

The Role of Communication in Chinese Immigrants' Lives: A Comparative Analysis of Parents' and Children's Adaptations

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Abstract

The United States of America is a racially diverse country with immigrants from all over the world. Within this broad group of immigrants, a significant number came from China. Some Chinese immigrants started their life in the United States as international students and then become permanent residents or citizens. Another large group of Chinese immigrants chose to move in their thirties or forties with their children in their teenage years. In this research, I interviewed six immigrant families from China to the United States. Specifically, I analyzed the role of intercultural communication during immigration, the reasons why children adapted to the new environment better than their parents, the changes within the immigrant families, the cultural differences they experienced, and the stereotypes they faced.

Keywords

Intercultural communication, China, Immigrants, Children, Parents.

1. Introduction

In 2019, more than 46.2 million immigrants live in the United States of America. In 2022, for the first time in American history, the increasing number of immigrants is surpassing the natural increase—the difference between births and deaths (Chamie, 2022). According to the United Nation's World Migration Report (2022), China-United States of America migration ranked 12 among the "Top 20 international migration country-to-country corridor" —more than 2 million migrants.

Recently, Chinese immigrants have received increasing attention on a global level because of various issues. For instance, in the early years of the coronavirus pandemic, the virus was discriminatively framed as the "Chinese virus" (Vazquez, 2020). This has led to an increasing number of hate speeches, discriminating behaviors, and even unprovoked attacks against Chinese immigrants and Chinese Americans living in the United States. For instance, on April 7, 2021, a woman made anti-Asian statements and then slapped another woman sitting at a dining table with a friend in the face (CBS New York, 2021). In the same year, a 47-year-old man shoved a 52-year-old Asian woman on the ground outside a bakery, and this attack resulted in the victim getting ten stitches on the forehead because her head hit the metal newspaper stand (ABC7 New York, 2021).

Under this circumstance, understanding current statuses, living conditions, stereotypes of Americans, and attitudes toward the United States of Chinese immigrants is not only important but also urgent in the process of globalization. Therefore, this paper focuses on the experiences of Chinese immigrant families who moved to the United States of America with different backgrounds but similar reasons—children's education. The study aims to examine their experiences in the U.S., and especially challenges and coping strategies throughout their journey. Specifically, what role does communication play in the obstacles immigrants face after moving to the United States of America from China? Why do children usually adapt to the new environment better than their parents? What changes are made when families immigrate from

China to the United States? How does cultural difference contribute to the problems with immigrants' lives? What stereotypes do Chinese immigrants face after moving to the United States of America?

To answer these questions, I conduct interviews to have direct communication with my conversation partners and understand their situations and feelings. In this research, conversation partners include both parents and children in immigrant families. The children all moved to the United States during their middle school or late elementary school years, which made them understand and adapt to both cultures; however, the parents moved to the U.S. in their middle-aged years, which created different extent of adaptation to the new environment and cultures, compared with their children. These interviews not only provide information for the research, but also empower conversation partners. Participating the research, both parents and children had a better mutual understanding of different obstacles that each other faced in their respective social environment, and thus grew empathy. Additionally, because of my background as a Chinese immigrant, I also used auto-ethnography to incorporate my understanding of those questions into this paper.

In the next section, I will review previous studies in intercultural communication and related fields, laying theoretical ground for my research. Then, I will explain the methodology of interviews and recruitments. Then, I will describe and interpret findings, followed by the conclusion discussing limitation of this research and inviting future studies.

2. Literature Review

Ong defined the term "flexible citizenship" by using the example of Hong Kongers who want to work in china but seek citizenship elsewhere after Hong Kong's return from England to the People's Republic of China in 1977 [6]. She also pointed out how Southeast Asians like to use guanxi ("personal and kinship networks") in business [7]. How families' focus on business can bring out transnational changes when the father as an "astronaut" who continually travels from countries to countries while the mother and children live in the U.S. or other countries [6]. There are lots of astronaut families in society nowadays, so it is worth studying the culture and communication to better understand their experiences as they move from one culture to another. However, Ong's research studied earlier generations of immigrants mostly from Hong Kong [6]. With the economic development of mainland China, more and more Chinese immigrants moved from their home country to the U.S. Their experiences also demand to be examined to include updated conditions.

