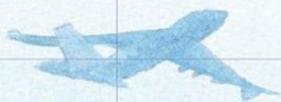


Keep Your Life, Family  
and Career Intact While



# LIVING ABROAD

"The essential survival guide. Must  
reading for anyone living abroad."

Louis Kraar  
Senior Editor, *Fortune*



**Cathy Tsang-Feign, PhD**

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# What every expat needs to know

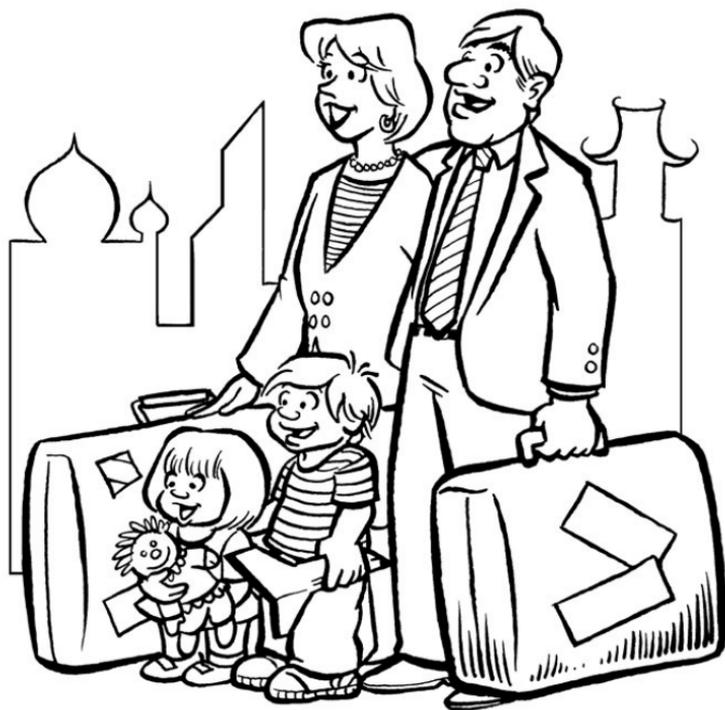
*“In an easy-to-read, jargon-free book Cathy Tsang-Feign helps confront problems unique to the expatriate experience.”*

-South China Morning Post

On the principle that “awareness is half the cure,” psychologist Cathy Tsang-Feign identifies and explains most of the common personal, relationship and family problems encountered by people living abroad: from the initial culture shock to the special joys and pitfalls of the expatriate experience, to the challenges of re-entering your own native country.

In this thoroughly-revised and expanded new edition, Dr. Tsang-Feign uses real-life examples and easy-to-understand explanations to fully prepare you for a move abroad, and to help those already there to help themselves live a well-rounded, satisfying life.

Keep Your Life, Family  
and Career Intact While  
**LIVING ABROAD**



Third edition, revised and expanded

**Cathy Tsang-Feign, PhD**

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## FOREWORD

THERE IS A lot of romance associated with living abroad. It is often seen as a life of glamour, of white suits and high tea on palm-shaded verandas, chauffeurs and servants and dinners with diplomats, with no problems in store other than a touch of culture shock.

This naïve fantasy might be expected of one who has read too many popular novels about Paris or Shanghai. But all too often, it is held by those actually living abroad as expatriates. When this fanciful image is finally shattered by the realities of life in a foreign land, the disappointment can be overwhelming.

Living in another culture can be extremely rewarding, both financially and personally. It is a special lifestyle. As such, it comes with special problems: stress, acculturation, isolation, long-distance relationships, bored or frustrated wives, oft-traveling husbands, and rootless children.

Frequently these problems are predictable, if not inevitable. Often they take us by surprise. For many people, these special “expat” problems can lead to a general feeling of confusion and alienation in the foreign society. In the worst cases, they can lead to the break-up of marriages that had always seemed happy before moving abroad.

This book is intended to help all those who live, for whatever reasons, in a foreign country. It is intended for expatriates, immigrants, and those planning such a move.

On the principle that “awareness of the problem is half the cure,” this book identifies and explains, by way of example, most of the common personal, relationship and family problems encountered by people living far away from home. From the initial culture shock, to the special joys and pitfalls of life as a foreigner, to the particular problems suffered by men, women and children overseas, to the unforeseen traumas of re-entering your own native country.

