drop-in parental supervisors. We then draw out how these transitions to adulthood produce seemingly incongruous emotional attachments to Vancouver as a place with a leisurely ethos, in contrast to what they perceive as the alienating hostility of Hong Kong as a city. Discerning these sentiments has policy implications because these young people's individual decisions either to return to East Asia or to remain in Canada produce differential geographies of transnational migration and settlement. Such geographical variation among young people suggests that, while circular migration between Vancouver and Hong Kong may have become commonplace, this norm does not decisively determine young people's movements, much less their attachments to place.

The transition to adulthood in flexible families: individuating spatial sensibilities

The literature on transitions to adulthood suggests that as adolescents become adults they are increasingly able to articulate their own distinctive geographical imaginaries, with consequences for their subsequent mobility, their choices about when, where and how to move. Although these shifts are conventionally described in terms of

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childhood school spaces to adult workplaces, Valentine (2003) contends that we should conceptualize 'youth' as a process of individuation in which children cross an imaginary boundary into adulthood. Geographers focus more typically on 'unconventional transitions to adulthood', such as disabled and sexual minorities in the United Kingdom (Valentine and Skelton 2003a, 2003b; Worth 2009), rural families in Bolivia (Punch 2002) and child migrants in Africa (Ansell et al. 2011; van Blerk 2008; Young 2004). They contend that the process of 'becoming' adult entails a sense of agency in deciding what spaces to inhabit in relation to the aspirations and conditions of their families and communities of origin (Hopkins and Pain 2007).

While many accounts of adolescence focus on marginality and poverty, the Hong Kong–Vancouver case reveals how young people negotiate flexible familial strategies of affluence in a global economy, a theme insufficiently traced in the literatures of both youth transition and transnational migration. Extensive research on migration between East Asia and North America prompted Weiqiang Lin's (2012: 137) critique that these studies have 'become mired in unceasing efforts to refine and reassess typologies such as families of the "Pacific Shuttle", "astronaut fathers", and "parachute kids" … at the expense of contrasting stories that may be able to offer fresh theoretical fodder'. Yet, many of these stories focus on adult rationales for migration at the expense of young people's voices. It was their parents, for example, not their children, who worried about the possibility of political instability following Hong Kong's transfer to Chinese sovereignty in 1997 (Hamilton 1999; Ma and Cartier 2003; Skeldon 1994). Adults were the ones who devised schemes to maximize their family capital, both material and symbolic, during their migrations around the Pacific (Ley 2010; Ong 1999; Ong and Nonini 1997; Waters 2006).

Parental migration decisions have led to an expectation that their children will eventually join the migration circuit when they reach adulthood. Indeed, recent studies of return migration, including (to some extent) the literature on Hong Kong–Vancouver transnationalism, often focused on the potential of young people who seek to return to develop their homelands economically through what Levitt (2001) calls 'social remittances' (IOM 2005: Long and Oxfeld 2004). In the Hong Kong–Vancouver case, scholars observed a 'circular migration through the lifecourse', with schooling in Vancouver, work in East Asia and retirement back in Canada (Kobayashi and Preston 2007; Ley 2010; Ley and Kobayashi 2005; Mitchell and Olds 2000; Waters 2005, 2006, 2008). In the context of such circularity, the education of children emerges as a key factor in driving relocation (Kobayashi and Preston 2007; Waters 2005, 2008). Some immigrant families plan this transnational arrangement well in advance because they expect their families to engage in ongoing migration between Hong Kong and Vancouver (Waters 2003a).

Few authors have discussed the range of adolescent reactions to such arrangements, other than for those who expect to participate in circular migration between Hong Kong and Vancouver (Ley 2010; Waters 2006). Preston et al. (2006: 1637) intentionally exclude 'younger participants' from their sample because 'they represent a different generation: the majority are educated primarily in Canada, with a very different exposure to citizenship possibilities.' Indeed, such omissions reflect a