Besides Ong's research, previous studies have developed various theories to explain the challenges and coping strategies in intercultural communication. The study of cultures reinforces one's understanding of oneself, for you can see your culture from other cultures' perspective. Moreover, studies unveil challenges that immigrants potentially face during their early years of immigration. For instance, studies found that communication rules are rarely explicitly stated, so that immigrants would have to take some awkward steps to confront natives with the goal of having a conversation without any misunderstandings. Furthermore, establishing an intercultural identity/relationship requires lots of attention to tiny aspects of culture such as advertising, public service, news. This cultural sensitivity that could only be acquired by multicultural individuals takes time to build, during which the individuals might have many obstacles to face [8].

When people mention obstacles that immigrants might face, the key factor is usually the language barrier. Cargile has identified that, from the intercultural communication perspective, people's attitude toward language barriers are primarily affected by: accents, speech styles, and speech rates [9]. Those characteristics are so important that it takes a tremendous amount of time and practice for immigrants to sound like the natives, during which immigrants might face

language-based discrimination just because they have different accents. This study only focused on how and why this language-based discrimination would happen, but it did not examine the severe impact of the discrimination.

Other than language barrier, immigrants also face obstacles because of the significant cultural difference between western and eastern countries. The worldviews of two groups are different. For example, the eastern religions are polytheistic and consider harmony as the “ultimate good” while western religions are monotheistic and consider transformations the “ultimate good” [10].

Moreover, a very common aspect of the difference between western and eastern cultures is the difference between individualism and collectivism [11]. Confucianism, a major philosophy in the east, has four major principles. One of those is jen (humanism), and the core of this principle is to grow empathy with others’ feelings, which automatically makes people have stronger ties with each other as you develop those emotional bonds. Confucianism also contributes to the important discrepancy that eastern culture focuses on process-oriented communication while western culture focuses more on out-come oriented communication. Communications in the east center on the receiver while communications in the west focus on the sender. Those all, for different extents, related back to the point of individualism versus collectivism. Process-oriented and receiver-centered communications renders people to consider more for the others than themselves. When put into society, this means to consider more for the society as a whole than themselves.

In addition to collectivism versus individualism, Andersen has recognized that eastern countries tend to have high-context communications while western countries tend to have low-context communications [12]. Low context communicators, those from the west, tend to focus on self-esteem, individual pride, etc. High context communicators, those from the east, tend to focus on group harmony, group-oriented status, etc. Those articles didn’t mention how Chinese immigrants feel in this new low context environment, which will be later discussed in this paper. Despite the differences, previous studies addressed how to make immigrants feel welcomed in one’s community. For example, one should ignore race, color, and stereotypes and treat others based on their personalities rather than the pre-perceived impressions. Also, in order to reduce misunderstanding, when talking to immigrants, one can avoid use slangs and clear articulation [13].

Previous study has pointed out that changes such as preferences on dressing, food, and modes of transportation are less resistant to major changes such as attitudes toward gender, age, sexual orientation. However, depending on the age and the openness of the specific individuals, those “deep structures” are also easy to change in certain circumstances [14]. For instance, an international student who is surrounded by natives is easier to accept the new culture than an international student who only stays with students from the same origin as him/her, and if this difference last for enough time, two completely contrasting cultural identity can form.

If someone only can enact one cultural identity in an appropriate manner, it is called cultural competence, yet if someone can enact different cultural identities in particular situations, it is called intercultural competence [15]. Perhaps, in the United States, the group of people who need to develop intercultural competence the least is the white. Whiteness in society usually defaults as a privilege as they put themselves on the top of the social ladder since Columbus first discovered the Americas. More than 600 years of history has established this social structure. However, the most valuable insights in Martin (2014)’s research is that she pointed out how white students also found it unfair how the minority students get more privileges just because of their color. Furthermore, as the demographics of the United States change, whites are increasingly starting to perceive themselves as the minority group.

Still, no one should feel isolated in society. Diverse communities co-influence each other's experiences. During the influencing process, three main factors influence the stress level, adaptation rate, and growth of the immigrants: communication (personal and social), environment (host receptivity, host conformity pressure, ethnic group strength), and predisposition (preparedness, ethnicity, personality) [16].

