



**UTS Business School  
Management Discipline Group**

**How does Family Matter? Investigating the  
Experiences of Expatriates and their Families in  
International Assignments**

**Quyen Thao DANG**

A thesis submitted in fulfillment for the degree of

**Doctor of Philosophy**

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## **CERTIFICATE OF ORIGINAL AUTHORSHIP**

I, Quyen Thao Dang, declare that this thesis is submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Doctor of Philosophy, in the Business School at the University of Technology Sydney.

This thesis is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis. This document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution. This research is supported by the Australian Government Research Training Program and the joint scholarship between University of Technology Sydney and Vietnam International Education Development.

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## GLOSSARY

**Expatriate:** For the sampling purpose of this study, global assignees who had an assignment of one year or more, and were approached are specifically called expatriates.

**Global assignee:** Global assignee refers to a person who goes outside of their home country to work at another location. In this study, global assignee or international assignee is used to encompass all types of employees undertaking all types of international assignments including long-term expatriates, short-term expatriates, international business travelers, flexpatriates.

**Organizational expatriate:** A person who goes to work outside of his or her home country due to the requirements of their organizations.

**Self-initiated expatriate (SIE):** A person who goes to work outside of his or her home country at their own initiation.

**Expatriate family:** A family of an expatriate, which may include a spouse or partner of the expatriate with or without children.

**Expatriate spouse:** A spouse/partner of an expatriate

**Accompany (or accompanying) expatriate family:** An expatriate family who moves abroad together during the expatriate's international assignment

**Accompanied expatriate:** An expatriate who is accompanied by his or her family during international assignments

**Un-accompanying or split expatriate family (split family):** An expatriate family whose members (the expatriate and expatriate spouse) are split during the expatriate's international assignment

**Unaccompanied expatriate:** An expatriate who is not accompanied by his or her spouse during international assignments

**Un-accompanying spouse:** An expatriate spouse who does not accompany the expatriate on the international assignment

**Host country:** A country to which an expatriate is relocated for work purpose.

**Home country:** A country from which an expatriate originates; or the expatriate has permanent residency or citizenship in that country.

Home organization: An organization that assigns an expatriate to go to work abroad.

Host organization: An organization that is the employer of an expatriate in the foreign location.

## **ABSTRACT**

The significance of expatriates in managing the overseas operations and providing a boundary spanning role that helps integrate the operations of a subsidiary in the wider inter-organizational global network is widely accepted in international human resource management literature. Extant literature suggests that family plays a certain role in expatriation decisions, and success or failure of expatriates. The number of expatriates that are married/partnered make up the majority of the expatriate population, and most global assignees have family concerns and are influenced by their family in many aspects of their work life. While extant literature has paid attention to the experiences of the family and their influence on the expatriates' adjustment and performance in the host country, most of these studies have focused on expatriate families who accompany expatriates. The group of split families (where the family does not accompany the expatriates on the international assignment) has been neglected in the literature, thereby limiting our understanding of why in some instances families do not accompany expatriates, how expatriates adjust and perform their tasks in the host country without the physical presence of their families, and how split expatriate families experience international assignments.

Using family systems theory, the motivations to undertake international assignments of accompanied and unaccompanied expatriates were investigated, as were the reasons why split expatriate families participate in the split situation. In addition, how families of both situations influence expatriates' challenges and work outcomes in the host country and how these families experience international assignments were explored. Data for the study were collected using semi-structured interviews with expatriates, expatriate spouses and human resource managers or organizational representatives. The data collection was conducted in Vietnam, which hosts a large number of foreign expatriates, and is an emerging economy.

The findings of this current study show that families influence the motivations, considerations, challenges and work outcomes of expatriates in both accompanying and split situations. Furthermore, the experiences of expatriates and families in the split situation are vastly different from those in the accompanying situation although similarities also exist between the two situations. The key findings focus on six major areas: work-related vs. family-driven reasons, family-centered concerns and considerations, adjustable vs. enduring challenges, crossover and spillover effects on expatriates' work outcomes, tested emotional bonds and organizations' lack of care for the split situation.

By offering insights about split expatriate families in comparison with accompanying ones, this study contributes to the literature on expatriate recruitment, adjustment, work outcomes and family systems theory. In terms of practical contributions, the research outcomes will serve as lessons for multinational enterprises, organizations operating internationally and expatriates and their families to increase expatriation success without compromising family outcomes.