Using real-life examples and easy-to-understand, jargon-free explanations, this book aims to more fully prepare people for a move abroad, and to help those already there to help themselves live a well-rounded, satisfying life.

## **AWARENESS IS HALF THE CURE**

Many clients walk into my office and tell me: “I’m miserable. I know something isn’t right in my life. How can I fix it?”

“Fixing” something is only a matter of time, approach or method. The real issue for most people is not that they have a problem that needs fixing, but that they end up repeating the same mistakes over and over again.

The main purpose of this book is to help you detect your problem areas, look for patterns and confront them. Before you can ask a question like, “What should I do now?”, you need to ask yourself what you are doing, and how your own actions or thinking have contributed to or help to maintain self-destructive patterns. Until then nothing can alter the problem.

Sometimes people try to run away from reality by changing place, job or partner. They hope a “fresh start” will make

the problem go away. But the fact is: no matter how many times you relocate, change jobs or remarry, you ultimately cannot run away from yourself.

Whether or not you stay in one specific place or with one partner, you still need to live with yourself. But you do have a choice: you can either continue to be dissatisfied, or you can choose to approach life in a different way. Many people go for years without being conscious of how much they themselves are to blame in creating their own problems, or how they have allowed other people to manipulate them.

Awareness is half the cure—When you are aware of your own actions, you will understand what purpose your undesirable behavior is serving. Once you gain this understanding, you are less likely to slip into old patterns. If you do end up repeating old habits, you will be more aware of what you do and can make a conscious effort to tackle them.

There are no “cures” or magic in this book. What I have done is to define and explain common complaints of people who live overseas, to help you discover, prevent and avoid similar pitfalls in your own life. Human beings are very flexible. If you want to, you will and you can alter your life by yourself, armed with an understanding of the root causes of your habits, patterns and problems. That is the goal of this book—to reach people who are sincere and serious in wanting to do something for themselves.

As individuals we all have the right to live a full and satisfying life. It is up to you to exercise that choice.

# Chapter 1

## Problems of moving



## **MOVING EXPERIENCES**

MOVING OVERSEAS OFFERS one of the most exciting opportunities any person can ever experience. Whether one is moving abroad by choice or by assignment, there is much to look forward to: travel, exotic cultures, foods and languages. And, naturally, things to worry about: health, climate, homesickness, and the unfamiliar and unknown.

If one has never lived in a foreign country before, it is hard to imagine what it will be like. But even for those who have relocated two or three times, each move is different, promising new pleasures and new pains.

Moving to another country is a stressful experience, whether the move is permanent or for a specific period of time. Most people move for positive reasons, such as career transfer, starting a better life abroad, or sheer wanderlust. They look forward to the change of scenery with anticipation and excitement. Yet as the departure date looms nearer, tiny doubts and anxieties begin to add up to mental and physical stress. Such concerns are normal, even predictable. They are best dealt with before the move rather than after.

## **STRESS BEFORE THE MOVE**

Lilian, age 34, will be moving to Australia with her husband and daughter in six months. For over three weeks she has

been suffering from insomnia. She saw her physician, who referred her for psychotherapy.

*Lilian says she used to be an easy-going person. But during the past several weeks she found herself moody and frequently snapping at her husband. She has lost interest in and is unable to concentrate on her job.*

*"I don't know why I should feel so anxious. I thought I was all prepared for the move," she said.*

Lilian's reaction is not surprising. She is going through a major change in life and is unable to cope with the stress involved. Not understanding what she is going through makes her even more anxious and unable to deal with it in an appropriate manner.

Moving abroad is a stressful event which demands a great deal of emotional strength. Many factors contribute to such stress.

First, one has to deal with a major restructuring of the family. Separation from relatives can stir up enormous sadness and guilt, especially when elderly parents are being left behind. This may be taken as disloyalty or abandonment, which can be particularly stressful for people from certain cultural or religious backgrounds, such as Asians or Catholics, because of their traditional emphasis on family and the elderly. For the ones leaving this is a double blow. They have to adjust to the loss as well as bear the guilt.

Guilt doesn't resolve problems but merely compounds them. Directly expressing one's feelings to family members will help clarify misunderstandings and open channels for mutual support. All have to give each other time to accept

and adapt to the change, and must realize that separation is a growth process which has benefits as well as drawbacks.