As the immigrant adapt to the new environment, they adapt to the new ways of thinking, feeling, acting, and this is called the acculturation process [17]. While they are going through the acculturation process for the new culture, they are also going through the deculturation—unlearn some cultural habits--process of their original culture. A graph that shows the “stress-adaptation-growth dynamic” is a cyclic and continual pattern, similar to the movement of a wheel. This graph portrays the inevitable stress brought by the acculturation and deculturation processes [17]. Eventually, immigrants meet a point of equilibrium where they can smoothly enact different cultural identities in different situations.

Nonetheless, even older immigrants sometimes face where natives would have stereotypes about them. However, some of those are actually microaggressions. When someone asks an immigrant, “Why is your English so good?” is an example of microaggression [18], but for immigrants who don't understand the culture well, they might just think of this as a normal question, even praise. At the same time that immigrants should learn how to identify microaggression, natives can also learn what words might offend the immigrants.

Additionally, besides the obstacles from the outside environment, there are also changes within families when critical decisions such as immigration were made. A concept that need to be introduced here is “astronaut family:” when migrant families choose to have some of the family members “return to their country of origin to work while the remaining family members, usually the women and children, continue to reside in the host country [19].

Besides, within families, parenting styles is an important component of family lives. There are four basic types of parenting style: authoritarian, authoritative, permissive, and uninvolved. Authoritarian parents would establish strict rules in the household and a “one-way mode of communication,” where children can't negotiate with their parents about different issues. Authoritative parents would “have clear guidelines for their expectations,” but different from authoritative parents, they would explain their reasoning behind those rules. Permissive parents tend to only have a few rules and open conversations with their children; to a greater extent, there are uninvolved parents who just “fulfill the child's basic needs” and remain mostly separated with their child's life [20].

Built on previous studies, the following section explains the interview and auto-ethnography methods.

3. Methodology

I chose to take the interpretive approach and conduct interviews because such a methodology allows me to have a deep understanding of the views of my conversational partners (the daughter and parents) on different issues and better feel their emotions while they are talking about the events. The conversation partners were recruited through my personal connections. Most interviews (5 out of 6) were semi-structured, in-depth ones on an average of one hour. Interviews were conducted under different conditions based on the conversational partners' preferences and availabilities: Family E and F are the only two exceptions. The other families were interviewed face-to-face, with parents and daughter sitting in the same space. All interviews were conducted in both Chinese and English and was translated to English by myself. Moreover, since I first started this research because of my background as a Chinese immigrant, I used auto-ethnography and answered the interview questions myself too, so I can incorporate my understanding of the interview questions into this paper.

These are the six families (daughter and parents) which I coded them with the letters. Below is the basic information about the six families:

1. Family A immigrated to the United States from Qingdao, China in February, 2018 during the daughter's seventh grade year. Qingdao is a New Tier[21]-1 city. Daughter A learned English in school and took afterschool classes from third grade to sixth grade. Mom A claimed that they moved to the United States for the education system in the states. Family A was recruited because of my personal connection with Daughter A—we attend the same school.
2. Family B immigrated from Lanzhou, China (a Tier-3 city) in 2017, during the daughter's ninth grade year. Daughter B was in an English afterschool class since second grade until they immigrated. Daughter B is a premature baby, and unfortunately, she has physical developmental disorders. Mom B stated that they chose to immigrate because they don't want their daughter to be discriminated in school. When they were back in China Mom B was a kindergarten teacher, and Dad B worked at the local railway bureau. Both jobs are decent with great social welfare, which contrasted greatly with their jobs after immigration. Mom B became a part-time teacher at a private-owned daycare, and Dad B became an Uber driver.
3. Family C immigrated from Beijing, China in January 2018 during the daughter's fifth grade year. Beijing is the capital, a Tier-1 city. Daughter C learned English in school and took a language class in preparation of the life in the U.S. 6 months before they immigrated. Mom C stated that they chose to immigrate for the education system and better natural environment. Mom C chose to move to the west coast—California—because the mild, sunny weather is good for the improvement of Daughter C's asthma. Family C was recruited because of my family and their similarities—both from Beijing, both have asthma, and both from astronaut families.
4. Family D immigrated from Beijing, China, in 2018 at the start of the daughter's seventh grade. Daughter D learned English in school, had English classes on the weekends from first grade to sixth grade, and another English class in preparation for their immigration. The parents thought that U.S. had a comparatively advanced education system in the world, but they had to impulse to take real action after seeing people around them immigrating to the U.S., especially my family.
5. Family E immigrated from Dalian, a Tier 2 city in China in 2015 at the beginning of the daughter's fourth grade. Daughter E learned English both in and outside school, simply to improve her English grade in school, but not to get prepared for immigration. Mom E married an American man in China and then moved to the U.S. with him, but she also claimed that she immigrated so that her daughter would have a better future. They were recruited using the snowball strategy. Family E is one of the exceptions: the daughter and mother answered questions separately in different spaces.
6. Family F immigrated in 2018 at the beginning of the daughter's sixth grade year from Shenzhen (Tier 1) in China. Daughter F attended an international kindergarten and a normal public elementary school. She never took any classes outside of school, but her English grade was really good throughout her elementary years. Mom F stated that they immigrated to the U.S. for the education of her kids (Daughter F has an older brother). They were recruited using the snowball strategy. Family F is the other exceptions because the interview was conducted asynchronously. I sent the questions to Daughter F through WeChat, she recorded herself and answered the questions designed for the children, and then she asked her mom the questions designed for the parents, also recording it. Later, the recordings were sent to me.