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broader absence of child voices in contemporary accounts of transnational migration (Dobson 2009; Hatfield 2010; Orellana et al. 2001; Skelton 2009; Yeoh et al. 2005).[1] They also suggest that the focus of studies on the emotional complexity of transnational parenting at a distance needs to shift from the intergenerational geographies of children left behind to the emerging geographical sensibilities and performativity of youths undergoing adolescence (Elmhirst 2002; Parreñas 2005; Waters 2002). Instead of assuming that young trans-migrants unproblematically imagine Hong Kong as a place to which to return, we examine how these young people experience the transition to adulthood while negotiating transnational migration norms within their families (Featherstone et al. 2007). When they moved to Canada, they may not have been part of the decision to leave friends and close relatives behind in Hong Kong and to join other relations. However, as they embark on their own process of individuation, how do these young people describe their geographical attachments to place, especially as they are becoming adults? How will this inform their individual migration choices? Moreover, do their decisions invariably corroborate the prediction that they will inherit the circular migration patterns of their parents?

Research methods

This article, built on in-depth interviews with young people in Vancouver and Hong Kong, incorporates data acquired over the course of three separate projects. The first project, lasting from 2000 to 2002, sought data from 34 young people (aged 18 to 22) from Hong Kong living in Vancouver, all of whom had immigrated to Canada as children with their families during the 1990s. A second period of fieldwork took place in Vancouver in 2008, in which we interviewed 13 young people (aged between 18 and 30) as part of a nine-month study of a Christian congregation dominated by transnational migrants from Hong Kong. Finally, a third period of fieldwork, for yet another project, took place in 2010 in both Vancouver (seven weeks) and Hong Kong (five weeks). In this last phase, the research included participant observation at five churches in Hong Kong and interviews with people of various ages, as well as a mixture of individuals who identified themselves as Christian and those who did not (the latter were still connected to the church for reasons of employment or education). We also participated in a civic study group in which city officials asked Cantonese speakers in a Vancouver suburb for feedback on their social planning policies.

The time that elapsed between these different episodes of research permitted us to reflect retrospectively on what common features transnational families retain over the years and across subgroups. Moreover, while intersecting factors such as religion may initially seem problematic (Holloway and Valins 2002; Hopkins 2007; Kong 2001; Tse 2011), our data intentionally mix the two groups, thus making it difficult to separate subjects who profess faith from those who do not. Despite the apparent 'significance that religious pursuits have [been accorded] … more generally in this ethnic community' (Waters 2003a: 230), we can partly justify the presumption of secularism (Ley and Tse 2013; Li 2010) because Cantonese-speaking churches are

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often 'constructed through practices that may not be explicitly religious' (Tse 2011: 765). Examples of these include invocations of social background and language preference (Leung and Chan 2003; Smith 2005). Indeed, the similarities of the narratives, processes and imaginaries articulated over the years across intersecting social factors – and even among academic projects intended to be separate within the Hong Kong–Vancouver social field – make us confident that our qualitative findings, albeit in a limited sample, encompass the multiplicity of young people's voices in 'astronaut families' in Vancouver.

Sporadic fragmented supervision: feeling transnational distance

Given that we are already aware of the parents' political and economic rationales for Hong Kong–Vancouver transnationalism, we now turn our attention to the emotions of the young to explore how they articulate 'the effects of transnationalizing the family' on intra-familial bonds (Yeoh et al. 2005: 313). Their stories focus on the normality of receiving supervision from Hong Kong while living in Vancouver. The young people to whom we spoke often revealed that their non-local parents intervened sporadically in their local Canadian lives. Despite the availability of communications technology, they articulated a sense of emotional distance between their transnational families and their everyday lives in Vancouver. While geographers have sometimes focused on how parents living close to disabled or minority children sometimes misunderstand their special needs (Punch 2002; Valentine and Skelton 2003a, 2003b; Worth 2009), few have addressed how parents at a geographical distance sometimes intervene in ways that are incongruent with the everyday realities of those undergoing the transition to adulthood. These mismatches suggest the presence of two given factors. First, as is often cited in the literature, the parents in transnational families strive to keep their families together while maintaining mobility for political and economic reasons. Second, these attempts are less successful than they might appear at face value, for the children often perceive them as inconsistent, fragmentary interruptions in their otherwise independent lives. Despite the efforts of transnational families to maintain familial communication, the young people's growing emotional detachment from their families demonstrates that – at least for them – transnational geographical distance changes the character of intra-family relations.