Another major stress factor for people about to move is fear of the future in a foreign land. Neither Lilian nor her husband has ever been to Australia. Yet they have already said their goodbyes and rented out their home. There is no question of turning back. But still their unfamiliarity with Australia is creating uncertainty and anxiety.

Frequent bombardment of advice from family and friends can also be quite exhausting and stressful. Though offered with good intentions, most advice tends to focus on the negative. Departees will be told over and over how to prepare for the strange climate, the unavailability of safe, familiar food, and so on. Such warnings only increase apprehension and doubt. Since advice is often conflicting, it can further confuse and overwhelm the already nervous traveler.

People preparing to move overseas have to take advice with a grain of salt. Use your own judgment and wisdom when listening to suggestions. If necessary, gently tell your enthusiastic advisors to step back and give you time to work through it.

The stress of the process of moving abroad cannot be eliminated. However, if appropriate steps are taken it can be minimized.

Usually there are thousands of chores requiring attention prior to the actual move. It is easy to become overwhelmed and confused. Thus it is helpful to prioritize tasks, make lists, and tackle chores one at a time. This not only helps to actually get everything done, but will increase your feeling

that things are under control. In order to reduce the anxiety of moving to a new place it is advisable to make a visit prior to the actual relocation.

It is important for you to be aware of your own mechanisms of responding to stress. Instead of repressing the anxious feelings it helps to verbalize them with your spouse, family members or friends. Through communication, you will find mutual support to deal with the coming separation and uncertainty.

You should not worry if you feel “not totally prepared”. Everyone feels this way. As long as you understand what you are going through and don’t let the anxiety and stress take over, you will be able to effectively complete the chores and preparations, and better deal with the emotional changes.

Individuals in Lilian’s situation need to realize that the stress and confusion they experience are normal. They are part of an adjustment process that will eventually come to an end. You have to accept and deal with it rather than reproach yourself for feeling that way. Given time and an open mind you will have few problems in making the transition to the new land.

## **CULTURE SHOCK**

After selling or letting the house, shipping the furniture, and attending the farewell parties, most people feel they are all ready to go. However, moving abroad requires more than just physical preparations.

An individual or family relocating overseas is about to undergo tremendous changes in their life. Besides the

normal adjustments associated with moving—setting up house, finding new friends, familiarizing themselves with new geography and climate—new expatriates face a host of other changes.

They will be intrigued—and repelled—by new sights, sounds, smells, and ways of thinking and living. Changes in cultural identity, social position and etiquette will all take getting used to. Foreign languages, dress, food and customs are all part of the excitement and challenge of moving to a new land.

An individual cannot help but react to all the new stimuli and influences in his or her life. The reaction is not a single event, but a mixture and series of emotions, ranging from elation to depression to infatuation to homesickness. This mixed bag of reactions is commonly known as “Culture Shock”.

Most people who move overseas expect to experience this phenomenon. Many believe it is something like jetlag: an adjustment you go through and get over with within a short period of time. In fact, the experience is better defined as *acculturation*, a process which can last from six months to more than a year.

Anyone who moves to another country will inevitably go through acculturation. Immigrants expect to take on a new cultural identity and therefore are more willing to adjust and adapt. However, expatriates planning to stay only a set period of time usually have no intention to assimilate. For them, acculturation can be as unpleasant as it is unexpected.

*“I’ve only been here four months, yet I just can’t wait until my home leave in December!”*

Benjamin, a marketing buyer, was transferred to Hong Kong on a two-year contract. A few weeks ago he began to complain about the crowds, the weather, not being understood by his staff, and so on. All he talks about is how much better things were back home. He is homesick.

What Benjamin is going through is the normal process of acculturation. But like him, many people are taken by surprise when it happens.

Whether people choose to or not, they will go through four stages of acculturation. These are:

**ELATION:** When first in a foreign country, one finds it quite stimulating that most things are so unlike back home. For Benjamin, the exotic Asian sights and sounds and meeting the lively international expatriate crowd were all part of the initial excitement. However, after several weeks, when one has to settle down to everyday life, the differences can turn into annoyances.

**RESISTANCE:** Frequent comparisons between home and the host country make everything back home seem so much better.

Benjamin is getting annoyed by the frantic pace of life in Hong Kong, the indirectness of Chinese people in business, the crowds and difficulties in being understood. He is frustrated at the narrow choice of English-language entertainment on television or in cinemas and theaters. He finds himself missing his old friends, favorite foods, and the ways of doing things back home.