4. Findings

Confirming what previous scholars have stated about the importance of language barriers in communications, my communication partners all agreed upon the fact that they felt more adapted to the new society after overcoming the language barrier, which means being able to communicate with natives freely. For instance, 4 out of the 6 daughters used the phrase “after my English got better” when talking about the turning point of fitting into the new environment. Daughter A claimed that she felt more included in the community after “sensing significant improvements in my language skills and being able to communicate with others on the same level. As a result, I didn’t feel ‘inferior’ to them and was even able to help others with their problems.” Being able to overcome the language barrier usually takes time, people might not realize at the time that they are more adapted to the environment than before; however, since my conversation partners all had immigrated for years, they are clearly aware that the turning point is when they have the ability to fluently communicate in English with their classmates, teachers, etc.

Language does not only play a role in signifying their assimilation into the American society, but also generates anxiety before they were able to cross that language barrier. As Daughter C recalls:

“My teacher transferred me out of the honors English class because she thought my English skills were not good enough in terms of the grades. I was especially hit during that period of time when she asked me to consider transferring back to the normal English class. I transferred but was really sad, which is why I asked my mom if I could go to Kumon to improve my reading and writing skills.”

Even the kids, who are usually considered easier to adapt to new environments and have the chance of interacting with natives on a day-to-day basis, are suffering after immigration, what about the parents?

Children usually adapt faster to new cultural environment than their parents because of their more frequent interactions with native speakers in terms of customs, habits, idioms, and so on. As the amount of communication is a determined factor of fluency in language, the amount of communication is also a determined factor of how much someone is adapted to the society.

This is a contributing factor why parents usually feel less adapted to the society compared to their children. If parents do not have a job and immigrated solely for their children’s education, they wouldn’t have opportunities to interact with native speakers, which would gradually increase their English skills. Even if parents do have a job, their mindset and habits are already accustomed to their old society. It would be harder for them to accept new information—languages, norms, values, etc.—compared to their children. Other than the lack of interactions, parents started to learn the language at a later age, and this difficulty in speaking English can bring lots of problems to immigrants’ lives.

When being asked what’s the hardest obstacle you have encountered after moving to the U.S., Dad D replied:

“Language barrier. Specifically, buying a house, paying utility bill, taking phone calls in English, making phone calls in English, etc. All of those are super difficult for us.”

When being asked the same question, Mom D said:

“The greatest obstacle would be the feeling of loneliness. There are lots of things that I’m not used to, the language, the environment, etc. For a while, I was homesick every day and every night.”

Note that Dad D and Mom D are both English language beginners. They couldn’t even recognize all of the 28 letters before immigrating to the U.S. Consequently, they have been struggling with almost everything in life in the U.S. However, even for those who have some basic knowledge of English, life can be tough, for language, combined with lots of different factors, can trap those adults in dilemmas.

For instance, Mom C professed:

“The greatest obstacle is the language. No matter how good your English is in college in China, no matter what level of test you passed, it doesn't work here. Another thing is the culture. It's so hard for us in our forties to assimilate into this new environment. Maybe it's easier for the younger kids like you guys. For us, the inherent culture is too inherent that we would unconsciously exclude the foreign culture. Especially in the United States, it is even harder since this the U.S. is an immigrant country, and there are multiple races living here...Also, for us new immigrants, I would say it's easy to think about giving up and return to China for the first couple of years...In addition, an awkward situation that our generation has right now is that our parents are still living in China. Let's say when you kids get to college, our parents would be around their eighties, optimistically speaking, and we need to be there for the last part of their lives.”