Ellie[2] has lived in Vancouver since she was 12. For nine years (beginning immediately after the family immigrated), her father shuttled between Vancouver and Hong Kong on business. Eventually, both her parents decided to return to Hong Kong with her younger sister, leaving Ellie and her older sister in Vancouver. They continue to live in the family house and their mother visits every couple of months 'to see how we are doing' and to check up on the house – 'we are having a hard time cleaning it! That is why my mum has to come and check!' Katie's mother moved back when her son returned to Hong Kong to study. She calls her parents 'astronauts' because of the way they 'come back and forth' whenever her father takes an occasional 'holiday' in Vancouver.

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> OK, like, that's what we call like a flow, and a flow is like going back. They went back because my brother wants to study in England and he wants to study law. … He went back there to [the] international school and then my mum went back with him too, and I was here alone since then.

While young people like Katie understand that their parents make these arrangements in the family's economic interest, they resent their parents treating them as if they were incapable of either practical or emotional independence. In Hong Kong, we corroborated these stories at a farewell party for two parents who were moving back to Australia, both quitting their jobs, one as a headmaster of a prestigious Christian school, the other as a distributor of missionary literature. They were 'returning' to Australia, where their younger daughter, who lived alone with her sister in a two-storey house, was entering university. They explained to us that they wanted to supervise the daughter through this transition and take back their rightful ownership of the house. Such observations show the presence of contradictions in these young people's transitions to adulthood: while their parents leave them, often in isolation in Vancouver, they treat them as children who still need supervision for mundane tasks like housecleaning, not as young people on the threshold of independence.

On the receiving end, such supervision comes over as fragmented. Ellie, living in her parents' house in Vancouver, presumably cleans it only when her mother returns every few months. Likewise, our encounter in Hong Kong corroborated Katie and Ellie's impression of the fragmentary and selective nature of parental supervision from the parents' side as well. In effect, such parents only intervene at specific moments in their children's lives. Moreover, that the devout Australian couple in Hong Kong and our Vancouver interviewees who never mentioned faith behave in the same way suggests that religion has no effect on these familial patterns. These three cases demonstrate that while distant parents treat their offspring as children, for the majority of the time these young people operate as though they were independent.

However, the young people emphasized that where parents were absent, the extended family made efforts to fill the gap. Nevertheless, these family members also often behave like occasional supervisors. Jason explained the reasons for his parents' return trips to Hong Kong:

> Well, my father went back three times, I think, in six years, and the last time was because my grandmother passed away. And, for my mum it is also three times, just on vacation, taking care of my cousins. Actually, it is her sister that told her to go back and take care of her children. So, she actually booked the ticket for her!

When asked why his aunt needed his mother to look after her children, Jason said it was because 'she has just fired her Filipino worker'. The supervision given by Jason's mother – this time of children back in Hong Kong – was, like that received by Katie and Ellie, for only a month. Moreover, it was obligatory because firing the Filipina caregiver had created a vacuum that needed filling. Indeed, part of the strategy that

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Jason's aunt had devised was to use her extended family to oversee her children while she and her husband engaged in their transnational shuttle, implying that such considerations come into the calculations needed to maintain the family while the adults engage in flexible economic accumulation. These strategies suggest that parents who plan for the dependable presence of a family member may protect their children from the fragmentary care experienced by the young people to whom we spoke.

Accordingly, it is also common for transnational grandparents to fill this role, but these arrangements are also sporadic. Beverly has a dispersed extended family. Her father has two siblings living in Vancouver; her mother has siblings in both Edmonton and New Zealand; she has a cousin studying in England and her grandparents, who now live in Hong Kong, visit Vancouver once a year. Her aunt flies back and forth between Vancouver, Hong Kong and Mainland China, helping her husband with his business, and her uncle has been engaged in trans-Pacific commuting for eight years. Therefore, the only person whose business it was to take care of Beverly was her grandmother:

> Actually my grandmother lived with my aunt [in Vancouver] before I came here. … She came here with my aunt to look after her children. So, my grandmother had lived here. … She came here for a few months to stay and then went back to Hong Kong and then she came here … many times.