Many foreigners in this stage tend to associate only with others from their own country. They constantly compare everything to “back in England” (or New York or Frankfurt). Such people remain separate from the local community and establish their own secluded, privileged society. Many expatriates remain in this stage until the day they move back home.

**TRANSFORMATION:** Usually this occurs about nine months down the road, when individuals feel more familiar with the environment and begin to see the good side of the host country.

For example, Benjamin will probably appreciate the efficiency of service and be intrigued by many Asian customs and formalities, which he finds so much more attractive and sophisticated than back home.

Often, people in this stage go to the extreme of rejecting their own culture. Immigrants in particular may try to take on a totally new cultural identity. They refuse to speak their native language or associate with their own countrymen. They tend to view their own culture with a negative attitude and disdain its customs and traditions as backward or crude.

As for expatriates, after months of adjustment they now appreciate the privileged and exciting expat lifestyle: travel, cultural variety, domestic help, etc. They embrace life overseas, no longer wanting to return to the “average”, “boring” lifestyle back home. They may put down people back home whom they see as naïve or narrow-minded. Many get stuck in this stage. They either stay put in this particular expatriate society or move to another foreign country so as to maintain their expatriate lifestyle.

However, no matter how much a person changes outwardly, he cannot shed his roots. Culture is embedded in a person's thinking and behavior. One simply cannot shed one's cultural roots and transform into a different person.

Ideally, people continue the natural course of acculturation to the final stage.

**INTEGRATION:** Cultural barriers are bridged. Individuals finally learn to appreciate both their own heritage and the new way of life.

Many people remain stuck in the second or third stages, Resistance or Transformation, cutting themselves off from either their new world or the one they came from. These "adjustments" are unbalanced, and lead to eventual frustration and unhappiness. Many of the difficulties and psychological complaints of foreigners in a new land, including stress and family problems, can be directly linked to incomplete acculturation.

Children usually are more easily acculturated or assimilated than adults. The different paces of adjustment to the new culture can put a gap between parent and child. Therefore, parents should not overlook this area.

If expatriates and new immigrants understand and anticipate the four stages of acculturation, much of the stress and turmoil of relocation can be dealt with. Particularly during the second stage, newcomers like Benjamin need to give themselves time for adjustment and not give up and go home.

## TRANSIENT FAMILY SYNDROME

For immigrants and most expatriates, acculturation is a temporary but necessary process, enabling them to feel at home in a new land. But for a third group of people, it is a never-ending routine, leaving them feeling that they have no home at all.

Growing numbers of families—diplomatic, missionary, military and, increasingly, business people—are required to move on a regular basis, usually every two or three years, to a new, distant location. Such families are often the envy of relatives and friends. Yet underneath the glamour and excitement of the globetrotting lifestyle lies a host of pitfalls and problems. These people are often reluctant to voice their complaints, for fear that others wouldn't understand, or of jeopardizing their own or their spouse's career.

*Ever since Lucy returned from visiting her sister's family in the United States, she finds herself moody and unhappy. Whenever her husband tries to comfort her she lashes out at him.*

*"I enjoy our lifestyle and I wouldn't trade it for anything, but I also never knew how much I was missing," Lucy said.*

Lucy moved to Taiwan six months ago. Prior to that, she lived in Egypt, Poland and Greece. Because of her husband's diplomatic career, they are required to relocate frequently. Taipei is their fourth posting in the past ten years.

*“I never could imagine how my sister lived her mundane suburban life. Now I understand there are many rich experiences that I cannot have,” she said.*

Seeing her sister’s stable home life, house, close friends and friendly neighbors, she has suddenly realized how much these things mean to her.

Lucy enjoys her varied life, living in different parts of the world, yet all of a sudden she feels that she wants something more than “interesting experiences”. After all these years Lucy finds herself with no close friends, no place that feels like home. As much as they call the United States “home”, she doesn’t really feel their roots are there anymore.

Lucy’s dilemma is a result of “Transient Family Syndrome”. People like her are planning their next move almost as soon as they arrive at their latest assignment. Although they will establish an active social life, when any relationship becomes too personal or emotionally involved, unintentionally they pull back. Rather than going through the repeated pain of separation and loss, they unconsciously avoid letting friendships get too close.