As shown above, language is not the only obstacle that immigrants will face, there are also the cultural differences to which they need to adapt. In the United States, different ethnic groups already established their own social circles, so it is hard for immigrants to blend into groups other than their own ethnic group. Moreover, in Chinese culture, a large portion of people choose to live with their extended family rather than only their nuclear family. This is because filial piety is part of the ten central traits of Confucianism. This is also due to the fact that Chinese people are more collectivists than individualists, and Americans tend to be more independent and separate from their parents after becoming adults. However, in the U.S., immigrants live with nuclear families, which makes them...

Other than values about families, some cultural difference also includes the way we communicate with our peers. For instance, Daughter E recalled that when she was in elementary school, she had a classmate who was making hand gestures that meant Asian hate (gestures making fun of the typical Asian slanted eyes) and said that she was ugly. The classmate had a comparatively dark skin tone, so to argue back, she said, “Your Face is black.” Although the classmate was the one being rude at first, Daughter E was called to the principal's office, but the principal did not point out what she did wrong and only said, “Think about what you did wrong, and you should apologize for that.” At the time, Daughter E's English skills were not enough to let her argue for herself and did not know that discrimination towards colored people is such a crucial and controversial issue in America, so she wasn't aware of how big of a trouble she was in, although she was also discriminated.

Other than ethnic and cultural difficulties, the immigrants are completely removed from China and the Chinese culture. While that is a difficult thing to handle, shifts also take place within the families after immigration. For instance, my own nuclear family became an astronaut family where my dad works and lives in China in order to financially support our family and occasionally fly over to the US to visit my mom and me. Yet, I'm not a rare case.

Family C is also an astronaut family where the dad works and lives in China, occasionally having business trips, in order to financially sustain the family's living. Family F is also an astronaut family but with slight difference with my family and Family C. Dad F and Mom F periodically switches with each other so that one parent would be in the U.S. taking care of the kids, and the other would be living and working in China. Although all three of those families have not had disputes because of this shift to being an astronaut family, this shift is indeed a significant change on the families' structures, and this phenomenon is a newly rising trend among Asian immigrant families.

Lastly, in addition to all the changes and challenges that Chinese immigrants need to face, whether it's about ethnic differences, cultural differences, lifestyle, traditions, or anything in general, Chinese immigrants also face stereotypes.

The most common stereotype that Chinese immigrants face and was mentioned by four of the six daughters was that their peers hold the view that they are good at math because they're

Asian or because they're Chinese. This might be true for a specific group of people and might even boost confidence for some new immigrants if they really are good at math—so at least they have one advantage over their peers. Yet, for those who are not good at math, they would get more comments when other found out since the expectations are that high. One phenomenon that I observed was that Chinese or all Asian descents would be timid to answer what level of math course they are enrolled in if they're in the so-called average or below average level for the specific grade levels.

Moreover, people have a common stereotype that Chinese parents are relatively authoritative parents, but in fact, there are lots of free-range Chinese parents, who are not as disciplined as the textbooks would say.

5. Conclusion

In summary, this study has addressed several questions regarding immigration and intercultural communication. First, it found that communication, which includes the use of the English language, is a huge part of the obstacles that immigrants face after immigrating to the U.S. from China, and lots of other obstacles related to the inability to fluently speak the language. Then, this study found that children adapt to the new environment better than their parents because they immigrated at a younger age, which makes them more capable of accepting and assimilating into a new environment with a completely new culture. Furthermore, being dropped into a new community, families also face the situation of becoming an astronaut family where the nuclear family are not even physically in the same location for most of the time. Parents and children would see lots of unfamiliar cultural practices in their daily lives that they would need to accept and familiarize. Besides all the changes and challenges, immigrants need to face stereotypes from the natives, which would make them feel wrongfully accused for lots of instances. With those findings, this study has empirical value in terms of investigating the relationship between immigration and intercultural communication. Being an immigrant myself, I go beyond my single case and explore the stories of immigrant families around me. A limitation of this study would be the lack of quantities in evidence: only six families included. However, this study can still set foundation for further research in the field of both immigration and intercultural communication.

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