In other words, because Beverly's grandmother was 'flying back and forth', she performed the role of a sporadic supervisor. This placed Beverly in much the same position as the others, whose returning parents occasionally supervised their lives. Such treatment implied that Beverly, unlike the other members of her family who shuttled around the world on business, was still a child in the eyes of her family, yet her grandmother's movements back and forth implied that even she was in transit. There were still periods, some even lasting for months, when the grandmother was absent and Beverly left unsupervised.

The lack of supervision, some of our interviewees told us, allows them gradually to detach themselves emotionally from absentee family members (Ley 2004; Waters 2010). Jenny, for example, who spent the past four years in Vancouver without her parents or brother, said 'I do miss them sometimes, but we don't talk that often.' She has come to accept their daily absence from her life, so the distance is both geographical and emotional. Jason has lived in Vancouver for more than ten years with his mother and sister while his father worked in Hong Kong. He reported that he has little real 'attachment' to his father, as his presence or absence no longer registers with him on an emotional level. Although Ansell (2009) contends that communication technologies can bring people at a distance, such as transnational parents, into the lives of youngsters (Ellis et al. 1996; Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 1997; Parreñas 2005), this is not a given. There are emotions attached to physical distance and as the young adults discover their independence (often in the absence of familial supervision), the geographical distance between family members becomes an emotional reality and the telecommunications fall into disuse.

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We are not saying that all families in these circumstances abandon attempts to maintain communication at a distance; rather, we are demonstrating that transnational family members do not necessarily relate to the mundane lives of their children living in Vancouver. As Henry recalls, 'the last time I went back was only for a few days because it was the week right before my mid-terms and I had five mid-terms that week. But my god-brother was getting married that week.' Henry recalls having to fly to Hong Kong during the exam period as personally inconvenient. He remembers it more for the stress it put on his school life than as a celebration. His case demonstrates that young people sometimes experience what would seem to be major family celebrations as interruptions to their otherwise independent Vancouver routines, such as schoolwork. While not explicit in Henry's statement, such perceptions on the part of youths are *emotional* articulations. On the one hand, their emotional distance from their families frames their perception of an event like a wedding as impinging on their everyday lives at home in Vancouver. On the other hand, to allow a mismatch between the exam period and a family festivity suggests a breakdown in communications on both sides of the Pacific, which might have something to do with emotional distance.

In short, the young people often view the mix of pragmatic strategic considerations and obligatory familial arrangements their parents construct for them as sporadic, fragmented interventions in their lives. The Hong Kong–Vancouver case study is of particular interest because the familial distance it emphasizes contrasts with two trends in the existing literature on youth transitions. First, parents living in close proximity to their children are sometimes faulted for failing to understand the difficulties of young people with disabilities or non-heteronormative sexual orientations (Valentine and Skelton 2003a; 2003b). Our study, however, is about distance. It shows that geographical distance can increase gaps and generate differences between parents and young people on the brink of adulthood. Second, unlike the 'unconventional transitions to adulthood' (van Blerk 2008) young people in Africa experience through migrating from rural to urban areas (Ansell et al. 2011), the young people to whom we spoke did not choose to migrate to Vancouver and then go through the transition to adulthood away from their parents. In this literature, parents are often absent, but what is unconventional about these 'unconventional transitions to adulthood' is that the youths themselves become creatively involved in undertaking them. Conversely, or so our interviewees informed us, parents travelling in pursuit of economic opportunities try to maintain communication with their children but the latter still undertake the transition to adulthood in relative independence.

Therefore, as their transnational families plied the skies between Hong Kong and Vancouver, the adolescents left behind in Vancouver felt neither the full presence nor total absence of their parents. The ready availability of transport and communications technologies allows parents and extended family members to drop in on their children in Vancouver. On their part, however, the young people experience these visits more as inconveniences. This points to the reverse of Punch's (2002) notion of 'negotiated interdependence' in rural Bolivia, in which youths, whose worlds might revolve around life in a single village, feel the need to balance their individual educational

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opportunities with household considerations. The articulation of independence occasionally interrupted by parental or familial supervision and overseas family events in turn suggests that, while not totally absent, the presence of older family members in the young people's lives is not necessarily constant. Our case study thus uncovers data on the receiving end of parenting at a distance (Parreñas 2005), revealing the relative independence of young people in Vancouver who experience the involvement of their families in their lives as fragmentary and sporadic.