In addition, people in this group tend to associate with others who, like them, also transfer frequently. Living among such a transient population is not conducive to forming close, lasting relationships.

Transient Family Syndrome is especially hard on spouses. Since one person’s career requires frequent moves, the partner cannot fully develop her or his own career or outside interests. In Lucy’s case, she doesn’t have the chance to be a normal homemaker. She doesn’t have the time needed to build bonds or support with neighbors. She is unable to take

root in the local community and establish a close circle of friends. When she is feeling down she doesn't have someone to call upon or a shoulder to cry on. "At times I feel terribly lonely," Lucy claims. She has no outlets outside of her husband and children.

This problem not only affects individuals, but the whole family. With no outside support, family members put tremendous demands on each other and expect the marriage and family life to meet all emotional needs. Such families often become so interdependent that individual outside friendships may seem like "treason". This feeling inhibits them even more from other contacts, which results in further isolation. The effective way to deal with Transient Family Syndrome is not relocating back home, but finding the courage to open up emotionally and reach out to establish genuine friendships.

It is true that distance can create obstacles to sustaining close friendships. However, if mutual effort is made to stay in touch, such obstacles can be conquered. Phone or video calls, e-mails, posting little gifts, and occasional visits can keep friendships alive. Your attitude can overcome the problem of distance.

Members of transient families need to be aware of whether they are in any way sabotaging each other's personal growth. It is important for them to give space to each other and encourage outside contacts. These new friendships will also speed up acculturation.

When such families decide to reach out they will likely find others experiencing similar needs. Nothing will better erase the myth that "we are all alone."

Transient Family Syndrome is not necessarily experienced by all transient families. Yet often an individual or family may not recognize its impact until suddenly it strikes them what they're missing. It is important for people to acknowledge their own feelings and note whether other family members' needs are not fulfilled because of frequent relocations.

## **EVERY MOVE IS DIFFERENT**

No one is immune from the adjustment and stress that come with moving abroad, whether for the first or the fifteenth time. Having experienced relocation once does not make the next move trouble-free. The logistics of moving to a second, third, or fourth overseas assignment will take on a patina of routine, but it may come as a shock to undergo the inevitable stages of acculturation yet again, to once more find oneself a newcomer, to re-orient oneself to the quirks and subtleties of social and business interactions within a new culture, even if it is just the country next door.

Every move is different, depending on one's life stage or circumstance. Crossing borders after marriage or divorce, or after having children, carries many different contexts, responsibilities and obstacles than a prior relocation when one was young and single or married but childless. A move due to promotion, or starting a new job after a period of unemployment, may distract attention from other personal, social and cultural adjustments.

The problems of moving will at least be familiar the second time around, but it is crucial not to take for granted

that less effort is needed to properly settle in. It is important that serial expatriates remind themselves that culture shock, or acculturation, can take from six to nine months, or for some, as long as a year and a half. There are no shortcuts. As long as you are prepared and allow time for the adjustment stages, you are bound to be able to manage well and enjoy a successful assignment abroad.

## **THE INTERNATIONAL PERSON**

Moving to another country, whether for the first or the tenth time, is never an easy experience.

Like a tree transplanted to a new patch of ground, there will be a period of wilting. But given time and a little special care, the transplanted person, like the tree, will recover, acquire greater breadth, and blossom more than ever before.

Coming to terms with one's old and new cultures is coming to terms with two sides of yourself. With sensitivity and an open mind, an immigrant or expatriate can integrate the two and dare to be who he or she really is: a special individual who is truly cross-cultured.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

DR. CATHY TSANG-FEIGN is a leading expert in the field of expatriate and cross-cultural psychology, based on decades of experience working with international executives and diplomats and their families in North America, Europe, Asia and Australia.

She holds Master's Degrees in Counseling and Family Therapy and a PhD in Psychology. She has practised professionally in Los Angeles and Atlanta, as well as London's Harley Street, and currently runs a private practice in Hong Kong. She travels extensively to provide training and assessments for international corporations and government organizations.

She is a former columnist on family psychology for the *South China Morning Post* and *American in Britain*.

She is married with two children and is an avid gardener and beekeeper in her spare time.

For more information, visit her website:

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