Attachment to Vancouver: individuation and future migration options

Having discussed these young people's emotional detachment from their transnational families, we now turn our attention to the attachments that they do form. The geographical dynamic of intra-familial distance mentioned earlier sets the context for how young people in this population become adults and determine their own transnational movements (Hopkins and Pain 2007; Vanderbeck 2007). Although custom and duty may at times dictate that these young adults need *at least to contemplate* a move back to Hong Kong for work, their detachment from their transnational families seems to occur alongside a growing emotional attachment to Canada as a place. The vast majority of our sample of young migrants had obtained Canadian citizenship. While some authors have commented on the instrumental nature of citizenship among recent Chinese immigrants to Canada (Mitchell 1993; Smart 1994), we suggest that teenage immigrants to Canada (those aged between 14 and 17) often show a high degree of acculturation and settlement over time (Waters 2003a). They are likely to develop 'cultural traits' and expound ideas that are in direct opposition to the wishes and values of their parents. In our interviews, the young people attributed positive qualities to Vancouver, which they perceived as laid-back and spacious, and negative ones to Hong Kong. Although their statements at times contain gross geographical generalizations, we contend that as young people differentiate themselves from their families and friends within the transnational social field, their articulations express individuated spatial sensibilities that signal a successful transition from childhood to young adulthood, despite their parents' wish occasionally to supervise them as transnational children. Such observations suggest in turn that while the 'return' migration of young people has been hailed as the next horizon of migration research (Ley 2010; Ley and Kobayashi 2005), students of Hong Kong–Vancouver transnationalism should guard against assuming that all young people from Hong Kong wish to return there after finishing their Canadian education.

Despite been born in and having lived their early years in East Asia, many young adults feel a strong affinity with Vancouver. Compared with the older immigrant groups, these young adults looked upon a 'return' to Hong Kong as going somewhere quite alien, if not hostile (Christou 2006; King et al. 2011). Katie spoke of a change in the geography of her affections from Hong Kong to Vancouver:

> When I first came here [to Vancouver in] 1995, the first two years I cried a lot because, like, most of my friends and my dad … [are] in Hong Kong, and my

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> grandparents and relatives [are] in Hong Kong. … It was a hard time. Then, suddenly, it changed from a new place. … And then everything's not the same [back in Hong Kong]. I love to go back to Hong Kong every now and then, like, Christmas, summer … to go back there and stay there for a month or so, but … after five or six years [in Vancouver] I kind of get used to it. Like, Vancouver's home more than Hong Kong's home. … Because after we moved to a new house, I don't really have much attachment over there. I don't have my own room, and everything is like … I'm sharing with my brother. I feel so inconvenienced. I don't really like it, so I'd rather come back.

Katie has made the transition from a child feeling isolated from family and friends to developing her own individual life as a young adult in Vancouver. For her, the conceptual difference between Hong Kong and Vancouver is that, at home in Canada, she has her own private space, which she values. These sentiments recall Blunt's (2005: 506) definition of the 'home' as 'a material and an affective place, shaped by experiences, social relations, memories and emotions'. Although Katie has spent holidays in Hong Kong, abstract spatial imaginations derived from her day-to-day life in Vancouver, in which she enjoys her own conveniently private, individual domestic space, shape her emotional geography.

Negative stories about Hong Kong often accompany the articulation of Vancouver as home. These young people viewed Hong Kong's public places as rushed spaces of hustle and bustle, unlike the spacious leisurely pace of Vancouver. As Jenny put it:

> I am not very familiar with the Hong Kong area. I know how to get from one place to another. I know the malls, but I do not know the names of the roads. … I just don't like the weather [and] the environment. It is more crowded and it's kind of tight. I like Vancouver a lot. … This summer, when I went back to Hong Kong, on my first day, I went shopping with my friend and we were going so slow that people were passing us! … I don't have many friends in Hong Kong any more – usually, if I go back I'll be with my Canadian friends. We were, like, wow, everyone is in such a hurry.

Their positive emotions about Canada partly derive from a feeling of being out of place in Hong Kong. This is not only because they lack friends there but also because they find the city unfriendly, its public spaces too busy and the pace of life too fast. While they start out as immigrants to Canada, in time they develop a sense of Canadian expatriation, complete with a community that shares the experience of having lived in Vancouver when they return to Hong Kong. Likewise, while his parents expected him eventually to return to Hong Kong, Jeremy felt more 'generally localized personally here [in Vancouver] than in Hong Kong':

> It is happier. It is generally happier. It is slower and people are more forgiving. In Hong Kong, when you do something bad, they generally attack you mercilessly. … Not everybody is cold-hearted in Hong Kong, but they look

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> cold-hearted … and people tend to show off in Hong Kong more than in Canada.

Jeremy describes Hong Kong as a hostile place compared with what he sees as the comprehensive peacefulness of Canada. These young people each assimilated what they regarded as particularly Canadian values, namely privacy, leisure and a laid-back attitude to life, and contrasted them with Hong Kong as a crowded, fast-paced and dangerous city. They developed their values independently of the more mobile members of their transnational families. They became *emotionally* Canadian, though not necessarily in the sense of loyalty to the Canadian state (Ho 2009). Rather, their emotional identification with Canada contrasts the sense of privacy, leisure and happiness they feel in Vancouver with a fear of the foreign that Hong Kong's busy and hostile atmosphere evokes.

Their feelings about Vancouver as a place affect the individual migration decisions that these young people make when they become adults. Those who stayed in Vancouver justified their decision by insisting that, unlike their friends who had moved, they were unable to keep up with the frenzied pace of work in Hong Kong. David, a recent graduate of the University of British Columbia, said that he would not move back to Hong Kong because of its busy work culture: 'people go back, back, back. … I wouldn't go back because, well, I can't say I won't, I won't say 100 per cent, like I wouldn't go to Hong Kong for work. … I can't stand the competitiveness. I know myself. I would not survive.' When asked why he would not survive, he responded, 'being a Christian, right? It brings along the fact that there are values that I value in a European culture, whether they like it or not … the bottom of their beliefs, or how they do things.' While ostensibly putting it down to his faith, David's answer is in fact not very different from the previous interviewees who depicted Hong Kong as a hostile, restless city. Conveniently conflating Christianity and Western European culture typified in the laid-back values he associates with Canada, David typecasts his peers who return to Hong Kong as risking burnout and becoming workaholics.

Like David, Ellie (for whom we did not collect data for faith) is determined to resist the 'trend' among her peers to return to Hong Kong after her graduation. When asked to describe her attachment to Canada, she replied that, 'actually, most of my memories are in Vancouver. … It's like my home.' On pressing her further about her reasons for wanting to look for a job in Canada, she admitted that she felt apprehensive about change. As she put it, 'I don't like change much actually. Yes, so I don't like leaving to a new place.' Ellie's reluctance to return to Hong Kong demonstrates that it is possible to resist the normal course of return migration. For her, normality does not mean that she has to follow the trend; indeed, moving to Hong Kong would be a painful wrench from her everyday life in Canada and strong attachment to Vancouver. Similar ideas emerged from a civic study group we joined in a Vancouver suburb in 2010. A member of the group in his mid-twenties used the Cantonese phrase '*Ho sunfu ah*'[3] to express his frustration with friends who had moved back to Hong Kong. This young man and his friends look upon Hong Kong as a place of great suffering with long working hours and no personal transport,

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compared with Canada where the work pace is leisurely and they can own their own cars. He explained that his friends had felt very little emotional attachment to Canada until they left. Only when they were in Hong Kong did the difference in pace make them realize how attached they had actually become to the Canada of their imagination. While pressures may come from both parents and peers who live transnational lifestyles, each of these examples demonstrates that the young people in our first period of fieldwork made the transition to adulthood *in Vancouver*.

Conversely, return migration need not reflect a lack of attachment to Vancouver. Indeed, the vast majority lamented *having* to return and expressed a desire, sometime in the future (notably when they had their *own* children) to return once again to Vancouver (see Ley 2010). Several participants spoke of encouraging their parents to retire to Vancouver to maintain a link with the city, even though they themselves intended to return to Hong Kong. Others are determined to resist the trend altogether and brand family arrangements in the transnational community as unfitted to their lifestyles. Such attachments suggest that, instead of following a predetermined mobile lifestyle, when these young people became adults they valued what, in the absence of their shuttling family members, they perceived as Vancouver's leisurely pace. Whatever the initial motivations of the adults who moved them there, they do not base their decision to remain in Vancouver on a pragmatic strategy to maximize their future capital gains (Waters 2006). Instead, it is where they became adults so a place to which they have become emotionally attached.

Conclusion: becoming adults between Hong Kong and Vancouver

We have focused on the transnational nature of contemporary transitions to adulthood, discussing research on the experiences of a number of young adult immigrants moving between Vancouver and Hong Kong. For some young immigrants, split families have been and are a way of life and, consequently, it makes little sense to attempt to understand their lives in Canada without a broader appreciation of the ways in which they configure transnationality. However, such transnational 'normality' does not mean that the youths becoming adults in these situations are not critical of such transnational strategies or that they have failed to adapt to life in their destination migration sites. Our research uncovers a surprisingly harsh critique of split families from the young people *within* this transnational community who express emotional detachment from their families and attachment to Vancouver as a place.

We have suggested that this dissatisfaction often appears contradictory, for while young people express resentment at being isolated in Vancouver, their entry into adulthood precipitates an acknowledgement that Canada, not Hong Kong, is in fact home. They discover that they do not after all wish to be trans-Pacific shuttlers; they perceive Canada as a place of leisure with a laid-back ethos and want to stay. These new geographical attachments are in turn products of their own transitions to adulthood, suggesting that their experiences and emotional framework need to be unpacked alongside issues of intergenerationality, intersectionality and lifecourse as young people become adults over time (Hopkins and Pain 2007; Valentine 2003;

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Worth 2009). Our case study has uncovered the unique role played by transnational family members in the individuation processes of young people growing up in Vancouver. While parents and extended family members attempt to engage with the young people from a geographical distance, the quotidian reality for those making the transition to adulthood is that their lives are already independent. However, they do not achieve this independence through 'unconventional transitions to adulthood' in which the young assume agency over their lives for economic reasons (van Blerk 2008); instead, their parents' political and economic calculations bring it about. Although the parents attempt to play a supervisory role, their children tend to perceive their efforts as fragmentary and sporadic interruptions. Such perceptions, we have argued, are footprints of an emotional geography in which young people reaching adulthood between Vancouver and Hong Kong regard their families as distant entities – they have become adults without the help of their calculating parents.

This article is a call to attend more carefully to the geographical articulations of young people in transnational family arrangements, particularly to those who reach adulthood in sites physically distant from their families. It may be easy to assume that because readily available communications and transportation technologies narrow geographical distances, the everyday realities of young people living apart from their families consist of these new modes of interaction. Moreover, because the literature on youth and transnationalism has turned its discussion to return migration, one can facilely presume that the young people we have studied uncritically follow the calculations of their parents to return to East Asia for work. Attending to the emotional geographical articulations of young people reaching adulthood is a corrective to these two assumptions, for we discover an asymmetry between the political and economic calculations of transnational parents and the way young people live life locally. We have argued that the young people we discuss have become adults because they are able to articulate their own geographical sensibilities despite the expectations of both their parents and the existing literature. Return migration and settlement are not givens for young people; they are choices that people who have successfully undergone the transition to adulthood have the agency to make.

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Notes

1. Some focus-group accounts, including those of young adult participants in Vancouver and Toronto, have recently been published (Kobayashi and Preston, 2007; Ley and Kobayashi 2005) to complement the small body of earlier research on the so-called 'satellite kids' phenomenon in Vancouver (Waters 2003a, 2003b).
2. We have anonymized all interview subjects.
3. Cantonese: 'Ah, it's very miserable!' *Sunfu* literally translates into 'bitter body', suggesting an image of misery.

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